

The Macon Melody

\$2.00 • Bibb County's Community News Source • MaconMelody.com • Friday, November 21, 2025 • Vol. II, No. 22



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
From left, Joyce Mason, Deborah Russell and Pearl Stephens, residents of The Gardens, stand beside the apartment complex's entrance sign as they discuss their efforts to get answers about spiking water bills.

At west Bibb senior complex, tenants unite over baffling water bills

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
laura@MaconMelody.com

White paint covered the plastic faces of the small water meters inside a wall panel in apartments at The Gardens, an affordable housing development for seniors in west Bibb County.

At least, until recently. It was a detail tenants hadn't paid much attention to until earlier this year, when some of them began receiving water bills they describe as "astronomical."

The bills, from a company with offices across the globe, showed seniors living alone in one-or two-bedroom apartments were using 10,000 gallons of water each month.

That's about what a family of four would use in 30 days, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

A trio of women who live in one of the three buildings talked amongst themselves about the bills, which have put each of them in a financial bind as they are on a fixed income. The bills have increased from about \$35-45 to more than \$75 each month. Some have been as high as \$124.

The three are doggedly pursuing answers.

"Most of us here are single women and single men, but the majority is single women," 65-year-old Deborah Russell said. "We don't have anyone, you know, to have our backs. We got to have our own backs — and each other's."

Russell and her neighbors, 78-year-old Joyce Mason and 62-year-old Pearl Stephens, banded together and decided to make some noise about it. They dubbed themselves "The Thunder Women."

The women addressed the Macon Water Authority board at its Nov. 6 meeting, and what they described had some on the board raising eyebrows.

Apartments built in 2012 or later are required to have submeters, according to the Georgia Water Stewardship Act.

But how those submeters are managed can vary from development to development.

Board Chair Gary Bechtel, a realtor, said apartment complexes typically have one master meter for the whole development, and management will either include water charges in the lease agreement or

bill each tenant based on the master meter bill.

In this case, Bechtel said it appeared the tenants were being billed for "probably more than you use." The company is caught up on its current water bills and in good standing, Bechtel said, so there is little the board can do to help.

Other board members urged the women to hire a lawyer, but that option would require even more money. All of them have to carefully budget expenses each month.

After the meeting, the Thunder Women returned to their apartments and scratched the white paint off the meter so they could start tracking their usage.

In search of a resolution, the trio of women also paid visits to the leasing office.

They contacted the Georgia Advocacy Office. They called the billing company.

Russell said she asked a friend from church what to do about the spiking water bills, and the friend told her she needed to find a new place to live.

See **BILLS**
Page 2



PHOTO BY LEAH YETTER
Josh Rogers is pictured outside the NewTown Macon offices in downtown Macon in this undated photo. The former Historic Macon Foundation and NewTown Macon leader is being honored with the naming of a Third Street block as Josh Rogers Way following his death last year at age 42.

Third Street block to be named for downtown champion Josh Rogers

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
laura@MaconMelody.com

A man whose life's work was making downtown Macon a better place will be remembered for generations to come as a city block is set to be named in his honor.

Josh Rogers Way will be located on Third Street between Cherry and Poplar streets. The Macon-Bibb County Commission voted unanimously Tuesday to spend up to \$500 on signage honoring Rogers, a community leader and transformer of downtown who died suddenly and unexpectedly at age 42 last November.

A formal dedication ceremony will be announced at a later date, Mayor Lester Miller said.

Rogers was born in Waycross and attended Mercer University, where he fell in love with Macon and graduated in 2005.

He went on to work for the Historic Macon Foundation and later NewTown Macon, playing integral roles in the revitalization of downtown.

Rogers is survived by his wife and two young children.

Mayor Pro Tem Seth Clark urged all commissioners to vote in support of the measure so that "when Jack and Ellie look back in 5-10 ... looking at the work their father did here, they saw that the county represented and supported them when they needed it."

All commissioners signed on to cosponsor the ordinance.

Arena advances

In other business, the commission approved a company for preconstruction work on a planned sports and events arena at a cost of \$675,000. The money will come from the 2025 Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax.

MFA Program Management, the company the commission hired in September to manage and oversee the construction of the new arena, recommended Barton Malow Builders, a family of multiple companies, to work as construction manager at risk.

Sheridan Construction of Macon will partner with Barton Malow on the work.

"They want to give back to the community as much as possible,"

MFA Program Management Senior Project Manager Will Christenbury said of the Barton Malow group, adding that about 15% of the work will be completed by small local businesses.

"That's about 320 jobs just in construction labor alone. Now, if you look at all the people behind them in administrative roles, it could be 500-plus jobs throughout the process of this arena just here in Macon alone."

Christenbury also said 15% of the work will be completed by female and minority workers.

Construction of the sports and events arena is set to be complete in 2028. The arena's construction costs have yet to be finalized.

The SPLOST, a one-cent sales tax meant to raise \$450 million in revenue for capital projects, was approved by voters in March.

Periodical — Mail Label

Mercer taps Penny Elkins as first female president

BY CASEY CHOUNG
casey@MaconMelody.com

Penny Elkins — an educator for more than 30 years — will be the new president of Mercer University, school officials announced Nov. 14.

Elkins previously served in administrative and teaching roles at the university. She started her career there as a professor in the Tift College of Education and later served as senior vice president for enrollment management. She is currently Mercer's executive vice president and interim provost.

Elkins was the unanimous pick of a 12-member presidential search committee led by former Mercer Board of Trustees Chair Richard A. "Doc" Schneider. The committee's recommendation of Elkins was accepted earlier Nov. 14 — in another unanimous vote

— by university trustees during a meeting at Mercer's Penfield campus in Greene County.

Elkins will replace William D. Underwood, who announced in April his intention to step down as the university's leader — after serving in that role for 19 years — and return to a full-time teaching role in the Mercer School of Law.

She will take office as the university's 19th president — and the first woman to hold that role — on Jan. 1.

The president-designate holds two degrees from Mercer, including a bachelor's degree in Christianity and education and a master's degree in education. She has a specialist in education degree from Georgia College and State University and a Ph.D. in



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Penny Elkins addresses the crowd during a Nov. 14 press conference at Mercer University, where she was introduced as the university's next — and first female — president.

See **ELKINS**
Page 3



TRY THIS HYGGE-INSPIRED WINTER FITNESS CHALLENGE FOR ACTIVE AGERS



Photo by Freepik.com

Sponsored by: **Carlyle Place**
A Life-Plan Community of Atrium Health Navicent

The Danish embody a hygge (pronounced “hooga”) lifestyle to relax and enjoy simple pleasures when the winter winds blow. But what is hygge, exactly?

The Scandinavia Standard explains hygge this way: “Hygge is about coziness and surrounding yourself with the things that make life good, like friendship, laughter, and security, as well as more concrete things like warmth, light, seasonal food and drink.”

Active adults 55+ can embrace hygge by slowing down and appreciating quiet moments, doing gentle exercises, reveling in nature, making social connections, and tuning into the world around with all five senses.

If the concept intrigues you but you’re unsure where to start, this guide offers a hygge-inspired challenge to incorporate the Danish practice into your fitness and self-care routine this winter.

Core Aspects of Hygge

Imagine it’s a blustery winter day outdoors and you’re inside, snuggled up in a blanket in front of a crackling fire, reading a book, intermittently sipping a cup of hot chocolate. Add up all these cozy elements and the collective feeling they offer — that’s hygge.

Hygge’s core aspects include:

- Creating a cozy and comfortable atmosphere in your emotional state and physical environment
- Using soft lighting or scented candles to create a warm, inviting space
- Spending quality time with friends, family, and co-workers
- Celebrating simple pleasures, like cooking an aromatic meal and sharing it with loved ones, or going on a nature walk
- Practicing mindfulness and being fully present in the moment, enjoying your surroundings, company, and activities
- Embracing each season’s unique qualities
- Prioritizing wellness and self-care in surroundings and a lifestyle that supports mental well-being, comfort, and relaxation
- Unplugging and enjoying in-person

activities, like playing board games or doing puzzles

Incorporating Hygge in Fitness and Self-Care Routine

Hygge-inspired fitness might include doing yoga by candlelight, strolling through a winter festival to see the twinkling holiday lights, enjoying the smell of cinnamon-dusted pecans, savoring a sip of hot cocoa, listening to festive holiday music, or feeling cozy mittens warm your hands.

Self-care might mean soaking in a hot tub, getting a massage, or listening to songs that conjure cherished childhood memories. Hygge is doing anything that promotes a sense of feel-good, mental, and physical well-being.

How to Support Physical and Mental Well-Being with Hygge

Hygge practices vary for each person. So, always follow your physician’s orders regarding medical restrictions and limitations when incorporating hygge into fitness routines.

Overall, doing a combination of strength training, aerobic exercise, and balance exercises throughout the week is good for healthy aging.

Maintaining social connections, learning a new hobby, and practicing relaxation techniques relieves stress and promotes mental wellness.

You can apply hygge principles to all these things.

Hygge-Inspired Weekly Winter Challenge Ideas

You can fill an entire week with hygge-inspired activities that promote physical and mental well-being, relaxation, togetherness, and mindfulness in a cozy setting. You can rotate, tweak, or customize them as you wish to round out a month.

Here are some ideas (and always follow your doctor’s medical guidance):

- **Monday** – Bundle up and go for a walk through the neighborhood or a local park. Notice how your hat feels against your ears and how your gloves or mittens keep

your hands warm. Listen to your boots as you walk. Do they crunch on snow? Search for wildlife in the trees, like a squirrel or a cardinal. Keep a nature journal that details your experience.

- **Tuesday** – Do chair yoga or resistance band exercises indoors in front of the fire (if you have a fireplace) or under soft lighting. Listen to classical music or your favorite soothing tunes as you exercise. Enjoy a warm bath or shower afterwards and wrap up in a soft, cozy robe and slippers.

- **Wednesday** – For hygge-inspired taste and smells, bake or cook some of your favorite foods and enjoy the aroma that wafts through the kitchen. Make something that invokes pleasant memories, like your grandma’s homemade bread, your mother’s chocolate chip cookies, or your signature spaghetti sauce. Invite friends or family members over to share lunch or dinner and play active games like charades or Pictionary that also make you laugh.

- **Thursday** – Do a random act of kindness to boost someone’s spirit. Send a friend a card, call a relative, pay for a stranger’s coffee, take holiday treats to a neighbor, or volunteer at a local charity.

- **Friday** – Enjoy a quiet night at home, curled up in a blanket, reading a book while sipping tea, or telling your favorite childhood memories to a family member who’s there or over the phone.

- **Saturday** – Get more exercise and quality social time by hosting a party that involves dancing to your favorite songs, eating tasty food, drinking hot cider, and laughing. To keep things hygge cozy, have a flannel or pajama party theme.

- **Sunday** – Go device-free for a day and be present for your spouse, children, grandchildren, or friends. Cook together, do a craft, host a book club meeting, watch movies, or just enjoy some undistracted conversation.

