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CULLMAN'S MONDAY NEWSPAPER

CULLMANSENSE

COMMUNITY MATTERS

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Local



Kansas City Barbeque Society Grilling Class Teaches Locals the Art of Barbeque p7

Local Steakhouse Brands Another Small Town p2

State/National

Voting Rights for Felons on the Table p3

Sports

WSCC men's basketball wins 3rd ACCC/Region 22 championship in 5 seasons p5

CULTURE

Seeing Beauty Through the Lens of a Camera p10





Paddle into summer! p4

PETS OF THE WEEK p2



West Point Band Boosters host 31st Annual Rodeo

» Fundraiser crowns champions in each of seven events; helps buy uniforms for band

By: Josh McBrayer
josh@cullmansense.com

CULLMAN – The Cullman County Agricultural Center was filled to the brim with cowboys, cowgirls, and spectators eager to take in all of the action from the 31st Annual West Point Band Boosters RAM/IPRA/SPRA Rodeo.

"The Rodeo is currently our biggest fundraiser of the year," said West Point band director Chris Machen. "At this point we are trying to raise money for new uniforms which we desperately need.

p7



KATE MULLANEY/CULLMANSENSE

» Cowgirl Barrel Racing, Bull Riding, and a special Rodeo Pageant were all on display at the Ag Center.

Teaching about Autism

» 12 year old support group teaches families to cope p6

Kids Caring for Kids

» Local School District Helps Food Bank

By: Chelsea Sparks
Local Contributor

CULLMAN - Most of us will never know what it is like to go hungry. We will never know the stress of trying to figure out how to feed our children and ourselves from one day to the next. For an ever growing number, however, this is the harsh reality.

Economic downturn and lack of jobs with livable pay has left many families in a constant struggle.

Despite the many different viewpoints on the economy, the one thing that everyone can agree on is that no child should ever have to go hungry. This is what the town of Good Hope and its schools are trying to help prevent.

All four schools are collecting food and monetary donations to be given to Cullman Caring for Kids, which is a non-profit organization helping families and children in need. In addition to the food bank, the Cullman Caring for Kids organization runs roughly eight other programs.

All of these programs focus on helping to ensure that abused children receive the help they need and that people are aware of the signs of abuse.

Jerry Bartlett, who holds the fourth seat on the Good Hope City Council, is in charge of community service and is the spokesman for the fundraiser.

"We decided since we did not have any projects early in the year that we needed to add one. I spoke to Javon Daniel, and he told me this was the slowest time of the year for them so that's how I came up

p6

Staying at Home This St. Patty's Day? Not So Fast…

By: Kate Mullaney
kate@cullmansense.com

» St. Patrick's Day Ideas for Cullmanites

St. Patrick's Day is right around the corner and this year you can celebrate right here in Cullman. There are several ways you can celebrate St. Patty's this year.

On Saturday, March 15, The Busy Bee will be hosting a pub crawl along with Moe's, The Blue Moose, and The Local Standard. The Busy Bee will have an Irish meal as well as Irish beer.

Live music by Chris Bushey will start at 8 p.m. Moe's will have live music and their original menu. The Blue Moose will have corned beef, potatoes and live music.

The Local Standard will also feature live music for this St. Patrick's Day pub crawl.

You don't have to go to the bars in any particular order but make sure you hit up each one!

St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church will also be celebrating St. Patrick's Day on Sunday, March 16 with a St. Patrick's Day celebration.

This will be held in the St. John's Sanctuary from 5 to 6 p.m.

This celebration will include

p6

Meet & Greet Reveals New Face of Smith Lake & Upcoming Bass Fest

By: Natalie Bonner
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CULLMAN - An exciting Meet & Greet with Pro Angler Kevin Hawk happened at Smith Lake Park early last Friday afternoon to kick off the 2014 Bass Pro Shops Southern Open #2 held on Smith Lake over the weekend. Hawk's incredible boat was unveiled as well.

Hawk, who is a Bassmasters Elite Series professional angler, is a welcome breath of fresh air to the thriving Cullman community.

The Cullman County Commission, Cullman County Parks & Rec, and Smith Lake Park announced that Hawk would be promoting Cullman County and the Park as he travels across the country competing in the Bassmaster Elite Series.

"We signed a two-year agreement to represent Smith Lake Park and I hope to renew it as soon as that two years is done because I'd like to represent it as long as they will have me here," Hawk said with a smile.

Bass Fishing Hall of Fame President Sammy Lee, Cullman

p6



NATALIE BONNER/CULLMANSENSE

» Pro Angler Kevin Hawk signs multi-year agreement to represent Smith Lake Park.

Sports - 4 Calendar - 8 Poll - 18 Comics - 10

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Cullman Rotary Club Hosts 42nd Annual Rotary Auction

» Proceeds will fund various projects throughout community

By: Chelsea Sparks
Local Contributor

CULLMAN - Since its founding in 1937, the Rotary Club has been a part of our community as a group comprised of business leaders and prominent community figures. Most of us have heard the name at one time or another, but may not be completely aware of the full function of the organization.

The Rotary Club was founded over 100 years ago by an attorney in Chicago named Paul P. Harris. He wanted to create a club where professionals of diverse backgrounds could come together to share ideas. The club became known as the "Rotary Club" because of its early practice of rotating their meetings from one members' business to another.

Today, the Rotary Club does a lot more than just share ideas with one another; they are also active in supporting many worthwhile projects around the city and county. One such notable project was the effort to replace the trees lost in Cullman due to the tornado outbreak of 2011.

Dale Greer, long time member and manager of the Duck River Dam project, spoke of some charitable events and projects the club has done in the past.

"We donate scholarships to Wallace State Community College, we donate books to city and county schools," Greer said. "We give most of our money to local charities. We committed 25,000 dollars and paid that to the city of Cullman to replace the trees that were destroyed by the storm."

Their latest fundraiser was the 42nd Annual Rotary Club Auction. The auction took place on Friday night at the Cullman Civic Center and all proceeds will go to fund the upcoming year's projects and events like the ones mentioned above.

The Cullman Civic Center was packed with eager participants looking to make their bids and hopefully score some great merchandise. Tables were filled with a wide assortment of items and there was definitely something for everyone. Home décor, sporting goods, gift certificates, and many more items were on display and everyone was ready to make their bid.

The silent auction was first, and people politely and quietly made their way around the room browsing and writing down the occasional bid. However, as the auction progressed and the announcer started counting down the time left, things began to heat up. Participants anxiously watched and waited as the time left before the auction closed quickly ticked away, hoping that their bid would hold and they would leave victorious. Although the auction was silent, it was far from dull as bidding wars on paper took place on several hot items.

There is a lot to be said for the Rotary Club and its rich history in the community. Dale Greer spoke some more about his experience and what made him proud to be a Rotarian.

"What I do for a living, working for the city of Cullman, is recruit industry, and I see so many things of value in that process," he said. "It's the hospital and the schools and the civic clubs, it is everything that makes up a part of community, and I just realized I had to be involved in it."

The Rotary Club allows people like Greer to meet other professionals in the community and brings them together to further enrich the area around them. Whether it is through charitable projects or a way for local business men and women to meet and share ideas, the Rotary Club serves many worthwhile and important functions essential to the city.



CHELSEA SPARKS/CULLMANSENSE

» The bidding became heated and nerves tensed as the minutes until the end of the auction ticked away.

To get the latest information on the Rotary Club and their upcoming events, visit their Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/pages/Cullman-Rotary-Club/115283305172250.

Local Steakhouse Brands Another Small Town

By:Chelsea Sparks
Local Contributor

If you are looking for a great place to eat this weekend and you are a fan of mouthwatering steaks, then head over to Brandin' Iron Steakhouse in West Point. This restaurant has a lot going for it besides its reputation for hearty steaks and the famous "Brian's Fries."

This family friendly restaurant not only recently received the Small Business of the Month award from the Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce, but is also opening another Brandin' Iron in Cullman County.

The Brandin' Iron Steakhouse started in May of 2006 when Brian and Misty Stricklin were given a tip to go check out a location for sale in West Point.

The couple instantly fell in love with the property and decided that it was the place to fulfill their dream.

The owner, Brian Stricklin, has worked in the food industry for about 12 years and had always wanted to open a restaurant of his own.

When the Stricklins acquired the establishment, they set out to build their brand and earn their place in the community as one of the most talked about restaurants around. It seems their goal has been reached.

The manager of the steakhouse, Josh Speakman, talked about the philosophy of the Brandin' Iron and how they strive to offer a lot more than just a great meal.

"I often tell my staff that we are in the entertainment business and just happen to serve food," he said. "Because I believe when people go out to eat they are not just looking to consume food, they desire an experience. Our main focus is maintaining a small town, friendly, and family oriented atmosphere."

The new location will be in Fairview, a small town that promotes the atmosphere that the Stricklins want.

The restaurant will be opening sometime this year; optimistically sometime this spring or summer, but a definitive date has yet to be set.

"I am both excited and honestly a bit nervous," Speakman said.

"I am excited because I know it is something Brian and Misty have wanted for years and finally seeing it come to fruition is the success of four or more years of planning, saving, and staying focused on a common goal amongst our team."

He went on to say that he is more than confident that the second location will be just as big a hit in Fairview as it has been in West Point.

Another notable quality about this restaurant is its contributions to local charities around the community. Speakman spoke of the excitement he felt about the new location and its ability to open up even more ways to reach out.

"I am absolutely certain the second location will be just as successful as we have been in West Point," he said. "That excites me because I see what great contributions the West Point location is able to make to the local charities and community in its entirety. So I can just imagine what a positive impact we will be able to have on our community in order to help our neighbors who are less fortunate. It's just going to be a lot of work."

It's for everyone when a small business does well because everyone can benefit from the Stricklin's success. When you can boost the local economy and know that your money helps with charitable donations while enjoying a wonderful meal, well, as they say, "That's amore!"

Pets of the Week

Masago

Hello, my name is Masago and I am about 2 years old and weigh 37 lbs. I am hoping that my family comes to claim me soon, but if not, I will be up for adoption on March 11 at 10:30 a.m. If you are interested in me, call or come by to add your name to my wait-list, or send my family!



Rowdy

I'm Rowdy and I am about 6 months old and weigh about 43 lbs. I am believed to be a German Shepherd mix and I can't wait to find my new forever home. I have been at the Shelter since January 30 so I am more than ready to have a yard instead of a kennel to play in. I promise to be a loyal, loving companion.



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If you know the owner of either dog or if you are interested in adopting one of the dogs, please call 256-734-5448 or come by the Animal Shelter.

Voting Rights for Felons on the Table

By: Jake Grovum • Stateline

Kentucky could be heading for a historic change this year as it moves closer to abolishing its law banning felons from voting, thanks to a bipartisan effort in the state Capitol and a big assist from Republican U.S. Sen. Rand Paul.

The state has long had among the most restrictive felon voting rules, thus disenfranchising a high percentage of its voting-age population. Black residents have been disproportionately affected — more than one in five of voting age cannot cast a ballot.

