

The Macon Melody

Friday, August 8, 2025

Bibb County's local source for community news

Vol. II, No. 7

Melody announces new executive editor

Evelyn Davidson
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Joshua Wilson will take the helm as the new executive editor of The Macon Melody starting Sept. 2, the Georgia Trust for Local News announced this week.

The Mississippi native says his aim is to make The Melody a digital-first newsroom, while also bolstering its print content.

"Wilson has been at the cutting edge of expanding local journalism

beyond the printed page and into the digital space where so many people now receive their community news. But, he still has ink in his veins," said executive director of the Georgia Trust for Local News DuBose Porter.

He said he believes Wilson understands the role of local papers in documenting history through the day-to-day lens of an entire community.

"He is a great fit for the Macon-Bibb region and we look forward to his leadership," Porter said.

Wilson said he sought an organi-

zation with a clear vision for how to ensure trust and transparency, while combatting information overload in the journalism industry.

"This is a natural progression in my career," he said. "I wanted to find an organization that really believed local news was vital to the future of journalism and also to a functioning democracy."

Wilson comes to The Melody from the University of Southern Mississippi, where he spent several years as an adjunct professor of media literacy and multimedia storytelling. He also

served as the community liaison for the university's Roy Howard Community Journalism Center since 2024.

Wilson's career is rooted in his early work as a local journalist for his south Mississippi hometown of Brookhaven, where he wrote obituaries and penned news columns when he was 15 years old.

"Since then I have been obsessed with telling people's stories," said Wilson, noting that journalism fosters curiosity, empathy and a desire to understand the world.

He earned bachelor's degrees in

social science and English from William Carey University, where he also received a Master of Business Administration.

Wilson became editor of the college newspaper and later served as the university's director of media relations and marketing, and taught as an adjunct professor.

He held other jobs in corporate marketing, but longed for "the authenticity of local news" and sharing

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County to pave 20 years worth of roads

Laura E. Corley
Senior Accountability Reporter
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Macon-Bibb County plans to pave "20 years worth of roads in one year," Mayor Lester Miller announced Tuesday at a county commission meeting.

Months earlier, the mayor said the county would pave 25 years worth of roads over four years.

"I was being very conservative," Miller said of the less ambitious timeline he announced in May. "We wanted to see how quickly we could do this."

The county has already advertised the first chunk of pav-

ing work, which includes 36 miles of roads at a cost of \$11.8 million, Miller said.

All told, the county expects to pay \$44 million to pave 459 roads, a total length of 129 miles of the county's more than 1,100 miles of roads. Typically, the county only paves about 8 miles of roads each year, the mayor said.

The county will use money from the current and upcoming Special Local Option Sales Tax, state road maintenance grants and general funds to pay for the work. The 2018 SPLOST collections ended last month and collections on the

See ROADS, Page A3

East Macon pastor named Bibb's new truancy liaison



Jessica Gratigny / The Melody

East Macon pastor Dominique Johnson (center, with microphone) speaks at a parade honoring Northeast High School earlier this year. Johnson was named the new Bibb County School District truancy specialist, a position he said he feels equipped to fill because of his relationships with Maconites.

Casey Choung
Melody Reporter
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The Bibb County School District hired East Macon pastor Dominique Johnson as the county's long-awaited truancy specialist following a June 31 public hearing on the millage rate.

Echoing what district officials have said previously, Johnson said he sees himself not as a traditional truancy officer but instead as a "facilitator" within the community.

Johnson will be responsible for be-

ing the "primary contact" between the district and families when it comes to attendance, according to the district's job description. He will also have to make regular phone calls and home visits to support absent students as well as hold workshops and events to "promote a culture of attendance."

"Let's put our hand to the problem," he said. "Let's approach it restoratively and redemptively and not punitively, while still holding people accountable."

The hire comes after the Macon-Bibb County Board of Commissioners approved \$345,000 for the district to

fund the position for three years.

A little more than a quarter of the students in Bibb County Schools are considered "chronically absent," meaning they have missed more than 10% of the school year.

Superintendent Dan Sims recommended Johnson for the position, Board of Education President Myrtice Johnson said. Myrtice and Dominique are not related.

The board president said while she

See TRUANCY, Page A2

New MGA air traffic program set for lift off

Casey Choung
Melody Reporter

Middle Georgia State University's School of Aviation signed onto the Federal Aviation Administration's enhanced air traffic controller program earlier this month, shortening its students' paths toward certification.

MGA joins several other college programs in the enhanced ATC Collegiate Training Initiative as the federal administration faces a shortage of nearly 3,000 air traffic controllers nationwide, according to a FAA press release.

Under the enhanced program, students can go directly

to a facility for localized, or facility-specific, training to earn their certification, unlike in a regular CTI program where students would have to attend the FAA's academy.

Students who go through the enhanced program may be employed by one of the FAA's private contract companies.

"It's important work," said MGA's air traffic control tower manager Angela Taylor. "You're saving lives and keeping people safe as they travel. It is a very serious job."

Taylor has been teaching students in MGA's air traffic

See ATC, Page A3

Periodical — Mail Label

Macon local spots himself in 'Superman'

Sometimes it takes a superhero to stay in the background

Ed Grisamore
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Tripp Spears was 39 years old when he went to bed the night of October 27, 2024.

He woke up the next morning ... and he was 40. "It wasn't a midlife crisis," he said. "I just told myself I wanted to try something different."

He didn't keep a bucket list with aspirations to write the great American novel, climb Mount Everest or run with the bulls at Pamplona.

Spears was happily married, working for his family's business and performing as a singer/songwriter in his hometown of Macon.

He simply announced his intentions of appearing in a movie. He wasn't looking for top billing. He had no desire to be a

leading man. He was content to blend in as a face in the crowd on the silver screen.

He set the bar low. After all, there is no Academy Award for "Best Background Actor."

"I wanted to be an extra," he said. "I didn't have to say anything. I just wanted to experience it, to see behind the scenes and make connections."

Growing up, he had no acting experience in school plays or community theater. He did, however, make an appearance on national television.

"I always took the music route," he said. "I didn't think I would be doing this. I wasn't trying to get famous. I tried to do that in my 20s."

In 2005, he appeared on the MTV series, "Room Raiders," where three



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Tripp Spears holds an issue of "Action Comics" featuring Superman on its front cover at Fanboy Comics and Collectibles in Macon. Spears, an avid Superman fan, appeared in the hero's latest film adaptation as an extra.

See SUPERMAN, Page A2



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Superman, A1:

contestants would have their rooms inspected to earn a romantic date. His episode had a twist. It involved a songwriting contest, and he emerged the winner.

He later joined a band called Rookie of the Year and went on tour. (Now, he sometimes sings his MTV song, “Sideswept by Jealousy” when he performs at local clubs and restaurants.)

Last spring, he noticed a casting ad for the new Superman movie. Filmmakers had transformed Macon’s historic Terminal Station into the setting for the Daily Planet newsroom, where Clark Kent worked as a newspaper reporter.

Spears applied to be an extra and submitted a headshot photograph. He assumed he might land a part in scenes at the Terminal Station. Instead, he was asked for his measurements and clothes sizes and was sent to Atlanta to be outfitted as a Boravian soldier.

“I never thought I would be in a DC (Detective Comics) film, let alone a Superman movie,” Spears said.

Although he is a Superman fan, he has a cat named “Batman.”

His part in the movie required spending “long days in the sand.” Battle scenes for the movie were filmed at Atlanta Sand and Supply Co.’s mining operation in Crawford County.

The corporate offices of Atlanta Sand are located on Peake Road in Macon. The

terrain of the sand mines have been used as backdrops for other action-adventure movies, including “Black Adam,” starring Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, and “Black Panther 2,” featuring the late Chadwick Boseman.

Spears took his minor role seriously. For four days, he got up at 4 a.m. and arrived early on the set, dressed in full army fatigues with a vest and helmet. Some of the other extras had difficulty with the heat and keeping up with the rigorous physical demands of running in the sand.

He did have an opportunity to meet director James Gunn. Spears gave him a sticker depicting him riding a tiger from a video game called “Mystical Ninja.”

“It was my way of self-promotion,” Spears said. “I used it on one of my record singles. My name wasn’t on it, just my image. I told him my name.”

Spears and his wife, Emily, later saw Gunn one evening in downtown Macon. The director was having dinner at Oliver’s Corner Bistro with some of the movie crew, including actor Nathan Fillion, who played the Green Lantern, and Isabela Merced, who was Hawkgirl.

For months, Spears had to wait patiently for the movie to be released.

“I told a lot of people about it because I was excited,” he said. “When the trailer came out, I watched it religiously. I was trying to pinpoint the moment and find a glimpse of myself in the scene. I had to wait for the movie to see if I was in it.”

When “Superman” opened



Photo provided by Tripp Spears
In foreground, from left to right: Tripp Spears, director James Gunn and actor Nathan Fillion, who plays the Green Lantern, pose for a photo outside Oliver’s Corner Bistro on Second Street in Macon while the crew was in town to film the ‘Superman’ film in which Spears was an extra.

at Macon’s Amstar Theatres on Friday, July 11, Spears went to the 9:15 p.m. showing with his wife and about a dozen friends.

Although he had high hopes, he still had to brace himself for disappointment if his part somehow ended up on the cutting room floor. In the theater, he described his scene as fast and chaotic, with 150-200 soldiers.

“One of my friends said, ‘Oh, there’s Tripp,’ but he

was just joking around,” Spears said. “I think that was me standing by one of the vehicles, holding the gun the same way I held it. And my mom said the beard looks like it’s me. If you zoom in, it’s blurry, but she said it’s me.”

His networking has paid off. On the final day, he was scanned by more than 200 cameras for use in 3D character modeling. He later signed with a talent agency.

Since then, he has appeared

as an extra on HBO’s upcoming series “DSL St. Louis,” with Jason Bateman and David Harbour, and in the Peacock TV series “The Good Daughter,” starring Rose Byrne and Meghann Fahy.

He also received work as a patron in a bar in the Apple TV series “Cape Fear,” with Amy Adams and Patrick Wilson. He is the father of a middle school student in a spelling bee in comedian Nate Bargatze’s film debut in “The

Breadwinner.”

You can soon catch his face in a cafe scene in “It’s Not Like That,” starring Scott Foley, on Amazon Prime. His first speaking part – he utters the words “Yes, sir!” – is in a mobile-friendly drama and TV app called “ReelShort.”

“There’s not a lot of money in it,” he said, laughing. “It’s the bragging rights, to be able to say, ‘Hey, I’m in that!!!’ ”

Truancy, from A1:

does not know the pastor personally, she trusts Sims’ judgment and thinks Johnson is “up for the challenge.”

“A lot of our students and their parents don’t really understand the importance of being in school,” she said. “If they missed one day then they’ve missed a whole lot. It will be difficult for them to catch

up.”

Johnson said he plans on continuing his work as a pastor while working as truancy specialist. He also heads The Urban CEO (Community Empowerment Organization), which runs an eight-month leadership academy, a back-to-school supply drive for Northeast High School and mentoring and consulting services.

In the past, Johnson

worked with Mercer University’s federally-funded Upward Bound program, ONEMacon, an economic development organization, and Cure Violence Macon a local nonprofit aimed at curbing gun violence.

Johnson said his previous roles have prepared him to motivate not just students but also parents, and he sees the truancy specialist job as an extension of his work as

a pastor.

Johnson, a Northeast graduate, said because he comes from the community he won’t be starting “from scratch” when it comes to building the relationships needed to do his job effectively. He added that he’s worked with low-income before.

“This is my makeup,” he said. “I am graced to do this type of work.” Johnson said he hopes to push

students and see them “blossom” to solve the truancy issue. He added that the district needs to consider impacts of generational poverty and trauma while dealing with truancy.

“At the end of the day, I am gonna go and see what’s going on, what’s working, get characteristics of the students who are absent and build a cohesive team,” he said.

Crash on deadly stretch of road kills two Macon teens

Laura Corley
Senior Accountability Reporter

A pair of teenagers died in a crash in the predawn hours Aug. 1 on a stretch of Zebulon Road where other fatal crashes have occurred in recent years.

Alexander Floyd Strebeck, 18, was at the wheel of a Dodge pickup about 2:15 a.m. when he ran off the road and into a tree near Colaparchee Road not far from the Barrington Hall subdivision. Strebeck, of Forsyth, and his passenger, 17-year-old Landon Brooks Lawless, were pronounced dead at the scene, according to a news release from the Bibb County Sheriff’s Office.

Lawless, of Fort Valley, was ejected from the vehicle, Bibb County Coroner Leon Jones said.

“The truck was wrapped around a tree,” he Jones said.

The teenagers are not the first to lose their lives on that length of road on the west side of Interstate 475, not far from the Monroe County line.

Two people died in separate, single-car

crashes after running off the same segment of road in 2022.

Cory McKenzie Mull, 17, was at the wheel of a Mazda3 compact car when he ran off the road and struck several trees. Mull, a senior at Mary Persons High School, died at the scene of the late night crash on Sept. 15, 2022.

Months before Mull’s death, a 34-year-old woman at the wheel of a 2007 Honda Accord ran off the road and slammed into a brick mailbox and fence. Tiffany Fuller, a cosmetologist, was pronounced dead at the scene of the March 10, 2022, crash.

Nearly eight years before the pair of deaths in 2022, 17-year-old passenger Abby Hinson was killed in a highly publicized wreck on July 23, 2014. The driver, son of a former Mercer University basketball coach, pleaded guilty to reckless driving and vehicular homicide and was sentenced as a first offender to seven years on probation.



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Roads, from A1:

SPLOST voters approved in March won’t begin until October.

County Commissioners voted to approve a municipal bond so the county can get the money to begin roadwork instead of waiting for the new penny sales tax collections to roll in. Commissioners Seth Clark and Joey Hulett were absent.

