

The Macon Melody

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Bibb County's local source for community news

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How \$100k from Mayor Lester Miller was used to influence 2024 elections

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An organization controlled by Mayor Lester Miller directed more than \$100,000 to support and oppose candidates running for local and state offices, a Melody

investigation found.

The money was filtered through different organizations and most candidates targeted were surprised to learn of expenditures on their behalf.

Miller was re-elected last year to serve a second and final four-year term, according to the current

county charter. However, he has asked local state representatives and senators to amend the charter so that he may run for a third term.

Miller is the CEO of Advance Alliance of Georgia Action Fund Inc., a nonprofit created in 2023, according to records from the Georgia Secretary of State's Corporations

Division. Miller contributed \$170,000 from his campaign to the nonprofit, according to his campaign finance disclosures reports.

Miller declined to be interviewed by a Melody reporter but agreed to respond to questions via email. He said the contribution to Advance Alliance was "to support its mission," which

is to promote "civic engagement and policy advocacy in the areas of public safety, education, economic development, and good governance."

Advance Alliance contributed a sum of \$116,500 to a new independent committee called Ma-

See LESTER, Page A2

No schools will close yet, Bibb board decides

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The Bibb County school board decided Thursday that it will not close any schools, halting a yearlong process of studying the possibility to save money.

Instead, it plans to balance enrollment by rezoning some elementary students to schools where enrollment is below the

state's minimum of 450. Seven of the district's 22 elementary schools fall below the state's minimum, according to March data from the Georgia Department of Education.

Factors driving the discussion included a yearlong trend of declining student enrollment, aging facilities and a need

See SCHOOLS, Page A2

How Macon Land Bank salvages forgotten property

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The old Bateman & Wade store operated for decades on the invisible line separating the Pleasant Hill neighborhood from the Ingleside neighborhood.

The era of butcher paper-wrapped meat, candy and salted fish ended when the specialty grocer closed in the early 2000s.

After nearly a decade of abandonment, the small building at Rogers Avenue and Clayton Street was sold in 2013 to a man who converted the place into "R and R Food Mart," a convenience store with coin-operated gambling machines and smoking allowed inside.

A year after he bought the property, the new owner was among those arrest-

See LAND, Page A3

Sunrise Service



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Hundreds of Middle Georgians gathered at Coleman Hill in downtown Macon early Sunday morning for the traditional Easter Sunrise Service held by Mulberry Street United Methodist Church. Attendees sang hymns, listened to a sermon and prayed to celebrate the holiday as the sky brightened. For more photos of the Coleman Hill Sunrise Service and other Macon events, see page B6.

Local artists protest against Trump admin immigrant deportation, detention

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Armed with colorful chalk, Middle Georgians took to the pavement Saturday, leaving messages on downtown Macon's Poplar Street median in solidarity with immigrants and in protest of the Trump administration's mass deportation and detention policies.

The names of American immigrants who were deported — names like "Kilmar," "Rumeysa" and "Badar" — were written in big letters across the sidewalk.

"United We Stand," "Peacefully resist, like a thorn in the side, in every way possible" and "Let all be free" were some of the messages left by attendees.

Johnathan Tomberlin, a 20-year-old protester and Cordele resident, said

he's worried for his safety and that it seems like the current administration is coming for everyone.

"I'm tired of how things are in this country. I want things to change," he said.

Tomberlin was an online student at South Georgia Tech but decided to put his education on hold. What he's seeing

See PROTEST, Page A2

Periodical — Mail Label

With unique charcoal, Horne keeps his fire going



Photo courtesy Stebin Horne

Stebin Horne of Macon takes a photo as the sun sets in the African wilderness. Horne uses wood harvested in Africa and produces charcoal as the president and founder of African Charcoal Company.

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To Macon's Stebin Horne, every day is Earth Day.

It is more than just a day in April to support environmental protection and promote renewable energy. Earth Week is more than just an opportunity to foster understanding of the ecosystem and encourage stewardship of our resources.

Horne, 50, could be considered more of a bush whacker than a tree hugger. But saving the planet one backyard burger at a time has become both a way of life and the cornerstone of his entrepreneurial spirit.

Horne is the president and founder of African Charcoal Company. His product is available locally at Salt Lick and Ace Hardware stores. It is packaged in bright yellow and red, 17-pound bags, with a lion's face practically jumping out all the way from Namibia.

The marketing pitch is "Best on the Planet. Best for the Planet."

Inventing grills and distributing an exotic charcoal wasn't exactly on the flight manifest when he was growing up in Macon, the son of Frank Horne, a local attorney and former state legislator, and Pat Horne, a longtime educator.

Horne was a star soccer player at Stratford Academy, then followed in his father's footsteps to the University of Georgia and on to law school at Mercer. He married and became the father of two sons.

But the former Macon city councilman watched parts of his life unravel. In 2006, he ran unsuccessfully for the state House District 137.

"It took a bankruptcy, a divorce and a foreclosure to hit me across the face and let me know there was a world out there I needed to tap into," he said.

Horne said he moved to

See CHARCOAL, Page A2



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\$2.00



Evelyn Davidson / The Melody

TOP: Several community members brought protest signs to the Action in Art demonstration Saturday, the second protest in a month. **BOTTOM:** Macon artist Kevin "Scene" Lewis paints a portrait at Saturday's Action in Art demonstration of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Maryland resident deported to El Salvador.

Protest, A1:

in the news recently, he said, is more important.

"I think everybody's becoming desensitized to all the bad news," Timberland said. "But we can't just ignore it."

The event featured guest speakers who spoke to the community about their own experiences and reasons for mobilizing.

Melissa Rodriguez-McClain, executive director of Centenary Community Ministries, shared details of her visit to Georgia's Stewart Detention Center.

"These are individuals who once thought this country was worth risking their lives over," she said. "We're talking farmers, painters, landscapers, our students, our service workers."

She recalled meeting a woman who worked on a sweet potato farm in North Carolina. ICE detained the woman, despite her having the paperwork for asylum and waiting on a court date. She filed for voluntary deportation because she would rather leave the country than be in the detention center.

Andee Ardoin, a Warner Robins resident, also came to Macon to be a part of "Action in Art" because he has not seen residents in his own hometown speaking out.

Saturday was Ardoin's first-ever protest, and he believes a lot of the issues come

from people wanting to control others' freedom.

"It starts with people at the margin," Ardoin said. "It starts with people that are the most vulnerable."

A portrait of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Maryland resident deported to El Salvador whose name has been in the news recently, looked out over the artists and community members leaving their messages and images on Poplar Street.

The depiction of Garcia was created on a portable graffiti wall by local artist Kevin "Scene" Lewis.

"I just wanted you to see the humanity in (Garcia)," he said. "This is a father. I can only imagine being taken away from my family."

Lewis worked on the mural live at the art demonstration. It's easy to paint from the comfort of his studio, he said, but he believes that showing visible support in the community is important.

The demonstration attracted attention from passersby who had not intended to jump in on the artistic action.

Andereca White, a 31-year-old Macon native, was walking downtown when the crowd of folks drawing, painting and playing music caught her eye.

If she had known, she said she would've brought her own sign.

White said she joined because, as a person with disabilities, she can relate to what the community is speaking out

against.

As a substitute teacher, White said hearing her students talk about fears of deportation and detention hurts her heart.

Crystal Kennedy, 40, is half Hispanic. She is a kindergarten teacher who teaches some students who are not native English speakers.

"Equity not billionaires," read the sign she held at the art demonstration.

Although she has never voted or been to a protest before Saturday, she said witnessing recent "injustices" urged her to take action.

Unhappy with the changes she's seeing in her classroom and with increased fear of being fired for going against the administration's agenda, Kennedy now plans to retire from teaching after 18 years.

Craig Hamilton spoke before the gathering on Poplar to reflect on his first protest in 1985 on President's Day. He spoke out against the Reagan administration's handling of the AIDS crisis.

He is a lifelong Maconite, DC Comics illustrator and artist teaching at Cornerstone Academy of Art and Design.

"Here I am at 60 having to do all of this all over again," Hamilton said. "This time, it's not just AIDS, it's not just the gay community. It's health-care, it's cancer research. They're attempting to strip our human rights away."

Lester, from A1:

con-Bibb Forward Together Inc., campaign finance disclosures show. The committee is registered to David Thompson, CEO and co-founder of Piedmont Construction, the company hired to build the county's new \$44 million amphitheater.

Thompson did not respond to requests for comment.

Advance Alliance is the sole financial contributor to Macon-Bibb Forward Together, which reported paying Southern Majority, a political consultant firm owned by Amy Morton, a sum of \$101,914 for work in support of certain candidates running for seats on the Macon-Bibb County Commission and the Macon Water Authority Board.

Morton's firm was contracted by the county in 2021 to manage its Macon Violence Prevention program on behalf of the county for \$23,200.

Miller has paid Southern Majority nearly half a million dollars from his own campaign for consultant work.

Campaign finance records show Southern Majority was paid the following sums to operate phone banks, distribute campaign literature and other campaign-related work targeting candidates including:

- \$24,353 in support of Melvin Flowers, who lost to Stanley Stewart in the race for the District 3 seat on the county commission, which includes the county's east side.
- \$20,992 in support of Marshall Talley, the mayor-endorsed candidate who lost to Desmond Brown in the race for the District 2 seat on the Macon Water Authority Board.
- \$5,000 in support of and \$10,091 in opposition to Desmond Brown, who defeated Marshall Talley in the Macon Water Authority Board race.
- \$19,981 in support of Raymond Wilder, who won against NewTown office manager George Thomas in a race for the county commission District 6 seat, which represents the county's west side.
- \$11,097 in support of Brendalyn Bailey, who won a county commission seat for District 9, which includes a portion of

central Bibb County, after vying with other candidates including Thomas Hudson, Renolda Scott and Greg Turner.

• \$3,400 in support of Kim Jenkins, who lost to Donice Bryant in the race for the county commission District 7 seat, which includes the southern end of the county.

Macon-Bibb Forward Together hired a different consultant for work in opposition of Juawn Jackson, who lost a bid for the state representative seat to the mayor-endorsed Rep. Tangie Herring. At the time, Jackson was serving on the Bibb County Board of Education along with Daryl Morton, who is married to Amy Morton.

Macon-Bibb Forward Together paid \$11,894 to Red Clay Political, a Savannah-based consulting firm, for mailers that were critical of Jackson. Red Clay Political is registered to Andrew Blascovich, who once worked for former U.S. Sen. Kelly Loeffler, according to The Current.

Target candidates react

Most candidates targeted by Macon-Bibb Forward Together said they were unaware of money spent to help them get elected.

Miller said in an email that Macon-Bibb Forward Together "did not spend any money in support of my campaign nor did the independent committee coordinate with any candidates" and that the committee is "consistent with established law."

"By definition (and campaign finance laws) independent committees make expenditures without coordinating with any candidate," Miller said.

Flowers submitted an affidavit to the state last May stating he did not intend to raise more than \$2,500. Asked about the costly campaign work done on his behalf, Flowers quickly replied, "Didn't nobody give me no money."

Bailey said she was unaware of the \$11,097 Macon-Bibb Forward Together paid Southern Majority to support her campaign.

"It would have been nice to have had that help," Bailey said, adding that family members shouldered the bulk of her campaign work and did a "very great job."

The mayor endorsed Marshall Talley and helped encourage votes for him in a Facebook post, but Talley said he was unaware of the

more than \$20,000 Macon-Bibb Forward Together spent to advance his campaign.

"I had no idea," Talley wrote in an email to The Melody upon learning of the expenses on his behalf. "It's both eye-opening and, I must admit, a bit frustrating. On one hand, it's encouraging to know that organizations exist locally with this kind of political monetary infrastructure. It suggests that my message resonated with some folks who have the means to support candidates they believe in. That's promising for the future of local politics."

"But here's the thing, I still lost. And now, knowing about this substantial investment, my political frustration is through the roof. Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful that my message aligned with an organization willing to put their money where their mouth is. But it makes me

wonder: what if that \$20,000 had been used differently? ... I can't help but think how much more effective that money could have been if it had gone into candidate and campaign training programs. Imagine equipping passionate newcomers like myself with the tools and know-how to run a tight ship from day one. That could be a game changer for local politics."

Desmond Brown said he was surprised to learn Macon-Bibb Forward Together paid to both support and oppose his campaign against Talley for a seat on the Macon Water Authority Board.

"Wow," Brown said. "Oh my God. ... I understand not everybody is going to be for you, but I didn't know."

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Schools, A1:

to cut costs to remain fiscally sound.

Deputy Superintendent Katica Lovett told the board declining enrollment is not yet "severe" enough to warrant closures and the district can instead "rebalance" enrollment by rezoning students to under-enrolled schools before considering other options.

Deciding to pass on school closures avoids disrupting "community identity and neighborhood ties," Lovett told board members, noting criticisms gleaned from community meetings last month.

"Consolidation is always a possibility, but we did thorough analysis to say that it's something we don't want to pursue," Lovett said. Though the need to close schools to save taxpayer money has been discussed for years, the district began exploring the possibility in August when it formed a steering committee and began hosting town halls at schools

it considered for closure.

L.H. Williams, Hartley and Porter elementary schools were the three identified by the school district for potential closure. Other options included rezoning students at John R. Lewis and Taylor elementary schools.

"We had an opportunity to take a deep dive," board president Myrtice Johnson said. "It puts us a step further ahead of what to do in the future and maximize student achievement."

Bibb County board member James Freeman said the process showed the solution is not as simple as merging one school with another.

"The scenarios didn't make sense until we looked at rezoning," Freeman told The Melody.

Closing any one of the three elementary schools would have saved the district about \$900,000 annually, while the other options presented offered "no significant cost savings," Lovett said.

While the district is facing a financial deficit, Bibb County Schools CFO Eric Bush

said school closures are not imperative but "one of many tools" that can be used to save money.

Thomas Duvall, who has advocated to keep L.H. Williams Elementary open, said the board's decision to not close one or more schools was like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He said he was grateful to the district for listening to the community's pleas to keep schools open.

Lovett recommended the district hire a consultant to conduct an organizational efficiency study to find ways to cut costs. The request for proposals would be published in May and completed in July.

The board also approved buying new laptops and 10 buses. It also approved a contract with SP Design Group to begin working on a new gymnasium for Northwoods Academy.

The school board is set to vote on its budget for next fiscal year in May before hosting two public hearings in June.

Charcoal, A1:

Atlanta in 2008 to “get out of Macon and clear my head.” He was working on mergers and acquisitions for a health-care company when he met Roos-Maryn Opperman. She was from South Africa and on “holiday” to America after graduating from the University of Pretoria.

He courted her across two continents and an ocean, and not only fell in love with her but her homeland. She not only fell in love with him, but deeply and patriotically in love with the United States.

Her family members laughed and began calling her “Miss America,” while Horne picked up the nickname “Mr. Africa.”

