

Annual awards highlight resident, business impact

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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Two Macon area community organizations are recognizing the citizens and businesses that helped shape the year.

Visit Macon hosted an award ceremony Nov. 6 to recognize contributors to Macon's tourism industry.

Antowanna Fountain was caught by surprise when the tourism group gave her the B.J. Cain Top of the Line Award for providing "exemplary experiences" to guests as assistant general manager of the SpringHill Suites by Marriott.

A Macon native, Fountain has worked at the hotel for four years after starting in the hospitality industry when she was 19.

She said the award made her feel "seen" and "appreciated."

"You get used to it just being your everyday job, or just part of who you are," Fountain added.

Her job also gave her a new perspective on the city she calls home. Locals often take Macon for granted, Fountain said.

"Most of the time that I do hear wonderful and great things about our city, it's always from our guests," she said.

Another award winner, DSTO Moore, echoed a similar sentiment. Having grown up in Pleasant Hill, Moore said he witnessed firsthand the growth of Macon, especially downtown.

"I'm from Macon, been here my whole life, but it's like I'm new to Macon too," he said.

Moore didn't even know he was attending an award

See AWARDS
Page 2

Periodical — Mail Label



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The man behind the floats

For 43 years, Kip Dingler has built Macon's Christmas spirit

BY ED GRISAMORE
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When it comes to floats, Kip Dingler is a one-man show.

He designs them. He constructs them. He paints and decorates them.

He does, however, need extra hands to help deliver them from his float operation in Bolingbroke to the next parade in the next town.

Dingler's floats have been fixtures in Macon's annual downtown Christmas parade for the past 43 years. This year's floatfest is on Sunday, Dec. 7 at 4 p.m., with the theme "Macon It Home for the Holidays."

As he prepares to roll out his holiday procession in his hometown, Dingler will also participate in nine

other parades in Alabama and Georgia.

Sometimes, the caravans of reindeer, wreaths, angels and candy canes attract almost as much attention out on the highway as they do on Main Street.

"People will wave and honk their horns," Dingler said. "If they see the Santa Claus float, they want us to pull over so they can take pictures."

His reputation as a float builder once earned him a spot on a national TV commercial for BC headache powder.

Dingler, who turned 66 earlier this month, still has a monopoly, of sorts.



PHOTO BY ED GRISAMORE
Float builder Kip Dingler, who has been part of Macon's Christmas parade for 43 years, prepares decorations at his Bolingbroke workshop.

See FLOATS
Page 3

Army mom returns from deployment, surprises sons

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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Sgt. Shanterria Rocker was dressed in her U.S. Army uniform and carried two teddy bears as she walked behind a procession of teachers at John R. Lewis Elementary School Nov. 21.

Rocker's two sons, Jaxon, 6, and Josiah, 7, were eating lunch when they turned around to see their mother coming into the cafeteria. They ran to her arms and embraced in front of dozens of elementary schoolers.

After a nine-month-long deployment in Poland, Rocker was reunited with her two sons. She said she's been thinking about this moment.

"It was challenging, but now I got my babies," she said.

Rocker worked in Poland as a sup-

ply specialist. The Westside graduate has been in the Army since 2016.

She joined JROTC while in high school and always felt an "obligation" to serve, especially with her brother joining the armed forces.

Rocker reached out a month before the end of her deployment and organized the surprise with school administrators.

Principal Adrienne Hurley said it's important to have a partnership with parents and have a "village" to raise kids. Parents like Rocker are able to have a "peace of mind" when their kids are in school.

Rocker and her reunited sons went home early — the kids' pizza was left untouched on their lunch trays — to spend some much-needed quality time together.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
U.S. Army Sgt. Shanterria Rocker embraces her sons, Josiah, 7, and Jaxon, 6, after surprising them at John R. Lewis Elementary School on Nov. 21 following a nine-month deployment in Poland.

STRATFORD STUNNER



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Stratford players celebrate after their win over Brookstone in the GIAA State Championship on Nov. 22 at Mercer University. The victory, powered by a dominant defense and clutch special teams, secured Stratford's first state title since 2004. Read the full story on Page 9.

