

NEA'S

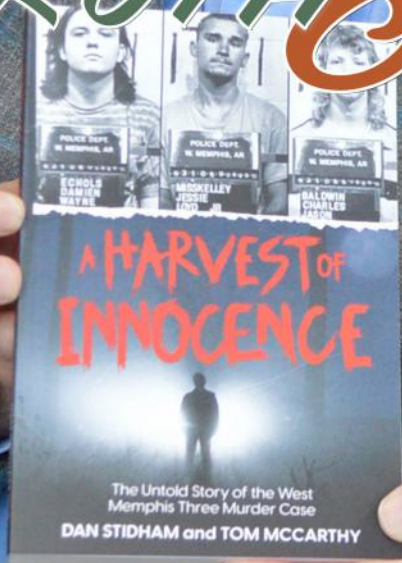
# PREMIERE

## MAGAZINE

MARCH 2025

### TRUTH & JUSTICE

A STORY THAT  
HAD TO BE TOLD



MARCH INTO LITERACY  
SPECIAL SECTION: NEA SENIORS  
POLAR PLUNGES SUPPORT SPECIAL OLYMPICS

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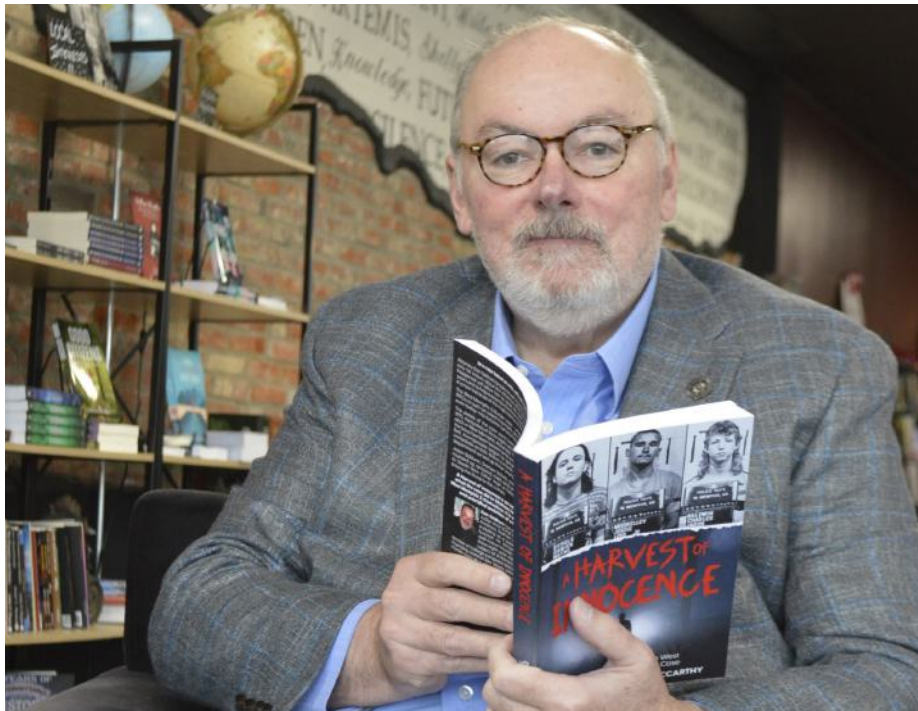
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Dan Stidham shares how his need to tell the behind-the-scenes story of the West Memphis Three case led him to write "A Harvest of Innocence."

Pages 22-24

Cover Photo by Gretchen Hunt



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## From Us to You

I guess it is obvious that reading is my thing. I love the art of a story when reading fiction, how the author weaves the characters' lives into each other's and shows us how integrated each of us are even though we often think we are isolated.

When I started Premiere in May of 2007, I was told I would run out of good stories to tell of the people in NEA, but I knew that would not happen. We all have a story to tell and my favorite thing about Premiere is the opportunity to show how one small act of kindness touches so many.

Literacy - reading the written word - is so important to all of us, no matter our age. There is no better feeling than having a little one on your lap and reading them a book — then as they grow watching them “read” the book and then seeing them when they really grow up and choose to read for pleasure.

I am so thankful for all the people and programs supporting Literacy Awareness. What started as an idea to feature some local authors (because we thought readers would like the opportunity to read what their NEA writers have written) evolved into a full-fledged resource guide to better literacy in NEA.

I cannot remember a time in my life when reading and writing were not high on my list of things to do. I started learning to read at the age of three because I was determined to do everything my older sister was doing. A library card was a priceless possession and many hours have been spent picking out just the right books, not to mention reading them.

All through my childhood I wrote songs and poetry, and in junior high and high school I enjoyed both creative writing and contributing to the school newspaper and yearbook. I don't think many were surprised when my career path included writing.

This month's edition has been an inspiration as we have learned ways young people are being encouraged to read, and we have gotten to share stories of several local authors. I hope you will be as encouraged as I have been that there is a bright future for the written word as we celebrate Literacy Month. We certainly are honored to be able to publish NEA's



We hope you enjoy this edition and go to your local bookstore and ask about these books and others by Northeast Arkansas authors.

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Premiere Magazine and share the Good News of Northeast Arkansas and the People Making It Happen!

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# Spring Into Strawberry

BY KATIE COLLINS

Growing up in the country, I never had the opportunity for visits from the ice cream man in my neighborhood. That all changed one summer when visiting my aunt in St. Louis. A real, live ice cream truck was coming down the street! What to choose? It had to be a Good Humor Strawberry Shortcake bar!

Those have been a favorite ever since, so I was pretty psyched to find this recipe that is a tasty play on those classic ice cream treats. You have a strawberry base, topped with a cream cheese layer, and finished with the classic strawberry crunch. Let's welcome in spring (hopefully!) by making a batch of Strawberry Crunch Bars!



## Strawberry Crunch Bars

### Ingredients:

#### Base:

1 box strawberry cake mix  
½ cup (1 stick) salted butter, melted  
2 large eggs  
2 Tablespoons strawberry gelatin powder (will need a 3 ounce box total for base and topping)

#### Cream Cheese Layer:

8 ounce block cream cheese, softened

¼ cup salted butter, softened  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
½ cup powdered sugar  
2 Tablespoons heavy cream

#### Crunch Topping:

20 Golden Oreos  
4 Tablespoons salted butter, melted  
4 Tablespoons strawberry gelatin powder

### Directions:

Preheat the oven to 350. Line a 9x9 baking pan with parchment paper and spray with non-stick spray.

Make the base by mixing the base ingredients together until well mixed. Spread base mixture evenly in the pan. Bake for 18-20 minutes and cool completely.

For the cream cheese layer, use a mixer to mix the cream cheese, softened butter, and vanilla. Add the powdered sugar and heavy cream and beat until smooth and fluffy. Spread over the cooled base layer.

For the topping, put the Golden Oreos in the food processor and pulse until they're broken into small pieces. You don't want fine crumbs; some discernable cookie pieces are good. Place the cookie pieces in a bowl, add the melted butter and four remaining tablespoons of strawberry gelatin. Stir until well combined.

Sprinkle crumb topping over cream cheese layer, pressing it down into the cream cheese. Cut into squares and serve. Store in the refrigerator.

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# Broadway Nights



## GCFAC Hosts Gala



Ryan Fisher

The Greene County Fine Arts Council held its annual awards ceremony in conjunction with a Broadway Nights Gala on Saturday, February 15th, at The Barn at Locust Creek in Paragould.

The black tie optional event included a variety of desserts, a silent auction, live performances and Broadway trivia.

The three GCFAC productions in 2024 were *Grilled to Perfection*, *Dracula* and *A Christmas Carol*. Awards were presented to

the following: People's Choice, April Sharpe Oakes; Best Director, Suzanne Clark Bushong; Best Actress, Trinity Mansfield; Best Actor, Shelby Linam; and Best Production, *Dracula*.

The GCFAC also announced the establishment of the Thom Fielder Lifetime Achievement in Theater Award with Thomas Fielder being honored as the first recipient.

Follow the Greene County Fine Arts Council on Facebook to get involved or receive updates on the 2025 production season.



Shani Barnhill, Chyna Summers, Kristin Summers



PHOTOS BY GRETCHEN HUNT



Quinton Mauldin, Bethany Tosh



Dracula swept the awards

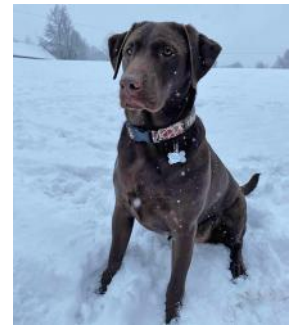
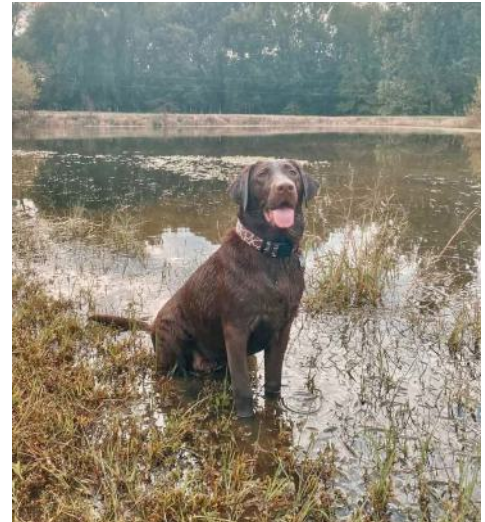
# PET *of the* MONTH

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BY MISTY STIRNAMAN AND CHAD BECK

**B**eckett will be one year old on March 15, 2025. We have had her since she was 6 weeks old. She was born in Linden, Tennessee. Her favorite snacks are cucumbers, bananas, and pretty much anything you offer her.

She loves to play fetch, especially with her retrieval toys in the pond. She enjoys riding in the front seat of the truck and shed hunting. She recently found her first deer shed at 10 months old. She is very lovable and super smart.



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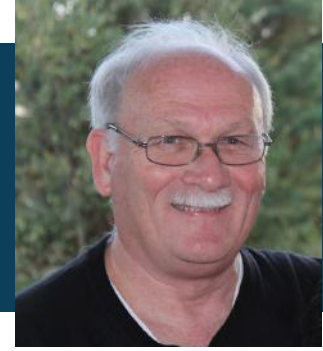


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# Get Rich

WITH RICHARD BRUMMETT



According to the dictionary, literacy is defined as “the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, achieve one’s goals, and develop knowledge and potential.” This encompasses the capacity to communicate using “inscribed, printed, or electronic signs or symbols for representing language.”

Reading and writing is what most of us think literacy is. Additionally, literacy encompasses the ability to understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication, including spoken language and printed text ... or so the experts say. The spoken language part always hits home with me for some reason.

Having worked in the newspaper industry for parts of five decades, I’ve come into contact with a lot of people who test the boundaries of literacy in both the spoken and written word categories. I’ve answered the telephone to listen to a reader’s rant regarding something we published and the longer he or she complained, the more I questioned his or her sanity and literacy. My first newspaper publisher, Fred Wulfekuhler, used to caution us to not only strive for correctness but also for sensible reading. “The woman was shot in the fracas and the bullet’s in her yet,” he liked to use as an example of correct, yet confusing, reporting.

Once a truck driver from another state called and demanded that newspaper editors all over America begin writing editorials proclaiming that “these dang unlegals from Mexico” be sent back, immediately. Not understanding his obvious passion for the problem while sitting in Northeast Arkansas in the early 1990s, I had to ask him exactly what it was he expected me to accomplish.

“They’re going to ruin our country,” he said emphatically. “They’re coming in by the thousands and they’re criminals and druggies and ...” this is where it really got good, “almost all of them are unilliterate! They ain’t no way they can even hold down a job!”

Well, I guess not, if they’re unilliterate. They just ain’t no way.

That call topped another one where a fellow was really hot because our police report said he had been ticketed for his fourth DWI offense. “That’s only my third DWI!” he shouted, and demanded we run a correction because the charges on the last one were eventually dropped. Again, if literacy includes the ability to understand and appreciate various forms of communication, including printed text, I had to ask if he truly wanted us to run more information regarding his drinking/driving offenses or maybe just let it disappear from folks’ minds. “Dang right, I do,” he said. “You’re making me sound like a alcoholic!”

So we ran a correction saying it was only his third offense, not his fourth.

Several times, having advertised an opening for a reporter’s position, I looked over resumes and quickly moved some to the “no way” pile; I mean, if you’re trying to prove your worth as a reporter shouldn’t you first check your own resume for mistakes? Misspelled words,

horrible grammar mistakes, punctuation issues ... literacy is important in that realm.

Spelling is a big part of being a dependable reporter, even though we once had a writer who brought home some plaques from the annual statewide newspaper awards contest in spite of the inability to spell or speak correctly. I told the editor that reporter needed to see the plaques in two and give him half, because without him the entries wouldn’t have won anything except the Worst Speller Award.

It takes a good editor to make some people seem literate. I once took a much-needed day off from the editor’s desk but decided later that evening, close to deadline time, to stop by and see how things were going. “Just about ready to send it to the printer,” I was told, but something told me to go back over one reporter’s submission. “The police said they had went to a local store,” the report said, “and they seen the subject’s car.” Not only was it “wrote” bad, it was edited “badder” and I suppose would have made it into print had a little voice in my head not said to stop by the office.

I’m guessing if some of these people spoke out in public as they wrote in the office, just about anyone felt he, too, could be a reporter. A guy I had known for many years came in once and sat down across the desk from me, making small talk for a while before asking if we might have any job openings. I assumed he was referring to something in the press room because he’d always been a mechanic of some sort but he informed me he was thinking of a reporter’s job.

“I’m just looking for a change,” he said, “and I always done real good in English when I was in school.”

I’m sure he did, but he just didn’t seem to be what I was looking for.

A young woman once applied for the reporter’s position and I invited her for an interview. Upon her arrival she handed me an updated version of her work history, and in the space dedicated to “other interests” she had written in, “I enjoy being a tooter.”

Not a joke. For real. A tooter.

So, I suppose, this is really just a long-winded way of asking, “If one gets the point across regardless of poor spelling, grammar and sentence structure, is he or she just as literate as the Rhodes Scholar? If being literate combines reading, writing and communicating via the spoken word, does it matter how close to correct one gets? If you’re able to get your point across, I suppose you are literate, even if you need a good editor to follow you around.