As a new week begins, change these activities and learn new hobbies, enjoy a new recipe, go on a nature scavenger hunt, do meditation, call a long-distance relative, and host a candlelight dinner. The hygge-inspired possibilities for each week are endless and up to you.

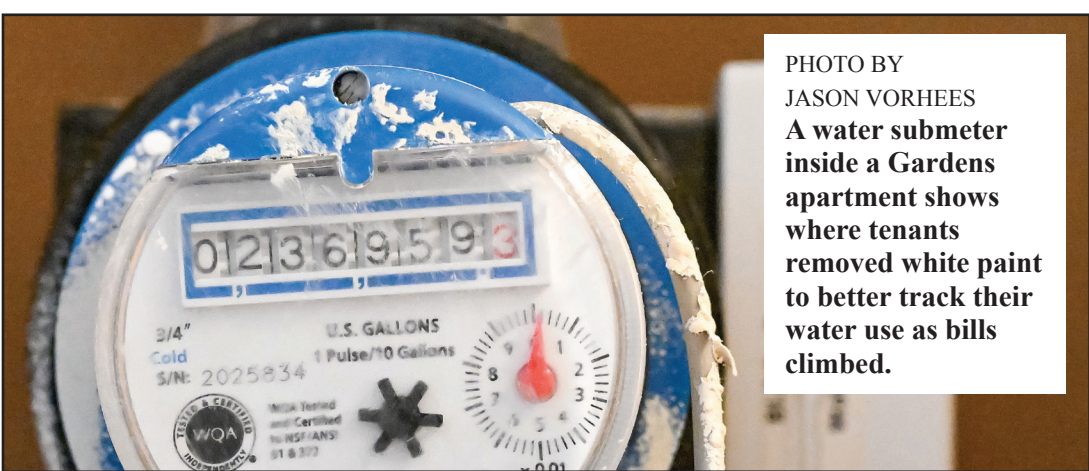


PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
A water submeter inside a Gardens apartment shows where tenants removed white paint to better track their water use as bills climbed.

BILLS

Continued from Page 1

Her monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment was \$550 when she moved in when The Gardens first opened in 2019.

Next year, she said her monthly rent will be \$1,200.

“I looked and I couldn’t find nowhere no cheaper,” Russell said, adding that she enjoys the quietness of the apartments and its garden, a tranquil fenced-in patch by a gazebo and grill, where collar green leaves fan up from the dirt.

A tenant who uses a wheelchair made small ramps to access the garden and tends to each row.

The Thunder Women also individually called the number listed on the bills from Yes Energy Management, the worldwide company the apartment complex recently began using.

“I know they’re in Europe because I’m the kind of person that calls and asks, ‘Where are you from?’” Mason said. “What we all are not doing is asking enough questions, and starting now we need to be advocates for ourselves. ... Basically, they’re just getting richer and stealing from the poor.”

Thomas said several other neighbors she’s spoken to say they also received high water bills. She said she’s not home enough to use the thousands of gallons for which she’s billed.

“There’s a lot of people out here who’ve got a lot of problems like we do,” Thomas said. “They’re just scared to come forward.”

Mason said some neighbors keep quiet about the bills because “they’re afraid. They feel like they’re going to get evicted.”

The Macon Melody obtained two years of billing histories for the apartments from the Macon Water Authority.

Those records show the monthly water bill for the entire complex has ranged from as low as \$1,620 in October 2023 to as high as \$3,125 in November 2025. The apartment also has a history of paying late, receiving notices of service disconnection and collection calls from the authority.

Though the tenants are billed by Yes Energy Management for water, they write checks or issue money orders to Investors Management Co., the Valdosta-based company that owns the complex.

Meanwhile, the water authority sends the bill to a post office box in Hicksville, New York, for Gardens Macon LP.

Reached by email last week, David Brown, president of Investors Management Co., said he would look into the water bills because “the usage seems very high.”

Earlier this week, Thomas and Mason said

maintenance workers changed the meters in their apartments.

Leah Daugherty, chief operating officer for Investors Management Co., responded to an inquiry from The Melody via email Tuesday and said the company was not aware the meters had been painted over and is working on stripping the paint “so they are clearly visible to both the residents as well as our staff.”

“As is our standard practice, we are in the process of submitting reimbursement requests for all residents whose water bill was higher than the average usage. We are enforcing this across the board for all residents whose usage is higher than should be normal; not just the ones who have reported these high bills to the management office.

“This will be completed by the end of the week. In some cases, maintenance staff was able to repair running toilets, etc. that were causing these high usages; in other cases, the bills were high and then came back down to a normal range with no maintenance repairs made.

“We are in communication with YES to determine the cause of this. The Gardens nor the management company profit in any way from the water/sewer utility service provided by YES to the residents.”

The apartment complex was built using low-income housing tax credits. The tax credits are competitive and administered by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs. In short, corporate banks get a break on annual taxes if they loan money to a developer to build or renovate low-income housing.

The state department ensures rents are capped in accordance with a land covenant requiring the complex to ensure 80 of its 100 units are reserved for low-income residents and rent is capped on those for at least 15 years.

Amy Marland, special project specialist at the state department, said her office acts as a kind of last resort for complaints from tenants at apartments built with tax credits.

“We kind of swoop in and get everything resolved so that it’s satisfactory to the resident and that ownership is doing the right thing,” she said. “And they need to be doing the right thing. The management companies, there are certain things they’re supposed to do and if they don’t do them, they get fined. Most of the time, they don’t want to have a fine.”

Marland said her office would look into the issue of water bills at The Gardens, but “most of the time we have owners and management companies that really want to do right by the residents, which they should because ... they deserve to be living in a healthy place and a safe environment, especially the seniors. I think they get overlooked because of their age.”

Grow local news: Melody now hiring marketing role

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
evelyn@MaconMelody.com

The Macon Melody is hiring a full-time partnerships and sales specialist to help grow the advertising and sponsorship revenue that supports its nonprofit journalism.

The role — based in The Melody’s office at Mercer Village in Macon — will focus on building relationships with businesses and community organizations and selling advertising across the newsroom’s print and digital products. Founded in 2024, The Melody is the first startup newsroom of the National Trust for Local News and is part of the Georgia Trust for Local News, a statewide network of 20 community publications.

Executive Editor Joshua Wilson said the position goes beyond traditional ad sales. The hire will help modernize how Macon organizations connect with readers and will support one of the nation’s most closely watched efforts to strengthen community journalism. The Melody publishes a weekly print edition and special publications, has robust digital presences at MaconMelody.com and on social media, offers a growing slate of e-newsletters, and is preparing to launch a short-form video series and a podcast.

The job is aimed at early-career profes-

sionals with an interest in sales, marketing or communications. Two to three years of experience is preferred but not required, and the Georgia and National Trusts will provide training and professional development. Candidates should be strong communicators, comfortable working toward goals, and eager to represent The Melody at business and community events. Experience with customer relationship management software and digital advertising tools is helpful.

The position offers a base salary with above-industry commission potential, as well as health insurance, a cafeteria plan and paid time off.

View the job description on The Melody website: MaconMelody.com/mm-sales-hire.

Applicants should send a resume and contact information for three professional references to joshua@MaconMelody.com. The hiring process includes a phone screening with The Melody’s executive editor, a virtual or phone interview with National Trust leadership, and an in-person interview with the Georgia Trust management team.

The newsroom hopes to fill the role before the new year, with an expected start date of Jan. 5.

Questions may be directed to Wilson at joshua@MaconMelody.com.

Give Your Retirement Plan a Promotion Veterans Save 5% Off Entrance Fees

Since 2001, veterans and non-veterans alike have come to Central Georgia’s only Life-Plan Community to live, learn, laugh and play on our amenity-rich campus in Macon. We call it crafting your happy.

To schedule a visit or learn more:
478-845-6899
carlyleplaceinfo.org/military

Carlyle Place
A Life-Plan Community of Atrium Health Navicent



5300 Zebulon Rd. | Macon, GA 31210

SN77 J

Gray Highway gets safety and pedestrian access upgrades

BY LIZ FABIAN
The Macon Newsroom

Pedestrians soon will have tools designed for safer crossing of busy Gray Highway — or U.S. 129 — at North Avenue and beyond.

In a Georgia Department of Transportation “District Quick Response” project that began several weeks ago and is nearly complete, crews created larger pedestrian median islands, installed push-button signal crossings at each enhanced crosswalk near Nottingham Drive and removed a left-turn lane into QuikTrip.

The crosswalks cut through these larger raised-surface islands that divide lanes on opposite sides of the traffic lights on the highway.

“We’re installing pedestrian push buttons within these medians to allow for a two-stage crossing, so pedestrians have more crosswalks and median refuge, so they don’t have to make it all the way across Gray Highway in one go,” GDOT District Communications Officer Gina Snider told The Macon Newsroom in an email.

Unfortunately, the first push-button signal pole installed at Nottingham Drive was knocked over just hours after it was installed in an apparent hit-and-run crash in the early morning hours of Nov. 1.

While Macon-Bibb County maintains all the pedestrian signal lights and traffic lights, Facilities Management Director Rob Ryals said they would not be liable for replacing or repairing that one.

“Technically, that knock down belongs to the contractor. Once the contractor starts, any damage or anything, they have to repair it. And even after they get finished with that intersection, if there’s a problem before we accept the project, they fix it,” Ryals said.

GDOT also reduced the width of northbound lanes of U.S. 129 at Nottingham and removed the southbound left turn from North Avenue into QuikTrip across from Baconsfield Drive.

“The project is ‘tidying up’ access south of Nottingham Drive in order to reduce vehicular conflict points and improve corridor safety by removing the Gray Highway southbound left turn to QuikTrip,” Snider said.

Southbound traffic may still turn left into Wilson Street to enter QuikTrip.

During a recent Pedestrian Safety Review Board meeting, county Traffic Safety Manager Weston Stroud announced GDOT also will be installing a pair of mid-block, rapid-flashing beacons at new

mid-block crosswalks in the heavily-traveled section of Gray Highway that’s dotted with fast food restaurants south of Shurling Drive.

Similar to a mid-block crossing at Cotton Avenue Plaza and Second Street, a pedestrian can push a button to activate lights on a pedestrian crossing sign to alert motorists to stop and allow the person to safely cross.

Stroud also said the Federal Highway Administration approved the agreement that will provide more than \$7 million for the pending “East Loop” project, with \$5.6 million coming from the federal government and \$1.4 million in matching funds from Macon-Bibb County.

Over the next year, environmental assessments mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act should be completed for the project that includes a mile of new sidewalks along Gray Highway north of Walmart and 3.5 miles of multi-use trails through a Safe Streets 4 All grant.