A long-running push by voting rights advocates to end these restrictions got a boost from Paul, who this week pushed a compromise in testimony before state lawmakers. Republicans in the legislature, who control the Senate, for the first time agreed to ease the ban.

"It has the best chance it's ever had," said Senate Majority Floor Leader Damon Thayer.

Even as advocates for expanded voting rights anticipate a victory in Kentucky, they have a long road ahead in the many other states that continue to bar felons from casting ballots, disenfranchising millions. The years of effort and the convergence of political forces that could lead Kentucky to change its law show how difficult the challenges can be.

This year, a handful of states are considering proposals to facilitate voting for felons, according to Wendy Underhill at the National Conference of State Legislatures, continuing a trend that began in the 1990s. That's when states started to rethink disenfranchisement laws, spurring fierce debates about elections, criminal justice and racial politics.

Nearly two dozen states have since eased their laws; Delaware was the latest last year. The state removed a five-year waiting period after release before felons could vote and allowed most to regain their voting rights once their sentences are complete. Besides Kentucky, the issue has also gained particular attention this year in Florida and Iowa.

The debate is far from settled. Some states have even tightened laws, including South Dakota, which revoked in 2012 voting rights from felons on probation who were previously allowed to cast ballots.

"The practice of disenfranchising felons goes back thousands of years," said Roger Clegg, president and general counsel of the Center for Equal Opportunity, a conservative think tank. "When you think about it, we don't let everybody vote. We have certain minimum, objective standards of responsibility and commitment to our laws. Somebody who's committed a serious crime against his fellow citizen can't be presumed to be able to set those laws."

In a high-profile speech last week, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder called for changes to voting laws banning felons from voting, singling out Kentucky and other states where supporters acknowledge they have an uphill climb.

"This has much more momentum than we've had before in that state," said Marc Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project, a group that wants to reform felon disenfranchisement laws. "But these things take several years to germinate. We don't expect to see dramatic numbers of states (considering changes) just because Eric Holder made a speech."

A Long History

Almost every state places some limits on voting by felons. All but two — Maine and Vermont — bar prisoners from casting ballots; 13 and Washington, D.C. prevent felons from voting only while imprisoned; and 25 states let felons vote once they have served their sentences, plus probation or parole sentences. Nebraska has a two-year waiting period.

The remaining 10 states — Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wyoming — have much stricter laws that can bar felons from ever voting again. Most allow the governor to restore voting rights, but that power is used in varying degrees across states and administrations.

As a result, significant numbers of voters in some states have been left off voting rolls long after release from prison, including disproportionately high numbers of potential black voters, who are disproportionately represented among the prison population.

A report from the Sentencing Project found that in the 2010 elections 5.85 million Americans were disenfranchised nationwide because of felony convictions, including one out of every 13 voting-age African Americans. More than 7 percent of the entire voting-age population was disenfranchised in six of the states with the harshest policies.

Kentucky is among the worst: 7.35 percent of its voting-age population was barred from casting a ballot in 2010 because of felony convictions, including 22 percent of its black voting-age population, according to the report. This was second only to Florida, where nearly 11 percent of the voting-age population was disenfranchised, including 23 percent of blacks.

Deep Roots

Kentucky's felon voting ban has deep roots in the state's constitution, requiring a popular vote, on top of legislative approval, to alter it. The state's politics — split party control in the legislature and Democratic Gov. Steve Beshear — have also been a hurdle.

But last month, a bill that would automatically restore rights for some felons sailed through the Democratic-controlled House, 82-12.

The Beshear administration, which on its own has streamlined the restoration process and granted 8,000 felons their right to vote since taking office in 2007, has backed it as well.

Its warm reception in the GOP Senate raised hopes. As the Republican majority leader Thayer said, Paul's proposal to add to the legislation a five-year waiting period provided a breakthrough.

In his testimony, Paul said, "One mistake in life shouldn't permanently block a citizen's access to the ballot box. The right to vote is among the most important rights we have. It is something for which people in other countries have lost their lives."

Thayer said proponents on the issue have made a good case for redemption and paying a debt to society. "I could care less about what Attorney General Holder says about any issue," Thayer said. "He's had no effect on this matter in Kentucky, or with me personally. But Sen. Paul, on the other hand, has changed the terms of debate."

Still, it remains to be seen how House Democrats and the governor will respond to the five-year waiting period amendment. The bill gained approval in the Republican-controlled Senate Wednesday afternoon 34-4, and changes must be reconciled with the House.

If lawmakers succeed in reaching a compromise, it will be on the ballot this fall.

Mixed Results Elsewhere

While Kentucky may offer hope for supporters of felon voting rights, other states with the most restrictive laws, including Arizona, Florida, Virginia, and Iowa, have shown little interest in altering their policies.

"We're really a long way from where we should be," Arizona Democratic Rep. Martin Quezada said, adding that his bills to ease felon voting have had trouble even getting a hearing in the GOP-controlled legislature. "There just doesn't seem to be a willingness to go this route."

Virginia shows the issue can even divide parties. Former Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell supported easing his state's felon voting rules, and his administration restored rights to more than 6,800 felons under his office's authority.

But proposed changes to state law that would outlast his administration went nowhere, despite Republican control. The trend has carried over into this year, said Democratic Del. Alfonso Lopez, who's running for Congress this fall and has seen his bills to ease felon voting rights stymied in the House of Delegates. A proposal has surfaced this year to cut the funds for the governor's office to carry out clemency and voter restoration, Lopez said.

The issue has also often been swayed by whoever is in the governor's mansion. In Iowa, for example, former Democratic Gov. Tom Vilsack issued an executive order in 2005 granting voting rights to all felons once they completed their sentences.

In 2011, Republican Gov. Terry Branstad rescinded the order, re-installing the state's policy of making felons who have served their sentences apply to have their rights restored.

Democrats there have proposed changing the law, citing a cumbersome application process and uncertainty of the dueling executive orders. But Republicans, who control the House, oppose that, as does the Branstad administration.

Florida's felon voting law could factor into its governor's race this year.

Former Gov. Charlie Crist, at the time a Republican, streamlined enfranchisement for felons while in office, allowing some lesser offenders to regain their rights without a lengthy hearing or investigation. But his successor Gov. Rick Scott, also a Republican, reversed course, going back to a policy that allowed convicts to apply to a clemency board for their rights to be restored after at least a five-year waiting period, longer for some crimes. Crist, now a Democrat, will run against Scott in the fall.

In Alabama, Republican Gov. Robert Bentley backed a move to ease these laws after Attorney General Holder's speech last week. Whether that will gain traction with other Republicans, though, is unclear. Attorney General Luther Strange, also a Republican, has said only that his office is studying the issue.

Stateline is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news service of the Pew Charitable Trusts that provides daily reporting and analysis on trends in state policy.

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Smith Lake Paddle Boards is Ready for Summer, Are You?

By: Kate Mullaney
kate@cullmansense.com

CULLMAN - If you're looking for fun on the lake this summer, look no further than Smith Lake Paddle Boards. Paddle boarding is the perfect way to enjoy the water, and with warm weather just around the corner, owners Susan and Tommy Cost encourage you to try it out.

"It's good exercise, it's fun, it doesn't kill your joints, and it gives you freedom on the water," said Tommy.

Paddle boards have a foam core base with a fiber glass outer layer. They weigh about 28 pounds and float up to about 270 pounds. They're long and stable enough so you get a nice glide across the water, but they're light enough so that you can get them in and out of the water on your own.

You paddle with a one blade paddle and stand with your feet and body facing forward. Your goal in paddle boarding is to paddle straight and fast.

This will be the third full season the Costs have been selling paddle boards. "The first board we bought was my board and we got hooked on it. No one else was selling them and we have a lake in our backyard, so we thought we might as well let everyone else have fun with it too," Susan said.

"So we decided to set the business up in northern and central Alabama," Tommy added. "Our first year went well, and last year we expanded into Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi."

Opening this business was pretty simple for this outdoor couple. They met the man who conducts the wholesale program for Yolo boards (who also happens to be from Cullman) when they bought Susan's board.

Although he had a great deal of interest from other people wanting to sell these fascinating boards, he narrowed it down to the Costs and a few other people. "We lucked out and ended up being the exclusive dealer for this area," said Tommy with a smile. "He called us after about a week and a half, and then we bought our first load of boards."

So far, these adventurous owners have only done daily rentals on Smith Lake. This summer, however, they are going to open an on-water spot and do hourly rentals, demos, group lessons, and other events on the water.

They even have some bigger events planned for this summer as well, such as a mileage building class, paddle board yoga, and a paddle board race.

"The mileage building class is going to be for people who want to get into the racing scene, but would like to train a little at a time," Susan explained. "Paddle board yoga will be fun as well. We'll provide the board and a yoga instructor so all you have to do is show up to the class."

Both the mileage building class and paddle board yoga will begin in May. The paddle board race will be at the Silver Rock Cove and will be held on June 21.

"This will be our second year to do a paddle board race on Smith Lake, and it's called 'Paddle at the Rock'" said Tommy. "The first year went really well. We had about 50 people, and we hope to double that amount this year. All proceeds go to The Bell Center in Birmingham."

The Bell Center for Early Intervention Programs is an entity that is dedicated to building programs to maximize the potential of children from birth to three years of age who are at risk for developmental delay.

"Paddle at the Rock" will consist of three races: a 1-mile race, a 3-mile race, and a 6-mile race.

"The 6-mile race is for elite paddlers," said Tommy, "but just about anyone can participate in the 3-mile race."

"It's kind of like running a 5K," added Susan. "And the 1-mile race is just a lot of fun."

This year, "Paddle at the Rock" will be a part of a race series with 12 other races around the southeast.

"We're in cooperation with other board vendors so we incorporated our races together. Of course, people can just do the individual races too," Tommy explained. Susan and Tommy's new boards range from $985 to $1,500 depending on the model of the board. Their daily rental prices are $50 per day, and they will bring the board to you and pick it up at the end of the day.

Hourly rental prices will be determined soon. If you would like to contact Susan and Tommy, visit www.smithlakepaddleboards.com, find them on Facebook at Smith Lake Paddle Boards, or call them at 256-736-3002.

Prep Sports Weekly Scoring Recap

MONDAY, MARCH 3rd

Baseball

• Good Hope 11 vs Cold Springs 0 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)
• Hanceville 17 vs Holly Pond 1 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)
• Vinemont 6 vs Fairview 16 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)

Soccer (Girls)

• Cullman 3 vs West Morgan 0

TUESDAY, MARCH 4th

Baseball

• Hanceville 3 vs West Point 1 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)
• Fairview 3 vs Good Hope 5 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)
• Vinemont 6 vs Cold Springs 5 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)

Softball

• Falkville 20 vs St Bernard 0
• Good Hope 12 vs Hanceville 2
• Vinemont 0 vs Holly Pond 17
• West Point 8 vs Brewer 11

Soccer (Girls)

• West Morgan 1 vs Cullman 0
• St Bernard 0 vs Pope John Paul II Catholic 10

Soccer (Boys)

• Muscle Shoals 0 vs Cullman 4
• St Bernard 3 vs Walker 2

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 5th

Baseball

• West Point vs Vinemont 0 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)
• Fairview 8 vs Holly Pond 3 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)

THURDSAY, MARCH 6th

Softball

• St Bernard 0 vs Decatur Heritage 18
• St Bernard 0 vs Decatur Heritage 22

Soccer (Boys)

• Athens 1 vs Cullman 2
• Fultondale 4 vs St Bernard 0

FRIDAY, MARCH 7th

Baseball

• Hanceville 11 vs Good Hope 0 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)
• West Point 6 vs Good Hope 5 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)
• West Point 10 vs Fairview 4 (Cullman County Baseball Tournament)

Softball

• Decatur 7 vs Vinemont 6

SATURDAY, MARCH 8th

Baseball

• Hanceville 7 vs West Point 2 (Cullman County Baseball Championship)

Thompson "roaring" at Auburn

By:Josh McBrayer
josh@cullmansense.com

AUBURN - Anyone who has ever watched Cullman baseball has heard the name Keegan Thompson but, is it so often is, once the "big fish" leaves the little pond, he is lost in the sea of players with the same talents.