Richard Brummett is a journalist with more than 50 years of newspaper and magazine experience. He enjoys writing to help people bring their stories to life, and hopes through his monthly Get Rich column to help put a smile on readers’ faces.



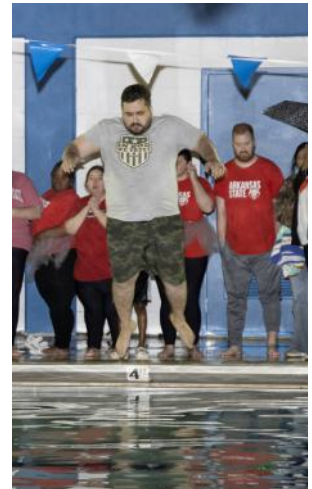
# LET THE GOOD TIMES BE COLD

## POLAR PLUNGES SUPPORT SPECIAL OLYMPICS

Jumping into ice-cold water to raise funds for Special Olympics is a winter tradition through the annual Polar Plunge, held this year at the Paragould Community Center in January and the Jonesboro Pool Center in February.

Participants collected donations, dressed in special T-shirts or costumes and braved the cold temperatures and even colder water to raise money to support Area 1 Special Olympics athletes.

The Paragould Plunge raised \$18,051 and the Jonesboro Plunge raised \$7,822. To learn more about Special Olympics follow Special Olympics Arkansas Area 1 on Facebook.





PHOTOS BY SHELBY RUSSOM, GRETCHEN HUNT AND DINA MASON



# GREENE CO. BANQUET CELEBRATING 4-H MEMBERS' WORK IN 2024

A large crowd gathered February 3rd at the new Greene County Extension Service building for the annual 4-H Banquet. Among awards presented were the Junior County Champion award to Karie Head and the Senior County Champion Award to Andrea Pillow. The Friend of 4-H Award was presented to County Judge Rusty McMillon and the Greene County Quorum Court for their support in the construction of the new Extension office. As attendees made their way to the food line they were treated to display boards with information about the members' different 4-H projects.



Junior County Champion: Karie Head



Senior County Champion: Andrea Pillow



Friend of 4-H Award: County Judge Rusty McMillon and the Greene County Quorum Court



PHOTOS BY GRETCHEN HUNT



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# A Night at the Museum

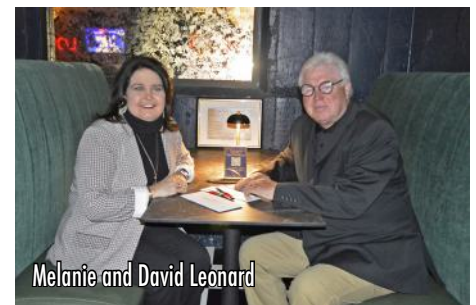
## NEACM EVENT RAISES FUNDS, AWARENESS

An effort underway to establish the Northeast Arkansas Children's Museum in Jonesboro got a boost on January 28th with the A Night at the Museum fundraising event at The Lounge at Huntington Square.

Jordan Carlow, who is spearheading the project, along with Kristen Amick, said results from a feasibility study show the museum should expect to have 70,000 visitors annually. "It shows a powerful impact," Jordan said.

The new logo for the museum was unveiled, and supporters heard updates including that the Roto Group has been selected as the design firm to move the museum from concept to master plan.

Community meetings will be held to decide what exhibits and attractions to feature in the local museum. Financial support to continue the effort, including initial contributions for the Founder's Circle, can be made by visiting [neachildrensmuseum.org](http://neachildrensmuseum.org).



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# Just Write

## Romance novelist shares her story

BY GRETCHEN HUNT

Juli Page Morgan of Paragould said she started writing because she had a story in her head. Six books later, the stories are still flowing.

"I had this story in my head for decades and one day I sat down in front of my computer and I just started writing ... and it was horrible, but at least I was getting it out of my head," she said. "I never had any inclination to publish it ... really not to show it to anyone."

Her first manuscript, however, was picked up by a publisher, Crimson Romance, which has since merged into another publishing group. "I got really disillusioned by traditional publishing, so I got my rights back to my first book and I've been self-publishing ever since."

She said her experience was that the publisher did minimal editing, chose a cover and title for the book and that was pretty much the end of their efforts. "I still had to do all the work to promote the book," Juli said. "I didn't get into it to make money, but it bothered me that I was doing all the work and they were keeping all the money."

Now, she does it all. "I do my own covers, my own editing ... I do my own publishing. It's just me."

She published her first book in 2013 and her most recent in 2022. "I didn't realize it had been that long," she said. "I need to get busy."

There is a little piece of me in every one of my characters.

Juli Page Morgan

While Juli writes fictional romance novels, she said some of the stories are loosely based on things she experienced.

"I was in radio from the time I was 18 years old. I worked in some of the larger markets. I met a lot of rock bands ... hung out with a lot of rock bands. I saw things. Every book that I've written so far has a rock star in it. It is fictional, but I will throw in something real - I always change the name to protect the guilty," she said.

Her first three books were set in the 1960s, '70s and '80s in Memphis. "They have a lot more fictional stuff in them." The next three are set more present day.

Juli said while the heroines in her first books were young, the lead



characters in her more recent books are in their 40s and 50s, placing importance on the fact that older women can still be vibrant and still like men. Rhett from her Illicit Rockers series is her favorite.

"There is a little piece of me in every one of my characters. There is more of me in her than the rest of them," she said.

Juli grew up on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and after spending a year at Oklahoma Christian University in Edmond, Oklahoma, she moved back. While she said OCU was not the right fit for her, she did get started in radio at the university, something she took back with her to the coast.

Her time working in radio influenced her writing, but so have other writers. She said as she began the journey of becoming an author, she got a lot of feedback from other authors and from reading online writers blogs.

"We read each other's manuscripts. We offer criticisms," she said. "Sometimes we accept edits. Sometimes, we leave it the way it is. Some of the people I've met have become best-selling authors, and I'm so grateful for them."

She recommends Writers in the Storm, Lisa Hall-Wilson and Kristen Lamb if looking for a good blog. She said Lisa Hall Wilson's blog introduced her to Deep Point of View. "I didn't realize it was a thing. Then I realized ... oh, that's why I like that book..."

While she said she has learned a lot about writing from forums and blogs, she said she has also realized her writing process requires her to step away from those resources when she gets ready to write.

"For me, I found that it stifled me so bad and it made me afraid to



write," she said. "I really like what they have to say, but when I'm writing I stay away from them."

She said as much as she has been inspired by her favorite authors, she also avoids reading them while she is working on a book. "I can't read their books or I start writing in their voice. So, I have to stay away from reading when I'm writing."

She encourages others who have stories in their heads to put them on paper, but warns not to expect to get rich. "Very few have that kind of success," she said, noting that she reads books from a lot of independent authors who are really good but aren't really making money. She said that is reserved for the big names like John Grisham and Diana Gabaldon.

"Diana Gabaldon could publish the phone book and it would be a best seller," Juli said. "She's my favorite author, by the way."

Her advice for those ready to give writing a chance?

"Just sit down and write it," Juli said. "Don't worry about how good it is. Don't worry about your grammar. Don't worry about your point of view. Just get that idea out. The more you get out, the more you'll be pleased with yourself."

She recalled the first draft of her first manuscript. "It was so long, but then I had all the ideas. Some I used in other books. Just write, just do it. You can always clean it up later."

Juli's books are available at Amazon.com and through Kindle Unlimited.



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# Viva Greene County

The Paragould Regional Chamber of Commerce hosted its business showcase, Viva Greene County, on Thursday, February 13, at the Paragould Community Center. The Las Vegas themed event included a time for business networking, a mascot race, which was won by the Greene County Tech Eagle, lunch for participants and Chamber members and interaction with the public. In addition, attendees enjoyed several performances by Paragould School District students as part of the PSD booth, which took first place at the event.



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# FAMILY Literacy Nights

It is not surprising that the Craighead County Jonesboro Public Library would have a focus on literacy, but the first Tuesday of each month the staff goes above and beyond to make reading fun for the entire family by hosting Family Literacy Nights.

Amanda Stogsdill, Assistant Youth Services Manager, said the library has been hosting Family Literacy Nights for about a year and a half. "They are ideal for children in preschool through kindergarten and their families," she said.

Each month has a theme; for instance, in February the theme was cake, and the children enjoyed the cake-themed books including "Peanut Butter and Cupcake" by Terry Border. The event also engaged the children with cake songs and flannel activities, and they decorated cupcakes after dinner.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

"We try to create a print-rich environment by posting the songs and fingerplays for children to read along with us," Amanda said. "We also ask children reading comprehension questions, demonstrate reading left to right on the page, and have the children try to predict outcomes while reading stories."

While each month offers something fun, there have been some themes that have stood out.



"Our pasta-themed Family Literacy Night was a fun experience," Amanda said. "We made sensory boxes with colored dry pasta, yarn spaghetti and meatballs, and pretended to be Parmesan cheese for the children to play with after storytime.



They had so much fun! Our most well-attended night was the dinosaur theme. We read dinosaur stories, allowed the children to build their own skeletons with our foam dino bone blocks, and served dinosaur nuggets and macaroni and cheese. Amanda stressed that everyone in the family can benefit from Family Literacy Night.

"The children enjoy the stories and learning new skills and concepts from them," she said. "We model literacy strategies for parents to use at home to promote growth and learning, and bringing families together for meals helps promote strong ties with each other and other families in our community."

March's Family Literacy Night will be on Tuesday, March 4th, from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m. "Our theme will be Fruits and Vegetables, and we will be serving vegetable soup and fruit salad," Amanda said.

## GREENE COUNTY SPELLING BEE

Zena Burton, a student at Greene County Tech Intermediate School, was the champion speller at the 74th Greene County Spelling Bee on February 3rd at the Collins Theatre in Downtown Paragould. Also placing were Second Place, Evalyn Wolfe, Marmaduke Elementary; and Third Place, Maverick Moss, Crowley's Ridge Academy. Cody Gray presented the winners with plaques on behalf of the Paragould Kiwanis Club.



# THE ADVENTURES OF Lester

BY VICKI McMILLAN



Hello, my fellow readers; Lester here to welcome in the month of March! This issue of Premiere is focusing on literacy - the ability to read and write. I personally don't know what I would do if I couldn't read. During my time incarcerated at the Jonesboro Dog Jail, I read anything I could get my paws on. My fellow inmates and I wore out a copy of *The Great Escape*, the book about three pets escaping London during WW2 -- not the WW2 movie with Steve McQueen. Confusing, I know. We would read aloud to the young pups who could not yet read. The little ones really enjoyed hearing Lassie, and often questioned Timmy's mental acuity.

Then I was adopted into a family of readers. These guys read all genres, all the time. If it was a western, Big and I read it. If it was a biography, Nana and I read it. That continued after I moved in with Vicki and Mac - only my reading tastes broadened. In fact, a lot of our travels would include famous or favorite authors' homes. We struggled through Faulkner before seeing Rowan Oak in Oxford, we toured the Anne of Green Gables farm in Prince Edward Island, Canada, and of course, Hemingway's Farewell to Arms just up the road in Piggott, which I have seen every time out-of-town guests come to visit.

My favorite author-home is Mary Kay Andrews' home on Tybee Island. She is just about the sweetest lady - and if I don't pee on her grass, she

gives me great treats! Win! She writes some great books - about one every summer! We've even seen Steven King's place in Bangor, Maine -- spider web iron fences, and all. I'll just say this about that: I might have died trying, but I would have made that dumb ol' St. Bernard Cujo sit up and take notice.

There are lots of reasons reading is so good for us. It improves memory, enhances the vocabulary, and strengthens analytical thinking. Reading can take you to places you might not otherwise go — and it is basically free entertainment!

If you find yourself looking at a list of banned books, take that list to the Greene County Library or to Weber's Book House. Get a book from the list and read it. Find out what's in it that is controversial. This scrappy ol' pound dog doesn't want you to be a sheep!

\*There are resources in NEA that can help folks that need to improve their reading skills: Focus, Inc., Black River Technical College, Arkansas State University — just to name a few.

Happy Reading,  
*Lester*

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## AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

# Truth & Justice

*A story that had to be told*

BY GRETCHEN HUNT

Every author has an inspiration. For Dan Stidham of Paragould, the truth drove him to write. His desire to share a true accounting of the West Memphis Three murder case and to exonerate the teenagers who were convicted of the 1993 murders led to years of work on his book, "A Harvest of Innocence."

"The truth ... truth and justice were the motivating factors," he said.

"It was very important to me to tell this story from the correct perspective because there's many mythologies and conspiracy theories on the internet because of the way the case came to its conclusion," Dan said, referring to the Alford plea, which freed the men, who maintained their innocence, but left them with felony convictions.

Dan said a third very important motivation is to make sure this never happens again to another Jessie Misskelley, or another Jason Baldwin, or another Damien Echols. "I feel the need to be a criminal justice reformer and explain ways that we can keep this from happening again in the future," he said. "I think everyone would agree that we have the best judicial system in the world, but there are still some things that we need to fix in order to eliminate the possibility of someone who is innocent going to prison for something they didn't do."

He drew an interesting parallel when discussing his need to share his accounting.

"I feel like the older lady on the movie Titanic," he said. "They are trying to recover or at least find the vessel and she's telling the story about what happened behind the scenes. We all know that the boat sank and all these people passed away unfortunately, and everyone knows about the West Memphis Three case, at least peripherally, and I'm the person telling the story from my older Dan perspective kind of talking about the younger Dan and all the travails and stumbles I took along the way to get to my goal of getting them released."

An Eagle Scout and student at Greene County Tech, Dan decided to fast-track his legal career by starting college early.

"A lot of people don't know this, but I actually am a high school dropout," he said. "I started college at the age of 17 at ASU because I thought I would be a lawyer a year faster and my math was correct."

He earned his Bachelor's in Sociology at ASU and went to law school in Fayetteville. "I was fortunate enough to work for my mentor, W.H. Taylor, in Fayetteville. I learned more working with him than I did in class. I think it really helped prepare me for what I was eventually going to face with the West Memphis case."