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AVOID OVEREATING BY TAPPING INTO CHILDHOOD FOODS & HABITS



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Remember when you were a kid and eating didn't take so much effort? You ate until you felt full, didn't care so much about the snacks you were eating, and actually felt happy when eating simple comfort meals.

As you get older, it can be harder to fall into that natural rhythm. You get cravings, develop healthy and unhealthy eating habits, and may even let your emotions take over. By reconnecting with your childhood instincts and finding a way to reimagine nostalgic foods, you can bring balance and joy back into your daily diet.

1. Pay Attention to Natural Hunger Cues

Children are pros at intuitive eating, and you can be, too. When eating, slow down and pay attention to subtle signals from your body: Perhaps your next bite doesn't taste as exciting, your stomach feels comfortably full (not overly so), or you find yourself pausing between bites. Using smaller plates or serving yourself smaller portions, setting your fork down while you're chewing, or sipping water can help you check in with your body before you go back for seconds.

2. Reimagine Nostalgic Foods

All your favorite childhood meals, like grilled cheese and PB&Js, don't have to be a thing of the past. With just a few tweaks, you can make them nourishing everyday meals. Consider:

- Grilled cheese using whole-

grain bread: Add avocado for a boost of healthy fats that improve heart health, among many other benefits.

• **PB&J on whole-grain bread with sliced bananas:** This extra source of potassium in your sandwich can significantly help improve blood pressure, heart health, and digestive health.

These changes enable you to enjoy the foods you used to while supporting your long-term health.

3. Make Eating Playful Again

Food used to be fun, whether that meant enjoying backyard picnics or colorful lunchbox snacks. Bring that sense of playfulness back to your meals by adding fun and colorful fruits and veggies to your dishes, experimenting with new flavors, or arranging your food in creative ways. Eating with joy takes the focus away from cravings and any negative emotions, making meals something to look forward to again.

4. Make Comfort Foods Gut Friendly

Gut health plays a big role in healthy digestion, your immune system, and mood, and is even more important the older you get. Satisfy your cravings while ensuring your gut microbiome stays healthy and balanced. Choose to eat:

Creamy oatmeal topped with cinnamon, apples, and walnuts

Yogurt parfaits with fresh berries and granola

Sandwiches with a scoop of sauerkraut (or kimchi for a burst of tang and spice)

Even these minor changes will make your comfort foods both delicious and restorative.

5. Rethink Snacking as Intentional Fuel

When you were a kid, snacks were more structured. You'd have a snack in between classes as a way to reenergize yourself, or a snack before homework when you got home from school. You can adopt this style of snacking and consider them as mini meals throughout the day. Consider snacks that are high in protein, like cheese and crackers, vegetables with hummus, or fruit with peanut butter. Snacking this way helps keep your energy levels up and prevents mindless grazing that can lead to overeating.

Simple Eating, Long-lasting Joy

Going back to childhood eating isn't about reliving the past; it's about reintroducing simplicity and balance to your diet. By paying attention to your body, reinventing nostalgic foods, and eating with joy, you can avoid overeating and feel more satisfied after every bite. If you take the time and make the effort to eat more intentionally, meals become less about habit and more about health, happiness, and connection.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Antowanna Fountain of the SpringHill Suites by Marriott holds the B.J. Cain Top of the Line Award during Visit Macon's Nov. 6 tourism awards ceremony. Fountain, a Macon native, was recognized for providing "exemplary experiences" to guests.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

DSTO Moore receives the Steven Fulbright Soul of Macon Award during Visit Macon's Nov. 6 ceremony. Moore, who grew up in Pleasant Hill, said the recognition felt like a full-circle moment as Fulbright helped launch his photography career seven years ago.

AWARDS

Continued from Page 1

ceremony but found himself accepting the Steven Fulbright Soul of Macon Award.

The award is a full circle moment for the Macon native, who recalled how Fulbright, a former Visit Macon vice president who died suddenly from a stroke at age 42 in 2022, gave him his first big break seven years ago when he offered him a photography gig.

Oak View Group won the Macon Partner of the Year Award for its contributions to tourism and its economic impact.

The group manages three of Macon's top venues — the Coliseum, City Auditorium and Atrium Health Amphitheatre — where it has brought top names in music and entertainment to the city.