However this is not the case for Thompson. He is already etching his name in the annals of Auburn baseball history, being the first Auburn pitcher to throw a complete game-one hitter in 12 years when he baffled the Presbyterian College hitters on his way to earning a 3-0 win, the first in what looks to be the start of a great career.

The only hit came on a Punch and Judy bloop single. Two other Presbyterian hitters reached base via Auburn errors but none would touch the plate.

In Thompson's second appearance, he weaved another gem, allowing just a single run to Mercer while earning his second career victory 4-1.

He did it allowing just two hits in his second outing. Over the two starts, Thompson has a miniscule 0.39 ERA. He has given up just three hits and one run, hurling 23 innings and striking out 19 while walking just two.

As sound as Thompson is on the mound, he is equally as tough when he steps in the batter's box to face opposing pitchers. During a week long stretch between February 24th and March 3rd, Thompson went 5-12 from the dish with an RBI, a double bagger, and crossed the plate twice.

His dominance on the mound and his ability to handle the stick at the plate, earned Thompson Freshman of the Week honors in the SEC. His even keel attitude and calm demeanor is just what you want from an ace on your staff but don't let that fool you.

Thompson has just as much fire in his belly to win at Auburn as he did at Cullman. His drive and determination has already caught the attention of his head coach, Sunny Golloway, who has been quoted comparing Thompson to former Auburn great Tim Hudson. The comparison to one of the greatest ever set foot on the baseball diamond on the Plains will be tough to live up to, but if anyone can, it is Keegan Thompson.

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Did you know that traditionally the most important deadline for 12th grade college funding is Dec. 1 nationally for them to receive priority, merit-based funding consideration for all (4) years of undergraduate work?

Did you know that seniors who want to transfer from a 2-year program to a 4-year need to go ahead and prepare for transfer scholaship eligibility now?

While there are many variables that affect a student being selected for a merit-based award over another similarly academically qualified student, typically, the student's gpa & test score are the standards by which the student is entered into his/her highest "eligibility selection window":

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- Seniors with mid-range scores, let us show you how to maximize your remaining merit-based funding opportunities!
- Seniors with no/low scores, let us show you what you still can do to get as much funding as possible!
- Seniors with exceptional circumstances, let us show you how to help ensure that all of your additional opportunities are utilized!



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WSCC men's basketball wins 3rd ACCC/Region 22 tournament championship in 5 seasons

By: Russell Moore
WSCC Contributor

HANCEVILLE - Wallace State men's basketball sophomore guard Jestin Lewis sat at Tom Drake Coliseum last March and watched Shelton State cut down the nets after winning a state championship.

Lewis and fellow sophomore Marcus Johnson vowed to Wallace State coach John Meeks the Lions weren't going to allow that to happen again on their home court.

That promise has been fulfilled. Top-seeded Wallace State cut down the nets Saturday night at home after an impressive 77-67 victory over rival Shelton State in the 2014 Alabama Community College Conference (ACCC)/ Region 22 tournament title game, capturing the program's second state championship in the last three seasons under Meeks and the third in five seasons.

"It broke my heart last season to see Shelton State cutting down those nets. To be able to win the championship against them this year means so much to me," said Lewis, a Virginia native.

"We promised coach Meeks we were going to win it this year and we backed it up. We dedicated ourselves the entire season. We've put in a lot of hard work and it's all paid off."

Lewis definitely kept his end of the bargain up. He started the title game on fire, scoring the first 11 points for Wallace State.

He had 19 points by the half and finished with 31 points, tying a career-high he established against Shelton State earlier this season. Lewis, a Mercer commitment, also finished with seven rebounds and four steals.

"Jestin Lewis and Marcus Johnson walked on this court last year and told me this season was going to be ours. I challenged them every day to live up to that promise and they did. I couldn't be more proud of our entire team. We had high expectations all season and lived up to them," Meeks said.

"Jestin Lewis especially showed a lot of leadership in this game. He huddled guys up and did a great job with things beyond the stat sheet this week. He was the first one in the gym this week and the last to leave."

With Friday's semifinal win against Lawson State, Wallace State (27-6) had already assured itself a berth in the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) Division I national tournament, beginning March 17 in Hutchinson, Kansas.

The Lions weren't satisfied with that. They had one more thing on their mind.

"Our guys never talked about going to Hutch last night (Friday). It was all Shelton State all the time. They talked about winning this game and they did," said Meeks, who led Wallace State to its second national tournament berth in 2010 during his second season in Hanceville.

Despite a handful of injuries and adversity over the last two weeks of the regular season, the Lions entered the tournament as the North's Division top seed and as the hunted team after earning the regular-season championship.

Wallace State was ready for every challenge this week.

"It's been tougher the last three days to win. Each team was coming after us because we were the best team during the regular season and we were on our home court," said Wallace State forward Marcus Burwell, who finished with 10 points, including a pair of clutch 3's late in the game.

Added Lewis: "We are a family. We are brothers. We feel like we've been together for four years instead of one. We always knew we could win a ring together, so no challenge was too much for us. We knew if we played our game and stuck together, we could win this championship."

Lewis sparked Wallace State's fast start in Saturday's title game with 11 consecutive points, giving the Lions an early 11-5 advantage.

Lee Moore's 3-pointer with 13:04 left in the half then extended Wallace State's lead to 20-13.

The Lions built as much as an 11-point lead in the first half before Shelton State chipped away and cut the Wallace State margin to 40-36 at the half.

The long-time rivals traded leads four times during the opening four minutes of the second half and were tied at 46-46 with 14:28 to go after Shelton State's Albert Lynch III hit a 3-pointer from the left corner.

Wallace State regained control on an X-keem Jones putback, making it 48-46 with 14:01 remaining. Minutes later, Burwell, a sophomore transfer, nailed a pair of huge 3's on consecutive possessions for Wallace State, extending its cushion to 61-51 with 7:35 left.

Wallace State never relinquished the lead, but Shelton State didn't make it easy either. The Bucs cut their deficit to two, at 69-67, with 54.1 seconds remaining, but Wallace State answered with an 8-0 run to secure the championship, getting clutch free throws from three different players.



WSCC

» Wallace State players, including Jestin Lewis (5) and Quinterian McConico (42), walk to accept the first-place trophy from the commissioner.

Burwell's second-half 3's were a huge boost for the Lions.

"Marcus wasn't playing well in the first half, but we knew we had to get something out of his position. He's a gamer and does a lot of things that don't show up in the box score. He played some big-time minutes for us," Meeks said. "All of our guys stepped up when they had too. We've been in the same spot all season. We knew Shelton State had a run left. We made plays and answered when we needed too."

Burwell was thrilled to answer the call.

"I knew I had to step up because the game was getting close. I knew I could make those shots. I knew if we could get a double-digit lead, we would be in good shape. I just shot them with confidence," Burwell said.

"To contribute to this championship is like a dream come true. This has been our goal from the beginning. We've prepared for this since October and now we get to go Hutch and try to win that."

Moore was named the tournament MVP after pouring in 19 points versus Shelton State. The freshman guard from Kennesaw, Ga. finished with 53 points over three tournament games.

Lewis, Burwell and Johnson joined Moore on the all-tournament team.

During its long history, Wallace State basketball had never won a state championship until the 2009-10 season. Meeks, 30, led the Lions to a second state title and national tournament appearance in 2012 after his team won four games in four days as an underdog and a No. 6 seed. This championship was much different. The regular season, which included a 14-game winning streak, was an incredible ride and the heavily-favored Lions played with high energy and poise during their three-game tournament run.

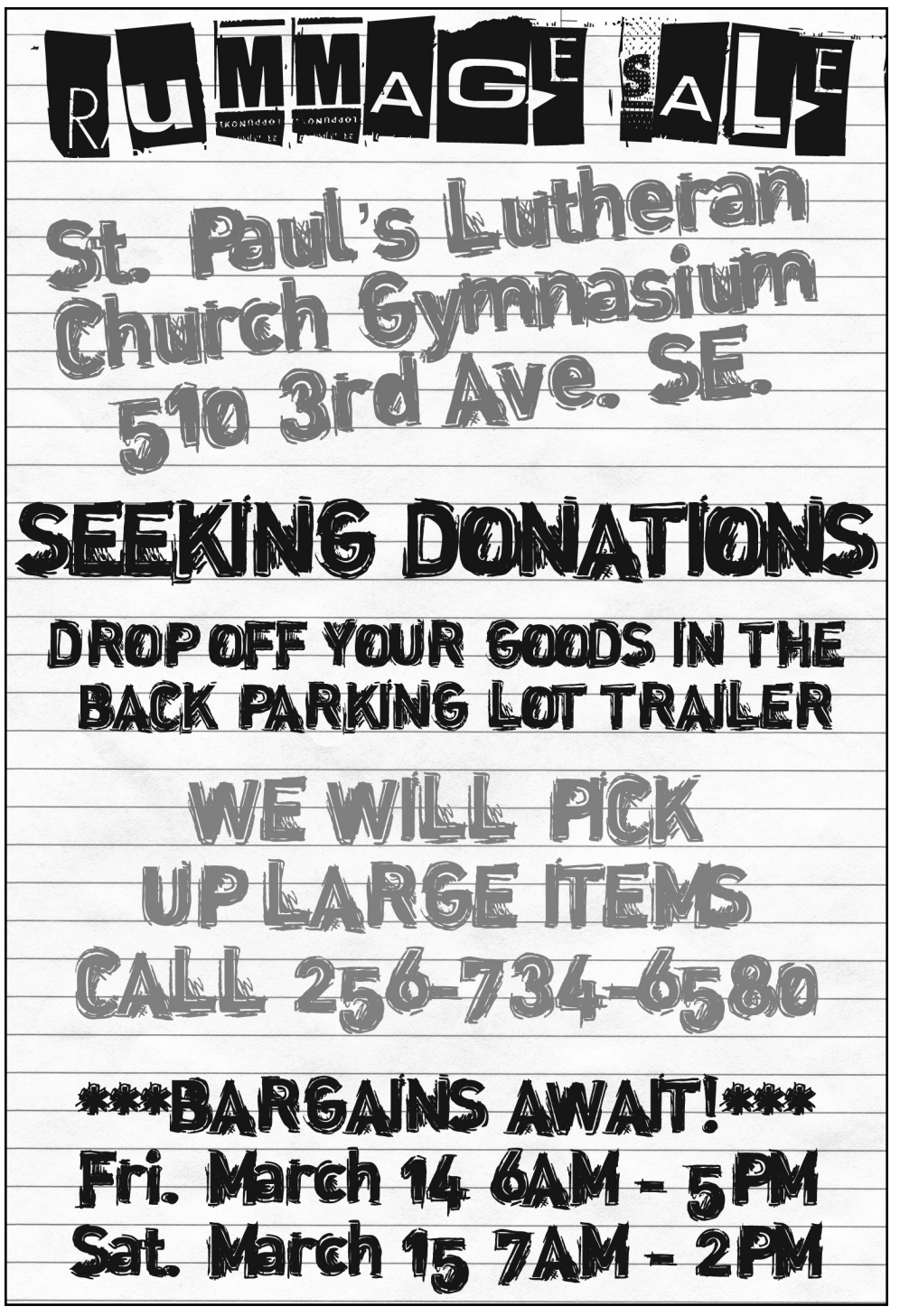
"Our guys responded night in and night out. No one counted us out this time. For us to get the No. 1 seed with all the adversity we faced and to play with only eight guys for two weeks is a true testament to the will and character of our guys," Meeks said.