He worked on a couple of capital murder cases with Taylor. "It was great experience for me, which my colleagues were not getting while



they were sitting in class, which for any readers who are thinking about going to law school, don't do it the way I did it. Go to class, there's time for everything, but it worked well for me and it was a great prep for my first jury trial as first chair, the Misskelley case, the triple homicide, that I really wasn't qualified to do under the ABA standards, but it just turned out that way."

Dan said while he knew early he was going to be a lawyer, he never anticipated becoming an author.

"It sort of came about by virtue of the case and how I saw the narrative being portrayed by the state of Arkansas and how unfair I thought it was that they were able to get off the sinking ship," he said. "They can always say, well they pled guilty, but we can always say well we maintained our innocence. It's sort of like a tie football game, but it's really not."

The book came out at the end of 2023, and in April of 2024 the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled that evidence could be retested with new advanced DNA technology that wasn't available in 2007 when the first round of testing occurred.

"We're hopeful that we can obtain a full DNA profile that we can put into CODIS and perhaps catch the killer," Dan said. "Which is another goal of my book - to bring the person or persons responsible for this to justice."

So how does someone who never intended to become an author start the task of writing a book?

"In all honesty, I bought a couple of books on how to write a book that I never read, and as silly as that sounds I had taken notes, copious

notes, throughout the trial, and throughout the appellate process, and of course I had my file itself and I had access to the evidence and things of that nature," Dan said. "When I started, I realized very quickly when I talked to one of the top literary agents in New York that I wrote like a lawyer, which was no huge surprise, but he suggested that I obtain a co-author or an editor or someone to help me not write like a lawyer."

That's when Dan began working with Tom McCarthy, his co-author, back in 2014. "That's how long we've been working on this project," he said. "We thought it would be done in the first six months." Nine years later, they finally crossed the finish line.

"There were a lot of things that happened along the way, life happens, I lost a child, a 34-year old child, that was obviously a setback, but it also allowed me to pour that grief and pain and the issues that go along with it ... it allowed me to pour my book, the final manuscript, through that filter, which I felt was very important so that I would not be incompassionate, if that's even a word, to the victims' families in the murder case because the last thing I wanted to do was make their grief worse by writing the book. Having known the pain of losing a child, I can certainly understand theirs, and I just wanted to make sure that I treated that issue as compassionately as possible."

Dan said he honed his writing skills with help from Tom, who is retired from the publishing business as an acquisition editor for one of the largest book houses in New York and has written best sellers for celebrities as a ghostwriter.

"I would write a chapter - I was the storyteller so to speak - I would write a chapter and then email it to Tom in New York and he would go over it and amazingly could say in three paragraphs what took me eight pages to write and it wasn't in legalese. I realized his value and worth very quickly," Dan said. "He brought a vast wealth of experience in writing. He kind of changed the legalese into prose or writing. As we got towards the end after all those years I got to where I could do it in such a way that instead of coming back to me as something completely different and compressed it would just have a different word or two or how about if we use this phrase."

As he worked on "A Harvest of Innocence," Dan started a fiction book, as well, working on it in between revisions from Tom.

Anybody can be a writer.

You're not born with a gene that says you're a writer.

Dan Stidham

"When I would send a chapter to Tom, while I was waiting I would work on my fiction book," he said. "It's a lot easier to write fiction because you don't have to worry about the facts, so it can kind of pivot. The story I've chosen has evolved into several different things and I'm

still trying to settle on what the actual story will be. It's based loosely on things that I've experienced and done throughout my life."

Serving as District Judge for Greene and Clay County, and his efforts with the West Memphis Three, still take up most of his time, but he hopes to complete his second book soon.

"It's still in the works, but as time goes on, I'll have more time to work on it and dedicate myself to the project and hopefully wrap it up and



publish it soon I hope," he said. "Finding the real killer is far more important right now and promoting my book in my spare time takes up a lot of time."

Dan encourages others to share the stories inside them, whether they are fact or fiction.

"Anybody can be a writer," he said. "You're not born with a gene that says you're a writer. It's like painting. I oil paint and I'm self-taught. I saw an article about Winston Churchill who began oil painting at age 40 and I just happened to be age 40 at the time and I thought well if he can do it, I can do it. So, I paint abstract paintings and seascapes, landscapes. Unfortunately, I haven't had time to do that lately, but if you just want to be creative you should not let anything get in the way of that creativity. We all possess it."

He also said recording family history is important, whether written or captured on video. "One of my most cherished possessions is a conversation I had with my grandfather before he began to suffer from dementia. I learned things about family history that I didn't know. I've done the same thing with my father, and everyone should do that."

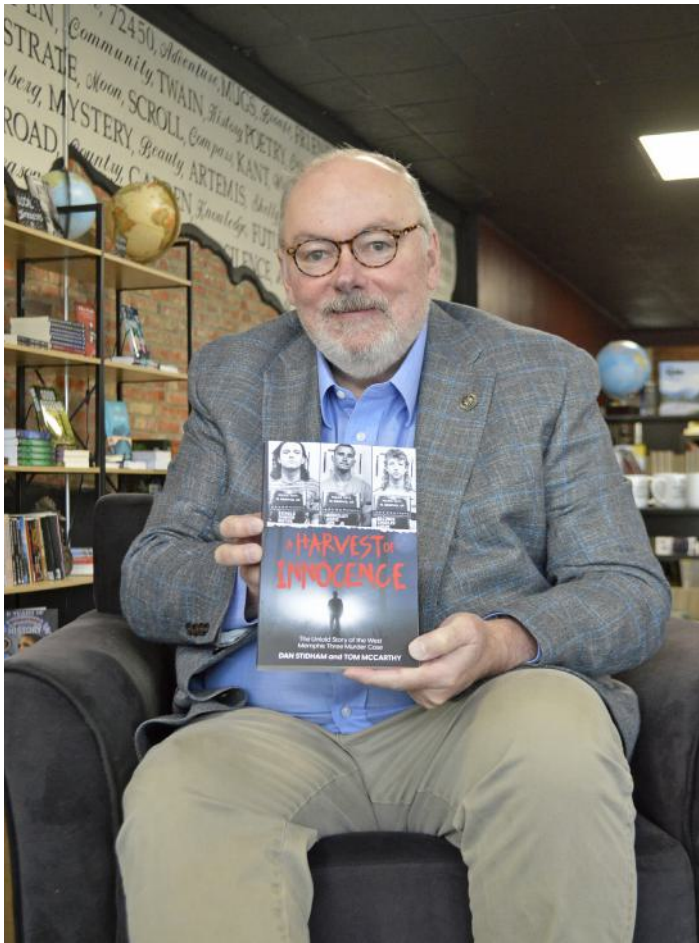
While being an author may not have been something Dan expected, his love for reading and books is well established. He recalled going to read for elementary students as part of the county literacy program several years back.

"It was such a rewarding experience," he said, noting that now he gets to enjoy reading to his grandchildren.

"I had four kids and each one of my children taught the next one in line to read and it was fun to watch because my wife and I were just amazed at how they could do that for each other," he said. "They

Continued ➔

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enjoyed reading. They all do. In fact most of our Christmas gifts are books because with books it's not like television in the sense that you have to be forced to watch a condensed version of the story. With a book you can just expand your knowledge and you get to sort of create your own backdrop for the story in the sense that you can assume what the characters look like and it's just such an enjoyable experience. I just love to read."

Dan said with self-publishing there is nothing to hold anyone back if they want to write a book.

"When I wrote the book and hit the button publish - it was like the world had been completely lifted off my shoulders because the story was out. It was finally told. My mission was accomplished, and I felt this relief and then almost immediately the Supreme Court ruled that we could test the new evidence, so I'm actually thinking about writing a bonus chapter for the book depending on the outcome of the testing results, which will happen hopefully within the next 60 to 90 days."

Looking back at his time as a young lawyer offered Dan a chance to tell the complete story, including his own shortcomings.

"I really think that experience was valuable to me and as I look back on my younger self, I'm just as hard on my younger self as I was the other players in the story and when I made a mistake, I owned it and I think that makes the book more authentic," he said. "It was very important for me that there be a behind the scenes look into what exactly was happening that didn't take place in front of the HBO cameras. It's just very important to me for there to be a true account of all that really took place and all that shouldn't have took place that did - and so that was the main motivation."

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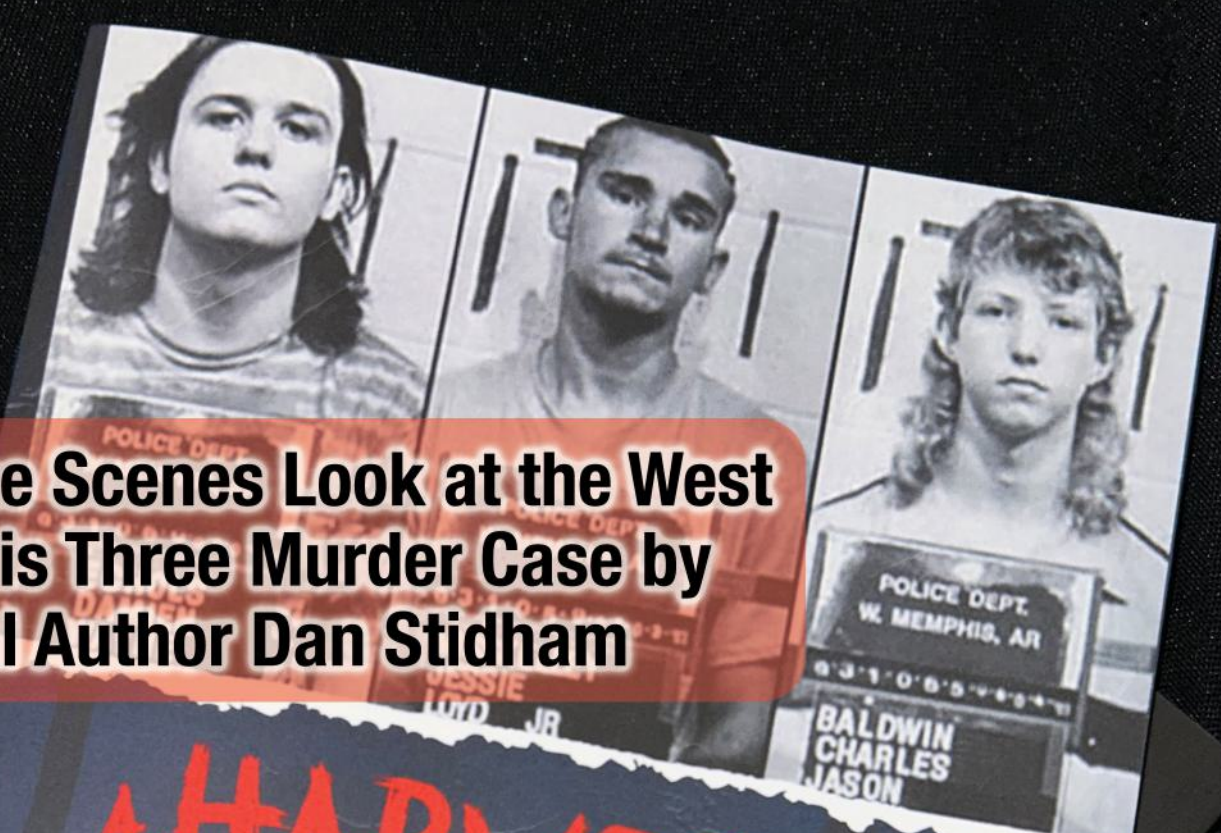
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# Greene County Wildlife Club

BY CHUCK LONG

MAKING THE OUTDOORS BETTER



Would you plant a tree knowing you would never see it produce fruit? Would you petition for changes that would impact future generations? Would you try to help your community by investing in land, habitat and facilities that would be utilized in the future? Those are tough questions to answer in the affirmative as many of us would rather dwell in the here and now than develop a plan for a better future for others. But I feel very fortunate to live in a part of Arkansas filled with selfless individuals who look to the future and can see beyond their front door. For the outdoorsman, one of the most impactful groups to work in Northeast Arkansas with that vision and mindset has been the Greene County Wildlife Club.

The Greene County Wildlife Club (GCWC) began in the mid-1980s from the thoughts of a few sportsmen who saw the need to better the outdoor opportunities in NEA. Since the inception of the club, the GCWC has been instrumental in the purchase of land that offers public hunting opportunities, helped develop facilities to provide many types of uses for local outdoorsmen, and fosters a conservation-minded approach in the area through cleanups and assistance with many projects.

The GCWC is perhaps best known for its land purchases that began in the mid-1980s. These purchases, which happened piece by piece, have blossomed into the W.E. Brewer Scatter Creek Wildlife Management Area. At the time of the initial purchases, the deer and turkey populations on Crowley's Ridge were at some of the lowest in history, but these men and women were still willing to invest in habitat for the future. Through a strong working relationship with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, the GCWC pieced together purchases of private property into a 5,000-plus acre piece of property now known for good deer and turkey hunting. Scatter Creek is a testament of what can happen when groups work together with the future in mind.

As the purchases of Scatter Creek lands continued, the club also saw the need to help with facilities that would enhance the experience for local outdoorsmen. The club members lobbied for many years for a shooting range to be developed on Scatter Creek and finally, in 2004, those efforts came to fruition. The Jack Cox Scatter Creek Public Firing Range is located just off Highway 34 west of Oak Grove and offers 12 lanes with the opportunity to shoot out to 200 yards. It is an unmanned range and gets continuous use in all seasons of the year. The club continues to invest in the range, providing the target holders and in 2023 gave the range building a fresh coat of paint. The club also participates in the ARDOT Adopt-A-Highway program, picking up trash along the range entrance at least twice a year.

One of the most important efforts of the GCWC took place in the early 1990s. In an effort to solidify its funding, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and Arkansas State Parks, along with Keep Arkansas Beautiful and the Arkansas Heritage Commission, asked the taxpayers of Arkansas to pass the "Conservation Tax" that would authorize a 1/8 of one cent sales tax that would stabilize funding for those agencies. The Greene County Wildlife Club and its members were leaders in a grassroots effort to garner support in Northeast Arkansas and the tax



was passed by a narrow margin, largely due to their efforts.