They celebrated their 10th anniversary last month. It was the second marriage for both. They live in Macon with their 7-year-old daughter, Lisbon, who is named after Roos’s family farm in South Africa.

Horne calls his wife “the muse for all my endeavors.”

National Heritage Day is held in South Africa on Sept. 24. It is a public holiday to celebrate cultural history, diversity and transition from apartheid in a country where 11 different languages are spoken. Horne said it is similar to the Fourth of July in America.

“It’s a day when everyone puts down all their differences and gathers around an open fire for food and fellowship,” he said. “After living in that part of the world, I began understanding their culture of cooking out. Their grill culture is very experiential as you gather around the fire.”

The unhurried communal sharing of food is known as a “braai.” The term originated from the Afrikaan language and is essentially the South African version of a barbecue.

Horne’s brother-in-law told him he thought it was funny how Americans preferred lids on their grills.

“He said you are covering up what we want to see,” Horne said. “We want to gather around because it’s the fire and the food that attract us.”

Horne’s introduction to that cooking concept was the inspiration behind his invention and patent of the Kudu open fire grill, a combination of grill grates, elevator bars and a cast

iron pan.

He began production and marketing in the U.S. and provided the jump start for his African Charcoal venture. At first, it was branded with the Kudu label but became a loss leader because of shipping costs. The African Charcoal Company officially launched eight years later on October 31, 2023.

There are more than 110 million acres in South Africa where a species of brush trees – sickle bush, camel thorn and blackthorn – were encroaching on the grasslands and disrupting the balance of nature. (They are the same trees Mufasa looks across from high on the cliff in Disney’s “The Lion King.”)

“It was about 90% savanna grasslands and 10% wood,” Horne said. “But when the Afrikaans came from Europe and brought in their cattle, they ate all the grass. The bush encroached and took over, so it now is 90% woodland and 10% grass.”

The trickle down effect on the ecology has resulted in a crisis, driving animals like the cheetah and black rhino from their natural habitat.

“The encroacher bush sucks up what little water you have in the water table, not only affecting the animals but the humans who live there,” he said.

The byproduct of these encroaching trees is acacia, a long-burning and flavorful hardwood used in cooking. There are incentives to harvest the wood, which also provides more than jobs in a region of the country with high unemployment. The wood is then converted to charcoal.

Horne eventually sold the Kudu line of his business, and began investing time, money and research into the sustainable charcoal business.

“I wanted to keep the charcoal because it was so different from any product here in America,” he said. “Ten years ago, I knew it was an incredible cooking fuel. But I didn’t know as much about the environmental impact.”

The charcoal contributes to the restoration of the African ecosystem, wildlife habitats and reduces carbon emissions.

Making use of his time during COVID, Horne studied and immersed himself in eco-training and certification.

“I began to understand the ecosystem and the balance of nature and how nature’s organization keeps the ship right,” he said. “All of it is amazing ... from how the animals interact to how the trees and the rocks and the minerals impact what trees grow here and the animals that eat them.”

“The whole thing started to make sense to me. The trees were completely out of balance, therefore everything was out of balance all the way down to the humans who live there.”

This summer, Horne will lead a group of Stratford high school students and teachers on a trip to South Africa as part of an ecology class.

Horne’s company has received certification as being environmentally friendly by the Forestry Stewardship Council. He has also diversified his business interests to include retail grill companies in South Florida and a company called Classic Overland, which offers restored Land Rover Vintage Defenders in Fort Worth, Texas.

He is also president of the parent Eco-X, a biochar company that produces sustainable and environmentally responsible charcoal substances. The “X” stands for the crossroads of business and conservation.

“As an entrepreneur, you look out and say: ‘Where is the next opportunity?’” Horne said. “The future of business – and they’re going to have to start teaching this in business classes – is that you are no longer going to value a company just based on its stock price. You are literally going to have to factor in impact and stewardship.”

“People have always felt that being a conservationist or sustainable or recycling or anything environmentally leaning was not in line with capitalism, business and consumerism ... that they are mutually exclusive,” he said. “In reality, we are moving into a world where they cross paths, and we don’t have a choice. I am trying to be a part of companies that show we can provide excellent products and services that are of the same quality and do good for the earth. That’s the genesis of everything I try to pursue.”



Photo courtesy Stebin Horne
Stebin Horne of Macon takes a photo as the sun sets in the African wilderness. Horne uses wood harvested in Africa and produces charcoal as the president and founder of African Charcoal Company.

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Land, A1:

ed in the county’s largest-ever commercial gambling raid. The owner lost his liquor license in 2017, which hit the business hard. Not long after that, the store closed for good.

As the years passed, the vacant building seeped into disrepair, turning a once-proud urban landmark into an eye sore.

The owner came to an agreement with Macon-Bibb County in late 2023.

In exchange for ownership of the property, the county agreed to have the Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority Board extinguish \$9,300 in unpaid property taxes.

The county demolished the building then deeded the property to the Macon Land Bank Authority.

The corner lot today is a greenspace where young saplings are taking root. What will become of the property in the future is unclear, but whatever it is will be better than an abandoned, tax delinquent eye sore. The county has said the community will have input on what becomes of the land.

The deal to get the property could not have happened without the land bank, the only government entity with the special ability to extinguish back taxes on properties it owns. That is because the land bank has a renewable 10-year agreement with the county and school district to do so.

“The main thing we can do that no one else can do is abate property taxes,” said Everett Verner, executive director of the Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority. “We’re run by a board of directors appointed by the local government.”

Land Bank authorities have been operating in Georgia for 30 years. The first one was created by Fulton County and the City of Atlanta in 1991. The second one was created by the City of Macon and Bibb County in 1996. As of this year, there are

29 land bank authorities across the state, according to the Georgia Association of Land Bank Authorities.

Land Banks are tools counties can use to get unproductive tax delinquent properties, like the old Bateman & Wade, into something productive and useful. Powers of the authority are spelled out in state law and then approved by a resolution at the local government level.

The Macon-Bibb County Land Bank acquires, holds, develops and disposes of properties in coordination with the county and the Macon-Bibb County Tax Commissioner’s Office.

That includes homes owned by people who have not paid property taxes, which subtract from the county’s tax base. The county ultimately wants those properties back on the tax rolls and into productive use, so the land bank works with the tax commissioner and county to identify properties to be sold at a courthouse auction and people or entities interested in developing them. The land bank also has its own auction each quarter.

“We have an agreement with the tax commissioner where we can actually start the tax foreclosure and that guarantee with him is that we’ll show up to make an opening bid,” Verner said. “That’s the main way we get properties lately, over the last few years. We also buy them directly, depending on the project.”

Verner said the land bank’s current priority is affordable housing and it will work with anyone that wants to work with it, though typically it works with entities or individual developers.

“We work really well with nonprofits when we hold property long term for development,” Verner said, adding that Habitat for Humanity, Historic Macon, River Edge and the Macon Housing Authority are among agencies the land bank has worked with the most.

More on the Macon-Bibb Land Bank Authority:

The Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority Board meets at 4 p.m. on the third Monday of each month at 688 Walnut St., Suite 102. Meetings are also streamed on Zoom (Meeting ID: 486 454 6084)

Board members are nominated by the mayor and approved by the county commission. The board’s bylaws include no limit on the number of four-year terms board members can serve.

Current board members include Tom Ellington, who served from 2010-2019 and was reappointed in 2021; Sundra Woodford, appointed in 2019; Veronica McClenon, appointed in 2022; Sylvia McGee, first appointed in 2015 and Bert Bivins, who has served on the authority since its creation in 1996.

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Opinion

Feel free to pay attention to the men and women behind the curtain at The Melody

The only downside to writing a weekly column is that sometimes, occasionally, every once in a while, it feels like you don't have much to say.

It's then that the blank page feels truly intimidating.

Because first and foremost, I don't want to waste your time. I use this space, most of the time, to discuss my life, the things I'm doing and watching and reading. I hope it breaks down any perceived barriers between me and you. Our work is important, but it shouldn't be mysterious.



Caleb Slinkard

The journalism I and my staff produce at The Melody is all about strengthening our community. As an independent, nonprofit newsroom, our focus is telling the stories that aren't being told, listening to people who aren't being heard, highlighting people that deserve more of the spotlight.

Our staff includes: sports editor Micah Johnston, columnist Ed Grisamore, senior government accountability reporter Laura Corley, photographer Jason Vorhees, general assignment reporter Casey Choung, reporter Mary He-

lene Hall and community reporter Evelyn Davidson. Senior Director of Business Development Dave Hedge, advertising account executive Hannah Thompson and news clerk Janisha Rozier round out the team.

Our reporters come from all over the country — Virginia, Texas, New York, Indiana and, of course, right here in Middle Georgia. We're proud to have three Mercer University grads in our newsroom, which is inside of the Reg Murphy Center for Collaborative Journalism at Mercer Village.

The Melody's reporting is designed to connect you to your community. It's a lofty goal, one we're not always able to meet. But even

simply pursuing such a goal is valuable.

While I believe we are good at telling Maconites' stories, we're not always good at telling our own story. In that spirit, I'll give you an overview of The Melody and how we're connected to dozens of newspapers across the country.

The Melody is part of The Georgia Trust for Local News — I'm actually the executive editor for the trust — a group of 20 nonprofit newspapers that stretch from the Georgia/Alabama border east past Dublin and south to Albany. Most of those newspapers are small weeklies, often the only news organization covering the city or county in which they operate.

The Georgia Trust is one of three state-level trusts owned by The National Trust for Local News, a nonprofit founded in 2023. The two other trusts are based in Maine and Colorado. The National Trust this week announced a new CEO, a veteran newspaper executive named Tom Wiley. Wiley is currently the president and publisher of the Buffalo (New York) News. I'm excited to see his vision for the company.

Curious about The Melody? Send me a note. I'd be happy to tell you more.

Caleb Slinkard is the managing editor of The Macon Melody. Email him at caleb@maconmelody.com.

Cherry trees and a boy's genuine show of honesty

George Washington's father, apparently, really loved cherry trees.

So much so that when he came home one afternoon from doing whatever people did during colonial times and saw his favorite specimen lying on the dirt, he was livid. It's unclear why the elder Washington loved the tree so much, perhaps he planted it with his own hands, or maybe he had carved a swear word in the trunk to impress someone. But at any rate he was irate to see it turned to firewood, though cherry wood is fine fuel for a cooking fire.

He confronted the future first president seeking an explanation. The young man famously replied, "Father I cannot tell a lie. I cut down the cherry tree." It didn't help that he was caught holding an axe with wood chips in his little powdered wig. The father was so moved by his son's honesty that he handed down only a trivial punishment of limiting his screen time for the afternoon but not taking away his cell-phone.

This, of course, is a myth. There's no evidence to back up this tale that has been handed down as gospel truth for generations. In one account George is only 6 years old and only marred the tree with a hatchet given to him as a gift. Who gives a 6-year-old boy a hatchet for their birthday? That sounds like the last-minute preparations of a nearly-always-inebriated uncle. It's only asking for trouble. The tall tale is just one



Kyle Dominy

of many that surfaced after the death of the larger than life figure whose image graces everything from our money to portraits in fine museums.

The story has become a parable about honesty. Honesty is always the best policy, yet it's strange that we teach that by making up a lie.

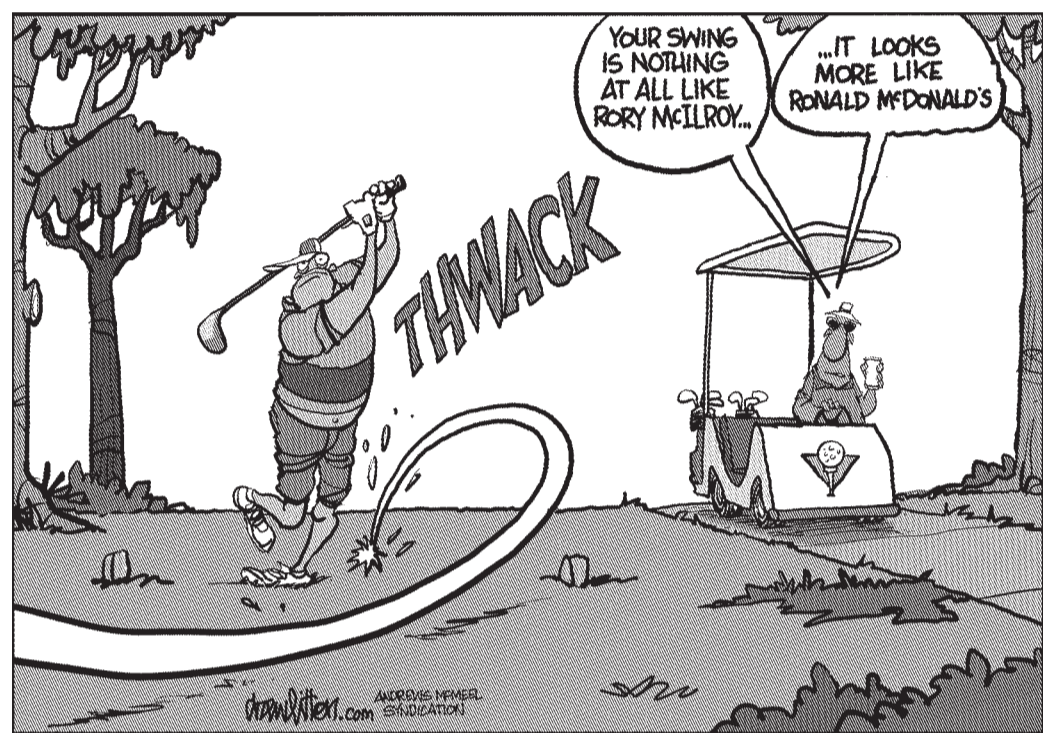
A recent trip to the store brought upon a show of honesty that revealed I must be doing something right. I volunteered to do the weekly grocery run with son in tow. After walking the aisles, filling the shopping cart, waiting in line and checking out we made our way through the parking lot to the car. While loading up the haul the boy finds an unbagged item at the bottom of the cart.

"Uh, oh," he said. "I think I forgot to put these on the conveyor belt."

I handed him the receipt and he scanned the long strip of paper. Sure enough, it was not to be found. So back in he marched to hand over the inadvertently stolen item. He didn't give me a chance to convince him otherwise, nor did I try. He still sees the world in boyish innocence, a wrong had been committed and it needed to be corrected. No gray area.

That in fact did happen. No twisting of the truth to teach a lesson. No myths or fables. Just a boy who told the truth. He didn't even have to have an axe.

Kyle Dominy is the writer of the column *New Southern Dad*.



College sports are teaching athletes troubling life lessons

Something gross is happening to college sports, and state lawmakers could make it even worse. As it stands, collegiate football increasingly resembles the NFL. Top college athletes are becoming millionaires and abandoning even the pretense of loyalty to their educational institutions. For fans like me, this is terrible news. I have long been a diehard college football fan who has reveled in school traditions, rivalries and the sport's amateur nature. Sadly, it is evolving into something unrecognizable.