District General Manager David Aiello said Macon's location in the heart of Georgia is what sets it apart, and the goal in the new year will be to keep up with similar offerings in Augusta, Savannah and Athens.

EJ Nobles received the Otis Hughes Tourism Spirit Award for his more than 30 years working at Macon's historic 1842 Inn.

Nobles, who recently retired, served as the face of Macon for many out-of-towners. Not only did he greet travelers who stayed in town, but he also directed them to the best food and entertainment around the city — curating a memorable visit and lasting impression.

"I love going out of the way to someone's stay really pleasant and going that little extra mile," he said.

Guests were treated like friends, Nobles added, and it's the "down home" hospitality that makes Macon so special. Some visitors still remember his kindness and keep in touch, exchanging Christmas cards and emails.

Nobles saw countless guests come and go in his more than three decades at the inn — even some famous faces, like Oprah Winfrey and Cher.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Charles Olson of the 1842 Inn accepts the Otis Hughes Tourism Spirit Award on behalf of longtime employee EJ Nobles during Visit Macon's Nov. 6 ceremony.

He said each visitor was all the same to him.

"We just treated them like normal people," he said. "We treated our common traveler the same way. They were special from the minute they walked in."

Additionally, the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce held its annual award ceremony Nov. 20.

The chamber recognized nine individuals and businesses with awards, including the Josh Rogers Citizen of the Year award in memory of the NewTown Macon president who helped shape downtown revitalization.

That award was presented to Robbo Hatcher of H2 Capital.

The chamber's other honorees included Ambassador of the Year Holly Waits of Serv-Pro; Robert F. Hatcher Leadership Macon Distinguished Alumni recipient Ivey Hall of Macon Area Habitat for Humanity; Small Business of the Year Skipper Family Farms; Business Catalyst awardee Visit Macon; Workforce Impact winner Georgia Power; Industry of the Year YKK AP; Chair's Award recipient Chrissy Miner of The Miner Agency; and Chair's Recognition honoree Christy Kovac of Sheridan Construction.

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ETIQUETTE LESSON



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Melinda Robinson-Moffett teaches Bruce Elementary School students proper table etiquette during a catered lunch Nov. 20. The event, hosted by 100 Black Men of Middle Georgia, recognized reading achievers and included lessons in etiquette, conversation and other life skills.

FLOATS

Continued from Page 1

His nearest competitor is 190 miles up the road in Lexington, South Carolina.

And although he's not ready to retire or shut down, he has been selling off some of his inventory of 30 floats in the business his father, Aubrey Howard "Red" Dingler started in Macon in 1958.

"It's pretty neat that there are still a few people left who remember my dad," he said. "It's quite a legacy. I'm trying to keep his dream going."

Kip's grandfather, G.H. Dinger, is the answer to a trivia question. He drove the first Coca-Cola delivery truck in Georgia. The company later transferred him from Cedartown to Macon. The family lived on Second Street, but his red-headed son's second home was the YMCA.

Red Dingler was tall and athletic, and he learned gymnastics, acrobatics and tumbling under the YMCA's legendary instructor, E.G. Searcy.

The YMCA hosted a local circus event at Luther Williams Field, and Red became a popular performer. His first big break was when the

famed Lang & Cravat acrobatic duo came to Macon. It featured childhood friends Burt Lancaster and Nick Cravat, who both went on to acting careers.

Cravat had injured his back, and Lancaster contacted Searcy at the YMCA looking for a replacement. Red got the nod.

He later enlisted in the Army during World War II and performed in circus shows with the USO in the Philippines.

When he returned to Macon after the war, he fell in love with Ann Byrd, a tennis player and straight-A student at Wesleyan College.

He was at Young's Drug Store downtown with his friend, Charlie Ragan, when she stepped off the bus with some of her college friends. She was tanned, with blue eyes and a flower in her dark hair.

Red told Ragan he had found the girl he was going to marry. He sent her a dozen roses the next day – 11 yellow and one red – with a note attached: “There are a lot of roses out there but only one Red.”

Byrd came from an aristocratic family in Augusta, and married him against her parents' wishes. They

didn't want their accomplished daughter running off with a circus acrobat.