The road resurfacing will be completed in “zones” instead of by commission districts so the county won’t have to pay contractors for as much travel, the mayor said.

Last summer, the county commission voted to buy “StreetScan” software from SHI International Corp. for nearly \$250,000. The software used LiDAR cameras, artificial intelligence and other technology to assess the conditions of each road and rated them on a scale. From there, the county identified roads most in need of resurfacing based on their rating.

“This is a fair and equitable way to get paving done across the district,” Miller said.

In other business Tuesday, commissioners agreed to participate in the opioid settlement with Purdue Pharma and the Sackler family.

“We don’t know what the dollar amount is that we’re going to get out of this settlement,” assistant county attorney Michael McNeill said, adding that it will depend on how many municipalities participate.

McNeill said the county spent the past year documenting the opioid crisis and its impact on Macon-Bibb. The amount awarded to the county will be based on that report, its population and other factors and must be spent on efforts such as education and prevention.

The Sackler family, owners of Purdue Pharma, patented Oxycontin in the early ‘90s. McNeill said the company used aggressive marketing techniques to get doctors to over-prescribe the drug it knew to be an addictive substance. McNeill said the family filed bankruptcy and the resolution is “for the purposes of getting anything out of them” because bankruptcy proceedings will wipe out their assets.



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Commissioners sit in Macon City Hall during a meeting earlier this summer in this file photo. The commissioners announced this week that they would keep paying Macon roads and join an opioid lawsuit.

ATC, from A1:

management program for 14 years, overseeing about 50 to 60 students each year. The enhanced program promises a more in-depth training with more rigorous testing and evaluations, Taylor said.

She added that other ATC programs have seen their enrollment numbers double under the federal partnership.

“We’re just really excited to help the FAA combat that issue of critically manned places and having people funneled into that career field,” Taylor said.

Middle Georgia State University’s ATC program was established 20 years ago.

Students in MGA’s two-year air traffic controller pro-

gram learn by taking classes but also get experience in simulated environments and by working in the control tower on MGA’s own airfield.

The school also plans to implement an additional program where students can earn their control tower operator certificate at MGA’s airfield, allowing students to be hired right into a facility.

Taylor said only a handful of other schools have their own control tower, and eight students who went through a pilot of the program went on to get jobs in the industry.

“Middle Georgia State University is in a really good spot where we have a control tower, where we have live traffic where students will be able to come up and work and there really isn’t anything that can replace live traffic.”

A high dropout rate has contributed to the shortage in ATC controllers.

When students are in MGA’s program, Taylor said they get students ready to work under pressure and being able to work with live traffic is a big plus for its students.

“There’s nothing to really prepare you for the real thing unless it’s the real thing,” she said.

Working at a facility, Taylor said, gives students the opportunity to learn “localism,” or the quirks specific to a control tower.

“The rules are the same, but you’re dealing with different airspace and different aircraft and runways,” she said. “They’re having to learn that and then be able to apply what they’ve learned to a real-world situation.”

In other business, the county commission voted to approve:

- A contract with California-based Aviatrix Communications marketing firm \$100,000 for airport promotional services
- Approval of a two-year lease with H2 Aero-services, LLC for two Air National Guard buildings at Middle Georgia Regional Airport for \$60,000 yearly with an option to renew it for one additional year
- Issuance of a purchase order for \$45,000 to Maudlin & Jenkins for extra costs related to the 2024 county audit
- Issuance of a purchase order for \$350,000 in solid waste funds to pay landfill tipping services related to the Mead Road Transfer Station
- Approval of an agreement with Middle Georgia Outdoor Lighting, Inc. for \$233,586 to purchase and install lighting at Memorial Park Gym
- Appropriation of an extra \$156,000 to Parks and Beautifications Department to pay for temporary workers and landscaping contracts
- Contract with Sheridan Construction for construction manager at-risk services for various renovations to the city auditorium for \$352,550 in 2018 Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax funds
- Acceptance of \$117,653 grant funds from the Georgia Criminal Justice Coordinating Council for the adult felony drug court program plus an in-kind contribution for employee salaries for \$20,762

Appointments

- Brendalyn Bailey to the Macon-Bibb County Board of Health for a term ending Dec. 31, 2028.
- Gary Wilson to the Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful Board to replace Stephen Adams, whose term is set to expire Aug. 18, 2025. Wilson’s term will begin Aug. 19 and expire Aug. 18, 2028.
- Brandi Simpson-Miller to the Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful Board to fulfill the unexpired term of Kenvoris Blair.
- George Thomas, Jr. to the Central Georgia Joint Development Authority for a four-year term.

Special Content furnished to the Macon Melody.

JUST LOOK UP: WHY STARGAZING IS THE PERFECT HOBBY FOR SENIORS



Photo by Freepik.com

Carlyle Place

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Late summer nights — when the air is still warm, but the sun begins to set a bit earlier — are the perfect time to head outside for stargazing. This hobby is excellent for individuals of any age, but seniors may find its health benefits and easy start-up steps especially appealing.

The Health Benefits of Stargazing
Stargazing is one of the best ways to introduce overall wellness to your routine.

Social Connections
Seniors need social connections to stay healthy in their golden years, and sharing an activity is a great way to build relationships. Stargazing not only connects you with others who share that passion, but it encourages you to reflect on your connection with nature, the planet, and our human history.

Mental Health
Research shows that being outside is exceptionally beneficial for our mental health, and stargazing is no different! The fresh air and natural sounds will help lower your stress and anxiety. You may also notice an improvement in sleep as you replace pre-bed screentime with the darker outdoors.

Cognitive Engagement
Learning new things is one of the best ways for seniors to stay sharp! Even if you don’t become an expert, the cognitive exercise you’ll get from observing the night sky will help you stay healthy and alert.

Stargazing Basics for Beginners
Whether you’ve learned some astronomy before or are a newcomer to the science, it’s easy to get started with a stargazing routine from your back porch.

1. Spend Time Outside
The best way to start stargazing? Head outside at night. While you can learn a lot from books and videos (like Astronomy for Older Eyes), interacting with your local night sky is the best education. Get comfortable locating common planets,

constellations, and stars and predicting their positions. Give yourself time to enjoy this alternative view of the world.

2. Download Apps and Buy Charts
Anyone can look up at the stars and enjoy the experience, no training necessary! To dig a little deeper, though, use apps or physical star charts to begin learning what your local night sky has to offer. The EarthSky Tonight webpage provides tips for what stargazers in the United States can look out for each night in an easy-to-use format. Sky & Telescope has a getting started guide that comes with six star charts and an interactive sky chart online. You can find the best stargazing apps in this list from Space.com, www.space.com/best-stargazing-apps.

3. Record Your Observations
Observing the night sky can seem monotonous — until you look back to see what changes happened right before your eyes! Keeping good records of your observations is the best way to track constellations, planetary positions, and other interesting objects. Take notes, draw pictures, or even use the voice memo app on your phone to record real-time thoughts.

4. Find Darker Skies
Stargazing is a great hobby because you can do it from your backyard. For a better view, however, you’ll eventually want to find dark sky areas without light pollution. This dark sky map, www.darkskymap.com, has locations that meet the criteria for enhanced nighttime viewing. Even if you only get to darker locations once a month, it’s worth the extra effort.

5. Invest in Equipment
Most experts recommend waiting until you’re a more seasoned stargazer to purchase a telescope. Why? Because so many interesting things are visible with the naked eye or through a good pair of binoculars. You can enjoy most of the benefits of stargazing without spending a fortune on equipment. When you’re ready, this telescope guide will

help you choose the right one, www.highpointscientific.com/astronomy-hub/post/astronomy-101/top-10-things-to-know-before-buying-your-first-telescope.

Community Opportunities for Stargazing
Stargazing is a relaxing solo activity, but sharing the hobby with friends and colleagues can add depth to this new pursuit.

Local Astronomy Clubs
Most cities have astronomy clubs full of amateur and professional enthusiasts! If there isn’t a local group, consider joining virtual clubs that meet online all over the world. You can choose a group in a major city close to you so that your view of the night sky is similar.

University Programs
If you have a university in your area, check into the astronomy department. Graduate students run seminars, observatory nights, and demonstrations year-round. Most of these events are free or low-cost, and the presenters are passionate about sharing their local knowledge!

Neighborhood Enthusiasts
One of the best ways to dive deeper into your stargazing hobby is to get friends and community members involved. If you can’t find resources in your area, start a club yourself! Offer a weekly evening walking group and invite participants to stay after sunset for a stargazing party.

If you’re concerned about nighttime safety, start an astronomy group and hold daytime meetings to learn about your night sky and study online charts. When it’s time to head outside, go to an organized community event or visit a state or national park where rangers are available to help keep your group safe. You can also plan times to visit museums and observatories as a group.



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Editor, from A1:

stories “important to the flavor of the community.”

In 2020, Wilson became managing editor of a weekly community newspaper and lifestyle magazine in Hattiesburg.

His coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic reminded him of the importance of local journalism as a “true hub for community,” he said.

When it came time to start a new chapter in his career, Wilson said the Georgia Trust stood out as an opportunity to be a part of an innovative nonprofit focused on local news.

“I wanted to be in a place where I felt like I could do great work in a community that needs quality journalism,” he said, noting Macon’s rich Civil Rights and music history.

As a newcomer, Wilson said he will start

by earning the community’s trust and encouraging an open door policy in which folks can share what’s on their mind, from constructive criticism to restaurant recommendations.

He plans to immerse himself in the Macon community, playing active roles in local organizations, talking to residents and working with Melody staff to write stories that shed light on the core issues faced by people in the community.

“I have always been a believer in the power of journalism to do great things — whether that means hold governments accountable, spotlight untold stories, build up unrepresented communities — I think that journalism has a true power and journalists have a very powerful responsibility,” Wilson said.

Corrections

The article titled “Macon Elected Officials Owe Thousands” that appeared in the Aug. 1 edition of The Macon Melody incorrectly reported the amounts and payment status of some outstanding fines owed by local candidates due to out-of-date information provided by Government Transparency and Campaign Finance Commission. The online version of the article has been updated to reflect this information.

Opinion

A heartfelt hello from The Melody's new editor

Somewhere between loading up moving boxes and saying goodbye to Mississippi, I've been thinking a lot about how to introduce myself to Macon.

I could start with a resume rundown: I'm an experienced community journalist, newspaper editor and journalism educator. I've written thousands of stories over the years everything from government accountability reporting to heart-felt obituaries and personality profiles. I've helped build a nonprofit community journalism center from the ground up. And I believe deeply in the power of local news to connect, inform and uplift a community.

But here's the thing: You don't know me yet. And that's fair.

I can talk all day about trust, transparency and community, but those are just words until I earn your trust and prove I mean what I



Joshua Wilson

say.

So let me start here: I'm honored to be stepping into the executive editor role at The Macon Melody. It's more than a job. It's a calling. I believe in the future of local journalism — especially when it's community-rooted and built to serve people.

I've admired this newsroom from afar a passionate, dedicated team that's already doing remarkable work in Macon. I feel lucky to join them and help carry this mission forward.

Big ideas don't work without big support. The Melody exists because of the backing of organizations like the Georgia Trust for Local News, the National Trust for Local News and the Knight Foundation. They've invested real resources into making sure this newsroom not only survives but thrives. That matters.

We're building something with staying power.

I'll be joining the team officially on Sept. 2 and putting down roots in Macon later this month. I ask for a little patience as I get settled and learn my way around.

I'll be out and about often. I want to meet not just the power players but the people who make Macon what it is — the teachers, store clerks, volunteers, elders, kids with big ideas. You won't just find me behind a desk. You'll find me at community meetings, neighborhood events and local hangouts. If you see me out and about, please say hello.

My door's always open and I mean that. If you have feedback, ideas, concerns or just want to introduce yourself, I'm all ears. I value constructive criticism and honest conversation. That's how we get better.

My hope is that The Macon Melody becomes not just your source for local news, but also your trusted neighbor — one that helps

folks understand what's going on and why it matters and one that celebrates the people who make this city shine.

We won't get everything right, but we'll always try our best. And we'll own it when we fall short. That's part of building trust, too.

Thank you for the warm welcome I've already felt here. I'm grateful. I'm hopeful. And I'm ready to roll up my sleeves and get to work.

Let's tell Macon's story together.

Joshua Wilson is the incoming executive editor of this publication. A native Mississippian, he is a former editor of the Magnolia State's largest business journal and a long-time community journalist and college-level journalism educator. Most recently, he helped build the Roy Howard Community Journalism Center in Hattiesburg. Send him a note: joshua@maconmelody.com.

Sky's the limit for downtown Christmas zip line

I had a MONI a few weeks ago. Middle Of Night Idea.

Are you sitting down? A zip line in downtown Macon ... from the top of Poplar Street at City Hall gliding 1,525 feet to MLK Jr. Blvd., where the Macon Rescue Mission's "JESUS CARES" sign once stood in giant block letters.

(Not "JESUS SAVES" but "JESUS CARES." And now, coming soon to a rooftop near you, perhaps "JESUS ZIPS.")

The idea swooped into my dreams after a friend's Facebook post about an "urban" zip line experience in Las Vegas. It is cleverly called "Slotzilla," and it flies above Fremont Street.

There are two options. You can "zip line" in a harness for two blocks 77 feet up in the air. Or you can "zoom line" 114 feet above the ground for five blocks in a prone position like Superman. (Google it and admit it's the coolest thing you've seen today.)

My MONI picked up speed after my church's recent mission trip to Costa Rica. At the end of the work week, I went zip lining for the first time. I wish you could have seen me channeling my inner Clark Kent, soaring like a bird and a plane above the flora and fauna in the rainforest.