Civic Journalism Senior Fellow Liz Fabian covers Macon-Bibb County government entities for The Macon Newsroom at Mercer University. She can be reached by email at fabian_lj@mercer.edu or by phone at 478-301-2976.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
A pedestrian crosses Gray Highway near Nottingham Drive in Macon as traffic passes below a drone in April 2025. The Georgia Department of Transportation is adding larger median islands, push-button signals and other upgrades to improve safety along the busy U.S. 129 corridor.

ELKINS

Continued from Page 1

educational leadership from Georgia State University.

“To be called and entrusted to lead the institution that so profoundly shaped the trajectory of my life is deeply humbling,” Elkins said.

Underwood said trustees made the “best choice imaginable” in selecting Elkins.

“I am overjoyed for Mercer,” he added. “She will be an amazing president given her exceptional and demonstrated leadership and relational and problem-solving talents.”

The outgoing president also told The Melody that college administra-

tors operate in competitive environments — “but it’s good that she’s a competitive person,” he noted.

After Elkins was announced as the next president of the institution during a late-afternoon press conference, applause and cheers filled the University Center, a massive hub for students at Mercer’s Macon campus.

Elkins told the students and university employees in attendance that she would continue to be “out and about” around campus.

She said listening shows that every person matters — and that the university’s supportive culture has kept her on campus.

Of her student years at the university, Elkins said: “I just knew ...

people were going to care for me, challenge me and help me to be the best version of myself.”

After graduating from Mercer, the Columbus native worked as a third-grade teacher at Macon’s Jessie Rice Elementary, which was closed as part of Bibb County consolidation efforts in 2015. Elkins later was assistant principal at L.H. Williams Elementary.

After taking office, Elkins said she plans to host listening sessions to understand the challenges facing staff members and students — and the successes they bring to the table.

“We’re in such strong momentum right now,” she said.

As president, Elkins will push the

university toward filling industry needs — from health care vacancies to the further development of the Georgia Aerospace & Defense Alliance, established in August to capitalize on and continue growing these efforts.

The alliance — founded by Gulfstream Aerospace Corporation, Lockheed Martin, Rolls-Royce, FlightSafety International and RTX — will be headquartered at Mercer’s Macon campus.

Its work will help grow the state’s aerospace and defense industries, which have a combined economic impact of nearly \$58 billion a year and employ nearly 200,000 Georgians.

Elkins said she will tell Mercer’s story “boldly” while also broadening learning opportunities for students, increasing research opportunities and pushing for more interdisciplinary collaboration.

Mercer, established in 1833, is a private research university serving more than 9,000 students on campuses in and around Macon, Atlanta, Savannah and Columbus.

Its main campus is in Macon. The university’s medical and law schools are also located in Macon, and university officials recently announced plans to build a new medical school campus that will serve as a gateway to the city’s rapidly growing downtown area.

JOE BONAMASSA

LIVE IN CONCERT



Atrium Health

AMPHITHEATER

MARCH 20

EVERY SHOW IS A NEW EXPERIENCE!

The courage to confront the impossible

There’s a moment when the political noise gets so overwhelming that it’s tempting to tune it all out.

I get that instinct. But some things are too important to ignore — especially when the sitting president of the United States repeatedly says things that are not just false, not just misleading, but mathematically impossible.

In recent weeks, President Donald Trump has been telling audiences that his “most favored nation” drug-pricing policy will reduce prescription drug costs by 1,000%, 1,200% or even 1,500%. These aren’t slips of the tongue. They’re repeated claims, delivered with confidence.



Joshua WILSON

And they collapse the moment they meet third-grade arithmetic. The maximum possible price reduction for any product is 100%. If a \$100 drug becomes free, that’s a 100% cut. You cannot cut it by more than that unless the pharmaceutical company starts paying you to take the medication. That’s not partisan analysis — that’s math. And yet Trump keeps saying it. Crowds keep cheering. And the country keeps moving on as if none of this should concern us.

It should.

The question isn’t only why the president insists on making claims that are clearly, provably untrue — though that’s a serious problem. The deeper and more troubling question is why so many Americans continue to accept these statements at face value, even celebrate them, when they so plainly defy logic.

Part of the answer is emotional. Trump speaks in absolutes — the biggest, the lowest, the most dramatic — because absolutes feel good when people are frustrated or fed up. These large and impossible percentage cuts sound bold and decisive. It sounds like someone taking a sledgehammer to a system everyone knows is broken. It’s easier

to believe a promise that big than to engage with the complicated reality of American health care.

But at some point, as citizens, we must draw a line between rhetoric and reality. And we’re long past that point.

There is another piece of this, though, and it’s a responsibility that falls on the media. When the president says something that is not only false but structurally impossible, reporters should not simply write it down and move on. They should stop him. They should say, in real time: “That does not make sense. That cannot be true. You are misleading people.”

Instead, too often, his words go

unchallenged in the moment. Fact-checks arrive later, long after the quote has raced through social media and settled into the minds of millions of people.

This isn’t about partisanship. It’s about basic civic literacy. It’s about whether we, as a country, still care enough about the truth to insist on it — even when it’s inconvenient, even when it interrupts the show.

We deserve leaders who respect us enough not to lie to our faces. And we deserve a press corps willing to say so the moment it happens.

Executive Editor Joshua Wilson wants to hear from you. Write him at joshua@MaconMelody.com.

PSC upset alone doesn’t signal a blue Georgia

Georgia Democrats are gleeful over their recent Public Service Commission victories, and rightly so. They toppled two incumbents and are primed for victory laps around the state.

Meanwhile, pundits like yours truly have been conducting election postmortems to see what can be gleaned from the November trouncing.

While Democrats are excitedly hoping this is a sign that Georgia is now — or is at least turning — solidly blue, I am not so sure. Yes, the margin of victory was astounding — Alicia Johnson defeated Tim Echols 62.74% to 37.26%, and Peter Hubbard vanquished Fitz Johnson 62.93% to 37.07% — but there is more to dissect in this story.

For those of you unfamiliar with the PSC, it is a board of five members who regulate utilities and in some cases even determine how much they can charge customers for staples like electricity. This is the result of the antiquated, anti-competitive system Georgia perpetuates. Under the current model, the state



Marc HYDEN

petition could easily replace much of it, but I digress.

Given this arrangement, voters want the PSC to keep their rates reasonably low, but the commission has been drifting in the other direction.

“Georgia Power bills have gone up six times in the last three years: three times as part of an overall rate hike, twice to pay for new nuclear reactors at Plant Vogtle, and once to cover high natural gas prices,” WABE reported.

The rate hikes for Plant Vogtle particularly sting. A conglomerate of monopoly utilities decided to build two new nuclear reactors at Vogtle and produced enticing cost estimates and timetables. They turned out to be dead wrong. The reactors were more than \$20 billion

awards electric providers geographic monopolies in exchange for being regulated. It is a pretty terrible paradigm, especially when free market competition could easily replace much of it, but I digress.

over budget and seven years behind schedule. Captive ratepayers are on the hook for this boondoggle, and the PSC was inextricably involved — to the displeasure of many.

Perhaps sensing angst in the electorate and with elections looming, the PSC took action: “Earlier this year, the commission voted unanimously to freeze base power rates for the next three years — though bills will still be adjusted next year for fuel prices and hurricane cleanup costs,” WABE continued.

This was too little too late. I imagine many voters viewed the PSC as regularly siding with corporate interests to the detriment of ratepayers and only changing direction once elections neared.

This alone could have spelled doom for the two incumbent PSC commissioners on the ballot, but the punches kept coming. Their races were the only statewide elections this year, and they coincided with a host of municipal elections, which in some ways favored Democrats. Heavily Democratic voting blocs, like those from Atlanta, turned out

in droves, while Republicans did not. Other than the PSC races, many had no other reason to go vote. My ballot, for instance, only had the two PSC races and nothing else.

Then there is the question of campaigning. Had I not been a political nerd and heavily involved in government, then I might not have even known that there was an election this year. I received zero mailers from the incumbents and only one ad for the Democrats reached my mailbox, although it was not addressed to me. I presume they campaigned, but anecdotally, I did not see much evidence of substantive, wholesale voter outreach — or at least efforts to reach me. I’d wager that many Republicans may not have even known of the election and its importance. Statewide turnout was a paltry 21.5%.

Thanks to a legal dispute questioning whether the PSC’s statewide elections were inconsistent with the Voting Rights Act, this was the first PSC election in many years. In fact, before this election, Echols had not faced a general election since 2016.

Fitz Johnson was appointed by Gov. Kemp in 2021 and never before faced a PSC election. This did the incumbents little good. If legal wrangling keeps candidates off the ballot for many years, then it can be difficult to achieve the kind of name ID needed to capture the imagination of voters, especially if their campaigns struggle.

Even with Johnson and Hubbard’s election, the PSC still enjoys a 3-2 Republican majority, but it is no longer an exclusive 5-0 Republican club. Time will tell how this influences the PSC, and while political scientists desperately search for clues to determine what the democratic victories mean for the future, I wouldn’t read too much into it. The PSC is important, but it is hard to get voters excited about it. Due to a number of variables, the election was simply stacked against Republicans.

Marc Hyden is the senior director of state governor affairs at the R Street Institute. You can follow him on X at @marc_hyden.

Assault on rural hospitals an assault on all

Recently, St. Mary’s Sacred Heart Hospital in Lavonia closed its labor and delivery unit.

For families in Northeast Georgia, this means the nearest maternity care may now be an hour’s drive away. For expectant mothers in labor, that can be the difference between life and death. Hospital administrators pointed to many factors behind the decision — shrinking rural populations, difficulty recruiting doctors and the outmigration of patients.

But the tipping point was unmistakable: the sweeping Medicaid cuts pushed through Congress in Trump’s terrible, tyrannical, no-good budget, which passed earlier this year. For a state where Medicaid covers nearly 60% of rural births, that’s a deadly blow.

One doesn’t often connect the dots between hospital closures and the end of democracy, but the signs here are unmistakable. In the 10 steps to authoritarianism, breaking the government so it doesn’t work is Step 4 — and blocking health care access is a clarion call.

The closure of a maternity ward is both a tragedy and a warning. Authoritarianism in the 21st century doesn’t often arrive with tanks in the street. As we’re seeing play out in America today, it seeps into daily life when governments deliberately weaken the safety nets people rely on to survive.

This is part of the authoritarian playbook. First, gut public services. Then normalize inequality. Finally,



convince communities that they are on their own. We’ve seen this in other countries: dismantling health care systems, stripping social supports and allowing infrastructure to crumble until despair becomes the norm. When people stop believing democracy can deliver the basics — like safe childbirth — they start believing autocracy might be worth a try.

But Georgia is on a fast track, aided by decades of failed health care policies and the refusal to expand Medicaid. As a direct result of this neglect, Georgia has already lost more than a dozen labor and delivery units in the past decade, not to mention our record number of hospital closures and looming shutdowns.

Each time, the loss ripples beyond the maternity ward and beyond the redirected ambulance. Hospitals are often the largest employer in rural towns. These closures hollow out local economies, drive away families and accelerate the decline of our communities. That is not accidental; it is the predictable result of policies that privilege political ideology over the well-being of our neighbors.