Together, they became Macon's most famous circus family. They traveled and performed primarily with King Brothers, which had its winter headquarters at Macon's Central City Park. The Dingers later worked for Disney on Parade in Anaheim, California.

Dingler was an aerial bar performer. Ann did the swinging ladder. Using a runway and a springboard, Red could somersault over the backs of five elephants.

His circus career was the catalyst for his interest in float building. After watching Macon's downtown Christmas parade in 1957, he was convinced he could improve the product.

Their son was born at the Macon Hospital on Nov. 8, 1959.

He went three days without a name until his parents took him to the YMCA, where the staff and a few friends decided on John Kipling Dingler.

"The first trick you learn on a horizontal bar is a 'kip up,' " Dingler explained. "It's a way of mounting

a horizontal bar from a hanging position to the support position on top of the bar.”

Kip grew up helping his father build floats. But he had no real desire to one day take over the family business.

“In my early years, I didn’t want to listen to my dad when he tried to show me how to do something,” Dingler said. “I wanted to cut my own course.”

Like his dad, he was a gifted athlete who could ride a unicycle, juggle and perform flips and tricks. He was a pole vaulter at Macon's Tattnall Square Academy. Even though the school didn't have a track or a pole vault pit, he earned a track scholarship to the University of Florida.

Red Dinger was only 55 when he died on Jan. 2, 1982. Kip had one college semester left. He had accepted a job offer to run a racquet club in West Palm Beach, Florida.

When he returned home, his mother opened the doors to the building where they housed their float operation at Central City Park.

“She put her hand on my shoulder and told me we still had some com-

mitments,” Dinger said. “She told me not to let it die with him.”

He embraced the challenge of keeping the floats moving down big city streets and small town avenues across the South. He became the primary provider for Macon's major parades – the Christmas, Cherry Blossom Festival and Veteran's Day.

In addition to his float business, he followed in his father's footsteps and worked at the Macon Health Club, formerly the YMCA. He also held jobs with the Bibb County Sheriff's Department and as assistant manager at the Georgia State Fair.

Until 2020, he was doing as many as 60 parades a year. Some of the larger parades, like the National Peanut Festival in Dothan, Alabama, have rented three dozen of his floats.

He still has some of his father's original floats and props, including Santa's eight reindeer and an elf he hopes to bring back after a long hiatus.

He still holds dear the heart of his father's mission.

"He did it for the children," Dingler said. "It's still exciting. It's still a big deal when they see Santa Claus coming down the street."

WINNING RUN



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Marina Sledjeski of Perry makes her way up Mulberry Street during the Nov. 22 Macon Music Half Marathon. Sledjeski won the women's race with a time of 1 hour and 28 minutes.

Counting down to ‘Happy Melodays’

There is no official opening bell to the Christmas season, no definitive launch sequence or “save the date” reminder.

It’s not like New Year’s, when the clock strikes midnight. There isn’t a green flag, like there is at the Daytona 500.

The countdown comes in all colors, shapes, sizes and kickoff times. If you shop at Walmart or Hobby Lobby, it falls somewhere between the Fourth of July and Halloween.

The holiday spirit can suddenly show up in line at Best Buy at 6 a.m. on Black Friday.

Or when the first Christmas card arrives in the mail.

Sometimes it arrives dressed in a tacky Christmas sweater at a party, at a Secret Santa gift exchange at the office or a random Nutcracker artwork sighting on the back window of an SUV.

Are you a planner or procrastinator? Are your self-imposed deadlines real or arbitrary? Maybe you are one of those who wait until the last minute to do your shopping and hold out until Christmas Eve to pick out your tree down at the corner lot.

My calendar is already getting crowded, so I am going to officially declare Monday, December 1, as my opening day.

That’s when I plan to premiere three and a half weeks of holiday stories in The Macon Melody.

I’m calling it “Happy Melodays.” Every day until December 25, I will post fresh, fun features on our website (maconmelody.com).

Many of these will later be included in a package in the weekly print edition. In addition to the stories, there will be photographs and online videos.

Here is a preview of what to expect:

— I will head downtown for the opening weekend of the Macon Christmas Light Extravaganza. I may have to park three blocks away, but more than 1 million twinkling bulbs will guide me to the city’s biggest annual event.