For decades, promising high school players accepted college scholarships in exchange for playing sports. They couldn't profit off of their tenure and generally didn't transfer to other schools—thanks to various restrictions. This kept teams intact as players waited their turn to play. Two developments have fundamentally upset this order, and are now spiraling out of control.

In 2018, the NCAA established the transfer portal where unhappy athletes could enter and shop around for a new school to play for, and longstanding rules around transferring changed. Officials repealed the one-year waiting period between transferring and playing and restrictions around communicating with other schools. Now the transfer portal has morphed into a free agency.

Unfortunately, numerous athletes no longer feel the need to remain loyal to their teammates — even if their dedication prior to the transfer portal was insincere. If they believe they have a better chance at a starting position elsewhere, then many are happy to abandon their school. In fact, after the 2023 season, more than 25% of scholarship players in the Football Bowl Subdivision transferred. Now plenty of football players are testing the proverbial transfer portal waters in search of massive payouts thanks to a seismic shift originating in the courts and state legislatures.

Following a class action case that determined the NCAA cannot prevent student-athletes from profiting off of their collegiate careers, states began paving the way to allow athletes to enjoy enormous windfalls. In 2021, Georgia joined many other states by passing legislation creating a framework that allowed student athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness (NIL).

"[NIL] refers to a person's legal right to control how their image is used, including commercially," reports ESPN. "In college, student athletes have long been prohibited from making deals to profit from their fame, so they forfeited their NIL rights by signing on with college sports teams." That has since changed. Now Georgia



Marc Hyden

college athletes can score mega deals, and much of their salaries come from shadowy private collectives and corporate sponsors. The old system seemed unfair — only allowing schools and the NCAA to profit on students — but this is getting out of hand.

Former University of Tennessee quarterback Nico Iamaleava reportedly garnered an \$8 million four-year deal to play on Rocky Top. After starting only one season, his representatives supposedly wanted to renegotiate his contract to earn \$4 million a year. Tennessee balked, Iamaleava skipped practice and ultimately announced that he would enter the transfer portal days ago.

Meanwhile, the University of Florida recruited Jaden Rashada whom the Gator Collective allegedly offered \$13 million to play in Gainesville, but the financing fell through. He subsequently went to play elsewhere. This isn't an issue only nagging our neighboring states. Georgia faces it too. The Lamborghini-driving former UGA quarterback Carson Beck had another year of eligibility to play in college. Instead of staying at UGA, he supposedly accepted a \$4 million one-year deal to join the University of Miami Hurricanes.

Whereas in the past, athletes sometimes went to schools because of, say, their academic record or to play under a specific coach, it now seems that the nation's top prospects simply look for the highest bidder. This won't keep many of them in place as they are prone to jump ship when they sense a better deal elsewhere. That's their right, but the state of play is a mess now.

State legislatures have presided over this change and might make it even worse. One piece of legislation introduced this year in the Georgia General Assembly seeks to make NIL payments tax exempt as if people earning millions of dollars shouldn't have to pay state taxes when minimum wage earners do. That's ridiculous. The bill didn't move during the 2025 legislative session, but expect states to continue tinkering with NIL proposals.

The system in place is disrupting the sport, likely for the worse, but it isn't beyond repair. Sports, by their very nature, are governed by strict rules, and likewise, issues adjacent to the game need additional guardrails to restore and maintain the sport's integrity. Doing so is easier said than done now that Pandora's Box has already been opened. How officials respond is anyone's guess, but hopefully lawmakers won't exacerbate matters even further.

Marc Hyden is the director of state government affairs at the R Street Institute. You can follow him on X at [@marc_hyden](https://twitter.com/marc_hyden).

The Macon Melody

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Baseball league has offered ‘miracle’ of joy, opportunity for kids with disabilities

There might never have been a “miracle” if Alex Morton had not asked his father why he couldn’t play baseball like all of his friends.

He was 7 years old. Alex wanted to wear No. 10 and thump his glove at third base like his hero, Chipper Jones.

But Alex was in a wheelchair. He was born with spina bifida, a birth defect in which the spine fails to close properly.

Dan Morton had no idea what to do to make that happen. But he promised his son they would find him a home plate. Somewhere. Somehow.

And they did. Every Saturday spring morning for two years, the Morton family made the 140-mile round trip past dairy farms and piney woods to Conyers, the birthplace of the Miracle League. The field there was dedicated 25 years ago this month, and appropriately named the “Field of Dreams.”

In the Miracle League, every child on the field is disabled.

These young people face physical and mental challenges every day, not just at a baseball game. The weight they carry through life is heavier than any bat in their bat bags.

Some were born with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy. Others are autistic, have learning disorders and visual or hearing impairments. Some were born without arms or with no movement in their legs.

Every time Dan and Ginger Morton returned home with Alex, they refused to hit the brakes on their dream to bring such a program to Macon. They knew there were hundreds of special needs children in the area who would love the opportunity to have a league of their own.

The community rallied behind their efforts and, 20 years this spring, the Miracle League of Macon threw out its first pitch at its new home at West Macon Park. After playing on an existing T-ball field for three years, league officials were able to dedicate an accessible



Ed Grisamore

ballpark with an artificial playing surface and dug-out mobility.

Boys and girls ages 5-19 were no longer on the outfield fence looking in.

Kids just want to play baseball.

And many of them still want to keep playing ball ... even when they are no longer kids.

Alex will be 30 in October. And his buddy, Ben Marsh, turned 35 last month. Not long after their eligibility expired, a “competitive” league, where the score is kept and outs are recorded, was created for the older players who don’t want their “careers” to end.

Ben, who has cerebral palsy, plays for the Dodgers. Alex is, of course, on the roster for the Braves. They are leaders in the dugout for the only two teams in this “old-timers” division. They play each other every Saturday – a whopping nine times during the season. This past Saturday morning, the Dodgers held on for a 20-19 victory. You would have thought they had won the World Series.

Ben and Alex are the only remaining players from the Miracle League’s opening day rosters of 20 years ago. So you might say they are likely first-ballot Hall-of-Famers.

Alex graduated from Tattnall Square Academy and Middle Georgia State University. He does production work for local radio sports personality Bill Shanks and is a statistician for Mercer’s baseball team.

He still plays third base and wears Chipper’s No. 10. Until this season, his walk-up music was the Ozzy Osbourne song “Crazy Train,” just like Chipper’s, although this year he switched to “Just Gettin’ Started” by Macon’s own Jason Aldean.

In 2009, Diane Alford, executive director of the Miracle League, arranged for Alex to meet Chipper before a home game at Turner Field. Alex will never forget meeting his idol, who played for the Class Macon Braves in 1991, his first full season in the minor leagues.

Chipper may be Alex’s hero, but Alex is one of mine. And so is Ben,



Ed Grisamore / Macon Melody

Alex Morton at West Macon Park. Morton played in the Miracle League of Macon 20 years ago and still plays baseball every Saturday as part of the Miracle League’s “old-timers” division consisting of two teams.

who has been a “miracle” his entire life.

That same year Alex got to meet Chipper, Ben was 19 and a junior at Rutland High School. He became the first player in Miracle League history to hit a home run over the fence.

Today marks the 16th anniversary of that legendary round-tripper. It was a tape-measure (150 feet) shot to left-center field. (Ben does not embellish the story, although legend has it clearing the bridge over Interstate 475 and is probably still rolling down Thomaston Road.)

Ben was born on March 11, 1990, just a few weeks before the opening day of baseball season, but long before he should have been on any lineup card.

He arrived three months premature and weighed 1 pound, 8 ounces. He spent 20 weeks in the neo-

natal intensive care unit. When he left the hospital, the headline on the front page of the local newspaper called him a “Miracle Baby.”

When Alex and Ben aren’t on the playing field, they are in the press box behind home plate, announcing the game over the P.A. system. It is their way of giving back to the league that has meant so much to them.

They both have aspirations to become broadcasters. And they know there is nothing more thrilling for the players than to hear “walk-up music” and the sweet sound of their names crackling over the speakers. It makes them feel special.

They grew up hearing their names at the ballpark. And they’re still hearing it after all these years.

Alex said he wants to play for another 10 years as long as he and the others are able.

“It gets tough with some of our physical conditions,” he said. “But we do the best with what we’ve got and go from there. I wouldn’t trade my experiences I’ve had out here for anything in the world.”

Dan has never referred to Miracle League players as having “special needs.” He calls it “special abilities.”

Alex said his father has talked to him about possibly taking over and being in charge of the league when his playing days are over.

It would be fitting for the young man who asked the question that got it all started to keep providing the answer so others can play, too.

Ed Grisamore has made an effort to spend at least one joyful Saturday morning at the Miracle League park every baseball season for the past 20 years.

AI Joe: Using AI to be the best neighbor possible

It starts with a smile. A wave across the driveway. Maybe a casserole that’s just slightly overcooked but delivered with the warmth of good intentions. Being a good neighbor is one of those timeless virtues that never goes out of style – but in this high-speed, Wi-Fi-powered world, could something as futuristic as artificial intelligence actually help? Surprisingly, yes. AI may not mow your lawn or lend you a cup of sugar (yet), but it can help with the little things that make a neighborhood feel more like a community. And here in Macon, where front porches and fellowship still matter, that little digital boost might go further than you think.

Let’s take a walk around the block – AI style.

Thank-you notes and friendly gestures

Say your neighbor helped rake your leaves after a storm or watched your dog while you were out of town. You could let tools powered by AI’s ability to understand and generate human-like text such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, or Notion AI draft a thank-you note like:

“Dear Mrs. Jenkins, I can’t tell you how much I appreciated your help last week. Your kindness made my whole day brighter – just like your front garden does!”

You can customize it and print it, text it or drop it in the mailbox with a little chocolate square or a flower from your yard. Apps like Copilot or Canva can even format your message into a printable card with a floral border or playful illustration. It’s a small gesture, but one that goes a long way – especially in a world where people often forget to say thank you.

Planning a block party or potluck

Organizing a porch crawl, yard sale or neighborhood cookout? AI has your back like a neighbor with jumper cables. Use ChatGPT to brainstorm themes, activities and even write the invitation.

Need a flyer? Try Canva. For RSVPs, Evite or SignUpGenius work great – and with ChatGPT, you can write descriptions for who’s bringing what to the potluck. It’ll even help you suggest dishes if you’re trying to balance out a table that’s heavy on desserts and light on the sides.

Dealing with tricky conversations

Every neighborhood has its moments. Barking dogs. Overgrown hedges. Mysterious fireworks on a random Tuesday. AI can’t fix



Joe Finkelstein

every issue, but it can help you find the right words before emotions run hot.

Claude.ai or Notion AI are great at rewording for tone – warm, casual or “firm but friendly.” You could even plug it into Grammarly and tweak the tone slider for “concerned but kind.”

Speaking their language

Got new neighbors who don’t speak much English? AI helps you roll out the welcome mat – in their language. Try Google Translate, Copilot or DeepL to craft a message in Spanish, Vietnamese or whatever language your new friends speak.

One couple near Vineville used ChatGPT to create a simple welcome packet in English and Spanish. It included neighborhood info, trash pickup details and a list of local favorites – from H&H Soul Food to Olivers. It’s amazing how something as simple as a translated greeting can turn strangers into friends – and turn a street into a community.

Neighborly vibes in a digital world

Look, AI isn’t going to replace your famous pecan pie or your front porch wave. But it can be your behind-the-scenes helper, making your gestures more thoughtful, your invites more polished and your neighborhood efforts a little easier. Want to send birthday reminders? Let your calendar app sync with a Google Sheet and have Gemini write personalized messages.

Need to create a flyer for a neighborhood watch or clean-up day? Ask AI to design it and include safety tips or a checklist. Even for folks who aren’t tech-savvy, these tools can be surprisingly easy. You don’t need to be a programmer – just a neighbor who cares and wants to make things better. Remember to be mindful of the information you share with these AI platforms.

So next time you’re not sure how to phrase that note, plan that party or bridge a language gap, let the robots lend a hand. They might not bring over a peach cobbler, but they’ll help you write a great thank-you to the neighbor who does.

And who knows? With a little help from AI, your block might just become the friendliest in the neighborhood.

Joe Finkelstein (AI Joe) has been a technology educator for over 20 years. For questions and comments visit askaijoe.com.

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Federal judge in Ga. grants temporary protections for international student visas

Sarah Kallis, Grant Blankenship, Sofi Gratas and Chase McGee
GPB News

As GPB reported on April 17, a federal judge in Atlanta seemed inclined Thursday to grant temporary protections — a restraining order against the federal government — for foreign students whose visas have been revoked by U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement.

The hearing before federal Judge Victoria Calvert from the 11th Circuit, Northern District in Georgia had 133 plaintiffs, as foreign students across the United States are facing visa cancellations. The students' attorneys said their clients are caught in status limbo and fear more action will be taken against them. They are asking for the court to grant a temporary restraining order to restore protections until a final decision is made.

Atlanta immigration lawyer Charles Kuck represents the students. He said they are legally entitled to due process.

"There's no doubt that this administration wants foreign students outside the United States, especially those from

countries it does not find desirable," Kuck said during a press conference after the hearing.

The affected students have had their visas paused via the Student and Exchange Visitor, or SEVIS, program. It is administered by ICE. Georgia is among the 10 U.S. states with the most participating schools and active enrollment of foreign students under this program, according to SEVIS data from 2023.

About a fifth of the 133 anonymous plaintiffs live in Georgia. Almost as many live in Texas with the remainder scattered across the country.

"SEVIS is kind of like the big brother for foreign students," Kuck said. "And if you violate any term in that, you get terminated. But also, apparently, you got terminated when you don't violate any terms in it, according to the new theory of ICE."

The suit describes how ICE used SEVIS to change visa status because of past infractions, which in some cases were as minor as speeding tickets. A small number of students had prior charges which had been dropped for things like assault or domestic disturbances. At least one student in the suit could find no plausible reason at all for

their inclusion.

Kuck believes the SEVIS records were correlated to other databases across all 50 states.

He speculates that authorities are using AI to "check it against every database, every criminal database, every civil database, every immigration database."

"If you get a hit, send them a revocation," Kuck said of the way students have been notified.

Attorneys for the federal government, including David Powell, argued to Judge Calvert that no real harm had been done to the students, and that they could follow a reinstatement procedure designed to allow students who have somehow fallen out of immigration status back into the system.

Powell told Judge Calvert none of the plaintiffs were truly out of status.

Last week, Azka Mahmood, the executive director of the Georgia chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations, said the lack of clarity on why some students have had their legal status revoked by the U.S. State Department is causing fear and confusion.