Wallace State's best finish at the national tournament was 5th place in 2010.

"It's tougher in junior college basketball to make a national tournament than at any other level. We have two prizes right now. We have the prize that represents the entire body of work we accomplished during the regular season, and we have one that represents the grind we've been through the last three days. The team laid it all out on the line and did whatever it could to win," Meeks said.

"To own both prizes is a lot of fun. We can look forward to chasing a third prize in a couple of weeks."

For more information about Wallace State athletics, visit wallacestate.edu.



Kids (from Front)

with it," he said.

"The city put up $100 per school to be used for prizes during the food drive. I pitched this idea to each principal, and the teachers and students took it from there. I am so proud of all the teachers, principals, and students for their efforts in this great cause. "

Good Hope High School has already turned in their efforts from the drive. In a short amount of time, the students have brought in several hundred pounds of food and approximately $1,000. For Javon Daniel, executive director of Cullman Caring for Kids, this is music to his ears.

"It's just incredible," Daniel said. "The Good Hope community has been extremely supportive this year. Without community support we would not be able to function."

He further commented that he was simply thrilled to learn that the Good Hope City Council has even allocated money in their budget to help Cullman Caring for Kids.

"We are just so thankful to have Good Hope help out," he said.

The Food Bank helps roughly 400-500 families each month. On average, they distribute around eight tons of food to families all over the county.

You can drop off a donation any time at their office on Northeast Arnold Street.

So many families need our help, and as always, citizens of Cullman are ready to answer the call. Good Hope Middle, Elementary, and Primary schools will all continue to take donations until March 14.

Good Hope and communities like it are doing remarkable things for the less fortunate.

The greatest part of it all is the involvement of the children in this fundraiser. It is an encouraging thing to see the youth of this county get involved and show their generosity.

Local Autism Group Offers Support, Understanding

By: Chelsea Sparks
Local Contributor

CULLMAN - When people think of a child with autism, a lot of different ideas and images go through their mind. Some may think of the "classic" symptoms such as no eye contact, regression of speech, and a lack of social skills. While most of these symptoms are accurate for a lot of children with autism, it is only scratching the surface of what autism is and what these children and their parents face.

From the moment a parent realizes what is happening, their life is forever changed. Many feel immediately isolated from friends and family, not sure where to turn and desperate for support and answers to their ever growing list of questions. The outside world can be a scary place for these children and their families since even going to the grocery store can become a struggle. If the child has a hard time with bright lights, loud noises, or crowds, then going out at all can seem like an insurmountable task.

Autism is not visible to the naked eye, children with the disorder look like every other child you see when you're out and about. What you may perceive as a temper tantrum in Walmart may actually be a child with autism struggling to control the anxiety that comes with sensory processing issues. A loud sound to you may be out right painful to them, and a crowd of people may be annoying to the average person, but for them it is a panic-inducing situation.

It is because of situations like this that many parents find themselves being scrutinized or judged by other people. When people cannot see a physical reason for the child's outburst, they may assume it's because of a lack of discipline from the parent, which is seldom the case. These children cannot help what causes them distress, and the only thing their parents can do is to try and help the child learn to cope – a process that takes a lot of therapy and time.

For these and many other reasons, Rhonda Davis and Jessica Dyson founded the Cullman Autism Support Group 12 years ago.

The group meets once a month for support meetings, but have many other events and outings for families to participate in. Rhonda spoke of how she and Jessica first met by absolute chance one day in Mobile.

"Jessica and I actually met in Mobile at an autism conference," she said. "I had signed up to do registration and ended up meeting Jessica. We met and found out our boys were about the same age and diagnosed at close to the same time."

After meeting and discovering that they both lived in the same area, the two decided to start a local support group to help other families in the area. Since its founding 12 years ago, the Cullman Autism Support Group has done some amazing things for the local autism community in helping to raise awareness and money for research. The most recognizable of their events is the annual Walk for Autism that takes place at Wallace State Community College.

April is Autism Awareness Month, and the group has some great events planned to honor the kids and families in the community and to raise awareness. The 10th Annual Walk for Autism will be April 12 at the Wallace State track and field. There will be concessions, crafts, baked goods, face painting, horse and buggy rides, and much more. There will also be a Chick-fil-A Autism Spirit night and for every person that comes in to order food and says, "I would like to support autism," 20 percent of the proceeds from their order will go to help fund autism research and awareness.

These are amazing families with even more amazing children, and they need the help of their community to spread information and awareness to make this a more accepting world for them.

You do not have to have a child with autism to get involved and help, it takes people from all walks of life to make a lasting difference, but together we can make the world a brighter place for those with autism and their families.

For information on any of the events listed or for information on how to get involved with the support group, call Rhonda Davis at 256-962-2208 or Jessica Dyson at 256-339-1151.

St. Patrick's Day (from Front)

a worship service, a celebration for St. Patrick's Day and will feature the music of U2.

Children ages four years to fifth grade will meet in Christ Hall for food, crafts, videos, and a visit from none other than St. Patrick himself.

Finally, a great, more personal way to celebrate St. Patrick's Day this year is to throw your own party.

All you have to do is grab some green decorations, look up some recipes for some green cocktails, and you've got a party – just add some good company.

Don't be afraid to get creative this St. Patrick's Day and choose your own way to celebrate.

Whatever you do, don't forget to wear green, unless you want to be pinched!

Bass (from Front)

County Parks & Rec Director Doug Davenport, Cullman County Commission Chairman Kenneth Walker, and several others were in attendance at the Meet & Greet and spoke briefly about what to expect with this new joint venture.

"I think we can expect a lot of great things with Kevin being on board with the promotion of all of our parks. If you do the research, fishing is coming on strong. There are high school fishing teams and college fishing teams and then you have people like Kevin himself who do it as a profession," Davenport said.

"I even heard them say the other day on the news that fishing is about to surpass NASCAR and that's amazing. We are right here sitting on a goldmine in Cullman County."

Yet another awesome surprise announced at the Meet & Greet was the upcoming First Annual Smith Lake Park Bass Fest: Bass Tournament and Music Festival to be held on October 4 from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

This new annual event will feature fun for families and visitors with the music festival, arts & crafts, and food vendors while the anglers are out fishing.

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Memorial chalices at Sacred Heart of Jesus

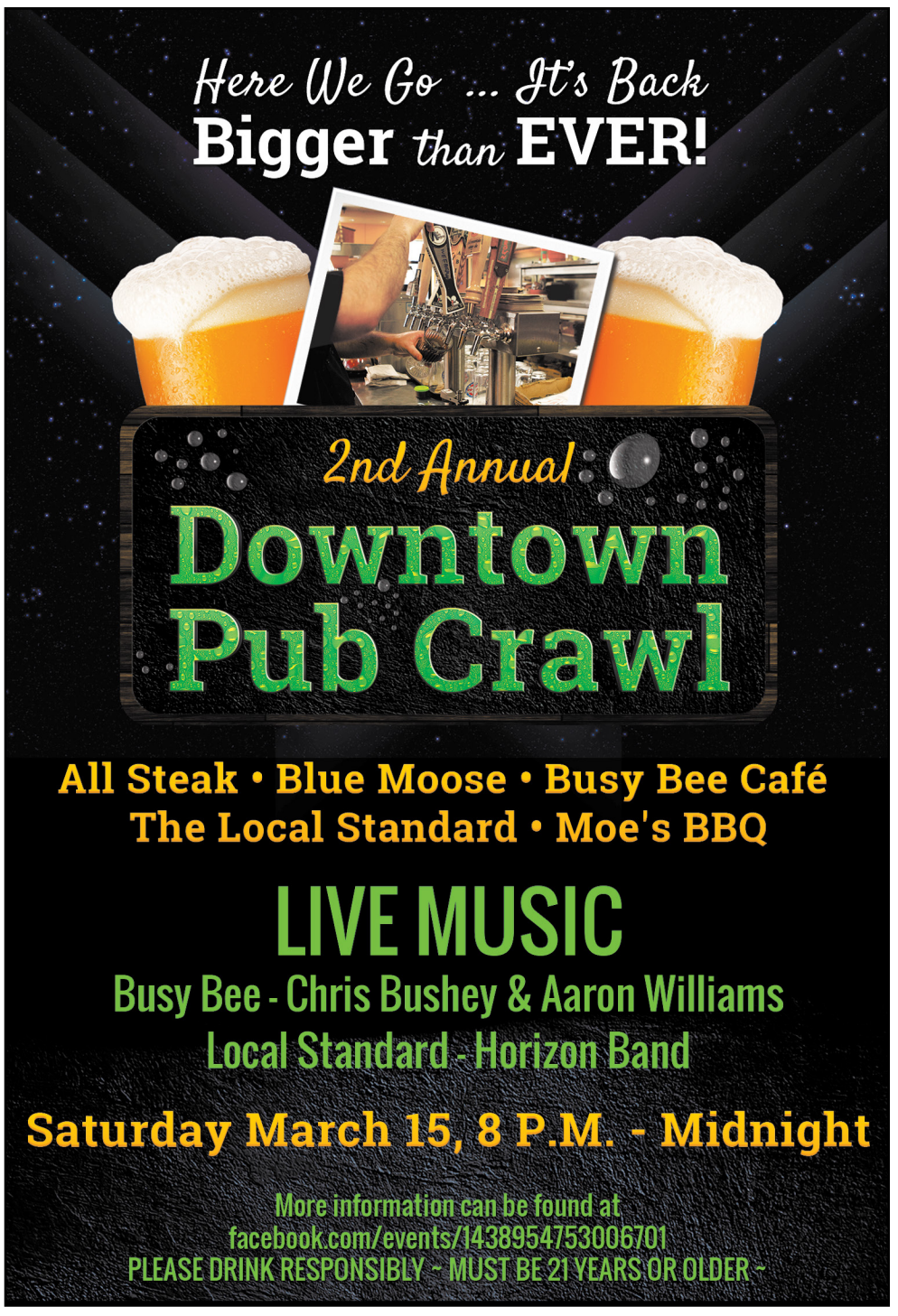


BARBARA RAGSDALE

» Pictured are Jim's daughter Lisa Young Chursholtz and his wife, Jane Young beside Pastor Fr. Patrick Egan, OSB. Not pictured is his son Jimmy Young of Atlanta.