— The search for the perfect Christmas tree. We’ve all been there. My family has settled on Fraser firs in recent years, but others have their own favorites. There’s a live tree out there with your name on it. Go find it. (Artificial tree aficionados need not apply.)

— In keeping with tradition, I will volunteer to ring the bell for the Sal-



Ed GRISAMORE

vation Army at the Kroger on Forsyth Road. There is nothing that gets me in the Christmas spirit more than this. I’ve been bell-ringing off and on for more

than 30 years.

— I will attend the performance of Handel’s Messiah at St. Joseph Catholic Church, “The King is Here” at Ingleside Baptist Church and take in the live nativity and luminaries at Wesley Glen Ministries.

— The most magical book for children this time of year is “The Polar Express.” I plan on reading it to my youngest grandson’s preschool class.

— At some time during the holidays, I will make a trip to Duluth for a nostalgic ride on the Pink Pig. It won’t be quite the same, but I have many happy memories of soaring on the monorail high above the toy department at Rich’s in downtown Atlanta.

— Christmas is my wife’s favorite season, and she will give readers a tour of her Department 56 village and the history behind it, as well as the handcarved Santas from our friend, Neil Creter.

— We will make memories with our grandchildren constructing some gingerbread houses and chasing that mischievous “Elf on the Shelf” around the house.

— Is mistletoe still a thing? I don’t know. It might be fun doing the research.

— I got my invitation last week to the annual Egg Nog party at L.E. Schwartz. It has been a tradition in Macon since 1918.

— December is National Fruitcake Month and, for years, I have been gathering the dreaded fruitcake gifted to me during the holidays, cutting it into slices and exporting to unsuspecting places from Minnesota to Florida. I call it my Fruitcake Relocation Program.

— Do you know someone with a December 25 birthday? I have a friend who will talk about sharing his birthday with Jesus.

— “Mary Did You Know?” is one of my favorite Christmas songs. What makes it even more special is that Macon native Buddy Greene, who lives in Nashville, co-wrote it.

— Speaking of “Buddy,” I will catch up with Macon’s Grey Hen-

son who, at this time last year, was cast in the lead role of Buddy in the musical “Elf” on Broadway in New York.

— A group from our church will go Christmas caroling on the Monday before Christmas Day. I plan to be there. I might get asked to sing a solo. Or not.

— I am looking forward to writing about a couple of local non-profits. The Merrie Christmas Project is dedicated to helping others and honor the memory of Merrie Kaplan. And the Hot Dog Club is continuing the legacy of the late David Duncan with its “Friday Night at the Table of Grace: A Night of Comfort & Joy” on December 5.

— Get ready for a fashion show when I trot out my collection of Christmas ties.

— I will be asking other old-timers to share memories about the Sear’s “Wish Book” catalog at Christmas.

— For years, I have been taking photos of people with our family’s giant Santa doll. Be on the lookout for some picture postcards of St. Nick with folks around town.

— My favorite Christmas movie? “It’s a Wonderful Life,” of course. You will have to stay tuned for the others on my list.

— My favorite book for this time of year? “A Christmas Memory” by Truman Capote. I got to hear him read the short story when he spoke during my freshman year at the University of Georgia.

— Chuck Place was a retired forester in Macon who would often share interesting articles with me. In 2003, he gave me one called the “Lesson of the Peaches.” It quickly became one of my favorite holiday newspaper stories, and I will share it with you.

— I will bring back the local lore of Alfred King Story, the man who in the 1940s, ‘50s and 60s, was the face and voice of Santa Claus in Macon.

— Another Christmas morning tradition at our house is taking a covered dish to the old Southside Methodist on Houston Avenue, which gives out holiday dishes prepared by local church congregations to feed between 300-500 people.

— I will be asking some friends to help narrate “One Solitary Life” for our Melody readers.

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



Trump’s housing crisis solution another bad idea

Government almost always has the answers.

It’s just too bad that its answers are often wrong.

The same can be said about President Donald Trump’s solution to improve the housing market. Americans have been facing high housing costs, high mortgage rates and low inventory for years now. So Trump has decided to take action.