"This is a really concerning thing for the state of Georgia, for our public education, pri-



Grant Blankenship / GPB News

Jawahir Sharwany (center) holds her face in her hand following a federal court hearing on April 17. Atlanta immigration attorney Charles Kuck (far right) argued on behalf of some 133 international college students.

vate education," Mahmood said.

Mahmood said she is advising international students to check their visa status and make sure they are not in violation of any rules. She is also urging universities to protect their international students.

The majority of the students in the suit are from India. The second largest group are students from China. Only two European students are in the list: one from France and another from Spain.

When asked about how many of their students have been affected, schools in the Georgia University System have not provided firm numbers but have been replying

with variations of the same answer: "We will do everything we are legally able to do to support our students."

Nationwide the numbers of students affected are equally unclear.

Of colleges who have reported numbers back to GPB, Emory University, confirmed four of its students have been caught in the visa confusion. Mercer University, based in Macon, confirmed the same number of students on its Atlanta campus, although it is unclear if any Mercer students are party to the civil suit.

A spokesperson for the University of Georgia told GPB that he was aware of

"several" international students who had their student immigration status terminated. He added, "We will continue to provide our international students with timely updates and support as we learn more."

Only 20 of the 133 plaintiffs in the ongoing litigation are listed alongside the university they attend. Of those, just under half attend a public Georgia school.

This story comes to The Melody through a reporting partnership with GPB News, a nonprofit newsroom covering the state of Georgia.



Ross Williams / Georgia Recorder

Sen. Jason Esteves, an Atlanta Democrat, announced a run for governor Monday. Esteves formerly served on the chair of the Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education

Jockeying for Ga. governor, U.S. Senate races heats up

Ross Williams
Georgia Recorder

The 2026 race for Georgia governor is shaping up with candidates from both parties now entering the race.

Gov. Brian Kemp cannot run for a third term, leaving the keys to the governor's mansion up for grabs.

Meet the declared candidates

Democratic Atlanta Sen. Jason Esteves announced his candidacy Monday with an introduction video highlighting his experience, including as a former teacher and chair of the Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education. In the video, titled "Underdog," Esteves took aim at what he characterized as radical Republicans in the state government following the lead of President Donald Trump.

"I've had enough of families

working harder than ever but still struggling and our kids falling behind instead of getting ahead," Esteves said in his announcement video. "Yet extreme politicians in Georgia push Trump's reckless agenda, rig the system for special interests and stick us with the bill."

As Esteves read these lines, the screen flashed with images of Trump, Kemp, Lt. Gov. Burt Jones and Esteves' only announced Republican rival, Attorney General Chris Carr, who became the first to throw his hat in the ring in November.

Carr's campaign has highlighted his experience in law enforcement, especially operations targeting immigrants, gang members and human traffickers.

"For decades, we've been the best place to live, work, raise a family and build a business," Carr said in his introductory video, titled "Keep

Georgia Strong." "That hasn't happened by chance. It's happened because we've had leaders who are willing to make tough decisions, put Georgians first and stood strong in the face of adversity. Progressive activists are trying to radically transform our values and our economy. As your attorney general, I've made it my mission to keep Georgia safe."

Carr has been a vocal supporter of Trump's second-term agenda, but their relationship hasn't always been chummy. In 2022, Trump called Carr "a disaster every step of the way" and backed an unsuccessful primary challenge against him after Carr declined to investigate Trump's baseless allegations of widespread voter fraud in Georgia's 2020 election.

Meet the maybe candidates

Lt. Gov. Jones, a Republican who is widely considered likely to enter the governor's race, is considered a more steadfast Trump ally — Jones was one of Georgia's so-called fake electors, who met at the state Capitol in 2020 to cast votes for Trump even after his loss to Joe Biden was officially certified.

Jones' closeness to the president could benefit him in a Republican primary, but it's less clear whether his tightness with Trump will help or hurt in a general race. How Trump shapes the race will likely depend on how Georgians' view the chief executive during the buildup to next year's election season.

"If the economy goes bad, if inflation is up, if unemployment is up, then some of the luster may be taken off of Trump," said University of Georgia political science professor Charles Bullock. "Now, for the MAGA folks, it probably doesn't matter, but for the critical element of independents and, in the general election, of white, college-educated voters, if Trump's attractiveness has been substantially reduced, then that certainly works for the advantage of Democrats."

Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, another rumored but unconfirmed candidate, could also make a reasonable play

as someone Trump-skeptical conservatives and independents could back.

Raffensperger was on the other end of the now-infamous 2021 phone call in which Trump called on him to "find" enough votes to overturn Georgia's 2020 election. Raffensperger declined, earning the ire of Trump and many of his supporters.

Firebrand conservative Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene is another member of the maybe column — she told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's "Politically Georgia" podcast back in February that she was open to either a run for the governorship or for Democratic U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff's seat, which is also on the ballot in 2026.

On the Democratic side, one much-speculated candidate seems less likely to have her eyes on Kemp's job than she did last year.

Democratic Congresswoman Lucy McBath hasn't ruled out a run entirely, but she announced late last month that she was suspending her bid as she focuses on the health of her husband, who recently underwent surgery for cancer.

Former Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, who recently served as an advisor to former President Joe Biden, told 11Alive News early this month that she plans to run for governor.

Former DeKalb County CEO Michael Thurmond has not ruled out a run — and neither has former state House Minority Leader Stacey Abrams, who became a household name after narrowly losing to Kemp in 2018 and again by a wider margin in 2022.

A crowded Democratic primary could be just the thing to dash the Dems' dreams, Bullock said, if the intra-party attacks get too intense.

"If they get into it, then a lot of money will be spent within the primary, and sooner or later, even though they may start out simply singing their own praises, there would be a tendency to go negative, especially if at least three serious candidates get into it so you have a run-off. That's when attacks really become strong."

This story was originally published by the Georgia Recorder on georgiarecorder.com.



Ross Williams / Georgia Recorder

Attorney General Chris Carr speaks at the 2025 Georgia Faith and Freedom Coalition. Carr has experience in law enforcement and supports Trump's second-term agenda.

Governor Kemp signs two tort reform bills, a top priority for the year

Dave Williams
Capitol Beat

ATLANTA — Gov. Brian Kemp signed two tort reform bills Monday that supporters say should reverse a pattern of excessive jury awards they hold responsible for rising liability insurance premiums that are hurting Georgia businesses' bottom lines.

Overhauling the civil litigation process in Georgia was the Republican governor's top priority for the recently concluded 2025 General Assembly session.

"These two bills level the playing field in Georgia's courtrooms and

ensure our business environment remains the best in the nation," Kemp said during a signing ceremony at the state Capitol.

Senate Bill 68, which House Speaker Jon Burns called the most comprehensive lawsuit reform in Georgia in nearly two decades, deals with issues involving trial procedure, including when plaintiff lawyers can argue for non-economic damages, when discovery can begin, and when lawyers on either side can request dismissal of a case.

But the legislation's most controversial provision put new limits on "premises liability," which governs when plaintiffs can sue business owners after suffering injuries

during the commission of a crime by a third party outside the owner's control.

To get enough legislative Republicans on board to pass the bill, the House amended the Senate measure to carve out victims of sex trafficking and their lawyers from the bill.

The Republican-backed Senate Bill 68 cleared both legislative chambers largely along party lines, with Democrats arguing it goes so far in shielding businesses from liability that it effectively will deny victims their day in court.

Kemp pushed back on that argument Monday.

"If you are wronged, you deserve

to be made whole and can be," he said. "This legislation protects that very right."

The second tort reform measure, Senate Bill 69, is much more narrowly drawn and enjoyed bipartisan support, at least in the state Senate. It focuses on a growing number of lawsuits being financed by third parties where financiers who are not a party to a case pay the costs of pursuing litigation in exchange for a portion of any judgement a plaintiff is awarded.

Rather than abolish third-party financing, the bill puts in guardrails to protect plaintiffs entering into such arrangements. It passed the Senate unanimously but drew

42 "no" votes in the 180-member House.

Business groups praised the governor for getting behind tort reform this year, as did the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, a think tank that advocates free-market approaches to public-policy issues.

"These new laws will bring much-needed fairness and transparency to a system that has become costly and unpredictable," said Kyle Wingfield, the nonprofit's president and CEO. "Georgia has long been recognized as the best state in the nation to do business, and these reforms will help ensure it remains that way."

Spice up dinnertime with a savory shrimp Creole dish

Lynda Balslev
TasteFood

Jazz up your weekly meal rotation with a little New Orleans heat. Creole cuisine is deeply rooted in Louisiana's culinary tradition, which is influenced by a melting pot of cuisines that include French, Spanish, African, Caribbean and Native American flavors.

Typical Louisiana creole cuisine is known for fresh seafood, rice and spice. The "holy trinity" of onions, peppers and celery is the fundamental base for many of its dishes, which also include tomatoes, garlic and Mediterranean herbs such as oregano and thyme.

The sauce in this shrimp stew is tomato-rich and relatively thin, unlike thicker stews or etouffee, which are thickened with a roux (a combination of butter and flour), yielding a darker, gravy-like consistency.

This recipe is light and bright, with a depth of flavor that belies its ease of preparation, which is achieved in 30 minutes. That makes it a perfect addition to your weekly dinner rotation.

Shrimp Creole

Active time: 5 minutes

Total time: 30 minutes
Yield: Serves 4 to 6

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 1 medium yellow onion, chopped
- 1 large green bell pepper, seeded, diced
- Kosher salt
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon sweet paprika
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce, such as Tabasco, or more to taste
- 1 1/2 pounds large (18/20) shrimp, peeled and deveined
- Ground cayenne pepper
- 2 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley, plus more for garnish
- 2 scallions, white and green, thinly sliced
- Cooked long-grain white rice, for serving

Directions

Melt the butter in a large, deep skillet or Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the celery, onion and bell pepper and lightly season with salt. Sauté the vegetables until softened without coloring, about 3 minutes.

Add the garlic and stir until fragrant, about 15 seconds, then stir in the tomato paste, thyme, paprika and oregano for about 15 seconds more.

Add the tomatoes, chicken stock, Worcestershire sauce, bay leaves and hot sauce. Bring to a simmer, then partially cover the pot and continue to simmer over medium-low heat for about 20 minutes to meld the flavors.

Season the shrimp with salt and cayenne. Add to the stew and simmer until the shrimp turn bright pink and are opaque through the center, 4 to 5 minutes, stirring as needed. Stir in 2 tablespoons parsley and remove from the heat.

Ladle into bowls and garnish with additional parsley and scallions. Serve with cooked white rice.

Lynda Balslev is an award-winning writer, cookbook author, and recipe developer based in northern California. Visit TasteFood at TasteFoodblog.com.



Events

Lauren Watkins Honky Tonk Night at The Hummingbird

Friday, April 25
9:30 p.m.
430 Cherry St.

The Hummingbird Stage & Taproom is thrilled to announce a night of modern country magic as Lauren Watkins, Big Loud Records recording artist and one of the fastest-rising names in country music, takes the Bird Stage on Friday, April 25 for an unforgettable Josh Terry Honky Tonk Night!

Pan African Festival of Georgia

Saturday-Sunday, April 26-27
11 a.m. & 2 p.m.
310 Cherry St.

The Tubman Museum's annual Pan African Festival of Georgia seeks to educate, integrate and unify families and build stronger communities to enhance cultural awareness. The festival features local, as well as regional musical acts, artists and business owners. The event will include a local artist's market, an African market, a children's village and a food court. Admission is free for this two-day event.

The Metropolitan Opera presents Le Nozze Di Figaro (Mozart)

Sunday, April 27
1 p.m.

355 MLK Jr. Blvd.
Metropolitan Opera Live In HD. Mozart's comic masterpiece stars Michael Sumuel as the clever valet Figaro, opposite Olga Kulchynska as Susanna, Joshua Hopkins and Federica Lombardi as the Count and Countess and Sun-Ly Pierce as Cherubino. Joana Mallwitz makes her Met debut on the podium. Presented by The Douglass Theatre. \$25 General, \$20 Seniors and \$15 Students.

Just Dance! Majorette Competition

Saturday, May 3
1 p.m.

355 MLK Jr. Blvd.
Just Dance! is a majorette competition where the audience gets to experience the immense talent of youth from all over. Come cheer six teams, as they hit the stage to battle for the title of Champion, competing in four categories. Tickets go on sale April 25 at 7:10 p.m. Presented by Harmonious Kara Performing Arts at The Douglass Theatre, \$20.00 advance tickets. \$30.00 general admission

National Day of Prayer with Hope For The Heart of Georgia

Thursday, May 1
8 a.m.

682 Mulberry St. & 285 Spring St.
The 74th National Day of Prayer is a national day of recognition celebrated in Macon since 1979 and recognized nationwide since 1988. Hope For The Heart of Georgia (H4HG) will host a prayer breakfast at First Presbyterian Church and a noon day service at Coleman Hill Park for the national day of prayer. H4HG is a faith-based non-profit that focuses on bringing unity to Macon through churches and through the community.



Provided by Bibb County Cooperative Extension

C. sasanqua pictured with Camellia leaf gall. The leaf gall is a fungal disease that can occur on any of the Camellia species. The best way to rid a plant of this disease is to cut the infected areas off.

Master gardeners offer helpful tips about native plants, camellia branches

Bibb County Master Gardener Extension Volunteers are trained in horticulture by the University of Georgia. Below, they have answered two recent gardening questions for Macon and Central Georgia.

Question 1: What are the weird growths on the tips of my camellia branches?

Answer: As the last of the camellia blossoms fades, several residents have contacted the Extension Office to ask about unusual, malformed leaves on the growing tips of their branches. These leaves are much thicker and lighter in color than the usual green, healthy leaf growth. The culprit, a disease called camellia leaf gall, is caused by the fungus, *Exobasidium camelliae*. It can attack any of the Camellia species, but is most prevalent on sasanquas (*C. sasanqua*), the earlier-blooming, smaller, dark green plants.

As with most fungal diseases, it is found more often in humid, shady areas of the landscape. If the galls are already appearing on the leaves, the best treatment is to cut them off, bag them, and discard them in the trash. Do not add them to compost bins or piles! If the undersides of the infected leaves already have a white coating, then the spores have formed and may be dropping to the ground to overwinter in the mulch. These can infect next year's new leaf flush. In this case, you might want to dispose of the mulch and dead leaves under the plant. The good news about this fungus is that it rarely causes permanent plant damage. While chemical controls have limited effects, pruning to increase air flow and sunlight may be helpful in controlling the disease. — Answered by Lynn H.

Question 2: We are hearing a lot about native plants these days — how will they benefit my yard? Are there local examples of

native gardens?

Native plants have developed over hundreds or thousands of years in a specific area. For Middle Georgians, this means plants that were here before the first English settlers established Fort Hawkins in 1806. Many familiar and favorite plants are natives, including white oak, Southern magnolia, and flowering dogwood.