Last week, I sent Bryan Nichols a text message. "Will you be downtown tomorrow? I've got a crazy idea I want to run by you."

Bryan has been known to have quite a few MONIs himself, so we are kindred spirits. He is co-own-



Ed Grisamore

er of Taste & See coffee shop on Poplar. He is also part owner of Macon Rocks, a climbing gym, just a stone's throw away on Cotton Avenue.

Most folks know Bryan as the vision-ary behind the Macon Christmas Light Extravaganza, which boasts more than 1 million twinkling lights stretching across almost six city blocks from the top of Poplar to MLK Jr. Blvd. during the holidays.

It has brought national attention to Macon and now rivals the Cherry Blossom Festival as the city's top annual event. More than 685,000 people turned out to see the lights between November 29 and January 5, providing an economic impact of \$7.1 million. Clark Griswold, eat your heart out.

Have you seen some of the extraordinary drone shots of all that yuletide glow? Imagine a zip line right down the middle of it. You could have your very own pigeon's-eye view.

I wasn't surprised when Bryan told me he had pitched the idea of a zip line when he made his first proposal to host the light show back in 2017.

Although it didn't meet any resistance from the powers that be, he lacked the financial muscle to proceed with it. The idea never got off the ground, so to speak.

There was also a wait-and-see attitude on how it was all going to turn out. In the beginning, no one could have imagined the extravaganza would grow on a scale that would be featured on ABC national news.

Bryan always has a wish list. He has tossed around the idea of adding a children's train and an outdoor ice skating rink. A German market is already planned for early December, covering a block at the end of Poplar.

Now might be a good time to revisit the zip line idea. It may be too late to pull it together for this year, but 2026 would be a worthy target date. Perhaps it could be ready for the Cherry Blossom Festival. Better a soft opening than a hard landing.

I figured Bryan would be pumped after I showed him a YouTube video of the Slotzilla in Las Vegas. But he was way out in front of me. He had already ridden it not long after it opened in 2014, and it was among the inspirations for his original zip line proposal.

He still keeps some of the blueprints in his head, including how high it would need to be to clear the pavilion roofs in the Poplar medians. The elm trees planted to the outside would form almost a perfect pathway through the lights. The large trees in the middle of the street at Third and Poplar could be pruned to form an opening.

There are no power lines to contend with, and as far as any other liabilities, the cross traffic at Second and Third streets would be blocked off to prevent having to ride above moving vehicles.

The launch tower could be located in the Poplar median adjacent to Just Tap'd and below City Hall and Rosa Parks Square, now under construction. There is already a concrete pad where the monument to the "Women of the Confederacy" was located before it was moved in 2020.

The tower could be designed so that it would be locked and sealed off so that nobody could trespass to climb it or try to scale its walls. Part of it could be used as an observation deck, where people could take selfies and family Christmas card photos with the light display as a backdrop. I can only imagine how many marriage proposals would take place up there, too.

From the Poplar hill, gravity would carry you 500 feet to the corner of Second and Poplar, across from the colorful "Macon" sign. There is another 800 feet to the shed where the Poplar Street Farmer's Market are held and 225 feet beyond that to the base of the Poplar. Golf carts could be used to shuttle people back up the hill.

The zip line ride would need to be affordable and offer slower speed options for children and senior citizens. It would not be feasible to keep it open and staffed year-round. It would practically pay for itself during the holidays, but could be made available for big events like the Cherry Blossom Festival, Bragg Jam and the Macon Beer Festival. It could be rented out for private parties and school field trips. I doubt people would want to ride the "Hot Line" on a summer afternoon, but Macon has one of the most enviable climates anywhere in the spring and fall.

I will admit my "zip-a-dee-doo-dah" idea has not been confined to Poplar. My thoughts have wandered over to Cherry and Mulberry, too. We could capitalize on the city's rich musical heritage with zip line attractions nicknamed "Zipping on the Dock of the Bay" (Otis Redding), "Scooty Frutti" (Little Richard) and

"Zippping Post" (The Allman Brothers Band).

Since Coleman Hill was once believed to be on ancient shores, Mulberry Street could boast the "Fall Line." Or since two historic churches, First Presbyterian and Mulberry Methodist, will celebrate their bicentennials next year, it could be known as the "Holy Rail."

The zip line along the narrow corridor of Cherry Street could carry the name "Airy Cherry." An extended line called the "Man of Steel" could arrive at the Terminal Station, where scenes from the recent Superman movie were filmed.

And we would need to take advantage of the river. There's already a series of zip lines across the Chatahoochee River between Columbus and Phenix City. We could use that as a model. It's the only dual zip line in the United States connecting two states.

Last summer, my wife and I ate lunch at a riverfront restaurant at Branson Landing in Missouri and watched folks zip line across Lake Taneycomo.

With a system of zip lines, we would have our own cable network. (OK, you can groan.)

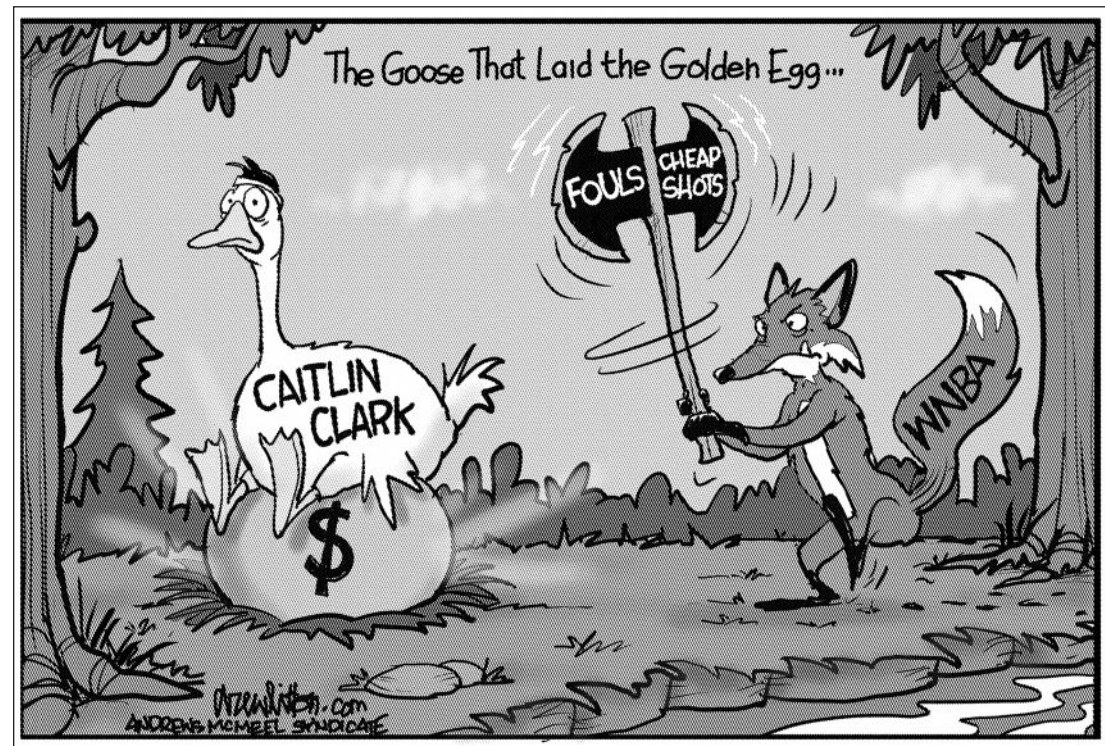
Before my MONI gets too carried away, let's circle back. I'm convinced a zip line would make Poplar even more popular during the holiday season.

Let's hear it for "The Zip Light."

Build it, make it non-obtrusive and first-class.

The sky's the limit.

Ed Grisamore is the self-described "Clark Kent" of newspaper columnists in Middle Georgia.



On the road: Taking a trip through the desert

As I've been in the box held by the mysteriously quiet stranger I recently sat next to on an airplane.

The suggestion was made by my mother after reading last week's feature. (In the paper of course. In the world of writing, you can't afford to offer a family discount.) That could explain it all: the man's solemn attitude, his lack of interest in what was happening around him and the focused stewardship of the parcel. Possibly he was on a mission to fulfill the last wishes of the dearly departed, traveling to the American desert to spread the remains in a sacred or beloved place.

There are few places as interesting and awe inspiring as the desert. It's no wonder that the Native Americans held such places in high regard. With its steep mountains and barren valleys, the terrain has almost magical effects on the body, though it could just be the elevation changes messing with the oxygen levels in the brain.

Enduring the heat and seeing the various cacti and scrub plants that thrive in a place that looks like another planet, especially coming from an area where everything is green, is a great reminder of the grit of America's early people and the first explorers who staked out a living in a place where few people could. It's also a good reminder of how easy we have it now. I'll cross the desert in a rented car over a covered wagon any day.

It was a dance convention for my daughter that made us modern-day pioneers headed west for adventure, but no stop in Arizona is complete without visiting the Grand Canyon. So after enduring an early morning flight, fueled by caffeine and those little cookies that Delta hands out, I loaded



Kyle Dominy

my family into a metal prairie schooner and made the near-four hour trek north to the Grand Canyon National Park. We stopped for the night in the town of Williams at a motel on historic Route 66. I had seen the canyon before, but the rest of my crew had not, and I wanted them rested and refreshed to see the spectacle.

One of the seven wonders of the natural world, the Grand Canyon is a sight to behold, and it's hard to find the words to describe it. You must see it to believe it. Imagine God himself jabbed his finger in the earth and dug a hole along the surface, leaving something behind that is both fearsome and beautiful.

Now imagine traveling such a great distance to see something so majestic and your family being completely dysfunctional the whole time. The kids bickered, my wife, with a fear of heights, was worried the entire time that one of us was, despite complying with all warnings to stay away from unguarded canyon edges, going to fall to our demise. I made things no better, well, by not doing anything to make things better.

Those pioneers had it so easy.

I tried to steal away for a moment of solitude and serenity, which was ruined by other tourists crawling out to the canyon's dangerous jagged edge for the perfect photo for their social media.

We left the park hot and tired. It was not quite the experience I had hoped for, but I wouldn't do it with anyone else. I understand the dance convention will be back in Phoenix in a couple of years, so we'll try again then.

The Grand Canyon will always be there, but I only have a little time to spend with my family.

Groovy Grisdom in the late innings of summer

Here are some melodious meanderings, tireless thoughts and groovy Grisdom for your reading pleasure in the late innings of summer.

If Justin Kelly runs for the mayor of Gray, governor of Georgia or U.S. senator, I want to be his campaign manager.

For the fifth straight year, the personable, 39-year-old owner of the Dairy Queen in Gray led his restaurant to the No. 1 ranking nationally in donations for last week's Miracle Treat Day.

The Gray DQ brought in \$180,000 in a single day, shattering last year's record mark of \$150,000. The local money goes to help support the Atrium Health Navicent Beverly Knight Olson Children's Hospital in Macon.

The Dairy Queen presold 6,000 Blizzards and served another 3,000 in the dining room and drive-thru. They went through more than 500 gallons of ice cream mix.

Leanne Morgan's new situation comedy "Leanne" has been one of the top shows on Netflix since it premiered on July 31. The Tennessee comedian has built a large and loyal audience, particularly in the South. My wife and I have been watching her videos on YouTube for years. She is one funny gal.

For those of you who might not know it, Macon native Blake Clark plays the character of "Daddy John" in the show's 16-episode premiere season. He is hilarious in his role as the stubborn and grumpy father of Leanne and her sister, Carol.

Clark is a 1964 graduate of Macon's Lanier High School, where



Ed Grisamore

his father, Lem, was a legendary coach. Clark is a veteran of 54 films and 50 television shows, including the final episode of the CBS television series "M*A*S*H" on Feb. 28, 1983, the most-watched single episode of a TV series in history.

There are two other Macon connections to the show. Jack McBrayer, who was born in Macon and attended Central High School, plays the role of Stephen, the wedding florist, in Episode 13 ("Don't Dangle a Dream.")

McBrayer, a four-time Emmy nominee, is known for his work on "30 Rock," "Phineas and Ferb" and "The Middle." He has voiced characters in "Wreck-It Ralph" and "Wander Over Yonder." He co-created and starred in the Apple TV series "Hello, Jack! The Kindness Show."

An indirect Macon connection is Chuck Lorre, one of the creators and executive producers. Lorre is nicknamed the "King of Sitcoms" for his work on "Two and a Half Men," "The Big Bang Theory," "Young Sheldon," "Cybill," "Roseanne" and other comedies.

Lorre was also the brains behind "Grace Under Fire" for five seasons (1993-98). That situation comedy starred Brett Butler in the role of Grace. Butler lived in Macon in the late 1970s, when she served as circulation district manager for The Macon Telegraph, the first woman ever hired for that position.

The new bridge on Bass Road between Forsyth Road and Rivo-li should be completed by the end of the month. Motorists have been



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

A sign on the side of Bass Road lets drivers know that the Macon road is closed for construction. The new bridge is set to be completed by the end of the month, which will be a relief to many drivers who have had to detour since January.

having to detour and take alternate routes since January.

That piece of good commuter news has been offset by another impending headache. The southbound Spring Street exit from Interstate 16 will be closed for construction until the end of the year.

I guess Macon's road theme for the year should be "You Can't Get There From Here."

Saturday is National Book Lovers Day, and the Friends of the Library bookstore at 5494 Forsyth Road is celebrating with a buy one, get one free sale from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. This includes all books, games and puzzles. Go support your local libraries.

Many of us are going to miss Phil McLeroy, better known as "Coach Mac." The beloved former FPD coach died on July 16. He was 86.

He was the school's first head football coach and longtime boys basketball coach of the Vikings. He also coached track and golf.