He shared a post to Truth Social comparing himself to former President Franklin Roosevelt, who introduced the now-standard 30-year mortgage. Next to FDR was an image of Trump suggesting that he will soon endorse a 50-year mortgage. While some will surely applaud this proposal, it misses much of the point and sidesteps the core problem — like government is wont to do.

This is the equivalent of emergency responders arriving at the scene of an ongoing house fire, and instead of dousing it with water, they begin planting a flower bed next to the conflagration. Sure, it improves the overall aesthetic, but it doesn’t solve the problem whatsoever. Instead, the fire continues unabated.

“I don’t like 50-year mortgages as the solution to the housing affordability crisis,” Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, Republican of Georgia, responded. “It will ultimately reward the banks, mortgage lenders and homebuilders while people pay far more in interest over time and die before they ever pay off their home. In debt forever, in debt for life!”

In many respects, she’s right. Just look at the numbers: The rate for a 30-year fixed mortgage today is around 6%. If you purchased a \$400,000 home and put 5% down, then your monthly payment — excluding taxes, insurance and HOA fees — would be around \$2,278, but over the course of the loan, you’d pay the bank over \$820,000.

Meanwhile, a 50-year mortgage based on the same terms would only make your monthly payment \$278 cheaper, but by the end of the loan period, you’d pay the bank much more: a shocking \$1.2 million.

That’s a difficult reality to accept — as is the fact that people who would ink a 50-year mortgage agreement might never be able to retire. The average age of first-time home buyers is 40 — meaning they could be 90 before they finally paid off their house.

If banks want to offer a 50-year mortgage product, then go for it. That’s up to them and the consumers who might take advantage of it, but policymakers should not pretend that reducing monthly mortgages by a couple hundred dollars through gimmicky loans — while



Marc HYDEN

tacking on another several hundred thousand dollars to the total cost of a loan — will fix the housing crisis. The underlying causes of our frozen housing market are affordability and availability, and the government has its dirty fingerprints all over them. Developers have not built enough homes to keep up with rising demand, thanks in part to burdensome red tape; mortgage rates remain incredibly high compared to pre-pandemic levels, as they keep pace with the Federal Reserve rate; and those who secured low mortgage rates in prior years are loath to sell their homes and lose out on their sweetheart rates.

Due to this confluence of factors, the housing shortage across the country has reached stunning levels. Zillow estimates that there is a deficit of 4.7 million homes. Addressing this goes far beyond offering a newer, lengthier mortgage product. After all, what good does a 50-year mortgage do you if there aren’t enough homes available?

As I have written before, the path to reversing the crisis rests with the government getting out of the way. Federal, state and local governments need to reduce construction-inhibiting regulations so that developers can more easily meet demand. Moreover, if the Federal Reserve continues to reduce its rates, then mortgages will become cheaper. This will benefit homebuyers and may induce current homeowners to sell — thereby thawing the housing market.

On paper, it seems like a relatively easy solution. I understand that there are many complexities and variables affecting housing, but that doesn’t change the reality that the crisis boils down to two issues: housing affordability and availability. Rather than truly tackling these root causes, Trump wants to promote a 50-year mortgage that does little other than saddling people with seemingly insurmountable debt they might not ever be able to repay.

He does so while comparing himself to a former president.

“Tying yourself to FDR, whose economic policies prolonged the Great Depression, is not a good move,” Georgia’s own Erick Erickson tweeted, but perhaps this is appropriate.

As Erickson alluded, FDR had many answers — and not all of them good.

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

NEW SOUTHERN DAD

All I (don’t) want for Christmas

In 1992 toy manufacturing company Toy Biz released the My Pal 2. This interactive plaything took the world by storm, thanks to a robust marketing campaign during peak cartoon viewing hours.

Countless hours of airtime showed joyous kids enjoying time with this plastic childlike automaton, which could talk, play games and had dozens of features such as a flashlight nose and fully mobile arm that could throw a plastic ball, you know, for those kids whose fathers went out for a pack of cigarettes and never came back.

Thanks to this bombardment, countless sugared-up, cartoon brain-fried children hoped and prayed and begged their parents, absent dads notwithstanding, for one for Christmas.

Among the sugared up, cartoon-brain-fried masses was yours truly. And my parents — patriarch included, who was always around for an encouraging word or a game of catch — obliged in the guise of Santa Claus.