Fundraising efforts for the GCWC took many forms. For many years the GCWC members could be found at the Greene County Fair, manning a booth to promote conservation and raise awareness for their organization. They were also the key players in the Rayo Breckenridge Bass Tournament, held at Lake Ashbaugh for many years. Both of these offered exposure to the public and the ability to add members and funds to the purse. Due to the decline of Ashbaugh, the tournament ended, and the fair booth is no longer a viable way to garner support, but the group is still working to raise funds through other methods.

The GCWC's focus has broadened in the last few years, and they are doing wonderful things for our community. Fruitful partnerships have developed between the club and local schools and other organizations. The club has recently been working with schools including the construction of an observation deck for student use at Paragould Primary School. An aerator fountain was recently installed in the Oak Grove Fishing Pond at Oak Grove School and a gazebo was constructed for student use. They have also helped with a wildlife habitat area at Chateau on the Ridge Assisted Living Center. The club played a big role in the renovations at Reynolds Park in Paragould, both monetarily and with labor, and has also provided assistance at the Paragould Community Center.

The club has built wood duck boxes, bird houses and bat houses that



have been distributed throughout the community and it has also purchased and donated many items to local first responders. Bleed Kits were given to the Paragould Fire Department as well as the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. The AGFC also benefited from donations of cameras, deer decoys and a sonar unit.

The Greene County Wildlife Club is a great group of folks that continue to play an important role in conservation in our area. The group meets every other month on the second Tuesday and they would enjoy anyone with a conservation-minded interest to join their ranks. For more information on the club, please reach out to Jack Cox or Rick Wooldridge, or contact me and I will point you in the right direction.

Our little corner of the outdoors would not be what it is without the efforts of the GCWC. Thanks to them for their unselfish work throughout the years. Take some time this spring to get out and enjoy our outdoors and I hope to see you out there!

Chuck Long is a lifelong Arkansas outdoorsman. Chuck retired from the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission after thirty plus years of service and now enjoys sharing his love of the outdoors through writing, speaking events and social media outlets. Have an outdoor question? Reach out to Chuck at [cflong2002@yahoo.com](mailto:cflong2002@yahoo.com).

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# NEA Galaxy

## Community Driven

BY RICHARD BRUMMETT

The Super Bowl is over but fans needing a good football fix year-round will have the opportunity to follow an area team starting next month.

The NEA Galaxy is a Minor League Developmental adult football team, founded by Kris Moss and Cody Boyd. While the goal of the organization is to field a competitive football team, Kris said just as important to the group is fostering community relationships.

“We’re very community based,” he said, adding they hope to “put our faces out there in Jonesboro, Paragould, Corning ... all around. We’re trying to plan in the future to hold a youth camp and a mentoring program. We want to give back to the community and at the same time give football fans a chance to see their favorite sport in the spring.”

With several players already on board from areas surrounding Paragould and Jonesboro and “nine or ten who are traveling from Southeast Missouri,” the Galaxy is looking forward to its season opener on April 5 against the NEA Knights in Blytheville. The Galaxy’s home opener is set for May 17 in Bono, where the team will play all its home contests.

Kris, the head coach, said he has played on minor league teams based in Jonesboro, Memphis and Cabot, and it seems Northeast Arkansas teams have had a hard time staying together for the long run. “It just seems for whatever reason,” he said, “that most of the teams in

Northwest Arkansas and the south and the central make it, but not in NEA so much. Two years at the most. Having played before I think we can be a real good avenue for young athletes to gather film and if they’re young enough for college to try to get put in there.

“That’s why we wanted to take our time, grow the structure and stay in it ten years or more. We were technically established in November of ‘23 and took a whole year to hold tryouts and line up coaches.”



Team members have already made appearances in the Paragould and Jonesboro Christmas parades and took part in an Angel Tree gift buying promotion, as well as promoting the Galaxy in person and through social media. “We recently hit 2.2 thousand followers on our Facebook page,” Kris said, “and I know some of the teams around the state have never been able to do that. That was a really big deal for us and makes us think we’re on the right track.”

About anything a fan could want to know can be found at [www.theneagalaxy.org](http://www.theneagalaxy.org), including the roster, season schedule and sponsorship opportunities.

“We want to give young players who hope to get a college to look at them that chance,” Kris said, “and older guys who aren’t professionals to maybe get in the Arena Football or Canadian or UFC. And we want it to be for those who aren’t looking at anything like that but just want to be able to still play the game they love.”

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# BOOKS ON WHEELS

## Corning adds Book Bus

BY GRETCHEN HUNT

For Heather Clifton, District Reading Specialist for the Corning School District, making sure books are in the hands of the students is a priority. One way to make sure that happens is the Corning Book Bus.

"The Book Bus is packed with books at all reading levels, interest levels, and genres," Heather said. "We also provide access to take-home learning materials and other resources for families. Additionally, the bus provides parents with access to the internet to allow them an

opportunity to access their child's online performance reports. The bus has been set up at local events, childcare centers, and has been open to students during and after school hours. Additionally, the bus will soon be trekking out into our outer district areas on weekends and throughout the summer months. With frequent book bus outings this summer, we are determined that what educators call the 'summer slide' does not negatively impact our students as in years past."

In 2023, the district was awarded a substantial SOAR Grant (Successful Outcomes for Arkansas Readers) offered through the Arkansas Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. This grant allowed the district to implement new initiatives to address reading difficulties and literacy challenges among students.

"One of our literacy team's top priorities quickly became the development of the Book Bus as we recognized the need to get high-quality books into the homes of our students," Heather said. "Corning is a rural district comprising many local communities, and not all of these small towns are able to provide a local library. The need for a literacy-rich home environment for all district students led to our idea of putting books on wheels."

Heather and Corning Superintendent Jennifer Woolard said they recognize the power of a literacy-rich environment to foster a love for reading, develop vocabulary, support and enhance cognitive and language development, and significantly impact academic success.

"The goal of our Book Bus is to build a personal library of interesting and self-selected books in the homes of each of our students and create in each child a passion for reading and learning," Supt. Woolard said. "We believe that every child should have access to fun and engaging books, and that geography or socioeconomic status should not have an impact on a child's opportunity to read. To bridge that gap, we are taking impactful and interesting books to our kids and their families."

Heather said the Book Bus always receives a warm welcome and the



SUBMITTED PHOTOS



students are excited to explore the books aboard the bus and look for new adventures and opportunities in the stories it provides.

"We have recently started taking requests for books, as kids are finishing series and looking for new books to read," Heather said. "To me, the frequent requests for books have been evidence that we are building readers. Just as exciting has been the parent response to our bus. Parents are now visiting the book bus to find their own books and stories as well."

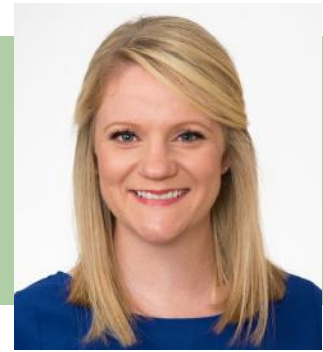
While the SOAR Grant offered the district the funding needed to purchase the start-up books and build the mobile library using a district-donated bus, the project is being maintained with private donations of books and funding, and the district is using some title funds to support the initiative.

"We only expect this project to grow and continue reaching our students, so our district and our community will ensure its ongoing success," Supt. Woolard said. "Providing a literacy-rich environment for our students is a priority in our district."



# You Lucky Dog!

WITH DR. KRISTIN SULLIVAN



In the veterinary world I live in, this is a phrase I often hear myself and other employees say to my clients about their pets: "You lucky dog!" It is meant as high praise to our client because they take such great care of their pets.

There are, however, those times when that phrase is used for pets that are adopted or fostered. Alternately, the same phrase may be applied to the owner of a really great pet. In this article, I'll be discussing how life-changing it is for not only you and your family, but for the pet you are saving when you adopt or foster with a rescue agency or humane society.

Life changing events come in all forms for people, but for dogs and cats that are in a rescue facility, humane society or animal shelter the biggest positive life-changing event is being adopted into a loving and caring family.

If you are anything like me, when you think of an animal that is at the pound, that scene from Lady and the Tramp with all the animals telling their sad tales

and then howling in sadness jumps to my mind first. That said, we all know these animals are getting cared for and fed, but with overpopulation being of great concern, euthanasia is certainly a large risk factor.

You learn quickly in the veterinary field how wonderful the rescue agencies, foster families, volunteers at rescue facilities, and employees of these various rescue agencies are to the community and specifically to those animals. I want to take this opportunity to thank those organizations, especially the local organizations of Northeast Arkansas, for all of their hard work, which is truly a labor of love and compassion.

I also want to thank the volunteers who donate their time in order to help improve the lives of the animals in these facilities; the foster families that take in pets while looking for their forever home; the organizers and leaders of these groups that ensure each pet has food, water and a



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safe place to sleep; and the citizens of this community who donate money to help finance these non-profit operations. It is because of these combined efforts that saving these animals is possible.

Adopting or fostering a pet is life changing for us as well. I'm sure we've all seen some of the videos of the dog or cat that was absolutely terrified - trying to attack or simply trying to get away from whatever person that was just trying to help it. Then you see the progress and the change in that animal as it



grows to know love and understands it does not have to live in fear. If you haven't seen any of these videos, you should! They are absolutely heartwarming. It is these changes that I am blessed to witness daily.

If you've ever been to ARPets Hospital, then you know we keep really yummy treats in every room/space of the hospital. As you can imagine, some pets do not like to go see the vet (which hurts my heart because I love seeing them!).

Naturally, I try to win my way to their hearts with a tasty treat. What I am really doing is attempting with every patient to make that connection and build trust. When trust is built, fear dissipates.

It is the same with many of these animals that have lived a life of fear and survival. When that trust is established, you have a loyal best friend ... and nothing beats that. And it is simply this, gaining a loyal friend that loves us unconditionally, that is so life changing for people.

So, go, adopt a lucky dog and realize that you are really the lucky dog. Happy St. PAWtrick's Day!

Dr. Kristin Sullivan is a small animal veterinarian practicing since 2012. She owns ARPets Hospital and PAWliday Inn in Brookland, Arkansas, with her husband Michael Sullivan. She strives to provide the highest quality veterinary care, advocating for her patients, and works to educate the public in animal health care and preventive medicine, while promoting the human-animal bond.

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# A HABIT OF *Choosing Joy*

BY KARAN SUMMITT

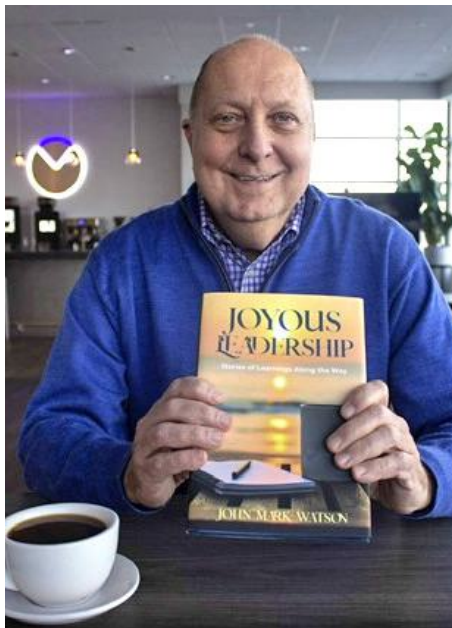
Mark Watson grew up in Paragould, and like others coming into their teen years during the '70s, he attended a local school, played sports, cruised Highway 412, went to church and had a part-time job making enough pocket money for whatever Mom and Dad said was his responsibility.

Those days in Paragould gave Mark a good start. Vernon Williams hired him as a stock boy and trusted Mark enough to promote him. Ethan Busby gave Mark his love for long-distance running, and Burl Lamb kept him in vehicles. Mark believed that with some hard work and wise choices, life could be good.

And life was good for a good bit of time. Mark dated Stacie, another Paragould native, and they married. Son Jared came along, and a few years later life hit an unexpected bump when their second son, Tate, was born with Down's Syndrome. Stacie devoted herself to the boys, and Mark tackled the demands of a career.

In time Mark was hired as General Manager and Vice-President for Parker, Incorporated. The company gave him ample opportunities for honing a variety of skills, including team-building and learning to grow a company globally. Eventually the Watsons moved to Mexico for a time to oversee the construction of a new facility.

In 2011, Mark left Parker to take on global operations for the BUNN Corporation — you probably recognize the name from the coffee machine in your company break room. The small, family-oriented business appealed to Mark. Believing he could put his own mark on their growth by helping it grow worldwide, the family moved to BUNN headquarters in Springfield, Illinois.



Life was on an even keel. Jared had graduated high school and Tate was doing well. Mark, an outgoing and entertaining presenter, was periodically asked to speak to young business professionals, civic groups and BUNN's training centers. The presentations led to multiple requests for his material to be put into book form.

Mark's love for long-distance running kept



him committed to regular workouts. He looks back at those days and describes himself as being "in the best physical shape of my life." That was about to change.

In the spring of 2013, Mark began to experience a series of health problems. He lost consciousness unexpectedly and was fitted with a pace-maker, thinking it might be a heart issue. Changes continued as Mark noticed a loss in physical strength, dexterity and numbness in his fingers and toes. Trips to a neurologist led to carpal tunnel surgery, but Mark's health continued to deteriorate.

The problems reached a peak in January of 2015 when Mark struggled to digest food and over a period of 30 days lost 26 pounds. Two weeks of extensive testing at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, led to the diagnosis of amyloidosis, a rare neurological disease with no known cure.

One bright spot in this devastating news was learning Mark had the

Life will be hard.  
We can choose joy  
or we can choose  
to grumble and  
complain.  
I've decided to  
choose joy.

Mark Watson

best possible specialist. Without knowing exactly what specialty Mark needed, the clinic assigned him to an internal medicine physician. That physician had recently completed a study on amyloidosis and immediately recognized Mark's symptoms.

Initial prognosis was Mark had about nine months to live. Medications could help manage symptoms of pain and food intolerance, but the disease was on a fast track.

In May of 2015, the doctor called with an offer. Mark was invited to participate in a new drug trial for amyloidosis patients, with a 6/10 chance of receiving the treatment vs. being in a placebo group.