Among his legacies was one of Macon's all-time great girls golfers, Kelley Richardson Hester, who went on to play and coach at Georgia and is now the head women's golf coach at Clemson. She said Coach Mac would always tell her to "keep my grits in a bowl" and that he loved her like a daughter, taught her how to drive, fish and treat people.

Coach Mac offered driver's education classes during the summer and taught hundreds of Macon teenagers how to drive, including two of

my sons, Ed and Grant.

I first met Coach Mac in 1979 and wrote a story about his love of cars. On Saturday nights, he would race on dirt racks from Gray to Dublin to Byron.

He shared with me about the time he told his wife, Helon, he would rather go racing than to attend a party with her. Needless to say, he was not happy. She had bought a new dress for the occasion and ended up going to the party by herself.

"She got pretty mad," he told me. "I didn't get any sugar for a week."

Borrowed from a friend: You know you're getting old when you start running into all your friends in line at the pharmacy.

Artificial intelligence can help the back-to-school balancing

Back-to-school season is here. For parents, that usually means going back to early wake-ups, packed lunches, tracking missing permission slips and wondering if you actually signed up for snacks for tomorrow's game or just dreamed it. The chaos is real.

But this year, artificial intelligence may be the surprise assistant that parents didn't know they needed. Whether you're juggling multiple kids, school schedules, after-school activities or just trying to keep the household running smoothly, there are now AI-powered tools that can lend a hand or at least take a few things off your plate.

Organizing the family circus

If you've ever double-booked a dentist appointment and soccer practice, you're not alone. That's where AI-powered digital assistants come in. Tools like Google Assistant, Siri and Alexa can help manage schedules, set reminders and even send alerts when it's time to leave the house. With a little customization, these tools can sync with shared family calendars and alert each member when it's time for homework, dinner or that dreaded science fair project.

AI tools like Morgen or Reclaim.ai go one step further, using machine learning to automatically schedule tasks and protect time on your calendar. Need to block out time to help your child study or take them to a tutor? These apps find the best window and adjust as new tasks pop up.

Homework help (without doing it for them)

Homework can be stressful for kids and parents. Whether it's the "new math" or a last-minute essay, many of us have sat at the kitchen table wondering when fourth-grade science became rocket science.

Fortunately, there are AI-powered tools that can offer just-in-time help without doing the work for your child. Apps like ChatGPT and Poe let students type in questions and get explanations in plain English. Whether it's breaking down a confusing word problem or summarizing a chapter of "To Kill a Mockingbird," these study buddies are available 24/7 with no classroom login required.

For math, Photomath is a game-changer. Students snap a photo of the problem and get step-by-step instructions on how to solve it. It's especially useful for visual learners who want to understand the process, not just the answer.

And if your child is working on a writing assignment, Grammarly helps catch grammar issues, improve sentence structure and make writing more clear and confident. It's like having an English tutor in your pocket.

These tools won't replace good study habits or classroom instruction, but they can provide that extra boost when your child needs a little guidance and when you're still trying to remember what a dangling participle even is.

Communication without the overwhelm

Let's be honest: between school apps, texts from teachers, emails from coaches and



Joe Finkelstein

last-minute announcements on Facebook groups, keeping up with communication can feel like a full-time job.

Instead of letting your inbox pile up with unread reminders and newsletter blasts, tools like Clean Email can help parents take control. It automatically sorts school-related messages into folders, highlights what is important and filters out the fluff so you are not digging through spam when trying to find that field trip permission form.

If you are using Gmail, pairing it with Google Calendar and the Gemini assistant, Google's AI helper, can make things even easier. You can ask things like, "What emails did I get from the school today?" or "What's on the calendar for Friday?" without touching a keyboard.

For the analog-at-heart, Cozi remains a favorite. It is not AI-driven, but it brings everything, calendars, to-do lists, meal planning and reminders into one place the whole family can access.

Mealtime, managed

Between work, homework and practice, dinner can easily become an afterthought. But AI can even help here.

Apps like ChefGPT or Mealime can generate meal plans based on your schedule, dietary needs and what's already in your fridge. Type in "I've got eggs, shredded cheese and tortillas," and you'll get a recipe for easy breakfast burritos before you can say "drive-thru." Some tools will even build a grocery list for you or link to delivery services.

Calming the chaos

Back-to-school season can be just as emotionally overwhelming as it is logistical. Kids are adjusting to new teachers, new routines and sometimes new schools. Parents are adjusting to early mornings, homework meltdowns and the background hum of "Did I forget something?"

AI can support emotional wellness, too. Apps like Headspace and Calm use AI to tailor guided meditations and breathing exercises, which can help both kids and adults manage stress. Tools like Reflectly and Day One allow families to keep journals, typed or dictated, that reflect on the day and track moods or goals. These aren't just good habits, they're simple ways to stay centered during hectic weeks.

A word of caution

AI can do a lot, but it's not magic. It's not a substitute for parenting, and it's not always right. You still need to double-check its answers, protect your family's privacy and use your best judgment when introducing kids to these tools.

The start of the school year can feel like a lot. AI won't make it effortless, but it might make it a little easier.

Joe Finkelstein (AI Joe) has been a technology educator in Bibb County for more than 20 years. For questions and comments visit askaijoe.com



Provided by J. Obermeyer

A cicada killer lands on a leaf branch. These insects look like giant wasps, but are not harmful to the ecosystem. Cicada killers have black and yellow markings and reddish-brown wings.

Big buzz, no bite: What to know about cicada killers

During the late summer months, you may notice large, wasp-like insects buzzing low over lawns, gardens or bare patches of sandy soil. With such an imposing size and intimidating appearance, cicada killers can certainly grab your attention — but don't be quick to panic. These wasps are surprisingly non-aggressive and beneficial to the ecosystem.



Karol Kelly

What are cicada killers?

Cicada killers (Sphecius speciosus) are solitary wasps native to North America. With males varying in size between 1 to 1.5 inches and females between 1.5 to 2 inches, they are one of the largest wasps in the United States. Cicada killers have black and yellow markings similar to yellow jackets, but their size, reddish-brown wings and relatively docile behavior set them apart.

Upon mating during the summer months (late June through early July,) the females begin digging burrows to make their nests. Nesting commonly occurs in areas of full sun where vegetation is sparse — like lawns, embankments, golf courses and sand traps. These burrows can reach 6-10 inches deep with noticeable "U-Shaped" mounds and loose soil at the entrance.

As their name suggests, this wasp species hunts cicadas. Cicadas are captured mid-flight and paralyzed by the venom of the wasp's sting — no small feat given the cicada's size. The immobilized cicada is hauled to the bottom of the burrow, where it will serve as provisions for the wasp larva before it pupates and emerges the following summer.

Are cicada killers dangerous?

No, they are not considered dangerous

to humans or pets. Contrary to yellow jackets, hornets and other social wasps, cicada killers do not build colonies or defend their nests. Males may appear territorial as they patrol an area, but they have no stinger and cannot hurt you. They do not damage turf or plants and typically leave the area once their nesting season ends in late summer.

What are the benefits of cicada killers?

Cicada killers help manage cicada populations. While individual cicadas do not pose harm, large emergences can damage young trees and ornamental plants. These wasps provide a natural, chemical-free way to keep cicada populations in check. Adult cicada killers feed on flower nectar, making them incidental pollinators — where an animal moves pollen from one plant to another, but is it not their primary objective. This is both an added bonus for gardeners and native landscapes.

How can we coexist with cicada killers?

If you happen to stumble upon one in your backyard, it is best to leave them alone. They may look intimidating, but they're important players in your local ecosystem. They do not spread disease, overpopulate or disrupt other species, and they usually disappear after a few of the summer. Consider taking a step back and appreciating one of nature's most misunderstood insect species — the gentle giants of your garden.

If you have any gardening or landscape questions, contact us at 478-310-5350 or email us at bibb.extension@uga.edu.

National climate coalition stops in Macon, highlights impacts of extreme weather, need for equitable solutions

Casey Choung
Melody Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

The hot air steamed a group of local officials and community members shaded under tents outside the Tubman Museum in downtown Macon. Many were sweating, fanning themselves and drinking water.

The weather was fitting as officials sought to raise awareness for the risks of extreme heat and the need for equitable environmental solutions at the press conference July 31, which was organized by the Climate Action Campaign.

Middle Georgia and most of the state faced heat advisories recently, with the heat index exceeding 100 degrees on some days, according to the National Weather Service.

East Macon resident and radio talk show host Tia Lockhart said her normal walk at Jefferson Long Park became much more arduous. Being six months into her pregnancy means she has to take her walks at night or drive up to Amerson River Park where there is more shade.

But not everyone is able to adapt their routines — or even have access to clean water — to stay safe in the heat, she said.

“This is a life and death situation that speaks more than just discomfort,” she said to a dozen people outside the museum.

Asha Ellen, executive director of the Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful Commission, spoke to the handful of attendees about the nonprofit’s efforts in planting trees to build tree canopies



Jason Vorhees / The Melody
Executive Director of the Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful Commission Asha Ellen addresses the crowd at a news conference outside of the Tubman Museum. Ellen discussed how the nonprofit plants trees to combat heat.

and provide shade and respite to combat the “urban heat island effect,” the phenomenon where urban areas are becoming hotter than their surrounding rural counterparts.

Lockhart said it’s especially important for

green space and tree canopies to be made available to historically disinvested and marginalized communities, particularly Black communities.

In 2024, Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful spent

\$100,000 planting trees and increasing canopy coverage in marginalized communities like Greenwood Bottom and Fort Hill, Ellen said.

She said Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful was able to plant 450 trees under the Trees Across Georgia grant, sourced from federal funds and the Georgia Forestry Commission. However, the funds are jeopardized under the threat of the Trump administration’s decisions to roll back funding from the Inflation Reduction Act.

“Because those funds are at risk, it will disrupt a lot of the plans and initiatives, not just here in Macon-Bibb, but throughout our country as it pertains to investing in tree canopies particularly in marginalized communities,” Ellen said.

The national coalition is currently on a nationwide “extreme weather emergency tour” to learn how climate is affecting local communities.

Satchel Tsai, the coalition’s program manager, said Macon was added to the tour because of the high number of extreme heat days it experiences along with the disparity in tree cover and exposure to heat in historically Black neighborhoods and low-income communities.

Tsai said the coalition is advocating for the full funding of all federal agencies working on environmental and climate protection as well as extreme weather emergency response and preparedness.

“People think about climate as this big abstract thing,” Tsai said. “It’s kind of hard to see it but when you’re somewhere locally seeing the impacts, that’s really powerful.”

Federal loan to help finance Ga. 400 toll lanes project

Dave Williams
Capitol Beat

ATLANTA – A plan to add toll lanes along Ga. 400 in Fulton and Forsyth counties is getting a big boost from the federal government.

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) Tuesday announced a loan of up to \$3.89 billion to help build the project. The money is being awarded through the federal Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) Congress passed in 1998, the larg-

est loan to a single borrower in the program’s history.

The State Transportation Board approved the project last August as a public-private partnership between the Georgia Department of Transportation, the State Road and Tollway Authority, and a consortium of several road-building and engineering companies. SR400 Peach Partners submitted the winning bid at \$4.6 billion.

The project will add two new toll lanes in both directions along a 16-mile stretch of Ga. 400 from the North Springs MARTA station in

Fulton County to one mile north of McFarland Parkway in Forsyth County. When opened to traffic in 2031, the new lanes are expected to reduce delays by more than 19,000 hours each day, or about 15 minutes per traveler, while reducing crashes by an estimated 8%.

“We are excited to celebrate Georgia being home to the largest public-private partnership in USDOT history,” Gov. Brian Kemp said Tuesday. “Georgia’s logistics and transportation network is a major selling point to job creators, and this approved financing will make it

easier for hardworking Georgians to commute.”

As with other toll-lane projects the state DOT has built, the new lanes will be optional for drivers willing to pay a toll to speed up their trip. Tolls will vary according to the level of traffic.

Under the public-private partnership model, Peach Partners will recover its investment in financing and building the project from toll revenue.

“Securing TIFIA federal credit assistance is an essential milestone for the SR400 Express Lanes proj-

ect,” said Javier Gutierrez, CEO of SR400 Peach Partners. “Thanks to this loan, this critical project will become a reality, improving safety and mobility in the greater Atlanta metro area for generations to come.”

The project also features a transit component. Peach Partners will contribute \$75 million toward improvements needed to serve about 12 miles of the Ga. 400 corridor with a bus rapid transit system to be run by MARTA.

AG Carr backs lawsuit challenging Savannah's ordinance targeting guns left in unlocked vehicles



Maya Homan
Georgia Recorder

Ross Williams
/ Georgia
Recorder

Georgia Attorney General Chris Carr speaks at the Georgia Chamber of Commerce’s Eggs and Issues event in Atlanta early in the 2025 legislative session. Carr recently filed a brief supporting a lawsuit against an ordinance passed by the Savannah mayor and city council

vehicles.

But the ordinance drew the ire of Republican state legislators during the 2025 legislative session, who tried unsuccessfully to pass a bill allowing recipients of Savannah’s gun storage fine to sue the city for up to \$50,000 in damages — though that was later lowered to \$25,000 when the proposal was added to another bill. That measure remains alive for next year.

Carr, who is a candidate for governor next year, also sent a letter to Savannah officials warning that the city had overstepped its authority in passing the ordinance.

“Because the General Assembly has expressly designated the regulation of firearms as an issue of general, state-wide concern, no local ordinance can regulate firearms,” Carr wrote in the letter.

Less than a month after the ordinance was passed, Jesup resident Clarence Belt filed a lawsuit challenging the city’s ordinance. However, Chatham County Superior Court Judge Benjamin Karpf ultimately dismissed the case for lack of standing, as Belt was not a resident of Savannah and had not been cited under the law. Belt’s lawyer, John Monroe, is now representing Deacon Morris and the Firearms Policy Coalition in a new lawsuit against the city, in which Carr has filed an amicus curiae.