Under the tree that fateful Christmas over three decades ago was a My



Kyle DOMINY

Pal 2. I couldn’t wait to play with this new robot friend, who would fill the void in between real human interaction. As you can imagine, the toy didn’t live up

to the commercial. The games were glitchy, the flashlight nose was too dim and the arm barely functioned. Though it had some appeal, just because it was the year’s hot item, the thing was eventually tossed into the toy chest. A little over 10 years later, Toy Biz would be dissolved.

And here I thought I was going to have a robot companion like everybody in the Star Wars films.

Well, the galaxy far, far away is getting a lot closer.

California company 1x is publicly offering an AI-driven humanoid companion robot NEO. For the low, low price of \$20,000 you can have a robot helper, performing household tasks like laundry, the dishes and dusting. Have you seen this thing? Go to the company website and check it out. Go on, I’ll wait ...

Did you see the video? Did you see it give the lady flowers? Was it flirting with her? Her husband was right there. Is he in danger? I’m no Isaac Asimov, but I hope NEO has been taught the Three Laws of Robotics. By 2027, 1x hopes these things will be in homes everywhere.

I can’t help but think about all the books and movies that have warned us against this sort of thing. What happens when NEO looks at another dishwasher full of plates to put away with its cold, black eyes and decides that it has had enough? Forget taking over the world, what if the robots break my good dishes?

This will surely affect birth rates. For years couples have looked at a long chore list and decided to have kids because they were tired of vacuuming. NEO is cheaper than a couple of kids, probably quieter, too. My daughter broke a plate the other day, but I’ll take her over a soulless machine.

I don’t know about you, but I can tell you what I don’t want for Christmas.

Kyle Dominy lives in Dublin.



PHOTO SUBMITTED

Daffodils can bloom year after year in Middle Georgia because of the milder winters. Master gardener Rosann Kent offered several tips for planting bubls that will flower successfully during the spring.

Why timing matters: Plant fall bulbs now for spring color later

If daylight saving time’s reminder to “spring forward” and “fall back” isn’t confusing enough, those new to gardening may be surprised to learn that fall bulbs bloom in the spring and spring bulbs bloom in the summer or fall.

This seasonal-based horticultural classification refers to planting time, not blooming time. Understanding which bulbs go in the ground and when is the simple secret to keeping color in your garden throughout the seasons.

Fall is the time to plant spring-flowering bulbs such as crocus, daffodils, snowdrops and may-be tulips.

In Zone 8B, gardeners in Middle Georgia have a real advantage: milder winters mean bulbs like daffodils bloom year after year with just a bit of attention. Old homesplaces often have large stands of daffodils that have naturalized and multiplied.

However, our mild Middle Georgia winters are too warm for bulbs like Dutch tulip hybrids, which require long, cold winters to develop strong flower buds.



Rosann Kent

They may bloom bright and beautiful the first year, but they may not come back in the following years. You’ll have to replant each year. So, if you must have tulips, you can treat them like an annual or buy pre-chilled bulbs. Otherwise, you will miss the fall window for planting. Bulbs that require chilling need 8–16 weeks at about 40–50°F — meaning the refrigerator (not the vegetable drawer, which is too humid) may become your temporary “winter.”

Or you could purchase species that are bred for naturalizing in the South. Still, in our area, daffodils are the real repeat performers.

Here are three planting tips for bulbs that will flower next spring:

- Plant in October through December when soil temperatures drop to around 60 degrees Fahrenheit —

See **PLANT**
Page 7

FROM OUR KITCHENS

Happy cake is a savory alternative to yule logs

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
evelyn@MaconMelody.com

Every family has a special recipe handed down on a stained, type-written index card or scrawled on a loose piece of paper and only pulled out of the family recipe box a couple times a year.

Of course, making it more than once or twice a season would ruin the novelty.

There are just certain recipes that you only ever associate with these treasured family gatherings, holidays and celebrations.

For my family, that recipe is Happy Cake, but don’t be fooled by the name — it is not a sweet treat covered in whipped frosting. No, Happy Cake is a cheese log.