Native plants provide tremendous benefits! As these plants evolved, other living creatures evolved alongside them for mutual benefit. Each native creature and plant play a part to keep the ecosystem working smoothly.

For our landscapes, we find that native plants mostly take care of themselves once established, if they are selected carefully for their habitat. Choosing different native plant species increases the biodiversity in the landscape. These attract insects that prefer that plant, and then more creatures arrive that eat that insect — making life more interesting for nature lovers. A yard with a variety of native plants will form part of a network of natural waypoints for migrating creatures to visit for food and shelter.

In Macon, there are two local native plant gardens that are open to the public during daylight hours: the Sweet Gum Trail at the Museum of Arts and Sciences and the Native Plant Garden at Amerson River Park. Bibb County Master Gardeners maintain the one at the Museum — it is in the area around the Kingfisher Cabin. The Fringed Campion Chapter of the Georgia Native Plant Society maintains the one at Amerson, between the playground and the Great Lawn. Both gardens feature a variety of labeled native plants to help guide you selecting plants for your own landscape. — Answered by MaryAnn F.

Please send your gardening questions to bibb.extension@uga.edu or call 478-751-6338.

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Ceramic, from A8:

create a scheduling calendar to promote events and keep one another's activities from clashing. Now, rather than a physical calendar put together by the likes of Kathy Hoskins, the calendar has followed technology and become macon365.com, which also serves as a directory of artists and arts groups and an inventory of Macon's public art.

Innumerable volunteers, connections, partnerships, executive directors and unsung heroes worthy of credit have sustained the organization and made it a success through the years. People like Roben Weitz, who created a successful arts education program reaching into schools in the mid-1990s to the early-2000s, and Jan Beeland who was executive director from 2012-18 and oversaw the development of the Mill Hill Community Arts Center and numerous projects connected to it.

In fulfilling its mission, the Arts Alliance has supported and led studies related to the needs of arts groups and artists in the community as well as the arts in relation to community building and art and economics.

That includes, with Wilkerson as executive director, the Arts Alliance's leadership role in the development of the 2020 Cultural Plan for Macon leading to five strategic priorities involving tourism, education, creative industries, neighborhood development and audience development.

Here's just a sampling of other facts and activities illustrating that the Arts Alliance is more than a gallery.

- Operation and management of East Macon Arts Village, anchored by the Mill Hill Community Arts Center
- Early activity helping to shape First Friday events downtown
- Presentation of cultural awards to deserving individuals and organizations promoting and furthering the arts
- Macon Mural Festival, which has seen a dozen or so murals added to Macon's exponentially growing public art
- Financial aid to artists in need during COVID-19 and beyond
- Calling for and organizing public art for Macon's Bicentennial Park

"There have been so many who've done such good work through the years to get us where we are," Wilkerson said. "We owe them all a debt of gratitude along with all those working so hard today to help Macon Arts fulfill its mission. Now, with Fired Works at 20 years and the Alliance at 40, it's time to celebrate — then back to work for the years ahead."

Contact writer Michael W. Pannell at mwpannell@gmail.com. Find him on Instagram at [@michael_w_pannell](https://www.instagram.com/michael_w_pannell).

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Fired Works Ceramic Festival celebrates 20th year

Macon Arts Alliance's Fired Works Ceramic Festival begins Friday and runs through May 3 at Carolyn Crayton Park in the Round Building from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. daily.



Michael W. Pannell

If you're an Arts Alliance member, there's a first-look preview party on Thursday from 4-7 p.m.

This is a special year for Fired Works: it's the ceramic exhibit and sale's 20th year.

"Since it began 20 years ago, Fired Works has been an extremely popular event in Macon and for those who travel here to see and buy the wonderful functional and sculptural ceramic works on display," said Julie Wilkerson, the Arts Alliance's executive director. "It's been so popular we created a similar show, Fire & Ice, seven years ago to feature ceramic and glass works each November."

Wilkerson said there will be both familiar and new artist-potters displaying work this year, but there will be one difference. Instead of a single featured artist as is usual for the show, during the 20th anniversary Fired Works, all contributors will be highlighted in the center of the Round Building with their accompanying work throughout the building.

"We usually have one featured artist's work on a pedestal in the center, but this year they'll all share the spotlight," Wilkerson said. "I think the fact that we can do that speaks to the quality of the creators and the work at Fired Works, whether it's a very useful household item or something that's purely artistic."

The stated mission of the Arts Alliance is to foster support for the advancement of the arts and culture in Central Georgia while striving to be an innovative leader of a thriving regional arts community. Aside

from showing artists' work in its First Street gallery, the organization maintains strategic partnerships in the community that strengthen the diversity and vibrancy of culture and the arts for tourists, residents, artists, businesses and civic groups.

While it receives some funding through the Macon-Bibb Hotel/Motel Occupancy tax as the official arts agency for Macon-Bibb, that only makes up about 8% of the Arts Alliance budget. Other funds come through donations, foundation grants, gallery sales and fundraisers like Fired Works.

"I think one reason Fired Works and Fire & Ice have been successful fundraisers for us is that they reflect who we are and what we do," Wilkerson said. "We're about art, artists and community, not walk-run events or road races or galas. It's been sustainable and between things like our gallery sales and the two ceramic shows, we've not only raised money for Arts Alliance programs, but we've been able to put over \$100,000 in artists' pockets through sales. It all works together to support our mission."

But how did Fired Works start? Where did the idea come from?

Lynn Cass was executive director from 2001-2007 and brought Fired Works into being.

"Louise Kaplan was on our board and knew of the Perspectives: Georgia Pottery Invitational in 2004 in Watkinsville, Georgia," Cass said. "She suggested we go one weekend. It was in a pretty small space and was just rows and rows of functional pottery. When we came back, we thought about it and decided it was something we should do in Macon, only we should expand it to include sculptural pottery as well. We had a great, active board at the Arts Alliance that was enthusiastic about it



Photo provided

Mugs and other works made by Roger Jamison are popular year-to-year at Macon Arts Alliance's Fired Works Ceramic Festival, which begins Friday and runs through May 3 in the Round Building at Carolyn Crayton Park. Admission is free daily from 4-7 p.m.

and we talked to local potters like Roger Jamison and Meg Campbell who were all for it. We had 50 potters that first year."

As opposed to the idea that Fired Works began as a small, local pottery show and then grew into something more prominent, Cass said the first year was a success with potters coming from throughout Georgia, then evolving to include folks from all over the country.

She recalls one show that featured North Carolina potter Michael Sherrill in a workshop and the \$25,000 piece he brought with him.

"We were so amazed, but we were

also so afraid someone would bump it," she said. "Every year, we added a little more. There were so many people involved, like Jim and Betty Wilcox, who were big collectors and pottery enthusiasts. Jim actually took pottery classes himself and did some fine work. I love what they're doing with Fired Works now and with Fire & Ice. It's still a big thing."

Not only is Fired Works celebrating its 20th year this year, but Macon Arts Alliance is also celebrating its 40th year. There will be a celebration fundraiser May 16 at the Mill Hill Community Arts Center, which will also provide a first look

at items in an anniversary artists' market on May 17 at the center. The anniversary celebration is \$40 in advance and \$50 at the door and includes heavy hors d'oeuvres. Next day, the artists' market is \$5 to enter with works from about a dozen select artists.

Artists will get 100% from sales of their work.

Nancy Brown Cornett is credited with being the driving force behind the Arts Alliance with its initial focus on being an arts organization roundtable gathering monthly to

See CERAMIC, Page A7

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Lessons from a longtime ump

Micah Johnston
Sports Editor

If it's a weeknight in the spring, there's a good chance Michael Stewart is busy.

As a matter of fact, he probably can't talk during the day, either. Or on Saturday mornings — and sometimes not even in the afternoon.

It's exceedingly clear that Stewart is about as dedicated as they come. He spends all day at his job as a social worker with the Department of Child and Family Services, then races to the baseball diamond to

umpire Vine-Ingle softball games several times a week.

Stewart always takes on extra games. To him, it's not a burden.

"I always work a game if there's a game available. It's just the mindset I have," Stewart said. "I know these kids and their families just want to play ball. They need me — or someone to umpire, whoever — there to do that."

His efforts have been rewarded with something resembling legend status among Vine-Ingle

See UMP, B3



Photo courtesy Michael Stewart

Local umpire Michael Stewart reaches over a young slugger's shoulder to help him hold the bat during a game.

ACE, Rutland set for GHSA tourney

Micah Johnston
Sports Editor

With the regular season finally complete, two Bibb County teams will be representing Macon's public schools in the GHSA state baseball playoffs beginning this Friday.

ACE fared the best of any public school in Macon, though it was still something of a down year as the Gryphons failed to win their region for the first time in four seasons. Still, ACE finished third in Region 2-A Division I and secured a spot in the playoffs with an 18-11 overall record and a 15-3

finish in region play.

The Gryphons were awarded the No. 17 seed in the 32-team GHSA Class A-Division I bracket, which was announced Monday morning. This means they will travel in the first round, something they have not done in several seasons.

"If I'm being completely honest, I'd venture to tell you that being 17th was disappointing," ACE head coach Josh McLendon said Tuesday. "We really make it a goal every year to try and play one playoff game at home in

See PLAYOFFS, B3



Mark Powell / For The Melody

Tattnall players celebrate in front of the dugout after a key scoring play during the Trojans' 13-10 win over local rival Stratford Tuesday night. The Eagles got out to an early lead in the zany contest, but some seeing-eye ground balls and clutch hitting for Tattnall closed the gap as the game went on.

Tattnall defeats Stratford in high-scoring region thriller

Michael A. Lough
For The Melody

The start of the Tattnall-Stratford game was delayed a full hour because of lightning throughout the area.

Tattnall might've been a little delayed, too.

But the game got going, and so did the Trojans — eventually — as they finished strong to take down visiting Stratford 13-10 Tuesday night in a GIAA District 6-4A/3A battle.

The teams play again Friday at Stratford. Tattnall then closes out district play with two against Piedmont. Stratford has two with last-place Mount de Sales and games at Bulloch and Tiftarea.

The win broke a tie with Stratford for second in the district, but the Trojans entered the game ranked third in GIAA Class 4A, the Eagles ninth.

Tattnall (18-5/4-3) had its win over FPD on April 8 turned into a loss because of a pitch-count violation. The Vikings have clinched the region and are ranked first. The Eagles (13-11/3-4) are tied with Piedmont, a half-game behind third-place John Milledge.

The young Eagles had their chances to pull it out, but some defensive issues and a few hits with eyes, among other things, did them in.

"We played our tails off," Stratford head coach Barry Veal said. "We played our tails off, we swung the bat. We're learning. We had enough errors to go around for everybody. Our kids are learning."

Tattnall head coach Jordan Brooks was happy the Trojans ended strong, considering their start.

"I thought we settled in in the middle of the game," he said. "I told the guys I felt like we were flat when we came out in all aspects of the game. It was like we were just there."

Stratford struck out three times in the top of the second after getting the leadoff batter on, but that was no bad omen. They went off for five runs in the top of the third.

Ellis Bridges and Bobby Wooten opened with a walk and single, and Jett Johnston was intentionally walked one out later. Bridges came in when Tate Johnston's high-chopping grounder up the middle took its time, preventing a forceout at second.

Wooten came in on what was scored as a steal of home, and one out later Jaxen Justice brought in two runs with a single to center. He then scored on starting pitcher Colton Whittington's double.

"Colton threw the ball great on the mound," Veal said. "It's the first game he started all year. A freshman."

The big inning woke up Tattnall, which then matched the Eagles' output in the bottom half of the inning.

Tucker Brown's leadoff double was followed by a pair of outs, including a run-scoring fly to left by Caden McGregger after Brown reached third on a wild pitch. Then a walk, single, hit batter, walk, and outfielder error brought in four more runs to tie it through three.

"When we've lost games this year, it's

mainly been because of walks and hit by pitches," Veal said after a five-walk game with three hit batters. "We still had some tonight."

Stratford kept grinding with single runs in the fourth and fifth, Whittington keeping Tattnall down in the bottom of the fourth.

The momentum, though, went back to Tattnall in the bottom of the fifth, Whittington's day coming to an end. A hit batter and an error on consecutive batters after a leadoff walk. That led to a run when Griffey Gorman drove in starting pitcher Wyatt Still with a single before Collins belted a two-run, bad-hop double down the left field line.

All the scoring happened with no outs. On came Justice, who did a nice job avoiding more trouble by retiring the side on seven pitchers.

Stratford answered with a run in the sixth on Davian Hammonds' sac fly, but the Trojans punched back with another four-run inning. Nobody covered on a nice bunt by Still to load the bases with no outs. Two outs later, Collins and Cody Colter came up with back-to-back two-run singles to right, one somewhat misplayed down the line.

That made it 13-8, Stratford showing some spark with two runs in the top of the seventh before going down in order, courtesy of Tristan Turner closing it out.

Five Eagles had two-hit games, Wooten and Jett Johnston scoring twice each and

See THRILLER, B2



Mark Powell / For The Melody

ACE coach Josh McLendon congratulates Karsyn Yates (21) after her two-run homerun against Jeff Davis in the 2024 GHSA state playoffs. McLendon, who coached ACE to a softball state title and a baseball Final Four appearance, told The Melody of his departure from ACE Tuesday afternoon.

ACE athletic director McLendon to leave ACE after this season

Micah Johnston
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

ACE Athletic Director Josh McLendon will leave the school after this season, the coach told The Macon Melody.

"Things happen in seasons, and this was just the end of my season at ACE. We still have a lot of work left to do with spring sports still in contention for multiple championships, but I'm just really proud of everything we built here," McLendon, who also serves as ACE's head baseball and softball coach, said. "It was a situation where — and I know this sounds cliché — you just know it's time to move on. This was what was best for me and my family." McLendon, the baseball

and softball coach at ACE since 2017 and the athletic director since 2018, could not yet say where he'll be working next.

McLendon led both the ACE softball and baseball programs to significant success, winning a state championship in softball in 2021 and leading the baseball team to a Final Four appearance in 2020. Both teams won four consecutive region championships.

"We've made the playoffs every year in softball, and we won all those region championships with both teams. We've sent a lot of girls to play college softball and a lot of boys to play college baseball. It's been really rewarding," he said.

See MCLENDON, B3



Mark Powell / For The Melody

Stratford's Korbin Persinger gets pumped on second base after a key hit during the Eagles' game against Tattall on Tuesday. The Eagles took an early lead but could not keep up with the Trojans in a 13-10 loss.

Thriller, from B1:

Justice driving in two runs.

Seven runs came in off the bat of Collins, Still adding two hits and Turner scoring three times.

It wasn't sharp for either team, but both

had some positives to take away.

"We didn't lay down, and easily could have after that five-spot," said Brooks, who was impressed with Whittington's debut for Stratford. "Not a lot of times do you get to answer and tie it back up in the same inning after you get hit in the mouth early in the game. "We fought. It was a good team win."