By November, Mark was feeling good enough to suspect his infusions were the new drug. Today, some 10 years later, the drug has evolved with less side effects. Mark takes an injection once each quarter.

BUNN refused to let Mark resign, vowing to stay with him as long as he could work. The speaking engagements and requests for printed material continued, with Mark reworking his presentations to include how his illness had impacted his perspective on life. The years weren't always easy, but Mark and Stacie came to realize that no matter what happens in life, there is joy to be found in every season.

Mark's material eventually made its way into book form as "Joyous Leadership: Stories of Learnings Along the Way." The book includes a series of stories from life, work and Mark's health journey. In 2023, the book was a Next Generation Indie Book Award winner, an honor reserved for first-time authors.

Mark recently retired from BUNN, and he, Stacie and Tate moved back



to Paragould. The speaking invitations continue, with Mark limiting them to two each month. There are ongoing health struggles, but amyloidosis is no longer considered a death sentence but a condition people can live with.

Mark's philosophy echoes his life journey with the words, "Joy itself is not a destination to reach, it's the journey along the way." If you would like to read more, Mark's book is available from Amazon.

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## Weddings and Young Children

Spring has sprung, and with it comes the beginning of the wedding season. When planning a wedding, a frequent topic of discussion is whether or not to invite very young children.

Some feel a wedding would not be complete without young children while others feel that even the best-behaved young children can become restless and disruptive during a long formal ceremony. So, should very young children be included in the guest list?

### Wedding guest framework

Deciding upon the guest list can be tricky. Many wedding experts suggest that the wedding guest list be considered a framework

for the event.

The framework for the guest list usually consists of the following:

- The size of the wedding.
- The style of the wedding.
- The cost of the wedding.
- The location of the wedding.
- The formality of the wedding.

Using this framework can help to determine whether or not the wedding will be child friendly.

A guest list that includes young children or a guest list for adults-only may be a difficult choice. Couples should consider how they feel about their wedding ceremony by considering the pros and cons of inviting young children. Here are some guidelines. You may think of many more based on your circumstances.

### Who to invite

Consider inviting young children if you:

- Want them to be a part of the wedding event.
- Feel they are an important part of your family.
- Would like the wedding to also serve as a

reunion for family and friends.

Consider inviting only adults if you:

- Think young children may be disruptive during the wedding.
- Have selected a location that may not be child friendly.
- Are planning a long, formal, solemn ceremony.
- Want to limit the number of guests.

### Who's invited

The first impression guests may have of the wedding is the style of the invitation.

Is the wedding formal or casual? Will the wedding be held indoors or outdoors? The invitation often sets the tone of the wedding celebration.

The invitation indicates who is invited. If children are invited then the parents' names are on the outer envelope and then on the inner envelope the parents' names and children's names are listed. If children are not invited then only the parents' names are listed on the outer and inner envelope. If using only one envelope, list the names of those invited.

## Quote of the Day:

"A happy marriage is a long conversation."

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### Providing childcare

Providing a nursery or hiring babysitters to watch very young children during the wedding ceremony and the reception is greatly appreciated by parents, guests and the members of the wedding party. Often a separate card is enclosed in the invitation notifying guests that a nursery or babysitting services will be provided.

This service gives the parents an opportunity to attend a wedding and reception that may not be conducive to very young children. Parents and guests can relax and enjoy the ceremony without worrying about a crying child. And, the wedding party can concentrate on the event and not have to be concerned about tired and fidgety young children.

Linda Lou Moore is a certified etiquette consultant. She offers business professionalism and dining seminars for adults, and etiquette and dining programs for children and teens. Contact via Post Office Box 726, Paragould 72451 or at [llmooreparagould@gmail.com](mailto:llmooreparagould@gmail.com).



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# Book Vending Machines *Create Excitement for Students*

BY SHELBY RUSSOM

The vending machines in the Jonesboro School District are not the typical snack-filled machines. Instead, they house books of every type, from picture to chapter.

The district implemented this almost 8-foot-tall book-based reward system to encourage students to fall in love with reading and actively participate in school.

Principal Marcus Jones said the Jonesboro Math and Science Magnet School students responded to the machine with excitement and curiosity.

“When students were transitioning from one location to another, you heard a lot of wows and ‘What’s that, Mr. Jones?’ And once we got it set up, it was pretty much the spotlight of the school,” he said. “When

kids passed it, they stopped in awe.”

The machines throughout the campus were purchased through Successful Outcomes for Arkansas Readers (SOAR) grants, which are intended to help the literacy rates of Arkansas schools flourish, and through fundraisers within the PATHS parent group. Literary instructional facilitators Amanda Mirafuentes and Jennifer Engelken worked together to find the machine and spearhead the process.

“When we saw the opportunity to get a vending machine, we jumped at it because we knew there was a lot of benefit in students having books,” Marcus said. “We wanted to incentivize reading as much as possible here at Math and Science.”

Mirafuentes said she felt incorporating book vending machines across the Jonesboro schools would be a great way to immerse students into reading and expose them to new books.

“Simply teaching them the skills of how to read does not make a student enjoy reading. The Book Vending Machine helped build the excitement about getting a book,” she said. “We work to make sure that our students know about good books and hear about them so they can start deciding what types of books they would enjoy, but the vending machine brought the excitement to a whole new level.”

The Math and Science school received its machine in 2023, and from there, Marcus was allowed creative freedom with running the reward system.

His idea to make the process fun and encourage students to attend class is something he calls “The Wheel of Attendance.” Each week, one lucky student has their name selected on a wheel system and receives a special gold token to purchase the book of their choice. To be eligible for the wheel, the student must have been at school each day of the previous week.

Marcus said he enjoys making the selection of a winner a whole production. Each Monday, every student who had perfect attendance the week before is added to the wheel, and a fun song is played through the school’s intercom system.

Now, the students have learned what the song means, and all get ready and listen intently because it could be their big day.

For sixth grader Josiah Walton, that big day came twice. Josiah said the first time his name was chosen, he was very excited. He said he had been trying to come to school every day since the machine was placed so he could win.

For his first book, Josiah chose “I Survived,” a book he said he has now read twice.





There are several students added to the wheel each week, making it unusual for one student to win twice. Josiah said this chance meant a lot to him, and he took the opportunity to pick a book he wouldn't normally read - a volleyball book.

"I felt really excited," he said. "Knowing that I was really lucky."

Josiah said he and his peers appreciate the book vending machine and the effort the school has made to make the selection process fun.

"It shows that the school helps the students and the kids with knowledge and better reading and showing us new stuff," he said.

The opportunity to choose a book from the machine is beneficial to students in multiple ways.

"That machine has improved the students' desire to want to read, and to read what they want to read," Marcus said. "One of the biggest things I think the students get out of that is that they get to own a book. Which a lot of them do not get an opportunity to own new books."

Marcus said the ownership of the books encourages students who otherwise were not readers to delve into the hobby.

"Once they are able to see what that looks like and feels like, they love



it and they become readers as a result."

Abbie Hayley, assistant principal of school improvement for the Visual and Performing Arts Magnet school (VPA), said the instructional facilitators and the VPA leadership team believe the vending machines provide a unique experience for the students, encouraging student engagement in school.


"When a student earns a chance to get a book, they are so excited! They are eager to earn their very own book and even more excited to start reading it," Abbie said.

The filling of each machine is catered to the reading level and interests of the students within the schools. Marcus said the district has been able to work with the community to get books through donations as well as grants.

"We have books that are chapter books, we have books that are picture books, we have books on Ninja Turtles, we have books on reptiles," he said. "It ranges from one end to the other to give students a variety of selection and to get them more excited about being able to use their coins to obtain their books."


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3/28 - Friday at 7:00pm, William Lee Martin - The Funny Life Tour

3/29 - Saturday at 7:00pm, Tell Me Lies - Fleetwood Mac Tribute, [showpass.com/tellmelies](http://showpass.com/tellmelies)

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Main Street Paragould Event



March 22nd

7:00 p.m.

Rockin' The Night Away

Downtown Collins Theatre



March 24th

7:00 p.m.

Bluegrass Monday

Downtown Collins Theatre

*A complete listing of all Downtown events can be found under "Events" at [downtownparagould.com](http://downtownparagould.com) or [facebook.com/oneandonlydowntown/events](https://facebook.com/oneandonlydowntown/events).*



March 28th

7:00 p.m.

William Lee Martin

The Funny Life Tour

Downtown Collins Theatre



March 29th

7:00 p.m.

Tell Me Lies

Fleetwood Mac Tribute

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## ETHICAL AI



**PERSONALIZATION:**  
Enhances customer experiences with tailored support.



**OPTIMIZATION:**  
Streamlines operations, predicts failures and automates tasks.



**IDENTIFICATION:**  
Uncovers hidden trends for informed business decisions.



**PROTECTION:**  
Vigilantly detects fraud and secures assets.

## UNETHICAL AI

**AGGRESSION:**  
Powers cyberattacks, increasing their complexity.



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# Medical Advancements FOR ALZHEIMER'S PATIENTS

BY GRETCHEN HUNT

**D**r. Ronald South, Medical Director of Neurology Services at Arkansas Methodist Medical Center, is excited to see a surge in medical advancements for Alzheimer's patients.

"It's rapidly advancing," he said. "There is some really cool stuff coming down the road. I'm like a kid in a candy store when I hear of the new treatments. It's a really cool time."

From about 2003 to 2023 there wasn't much new in Alzheimer's medications, but Dr. South said research was ongoing. Then, on July 6, 2023, a new infusion drug, LEQEMBI, received traditional approval from the FDA. It opened doors to treatment and changed the treatment paradigm.

"It's a game changer," Dr. South said. "It's sparked a lot of interest. A medication that actually modifies Alzheimer's really spurs a lot of research."

AMMC was one of the first hospitals in the state to do the infusions, and continues to be a leader in the field, with hospitals in other states planning to travel to Paragould to see how the program operates.

"Right now we lead the state in number of patients enrolled and number of infusions given," Dr. South, who is also currently serving as AMMC's Chief of Staff, said.

AMMC did its first infusion January 2nd, 2024, when two patients received treatment. A little over a year later, the hospital has more than 80 patients enrolled with over 800 infusions having been given.

"We started small and slowly to make certain the program was safe and within our capability. We want to have control over things," Dr. South said. "When I took this to the administration, 30 minutes later I got a call from the CEO, Mr. Bloemer, asking, 'What do you need?' Everyone was on board. Radiology, Billing, Infusion ... all those



different departments pulling together. It was a team effort."

While many rallied around, the one who did the research and was ready to act as soon as FDA approval was obtained was Dr. South. His passion for helping others comes from having watched both his parents suffer from different types of dementia. His mother passed away after a fall aggravated her condition, and his father followed just days later.

"I think it was just the realization that his wife was gone," he said of his father's passing. "They had been together for over 60 years. Why should anyone have to go through what I went through?"

Future looks bright

Dr. South recalled a patient who watched her mother deteriorate and die from the disease. The patient received the same diagnosis. She suffered some depression after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She quit sewing following her own diagnosis, but after she started infusions her daughter called one day because she couldn't find her mom. She found her in her sewing room. She had started sewing and stayed in there all day.

"She is at the top of the range, with great improvement. We have also seen minor improvement where the patient says, 'Doc, I can tell I'm doing better.' I asked one patient what he meant and he said, 'I remember I forget to do things now.'"

As patients progress through treatment, they undergo testing to see where they fall on a CDR (Clinical Dementia Rating) Scale.

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"We have a lot who have seen a 0.5 change. 0.5 doesn't sound like much, but on this scale it is huge," Dr. South said. "It's not a cure and it will not completely halt the progression of the disease, but we are trying to slow the progression down and we've had some good results."

Dr. South said the future is very bright as far as treatment goes. In addition to the approval of LEQEMBI for treatment in 2023, the FDA recently approved the drug for maintenance doses, as well, which means patients who have been enrolled in AMMC's program since its inception will soon be able to transfer to a maintenance program.

Another infusion drug, Kisunla, has also received FDA approval, and Dr. South is working to be able to offer it at AMMC, as well.

Dr. South stressed there are many different types of dementia, with Alzheimer's falling under that umbrella, but shared some statistics he thinks should have both patients and medical providers putting emphasis on the need for screening for the disease.

He said it is estimated that 7 million Americans have Alzheimer's Disease, but more than half of those are never officially diagnosed. He added that 2,000 people cross the threshold from mild cognitive impairment to the early Alzheimer stage each day, and screening could allow for earlier detection and treatment.

"People need to speak up with their primary care provider," he said. "Start the conversation. If you're having questions, bring it up."

He said a primary care provider can perform a mini-cog test, which can pick up on cognitive deficiencies and then if needed get the patient in to see a memory specialist. There is still more work to do to educate about what is available, though, according to Dr. South, who said, "A lot of providers don't know about LEQEMBI."

Now, AMMC is looking at what is needed to continue and expand its service to Alzheimer's patients.

"We are on the verge of exceeding our infusion capability space where we are, so we are looking at places in the hospital where we can expand our treatment space," Dr. South said. "We were on the cutting edge and that's where we want to stay."

## PATIENT, FAMILY SUPPORT

Ashley DeWitte, BSN, RN, is the Dementia Caregiver Support Group Facilitator. She said while caregiving for a loved one with Alzheimer's can be a challenging and emotional journey, it is not one family members have to face alone.

"AMMC's Community Alzheimer's and Dementia Support Group provides a safe, welcoming space for caregivers to share their experiences, learn from one another, and gain practical tools to manage the unique challenges of caring for someone with Alzheimer's or other types of dementia," she said. "This support group was formed in partnership with the Alzheimer's Association to offer reliable resources and foster a compassionate community of support. We're here to help you every step of the way."

AMMC's Community Alzheimer's and Dementia Support Group meets on the first Thursday of each month from noon to 1 p.m. in the AMMC Auditorium.

Dr. South said the benefit of the support group is that everyone is at different stages in the process. "If they know where the potholes are at they can help you avoid them."

In addition, patients receive treatment twice a month and the sessions are with the same group each time, so they have formed tight-knit groups with the other families in their group. "AMMC has done a wonderful job of forming a support group, but these treatment groups remind me of the group of guys at the coffee shop. They have that camaraderie and friendship," Dr. South said.