By: Barbara Ragsdale
Community Contributor

The family of Jim Young presented a gift of new golden chalices and a Patton plate to Sacred Heart of Jesus in memory of their husband and father who passed away last November. Jim was a life-long member of the parish and these engraved memorial gifts will be used during each Mass said daily and on weekends to hold the consecrated wine and communion hosts.



Kansas City Barbeque Society Grilling Class Teaches Locals the Art of Barbeque

By: Kate Mullaney
kate@cullmansense.com

CULLMAN - The weather fell in love with last Saturday afternoon, making it a perfect day for the Kansas City Barbeque Society grilling class. This all-day event was hosted by Mike Howell, the Cullman County Barbeque Challenge, and the Cullman County Bama Chapter. It was held at the beautiful Festhalle Market Platz.

Jim and Becky Johnson, global ambassadors of the Kansas City Barbeque Society, taught this class with professional insights and the rules and secrets of the competitive barbequing world.

Jim entered his first barbeque competition in 1984 and has since won 76 total grand championships.

He is the winner of 17 Memphis in May grand championships, including finishing first in every category four times and is a 9-time Memphis in May top 10 finisher. It's safe to say that this guy knows barbeque.

"I've been on the competitive cooking circuit for 30 years," Jim Johnson said. "So, now I go around and try to teach people how to cook barbeque for competitions."

Johnson stated that it takes at least three or four years to start doing well in competitions without any classes or formal training.

"I try to take that three or four years off of their time and show them how to cook for judges," he said. "I talk about everything from flavor profiles, to smoke, to meat, to knowing how and what trim, and to making it appealing to the eye."

This class was laid back and educational. He taught a group of about 12 people as they enjoyed the sun at the Farmer's Market.

He cooked in front of them on this beautiful day and he requested their help as he taught. It was hands-on, informative, and delicious.

Johnson is affiliated with several barbeque organizations such as Memphis in May and the Kansas City Barbeque Society.

With around 20,000 members, it's the largest of its kind in the world. He doesn't often compete anymore because he'd rather spread the joy of delicious barbeque than collect more trophies and titles.

"I travel internationally to cooking schools and I've been to 16 countries so far. This May I'll be in Italy and Ireland and maybe Poland," he said.

So, what brings this globetrotting barbeque master to Cullman, Alabama?

The answer is Mike Howell. Howell is a barbeque contest promoter in Cullman. He has a true vision and passion for barbeque.

"I met him at the Jack Daniels Invitational," said Johnson.

"He's building a foundation for barbeque here in Cullman. You have to recruit the guys cooking in the backyard who haven't cooked competitively. So, what we do is give them a class to help them compete on the BBQ circuit. We're giving them the confidence they need to start competing. We have to start small and build the ground work."



KATE MULLANEY/CULLMANSENSE

» Jim Johnson, 76 time champ, teaches participants how to get started in barbecue competitions.

Thanks to Mike Howell and barbeque expert Jim Johnson, Cullman should be a barbeque-conscious town in no time. This class certainly prepared Cullman's skills and taste buds for grill season.

Rodeo (from Front)

The money we made from the Rodeo is only a fraction of what we need for them but it puts us that much closer to getting them."

The event ran Friday and Saturday night with the gates opening at 5 p.m. and the action kicking off nightly at 8 p.m. Over the course of two nights, champions were crowned in each of the seven events: Cowgirl Barrel Racing, Tie Down Roping, Bareback Bronco Riding, Saddle Bronco Riding, Steer Wrestling, Team Calf Roping, and the ever-popular Bull Riding. In addition to the competition events, a rodeo pageant was held Saturday night.

Sponsoring this year's event were Lesley Hyde of State Farm Insurance, RAM Rodeo, Cullman Jeep Chrysler Dodge, Jack's Western Wear, Premier Bank, Brandin' Iron Steakhouse, and Pepsi.

As important as the rodeo is to the competitors, being that it is one of the biggest stops on their professional tour, it is equally, if not more important to the West Point High School Marching Band who rely on this rodeo as one of their biggest fundraisers of the year. Heavily involved in all aspects of the rodeo, band members each work at a different station during the rodeo, from security to rodeo clown. "We would like to say thank you to all the fans that came out and supported us. Without our community support, we would not be able to travel and perform like we do," said Machen as he expressed his gratitude for another great fundraiser.





Monday

Cullman Kiwanis Club
The Cullman Kiwanis Club invites all local men and women who are interested in taking part in community service along with great fellowship, fun, networking, and learning to attend their weekly luncheon meeting at 12 noon each Monday at the All Steak. Come see what Kiwanis is all about and enjoy a great luncheon meal as well.

Domestic Violence Survivor Support Group
Victim Services of Cullman sponsors a Domestic Violence Survivor Support Group meeting every Monday evening from 5 p.m. until 7 p.m. in the old County Board of Education Building with childcare available. For additional information please call 256-775-2600. CRISIS HOTLINE - 256-734-6100.

Overeaters Anonymous Gather at Grace Episcopal
Members of Overeaters Anonymous meet every Monday, at 9:30 a.m. at Grace Episcopal Church in the Carriage House located on Church premises. Further information is available at 256-747-6218 or 256-352-1143. Everyone is invited to attend these gatherings.

GED Classes at Desperation Church
GED learning classes are held each Monday night from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at Desperation Church. For additional information please contact Ed Oaks at 256-737-9564 or 256-735-6811. These classes are open to the public and everyone who wants to obtain their GED is welcome to participate.

Cornerstone Revival Ladies Prayer Meeting
A Ladies Prayer meeting is conducted each Monday night at 7 p.m. at Cornerstone Revival Center. For additional information call 256-796-2899. All interested women are invited to attend.

Aqua Zumba Classes at CWAC
Everyone is invited to take part in the Aqua Zumba classes that are offered each Monday at Cullman Wellness & Aquatic Center beginning at 7 p.m. in the center's indoor pool. Please call 256-775-7946 for additional information!

Tuesday

Cullman Caring for Kids in Need of Donations
If you are able to contribute to Cullman County's Community Food Band, the 'Caring for Kids' organization, they would be grateful. Non-perishable food items are needed, and of course cash enables them to purchase needed products to fill their empty shelves. Please call 256-739-1111 to see how to help or mail checks or money orders to Cullman Caring for Kids, P. O. Box 698, Cullman, Alabama 35056-0698. Thanks in advance for anything you can do.

Square Dancing lessons
The Friendship Square Dance Club of Cullman will be holding free lessons on square dancing from 6:30 p.m. until 8:30 p.m. Contact Rip Johnston at 256-347-7266 or Hulda Schaefers 256-734-3566

Knifty Knitters Weekly Meeting
Members of the Cullman Knifty Knitters group meet each Tuesday afternoon at 3 p.m. in the Cullman County Library. Everyone is invited to come learn how to knit yarn and needles are free. This group is open to all ages, both accomplished knitters and those wishing to learn the art form. Crocheters also are invited to take part in these weekly meetings. Please call Lesia for more info 256-734-2720, ext. 23.

Emotions Anonymous Support Group Meeting
An Emotions Anonymous Support Group meets each Tuesday at noon at Grace Episcopal Church Carriage House. Those interested are invited to attend these group sessions. Further information is available through the Group Director's office at 256-734-3605 or 256-796-8440.

Ladies' Auxiliary VFW Dance at Post 2214
The Ladies' Auxiliary of VFW Post 2214 invites the community to their weekly Tuesday night dances at the VFW Post building. The country line dance starts at 7 p.m. each Tuesday night, with admission only $5.00 per person. Concessions are available and all proceeds benefit the Auxiliary's local projects.

Wednesday

St. Monica's Group
St. Monica's Group for those addicted to alcohol or drugs meets every Wednesday night at 7 p.m. in the Rectory Basement of Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church. All are welcome to attend who feel the need. For further information please contact Brian, 256-595-0515 or Rita, 256-507-0358.

Manna Meals at St. Andrew's United Methodist
Everyone is invited to attend the weekly Wednesday night 'Manna Meals' at St. Andrew's United Methodist Church from 5 p.m. until 6 p.m. Sack dinners will be available for carry outs. Please call the Church office for further information 256-735-0444.

Storytime at the Hanceville Library
Everyone is invited to take part in the 'Storytime' session each Wednesday starting at 10 a.m. at the Hanceville Library!

Latter Day Saints Genealogy Library
The Genealogy Library at the Latter Day Saints (L.D.S.) Church is open to the public each Wednesday night from 7 p.m. until 8:30 p.m. Don Jones is available to open the Library at other times, if needed, so please contact him at 256-784-5098.

Girls & Boys Club at Spirit Life
Spirit Life Church will host a Girls & Boys Club meeting for those 12 and under every Wednesday beginning at 7 p.m. at the church. All are welcome. Please call the church for further info 256-739-3326.

Aqua Zumba Classes at CWAC
Everyone is invited to take part in the Aqua Zumba classes, which are offered each Wednesday at Cullman Wellness & Aquatic Center beginning at 7 p.m. in the center's indoor pool. Please call 256-775-7946 for additional information!

Thursday

New Vision Support Group
There is a New Vision Support Group which will meet at 10 a.m. and everyone interested in this subject is welcome to attend. The program is at Hilltop Community Center. Additional information is available by calling Linda Estes, 256-739-4653.

'Root Ministry' at Abundant Grace Church
There is a weekly meeting each Thursday night starting at 6 pm at Abundant Grace Church. 'Root Ministry' has the aim of radically overcoming obstacles together for anyone with any types of hurts, hang-ups or habits in their lives. Please call 256-739-7091 for additional information. All welcome!! **

Thursday Afternoon Overeaters Anonymous Meeting
Those interested are invited to attend the weekly Thursday afternoon meetings of Overeaters Anonymous which begin at 4:45 p.m. at Grace Episcopal Church's Carriage House. For additional information please call 734-376-2124 or 256-352-1143.

Friday

'Wii Bowling' at the Donald E. Green Senior Center
The entertainment for senior citizens is 'Wii Bowling' at the Donald E. Green Senior Center starting at 1 p.m. Everyone is invited. Come enjoy some exercise (but not too physical!) and fellowship with friends. They bowl every Wednesday and Friday afternoons at 1 p.m.

Nimble Thimble Quilt Guild of Cullman
Members of the Nimble Thimble Quilt Guild of Cullman will gather at the Colonel Cullman Museum starting at 9:30 a.m. today. All interested quilters are invited to attend this meeting.

Annual Rummage Sale at St. Paul's
Everyone is invited to the Annual Rummage Sale at St. Paul's Lutheran School today from 6 a.m. until 5 p.m. Come find some great bargains!