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



Photo from Mike Thurmond for Governor
Democrat and former CEO of DeKalb County, Michael Thurmond announced his campaign for Georgia governor, jumping into an already heated 2026 election.

Former DeKalb CEO, Georgia labor commissioner to run for governor

Ross Williams
Georgia Recorder

Democrat Michael Thurmond has joined the race to become Georgia’s next governor in what is shaping up to be a heated 2026 election.

“I’m running for Governor to fight for working families, protect and expand access to healthcare, and build an education system that creates multiple pathways to success,” Thurmond said in a statement on social media Wednesday morning.

Thurmond, 72, served as CEO of DeKalb County from 2017 until January.

Thurmond was the son of a Clarke County sharecropper, and in 1986, he became the first African-American elected to the Georgia General Assembly from his home county since Reconstruction. He served three terms as Georgia labor

commissioner and was interim superintendent of the DeKalb County School District, where he was credited with helping reverse a threat to the district’s accreditation.

Thurmond pledged to travel the state and campaign on his record.

“This campaign won’t be about promises, but performance,” he said in a statement. “I have led the transformation of broken private and public organizations, passed tax relief for Georgia seniors and working families, and helped more than 300,000 unemployed Georgians find good jobs. Georgia deserves a leader with the courage to tune out the political nonsense, bring people together and get results.”

Thurmond is not the only one with eyes on moving into the governor’s mansion next year once Gov. Brian Kemp’s

second and final term is up.

Atlanta state Sen. Jason Esteves, former Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms and state Rep. Derrick Jackson are among those also competing for the Democratic nomination, with Lt. Gov. Burt Jones and Attorney General Chris Carr the early frontrunners for the GOP nomination.

The party primaries are scheduled for May 19, 2026, after which the winners from each party will face off in the Nov. 3 midterm, which will also include the race for U.S. senator, other top offices like lieutenant governor and attorney general as well as every seat in the state Legislature.

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

From Our Kitchens: To cook for someone, is to love on them, local baker shares Pork N' Beans cake recipe

Reia Collins
Special to The Melody

I grew up thinking to cook for someone was to love on them. My fondest memories are of family or church gatherings where we cooked for one another and shared meals. Peanut boilings, fish fries, family reunions with barbecue, Brunswick stew and chicken-n-dumpings. Fourth of July with sandwiches, apple turnovers, watermelons and lemonade. Add the other holidays to the mix and all the desserts you can possibly think of and that's how we loved each other.

Until I was old enough to actually help in the kitchen, I remember sitting at the table watching both of my grandmothers, my mama and my aunts cook. I was so happy when I was big enough to stand in a chair to wash dishes in a dish pan in the sink! That was my first task in the kitchen. Who knew I would soon love to hate doing dishes? That wasn't the fun part after I could help cook.

In school my favorite class was home economics. It was then I learned to cook by recipes. Those were the easiest good grades I received. The spaghetti meal we prepared in there came out much better than the one I tried to surprise my mama with. Everyday she put the ingredients aside for her to come home from work and cook supper. I put EVERYTHING in the pot except the toast and salad. We always ate it together, so I never thought about how it came together! Needless to say we didn't have spaghetti for supper that night. Yikes!

Thankfully, I've come a long way since then. I still don't always follow a recipe. I like to be different. I also like to make things from days gone by like the multi-layer cakes. I was intrigued watching my granny make these on a cast iron skillet. She flipped them in the air, not with a spatula. We offer these in our bakery daily. When you receive a piece of cake from us, just know it's a hug from me to you.

Here is another neat recipe my granny shared with me. It taste just like a carrot cake!



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Macon Magazine's Moira Glennon and Susannah Cox Maddux present Layers bakery owners with this year's Great Macon Baking week award. Reia and Steven Collins, along with their daughter Sydnie Alvarez and granddaughter Atalia Alvarez accepted first place for the third year in a row.

Pork N' Beans Cake

Ingredients

- 2 cups flour
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 2 tsp baking soda
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 2 tsp cinnamon
- 4 eggs
- 1 cup vegetable oil

- 16 oz canned pork n' beans
- 16 oz canned crushed pineapple

Frosting

- 4oz softened cream cheese
- 1/4 cup or 1/2 stick margarine

- 1 tsp vanilla
- 1/2 box (10x sugar)

Directions

Drain pineapple. Drain and mash beans
In a large bowl mix all the ingredients

Add the oil, mashed beans and pineapple.
Stir well. Bake in greased tube or Bundt pan
for 55 to 60 minutes in a preheated oven at
350 degrees. Cool and frost.
Mix frosting ingredients well and frost cake
when it cools.

The Macon Melody

Bibb County's Community News Source

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To submit a letter to the editor or guest column, email caleb@maconmelody.com, mail it to our office or drop it by our front desk. The Macon Melody is located in the Reg Murphy Center for Collaborative Journalism in Mercer Village (1675 Montpelier Ave.). Our office is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The Macon Melody is a community newspaper that connects Maconites to all the stories of Bibb County. Our staff lives, works, and plays here. We know Middle Georgia, and our reporting illuminates and celebrates what makes this area special.

The Melody is part of the Georgia Trust for Local News a subsidiary of the National Trust for Local News, the nation's largest nonprofit newspaper company. We build stronger communities by protecting and growing community news across Georgia. Our 19 newspapers serve one in 10 Georgians.

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The Macon Melody

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Provided by Chris Smith
Koryn Young of Storytellers Macon speaks at one of the group's free story gatherings on the second Tuesday of every month at Grant's Lounge. Storytellers brings a featured storyteller and welcomes "open mic" tellers to sign up to share five-minute stories.

Storytellers Macon: A chance to share, listen, build community

Koryn Young knows a good story when she hears one, and she hears a lot.

Young is the executive director of Storytellers Macon, the group that invites our friends and neighbors to tell their stories to groups large and small, somewhat in the style of programs like “The Moth Radio Hour,” “Snap Judgement” and StoryCorps.

Entrenched in the community since coming here, Young has had leadership roles with the Magnolia Soap Box Derby, Bragg Jam Concert Crawl and other Macon groups while co-owning LePetit Marriage, an elopement, officiating and micro wedding service for all.

Young and I had a conversation about storytelling, art and community as she was busy getting ready for yet another board meeting with yet another group she’s involved with. Many thoughts were exchanged and questions shot her way about storytelling in general and Storytellers Macon in particular. Here’s a bit of it.

Q: Storytellers Macon offers detailed storytelling workshops, but what are three tips that could help anyone tell their personal story better?

Young: First, I’d say be real. The best stories come from the heart, not from trying to impress. Second, make a connection. A great story isn’t just about what happened – it’s about what it means to you and who you’re sharing it with. And last, leave a little spark.

Q: What do you mean by that?

Young: When your story elicits a laugh or a tear or a “me too” moment, lean into it. Give it room to breathe. Let it sink in rather than rushing to finish your story because you feel all eyes are on you, so you have to hurry. Let it have its moment. People learn things from stories, and that’s important, but stories really stay with people when they feel something. That’s true whether you’re talking with friends on the porch or are up on a stage.

Q: How do you feel when you hear someone’s story?

Young: At Storytellers gatherings, I’m in a constant state of organizing and making sure the experience is well-structured and people are comfortable. I’m keeping track of tellers and timers and other things. But a good story will knock me right out of that busy mode and kick me into listening intently. That’s what a good story feels like. Whatever that is, it can take me from all I have to do into just being a good listener, appreciating what I’m hearing and the person I’m hearing it from. It’s their life experience they are sharing and it’s important.

Q: You made listening a big part of the equation in what you just said.

Young: It is. Listening is as important as telling. That’s something storytellers need to understand, too. From the beginning of things, people have wanted to hear stories. In our case, people have left



Michael W. Pannell

their homes, driven to Grant’s Lounge where we have our monthly events, paid for parking and gotten themselves in front of you to hear you. They didn’t do all that because they didn’t want to hear you. They want to. Though we have time limits, it all goes back to the idea of letting moments in your story breathe and not be rushed. We’re there to hear you. And not every story is the same, nor should they be. Each person is different. Everybody has a story of some sort to tell and how it’s told isn’t about living up to imaginary expectations or following strict rules about storytelling.

Storytellers Macon has four main programs. There’s the monthly “Storytellers Presents” at Grant’s Lounge on the second Tuesday of every month. Socializing begins at 6:30 p.m. – except for next Tuesday, Aug. 12, when it begins at 6 p.m. Stories start promptly at 7 p.m. There’s a theme and a featured storyteller each month and anyone can sign up to tell their own, theme-related five-minute story. Storytelling events are free.

The theme this month is “Good Doers.” In September it’s “Playing Both Sides,” October is “Whip It,” November is “Defying Gravity,” and December is “Save it for Therapy.”

The group’s “Storytellers Live” events are more elevated programs featuring curated, mentored tellers. Programs are rehearsed, might feature musicians and are performed on a bigger stage, such as at the Piedmont Grand Opera House.

Storytellers workshops are held from time to time, are free and are for those who may or may not want to take part in a storytelling event.

There are also Storytellers partnerships where, for a fee, the group brings its storytelling know-how to other groups or institutions to help them prepare for and present their own, specific storytelling events. This could be at a school, university, business, civic or other organization or for just about anyone.

All in all, the idea is to give people the chance to tell their stories and for others to hear them for the good of all.

Q: How have you seen stories affect tellers and the listeners?

Young: For the teller, it’s like cleaning out a junk drawer – you finally make sense of the mess, find a few surprises and feel lighter when it’s done. Telling your personal story, whether done in a funnier or more serious way, helps you process your experience, feel heard and sometimes even laugh at something that once felt heavy.

For the listener, it’s like getting a free peek into someone else’s world. Stories can shift your perspective, stir your empathy or just give you a really good reason to put your phone down and actually pay attention. On a practical level, stories build trust, teach lessons and help people connect in ways small talk can’t.

In short: stories are how we make sense of life – how we sneak a little soul

into everyday conversation.

Q: Are you saying stories make the world go ‘round?

Young: It is one of the most basic things we do and have always done. Whether it’s from a stage or over coffee, in plays or movies, paintings or around a prehistoric fire, we tell our stories and we understand one another and the world better. Even a genuine greeting like “How are you?” is an invitation for a story. Stories are the oldest art form in the world.

In terms of how telling and hearing stories can bring about change in communities, they bring people together. I’ve heard of a case where someone came to an event not liking one of our storytellers at all. But when they began hearing their story, hearing a piece of their life experience, their dislike began to break down, a wall began to crumble. By the end of it, the person had changed their entire perspective of the other person simply by hearing that person’s truth. If you hear people’s stories, humanity comes in and even enemies can get a new perspective.

Q: All that, plus we just enjoy hearing stories, right? I mean, whether sad or funny, it’s rewarding and there’s a measure of fun in it.

Young: Absolutely. And something we say is, a story doesn’t have to be factual, it only has to be true. Nobody’s fact-checking your story or grading its construction. It’s you honestly communicating your story from your perspective. The teller is bringing human truth to the table and somehow that connects us all.

On Oct. 9, Storytellers Macon is having its first-ever fundraiser. They’re calling it “Stories Save The World” and Young believes that statement is true. The event will be a night of storytelling, community connection and “collective joy,” as Young said, to support the work of Storytellers Macon. It will feature a “best of” slate of past storytellers and introduce a Storytellers Macon membership group.

Called the Firecircle, Young said the membership group is where “the storytellers, the listeners, the loud-mouths, the truth-holders and the tender-hearted gather.”

“It’s more than a membership,” she said. “It’s a movement, a community of people who believe that stories don’t just entertain but they connect us, heal us and move the world forward.”

For more on Storytellers Macon, keep abreast of future workshops and events and to get in on the coming fundraiser as a participant or sponsor, go to storytellersmacon.org or find them on Facebook or Instagram.

You can also hear many local storytellers on Storytellers Macon’s podcast, “Heartbeat of Georgia,” on most streaming platforms. Each episode features first-person narratives from live shows paired with interviews and reflections that connect the stories to larger themes in the community.

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

Events

Third annual Black Business & Community Expo
Friday-Sunday, Aug. 8-10
3661 Eisenhower Parkway
This year’s expo theme, “Together We Rise: Where Culture Meets Commerce,” speaks directly to the mission of creating pathways for collective growth, opportunity and visibility in Middle Georgia. Hosted by Macon-Middle Georgia Black Pages, the expo has been expanded to a three-day event: Friday night – sponsors and vendors party at The Macon Mall, Saturday – Expo at the Macon Mall from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday afternoon – Family Fun Day at Henderson Stadium. This Expo aims to impact economics, education, small business development, workforce advancement, youth engagement and cultural preservation in the region.

Chappell Roan Yoga & Sing-along
Friday, Aug. 8
6 p.m.
1080 Third St.
Stretch it out, scream-sing your heart out, and sip a cocktail afterward – because why not do all three in one night? Join Mama Hawk Draws at Tanglewood Art Studios for a fun, not-so-serious yoga class led by Sylvia Snyderman, set entirely to the high-camp, high-emotion magic of Chappell Roan. This is for anyone who’s ever cried to a pop song while holding a plank. Your \$30 ticket includes a 1-hour all-levels yoga class, a Chappell Roan-fueled playlist to move and sing along to, 1 post-class drink from The Rose Room (NA options available!), as well as joy, community and a little pop girl catharsis. Bring a yoga mat or, if you need one, email hello@tanglewoodartstudios.com Girls, gays, theys – and even straight men (if they behave) – are welcome.