What makes authoritarianism possible is the slow, grinding destruction of trust. Every time a pregnant woman is told her nearest hospital

cannot help her, every time a community loses its only lifeline, our trust erodes further. Why vote when elected officials ignore your demand for safety and security?

The resilience of a democracy can be measured in its hospitals and classrooms, as much in its court-houses and statehouses. A flourishing society makes care accessible — because dignity is not a luxury and health care is a right. When leaders choose instead to strip away the very systems that sustain life, giving the wealthy tax breaks that bankrupt health care for thousands, they are turning democracy on its head — making it smaller, crueler and more fragile.

If we want to fight against the authoritarian assault seeping into our lives, we must see the regular signs of assault — not military juntas or tanks but closed signs on hospitals in the wealthiest nation on earth and new mothers turned away because our political leaders cared more about donors than new Americans.

We must refuse to accept the scarcity that is being pushed upon us as normal. We must demand a government that sees rural mothers and babies as worthy of care and not as collateral damage.

Democracy lives — or dies — in places like Lavonia.

Stacey Abrams is a bestselling author, entrepreneur, host of the podcast “Assembly Required,” and former Georgia House minority leader.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Push for a third mayoral term echoes Project 2025

BY JULIA ADELE CALLAHAN

Ever since the consolidation of Macon and Bibb County in 2012, our county has been regarded as a “strong mayor” form of government.

Strong mayors, like the mayor of Macon-Bibb, consolidate power to themselves by appointing heads of departments and nonprofits, putting themselves at the helm of the budget and policymaking decisions, functioning as the chief executor of day-to-day operations, deciding what makes the meeting agendas, and facilitating the approval of projects and contractors.

There are only 38 consolidated counties in the United States. This means that Macon-Bibb’s mayor has some of the most power of any other mayor in the country. This is an example of Project 2025 but on the local level.

Under Project 2025, the president removes career government workers and replaces them with political appointees. Macon-Bibb’s mayor has that same power locally. He rejects people who should be put in positions based on their resumes, educa-

tion and experience and instead puts in place folks who align politically with the mayor. This deprives us of the most qualified candidates and diversity of opinions.

It has also made for a tumultuous work environment in which our local government employees cannot voice any disagreement with the mayor without fearing for their jobs. Localities also allow this hiring and firing power to go to the next level by allowing the mayor to have a huge influence on the contractors and businesses that are hired for county contracts paid with taxpayer dollars.

We see the direct result of this strong mayor framework in Macon-Bibb: businesses have influence in, via political action committees, our politics (as recent speculation of ethics violations around campaign demonstration); county finances (the same few people impact decisions by serving in many different board capacities); and public input (through comments being cut off from meetings).

The two-term limit was put in

See LETTER Page 6



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Rosemary grows in a Middle Georgia garden bed, where the region’s mild fall weather helps perennial herb varieties thrive and provide fresh flavor for Thanksgiving dishes. Fresh herbs can elevate turkey, stuffing, vegetables and breads.

Herbs for the holiday table

BY MORGAN DURDEN
Special to The Melody

Thanksgiving is a time of gathering, gratitude and savoring the flavors of the holiday season, and herbs — especially fresh ones — are one of the simplest ways to elevate dishes, adding aroma and freshness to everything from turkey and stuffing to vegetables and breads.

And really, who wouldn’t love adding delicious flavor while saving a little money in the process?

Middle Georgia’s fall climate is ideal for growing flavorful culinary herbs that can be used to enhance the warmth and comfort of your Thanksgiving meal. Although it may be too late to use freshly grown herbs for Thanksgiving, many perennial varieties thrive in the region’s full sun and well-drained soil — conditions especially abundant here in the fall.

The milder fall temperatures give these herbs time to become well established, and their hardiness allows them to survive Georgia’s relatively mild winters, offering fresh flavors across multiple seasons.

Herbs are also highly versatile in the garden. They can be grown in raised beds or mixed into your vegetable garden. Given these ideal growing conditions, many herbs can play a starring role in your Thanksgiving recipes. Here are some Thanksgiving herb favorites:

— Sage: Sage is a hallmark herb for Thanksgiving, as it works well in stuffings and for seasoning turkey, pork or sausage with its earthy, slightly peppery flavor. Sage needs full sun to grow and can be a reliable perennial for your garden or containers.

— Rosemary: Rosemary has a bold, piney aroma that complements roasted turkey and vegetables. This herb thrives in sunny spots and can even be grown in large pots for easy access during cooking.

— Thyme: Thyme’s subtle, floral notes enhance nearly every savory dish on the table, from stuffing and gravy to slow-cooked meats. Thyme is very low maintenance and does well in raised beds or containers, needing only sun and light to grow.

— Parsley: Parsley brightens flavors and adds a fresh, green touch to the plate. Use it in stuffing, mashed potatoes, green-bean casseroles or as garnish to balance richer flavors. This herb grows easily in sun or partial

shade and can be planted in garden beds or pots for easy harvesting.

— Chives: Chives add a delicate onion-like flavor, which is perfect for mashed potatoes, deviled eggs or fresh soups and roasted vegetables. Chives are hardy and easy to grow in clusters, which is ideal for garden edges and raised beds.

— Oregano: Oregano adds a warm, earthy flavor with subtle hints of mint and pepper to breads, tomato-based sides and stuffing. Its subtle, savory note complements other herbs like sage and thyme without overpowering them. Oregano is easy to grow and drought tolerant, but it can spread quickly and may need periodic trimming.

Fresh vs. dried tips
Using fresh herbs versus dried herbs can make a big difference in the flavor of your Thanksgiving dishes.

Fresh herbs have bright, vibrant flavors and aromatic oils that are ideal for finishing dishes or adding a burst of freshness. These herbs need to be added toward the end of cooking to preserve their aroma and brightness.

Dried herbs have a deeper and more concentrated flavor that develops over time with heat. Add dried herbs early in the cooking process to allow their flavors to meld and develop.

As a general rule, use about one-third the amount of dried herbs compared to fresh since dried herbs are more potent. Combining both fresh and dried herbs can create layered, complex flavors which can work well for most roasted meats, vegetables, stuffings and gravy.

Herbs are an easy and flavorful way to bring your Thanksgiving dishes to life. From the earthy warmth of sage and thyme to the bright freshness of parsley and chives, each herb adds a unique touch to turkey, stuffing, vegetables and breads.

With just a few herbs, you can elevate your holiday meal, impress your guests and enjoy bold flavors without breaking the bank.

Morgan Durden is the administrative assistant for the Bibb County office of the University of Georgia’s Cooperative Extension Service. Send gardening or landscaping questions to bibb.extension@uga.edu.

LETTER

Continued from Page 5

place to balance the power-heavy “strong mayor.” Commissioners serve three terms because their power is significantly less (being part of a body of commissioners). These conditions were approved by a vote of the Macon-Bibb electorate. The current mayor’s argument that an extra term is needed to “finish the projects they’ve started” is stale. We can always vote for another person who will lower taxes or mirror the policies we actually want to see. A third term isn’t needed for that. Macon-Bibb deserves meaning-

ful, strategic and inclusive progress. We deserve a leader open to conversations without argument. We deserve a people-focused government that upholds the values of accountability and democracy.

If the goal is an effective government that works for us, let’s invest in new voices rather than extending familiar ones indefinitely. We don’t need a local Project 2025.

Julia Adele Callahan of Macon owns Dream Clean Housekeeping Co., co-founded Middle Georgia 4 Choice and serves as vice chair of the Macon-Bibb County Democratic Committee.

NEW SOUTHERN DAD

A little pine straw, a lot of thanks

I’ve shook out my fair share of bales of pine straw.

Shook out? Shaken? Let’s go with spread. I’ve spread out my fair share of bales of pine straw, especially at this time of year.

With the onset of the holiday season, many people spruce up their front yards to impress the neighbors and family members they don’t like. Nothing tells your spouse’s family “I’m doing pretty good for myself these days. Who’s the loser now?” like paying someone to clean up the flower beds. For many years this subdivision



Kyle DOMINY

vanity lined my pockets with cash just in time for Christmas. Of course, as a young man, while working in other people’s yards, I day-dreamed about having my own house and the disposable income to pay someone to labor for me. Such is the ignorance of youth. Now that I’ve learned a thing or two about life, I miss those days, and, sometimes, that line of work,

though my back may feel otherwise — though it can’t be worse than being hunched over a keyboard at a desk in my windowless dungeon day after day.

Sweat equity means to improve the value of your property by the work of your own two hands, and I try to relive my glorious manual labor days with projects around my own home. Now instead of wishing I could afford to hire someone to do it for me, I relish a long to-do

See **DOMINY**
Page 7



PHOTO BY ED GRISAMORE

Melody columnist Ed Grisamore, left, and his longtime friend Jesse Evans attend the Macon Sports Hall of Fame banquet at the Macon Coliseum in May 2025.

The many blessings worth counting this Thanksgiving

I spoke at a luncheon some years back, and I told the group I was lucky I had always known I wanted to be a writer.

When my speech was over, a man made his way across the room and said he needed to correct me.

“You’re not lucky,” he said, leaning in. “You’re blessed!”

Those words changed the lens through which I view my life. Attitude and gratitude have become my cornerstones.

Every Thanksgiving for the past 35 years, I have shared some of those blessings with readers of my newspaper columns.

Some blessings are in large print. Others are so tiny I need a magnifying glass. All are acknowledged and appreciated.

As we approach our annual day of thanks, my gratefulness spills over like turkey and dressing on a crowded plate.

It is for these things I am thankful:

— For church hymns, bucket lists and movies with happy endings. ... — For foot lockers, shoeboxes and time capsules to preserve the pieces of our past.

— For random newspaper moments when I can channel my inner Clark Kent.

— For kind souls who concede the argument to win the relationship.

— That today I am not a butterball turkey.

— For Vitamin D sunshine, with a generous helping of sunscreen, of course.

— For porch popsicles, butterfly kisses, scavenger hunts and rain that falls softly on the fields.

— For my longtime friend, Jesse Evans, or as we call him, the “Jesse of All Trades.” He’s always there when we need him. He also holds the crown as Mercer’s biggest sports fan.

— For quiet, reflective morn-



Ed GRISAMORE

ings in my writing nook, an upstairs room I call “Amore.” It means love and comes from the last five letters of my last name.

— For long walks and short lines.

— For sweet notes from former students.

— For red geraniums, white beaches and blue-collar mentality.

— For mid-afternoon snoozes (intentional and unintentional) in the vintage recliner that belonged to my dad. I call them “nappetizers.”

— That in another six weeks I will have completed the goal of reading my Bible from cover to cover in one year.

— For free shipping, soapbox derbys, stained glass windows, coloring books, comfortable shoes and old-timey lawnchairs.