Cullman Civitan Club Spaghetti Dinner & Silent Auction
Join others at the annual Civitan Spaghetti Dinner and Silent auction beginning at 4 p.m. The cost is $7.00, which includes spaghetti, salad, bread, and dessert. Eat in or take out. Silent Auction to be part of the event. This annual event will take place at St. Andrew's Church in their Fellowship Hall. Everyone welcome.

Friday Night Dance at the VFW
Cullman's VFW Post 2214 invites everyone to come to their weekly Friday night dances at the VFW Hall from 7 p.m. until 10 p.m. The cost is $5.00 per person and music by the Golden Oldies and Country with the Midnight Highway Band will be filling the air. Funds raised go toward the building rental. Get your dancing shoes on and come out for a great evening of fun and entertainment tonight.

Saturday

VFW Saturday Night Dance
The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 2214 invites everyone to their weekly Saturday night dances which begin at 7 p.m. and last until 10 p.m. The Boogie Night Band provides music on Saturday nights. Entrance fee is $5.00 for each individual. Come on out and bring your dancing shoes and enjoy an evening of great music, fun, and fellowship!

Veterans Bass Fishing Tournament at Smith Lake
There will be a special Bass Fishing Tournament for all military veterans scheduled from 6:30 am until 300 pm at Smith Lake Park. First place winner receives $1,000.00. Please contact Rick Leigeber at 256-734-8102. All funds raised will benefit local veterans.

Hanceville Lions Club Pancake Breakfast
Everyone is invited to get out and eat breakfast at the Moody Center as the Hanceville Lions Club members flip flapjacks to help raise fund for the Billy Ray Scholarship Fund. The breakfast will run from 7 a.m. until 10 a.m. $5.00 per person for all you can eat. Come feed those hungry kids - no cooking and no dishes.

Cullman Area Autism Networking Group
Members of the Cullman Area Autism Networking Group will gather at the CCCDD at 5 p.m., with childcare provided if reserved by March 6. Please contact Rhonda Davis at 256-962-2208 or Jessica Dyson, 256-339-1151. Tonight's program will be on sensory issues for older students and adults with Melissa Dew. All interested are invited to attend.

Next Monday

Cullman Kiwanis Club
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RESIDENTIAL RECIPES

Easy Cheesy Chicken Parmesan

By: Allison Robertson • Local Contributor

It was three years into our relationship when I asked my now husband if he liked chicken parmesan. He said, "Oh yeah, its' my favorite."

I was blown away. I had avoided making it for him because I didn't think he would like it and after a three-year hiatus, it was back on the menu. I made my original recipe for him. He approved but had a few suggestions.

Well, this had never happened before. He usually loved everything I made, without a word of criticism. I was thrown into a spiral of self doubt. (I take my cooking very seriously.)

So, I took his suggestions and put them into practice. I tried again a couple weeks later. Better, but not quite there yet.

Finally, on my fourth try (after altering my original recipe yet again), I came out a winner.

As with all my recipes, the easier they are, the better.

Don't worry about going out for date night. Stay in and make this. You'll thank me later.

Ingredients:

- 4 skinless boneless chicken breasts
- 2 cups - Italian style breadcrumbs
- 1 cup - flour
- 1 cup - buttermilk
- salt to taste
- pepper to taste
- 1 pound - thin spaghetti (or favorite pasta)
- 1 jar - favorite spaghetti sauce
- 1 block - mozzarella cheese

Instructions:

- Preheat oven to 375 degrees.
- Line baking pan with aluminum foil and spray with nonstick spray.
- Put flour and breadcrumbs on separate plates and pour buttermilk into a large bowl.
- Rinse and clean the chicken breasts and pat dry. Salt and pepper each side.
- Put one chicken breast into flour, coating completely. Brush off excess.
- Dunk the floured chicken breast into the buttermilk. Allow the excess to drip off.
- Place the breast into the breadcrumbs and really pack it on. Make sure it is entirely covered.
- Repeat with remaining chicken.
- Heat a couple tablespoons of oil in a nonstick skillet. When oil is heated, place the breaded chicken breasts in oil and cook on medium high 5 to 7 minutes on each side or until golden brown. Take out of the oil when done and place on the foil lined baking pan. (Don't freak out if your tiny skillet can't fit all four at once. Just do it in batches.)
- Place the pan fried chicken in the oven at 375 degrees for 30 minutes.
- After 20 minutes, bring your water to a boil for your pasta. Cut your cheese into thin slices.
- After the 30 minutes is up on your chicken, pull it out of the oven and lay the slices of cheese on top of the chicken. Cover that thing up! That way, if you browned it a little too much, or your breading has somehow fallen off, no one can tell because cheese makes everything better. Put it back into the oven.
- Cook the pasta according to the package directions. Drain and return to the same pot and add the sauce, putting it back onto the hot burner to get it all heated together.
- Pull the melted, cheesy chicken out of the oven and you are ready to plate.

Serve this with a salad and some garlic bread and you've got yourself a five-star Italian restaurant in your own home.

Just don't put a white tablecloth on the table if your husband is anything like mine because it *will* be ruined.

GET YOUR RECIPE PUBLISHED

E-mail submissions to recipes@cullmansense.com

MIDWIFERY

Women of Alabama Seek Options for Birth

» Duo spearhead writing campaign to Sen. Bussman

By: Chelsea Sparks
Local Contributor

One of the most important and personal choices an expectant mother can make is how and where to give birth to her child. Many decisions you make as a mother are subject to the judgment of others and not one choice is easy.

In Alabama, however, there is no choice on the "who" and "where" part of that question. Unless a woman wants to have an unassisted birth or gives birth in a hospital, the prospect of hiring a midwife to be present at your birth is not an option.

Christy Sherrill, an art teacher at The Shop Around the Corner, wants to change that. She hosted a letter writing campaign recently to try and allow women to have more options. Laura Reeder, a certified instructor of the "Bradley Method" of natural birth, joined her in this campaign.

In 37 states it is legal for a midwife to obtain a license to practice midwifery, but in states like Alabama you cannot. The hope this year is to at least decriminalize the act of midwifery. This simply means that while midwives still cannot obtain a license, they can no longer be prosecuted for practicing midwifery.

The bottom line as it stands now is that anyone can be present and help with a homebirth, except someone who knows what to do. For years, the objective has been to legalize midwifery in the state and allow midwives to obtain their license. This, so far, has been rejected over and over again.

The new plan is a bit different and may actually have a shot in doing some good for the women of Alabama who would like the option of homebirth with a midwife present. Sen. Paul Bussman, R-Cullman and Rep. Mike Ball, R-Madison have teamed up to try and decriminalize this act.

The bill that went to the House is basically now dead in the water, due in large part to lobbyists of insurance and medical groups, and the money they can throw around.

"House Bill (HB 67) will probably never even get looked at in the committee it has been assigned to. This is because the few Representatives on that committee are heavily funded by insurance and medical groups," Sherrill said.

"The lobbyists give money and a long list of how they would like for them to vote on each issue. As a small group with no money and one issue, it is probably best to keep pressing the Senate Bill where committee members are not so heavily funded by insurance and medical lobbyists."

This is why Sherrill and Reeder are asking the women of our community to write a handwritten letter to Sen. Paul Bussman and thank him for fighting for a woman's right to choose how and where they give birth, without the fear of prosecution, and to encourage him to continue to try and get the bill back on the table. This needs to happen before the end of March so that it can be brought to a vote this year.

For some women, the idea of a home birth is not their cup of tea, but for an increasing number of women, it is the ideal place for them to give birth. For Sherrill and Reeder, their mindset is not that there is a right or wrong place, but that women with healthy pregnancies should have the right to hire a midwife and to give birth in the place they are most comfortable.

AT A GLANCE: Let Your Headshot Speak for You

By: Nicole Helms
Local Contributor

According to an old adage, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Well if that rings true then your headshot is worth a million. Social media and online business is growing rapidly and in many cases your headshot is not only your brand image, but also your first, and last, impression.

Any public face, those who routinely come into contact with customers, clients, business partners, or potential business affiliates, should have a professional headshot. A static logo on your Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other social media sites, can be off-putting to clients. Your headshot puts a face with the name.

The most important thing when pursuing that professional headshot is to work with a, you got it, a professional, not the average Joe down the road with a camera. We call those people GWCs (Guys with Cameras) for a reason. You need to shoot with someone that you think you will be comfortable being photographed by and someone whose work style speaks to what you want your headshot to look like. Remember, people can always tell if a pose is forced or unnatural.

The best look for your headshot all depends on what you want your headshot to say about you. If you want to look executive and powerful, then you might want to take your headshot in an office, overlooking a city, with a serious look on your face. If you want to look approachable or causal, then try shooting at a park with a smile on your face to display your informal sense of business.

Using a solid color studio background is great for those who may be unsure of what setting they want to use or if nothing seems to fit. It's always a great idea to talk to your photographer about what look you are trying to portray and get their advice, too. It is, after all, their job.

Always try to keep the look as natural as possible with minimal makeup. Do your makeup as if you're going for a nice evening out – done but never overdone. Avoid glittery and shimmery makeup and don't over gloss your lips. Think about the image you are trying to portray. Not a make-up aficionado? That's okay, but at least wear foundation to even out your skin tone.

Men should wear a suit jacket, sweater, or a dress shirt. Women should wear a blouse or tailored jacket. Remember to wear something that you will be comfortable in because you don't want to look stiff and unnatural in your clothing and setting. Avoid wearing patterns, colors that are too close to your skin tone, and overaccessorizing. Pick mid-tone colors like greens, blues, or browns. Never wear anything that distracts the viewer from your face.

It's important to keep the same headshot for all of your e-Business accounts so that people who might look for you using more than one website will know that each account is the same person. This unified pattern will ensure that your potential clients and customers will know who you are when they can match your Facebook photo to your LinkedIn account's photo.

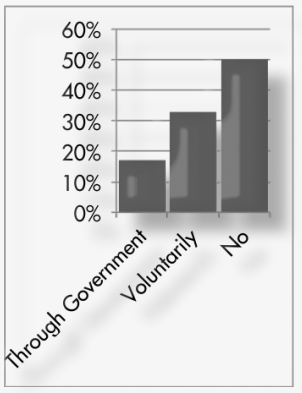
You should update your headshot at least every six months or every time you drastically change your look, such as when you dye your hair a different color. Also, plan to purchase several looks so that you will have options.

CULLMANSENSE
Community Matters

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Poll

Do you think food labels should be altered to make them easier to understand?



This Week's Poll

Do you fear an impending economic crash?