Art Night: Summer Dreams — Artspace Macon
Friday, Aug. 8
6 p.m.
2378 Ingleside Ave.
Celebrate the end of summer with a breezy DIY art night full of sunshine and creativity! Grab a table with your friends or family, wear your favorite beach shirt and paint the night away. Each guest will get an 8×10 or 8×8 canvas, plus access to Pre-drawn summer-themed designs (think sunsets, palm trees, beach drinks, tiki fun), a DIY collage bar filled with tropical textures and papers. Paints, brushes and supplies provided – just bring yourself and some snacks and drinks. Paint and vibe to some beach hits all night long.

Macon Film Guild Presents: "Familiar Touch"
Sunday, Aug. 10
2 p.m. and 5 p.m.
355 MLK Jr. Blvd.
Ruth (Kathleen Chalfant), a retired cook, prepares breakfast, but small and puzzling errors now punctuate her comfortable routine. When her son (H. Jon Benjamin) arrives to dine with her, she mistakes him for a suitor. Their “date” takes them to an assisted living facility, which Ruth does not recall having previously selected for herself. Among her fellow memory care residents, Ruth feels lost and adrift. As she slowly begins to accept the support of care workers Vanessa (Carolyn Michelle) and Brian (Andy McQueen), she finds new ways to ground herself even as her mind embarks on a journey all its own. Presented by Macon Film Guild at Douglass Theatre. \$5 General Admission.

Storytellers Macon Presents: Good Doers
Tuesday, Aug. 12
6:30 p.m.
576 Poplar St.
This month, Storytellers Macon is celebrating good doers – the people who act with heart, lead with impact and decide to make a difference every day. Whether it was choosing kindness over comfort or courage over fear, dive into the pivotal moments that shaped who we are. The host for the evening will be Susannah Maddux, publisher of Macon Magazine, a bi-monthly publication approaching its 40th year that seeks, shares, and celebrates the good life and great stories in Macon and the surrounding region.

‘Dancing through the Decades’ — Macon Pops
Friday, Aug. 15
7:30 p.m.
University Center, 1400 Coleman Ave.
Macon Pops is back and groovier than ever as it launches its 13th Concert Season with the return of a fan-favorite: “Dancing Through the Decades”! Join Macon Pops at Mercer University’s Hawkins Arena for a high-energy night of nonstop music spanning the 1940s through the 2000s. From swing to disco, Motown to ‘90s jams, Macon Pops will have the whole arena on its feet – and this year’s guest vocalist, powerhouse performer Nicole Kubis, will bring the heat! Mercer students and staff attend free with valid ID. Mercer alumni enjoy 15% off tickets with code MERCERPOPS. Tickets and tables are available starting at \$25. Visit maconpops.com for ticket info, artist updates and more.

Sudoku solution

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



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Andre Taylor, Central High School's athletic director, stands next to the school's new custom strength training equipment. Taylor has worked at Central for more than 25 years, and will oversee the next phases of the weight room expansion project.

Central unveils new weight room thanks to donations

Micah Johnston
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

When Central High School Athletic Director Andre Taylor first heard the idea to get his school a new weight room and training facility about a year ago, he assumed it would take some time.

After all, such renovations require planning, construction and funding that can take years to materialize.

Little did he know, Central's Booster Club and its president, Roger Jackson, had other plans.

"I was thinking this was a long-term thing when Roger brought it up to me some time last summer, but then it came to a chance run in with one of the booster club members with someone from Prince Services and Manufacturing," Taylor said. "They met Eric Williams, the CEO there, and it took off."

Central unveiled its new weight room built by Prince only about a year after planning first began, Taylor said, thanks to donations from Prince after the booster club described its goals for a more efficient training facility at the high school.

"When one of the members of the club mentioned knowing someone at Prince, Roger got right on that. Roger is always telling everyone, anytime you go out, just talk about the booster club. He's always saying, 'You don't know until you ask,'" Taylor said. "So the club worked with Eric and the company and made it happen."

The manufacturing company based in Macon had been wanting to contribute to the community somehow, Taylor said. They collaborated with PLAE Fitness — a company based in Canton, Georgia that they work with building equipment — to flesh out Central's training facility.

"(The training room) was working out okay for us, but it was just old. It was time consuming to have everyone in here training," said Taylor, who has worked at Central in some capacity since arriving in Macon about 27 years ago. "You'd have everyone waiting for a certain machine or whole teams not being able to work out because one team was already here."

The expansion doubled the size of the weight room, renovated the floor and walls completely and added new machines that tailor to sports both male

and female, Taylor said — and it's only Phase One of the project, as more machines are still on their way.

"There's some more things they want to install and they're actually some brand-new things that no other training facility has," Taylor said. "We were told that's actually part of the delay, because they are doing safety testing on it."

The second leg of the expansion does not have a timeline yet.

The equipment that is already in the room, while not "never-before-seen," is sparkling and new nonetheless. The racks, weights and bars glisten under fluorescent lights. The frames of the bench presses are a brilliant orange with blue accents — Central's colors for decades. At the top, "Chargers" is printed in verdant orange against a blue background.

"From that 'Chargers' nameplate to the 'C' logo on the floor, it's customized ... It's amazing the scale they upgraded it to. I've seen other weight rooms and training facilities at other schools and

See CENTRAL, Page B2

NOTEPAD

Gridiron Classic schedule set, VI stays in playoffs

Micah Johnston
Sports Editor

The Bibb County School District announced the schedule for its second annual Gridiron Classic, a slate of four football games to kick off the 2025 season, last week.

The Central Chargers (Class A-Division I) will take on the Dougherty County Trojans (3A) out of Albany in the first game Thursday, Aug. 14 at 4 p.m. The Rutland Hurricanes (2A) take the field next, playing the Bleckley County Royals (A-Division I) in the 8 p.m. game that day.

The Southwest Patriots (A-Division I) begin the second day at 4 p.m. the following Friday with a game against the Macon County Bulldogs (A-Division II), while the only intra-Macon matchup of the classic caps things off when the Westside Seminoles (2A) and Howard Huskies (3A) face off at 8 p.m.

All four games will take place at Thompson Stadium in East Macon after the classic was held at Fort Valley State University's stadium in Peach County last year.

The Northeast Raiders met the Peach County Trojans in that year's edition of the classic, but the matchup will not be on the schedule this year. The two teams instead meet in a standard game at the Trojans' home stadium at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 15.

ACE does not begin its football season until Thursday, Aug. 21 when it faces Central on the road.

Macon's GIAA private schools also begin their seasons next week, as two Macon teams have home games against powerhouse programs to open things up Aug. 15. The FPD Vikings (4A) will host Eagle's Landing Christian Academy (GHSA 4A) at 7:30 p.m., while Stratford (4A) will host St. Anne-Pacelli (4A).

Mount de Sales (4A) opens its season on the road that Friday against Loganville

Christian Academy (4A) at 7:30 p.m. Tattnall does not begin its season until a game against Pacelli the following week Aug. 22.

Windsor Academy (2A) will hit the road Aug. 15 as well to play Pataula Charter (GHSA A-Division II) in Edison, while CFCA (2A) will travel to Chula to take on Tiftarea Academy (3A). Covenant (GIAA 8-Man) will host Georgia Christian.

Mercer pitcher signs deal with Mets

Former Mercer southpaw Colton Cosper signed a free-agent deal with the New York Mets last week.

The Mets inked Cosper to a deal Aug. 1 after the left-hander pitched 17 splendid innings with the MLB Draft summer league Williamsport Crosscutters last month to the tune of a 0.53 ERA. Cosper struck out 20 while walking just a single batter and only allowing one run.

The signing comes after the Carrollton High School alum had a career season in his final year at Mercer in 2025. He finished with a 3.57 ERA across more than 88 innings.

The season included a pair of complete games, one of which came in heroic fashion in the Southern Conference tournament.

Macon RBI softball player earns scholarship

ACE graduate and athlete Francesca Divert was awarded a \$20,000 scholarship from Major League Baseball, Macon RBI announced this week.

Divert, a 2025 graduate, was named a recipient of the Major League Baseball RBI scholarship, which is given to 12 athletes selected from more than 330 RBI programs across the United States and the Caribbean. The scholarship recognizes exceptional student-athletes for their academic

See NOTEPAD, Page B2

Macon high school softball teams begin their seasons

Micah Johnston
Sports Editor

While football season is getting closer, high school softball season is getting started right at the same time. Macon boasts plenty of teams with high potential on the diamond, including a defending champ, a dynastic program with a new coach and many more.

Here's a look at some high school softball teams to watch for in Bibb County.

Tattnall and other GIAA programs

The Trojans have been one of the strongest teams in Macon for several years under head coach Jordan Brooks. Tattnall put it all together last season, winning the GIAA Class 4A State Championship in Columbus over George Walton.

The Trojans lost only one region game all year in a historic 29-5 campaign. They went undefeated in the state tournament in truly dominant fashion.

Some of the heroes from that run have now graduated. Star shortstop Gracie Appling, who came up with a clutch home run in the title game against the Bulldogs last season, is now at Louisiana State. Two other key contributors, Anna Mary Talcott and Molly Kemp, were seniors last season.

Those players were crucial in Brooks' model, in which he depends on older players to double as team leaders in addition to making plays on the field.

The Trojans will have talent returning as well, though.

The Still sisters, Anna and Callie, are both seniors. The junior class might be even more impressive, with returners Carsyn Atwater, Reese

Covington and Aibigayle Baugh all set to factor into Tattnall's attempt at a repeat. Covington hit the grand slam that made the difference in last season's championship matchup.

Young talent could be a factor as well. The Trojans have two eighth-graders and three freshmen on the team.

The Trojans started the season off with a dominant 21-0 win over Bulloch Academy before their second game was rained out Monday.

Another GIAA team in Macon is already off to a ripping-hot start despite the rain, as the FPD Vikings began their season 6-0 at the tail end of July and beginning of August.

The Vikes got started with a 4-2 win over Fullington Academy on July 25 and have not looked back, winning every game to start the year off strong.

In FPD's most recent victory, junior Gracyn Fuller pitched four hitless innings and struck out ten batters against Bethlehem Christian while also notching two hits and five RBIs at the plate in a ringing 11-3 Vikings win.

Fuller is one of a handful of returning players for FPD that will try and piece together a solid follow-up to last year's impressive 20-9 campaign. The Vikings gave eventual state champ Tattnall its only region loss all year, a 14-11 win for FPD, and made the playoffs with a 7-4 record in GIAA's Class 4A/3A District 6.

Several seniors moved on after last season, including star hitter Hannah Davis, but the Vikings also have a lot of room to grow. Aside from senior Ava Spillers, lots of FPD's key contributors like Fuller and Lyric Jones will be ju-

See SOFTBALL, Page B2



Mark Powell / For The Melody

Laney Bridges slides into second in a cloud of dust during an ACE Gryphons softball game last season. Bridges graduated after the 2025 campaign but helped build a strong foundation for ACE.

Softball, from B1:

niors this season, setting the table for some teambuilding across the next two seasons.

The Stratford Eagles will have a unique situation on their hands this year in GIAA play.

The Eagles finished 16-14 last season with a 6-4 region record, but their playoff run was the most notable part of the year. After George Walton defeated Stratford 10-1 in its first game of the 4A tourney, the Eagles roared through the loser's bracket as the No. 7 seed with explosive offense.

Stratford scored 16, 13 and 15 runs in the next three games respectively to defeat Bulloch, FPD and Strong Rock Christian to reach the final game of the bracket, just one win shy of the championship tilt. While George Walton defeated them again to finish off Stratford's season —

this time it was a much-closer 10-7 result that saw the Eagles push the Bulldogs to the brink — the run was an impressive one.

But that momentum may prove hard to sustain, as Stratford had a whopping eight seniors on that roster out of 13 total players, according to its MaxPreps page.

Now the Eagles have three seniors — Hayden Craddock, Reagan Ray and Taylor Ray — returning to lead the way with nine freshmen listed on the current roster.

Mount de Sales finished winless last softball season but will be in the same region with Tattnall, FPD and Stratford.

ACE and other GHSA teams

On the GHSA side, the ACE Gryphons — arguably Macon's best public school program across recent years — had a significant change in the offseason when head coach Josh McLendon left to become the head

softball coach at region foe Dublin.

McLendon led the team to a state championship in 2021 and playoff appearances in every season since he arrived at ACE in 2017, building the Gryphons into a bonafide powerhouse on the softball field.

ACE stayed internal to fill McLendon's spot, naming Andrew Claxton as its new softball coach back in April. Claxton, a Wrightsville native, has been at ACE for two years.

As far as the team's makeup, the Gryphons went 27-8 overall and 17-1 in Region 2 of GHSA Class A-Division I last season, narrowly losing a tiebreaker to East Laurens to win the region. ACE won its playoff matchups against Dublin and Jeff Davis to advance to the Sweet 16 before losses to Toombs County and Haralson County ended the Gryphons' postseason run.

Several key players will return to try and continue ACE's success. Seniors Sophie Denney and Reese

Thames will be key sluggers along with contact hitter Avery Stone, while Ella Allen and Avery Edalgo will be important in the circle.

Crucial players like the Yates twins — Karlee and Karsyn were also key players on the girl's basketball team when it won its first playoff game — as well as Madisyn Hallar and Laney Bridges graduated. Last season's seniors were freshmen when the Gryphons won their state title.

The rest of the Bibb County teams in Region 2 — Central, Northeast and Southwest — did not fare as well against the region's stacked schedule last season, though there could be some growth. The Chargers finished 11-12 with a very young roster. Northeast finished 7-15 while Southwest forfeited several games to finish 1-18.

At the upper classifications, Rutland went 7-20 overall and 4-11 in Region 2-2A, though they did notch

wins over region rivals including Jackson and Westside. The Seminoles struggled both overall and in region play, finishing 2-20 and 0-15 respectively.