— For road adventures, back scratches, Butler Brown paintings and lazy Saturdays watching college football.

— For people who tell me how adorable my grandchildren are because they will never get an argument from me about that.

— For high ceilings, low carbs and when the tie perfectly complements the dress shirt.

— For emoji-less text messages.

— That there is no expiration date on great music.

— For dots on the map with names Deep Step and Hopeulikit.

— That two of my sons were able to accompany me on a week-long mission trip to Costa Rica this past summer.

— For another longtime friend, Allen Levi, who wrote “Theo of Golden,” the most thoughtful book I’ve read this year. (I’m going to visit him next week.)

— For soul food, divine guid-

ance, fireside chats, sidewalk chalk and dopamine decor.

— For little boys who love dinosaurs and, if there’s a hill to roll down, they will find it.

— For Proverbs 4:23: “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

— That the American Camellia Society has named a japonica after me, “True Gris,” coming soon to a nursery near you.

— For reconnecting with friends.

— For M.O.N.I. (Middle of the Night Ideas).

— For days when I can remember my password and my pen doesn’t quit on me during an interview.

— For cast iron skillet and steel magnolias.

— For the memory of the late Gene Espy, who in 1951 became the second person to hike the Appalachian Trail. He was an inspiration to many.

— That I can still do my own stunts, although not as gracefully, and I won’t “let the old man in.”

— For ziplines, cool customers, role models, unsung heroes, theatre kids and good neighbors.

— For the stories I still have left to tell.

— That I live in a community that is big enough where I feel like I live in a city but small enough that I can walk down the street and see people I know. There’s a true sense of place. Thank you, Macon.

— For Delinda, Ed, Grant, Jake, Summer Sterling, Brewer, Sterling Gray, Ginny Pope and Bennett.

— For absent friends and guardian angels.

— For all of your blessings, too.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Send Ed Grisamore a note at gris@MaconMelody.com.

ROCKING THE HOMECOMING CROWD



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

Drivin N Cryin, a folk rock band from Atlanta, performs during the Mercer University Homecoming festivities before the Bears’ football game against Chattanooga. Mercer went on to win 63–17.

BILLY’S LET’S EAT REVIEW

Taking a big bite of Burger Week

Macon Burger Week (Nov. 7-15) just wrapped up and, as the new guy in town who landed here in April, I had no idea what I was walking into.

I thought, “Alright, it’s a burger. How special can it really be?” I was wrong. So, so wrong.

My fellow Maconites quickly shared with me their favorite hot spots and, as always, I listened.

The good people of Macon don’t just make burgers. They build experiences. They create flavor journeys. They craft patties with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for SEC football.

As I’ve quickly learned, when Macon restaurateurs are challenged, they do not rise to the occasion — they sprint to it, dragging creativity behind them like a cape. And Macon Burger Week is their Olympics.

Presented annually by the Georgia Beef Board and Visit Macon, Burger Week transforms the city into a playground of patties.

This year, 24 restaurants participated, each debuting a brand-new \$12 specialty burger created exclusively for the event. Many even tossed in fries and a drink for just a few bucks more because — let’s face it — Macon loves a deal.

There’s also the beloved Burger Week Passport, which encourages diners to eat their way through town. Collect five stamps? You get a T-shirt. Hit 10? You’re in the running for grill gear or even a Weber charcoal grill if you manage to get all 24 burgers.

It’s competitive, delicious and a perfect excuse to block off your calendar for nine days of meat-fueled joy.



Billy HENNESSEY

While I couldn’t try all 24 entries — my stomach has limits and my cardiologist would kill me — here are the standouts from my personal Burger Week crawl:

— Amici Macon and their The Spicy Islander Burger: Think Caribbean vacation meets backyard cookout. A black angus patty topped with grilled pineapple, caramelized banana peppers, bacon, fried jalapenos, provolone and mango sauce on brioche. The ingredients all sounded like something I’d swipe right on but the flavors didn’t quite harmonize the way that I hoped. Nonetheless, it was still a bold and brave burger endeavor.

— Cashman’s Pub and their Southern Peach Burger: A short-rib patty dripping in Bourbon Peach Jam, chicken-fried bacon, fried jalapenos, collard greens, cornbread crumbles, savory cheese spread and hot honey. It was sweet heat perfection. And the short rib patty? She understood the assignment.

— La Bella Morelia and their The Morelia Burger: A blend of chipotle, chorizo and ground beef with ham, pineapple, onion, mayo, lettuce, avocado, tomato and grilled white cheese. This Mexican restaurant doesn’t even serve burgers normally, and they still came in swinging. Unique, flavorful and a great cultural twist.

— Macon Water Ice and their Georgia Peach Burger: An incredibly well-seasoned patty, crispy beef bacon, grilled onions, fresh peaches, peach sauce,

lettuce, tomato and cheese. One of the best burgers I’ve ever tasted, period. The peaches didn’t just work — they sang harmony. A truly Macon combination.

— Mercer Village Pizza and their Cheeseburger Pizza: I went in skeptical. Why mess up a good pizza or a good burger? But listen ... they pulled it off! The seasoned beef, cheddar and mozzarella blend, burger sauce and fresh cold toppings gave me nostalgic backyard cookout vibes. Big win.

— The Rookery and their The Top Notch Burger: Smash patties with pepper jack, smoked tomato and poblano slaw, onions, and jalapenos. The Rookery normally dominates the burger scene, but this year’s entry didn’t blow me away. Social media agreed. Still good, but not the “Top Notch” we expected.

— Satterfield’s Barbeque and their The Cowboy Killer: Let me repeat this slowly ... a slow-smoked Wagyu beef patty. Smoked gouda. Bacon jalapeno jam. Black garlic aioli. Crispy onions. Potato bun. I went twice. I voted for them. I begged for it to be permanent. This was my winner and, based on comments from my followers, we want that burger to be on the menu full time. It was THAT good.

— Taco Mac and their The Dirty Cowboy: Two smash patties, American and Swiss, bacon jam, “secret” BBQ sauce and a beautifully seared brioche bun. Flavorful, indulgent and rodeo-level fun.

— The Social Duck and their Peach State Smokehouse Burger: It was supposed to feature peach BBQ sauce, candied bacon, grilled peaches and fried green tomatoes. Unfortunately, the version we were served didn’t match the photo or description. Missing elements, altered presentation — something clearly went awry.

So, who won my heart? The answer is easy: The Satterfield’s burger — although I would be remiss if I didn’t give a huge honorable mention to Macon Water Ice. Both burgers were excellent, but Satterfield’s won me over with their smoked burger, the incredible hospitality and the astronomical amount of posts and comments from burger-goers on social media.

Planning Ahead for 2026, I’m assembling a Burger Week Squad. A full-on beef battalion. We’re splitting burgers, taking notes and hitting every restaurant because Macon is too delicious to tackle alone. If you’re interested in joining this elite team of carnivorous champions, shoot me a message.

We’ll train. We’ll hydrate. We’ll stretch and then, as we always do, we’ll dine.

Until next time, Macon — let’s eat!

Billy Hennessey is the food columnist for The Melody. Write him an email at newlifenkiss@gmail.com.



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY

Melody food columnist Billy Hennessey holds Satterfield’s Barbeque’s “Cowboy Killer” burger during Macon Burger Week. The limited-edition creation featured a smoked Wagyu beef patty topped with smoked gouda, bacon jalapeno jam, black garlic aioli and crispy onions on a potato bun.

DOMINY

Continued from Page 6

list and am thankful I’m healthy enough to tackle it and have people to call on if I need assistance (“Dad, I could use some help fixing a shower when you can spare a couple of hours.”). Yes, this comes with occasional frustrations and sometimes a minor injury or two — and even a torrent of words you can’t, or at least shouldn’t, say in church.

Once a year I even get to shake out, or rather spread, pine straw again. There

are enough pine trees around the house that I don’t have to buy straw, another thing I’m thankful for. A few minutes with the rake and I have more than enough to give my home a little holiday curb appeal, though no one can see it but my family and deer that cross my front yard each night.

Living in the woods is something to be thankful for. Having a family to live in the woods with ranks high on the thankful list, way above the deer, which I could take or leave. Big rats are all they are, and I hope many Thanksgiving ta-

bles are set with venison.

I pile my pine straw on a big tarp and drag it around the property. My back is still a little sore, and I’m thankful for that, too.

A little pain is a good reminder that I’m still alive.

Wherever you find yourself, I hope it is a home, big or small, full of family, and maybe some fresh pine straw across the front, even if just for yourself. Happy Thanksgiving.

Kyle Dominy lives in Dublin.

FROM OUR KITCHENS

A slice for everyone

**BY CHLOE PAULK
Special to The Melody**

For years, I’ve held the belief that everyone deserves a piece of cake. When I developed a gluten allergy in 2020, it only further strengthened this belief.

I’ve had an entrepreneurial spark in me for longer than I can remember. Growing up, my parents had a rule for my older brother and I: if we wanted a car when we turned 16, we had to purchase it ourselves.

I watched my brother turn his hobbies into profit and I knew there was a way to make this happen with my love of baking.

When I was in the fourth grade, I started Chloe’s Sweets, a baking business featuring sour cream pound cakes, chocolate chip cookies and brownies. I marketed my sweet treats to everyone, including school teachers and gymnastics coaches. I even went door to door at downtown businesses in my hometown of Ocilla.

I kept baking, and by my freshmen year of high school I decided I wanted to take my business more seriously.

I had just received my very own KitchenAid mixer for Christmas and I wanted to venture into selling decorated cakes. I posted a time lapse video on Instagram of me decorating a cake — from there, Cake it with Chloe began.

One year after launching Cake it with Chloe, I became very ill but didn’t know the cause of the is-

sue. I discovered that I had developed a severe gluten allergy, which meant I couldn’t eat cake. As ironic as it is though, it only further developed my belief that everyone deserves a slice of cake.

Six years later, I am now a student at Mercer University and I have recently shifted my business to focus on gluten-free cake mixes.

My passion lies with helping people enjoy cake, especially those who aren’t always able to do so.

Coming from a rural, two-redlight town in South Georgia, I knew I wanted to create a simpler way for people to make their own delicious cakes and share with the people they love.

The gluten-free world can be overwhelming and hard to navigate, but that shouldn’t keep loved ones from gathering around the table.

This is the ultimate inspiration behind my gluten-free cake mix.

My dear friend, Mallory Green, came up with this idea when she was making pumpkin muffins for a gluten-free friend. She picked up her pantry staple, a Cake it with Chloe gluten-free vanilla cake mix, and wondered how she could turn this recipe into pumpkin cupcakes.

On the back of your bag of Cake it with Chloe cake mix, you will find instructions and ingredients, as well as substitutions to make the recipe vegan-friendly.

In this recipe, pumpkin makes a great substitute for eggs.