Dr. South also shared information about what he believes is a little-known resource for caregivers of dementia patients. "The state of Arkansas offers grants for respite care for caregivers," he said. "They will pay you \$500 to get a respite, then 90 days later you can apply again and get it again for a total of \$1,000 in a year."

Information on the grant can be found at [alz.org/arkansas/support/dementia-caregiver-respite-grant](http://alz.org/arkansas/support/dementia-caregiver-respite-grant).



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# Health Matters

BY KARAN SUMMITT

## VITAMINS & MINERALS



### The Best Choices for Seniors

March is National Nutrition Month and that makes it a good time to talk about all those times when healthy eating can be a challenge. Aging, illness, certain conditions and everyday life have a way of throwing a curve when it comes to a balanced diet. Maybe that's why in the United States more than 55 percent of us use multivitamins. They are the most commonly used dietary supplements and are a great tool for protecting our health, especially as we age.

#### What Are Vitamins and Minerals?

Vitamins help your body grow and work the way it should. There are 13 essential vitamins — vitamins A, C, D, E, K and the B vitamins (thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, pantothenic acid, biotin, B 6, B 12 and folate), and each one has a different job to help the body work properly. Some vitamins help you resist infections and keep your nerves healthy, while others may help your body get energy from food or help your blood clot properly.

Like vitamins, minerals also help maintain body functions. Minerals are elements that can be found on the earth and in foods. Some minerals, like iodine and fluoride, are only needed in very small quantities. Others, such as calcium, magnesium and potassium, are needed in larger amounts.

It is important to remember that supplements are not a substitute for a healthy diet of nutritious foods. As you get older, however, you can become deficient in certain vitamins and minerals, and the nutrients you get from diet alone may not be enough. Before starting vitamin or mineral supplements, you should talk to your doctor and pharmacist to determine if it is appropriate. Supplements may affect the way your prescription drugs work.

Below is a list of vitamins and minerals especially conducive to good senior health.

**Vitamin D** - In the body, vitamin D helps your body absorb calcium from the gut and is essential for strong, healthy bones. It can help reduce the risk of osteoporosis, a condition that makes your bones brittle and more prone to breaking. Taking the right amount of vitamin D may also reduce the risk of certain cancers and heart disease.

Normally, vitamin D is made when you go outside and your skin gets exposed to the sun. It is thought that five to 30 minutes of mid-day sun twice a week without sunscreen is enough to get the right amount of vitamin D. As you get older, you might not get enough sunlight, especially in the winter. Also, your skin and other organs that are responsible for making vitamin D might not work as well. Therefore, your doctor may supplement your vitamin D intake.

**Calcium** - Almost all the calcium in your body is found in your bones. As you age, calcium tends to leave your bones, which can put you at risk for osteoporosis. Deficiency may also put you at risk for osteomalacia, which is a softening of the bones. To maintain strong bones as you age, you can do weight-bearing exercises, such as brisk walking, golf or dancing. Because vitamin D helps you absorb more calcium, your doctor may recommend a supplement with both of these nutrients.

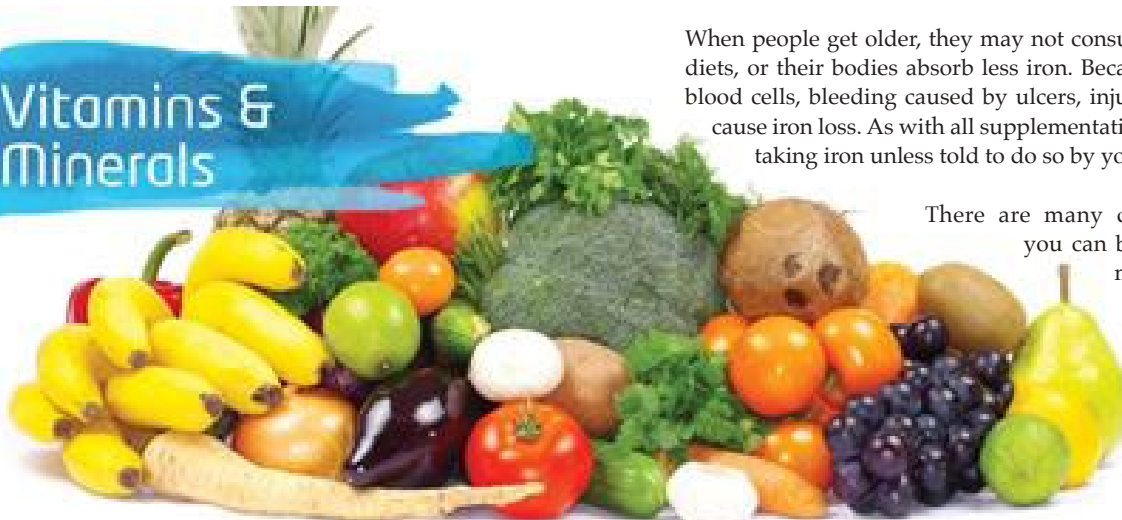
When taking calcium supplements, you might experience constipation. You can lessen these side effects by drinking plenty of fluids, eating lots of fiber (or using a fiber supplement) and exercising.

**Iron** - Iron is an important mineral found in red blood cells. Red blood cells are the oxygen-transporting cells of your body. An iron deficiency may lead to anemia, which is a condition that develops when your body does not have enough healthy red blood cells. A common symptom of anemia is fatigue.

When people get older, they may not consume enough iron in their diets, or their bodies absorb less iron. Because iron is found in red blood cells, bleeding caused by ulcers, injury or even surgery may cause iron loss. As with all supplementation, you should not begin taking iron unless told to do so by your doctor.

There are many different forms of iron you can buy over the counter, so make sure to talk to your pharmacist if you have any questions. After taking iron, you may experience an upset stomach. Your doctor may tell you to take it with food if this occurs. Like calcium,

### Vitamins & Minerals



iron can cause constipation and may also turn your stool black. Unless you have other stomach problems or medical conditions, this is not a cause for concern.

**Vitamin B12** - Vitamin B12, or cyanocobalamin, is used by all the cells in your body, especially the ones in your brain and spinal cord. If you become deficient, you may experience confusion, agitation or hallucinations. As you get older, you may not absorb vitamin B12 as well. Because vitamin B12 is found mostly in animal protein, you can become deficient if you are a vegan or vegetarian. Like iron deficiency, lacking too much vitamin B12 may lead to anemia.

**Immune-Boosting Vitamins and Minerals** - In addition to staying up-to-date on vaccinations, there are several immune boosting vitamins and minerals, most of them easily available with healthy eating. These include Vitamins A, C and D and minerals such as zinc. Probiotic foods like buttermilk, yogurt and sauerkraut contribute to good gut health, a major influence in maintaining a strong immune system.

As you age, vitamin and mineral supplements can keep you healthy. However, it is important that you use them appropriately and in conjunction with healthy diet and exercise. By talking to your doctor and pharmacist about your supplement use, you can reap the benefits of a good supplement regime while avoiding unwanted side effects.

Karan Summitt is a retired health educator with 25 years experience educating people of all ages on the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. She teaches and writes with a passion for sharing simple, doable strategies that make better health possible for almost everyone.

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# Woodburning

BY RICHARD BRUMMETT

## LOVE OF ART LEADS TO CLASS

**J**erry McAfee's love of art is paying dividends for others, thanks to his willingness to teach a woodburning class at the St. Bernards Senior Living Center in Jonesboro.

Pointing out that he's also a former Junior World Champion Cotton Picker, ("my brother won the Senior title") the 83-year-old McAfee said a lifelong fondness for painting and woodworking just seems to come naturally. "It's unusual," he said of his woodburning talents. "My Master's and PhD is in Vocational Agriculture. I taught that in college many years at Mississippi Gulf Coast. But all my life I've been, I guess

you would say, an artist. In the eighth grade I started taking art and I've been doing it all my life, the woodburning and painting, and now I teach classes here and in Bono at the Senior Life Center."

His Jonesboro classes meet Thursdays at 12:30 and the walls of the Senior Center are filled with his and his students' finished works. "I put one up here years ago," he said, "and now I've got 30 or so up. Some of the students' work is up, too."

Some are in the shape of elongated murals, others resembling photographs or paintings, but all attest to McAfee's talent and adept hand. He enjoys pointing out some of the unique touches he and students have added to many of the works.

As for the classes, he said 10 to 15 attend when the weather's not bad, and participants don't have to bring anything: "Just bring yourself. We'll furnish everything, all the tools, and show you how. I'll put you on a board and do some prelims; I'll draw something for you and you will run a line on it ... a bird or a flower, just follow the lines. We'll set you up with a woodburning tool and a piece of wood. Some sure do enjoy it."



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Along one wall is a colorful train, catching one's eye with both the skillful touch and the first place blue ribbon hanging from a corner. "We won that at the county fair with the only one we entered," McAfee said. "I don't really have many to go around my house. I save it for here." He's also proud of recognition he received from Louisiana State University a few years back, making mention of his woodburning art featured at St. Bernards. "Only me and a Pulitzer Prize winner have been awarded this commendation at LSU," he proudly stated.

He said some of the projects might take several months to complete. "If I say, 'I might try that,' when I see a picture or something, it will be woodburning and painting," McAfee explained. "That's what we see on the wall here. In class, I'll set up a long piece and some will be on one end woodburning and some on the other end woodburning. And some teaching others at another table.

"I know they enjoy it. Some pick it up quite quickly. Last week we had a couple from Honduras and they picked it up right away."

He said he's not certain where his knack for woodburning comes from, other than "maybe because I'm part Cherokee Indian. I don't know. Maybe some of it comes back from that."

Wherever it comes from, his work makes a nice addition to the center's walls. "I'm happy they like to put them up for everyone to see," he said. "And it makes the students feel good when they can brag on their work."

The Senior Center is located at 700 E. Washington in Jonesboro and may be reached by calling 870-207-7611 to gain more information about the classes.






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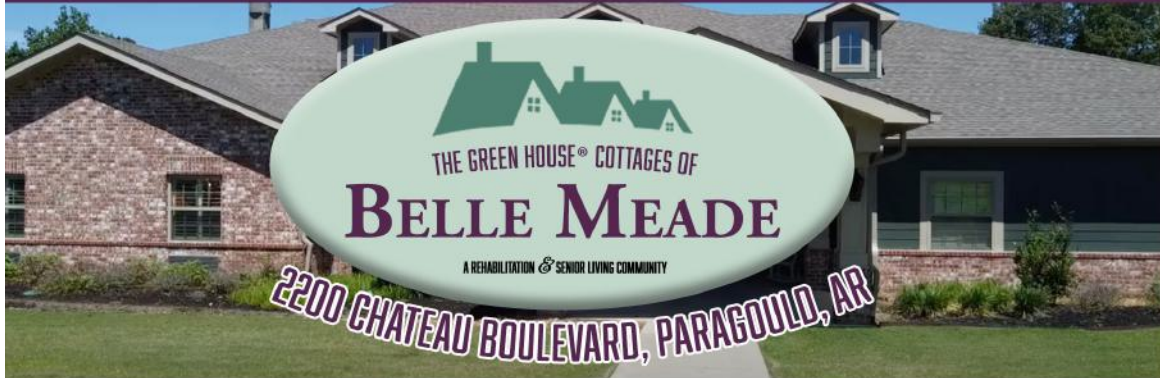


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# SENIOR B.E.E.S. *Quilting For Others*

BY GRETCHEN HUNT

**O**n Thursdays at the Senior B.E.E.S. Center in Paragould quilting is the order of the day. The group that gathers isn't just quilting or fun, though, they are quilting for others.

Loreta Allison, Nadine Blum, Louise Richardson and Vickie Fulbright make up the core group, and Loreta recalls that she began working at the center's boutique before she started helping with the quilting group.

"The quilting group then did hand-quilting, which I never got into," Loreta said. But around 20 years ago a group started meeting on Thursdays to do machine-sewn quilts and other projects and Loreta has been giving her time and talents there ever since.

The quilters make big quilts for housefire victims, and twin-size quilts for children in foster care, as well as baby quilts, walker bags and heart monitor bags.

Just as they give everything away, they also receive all their materials through donations. "Everything is donated" Loreta said. "We don't buy anything. We've got a closet full of fabric.



Nadine Blum

About the only thing we have to buy is a new sewing machine needle when we need one."

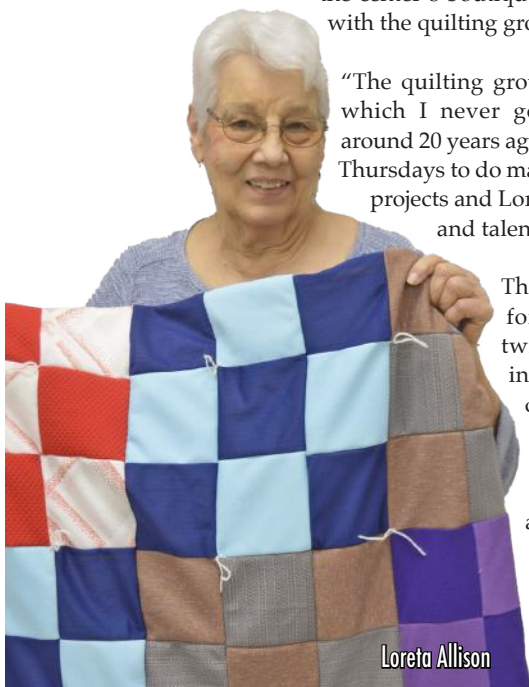
Louise, who claimed to be the new kid on the block, having only been quilting with the group for 16 years, said she cuts blocks out at home and sews them together then brings those pieces on Thursdays to sew into bigger blocks.

"You wouldn't believe the material people bring in," Louise said, as she pointed out some of the beautiful projects in progress at the center.

"I just like to sew," she added. "We really enjoy it. We probably get more joy out of this than anyone. That's probably my only gift is sewing. I hope that I continue to use it as long as I can."

Vickie is not able to come every week because of schedule conflicts with her church work and mission trips, but she still participates once or twice a month. All four ladies are committed to keeping the items stocked for those who need them, and they encourage others who would like to join them to do so.