The Howard Huskies were the most successful Bibb County School District team, as head coach Danny Slaughter helped the Huskies recover from a 2-9 start to finish 13-16 overall with an impressive 9-4 region record.

Abby Hardy and Abby Davis were two skilled hitters for the Huskies last year but have since graduated. Anna Nash should be a key returning pitcher, batter and senior leader for Howard as the Huskies once again try to tackle a difficult schedule, which features lots of travel to several Augusta teams and multiple games against talented programs like West Laurens.

Notepad, B1:

excellence, leadership and commitment to community service.

Divert played softball with Macon RBI and was a basketball player for the Gryphons. She is the second Macon RBI player to win the award after Sasha Norman in 2016, and the 25th Macon RBI student-athlete to receive a scholarship.

ACE hosted a ceremony Thursday morning with students, friends and family to celebrate Divert's achievement.

Stratford to host Eagle Night

Stratford Academy Athletics will host the latest edition of Eagle Night next week on Thursday, Aug. 14.

The event acts as the kickoff of the season for Stratford's sports teams and organizations and features various sponsors and vendors in addition to games, raffles and more. The event is "retro 90s" themed this year.

Vine-Ingle team continues World Series run

Vine-Ingle's team of 14-year-olds advanced in the Little League Junior League World Series this week in

Taylor, Michigan, defeating the state's own qualifying team 7-4 in their first game.

Vine-Ingle's effort was well-rounded, as five different players recorded hits while seven different players drew at least one walk. Kaiden Harvey had two hits and an RBI out of the leadoff spot, while pitcher Jayden Cannon pitched 5.1 innings in the seven-inning contest while striking out 12 batters.

The Macon squad scored its runs early and fended off a late comeback attempt by the Michigan team, but ultimately held on to win and advance to the next round of the tournament, the bracket of which

is split into an international side and a United States side.

The Vine-Ingle team was set to face the team from the East region — Naamans Little League of Wilmington, Delaware — in Game 16 of the tournament at 8 p.m. Wednesday, after The Melody went to print. A victory in that game would secure an appearance in the U.S. Championship game, the semifinal of the World Series bracket, while a loss would send Vine-Ingle to the loser's bracket.

Tattnall pitcher commits to Mercer

Tattnall's Wyatt Still, one

of the team's strongest pitchers and key contributors, announced his commitment to Mercer this week.

The southpaw finished his junior year for the Trojans with 68 innings pitched for one of Macon's strongest teams, notching a 2.78 Earned Run Average while leading the team with 96 strikeouts on the year. Still held opponents to a .198 average.

The left-hander also excelled at the plate, hitting .419 with a 1.067 OPS and 10 stolen bases.

Mercer's Cox starts Speedway Classic

Mercer University and FPD alumnus Austin Cox got the chance to pitch in MLB's first-ever game at a NASCAR racetrack last week, as the left-hander got the spot start after a rain delay at the inaugural Speedway Classic at Bristol in Tennessee on Saturday night.

Cox toed the rubber after Atlanta Braves starter Spencer Strider was scratched from the contest because of the weather delay. Cox did not fare so well against the Cincinnati Reds, pitching only 1/3 of an inning and allowing a run before rain officially postponed the rest of the game.

Central, from B1:

just said, 'I really want something like this for our kids,'" Taylor said. "It's going to benefit everyone. We're just really grateful."

While it was only the first day of school as Taylor explained the new

digs Monday, he said the football team had already seen some of the facility's updated gear during summer football practices.

"They've had the chance to come in and see it and they really enjoyed it. I know when we get every team in here — because it's really for all dif-

ferent teams, boys and girls teams, everyone — I think it will really help everyone," Taylor said. "It's a huge time-saver that lets them train at the same time."

The donation saved time in another way, too.

"When Roger tells you something

is gonna happen, it's usually gonna happen. So the club was raising money, but the target was way out. We had companies coming in and giving us prices," Taylor said. "But when (Williams) came in, everything changed. He said he liked our vision, and then by the second half

of this past school year they told us the plan to have it ready in August."

Taylor said Central's athletic trainer Brad Miles, who would come up to the building as progress was made over the summer, was a lifesaver during the build as well.

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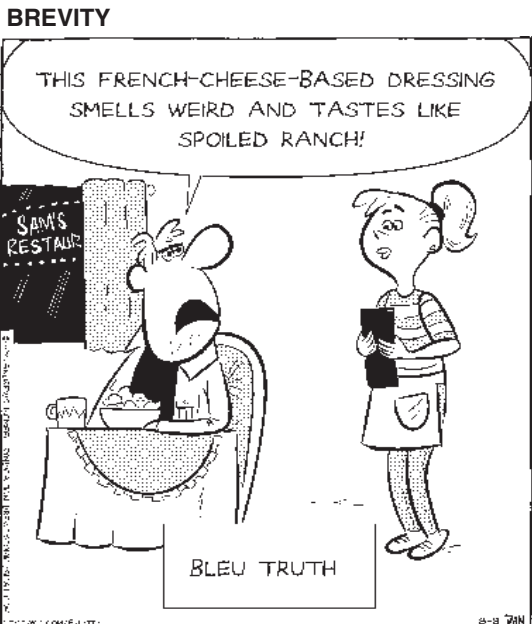
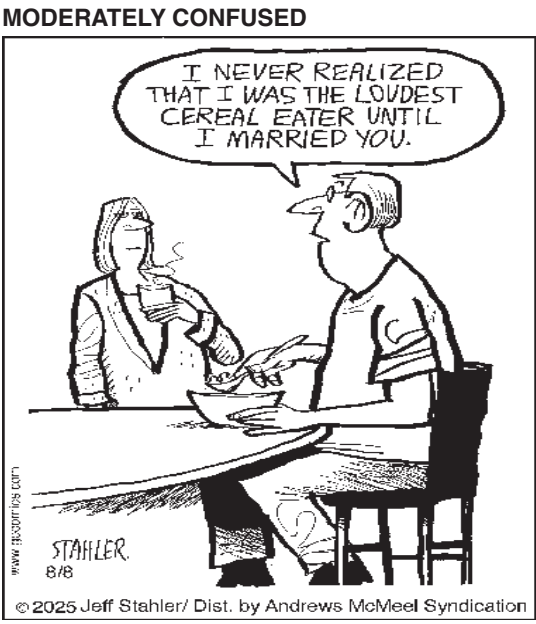
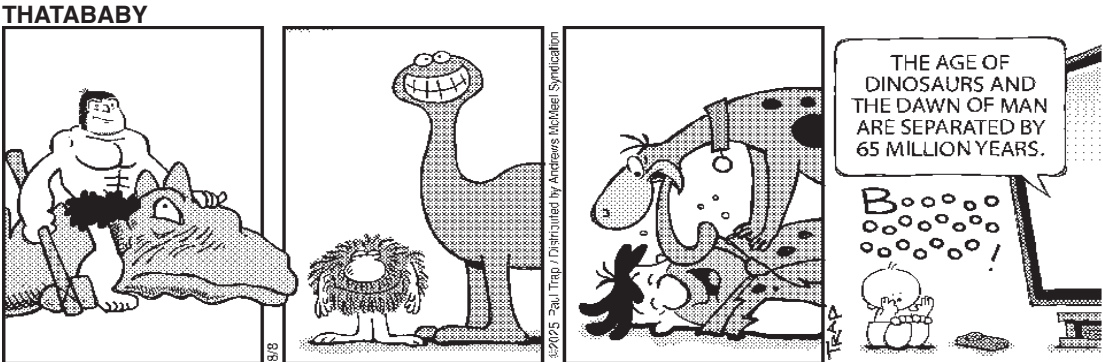
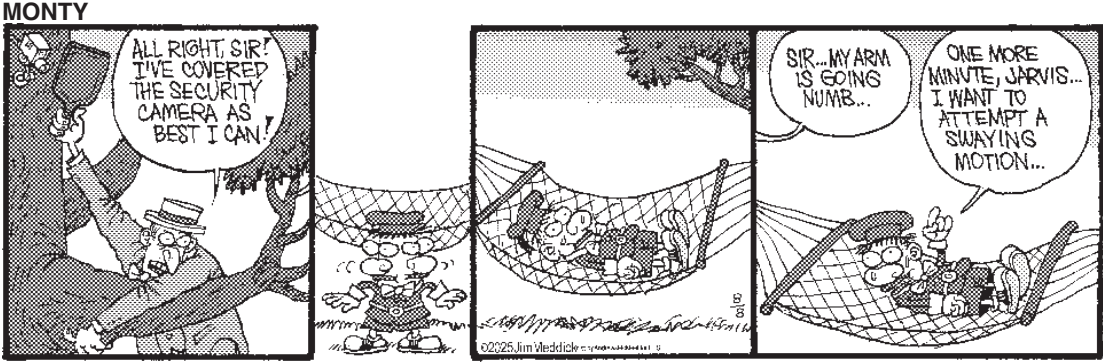
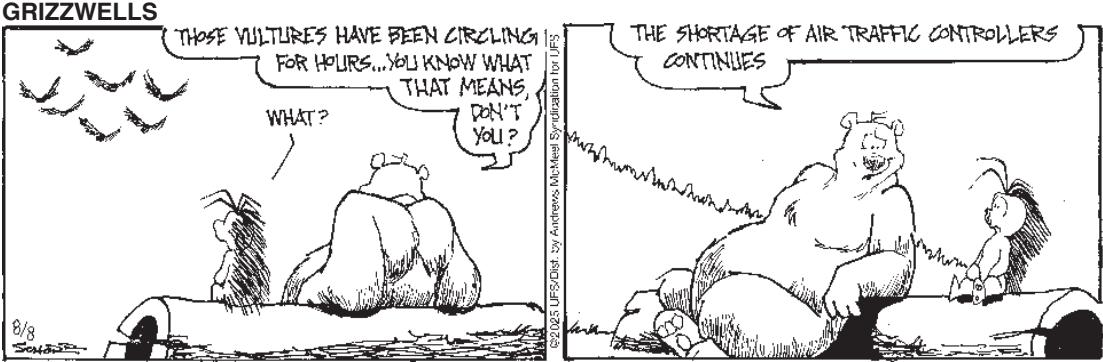
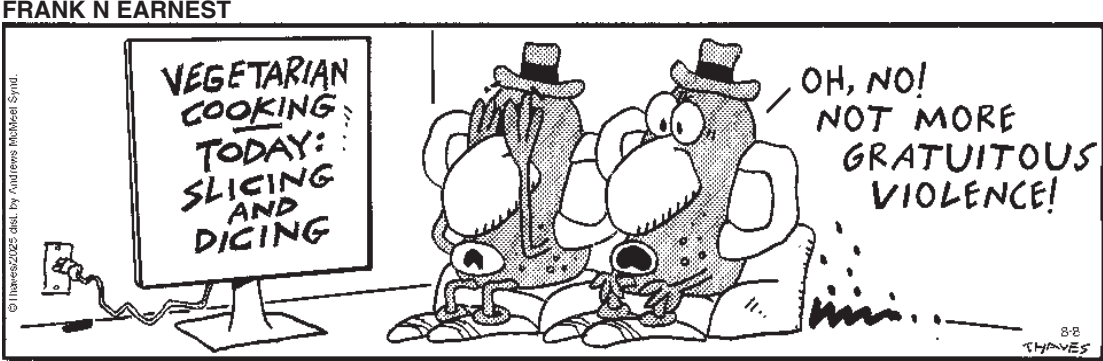
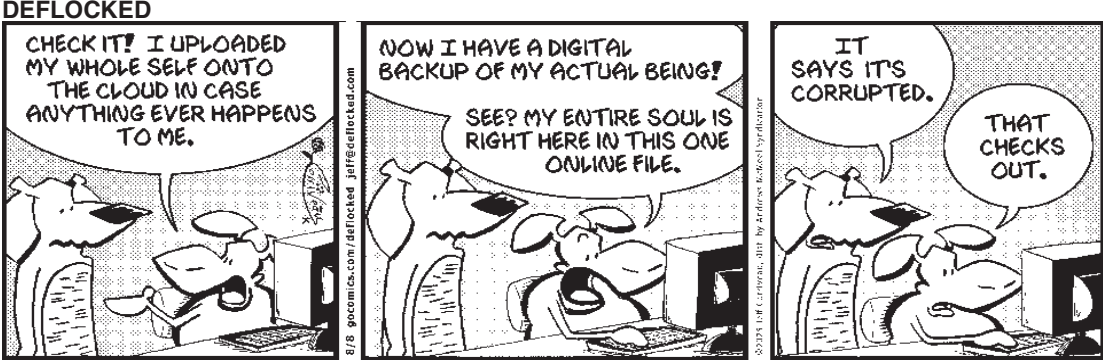
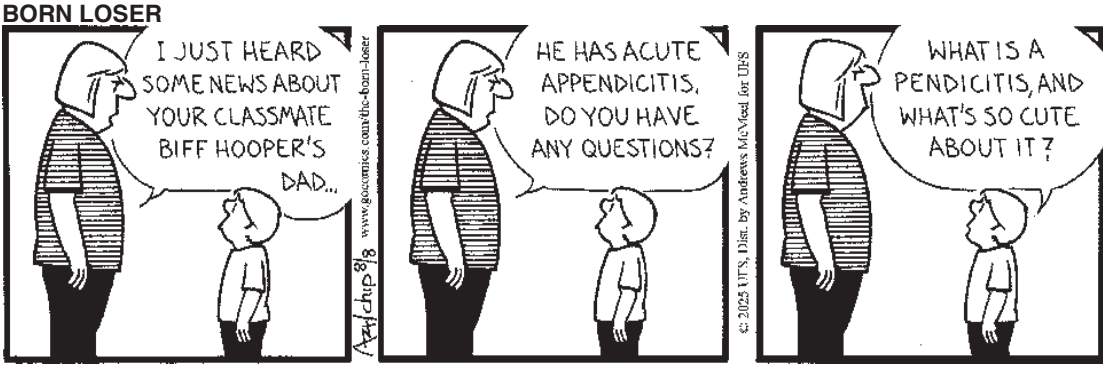
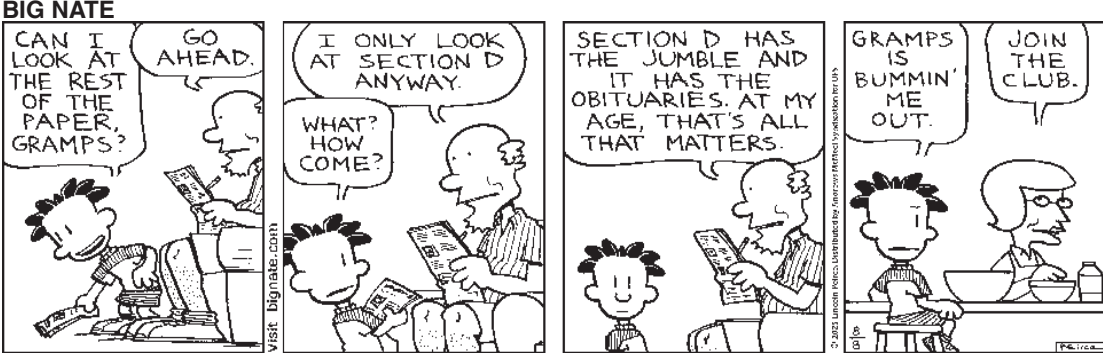
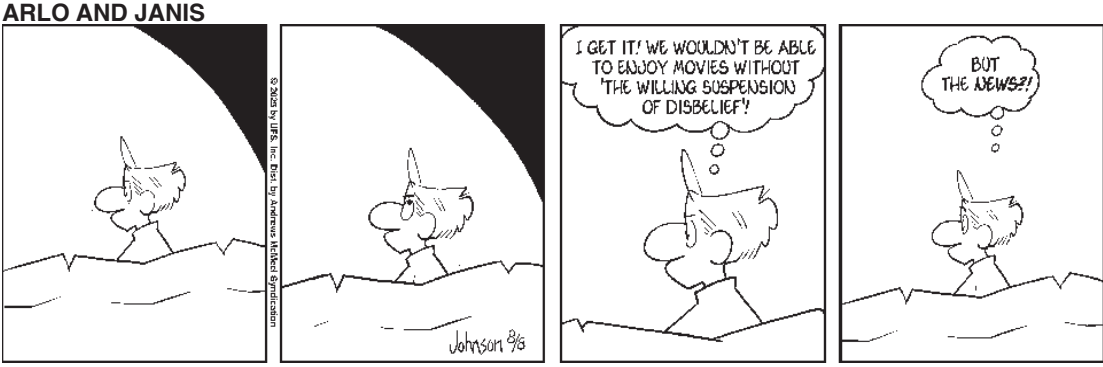
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NEA Crossword Puzzle