Vote Today at CullmanSense.com/Poll

cullman city parks & recreation

WHAT'S ON DECK AT PARKS AND REC....

www.cullmanrecreation.org
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- **Youth Baseball & Softball Reg EXTENDED:** Spring youth league baseball and softball will be extended through Feb. 18 for ages 4-14. Games will start in March at Heritage Park and the Field of Miracles. Cost is $90 and includes a hat and jersey. Call 256-734-9157 for details. Registration is open online at active.com by searching "Cullman Parks" or at the Cullman Civic Center.
- **Senior Spirit Travel:** Senior Spirit will travel to "Magnificent Michigan" May 8-14 with stops at Windmill Island, Veldheer's Tulip Farm & Delft Factory, Nelis' Dutch Village, as well as several museums and parades. Cost with motor coach travel and 6 nights of lodging is $1,349 for dbl, $1649 for sngl. Deposit payment of $75 is due by March 1, and spaces are filling up fast! Call 256-734-4803 for more information.
- **Nia Dance & Ageless Grace Fitness Classes:** Includes yoga stretching, anti-aging tips, and more with instructor Ann Caretti. Nia class is held Tuesdays at 10:00am at the civic center, and Ageless Grace is held on Thursdays at 5:30pm.
- **Ballroom Dance Classes:** Ballroom dance classes will be held weekly at the Cullman Civic Center on Thursday nights with beginners at 6:30pm and advanced class at 7:30pm under instructor Mack Wilson. Cost is $10 per person per class. Call the Cullman Civic Center for details at 256-734-9157.
- **Zumba Classes:** Held at the Civic Center Mon., Wed., and Thurs. 5:30-6:30pm. $40 for 10 classes or $6 per class with instructor Monica Kugler.
- **Men's Open Spring League Softball Reg.:** Feb. 15-March 15 at Heritage Park . Cost is $425 for a team which includes 12 game season and a single elimination tournament. Ages 15 & up, call 256-739-9931 for details or to register.
- **Miracle League Spring Softball Registration:** Feb. 15-March 15 at the Cullman Civic Center; cost is $50 per player which includes a jersey and trophy at the end of season. Call the Civic Center at 256-734-9157 for additional info.
- **Walk in the Park Disc Golf Tourn:** PDGA C-Tier tournament to be held on Sunday, Feb. 23 at 9:00am. Walk-up registration will be held on the back side of the park (old Woodland Hospital side) at the first disc-golf hole from 7:30am-9am. Call for details at 256-739-9931.

What's Online

Pinterest Projects: DIY Unique Wall Frame

These days, there is no shortage of do-it-yourself projects found on Pinterest. It's almost a guarantee that you will find a project you are looking for or stumble across an interesting idea. One project that seems popular among many pinners lately is repurposing old window frames because it's budget-friendly and the sky...

qrne.ws/171



OPINION: Obamacare's Assault on the Lower-Middle Class; Affordable Care Act Isn't What You Think

Obamacare or the "Affordable Care Act" continues to be highly debated four years after being signed into law. Conservatives present it as the poster child of liberal big government overreach.

qrne.ws/172

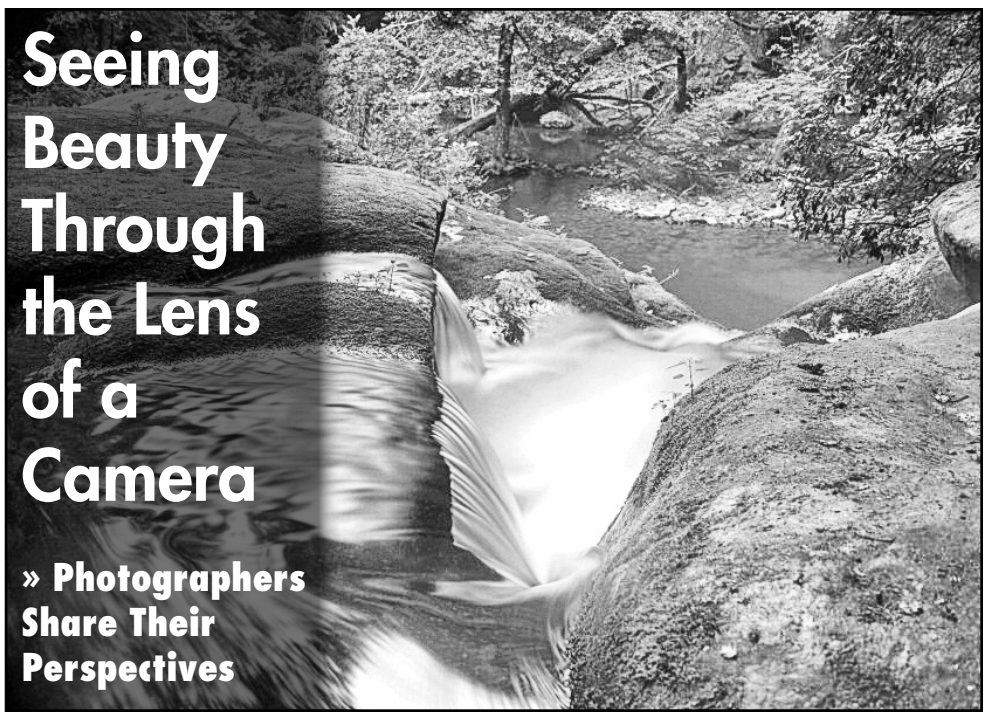
Arts and Crafts Show Helps Education in Hanceville

Across the country, education has been hit by major budget cuts, and teachers and students alike are feeling the effects. Teachers are being laid off and others are struggling to keep their classroom a warm and engaging environment.

qrne.ws/173

Seeing Beauty Through the Lens of a Camera

» Photographers Share Their Perspectives



ANDREW KREPS PHOTOGRAPHY

» Andrew Kreps finds his inspiration by walking through nature barefooted.

By: Sharon Schuler Kreps
Community Contributor

When I see someone sporting a big ole clunky camera, dangling in front of them, attached to a thick strap around their neck, I immediately stop what I'm doing and watch them for a bit. Why? Because I consider that person to have "magical powers" or the ability to see beauty in ordinary, everyday things the rest of us tend to overlook.

These "magicians" see the world through a pair of rose-colored glasses, otherwise known as the lens of their cameras. Not only do they see beauty, but they also capture these images as only they are able to do - from behind the lens of their cameras. I just happen to personally know two such people and decided to ask them exactly how they manage to find and take their lovely pictures.

Scott Roberts, a native of Cullman, explained it to me by comparing it to my writing. "Getting ideas for stories I guess is a lot like setting out to take a nice photograph for me. For example, a few weeks ago I set out on a Sunday morning very intent on locating a good picture that day. The day was perfectly warm. People were out playing in the park, walking their dogs, riding motorcycles, and just basically having fun outside. I drove 80 miles around the city of Huntsville that day and came home completely empty handed."

"But then the next day I went to Guntersville on some job related stuff and I found myself with a little time left in the afternoon. I located a place to go for a walk with the camera over my shoulder and despite the cold, grey day and surrounded by seemingly lifeless dead trees, I saw these little red flowers in the distance. These flowers turned out to be the picture of the red maple tree flowers that I uploaded to Facebook recently."

"I did not have the slightest idea that I would end up with a good picture at the end of that day. Because I was not hell bent on finding a great picture is probably the reason I found one. 'Hey, I wonder what's down that road?' is a question that often leads me to something good. And sometimes, that road can literally lead underwater. Then I ask myself, 'What's under the water?'"

Hanceville native, Andrew Kreps, finds the inspiration for his photography by walking barefooted through the forest or along a riverbank. "I love the camera, as a tool, to capture my perspective of life. The pictures are already there before I ever get a hold of them in the woods," said Kreps. "The same spot can be shot over and over again throughout the year and never gets dull. Outside, everything is always changing, so it's fun to watch the water levels in creeks and rivers rise and fall until it looks its best flowing between different rock layers at various depths. You can never take the same picture two times in nature, so that's what fascinates me about the whole thing. The best feeling is to grab a moment that sticks for good in your being and being able to preserve it for everyone else."



ANDREW KREPS PHOTOGRAPHY

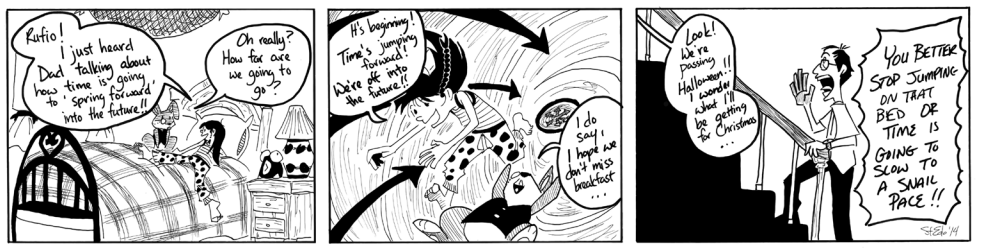
» Andrew Kreps

I am thankful for people like Scott Roberts and Andrew Kreps because they take the time to pick up a camera and learn how to use it.

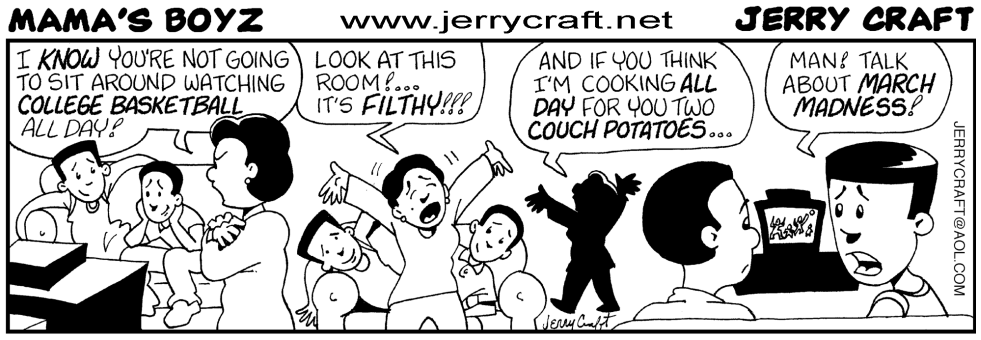
Then, from behind the lens of their cameras, each have taken amazing pictures and shared them. We desperately need people like this to remind us that the world is still a beautiful place, filled with color, wonder and life. I find this comforting, especially in this technology filled world we now live in.

Comics

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SUNNY STREET



SUNNY STREET



Chimay Tripel: A Feast for the Taste Buds

By: Kate Mullaney
Local Contributor

This week's beer review was made possible by the help of my sister and her husband, Emily and James Abadin. The only thing my brother-in-law likes more than introducing people to new beers is beer itself. So, this week he introduced me to a Belgian Tripel (my favorite style of beer).

Chimay Triple is brewed by monks at the Notre-Dame de Scourmont Abbey in Belgium. This brewery is one of the six breweries in Belgium that produce authentic Trappist beer; beer brewed by monks within the walls of a Trappist monastery. The Cistercian Trappist monks of Chimay began brewing their first, German inspired, beer in 1862 and in 1966, they brewed perhaps the most delicious style of beer: a Belgian Tripel.

Tripels are typically strong pale ales and usually high in alcohol content. They were originally modeled after the first beer of its kind created by Westmalle's Trappist brewery.

The Chimay Tripel is 8 percent alcohol and is light, sweet, bitter, and strong – a combination only known to those who have tasted a Belgian Triple. This beer had an intense aroma to me. As my family and I smelled our beer, we were able to note the distinct aromas of raisins, figs, flowers, and even plums. It smelled like fruit and looked even better.