GLUTEN-FREE PUMPKIN CUPCAKES

- 1 package of Cake it with Chloe’s Gluten-Free Homemade Style Vanilla Cake Mix.
- 1 cup of milk (or use 1 cup of an alternative milk for a dairy-free option).
- 1 cup of melted butter (or use 3/4 cup of vegetable oil for a dairy-free option).
- 1 cup of pumpkin puree (replaces the four eggs the cake mix calls for).
- One-half teaspoon (or 3/4 teaspoon) pumpkin pie spice or cinnamon.

You’ll mix the ingredients together and bake according to the package instructions. You can expect to get around 24 cupcakes from this recipe. Top with your favorite frosting. We chose a maple cream cheese frosting, and it paired beautifully with these pumpkin cupcakes.

To watch a video tutorial, check us out on Instagram and Facebook at Cake it with Chloe. To find your own bag of Cake it with Chloe cake mix, you can check out cakeitwithchloe.com or find it at Village Marketplace in Ingleside Village.

Butcher's Deluxe Package **61% OFF**

- 4 Butcher's Cut Top Sirloins (5 oz.)
- 4 Air-Chilled Chicken Breasts (4 oz.)
- 4 Boneless Pork Chops (5 oz.)
- 4 Gourmet Jumbo Franks (3 oz.)
- 4 Individual Scalloped Potatoes (3.8 oz.)
- 4 Caramel Apple Tartlets (4 oz.)
- 1 Omaha Steaks Seasoning (3 oz.)
- 8 FREE** Omaha Steaks Smash Burgers (3.2 oz.)

79797ZED separately \$227.94
SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY PRICE \$89.99

Go to OmahaSteaks.com/Deluxe2795
1.866.411.5403 Ask for Offer 79797ZED

Savings shown over aggregated single item base price. Standard S&H applies. Exp. 12/25/25. 1 25M8656 | Omaha Steaks, LLC.

Hale GROVES

SAVE OVER 52%

REG. \$49.99 **NOW \$34.99**
+ \$7.99 shipping

#483X | **HALE SELECT DELUXE GIFT BOX**
888-740-9507
HaleGroves.com/H6YG54
Use Code H6YG54

IC: H6Y554

Sculpture in new Bicentennial Park carves path for reconciliation, honors Indigenous heritage

Kenneth Johnson’s work — creations both large and small, from fractions of an ounce to multiple tons — are made with meticulous care and craftsmanship, while also infused with meaning.

Johnson is an award-winning, internationally recognized Muscogee (Creek)/Seminole jewelry designer, metalsmith and sculptor. He was raised in the present home of the Muscogee Nation in Oklahoma and now lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

His massive sculpture, “ECKE — Mother Ground,” is featured in Bicentennial Park at 239 Clinton St., just west of Ocmulgee National Historical Park in East Macon.

The site is the ancestral home of the Muscogee (Creek) before their forced and illegal removal from Georgia, when lands, homes, businesses and heritage roots were taken as they were driven off on their own Trail of Tears to Oklahoma.

A ribbon-cutting took place on Nov. 13 to commemorate the opening of the park, created by Macon200 and related government agencies in celebration of Macon-Bibb’s 200th anniversary in 2023.

The park serves as a symbolic reflection of modern-day steps toward welcoming back and re-forging ties between Macon and the Native American community that once called the area home.

Macon-Bibb Mayor Lester Miller said the park “stands at the crossroads of our past and our future on land rich with Indigenous history, Black heritage and the industrious spirit that built this community.”

He called it “a place for reflection and reconciliation where we can honor the stories that shaped us and look toward the future with hope and unity.”

The efforts of local, state and national leaders alongside Muscogee leaders to make Ocmulgee National Historical Park Georgia’s first full-fledged national park, co-managed by the Muscogee Nation, have become a unifying cause.

Johnson spoke of his sculpture — significantly placed to face west toward Oklahoma— to those gathered at the ribbon-cutting.

A talk with the artist

I had the chance to talk further with Johnson about his thoughts on the sculpture, his work and his tra-



Michael W. PANNELL

ditional Georgia homeland:

“The piece in Bicentennial Park is 7.5 tons, 12 feet tall and made from Georgia white marble,” he said.

“It’s one of my largest works to date and it’s important because of where it sits and what it represents.

“The life-size figure of a traditional stickball player will be placed in front of the sculpture. I like to do things that have some importance. With its scale, it denotes a gravity of place and the many people who lived here before Macon was a town — people who were already here with community, families and everyday life with government, structure and culture.

“The woman’s face alludes to our mother ground here, and the flames on its base represent the fires that went out from here and people who still exist today, alive and vibrant with a sense of fire burning within us. The white color of the Georgia marble is meant to be a healing color — that’s important. It facing west is important because the Bicentennial Park is about reconciliation. It’s about looking forward. Our goal is to have another sculpture, a sister piece in Oklahoma, facing east to mirror the one in Macon. It hasn’t been funded, but we’ve got to feed the vision for it.”

The idea of heritage and ongoing life — “we are still here” — is an important theme in Johnson’s work. An example, in addition to “ECKE – Mother Ground,” is something he calls the Muscogee knot, or life knot, which shows up in numerous jewelry pieces created by him.

Johnson wore such a ring at the event, and a similar necklace was worn by Tracie Revis of the Ocmulgee National Park & Preserve Initiative, the organization working toward seeing the Ocmulgee park become a national park as well as preserving lands around the Ocmulgee River.

“The knot represents two interacting segments,” he said. “I’m assigning to it the meaning of life based on my own understanding because I think these symbols have importance. You can see them visually, but some of the stories and history

connected to them have been lost to us, so I’m looking at these symbols with my intuition and with my heart as an artist.

“When I look at that life knot, the Muscogee knot, it means that you’re connected in time and in space to a place or to a person. When you’re in that moment, you’re alive, you’re connected. I distinguish that I don’t speak for the tribe and I can’t define what it means to everyone, but I know what it means to me. That’s part of being an artist — you create out of your own vision and skill and then put it out there for others to see, hopefully be moved and informed by it, and to bring to it what they see.”

While Johnson may become best known in Macon for the Bicentennial Park sculpture, jewelry design and metalsmithing represent the bulk of his career.

Johnson designed and created the silver crescent, necklace-like gorgets worn by Muscogee Principal Chief David Hill, Second Chief Del Beaver and others.

His work has graced multiple entertainment red carpets, including an iconic silver woodpecker gorget worn by “Reservation Dogs” creator and director Sterlin Harjo.

He has created custom, commissioned jewelry for U.S. Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O’Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor, as well as for a Canadian chief justice and a member of the British House of Lords.

Johnson’s jewelry has appeared in countless magazines, including French Vogue.

Whatever the medium, his work carries forward ancient, traditional designs based on pottery and patchwork familiar to him since his youth.

He said that in the work of his ancestors, he sees a flow — the same flow Johnson sees in his own work. It’s part of the story of his people, whether in tragedy and sorrow or resilience and triumph.

“It ties into things like the river and even the mounds,” he said. “The river goes beyond where we see it. Those mounds live beyond us, but we get to benefit from them and contribute in our own way.”

I asked Johnson if he felt the ongoing story of his people and heritage was being well told, past and present.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL W. PANNELL

Kenneth Johnson's sculpture “ECKE — Mother Ground,” sits in Macon's new Bicentennial Park at 239 Clinton St. Johnson is internationally known for his large-scale sculpture, which carries traditional Muscogee (Creek) designs into modern-day works.

“No, it hasn’t been told well,” he said. “In fact, for so long it’s been covered up. Most people in Macon don’t know who built those mounds or lived here. They talk about it archaeologically, anthropologically, but don’t understand that the people who built them have descendants walking around, driving around, flying here and there, working jobs, creating culture and are alive and thriving. So, it’s not just the Indian mounds over there, it’s about people.

“I think there can be a better job in acknowledging the Muscogee people, telling our story, and it needs Indigenous voices telling it. We want more and more partners in the community who want that kind of inclusion, who want a full story and perspective.”

As a child in Oklahoma, Johnson recalled being curious about his cultural ancestry but struggling to find answers.

Roughly 50 years later, he noted there is a greater sense of understanding.

“There’s been a shift and we’re seeing that there is a welcome and a return. Now, instead of saying you can’t go back, it’s that we should go back and engage in a good way,” he said. “I think the importance of having ambassadors for the nation, such as Tracie Revis, is paramount to that engagement.

“Seeing a cultural center opened here is such a great idea. I know what it is to grow up in Oklahoma and now have the privilege to visit here and engage, not as a tourist, but as someone who is invested here.”

Johnson and his art can be explored further at kennethjohnson.com and through his social media.

Contact writer Michael W. Pannell at mwpannell@gmail.com.

Find him on Instagram at [michael_w_pannell](https://www.instagram.com/michael_w_pannell).

South Macon church revitalizes abandoned gym

BY CASEY CHOUNG
casey@MaconMelody.com

Ray Rover was left thinking he needed to do more every time he walked through the doors of the gym next to Heritage Southside Church.

He said he heard God and prayed to figure out what more he needed to do.

His prayers were answered in 2010, and he bought two basketballs, walked down Capitol Avenue and asked a couple kids if they wanted to play at the gym.

Soon enough he had dozens of boys hooping in the gym, too many for him to handle, he said.

“I didn’t have a scoreboard. I didn’t have nothing,” Rover said. “So every game was the NBA finals.”

The homebrew basketball court is complete with two hoops, thick, faded yellow three point lines and patchy red paint zones.

Trophies from former teams hang on top of heaters, and a modern blue scoreboard can now settle all debates between players.

The brick gymnasium at the intersection of Houston Avenue and Rocky Creek Road is home to Street to Success, an afterschool program that keeps kids from the neighborhood off the street and instills a passion for learning.

Diane Coady, who now runs the

Street to Success program for girls, said the program not only gives kids an education, but also life skills and a sense of hope.

At the heart of the program is the idea of working to earn your play.

About 15 years ago, Rover said he started to mandate tutoring as part of the deal for being able to play basketball.

He had to add some basic rules, like no cussing, and if you come inside you gotta stay inside. The motto he instilled was “Commit, Submit or Get” (Out).

“They were not gonna come here and submit themselves to anything,” he said. “They were gonna play basketball and that was it. Everybody was going to the NBA.”

Overlooking the gymnasium, volunteers built a computer room in an empty office and a space for tutoring. Books line the shelves and there’s a green screen for kids to make educational videos.

Once a week, the ministry brings in a guest speaker to talk to kids about their job or their life experiences. They give kids 30 minutes a session to learn how to type.

Rover said it’s about creating a desire to learn in his kids. Teaching kids to read at grade level and showing them what jobs are out there is part of his “escape plan” for lifting kids out of poverty.

Coady said part of that escape

plan is offering kids a vision of what their lives could be and belief in the fact they can turn their lives around for themselves and their families.

“Hard work and study is the only way to be successful,” Rover said. “It doesn’t guarantee nothing, it just guarantees one thing: that if an opportunity —when it comes and knocks — you’ll be able to answer.”