ACROSS

1 "Mayday!"

4 Place a wager

7 Lobster feature

11 Wrath

12 "Fiddler on the —"

14 Long walk

15 Show assent

16 One against

17 Seed appendage

18 Genuflected

20 Brexit nation

22 The loneliest number

23 Big boat

24 Drinker's bill

26 Inventor — Whitney

27 Female deer

30 Exchange

32 Cyst

33 Come in first

34 Melody

35 Stopped a fast

37 Youngster

39 "— to the World"

40 Mongrel

41 Farm bird

42 Sly one

43 Blvds.

45 Small crown

49 "The Canterbury —"

51 Cry heard at sea

52 Small change

54 Business abbr.

55 Duration

56 Bouquet

57 CIA cousin

58 Go high

59 Run hither and —

60 Mil. rank

DOWN

1 Settle

2 Town in Maine

3 Not moving much

4 Rotten kid

5 Age

6 Carry

7 School-room necessity

Answer to Previous Puzzle

F	A	T		S	O	F	T		J	A	B	S	
A	P	E		E	W	E	R		O	L	E	A	
V	I	A		P	E	R	U		S	I	N	G	
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E	G	G		L	A	S	T		P	U	T	S	
M	E	S	S	Y		A	D	J	U	N	C	T	
					C	R	E	W		E	N	D	
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I	S	L	E			C	O	R	E		E	R	N
T	O	L	D			T	I	E	R		D	E	O

8 Old Italian money

9 Related

10 Join metal parts

13 Ending

19 Show the way

21 "How the — Stole Christmas"

25 Guiding light

26 Jug

27 Getting smaller

28 Black gold

29 Taylor Swift song "— Game"

30 India's — Mahal

31 — de Janeiro

36 Groom's garb

38 Olympian queen

42 Anteroom

44 Have a feeling

45 Felines

46 The Buckeye State

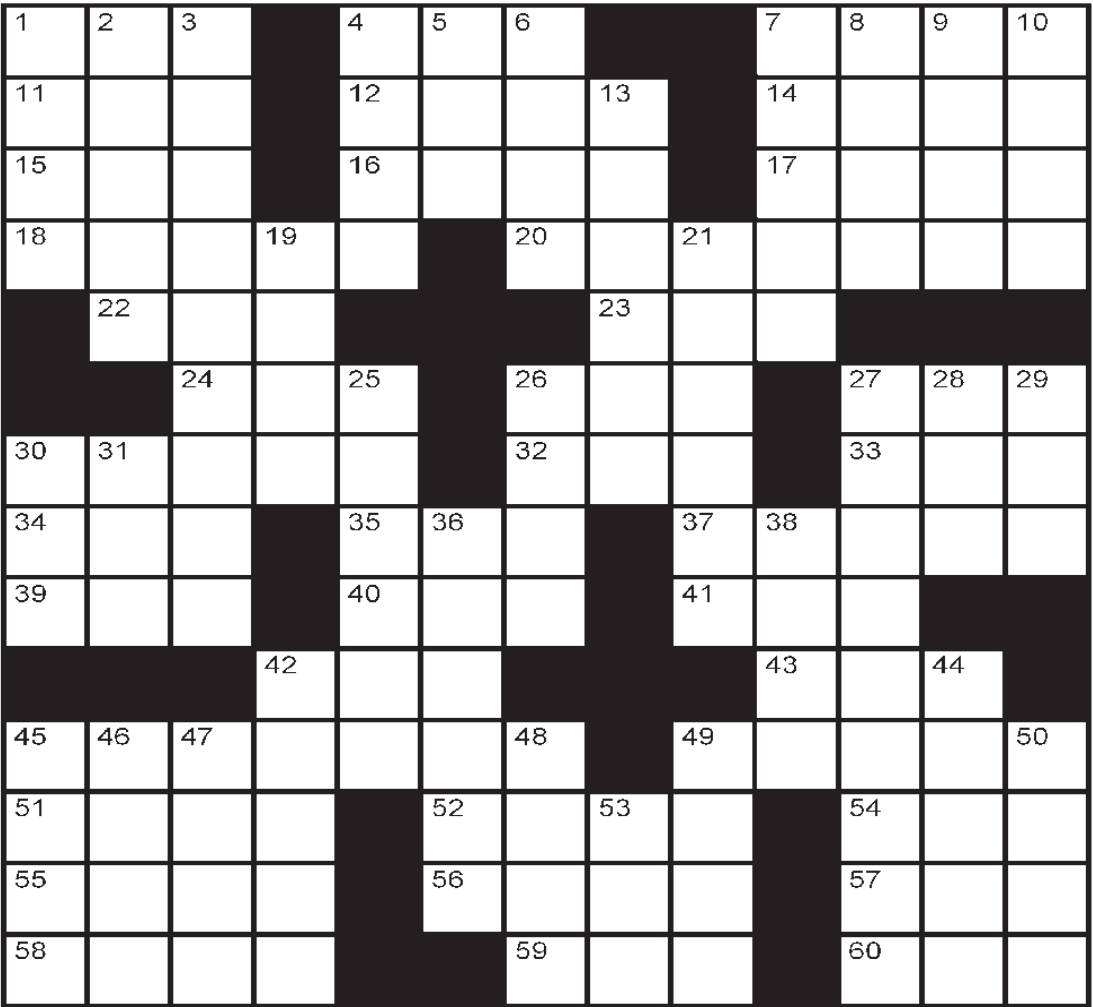
47 Italia's capital

48 In good order

49 Seabird

50 Read in haste

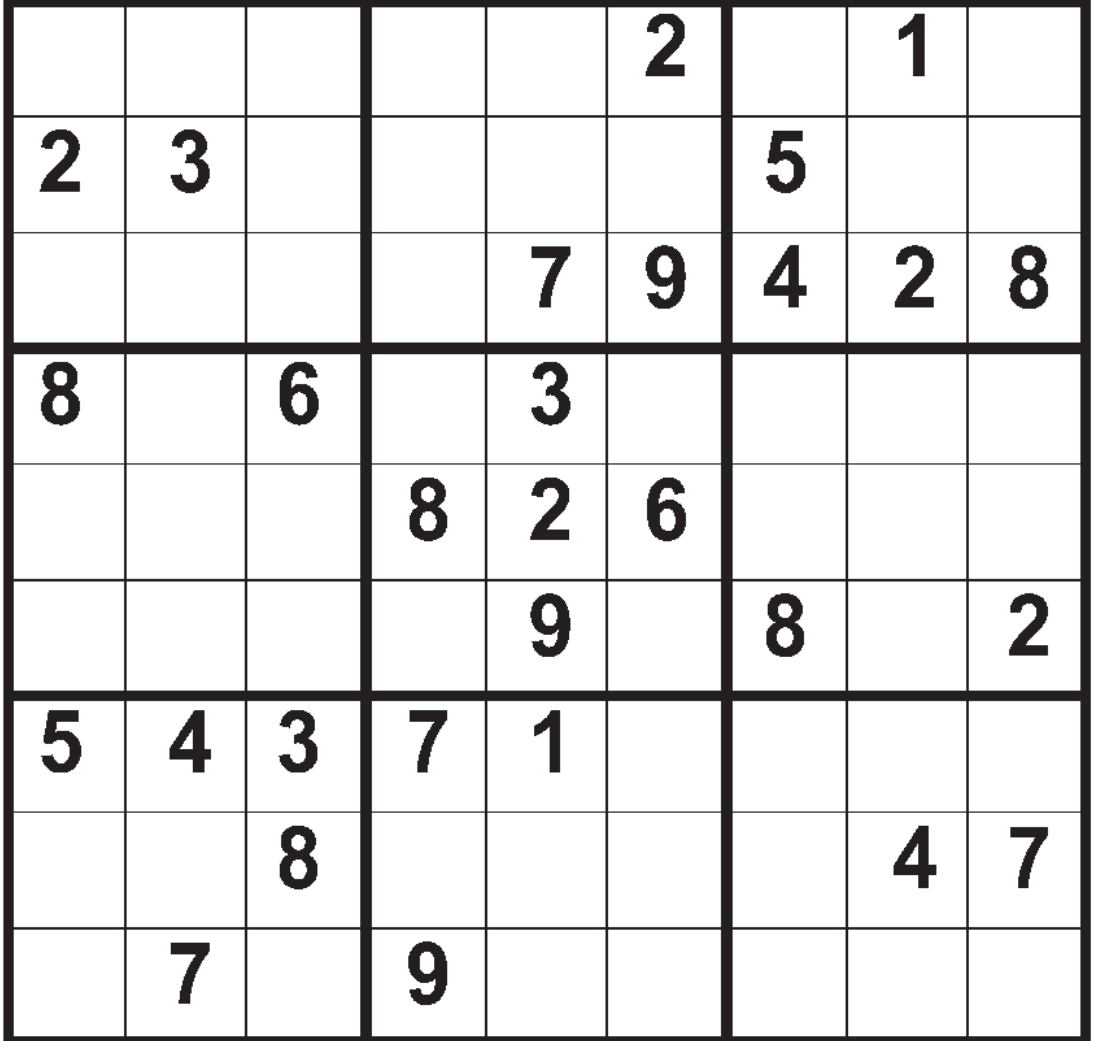
53 Bovine cry



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SUDOKU Solution on A8

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★





Photos by Jason Vorhees / The Melody and Bibb County Schools

1: Volunteers hand out free backpacks at Ed Defore Sports Complex on Aug. 1 during Bibb County Schools' annual Back to School Bash. **2:** A line of automobiles wrapped around the Ed Defore Sports Complex during the annual back-to-school event. The event featured free backpacks, school supplies and hygiene products, among other items. **3:** Volunteers hand out free school supplies between automobiles during the Bibb County Schools Back to School Bash. **4:** Rutland High School basketball players welcome parents and students to the Back to School Bash. **5:** The winners of Macon Baking Week pose for a photo outside of Rabbit Hole, a boutique retail store on Aug. 1. From left, first place winners Sydnie Alvarez, her mother Reia Collins and daughter Atalia Alvarez from Layers, second place winner Scott Mitchell from Sweet Eleanor's and third place winner Lander Reaves from Taste and See. Layers won for the third straight year. **6:** Kathryn Dennis, center, president of the Community Foundation of Central Georgia, poses for a photo with On the Table grant recipients Wednesday morning. 28 mini-grants were announced, totalling \$27,000. **7:** David Biek, dean of the School of Education and Behavioral Science at Middle Georgia State University, presents the results of a community survey held during On the Table in March. **8-10:** Students and parents pose for pictures and make their way into Vineville Academy for the first day of school Aug. 4.

To submit photos to the People page, email them to photos@maconmelody.com