"We just try to help wherever we can," Loreta said, noting that the four core members sew all the time, but anyone is welcome to join them. "Even if they can't sew, they can cut out blocks."



Loreta Allison




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# Lifelong educator: *Literacy still vital*

BY GRETCHEN HUNT

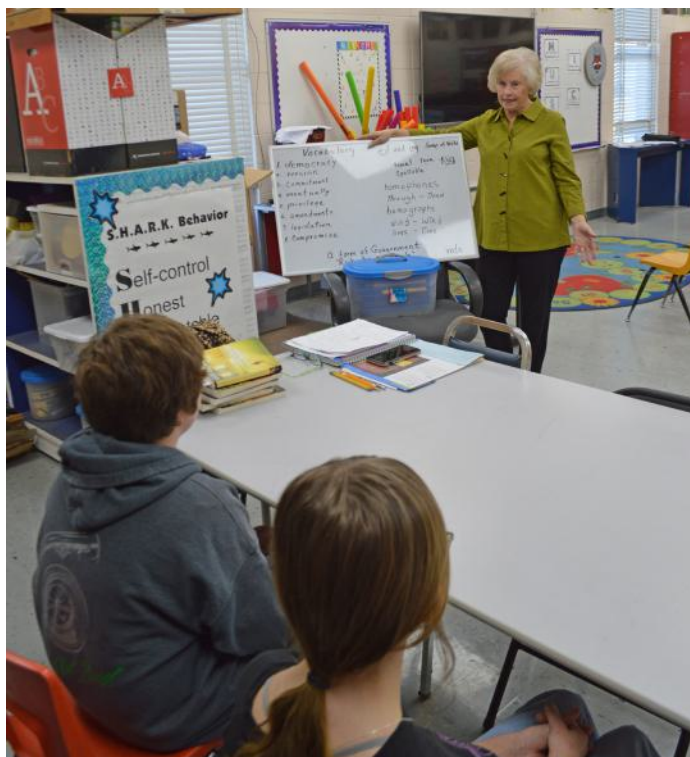
Cheryl Cain of Jonesboro spent more than 40 years in education before retiring as an administrator with the Valley View School District. But with teaching in her blood, she had to find a way to keep that blood flowing.

A lifelong educator, she taught third grade for the Jonesboro School District for five years and then did a short stint teaching Head Start before taking a position at Valley View. She taught reading for fourth-through eighth-graders for two years, then taught fifth grade for around 14 years before taking an administrative position.

Cheryl said when she retired as an administrator, her job had become 24-7, but she still had a desire to work with children. She found that opportunity at Baldwin Elementary School in Paragould as part of the district's reading tutor program. "I thought I would enjoy working with children a couple days a week," Cheryl said. "I came in here and it seemed like a good fit."

Jennifer Harper, principal at Baldwin Elementary, said when she was conducting interviews for prospective tutors, she quickly found herself on the receiving end of the questions when she sat down with Cheryl.

"We had put out the word that we were looking for tutors, and she had already decided she was going to give her time at a school," Jennifer said. "It was like she was interviewing me ... trying to decide if this was the school for her. I told her about our program, our building, what we were trying to do. She said, 'OK, I'm going to do it.' So she chose us."



The program was launched using funds to help with learning losses from COVID.

"When we first came back from COVID, we had the opportunity to bring in tutors because we had gaps that had to be filled," Jennifer said, noting the tutors could also step in if a teacher became sick. "Any moment of any day a teacher could have to be sent home. We are lucky at Baldwin, all of our tutors are retired certified teachers except one who also worked at a school."

Cheryl, who is one of nine tutors at Baldwin, works at the school at least two days a week through the program, which the district has found to be very beneficial. "The tutors work with the teachers on what the kids need," Jennifer said. "We focus a lot on second grade."

The quality of the tutors and teachers at Baldwin is something Cheryl said makes the program successful. "It's been my privilege to work with teachers who have a passion for what they do," she said.

Cheryl said while a lot has changed in education, she believes literacy is still vitally important.

"I feel like everyone needs to be able to read, comprehend and think for understanding," Cheryl said. "With COVID and a lot of things happening in education, I feel like a lot of children get behind if they do not have reinforcement of the skills they need to be a good reader."

She said she enjoys working with the students individually and in small groups, and the time she spends with them is what she enjoys most about being a reading tutor. "The response I get from the students – the connection," she listed as what she loves about her role as a tutor. "Getting to know them. I've never met a student I didn't like."



# The Cat IN THE HATS

BY RICHARD BRUMMETT

**T**he Cat in the Hat might not be that easy to locate, but the Cat in the Hats is just down the road.

Perry Lashley of Paragould has added a touch of humor to an otherwise serious occurrence, choosing to wear a different hat or cap to each of his many cancer treatment appointments. "I was diagnosed with chronic lymphoid leukemia (CLL) in 2016 and started going to NEA in Jonesboro, the Fowler Center," Perry said. "Two years later I was diagnosed with Stage 3 lung cancer and had to do 37 radiation treatments in a row, five days a week. I said to them as a joke one time, 'I may not wear a different shirt every time I come in here, but I can sure wear a different hat.' That's when the 'hat trick' started. I've worn a different one ever since."

On November 19, Perry wore his 100th hat, a "Perry's Ice Cream 100th Anniversary" hat and it quickly became one of his favorites because it features his name. The number 100 on the cap also corresponded with his 100th session, just as others have carried similar meanings. "I try to wear a hat that corresponds with the visit, like the 37 trip," he explained. "My kids made me a Hat 37 for my final radiation treatment.

I wore Hat 37. If I have a hat with a number on it, I try to save it for that trip."

Those who know him are accustomed to seeing him in a cap most of the time, and since he's a huge NASCAR and NHRA drag racing fan most of his collection is racing related. But friends and family have bolstered his assemblage by contributing hats and caps of all kinds, adding to Perry's enjoyment.

"It was just something to do when I started it," he said. "Everyone gets a kick out of it. They'll say, 'What hat's that?' One of the nurses even gave me one, my sister gave me one, friends. They just keep coming. As a matter of fact, when I wore my 100th hat, the doctor said, 'That has to be some kind of record.' It would be way over a hundred if I had done it when I first started treatments."

The "Perry's" cap is probably his favorite, he said, "because it has my name on it. There are some cool hats, like we go to Talladega every year and the police and security guys there have become our friends and they come to our camp and bring hats. I've got a sheriff's hat and a lot of racing related hats. I just wore my 104th hat."

Calling himself an eight-year cancer survivor/fighter, he said his



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leukemia is back and the lung cancer “is on hold. It’s not in remission, I think they call it stable. For now, the leukemia is on hold; I’m taking a pill for it. I want to get my story out there because sometimes it’s the little things that make a difference. I don’t wear a hat because my hair fell out; I’ve been challenged in the hair department for years. The hat trick is just my little way of dealing with it.”

Turning 65 this year, Perry said he still enjoys working on cars, as he has done for most of his life: “I had a body shop, and I’ve always painted cars. I went to Auto Body school at the Jonesboro Vo-Tech back in the day, mainly to get out of class. But I ended up loving it and stayed with it.”

The cap changing habit, he said, has helped bring a bit of joy to him, his family and his team at the cancer center. “I would like to thank my family and friends for their support,” he said. “They have been fantastic. I would also like to thank everyone at the cancer center. They are awesome.

“But I never dreamed I’d wear a hundred different hats down there. That’s a lot of hats when you think about it.”



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Valentine's King and Queen at the Senior B.E.E.S. Center in Paragould were Bill Ring and Lea Hall!

Betty Forkum and Rex Loftin were showered with gifts after being crowned King and Queen at Chateau on the Ridge.



The Valentine's Day celebration at The Bungalows included reminiscing about young love!

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## AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

# An Accidental Poet

*Unexpected career includes more than 100 awards*

BY SHELBY RUSSOM

In high school, Fay Smalling Guinn found herself rhyming word after word, seeking extra credit. Unbeknownst to her, this decision would later alter the path of her life and leave her as a multi-award-winning self-published author.

Fay said falling in love with poetry was accidental. Her first poem, "Dedication," had only been to make up points after getting a zero on a test she missed while taking a day to visit a college campus.

"To this nerdy girl that had never made less than an A in English, I was horrified," Fay said. "I was going to have this black mark on my record."

Because the missed test fell late in the school year, Fay would not have a chance to bring it up with other tests. Luckily, her teacher created an extra credit assignment – writing a poem.

"I'd never written a poem in my life," she said. "Seventeen years old and I'd never written any poems, so I decided I would try."

When Fay turned in the poem, she received a high enough score to raise her grade. To this day, she still has a copy of the poem that started it all.

In college, Fay continued to write through her column in her college newspaper and other entries, but the spark that started her success as an author still hadn't been lit.

Fay said she then fell into life, had three boys and began teaching. She still wrote on the side but did not have the time to concentrate on writing until she moved from Little Rock to Jonesboro to care for



her parents.

"They lived here for about five years," she said. "When they both passed away, I was just twiddling my thumbs like, 'What do I do now?'"

Then, an article in the Jonesboro Sun inspired her. The article revealed the existence of local writer's groups, like Writer's Ink in Paragould, and competitions. From then on, Fay was hooked and participated in everything she could. Because of that experience, Fay said it is important that people never discredit their local newspaper, as it may change their lives.

"I saw this picture of two ladies in there (the Jonesboro Sun), and they belonged to a local writer's group, and one was giving another one an award or something," Fay said. "It told where they met and when. The very next meeting, I was there."

After this discovery, the challenge of writing poetry, prose and flash



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fiction quickly became something Fay enjoyed. This newfound love replaced crafting and painting, which she still loves but cannot do as often after being injured and having surgeries.

"I've got that bug inside," she said. "That obsession to create something."

Fay said she loves poetry because it can be a quick way to express complicated feelings. She said the short poem format forces authors to deeply consider which words to use and how to convey a feeling briefly – a creative challenge she loves.

"If I can write so the reader can feel it too, or remember something, have a memory that he or she associates with that, then I've done my job," Fay said.

The inspiration for Fay's poetry comes from every aspect of her life. She has written about everything from a creek to a shoe sale, proving inspiration can be anywhere. She recommends every writer carry a notebook with them to jot down ideas when inspiration strikes.

"If you want to be a writer, you never lack from ideas," she said. "They're all around you."

This mindset mimics one of a mentor Fay met at a Hemingway-Pfeiffer writer's retreat who taught her to look around and seek inspiration with more than just her eyes.

"New writers, make lists, observe things with your eyes and your ears and your heart," Fay said. "If something touches you, that's something you could write about."

Fay has now won over 100 awards for her work and has even self-published a poetry book titled, "Don't Wear Red While Sitting Outside With Birds," which contains several of her poems. Fay said being acknowledged through winning awards and having a published book means so much to her, even if poetry books aren't for everyone.

Fay's book, "Don't Wear Red While Sitting Outside With Birds," can be purchased through Amazon.



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Curt Ellington

# LIL CABIN BAND

## *Making Music Their Mission*

BY KARAN SUMMITT

It's been said, "Love what you do and you will never work a day in your life." Ask any member of the LiL Cabin Band and they will tell you the saying holds just as much truth in retirement. They know firsthand the pleasure you feel when a part-time hobby turns into a mission that brings as much joy as it gives.

quarantine guidelines were lifted, Dennis noticed the residents had little of those contacts returning to brighten their days. In October of 2023, he pitched an idea to the rest of the guys -- what if they loaded up their instruments and provided a little "sunshine" to the folks at Sunshine Manor?

The story begins in a garage at Dennis Ellington's house with a handful of guys meeting on Thursday nights to do a little pickin' and grinnin', nothing they freely admit anyone would pay to hear. The group included two sets of brothers, Dennis and Curt Ellington and Tim and Dean Wooldridge, along with Randy Wallace, a tall, lanky fellow they all point to as the talented one of the original group.

The impromptu gig was a hit. Word spread around and the band was invited to other senior events. The following January Nashville Skyline invited the LiL Cabin Band to open for them at Lorado Grill, a local restaurant that offered live music. The huge crowd in attendance increased exposure for the band, and soon they were fielding a constant stream of requests. Tim took over booking events and Dennis invested in more equipment.



Randy Wallace

Their music was the kind they had grown up with, tunes that invite carpool karaoke and sing-a-longs. Each would take a turn singing the lead on a personal favorite while the rest provided harmony. There was more laughter than fussing over missed licks or song choices. Dean and Tim played rhythm guitar, Dennis plunked away on the bass guitar and Curt strummed along on the electric one. Randy's expertise on the mandolin and acoustic guitar added just the right touches.

The LiL Cabin Band hit the road and hasn't looked back. Their trips have taken them beyond Paragould to Pocahontas, Walnut Ridge, Jonesboro, Lake City and Monette, with all kinds of stops in between.



Dean Wooldridge

It was an enjoyable hobby for five longtime friends, providing hours of fun and fellowship without much thought of taking it any further than their weekly jam sessions. That is, until Dennis had an idea.

There have been challenges along the way. With a twinkle in their eyes and sheepish smiles, the guys admit they have their own sicknesses and doctor appointments that can interfere with show dates. They are especially careful to avoid contact with the senior population if one of them has been exposed to any contagious germs that might be going around. They have learned the necessity of adjusting if one band member is out, and now that they are fielding requests for repeat performances, they spend considerable practice time adding new tunes to their original routine.

Sunshine Manor was home to the Ellington boys' mom. Churches, schools and other groups had visited the seniors on a regular basis until the COVID quarantine left them isolated from the outside world. Even after

The men will be the first to admit that the work of setting up and taking down microphones, amplifiers,

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stands, stools and instruments isn't easy for five "old" guys. It takes the better part of an hour to get everything ready for the performances and another hour to take it down and load up Curt's SUV and Dennis's truck, but with a single voice they all say it's worth it. The stories pour out as fast as Dennis's feet tap the floor during songs, keeping the beat. In rapid succession they tell about ....

- The time at Rector when a lady with dementia was seated in the front row and began singing with them. Her grateful son remarked how long it had been since he witnessed his mom brighten up and engage in the things going on around her.

- A similar story when a son from Walnut Ridge sat with tears pouring down his cheeks as he watched his non-communicative mother with Alzheimer's join in and sing with the group.