NOTEPAD

ACE, Westside bound for soccer playoffs; FPD teams win GIAA tennis state titles

Micah Johnston

Sports Editor

micah@maconmelody.com

The ACE girls and boys soccer teams both earned the No. 2 seed in their respective GHSA Class A-Division state tournaments, as the brackets were announced Monday morning.

The girls finished the regular season 15-3 overall and 8-0 in Region 2-A Division I to win the region championship. The Gryphons' resume includes impressive wins over top teams like Morgan County — one of the best teams in 2A — and 6A powerhouse Lowndes County.

ACE hosted No. 31 Rabun County (4-9) at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, after The Melody went to print. The second round of GHSA playoffs is scheduled for May 1.

The Gryphons' boys team finished the year 11-6 overall and 8-0 in region play, also winning the region championship to secure priority seeding. While the boys could not pull out tough wins against large programs like Houston County and Perry, their superb region play earned them a great spot.

ACE will host No. 31 Worth County — the school is more known for its prowess in American football, but its soccer team went 4-15 this season — at 5:30 p.m. on Friday.

The Westside girls were the only other Macon team to make the GHSA tournament, their first playoff appearance in at least a decade, head coach Jason Stephens told The Melody last week.

The Seminoles went 6-8 overall and 2-8 in a difficult Region 2-2A with the likes of Morgan County and Pike County, the No. 1 seed in the 2A bracket. In a reversal of ACE's playoff path, though, Westside was able to thrive against local non-region competition to sneak into the postseason.

No. 22 Westside travelled to Blackshear to take on No. 11 Pierce County in the first round Thursday, after The Melody went to print.

boys doubles championships.

Jonathan Scott and Ethan Lashley gave up only five games across the entire tournament in the boys doubles victory, according to FPD Tennis on X.com. Averi Jones and Eve Scott gave up just a single game in their win.

On the singles side of things, Stratford's Yash Panse came in second place behind Logan Xayaseng of King's Academy.

Mercer golf players earn conference recognition after SoCon championship

A trio of Mercer women's golf players were named to the All-Conference team for the Southern Conference on Tuesday.

Mikayla Dubnik, Katie Scheck and Emilia Väistö earned spots on the SoCon's top list, with Väistö even winning Freshman of the Year for the conference.

It was Dubnik's second time on the all-Conference team as she averaged 73.3 strokes per round. Scheck averaged 74.1, while Väistö averaged 73.7.

The Bears place third as a team in the SoCon championships, which concluded last week. Dubnik finished second overall individually.

Mercer softball sweeps WCU, baseball set for key series

The Mercer softball team beat Western Carolina 12-4 last weekend to secure a series sweep over the Catamounts.

The blowout win was over after five innings, as the Bears notched 13 hits and scored eight runs across the last three innings to run away with things late. Senior Kathryn Rearley got the win after com-

ing on in relief and striking out three batters. Laura Vigna had three hits in as many as bats and drove in a pair for Mercer.

The Bears improved to 26-22 on the year and 6-8 in SoCon play.

The baseball team is set to face off against the top team in the SoCon standings this weekend, as a three-game set UNC-Greensboro will unfold Friday night at OrthoGeorgia Park in Macon.

The Spartans are 7-2 in conference play, giving them the highest winning percentage in the SoCon against league opponents, but they are 18-21 overall. Mercer is 25-17 overall and 6-6 in SoCon play.

Stratford sweeps FPD soccer on Senior Night

The Eagles girls soccer team got its biggest win of the season Tuesday night, defeating the FPD Vikings 2-1 on penalties to celebrate Senior Night in exciting fashion.

Stratford lost to FPD earlier this season, and the two have stayed in the top two spots in the region until their second meeting this week. The key win for the Eagles ended the Vikings' undefeated run and put the two squads in a tie for first place in GIAA District 6-4A/3A.

The Stratford boys finished the job in the boys game — though the two teams played simultaneously after a rain delay threw a wrench into the traditional doubleheader format — with a 4-0 win over the FPD boys in a more typical result. The Eagles improved to 12-3 and remained unbeaten in region play, while the Vikings dropped to 6-9 on the year.



Mark Powell / For The Melody

ACE's Kate Thomason sends the ball toward the net after evading Bleckley County defenders during the Gryphons' 6-0 win against the Royals this year.

Special Content furnished to the Macon Melody.

7 DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS THAT PROMOTE HEALTHY AGING

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Getting enough essential vitamins and minerals is a vital part of healthy aging. However, it's not always easy for older adults to hit recommended nutritional targets, especially if they have a decrease in appetite, changes in taste, or are dealing with a chronic illness. Taking dietary supplements can help fill nutritional gaps. That said, all supplements don't work the same way for all people. Therefore, it's crucial to consult a physician about the type, number, and frequency of supplements a person uses, as some can interact with medications, and others may not be effective, according to the

National Institute of Health.

Many supplements can cause adverse effects if someone mixes medicines and supplements, takes supplements instead of medications, combines supplements, or takes too many. Furthermore, "The FDA does NOT have the authority to approve dietary supplements for safety and effectiveness, or to approve their labeling, before the supplements are sold to the public."

Individuals should add any supplements they are taking to the list of their current medications and update members of their healthcare team immediately.

Supplements that Offer Benefits for Older Adults
Research about dietary supplements and their benefits is ongoing, and their positive effects vary per person.

Dr. Seema Bonney, M.D., and founder of the Anti-Aging and Longevity Center in Philadelphia, tells HealthCentral, "The purpose of any supplement should be to make up for potential gaps in your daily nutritional intake, particularly because your nutrition needs can change as you age."

The following supplements can have benefits for older adults, which are based on the latest research.

Collagen

Collagen is a protein that provides structure, strength, and support throughout the body. Aging causes the body to decrease its natural store of collagen. This decline can lead to a decrease in hydration and elasticity in the skin, as well as an increase in joint pain and stiffness.

Research shows that a collagen supplement can improve bone density, muscle mass, and skin health for older adults. For example, a 2022 research review published in *Dermatology Practical and Conceptual* found that oral and topical collagen helped reduce or delay skin aging.

Glucosamine and Chondroitin
Aging-related joint issues can cause mobility issues and a decrease in physical activity. Becoming sedentary, in turn, can lead to more health problems, including heart disease.

To combat these concerns, many older adults use supplements containing glucosamine and chondroitin. According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH), glucosamine and chondroitin are essential components of cartilage that cushions joints. Chondroitin supplements stimulate cartilage repair, and both glucosamine and chondroitin support joint health. Research is mixed on the efficacy of this pair of supplements.

Melatonin

Melatonin is a hormone that regulates sleep and wake cycles. Bonney explains that a decrease in the production of melatonin during aging may cause people to have issues falling asleep, staying asleep, or both.

Bonney suggests using a melatonin supplement can help sleep difficulties, though studies on its effectiveness are limited. One study emphasizes people should use caution when taking melatonin supplements.

Calcium and Vitamin D

Bone loss naturally occurs with age and can lead to fractures. Calcium works with vitamin D to support bone strength and health, according to the National Institute on Aging (NIA). People over 50 may need to take supplements to ensure they are getting enough, as the body's ability to absorb calcium decreases with age.

People absorb vitamin D naturally through their skin from exposure to sunlight but often don't get enough, especially during long stretches indoors during winter.

In *Stanford Lifestyle Medicine*, Dr. Matthew Kaufman, M.D. notes that vitamin D promotes muscle and bone strength, and some studies show evidence it "may improve brain health and cognitive performance."

Taking too much vitamin D can cause toxicity. So, it's important to determine vitamin D levels and discuss appropriate supplementation with a healthcare provider.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 maintains central nervous system health and helps lower levels of the amino acid homocysteine, which has been linked to heart disease, stroke, dementia, and osteoporosis, according to Harvard Health.

Older adults may have trouble absorbing B12 through food, and a deficiency may require supplementation.

Deciding whether to take a dietary supplement can be confusing, as research is constantly raising pros and cons, which also prompts conflicting medical opinions.

There are also circumstances in which supplements are harmful. That's why it's essential to discuss a supplement's benefits and risks along with the appropriate quantity or dose with a healthcare professional before taking it.



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McLendon, from B1:

McLendon, a Macon native who attended Central Fellowship Christian Academy and played baseball at Mercer in the early 2000s before coaching at Monroe Academy and CFCA, reflected Tuesday on his career with the Gryphons.

"The plan was for me to become the AD after the first director retired, and that happened my second year here in 2018," he said. "The exciting part of being athletic director was just the blank slate. There's a lot you can build. Especially with baseball and softball, it was really fun to start from the ground up with the facilities, the kids, the whole program.

"When I got here, we didn't have dugouts. We didn't have batting cages. It meant a lot to me to add all these features — a press box, new stadium seats, things like that — and turn it into a great program with great facilities."

McLendon's wife, Julie, teaches at ACE. His son, Jake, starred for the baseball team as a senior this season with a .375 batting average and 24 stolen bases. His daughter, Jaymi Kate, played on the softball team.

"My wife was here teaching the day the school opened. It's been a great run for us. ACE means so much to our family," he said. "It's bittersweet leaving something like this. I'll really miss the relationships, the success we've had, but I'm excited to build something new and put down new roots."

As athletic director, McLendon presided over ACE's fledgling sports teams as they grew by leaps and bounds after the school opened in 2014.

"That first year when I got here, we weren't playing any varsity sports. They were adding a grade each year, so we could only field teams with freshmen and sophomores," McLendon said. "It was a unique situation, and watching it all grow out of that was really special."

The Gryphons football team transformed into a playoff team and occasional region title contender. ACE's boys soccer team nearly won a state championship, losing 2-0 to Georgia Military College in 2021. The girls soccer team made the Elite Eight last year and appears poised for playoff success this season

after an impressive performance thus far.

"Across the board, I really do think we've had one of the best coaching staffs in Middle Georgia. We've got former ADs like (head football coach) Keith Hatcher and other guys, we had Matt Chambliss on staff here at one point, we've got Todd Whetsel. I could go on an on and not name everyone," McLendon said of ACE's other sports teams. "It's such a great group here, and I want that success to continue on."

McLendon expects his wife Julie to teach wherever he ends up as a coach.

"We kind of joke, we're a package deal," he said. "Like I said, this just felt right for our family. We're ready for whatever is next."

Playoffs, from B1:

front of the fans every year, and we missed that by one spot this year.

"Now, if you look back last year at when we had a home game and lost to a tough Pierce County team — that's what we have to go and do," he said. "We want to play spoiler for them, even if they're only one seed higher than us. I think it did fire us up a little bit getting that No. 17 spot."

"Them" in this case refers to No. 16 Elbert County, who are set to host the Gryphons for a doubleheader Friday at 5 p.m. in Elberton, on the South Carolina border about two and a half hours north-east of ACE.

The Blue Devils went 21-10 and 15-6 in their region, Region 8, to finish third. It was a top-heavy league with four 20-win squads, including first-place Providence Christian Academy which finished the season on a 16-game winning streak and earned the No. 5 seed in the private school bracket.

"They're a strong team, a really well-coached team. They're scrappy, for lack of a better term," McLendon said of Elbert County. "They do the little things well — they hit and run, they bunt and run, they like to squeeze if they get a man over to third... Baseball is baseball. The team that's hot at the right time will get it done."

The head coach thinks his team is perfectly capable of that after a season of ebbs and flows. ACE had plenty of good moments — they spent a sizable chunk of the year in first place in Region 2 and got an electric win over No. 8 Washington County in the final week of the season — but also struggled unexpectedly at times, as they did in their series against eventual region champion Bleckley County.

"The message has to be 'why not us,'" McLendon

said. "We played a really tough non-region schedule, too. We've tried to prepare them for this. We saw a UGA commit on the mound twice against Peach County, we saw a Kennesaw State commit twice, we saw the Auburn commit who pitches for Washington County. We have experience against high level competition."

Brice Whitley and McLendon's son, Jake, will be key hitters. Jake McLendon sports a .375 batting average and .500 on-base percentage, while Whitley is hitting .320 with 35 steals in the leadoff spot.

The key for the Gryphons, though, will be their youthful pitching, according to their head coach.

"Our top two starters all year have been sophomores. You don't want to put a whole lot of pressure on them because they're young, but at the same time they understand this: our success in the playoffs will come down to how well these guys pitch," McLendon said.

Should the Gryphons defeat the Blue Devils, it's likely that No. 1 Gordon Lee — a program that has built a sort of dynasty in recent seasons as a baseball powerhouse — would await them in the second round.

"We can't look ahead to Gordon Lee," McLendon said. "We've got to focus on this week, even though we know our path is challenging."

Strong non-region performance gives Rutland playoff berth

The Rutland Hurricanes will be the only team representing the Bibb County School District in the baseball playoffs this year, as they snuck into the Class 2A tournament thanks to a good performance against non-region teams.

The Hurricanes finished the season 8-13-1 on the season but went 0-12 in their



Mark Powell / For The Melody

ACE's Jake McLendon takes a hack at a pitch during the Gryphons' home game earlier this season against cross-town foe Central. Jake, son of head coach Josh McLendon, has been a fixture for ACE this season with a .375 batting average and should be a key piece for the Gryphons in the playoffs.

region, an outcome that appears disastrous on paper but becomes clearer when taking a closer look at Region 2-2A.

"We're in a really tough region and could not find a lot of success there this year. Every team in this region made the playoffs," head coach and Rutland athletic director Darryl Silas said Tuesday. "We're also starting a lot of freshmen, we're a very young team. We graduated three starting pitchers last year who were seniors."

The strong region included Morgan County, the No. 1 seed in the 2A bracket. While the 0-12 record against region foes was not ideal, Rutland succeeded against many of its traditional rivals in non-region play to go 8-1.

"We were able to muster a lot of wins against teams outside of that difficult re-

gion, and a lot of those teams were Macon teams, which is always good," Silas said. "In the past we would not be in the playoffs since we finished outside the top four in our region, but the new power rankings helped us."

The Hurricanes got the No. 29 spot, just getting in thanks to their difficult schedule. They will face the No. 4 Redan Raiders, who went 18-9 overall and 10-0 in Region 6-2A, in a doubleheader on the road Friday at 2 p.m.

The Raiders, who hail from Dekalb County, played some tough non-region competition. Their most impressive win came against the Gainesville Red Elephants, a 5A playoff team. But Redan's region was also relatively weak. The second-place team, Drew Charter, finished the season 12-12.

"I think it will be fun to go up there and get the experience of a playoff series, going on the road and getting to play a game," Silas said. "We have a young team and we're always trying to get more experience. It's going to provide them with something that can build their mental capacity to continue to play this game with fidelity and get better in the future."

The matchup against a higher seed could be tough. Silas said the team could usually make it through three or four innings and keep pace with high-ranked teams — usually in a 0-0 tie, he said — but tended to lose steam once their pitching faced opposing hitters the third time through the order.