Rover served in the air force before launching Street to Success. He works as a bailiff in the Bibb County Juvenile Court, where he said he sees a lot of disheartening situations.

Over the years, he’s lost 18 of his students to violence. But he said that tragedy doesn’t take away his hope.

“Whenever I see something fantastic, like going over to watch the graduation of one of my kids from the fire academy to become a fireman, that’s my paycheck,” Rover said.

The program is a ministry of Heritage Southside Methodist, an arm of Heritage Methodist Church off Vineville Avenue.

Before starting Street to Success, Rover and other church members started “Scrambled Eggs for Jesus.”

A small kitchen connected to the basketball court enables the church to cook for the community every Sunday.

A sheet metal shed behind the building was converted into the Heritage Lighthouse Resource Center

in 2022, a clothing closet and food pantry open every other Saturday.

Rover said about thirty people or so take out “a small retail store” worth of supplies every time they open up.

“We have been really blessed, we don’t depend on the government for assistance,” Coady added.

Nowadays, basketball happens once a week, and there aren’t enough kids to put together a serious team, Rover said.

He said he serves the kids that he can, even though he knows there are hundreds more out in the communi-

ty that could use his help.

While Coady, Rover and the ministry’s Facebook are open to inquiries, Rover said he encourages people to come see the organization’s impact for themselves.

He added that God provides all the resources he needs.

“What I’ve seen over the years is people see what we’re doing and they want to be part of something that’s being done,” he said.

This story is part of a Melody series highlighting local nonprofits in Macon.



PHOTO COURTESY STREET TO SUCCESS

Kids with Street to Success work with an artist to create their own paintings.

SPORTS

Okojie brings points, passion to Bears hoops

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Micah@MaconMelody.com

When Mercer basketball star Baraka Okojie is asked what defines him, he instantly brings up his family.

The junior point guard and Ontario, Canada, native talks about the influence of his parents and their cultures — his mother is from Kenya and his father is from Nigeria — along with his younger sister and older brother, the latter of whom is a basketball player at Howard University. He glows over them all.

You might not even guess that Okojie is a pretty incredible hoops player himself.

He gets around to that eventually.

“I’ve been playing basketball ever since I can remember,” Okojie told The Melody. “I think I’ve taken something into my game from everywhere I’ve been. I’ve learned

a lot.”

Okojie has gone from Canada to Florida to Virginia to Tennessee, playing basketball against future NBA talents and leading incredible upsets against nationally-ranked teams. He is passionate about basketball but also about plenty of other things — TV shows, music, his teammates and their video game show-downs.

Okojie has a huge personality — and that may be exactly what Mercer’s basketball program needs.

A longtime connection

Okojie’s road to Mercer was a long, winding one that began when he played prep basketball in Florida. It was there that he forged a connection with Ryan Ridder, Mercer’s current head coach,

See OKOJIE
Page 11



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Mercer's Baraka Okojie stands on Mercer's campus for a photo. It's rare to see Okojie, a hard worker and team leader, outside the gym at Hawkins Arena with his teammates.

Former SEC coach Muschamp in Macon

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Micah@MaconMelody.com

Former SEC player, coach and coordinator Will Muschamp spoke at the Macon Touchdown Club this week, delivering anecdotes and opinions on football to the crowd Monday with expert pacing.

It’s not often that college football coaches are also expert storytellers, but Muschamp knew how to spin a yarn and get some serious laughs from the audience of college football faithful. The former head coach of the Florida Gators and South Carolina Gamecocks covered a great deal of topics at the Methodist Home For Children and Youth.

The most frequent topic was Muschamp’s relationships and stories about his iconic SEC compatriots. The Georgia alumnus had plenty of stories about UGA coach Kirby Smart, Bulldogs offensive coordinator Mike Bobo and even former Alabama and LSU coach

Nick Saban.

Muschamp’s stories began — after jokes about being booed in Florida and playing a lot of golf since leaving the coaching business — with a Macon native. Muschamp got his big break coaching when Chris Hatcher hired him to be the defensive coordinator at Valdosta State in 2000.

About a month and a half after Muschamp was hired, the coaches interviewed Kirby Smart — then just a walk-on UGA player who had recently been cut by the Indianapolis Colts — to be their secondary coach.

Muschamp claims the eventual Georgia legend made a rather funny mistake back when his coaching career was just beginning.

“During the interview there’s a bear defense ... you can really play

See MUSCHAMP
Page 10

Central boys, girls sweep Rutland

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Micah@MaconMelody.com

The Central boys basketball team snagged a thrilling 62-58 win over visiting Rutland to cap a sweep for the Chargers after the girls team de-

feated the Hurricanes 72-19 earlier Tuesday evening.

It was the first win of the season for the Central boys, who edged out Rutland after a back-and-forth contest despite the Hurricanes maintaining a four-point lead for a significant

portion of the fourth quarter.

“The biggest takeaway is the fight. They just kept fighting. I’ve seen a lot of teams where they get

See CENTRAL
Page 11



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Central’s Jarvis Williams (0) is pressured by Rutland players during their game Tuesday. Williams and the Chargers pulled out a close win to earn their first victory of the season.

After season of adversity, Stratford set for championship



PHOTO BY DONN RODENROTH
Stratford defenders cloting to a George Walton ballcarrier in an effort to contain him during the Eagles’ 33-6 playoff win in Macon.

BY MICHAELA. LOUGH
Melody Contributor

Back when the weather was as warm as it’s supposed to be, Paul Carroll started hearing it.

Stratford cracked 40 points in its first three games, winning by 32, 35 and six points (to GHSA Class A second-round playoff team Wilkinson County).

“I think the other coaches saw it earlier in the year,” the second-year Stratford head coach said. “I don’t know any more. They would tell me, ‘Coach, we’re gonna be a dang good football team, we’re gonna make a run at this thing.’ And this and that.”

The graduate of Hardaway in Columbus and Georgia Southern hit the internal mute button, paying not a lick of attention, because thinking about things months away means nothing. It gets in the way of thinking about what was days away: the next game.

“That’s something they looked at,” he said. “I just, I never looked at it that way. I said I’m not into specu-

lating, I’m into getting it done.”

And the “it” is simply the next game. Carroll plans ahead, but he doesn’t look ahead.

Now, he can finally do both at the same time.

Carroll gets an extra day for all of it as he gets Stratford ready for the GIAA Class 4A championship game Saturday night at Mercer’s Five Star Stadium.

Even now, Carroll talks more about the next game, rather than what the next game means.

“It’s chaotic,” Carroll said. “We’re trying to keep it (normal). I just know that there’s a game to be played and it’s the last game of the season, and this is what just about every high school football player in the country wants to have the opportunity for.”

When Carroll got the job, his stress level rose, along with his concerns about strength, physical and otherwise.

It was a concern throughout his first season, a 7-3 year that ended with a tight loss at Brookstone in the

first round.

It remained a focal point in the offseason, and again in camp. Carroll liked the improving team outlook and work ethic, but strength was still something of an issue.

But less and less each month, each week. That emphasis has paid the kinds of dividends that lead to a championship game.

Increased mental toughness goes hand in hand with physical toughness, and the Eagles have shown both this season. A 5-0 start was followed by a two-game losing streak, and some in-house adjustments.

Stratford answered adversity and here it is, practicing for the last game of the year.

Discussing Maddox Whitehead brings a smile to Carroll’s face. Whitehead may be the poster child for what Carroll has been looking for in his first venture coaching at a private school.

“He’s the real deal,” Carroll said

See STRATFORD
Page 10

OKOJIE

Continued from Page 9

when Ridder was still the head coach at UT Martin.

“He played at DME (high school) in Daytona Beach, and that’s where we’re from. His high school coach I coached in AAU. I’ve just known that family for a long time,” Ridder said. “Out of high school we really wanted to recruit him, but UT Martin didn’t feel like the right fit at the time.”

Recruiting Okojie didn’t get any easier after he played for George Mason University and averaged almost 10 points per game and played a key role as a starter. He scored a career-best 19 points — all in the second half, incredibly — when George Mason upset then-No. 16 Dayton in an Atlantic 10 game of epic proportions.

“Those are the type of games you want to play in. I didn’t have a single point in the first half, but my coaches at the time got on me to be more aggressive,” Okojie said of his second-half outburst as a freshman. “Those games help you learn about confidence. Just playing basketball, going out there and being myself is probably the biggest thing.”

After his all-conference season at GMU, Okojie landed at Memphis, where he played a crucial role for the Tigers as they finished ranked in the Top 25, won the American Athletic Conference Championship and earned a

No. 5 seed in the NCAA Tournament, giving the sophomore valuable experience.

“My last two schools I was the youngest kid on the team. Being able to learn from the older guys, being able to get a lot of playing time my freshman year was big — having that trial-and-error kind of learning situation,” Okojie said. “Then last year (at Memphis) was an entirely new kind of learning situation, playing with All-Americans and NBA players, I learned how to work ... I learned how not just to be in the gym for a long time but how to be effective while you’re in the gym.”

Ridder and the Mercer staff knew they would target him that offseason.

“He’s an elite leader. He’s a connector. He’s got incredible experience for a player his age. I mean, we go play at Tennessee, our team has five turnovers. He’s a huge part of that,” Ridder said of his point guard. “From a basketball perspective, he’s just so steady ... He’s played in an NCAA tournament game, he’s not going to shy away from the moment.”

Okojie, now with a more developed style of play, has not disappointed since his arrival in Macon. He is averaging more than 15 points per game through the Bears’ first four games with 20 assists in that span.

“I feel like I’m a floor general now, I’m a lot tougher,” Okojie said of his growth as a player. “I’m trying to develop into a leader. I’ve worked a lot on my scoring this year and I feel like it really matches my passing game.”

Almost as impressive as Okojie’s athleti-

cism, though, is his desire to succeed — and to push his teammates to do big things.

Being a leader

His team-building skills are on display after a practice at Hawkins Arena. As the players have a little free throw shooting contest, Okojie jokes and laughs with almost every teammate.

“I feel like to be a leader on and off the court, you kind of have to have a personality,” Okojie said. “I’m one of those guys that wants to lead by example but also lead with my voice, so it’s just about getting comfortable with the guys over the summer and having fun.”

Okojie's friendliness and humor also show when he talks about the NBA 2K tournaments the team plays — he says he never wins the 2K games, although when they play NCAA College Football it’s a different story — or when he sarcastically begins singing songs around his teammates.

He also loves to talk TV. He’s thoroughly invested in a number of television shows, keeping track of his favorites in a couple of interesting ways.

“Ever since 2020 I’ve kept a list of shows I’ve watched or started watching in the notes app on my phone,” he said. “Then I was thinking over the summer about, ‘What’s the biggest thing about Baraka besides basketball?’ I’m a TV show guy.”

Okojie’s way of showing that passion is a

weaving series of tattoos on his left arm, ink he acquired over the summer. He didn’t have any tattoos before this year. His favorite is a headshot of Jon Snow, a popular character from “Game of Thrones,” which Okojie is currently rewatching.