- The expression of joy on a listener's face when a tune takes them back to good times from younger years.

Dean seemed to sum it up when he said, "I'm pretty sure there's no record contract in our future, but I love to look at the audience and see them singing with us." Tim goes on to add, "We believe these folks are our greatest treasures, and in many instances they've been forgotten by family and society. We want them to know we haven't forgotten them."

Performances allow the band members to reconnect with teachers and friends from the past. The men share again how well they get along. There are no big egos in the group. They attribute that to being content to remain amateurs, saying the lower expectations of the crowd make it comfortable for them to just sit back and enjoy performing. They chuckle when admitting that one of their first biggest surprises came as invitations to return started coming in!

The band has grown beyond the original five members. Bill White now adds keyboard licks to their songs, and

Russell Baldrige and Freddie Williams join them when they can, playing the fiddle and lead guitar. Total performances will soon pass 50. Through it all, the group keeps honing their craft with Thursday night practices in Dennis's garage.

Dennis's original idea to bring some joy to senior adults did not go unnoticed. In November he was chosen by KAIT8 and First Community Bank for their Gr8 Acts of Kindness Award. The band was surprised with the award during a performance at Paragould's Chateau on the Ridge. In talking with KAIT8 Dennis opened up to share more of his own feelings behind the motivation to perform for seniors.

He described a serious health crisis with the words, "It was bad. My colon ruptured, and I got septic immediately. They got me into surgery and I had double pneumonia. God saved me for a reason. I'm not a speaker. I bawl like a baby. I nearly died, and this is my way of saying thanks to God for sparing my life."

That post-Covid visit to Sunshine Manor provided the opportunity he needed to express his thanks and brighten the residents' day. Ellington did a little soul-searching and approached his friends and brother. The rest, as they say, is history, and the LiL Cabin Band was born.

The entire crew of LiL Cabin Band thinks of these no-cost performances as a ministry. They plan to continue performing as long their own health is good and seniors enjoy what they offer. In a play on the crowd-favorite words of an old Elvis Presley tune sung by Dean, they "can't help falling in love" with the joy they see on the faces of the audience and their enthusiastic response.

Band members' heads nodded as Tim spoke these words: "We don't profess to be good, but we sure do enjoy it!"

(Performance requests for The Lil Cabin Band can be made by contacting Tim Wooldridge at 870-926.8758.)



Tim Wooldridge



Bill White



Dennis Ellington



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# HEALTH LITERACY UNDERSTANDING YOUR OWN HEALTH

SUBMITTED BY DR. NATHAN TRIPOD  
ST. BERNARDS PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN

**A**s a doctor, I often see patients who don't know key facts about their health. Knowing and understanding your basic health information can help you stay well, find potential problems early and get the right care you need. I recommend that all my patients know how these six factors affect their overall health.

**Allergies** — Some people have allergies to food, medicine or things in the environment, such as pollen, pet dander or insects. Knowing what specific allergens affect you can help prevent serious reactions. Specifically, if you know you have a drug allergy — like penicillin — and haven't told your doctor, it's important to get that information recorded in your medical chart.

**Medications** — If you take medicine, you should know the name of each medication and why you need it. Some medications should not be taken together because they can cause bad side effects. If you ever go to a new doctor or the hospital, bring a list of your medicines or take a picture of them so you don't forget what you take.

**Medical History** — Do you have asthma? Have you ever had surgery? Does anyone in your family have heart disease, diabetes or cancer? Your medical history — and your family's — helps doctors figure out what diseases you might be at risk for. If you know your health history, you can take steps to stay as healthy as possible.

**Blood Pressure and Heart Rate** — Your blood pressure and heart rate show how well your heart is working. High blood pressure can lead to serious problems like strokes or heart disease. If you don't know your numbers and where they need to be, ask your doctor at your next visit. Keeping track of these numbers can help you stay ahead of health problems.

**Emergency Contacts** — If you ever have a medical emergency, doctors may need to contact someone who can help. Always have a list of emergency contacts, including a family member or close friend. If you have a serious health condition, like diabetes or a heart problem, wearing a medical ID bracelet can also help in an emergency.

**Lifestyle** — Healthy lifestyles not only make you feel better and improve your quality of life, they can also help you live longer. Good nutrition that includes whole grains, vegetables and fruit, as well as lean meats and drinking plenty of water help you manage your weight and improve muscle mass. In addition, exercise that includes walking or running and resistance training helps your physical and mental health alike. Finally, curb bad habits like drinking too many sugary drinks or too much alcohol and stop smoking altogether.

Take Charge of Your Health! The more you know about your health, the better you can take care of yourself. Keeping track of these six things gives you a head start on staying safe and healthy. If you're not sure about something, ask your doctor — we're here to help!

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# DON'T MISS THESE

## Upcoming Events in NEA



Dinner & Auction

March 8th

The 12th annual Make-A-Wish and Ag for Autism Dinner & Auction will be held Saturday, March 8th, at the Paragould Community Center. The family-friendly event will include dinner and live and silent auctions with 100 percent of the money raised going to the community and children who are battling various illnesses.

Doors will open at 5 p.m., food will be served at 5:30 and the live auction will begin at 6. For more information, visit the Annual Make-A-Wish and Ag for Autism Auction Facebook page or call Cliff Carter at 870-215-5751 or Danny Graham at 870-240-5739.



Pancake Breakfast

March 15th

The Paragould Kiwanis Club will host its annual Pancake Breakfast on Saturday, March 15th.

The event will be from 6:30 to 10 a.m. at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Paragould and will feature all you can eat pancakes and sausage.

Tickets are \$7 each, with tickets for children under five being \$4. Proceeds will fund the Kiwanis Club's community service projects to support children in the community. Tickets can be purchased from any Paragould Kiwanis Club member

66 | March 2025 Premiere



Link Production

March 13th-16th

The Link Theatre Company will present the musical, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, March 13th-16th, at The Fowler Center on the campus of Arkansas State University. The Tony Award winning musical comedy centers on a fictional spelling bee set in the geographically ambiguous Putnam Valley Middle School. Six quirky adolescents compete in the Bee, run by three equally quirky grown-ups.

More information on tickets and The Link Theatre's programs can be found at [www.thelinktheatre.org](http://www.thelinktheatre.org) or on The Link Theatre Facebook page.



Barket Market

March 22nd

The Arkansas Pet Savers will host their second Barket Market on Saturday, March 22nd, at the BC Lloyd Building on the Greene County Fairgrounds in Paragould.

The free-admission event will be from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. with craft, food and retail vendors. Anyone interested in being a vendor can email Amber Palmer, Barket Market coordinator, at [arkansaspetsavers@gmail.com](mailto:arkansaspetsavers@gmail.com) or text her at 870-878-1071 for more information. All vendor fees will go toward the organization's rescue efforts. There will also be dogs available for adoption.



Gala for JHDC

March 14th

The annual Be Your Own Beautiful Gala will be held Friday, March 14th, at 6 p.m. at the St. Bernards Auditorium in Jonesboro. All proceeds from the event go to the Jonesboro Human Development Center Volunteer Council to fund activities and programs for the residents at JHDC.

The evening will include a silent auction, fashion show and talent featuring residents of JHDC and community friends. Tickets are \$35 each or \$250 for a table of 8. For more information, call Cynthia Wilson at 870-666-7501 or email [cynthia.wilson@dhs.arkansas.gov](mailto:cynthia.wilson@dhs.arkansas.gov).



Angel Run

March 29th

The annual Saints and Sinners Angel Run and Car and Bike Show will be held Saturday, March 29 in Paragould. This year's event will be held at the Greene County Fair Grounds.

In addition to the motorcycle run, the event will also include a bike and car show, vendors, a barbecue cookoff and live music.

All proceeds from the event benefit Arkansas Children's Hospital.

Contact a Saints and Sinners member for more information.



## READING RETREAT EVENT FOCUSES ON MISSISSIPPI RIVER

This spring the Lakeport Plantation Museum, an Arkansas State University Heritage Site, will host a reading retreat focusing on the Mississippi River on Saturday, April 5.

The retreat will focus on two books. The first, "Wicked River: The Mississippi When it Last Ran Wild," written by Lee Sandlin, was published in 2010. This book describes the landscape and tribulations of the Mississippi River from the early 1800s through the siege of Vicksburg in 1863 when the Mississippi River Valley was the western edge of the United States.

The second book, "The Great River: The Making and Unmaking of the Mississippi," by Boyce Upholt, was published in 2024. This book traces the history of the Mississippi, from its geographical formation, to its use by indigenous peoples, to levee building in the modern era.

The retreat is \$45 for museum members and \$50 for non-members. Registration includes the books and light refreshments to be served the day of the event.

Upon registration, participants will receive copies of both books to read at their convenience. Participants will gather at Lakeport Plantation for an afternoon discussion from 1 until 4 p.m.

Lakeport Plantation is located at 601 Highway 142 in Lake Village. Hours are 9 a.m. until 3 p.m., Monday through Friday. Arkansas Heritage Sites are historic properties of regional and national significance in the Arkansas Delta. Other reading and writing retreats are held through the year at other historic sites, as well. For more information visit [arkansasheritagesites.astate.edu](http://arkansasheritagesites.astate.edu).

## ARTIST INC EXPRESS EVENT SET AT BAM

Artist INC Express, which helps artists of any discipline develop business skills to help them in their artistic journey, will host a free in-person workshop March 8th and 9th at the Bradbury Art Museum in Jonesboro.

The 10-hour, hands-on workshop is sponsored by the Arkansas Arts Council in partnership with BAM and the Mid-America Art Alliance.



Artists living within a 75-minute radius of Jonesboro who are 18 and older are eligible to attend. Space is limited. Registration deadline is 5 p.m. March 6th.

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# HAPPENINGS

## AMMC RECEIVES IQI RECOGNITION

Arkansas Methodist Medical Center (AMMC) recently earned an award from Arkansas Medicaid and the Arkansas Foundation for Medical Care (AFMC) as part of the annual Inpatient Quality Incentive (IQI) program. AMMC was recognized for its consistent participation of 10 or more years in the IQI program and for its efforts toward improving the health of Arkansans.

Through a partnership between Arkansas Medicaid, AFMC and the Arkansas Hospital Association, the IQI program was developed in 2006 to assess quality of care through the ways in which hospitals provide medical care to their patients. Since its launch in 2006, Arkansas Medicaid has awarded financial incentives to participating hospitals that demonstrate significant improvements in health outcomes.

"We are honored to receive this award from Arkansas Medicaid and the Arkansas Foundation for Medical Care as part of the Inpatient Quality Incentive program," said Candice Wicker, CNO of AMMC. "This recognition is a testament to our commitment to providing the highest quality care to our community, and it reflects the dedication and hard work of our entire team."



## BRITT APPOINTED TO ANSA BOARD

Black River Technical College registered nursing student Beverly Britt has been appointed to the Arkansas Nursing Students' Association (ANSA) Board of Directors as District IV Director.

In her position she will serve as a liaison between nursing schools in her district. Britt will also advocate for better education in nursing, overall wellbeing of student nurses and opportunities for involvement for student nurses in their communities.



Britt joined ANSA in early January of 2025 along with the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA). She wanted to apply to the Board of Directors, but the deadline for applications had already closed for the year. Taking a leap of faith, Britt emailed the ANSA and expressed her interest in serving on the board.

The ANSA informed Britt that they had a vacancy on the board of directors and she was welcome to email them an application. Britt's term will last for one year and if she wishes to keep her position she will need to reapply. She said she hopes to use her experience from serving on the Arkansas board to transition to a role with the national organization.

## DELTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA ANNOUNCES YOUNG ARTIST COMPETITION WINNERS

The Delta Symphony Orchestra recently announced the winners of its 35th Young Artist Competition. Twelve entrants from across the United States competed for prize money and an opportunity to perform with the Delta Symphony Orchestra.

Anne Elise Teeling, a soprano from Brooklyn, New York, was the winner of the voice division and also one of the two grand prize winners.

Leila Warren from Jacksonville, Florida, was the winner of the strings division and was the other grand prize winner.

Anamaria Tarkington from Jonesboro was the winner for the piano division, and Andrew Williams, also from Jonesboro, was the winner for the woodwinds division, as he performed the baritone saxophone.

The grand prize winners received \$1,000 each, and the other category



winner received \$750 each.

The grand prize winners also earned the privilege of performing with the Delta Symphony Orchestra at the Fowler Center on the campus of Arkansas State University on Sunday, February 23rd.

# LITERACY GRANTS ADE FUNDS TUTORING SERVICES

The Arkansas Department of Education announced at the end of January the launch of the second year of its Literacy Tutoring Grant Program. Through the program, 38,535 students in grades K-3 are eligible to receive up to \$500 in literacy tutoring services.

"I'm a mom to three, so I know every kid learns differently," Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders said. "Literacy coaches meet students where they are to ensure every kid is being set up for success. This program had a massive impact in its first year, and I know that year two will help even more Arkansas students learn to read."

The LEARNS Act created the program to provide additional assistance to students who have been identified as needing additional supports. ADE has allocated \$8.5 million for the program this year.

"The earlier that struggling readers can access additional services needed to help them read on grade level, the better," ADE Secretary Jacob Oliva said. "We encourage families to take advantage of the opportunity to obtain additional supports for their child and to reach out to their local school for additional in-school assistance that is available."

Students are eligible if they are at risk of reading difficulties, did not score well on state assessments, or were retained in third grade. Districts will notify parents of eligibility.

To ensure students receive high-quality tutoring services, ADE reviewed applications from tutoring providers. Parents of eligible children will select a vendor from the list, with ADE issuing payment directly to the provider.

The Literacy Tutoring Grant Program is one of several literacy strategies ADE is implementing to improve student learning. Other efforts include placement of approximately 120 literacy coaches in schools with a letter grade of "D" and "F" that serve students in grades K-3.



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# ANCHOR PACKAGING

# Next Month

## Volunteerism



NEA is blessed with both adults and youth who go above and beyond in the community as we celebrate National Volunteer Month.

## April Fools



Check out our Almost Famous feature as we spotlight some of the area's unique individuals with well-known names.

## Home & Garden



Learn ways to renew and refresh your home and garden in the April edition of Premiere.

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