"By the third time around, talented hitters like the ones we've faced this year have

been able to put the ball in play. That's what experienced hitters do," Silas said.

Two key players that have defined the season for the Hurricanes are Tate Summerday and Kaelix Marcus.

Summerday has excelled on the mound as one of Rutland's only consistent pitchers returning from last year, but he's also been a key contributor at the plate and in the field. The Region 2-2A Utility Player of the Year has a .385 average with a 1.126 OPS and four triples out of the leadoff spot.

"He's been a huge shining light for us this year. He's a difference maker," Silas said.

Marcus had the second-most stolen bases in the region, 13, to earn himself a spot on the All-Region second team.

Ump, from B1:

players, parents and officials, a status accrued through years of taking the extra game, working into the night and answering the call — about 20 years, to be exact, though he has not worked with Vine-Ingle for all those seasons.

Stewart's road to Macon was no primrose path, however. The umpire, social worker, role model and family man took a long and winding road to Middle Georgia instead, one he said was carved out almost entirely because of sports.

Lessons from the Motor City

Stewart grew up in inner-city Detroit, an experience that shaped him in a variety of ways.

"There was a lot to learn there, but in my youth it was sports that carved me a path. That's where I became motivated," Stewart said of his

upbringing. "I wasn't expected to live past 18 years old in Detroit."

Things did not come easy for him and his family, but Stewart had an eye-opening experience when he started playing AAU basketball to emulate his older brother. He eventually earned a basketball scholarship to a private school, even getting the school to prorate his siblings' tuition to keep him there.

He played basketball, football and even a little baseball, all while working at the school at the same time as an employee at the gym.

"That job taught me a lot about discipline, about paying attention and getting things done," Stewart said. "I also had to deal with people that I wasn't really on the same page with and learned to handle that in a healthier way... Before that I wasn't very good at dealing with people different than me."

"It made it my mission to meet people where they are. It's okay to be different. People have

circumstances, but they are not defined by them. I can change their circumstances and help them."

One head coach at the school told Stewart that sports could keep carrying him beyond high school.

"He told me I was not what everybody in life had predicted me to be," Stewart recalled.

Though it sounds cliché, and a little optimistic, it became a core tenet for Stewart.

"It helped me realize that there was more out there, more to explore, and I thought about it and realized sports could help me live a better life," he said.

Stewart translated his athletic talent into a unique career after he played more in college, as he carved out a niche in semi-pro football for more than a decade. He played on teams like the Baltimore Renegades and Central Penn Piranhas — these teams changed leagues somewhat regularly, but were similar to minor league baseball teams, Stewart said — and won multiple championships for the teams.

He traveled to play football while having various different jobs as a social worker, many of which were in the Foster Care system.

"Near the end of it, once my wife moved down here to Georgia, I was going back and forth between Baltimore and Forsyth and was running group care homes in Baltimore with Foster Care children. I flew back and forth for about a year," Stewart said. "In 2005 I finally moved all the way to Georgia."

Finding a new way onto the field

But not long before he moved to Macon, Stewart blew out his knee playing football in New Jersey. He knew after that game in the early 2000s that he could never play football again, but he also knew that he needed to stay involved with sports somehow.

"I couldn't stomach not being on a field. I immediately started brainstorming how I could keep sports in my life, after it had gotten me this far," Stewart said of his thoughts after the injury. "I needed to find something to do that makes me feel like I'm still engaged."

Stewart had been a basketball official in Baltimore and started working hoops as an official in Monroe County. Oddly enough, though, his way

back onto the field would come via the sport he played the least in high school: baseball. He started working as an umpire for baseball and softball almost as soon as he arrived in Middle Georgia and found the work immediately fulfilling.

He didn't start at Vine-Ingle, either. For his first five years as an ump, Stewart was a fixture at the tee-ball fields for North Macon Little League. He became the umpire in chief and directed assignments there in 2010.

"For a while after that I helped out with softball at Vine-Ingle while doing baseball in North Macon, driving back and forth, and eventually Vine-Ingle said, 'What would it take for you to come over here full-time?'" Stewart said. "And all I said was, 'make sure I have games to work,' and that was it."

Stewart has nicknames across town, though he's most often dubbed by players as "Big Mike." One moniker he earned, "50/50," came from travel ball.

"That's because I give them a big spiel in travel ball — I say half the people will love me, half the people will hate me. But in the end I'm gonna be right," he said, laughing. "It's that relationship that I have with the children that keeps me coming back, keeps me motivated."

The 57-year-old is motivated indeed. On the night we talk, he calls closer to 10 p.m. after taking an extra softball game and working under the lights.

Stewart works hard, even with his five children already through college — he lists their achievements, ranging from volleyball and lacrosse scholarships to music degrees, without hesitation — and following in his footsteps as social workers.

"They were expected to play sports in school because my wife and I knew that would shape them the right way," he said. "I think that's why they became so successful. I'm so proud of them."

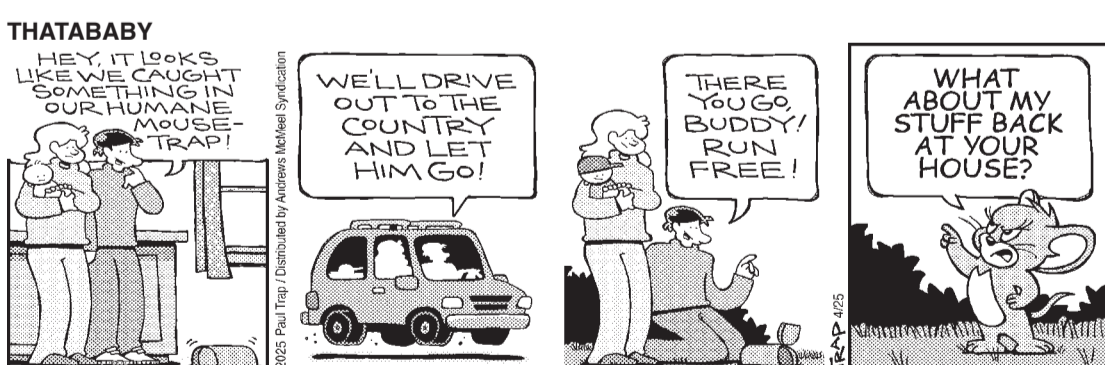
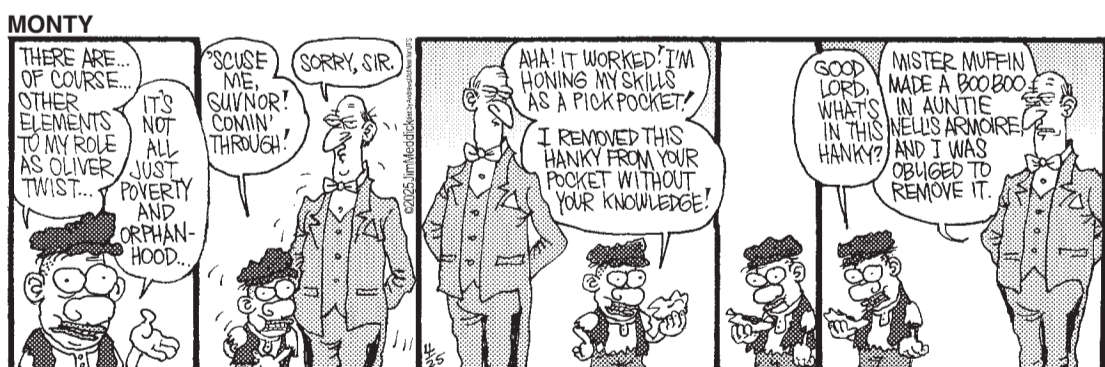
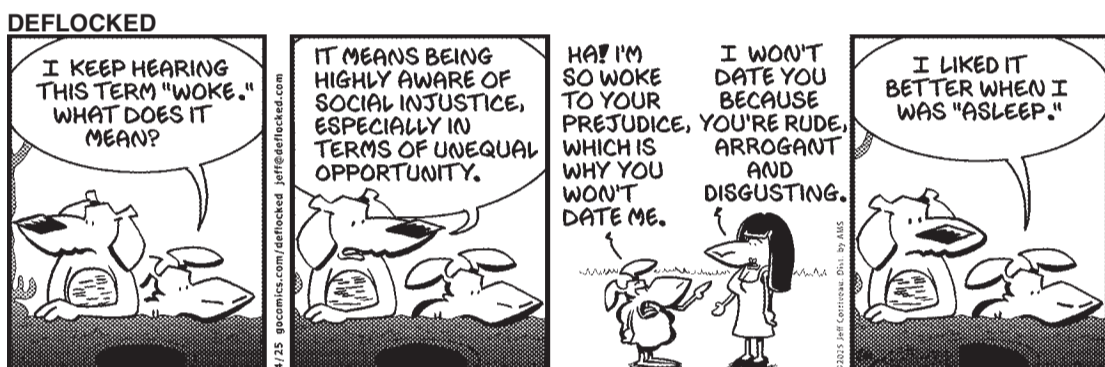
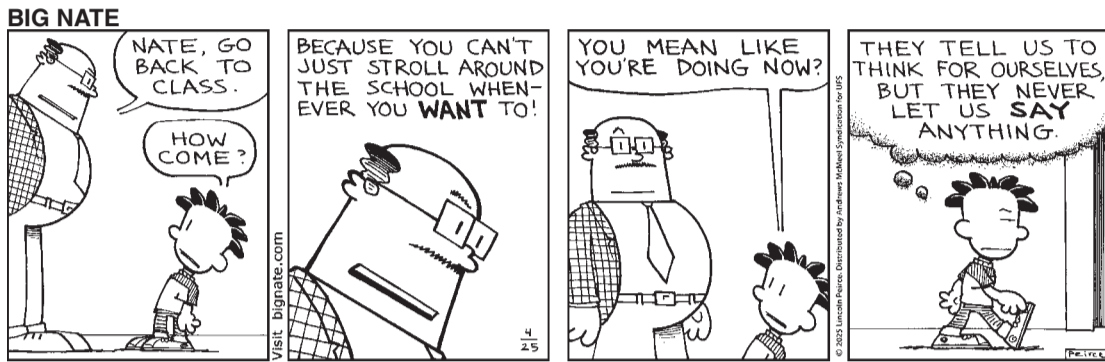
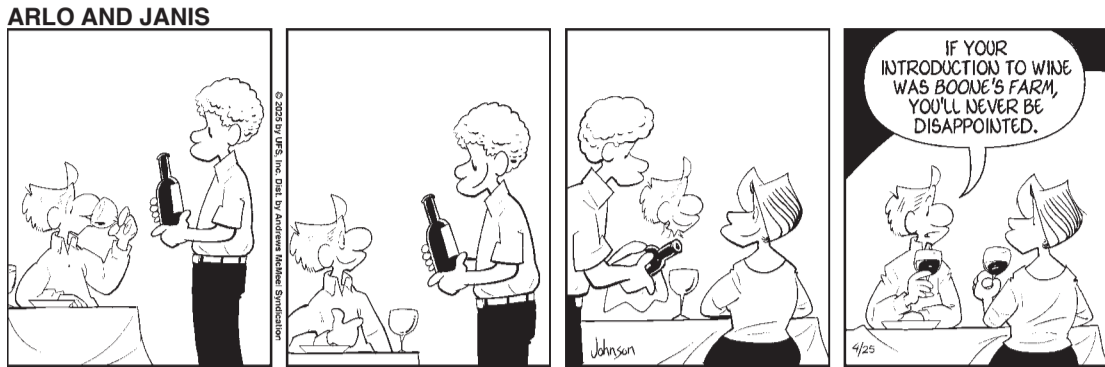
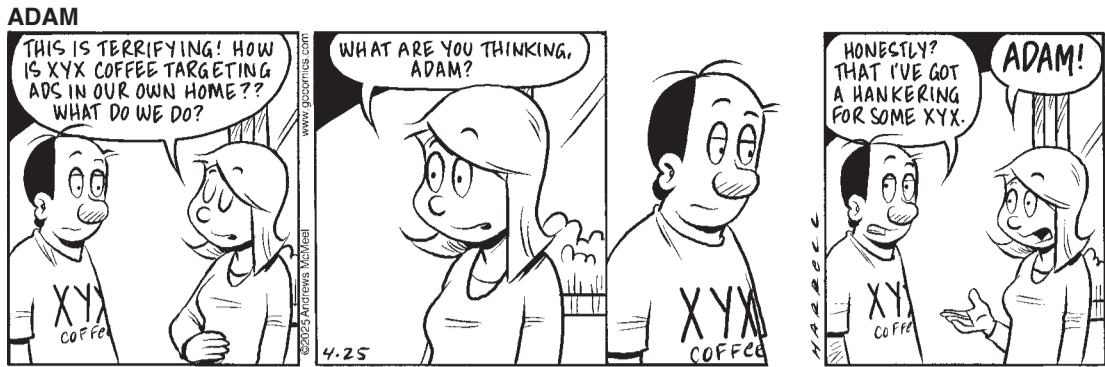
Even many years later, Stewart still remembers that young man from Detroit every time he steps across those white foul lines.

"The pathway of sports led me here," he said. "I wouldn't change it."



Photo courtesy Michael Williams

Umpire Michael Williams takes a group picture with a softball team after finishing up with a game during a recent season. Williams started out with North Macon Little League before coming on as a softball umpire at Vine-Ingle.



NEA Crossword Puzzle

- ACROSS**
- 1 Glide down a snowy hill
 - 4 As blind as — —
 - 8 "All — Jazz"
 - 12 Felt-tip
 - 13 Flat-top hill
 - 14 Pelt
 - 15 Cereal plant
 - 16 Himalayan legend
 - 17 In the twinkling — — eye
 - 18 Rare thing
 - 20 Noted Thanksgiving attendees
 - 22 Of the moon
 - 24 Play on words
 - 25 Pair
 - 26 Objective
 - 27 Actor — Wallach
 - 30 Fermented taro paste
 - 32 Bit of smoke
- DOWN**
- 34 Nothing
 - 35 Fuss
 - 36 Distort
 - 38 Cousin to a hwy.
 - 39 Lair
 - 40 Qt. fractions
 - 41 Letter after pi
 - 43 Pasture
 - 44 Offspring
 - 47 Fatherly
 - 52 Insert for a shoe
 - 53 Regretted
 - 54 — B'rith
 - 56 Barley bristle
 - 57 Wash. neighbor
 - 58 Module
 - 59 "— Smart"
 - 60 Titled woman
 - 61 Overdue
 - 62 Railways on trestles

Answer to Previous Puzzle

R	A	M		R	E	D	S		R	A	N	G	
A	L	E		A	D	I	T		E	M	I	R	
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S	T	E	W	S				A	D	O	R	E	D
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M	E	M	E		R	A	C	E		A	R	C	
B	E	E	R		D	R	E	W		N	T	H	

- 5 Microwave sound
- 6 — spumante
- 7 Exhaust outlet
- 8 Prickle
- 9 Sound system (Hyph.)
- 10 Genesis name
- 11 Playing cards
- 19 Cold and wet
- 21 Plant secretion
- 23 Tier
- 26 Inquires
- 27 Posse
- 28 Cup edge
- 29 Kind
- 30 Cushion
- 31 "— on a Grecian Urn"
- 33 Turkish city
- 37 Twisted
- 40 — capita
- 42 Fiery
- 43 Pigeon's perch
- 45 Stair post
- 46 Fellows
- 47 Goad
- 48 Unseen emanation
- 49 Abound
- 50 "— Karenina"
- 51 Cafe au —
- 55 Native of (Suffix)

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11
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60					61						62	

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SUDOKU

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

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			7	2								
			2			1						

Almanac

Today is the 115th day of 2025 and the 37th day of spring.