“I watch a lot of sports, too — obviously a lot of basketball. I like college football and I watch a lot of women’s volleyball in my spare time, too,” he said. “I’m really not a big baseball guy, but then the Blue Jays made the World Series. That was my first time watching baseball; that was really fun.”

Okojie’s variety of interests help him mesh well with the team — a particularly important task given the transfer-heavy makeup of Mercer’s roster.

“We’ve got a group of good dudes. They’re meshing, (Baraka) and everyone else. You get nine or 10 new guys, they don’t know each other, they have different backgrounds — but they have a very mature sense to them. They’re about their work,” Ridder said of Okojie and his team. “They have a common ground as competitors; they want to do what’s right.”

The Bears are 2-2 so far as the season is in its infancy. Ridder said the team is dealing with a bit of injury trouble, but the attitude and talent — the buy-in, the smiles and the skills — are there. Okojie said he agrees.

“This is only going to get better and better,” Okojie said. “Just watch.”

CENTRAL

Continued from Page 9

down more than one score late, they hang their heads,” Central head coach Andre Taylor said. “This group fought even when we had guys who fouled out that we were depending on. They stuck together and they finished.”

Clutch layups and free throw shooting fueled the Chargers’ comeback. Juju Williams, the team’s star shooter who dominated from beyond the arc last season, switched gears when the threes were not falling. He poured in all 13 of his points in the second half, most of them via crucial drives in the lane and foul shots.

“We were trying to get (Williams) going. The way they were playing him, they were just denying him the ball, and when we tried to scheme him open they were sending two and three at him,” Taylor said. “He just stayed patient. He’s a guy that never gets flustered.”

Williams had help from an emerging dynamic duo. Twin juniors Montae and Vontae Rembert each scored 18 points. Vontae chipped in 10 of his points in the opening quarter while Montae came in clutch with 8 points in the fourth, including a great play on an inbounds pass with about 25 seconds left to sink a layup and draw a foul to give Central a two-score lead.

“Those two have the capability of putting up big numbers. Them two with Juju is a great combination. I was looking forward to them coming into this year,” Taylor said. “They’ve had to step into a position that I really wasn’t looking for them to be in yet.”

Despite the eventual loss, Rutland had plenty of clutch plays on the other end. Kyriq Stallings made several key shots en route to a game-high 21 points. Jace Harris pitched in with 12 points and Kyle Howard rebounded with poise in the paint.

“We competed, these guys stepped on the floor and knew what their assignment was. That’s the main thing. They had good energy and they had good effort. You hate the result, but that’s just how it goes sometimes,” Rutland head coach Charles Gordon said. “We know and Kyriq knows that he can have that type of game, too. He had a bad night last game and he showed how well he can bounce back.”

Central grabbed the early edge, but Rutland

climbed back into the contest with some slick shooting from long range. The Chargers took a 14-11 lead into the second quarter before Stallings got hot, connecting on some threes and coast-to-coast layups to help the Hurricanes bounce back and grab a 24-22 lead at halftime.

The second half was a back-and-forth spectacle with scrappy defense by both teams and some timely shooting. No one player truly carried things for either squad, with multiple people contributing big shots and steals.

Rutland pulled even in the third and eventually took a four-point lead with about five minutes in the fourth, but Williams and the Rembert twins would have none of it. Central took a narrow lead with about a minute to play and fended off the Hurricanes to pull out the win.

Central girls hang 72 in bounceback win

The Lady Chargers dominated on defense and eventually found their stride on offense to secure a 72-19 victory over the Lady Hurricanes, riding a stellar 33-point performance from JaMyree Simmons in their first win of the season.

The Lady Chargers started slow — by their high standards, at least — with 13 points in the first but put up a smooth 23 points in both the second and third quarters to extend their commanding lead.

“The one thing I was most proud of tonight was that the beginning of the game, to me, wasn’t going the way we wanted offensively. We were getting all the defensive things we wanted but we couldn’t put it in the hoop — but the girls just continued to play through it,” Central girls head coach Tamara Bolston-Williams said. “They figured it out, settled in and let it come to them.”

It was the defense that truly shined for Central, as Rutland could not get past halfcourt without significant effort. The Lady Chargers regularly picked their pockets in transition.

Rutland drew first blood but failed to score again for the remainder of the quarter. Central took a 13-2 advantage into the second period, but the Lady Hurricanes looked solid on defense.

The advantage would not last, as the Lady Chargers exploded in the second and held Rutland without a field goal to take a 36-7



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Rutland and Central players scramble for a loose ball during their game Tuesday night. The Lady Chargers got a huge 72-19 win behind their stifling defense and a 33-point night from JaMyree Simmons to bounce back from a loss in their first game.

lead into halftime.

“We have to be more disciplined. A lot of things that happened were caused by some self-inflicted things, just executing,” Lady Hurricanes coach Erica Moore said. “We can make stops all we want in the beginning, but with a team like this you can’t continue to make stops and come down and not score or take care of the ball.

Simmons scored 11 in that second quarter as part of her big night.

“JaMyree has to get the shoutout tonight, she was pretty dominant,” Bolston-Williams said. “I love each and every one of the girls, they all continue to just try and grow every game.”

The third quarter was more of the same, though the Hurricanes did hit a clean shot from beyond the arc to start the period. Even with a shortened fourth quarter, the Chargers poured it on to take the 72-19 win.

It was a much-needed performance for Central after starting the season with a difficult matchup against 6A Grayson that ended in a 77-35 loss. Bolston-Williams was still pleased with the results of that game despite the final score, though, as she’s made a habit of scheduling significant challenges for her team early in the season.

“That first game, we always accept a challenge with a team like Grayson, that really showed us a lot of things that we need to refine,” Bolston-Williams said. “Any time you face a coach like Tim Slater, it just helps you as a coach sharpen your tools.”

It was Rutland’s first loss after defeating Crawford County in the season opener. The young Lady Hurricanes squad has already matched their win total from last year’s 1-20 campaign.

“It comes down to knowing if this is something you love or something you like. That’s what they have to take away. Like I told them in the locker room at halftime, ‘It’s y’all’s job to be able to make the decisions on the court,’” Moore said.

One player exemplified that for Rutland, the head coach said.

“Jakayla Hairston is little out there, I don’t know if you saw that, but she steps up in every game regardless of her minutes. She’s never scared, she’s like, ‘Coach, where do you want me to go?’” Moore said. “She’ll always step up and do her best, and that’s all you can ask for as a coach.”



SHERIDAN

CONSTRUCTION

We Build Relationships!

At Sheridan Construction, we don’t just build structures—we build relationships, trust, and a foundation for the future. As a leading commercial construction firm in Georgia, we specialize in education, healthcare, corporate, and industrial projects, delivering top-quality results with integrity and precision.

Creating spaces that transform communities for generations.

(478) 743-1578

www.sheridanconstruction.com

Offices in: Macon • LaGrange • Athens



Santa & His Reindeer Are Coming to

BROKEN ARROW

OUTFITTERS

106 Ag Village Blvd. Perry ~ I75 Exit 134 ~ 478-224-1616

December 13th from 12-4pm

Food Trucks On Site!

FREE Activities Include:

Face Painting & Tattoos

by Body Blyng

Cookie Decorating

Cookies by Sweet Evelyn’s

Ornament Crafts


Coloring Pages & More!



COMICS & GAMES

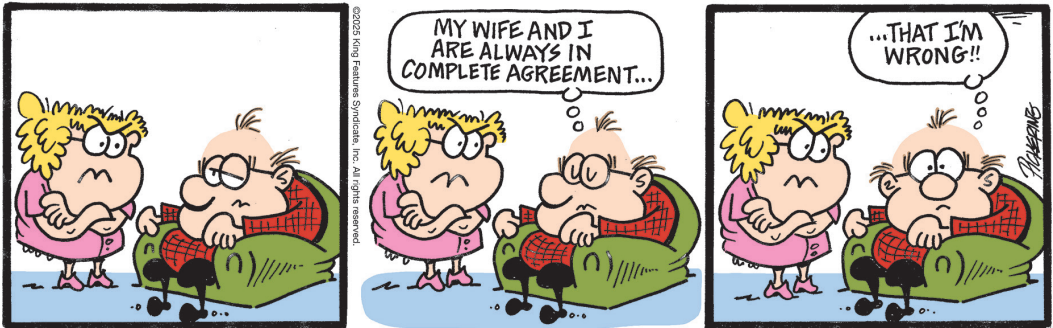
The Macon Melody • MaconMelody.com • Friday, November 21, 2025 • 12

Out on a Limb



by Gary Kopervas

The Spats



by Jeff Pickering

ACROSS

1 Listening device

4 Wrestling style

8 Wax-coated cheese

12 Cagers' gp.

13 Jannings of old films

14 Showroom model

15 Cheek

17 Pleased

18 Sports venues

19 CEO's deg.

21 Cowboys quarterback Prescott

22 Equivalence

26 London —

29 Allen or Tebow

30 "Kitchy- —!"

31 Ore deposit

32 Madrid Mrs.

33 Small bell sound

34 '50s president

35 Layer

36 Speakers' platforms

37 Chasteness

39 Fixed

40 Search for gold

41 Salad choice

45 Designer Wang

48 Magnitude

50 During

51 Vend

52 Homer's bar-tender

53 First-rate

54 Lays down the lawn

55 Evening hrs.

DOWN

1 Tolkien crea- tures

2 Help a hood

3 Hindu hero

4 — number

5 Inuit boat

6 Cambridge sch.

7 Dukakis of "Moonstruck"

8 Mystery writ- er's award

9 N.J. neighbor

10 "I — Rock"

11 '60s chic

16 "Frasier" pooch

20 "Kapow!"

23 "— you not!"

24 "Sula" author Morrison

25 Meditative practice

26 Radar image

27 Video- streaming brand

28 Baltic Sea feeder

29 Attempt

32 Fox's trait

33 Tribal emblem

35 Sch. fundrais- ing group

36 Gems from oysters

38 Apple tablets

39 Berate

42 Ninny

43 Fermi's bit

44 Deli loaves

45 Cistern

46 Punk rock off- shoot

47 Shred

49 "The Matrix" hero

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11	
12				13					14				
15				16					17				
18								19	20				
				21				22			23	24	25
26	27	28					29				30		
31						32				33			
34					35				36				
37				38				39					
				40				41			42	43	44
45	46	47				48	49						
50						51					52		
53						54					55		

Weekly SUDOKU

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

Place a number in the empty boxes in such a way that each row across, each column down and each small 9-box square contains all of the numbers from one to nine.

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

Solution time: 26 mins.

King Crossword — Answers

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

Answer

Weekly SUDOKU

MOBILE SERVICE

Premier Screens, LLC

CUSTOM MADE WINDOW SCREENS & RESCREENING SERVICES

premier-screens.com | (478)244-3885 | Find us on Google

We Come to You!