We had a difficult time deciding the color of this beautiful beer, but we eventually decided "light golden" was most accurate. It has a thick white head that stays around a while before diminishing. It's a cloudy beer with decent lacing.

Belgian Tripels have such a distinct flavor that they are almost impossible to describe; not too harsh or hoppy and rather dry. The best word I can think is tasty.

In the end this fizzy medium bodied beer leaves you with a nice and dry finish. Give it a try!

Lawyer Turned Author Has a Hit With First Book

By: Chelsea Sparks
Local Contributor

Robert Bailey always knew that there were two things that he really enjoyed – reading books and watching Alabama football. Growing up as an avid reader has definitely helped this lawyer turned writer to be a success.

"I've always loved stories ever since I was a kid," he said. "When I was in college, I took a short writing class on short stories and liked it. I got enough good reviews that I thought maybe I have a little talent in it."

Bailey received his law degree from the University of Alabama and has since been a civil defense trial lawyer for the past 13 years. He and his wife, Dixie Bailey, live in Huntsville and are the proud parents of two little boys and a little girl. It is truly a great accomplishment to juggle work, a family, and still find time to sit down, write a book, and fulfill a dream.

That dream is now a full-blown reality as his first novel, "The Professor," hit bookshelves on January 28. Now the past eight years of hard work and dedication are finally paying off, and the book is getting some great reviews. Not to mention the sold out book signings that have taken place in the past few weeks.

Critically acclaimed author Winston Groom (writer of the book "Forrest Gump") has said that the book is "Gripping from the first page to last." Many more authors have said as much, including Mark Childress, author of the renowned book "Crazy in Alabama."

The epiphany actually came to Bailey in college, the idea of what would happen if a law professor actually had to try a case. The story is centered on the character Thomas Jackson McMurtie. Once a promising trial lawyer, McMurtie gives it all up to become a law professor at the University of Alabama at the behest of his mentor Paul "Bear" Bryant.

The story takes a serious turn when the protagonist is faced with not only his failing health, but the seemingly overwhelming task of returning to the courtroom. Believing that he is not able to handle the case, he turns the reigns over to a former student, but soon finds that the young lawyer is just not up to the task and is forced to face a courtroom once more.

The book is one that could grab the hearts and minds of any audience, but the people of Alabama will probably find a connection that no one else can grasp. A story of tragedy, greed, betrayal, love, hope, and redemption is what you will find between the covers of this book. Another tale from the series is set for this time next year.

Editorial Cartoon



OPINION

Justice For Justina

By: Tom Esposito

Nationally and internationally, the big breaking news stories roll in like the waves of a stormy sea. Internationally, Russia is making a move to assert itself again as Empire. The Chinese are grandstanding off the coast of Japan. Syria and Egypt are boiling points and the Iranians are playing the West in order to assert themselves as the leaders of the mid-east with their push for nuclear armaments. Nationally, the weak economy is still taking its toll on Americans in every financial strata, Affordable Health Care is a bust out of epic proportions and there is a malaise in Washington that hangs like a pall over the country.

These and other topics too numerous to list are all major news items. They all have weight and they all significantly affect nearly every American in varying degrees of severity. Then comes a story, that is not international in scope, does not involve the threat of war, famine, failing economies or epidemic and yet the story itself is chilling in scope and fosters creeping fears, anxiety and even hatred that seem to fester in so many people in so many places in our country. Not quite two years ago and at the age of 13, Justina Pelletier was sent to the Boston Children's Hospital when she was referred there by the Tufts Medical Center in Connecticut. Ostensibly, she went to Boston to review her rare mitochondrial condition that has had an effect on her health. Not only did Boston Children's Hospital disagree with the findings from Tufts, they called in a psychiatrist, reportedly with five months of experience who immediately stated that Justina was actually the victim of child abuse. Without any known additional consultation with the Tufts team, Boston Children's contacted the Massachusetts Department of Children Families (DCF) and Justina was remanded into their custody.

That began over a year of nightmares for the Pelletier family and for Justina that is almost unfathomable in any attempt to empathize with the families travails, yet is somehow quite believable in the bureaucratic morass that finds its way into this and other similar stories throughout the United States. The so-called "faceless bureaucrats", hiding behind vague laws and insipid actions, were in fact petty people who seemed to take mindless pleasure in exerting their petty authority over the lives of the Pelletiers. They did so with no rationale or compassion or common sense when they took action and the toll these actions took on the Pelletiers has been enormous.

Justina went to Boston as a happy, soccer playing teen, anxious to find out how the "adults" could help her and a year later, was in a wheelchair, looking ill and pale. Her family was under a gag order and could not even plead their case or side of the story to any members of the media or politicians who might be able to help them.

Think about it. The Pellitiers take their daughter to the supposed experts and become involved in the kidnapping of their child. That is what this was, a kidnapping. When the parents tried to take their daughter back home and back into the care of her Tufts' doctors, the Massachusetts DCF polished up their jack-boots and stole Justina. They stole her physically and they stole her mentally. It would seem that no one in Boston used any logic to stop this injustice and instead, those faceless ones only continued to dig a hole deeper for themselves instead of simply admitting that they had no right to kidnap Justina and steal over a year of her life. Unfortunately, they dragged the Pelletiers into that hole with them. The cast of villains in this story include the judge who sided with the Boston Children's Hospital Staff as well as the Massachusetts DCF and then issued the gag order and the psychiatrist who started this entire malignant ball rolling with his nonsensical claims of child abuse when he completely disregarded the Tufts' medical team findings.

Justina's father finally decided that he could not tolerate the situation and broke the gag order. He went to the media and was immediately charged with contempt. However, things were now moving in Justina's favor. She was recently allowed to leave the locked down psychiatric facility that she had been housed in for over a year. Think about that. Think about your own child thrown into this type of maelstrom and then locked up, away from her family and unable to see them, in a psychiatric ward. Progress is being made and it is hoped that Justina will finally be returned to her family. Unfortunately, this story is still without a happy ending.

As in any kidnapping, people in Massachusetts need to be indicted. Entities need to pay heavy fines. Someone needs to go to jail.

OPINION

Ukraine's Road to War

By: Sage Overton
Local Contributor

It's on every news outlet and most of social media. Global tensions have hit their highest point since probably the Cuban Missile Crisis in October of 1962. Ukrainian citizens overthrew their current government and Russian troops have moved in and seized the Crimean peninsula, a small autonomous region of south Ukraine. At a glance, it sounds like Russia is the party to blame. However, a lot of little events built up to today and America may have played a large part in it.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine has been between a rock and a hard place. Prior to the U.S.S.R.'s downfall, Ukraine, along with most of Eastern Europe's Baltic states, existed as satellite states inside the larger republic.

Since gaining its independence though, Ukraine has still had to rely heavily on Russia for economic assistance, energy needs, and as its single largest trading partner. But Ukrainian citizens have craved a more western style democracy. The balance has been a hard one for the country – how to re-integrate itself with the West but not isolate itself from Russia.

Ukraine's internal problems are nothing new. As the country heavily relies on external trade for steel and energy, the global downturn has placed the country in a bind. It owes 3 billion to the IMF and 2 billion to Russia's VTO. It is currently seeking 4 billion in additional funding to help repay those loans. The country's currency is heavily depreciated and its reserves are almost exhausted.

Economic conditions have only played a small part in the internal turmoil though. Since taking office in 2010, President Yanukovych has often said one thing but done another. He has sought to strengthen ties with Russia, limited freedom of the press and done little to curb rampant government corruption. He has also sought to expand presidential powers and repress political opposition. Amnesty International accused Yanukovych of using special police to carry out these policies.

Protests began in earnest on November 27 of last year, following Yanukovych's decision to drop an associative agreement with the European Union. This kind of agreement is often seen as the first step towards membership in the EU.

Three days following the decision, police were ordered to put down the protests. Violence broke out between the two sides. The next day, the protests grew to 300,000 people and more violent clashes occurred. On December 17, Russian President Putin announced Russia would buy 15 billion in Ukrainian bonds and drop exported gas prices.

The following January, two protestors died after police used live ammo to disperse crowds on the 22nd. Two days later, the prime minister resigned. On February 18, over 20 people were killed in clashes, including 10 officers.

A European mediated peace agreement went into effect on the 21st, in which President Yanukovych agreed to a new government and early elections. He then disappeared from sight. The next day Parliament removed him from office. On the 24th, an arrest warrant for the former president was issued. Three days later, masked gunmen seized control of Parliament and government buildings throughout the Crimean peninsula. The next day, more unmarked, heavily armed men took over strategic points throughout the region. Ukraine accuses Russia of invasion. Yanukovych appears in southern Russia.

On March 1, Russia's Parliament passed legislation approving the use of Russian troops in Ukraine to safeguard Russian bases and citizens.

On March 3 it was reported that Russian commanders at sea and on land in Crimea have demanded their Ukrainian counterparts lay down arms and surrender before dawn tomorrow or face consequences. Russia has also claimed their military is further legitimized by a request from former President Yanukovych to return him to his office. Ukraine has ordered all military personnel to arms and to stand their ground.

Recent years of U.S. inaction and domestic discord helped encourage Russian actions. On Friday, Feb. 28, Pres. Obama issued a statement saying, "We are now deeply concerned by reports of military movements taken by the Russian Federation inside of Ukraine... any violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity would be deeply destabilizing...the United States will stand with the international community in affirming that there will be costs for any military intervention in Ukraine."

The statement is weak. Unlike in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, it makes it very clear America will not move forward without international support. Russia knows Obama faces a split Congress at home unlikely to agree on a course of action. Pres. Putin also knows America is not in a position to offer a direct military challenge.

The public is war weary and the economy is still very shaky. Soldiers are still being withdrawn from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Lack of American interest in a war or being the world's police was made very clear after Pres. Obama's Syrian "red line." Obama stated prior to August of last year that, "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized."

Al-Assad's regime crossed that line in August of last year and nothing happened. Not really. No troops were deployed. No air strikes or no-fly zones enacted. Just more rhetoric and an eventual agreement brokered between Russia and America that Syria turn over its chemical weapons. Almost half of the public had disapproved of American intervention.

During the Ukrainian protests Pres. Yanukovych had been warned by Obama's administration not to harm peaceful protesters. People were killed by Ukrainian forces, and again the U.S. did nothing but make more statements condemning the violence. Not even sanctions were imposed.

This all still follows a conversation between Pres. Obama and then Russian Pres. Medvedev accidentally captured by a "hot mic" in 2012. The conversation was regarding missile defense and Obama asked Medvedev to give him space until after the presidential election that year. In many critics' eyes it made Obama, and hence America, look weak.

Combine all of the above and it is easy to see how America helped push Russia into Ukraine. A divided Congress.

No public stomach for war. A president who draws lines for other countries to cross with minor consequences to be paid. An international response that typically draws its lead from America. Off record conversations that placate to Russian interests. Obama played a game of chicken with Pres. Putin in front of the entire world. Obama dared him to invade. Russia did. Now the world will wait to see if Obama (and America) blink or meet them head on.

Bill Smith

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