TODAY'S HISTORY: In 1859, British, French and German engineers began construction on the Suez Canal in Egypt.

In 1898, the United States declared war on Spain.

In 1945, U.S. and Soviet troops met at the Elbe River in Germany, signaling the defeat of German defenses.

In 1953, Francis Crick and James Watson published an article describing the double helix structure of DNA.

In 2011, a four-day tornado outbreak in the southern United States began, producing 358 confirmed tornadoes and killing more than 300 people.

TODAY'S BIRTHDAYS: Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), soldier/politician; Edward R. Murrow (1908-1965), journalist; Ella Fitzgerald (1917-1996), singer; Jerry Leiber (1933-2011), songwriter/producer; Al Pacino (1940-), actor; Renee Zellweger (1969-), actress; Jason Lee (1970-), actor.

TODAY'S FACT: Most of Jim Henson's Muppets are left-handed, due to the fact that their puppeteers use their dominant hand (typically the right) to control the puppets' head and mouth, while the other hand controls the puppets' arms.

TODAY'S SPORTS: In 1950, Chuck Cooper became the first African American drafted into the NBA by the Boston Celtics.

TODAY'S QUOTE: "Just because your voice reaches halfway around the world doesn't mean you are wiser than when it reached only to the end of the bar." – Edward R. Murrow

TODAY'S NUMBER: 26,723 – nautical miles traveled by the U.S. Navy's nuclear-powered submarine USS Triton during its 60-day-circumnavigation of the world, completed on this day in 1960.

TODAY'S MOON: Between last quarter moon (April 20) and new moon (April 27).

Community Briefs

New York man assaulted in Bibb County jail

A 21-year-old man from Jamaica Queens, New York, was hurt in the Bibb County jail after hot water was thrown on his face earlier this month.

Romario Justin Casey had been in jail for 9 days when he was reportedly assaulted on April 15, according to a news release from the sheriff's office. Casey hid his injuries for four days before notifying deputies on April 19, the news release said.

Casey was treated at a local hospital and returned to the jail. Investigators learned other inmates threw hot water at Casey's face through the cell door and are working to identify those individuals.

Casey was booked in the jail April 6 on charges including two counts of terroristic threats and acts, records show. His bond is set at \$7,700.

Owner of soon-to-open downtown eatery announces bid for governor

Sen. Jason Esteves, D-Atlanta, recently announced plans to run for Georgia governor. Esteves and his wife, Ariel, live in northwest Atlanta and own the Flying Biscuit Cafe in Columbus and another one set to open next month in downtown Macon at Second and Mulberry streets.

Esteves, a former Atlanta Public Schools board chairperson, was elected to the Senate in 2022 and is among several others who have announced plans to run for governor.

Colorectal specialist joins Piedmont

Dr. Sam Atallah, whose innovated techniques have transformed colorectal surgeries, is now practicing at Piedmont Macon Medical Center.

Atallah joined the Piedmont Physician Surgical Specialists Macon practice, which provides Middle Georgians with a new level of colorectal expertise including robotic and minimally invasive surgeries.

Atallah hails from Orlando,

Florida, and is the author of three medical textbooks and more than 100 peer-reviewed scientific publications. He is the co-creator of Transanal Minimally Invasive Surgery, which allows for the removal of rectal tumors without abdominal incisions.

Atallah completed his residency in general surgery at the University of Texas Medical School and his fellowship training at Methodist Hospital in the Texas Medical Center. Atallah graduated from the Surgical Leadership Program at Harvard Medical School in 2021.

"I'm excited to bring colon and rectal surgery to Middle Georgia so patients won't have to drive a great distance to get care," Atallah said. "Instead, they can get state-of-the-art treatment right here at home."

Georgia Opioid Crisis Trust to offer grants, training

The Georgia Opioid Crisis Abatement Trust is set to launch its 2025 grant application period in May to provide funding opportunities and support for programs that address the opioid crisis across the state.

"These funds represent a critical investment in Georgia's fight against the opioid epidemic," said Kevin Tanner, trustee of the Georgia Opioid Crisis Abatement Trust. "We encourage eligible organizations to take advantage of this opportunity by attending a training session and applying for funding that will make a meaningful impact in their communities."

The trust was established to distribute Georgia's share of national opioid settlement money following lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies including Johnson & Johnson. The money supports evidence-based programs that aim to prevent opioid misuse, expand treatment services and strengthen recovery initiatives statewide.

The Notice of Funding Opportunity is set to publish online May 5 and the grant application portal is set to open May 19. Organizations and local governments inter-

ested in applying for funding are encouraged to attend one of the Trust's in-person or virtual training sessions. For more information on the 2025 grant cycle, visit gaopiodtrust.org.

Bibb Schools poetry slam

Students from the Bibb County high schools will participate in the Griffith Foundation's 5th annual poetry slam on Friday at 6:30 p.m. in the historic Douglass Theatre. Students will present original poems based on the theme "Social Justice: Silent No More." Seniors will compete for a total of \$30,000 in scholarships. Tickets are free, but must be reserved online. Free parking will be available in the garage next to the theatre.

Macon-Bibb EMA to host open house

The Macon-Bibb Emergency Management Agency is opening its operations center to the public from 5-7 p.m. on First Friday, May 2, to educate visitors on how it manages emergencies. The operations center, at 700 Poplar St., was once a Cold War era fallout shelter. The mobile command vehicle also will be available for demonstrations in what promises to be "an exciting and eye-opening event."

Opa! Greek Spring Fling set for Saturday

The Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church is set to host its annual Greek Spring Fling event on Saturday, April 26, from 11 a.m. - 7 p.m. at 859 First St. downtown. The event is free and parking is available nearby. Mediterranean fare available for purchase includes gyros, pastitsio, loukaniko, spanakopita, loukoumades and frozen pans of baklava. The one-day event is first come, first serve. For more information, visit holycrossga.org.

Second arrest made in connection with 2024 slaying

The U.S. Marshals Southeast Regional Fugitive Task Force arrested

a 20-year-old man at a Milledgeville residence Tuesday and charged him with murder and aggravated assault in connection with a fatal shooting in Macon nearly seven months ago.

A Crimestoppers tip helped lead investigators to Davian Nayshaun Forne, the second person to be charged with murder in connection with the September shooting death of 23-year-old Dontavious Ryshaun Holsey. Holsey and an unnamed 17-year-old were both shot at the intersection of Wallace and Jeffersonville roads early evening Sept. 30.

In November, Bibb and Jones county sheriff's deputies arrested 18-year-old Devin DeLoach in connection with Holsey's death. Court records from March show DeLoach asserted they acted in self defense. DeLoach was released from the Jones County jail on a bond of \$100,000.

Tips sought in Bloomfield shooting

The Bibb County Sheriff's Office is asking for the public's help with tips to help solve a recent shooting. A 19-year-old woman and a 23-year-old man were both shot in the 3000 block of Bloomfield Drive about 10 a.m. Tuesday. Both were taken to a hospital for treatment. Anyone with information about the incident is urged to call Macon Regional Crimestoppers at 1-877-68-CRIME.

SUDOKU ANSWER

7	4	5	8	1	6	2	3	9
3	8	9	5	4	7	7	6	1
1	2	6	7	3	9	4	8	5
2	1	7	4	9	3	8	5	6
9	5	4	6	8	7	3	1	2
6	3	8	1	2	5	9	7	4
4	7	2	3	6	1	5	9	8
8	6	3	9	5	4	1	2	7
5	9	1	2	7	8	6	4	3

What to watch FRIDAY

April 25, 2025

All times Eastern. Start times can vary based on cable/satellite provider. Confirm times on your on-screen guide.

Havoc

Netflix ■ Original Film

Tom Hardy leads this action thriller as a bruised detective who must fight his way through a criminal underworld to rescue a politician's estranged son, while also battling his own demons. Along the way, he unravels a deep web of corruption and conspiracy that ensnares his entire city and finds himself with a number of factions on his tail: a vengeful crime syndicate, a crooked politician and his fellow cops.

Étoile

Prime Video ■ New Series

The Emmy Award-winning writing/directing team that brought you The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel (and the timeless classic Gilmore Girls) – Daniel Palladino and Amy Sherman-

Palladino – is back with a new drama series featuring the dancers and staff of two renowned ballet companies who swap their most talented stars in order to save their businesses.

NCIS: Sydney

CBS, 8 p.m. ■ Season Finale

In "Sting in the Tail," the Season 2 finale, the team races to find a missing anti-aircraft missile on the eve of a World War II commemoration ceremony. NCIS: Sydney has been picked up for Season 3.

Grosse Pointe Garden Society

NBC, 8 p.m.

In the new episode "Seasons," Alice (AnnaSophia Robb) welcomes a new addition to the family to snap Doug (Alexander Hodge) out of his funk; Catherine (Aja Naomi King) is torn as she must help sell her childhood home; Birdie (Melissa Fumero) receives surprising news that changes everything; and Brett (Ben Rappaport) teams up with Melissa (Nora Zehetner) to care for their sick kids.

The Never Ever Mets

OWN, 8 p.m.

In the new episode "Lying for Sport," tensions are high in the house, forcing one couple to seek advice from relationship expert Dr. Ally. Multiple couples deal with



'Fire Country'

SERGEI BACHLAKOV

issues of trust when it's learned that people aren't exactly who they said they were.

Fire Country

CBS, 9 p.m. ■ Season Finale

Season 3 of the action drama wraps up with a two-episode finale. In "A Change in the Wind," Bode and Manny (Max Thieriot and Kevin Alejandro) try to save lives and protect property when a fire erupts at a gas station. In "I'd Do It Again," high winds push the Zebel Ridge fire into Edgewater, threatening Walter's (returning guest star Jeff Fahey) care facility. The series has been renewed for Season 4.

MOVIES YOU'LL LOVE



'The Avengers' MARVEL

The Beach House Murders (2024, Suspense) Brittney Dorey, Devante Winfrey **LMN, 6 p.m.**

50 First Dates (2004, Romance-comedy) Adam Sandler, Drew Barrymore **VH1, 7 p.m.**

Jurassic World Dominion (2022, Action) Chris Pratt, Bryce Dallas Howard **E!, 7 p.m.**

Lethal Weapon (1987, Action) Mel Gibson, Danny Glover **AMC, 7 p.m.**

The Deadly Getaway (2022, Suspense) Yandy Smith-Harris, Jason Weaver **BET, 7 p.m.**

Death Becomes Her (1992, Comedy) Meryl Streep, Bruce Willis **Bravo, 7:30 p.m.**

Held Hostage in My House (2024, Suspense) Amy Smart, Matt Davis **LMN, 8 p.m.**

The Avengers (2012, Action) Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans **FX, 8 p.m.**

Big Daddy (1999, Comedy) Adam Sandler, Joey Lauren Adams **VH1, 9:30 p.m.**

Lethal Weapon 2 (1989, Action) Mel Gibson, Danny Glover **AMC, 9:30 p.m.**

Deadly Intentions (2024, Action) Deji LaRay, Jazmine Robinson **BET, 10 p.m.**

From the editors of TV Weekly and tvinsider.com

CATCH A CLASSIC

TCM Spotlight: Pulp Fiction

TCM, beginning at 8 p.m.

Turner Classic Movies' monthlong Friday night celebration of films that are based on works of pulp fiction (or are just pulpy in their own right) concludes this evening with a lineup of sci-fi and fantasy titles. Up first is **The Thing From Another World** (1951), the classic about a team of military and scientific personnel trapped at the Arctic Circle with a deadly alien invader that has been accidentally thawed from its long slumber in the ice; **The Land That Time Forgot** (1974),



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based on pulp master Edgar Rice Burroughs' novel about a World War I U-boat crew and some torpedoed passengers they've picked up happening upon a hidden world where prehistoric creatures still exist; **Doc Savage: The Man of Bronze** (1975), an action film led by Ron Ely as the titular hero who first appeared in 1930s pulp magazines; the

1985 sword-and-sorcery flick **Red Sonja** (pictured), starring Brigitte Nielsen, in her film debut, as the title warrior, originally created by Robert E. Howard of Conan the Barbarian fame (Arnold Schwarzenegger has a supporting role here); **She** (1965), an adventure film from Britain's Hammer Studios, starring Ursula Andress and Peter Cushing, and based on the 1887 novel by H. Rider Haggard (King Solomon's Mines); and **Time After Time** (1979), a sci-fi tale that imagines The Time Machine author H.G. Wells (Malcolm McDowell) using a real-life time machine to pursue Jack the Ripper (David Warner), who has also used the device to escape from the late 19th century into the late 1970s, where he begins another murder spree.



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WHILE SUPPLIES LAST



Photos by Jason Vorhees / The Melody

1: A 200th anniversary monument is unveiled Wednesday morning during a 48th Infantry Brigade Combat Team anniversary celebration at the units' volunteer headquarters on Shurling Drive. IBCB Commander Col. Nathaniel Stone spoke at the ceremony and the names of fallen IBCB soldiers from operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom and New Normal were read. **2:** Soldiers stand at attention during the National Anthem at the celebration.

Photos by Jason Vorhees / The Melody

3: Hundreds of worshipers gathered on Coleman Hill Sunday morning for the 108th Annual Community Easter Sunrise Worship. The interdenominational service was put together by members of Mulberry Street United Methodist Church, Centenary United Methodist Church and High Street Unitarian Universalist Church. **4:** Camilla Packroff, left and Katie Trotter perform during the sunrise service on Coleman Hill.



Photos by Jason Vorhees and courtesy Leah Yetter and Kerry Hatcher

5: Ingram-Pye Elementary held a drive-thru parade Friday afternoon to support and encourage third through fifth graders for the upcoming Georgia Milestone tests. **6:** Hartley Elementary student Alayah Miles came in first place among second graders in the state's Young Georgia Authors competition, for her story titled "The Magic Pencil". **7:** Local artist Kevin "Scene" Lewis paints a portrait of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, a Maryland resident deported to El Salvador during an 'Action in Art' rally Saturday in downtown. **8:** A protester holds a sign during the rally on Poplar Street.