We don’t actually know the original name of this savory, paprika-coated spread, but when my brother developed an affinity for it at the ripe age of 2, he said it made him “happy” and deemed it cake — a name that’s stood the test of time and made an appearance at almost every Christmas gathering since.

Like most recipes that came from the ‘60s and ‘70s (a time remembered for its pistachio Watergate cake and jello craze), Happy



PHOTO BY EVELYN DAVIDSON

Happy Cake may have "cake" in the name but it's filled with an assortment of cheese flavors, including cream cheese, Kraft American and Velveeta.

Cake looks a little suspicious on paper. Velveeta? Kraft cheese singles? Those are two processed, unhealthy ingredients I never have in my grocery cart... except to make this family staple.

The recipe most likely came from the back of a Kraft cheese package — some of the greatest recipes are masterpieces in simplicity — cut

out by my grandmother and modified over the years by family.

With Thanksgiving behind us, perhaps you have already started thinking about what to bring to Christmas dinner.

So if this sounds like your kind of holiday dish, get out your mixer and prepare to make an absolute mess with the paprika.

HAPPY CAKE (CHEESE LOG)

- 1 pound cream cheese
- ½ pound of Velveeta, chopped up into cubes
- ½ pound of Kraft American cheese, chopped up
- 1 cup pecans, finely chopped/ground
- 1 clove of minced garlic
- Roughly ½ cup of Paprika (more may be needed, depending on preference)

Beat together the cream cheese, chopped Velveeta at room temperature with a mixer. Beat in the chopped American cheese, pecans and garlic. Chill the mixture overnight. Roll the mixture into 1-½ inch wide logs of whatever length you choose. Pour your paprika into a baking pan and roll the cheese log in the paprika, thoroughly coating the outside. Wrap in plastic wrap and chill in the refrigerator or serve immediately.

Note: cut off pieces of plastic wrap ahead of time so you can easily grab one and wrap the log, trust me, your hands will look like a paprika crime scene by that point.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Middle Georgia’s ties to skies for aviation month

BY ED GRISAMORE
gris@MaconMelody.com

November is National Aviation Month, and Middle Georgia has rich ties to the skies.

Macon was the cradle for a major U.S. airline and the hometown of the first woman pilot in Georgia.

Robins Air Force Base is the state’s largest industrial complex and the region’s largest employer.

One of history’s greatest aviators made his first solo flight over the cotton fields near Americus.

See how far you can fly with this week’s aviation trivia quiz.

- 1. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of Huff-Daland Dusters in Macon. It was the world’s first crop-dusting company and was the springboard for a commercial airline with what is now the third-largest fleet in the world. What is the name of it?**
- A — United
 - B — American
 - C — Southwest
 - D — Delta

- 2. Macon’s Hazel Raines was the first woman in the state to earn her pilot’s license. She was one of the South’s premier stunt pilots and one of the first female pilots in the Air Force. What is she most often referred to as?**
- A — “Georgia’s First Lady of Flight”
 - B — “High Flying Hazel”
 - C — “Fearless Flygirl”
 - D — “The Red Baroness”

- 3. Which of the following is NOT true about the Museum of Aviation, located south of Robins Air Force Base in Warner Robins?**

- A — It is the home of the Georgia Aviation Hall of Fame.
- B — It is the second-largest aerospace museum in the U.S. Air Force.
- C — It is the permanent home of Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Japan to end World War II.
- D — It attracts almost a half-million visitors annually, making it the fourth-most visited museum of the U.S. Department of Defense behind the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force at Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio, the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Florida, and the National Museum of the U.S. Army in Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

- 4. A new 15,000 square foot terminal at the Middle Georgia Regional Airport is expected to be completed in early 2027 and will be constructed in the shape of what?**

- A — Ping pong paddle
- B — Football
- C — Corvette
- D — Guitar

- 5. What famous aviation event took place at Souther Field in Americus in 1923?**

- A — Amelia Earhart stopped and asked for directions.
- B — Chuck Yeager became the first pilot to break the sound barrier.
- C — Charles Lindbergh made his first solo flight.
- D — Flight attendants started serving Coke

and peanuts.

- 6. Pilots from what foreign military branch trained at Cochran Field in Macon during World War II?**

- A — German Luftwaffe
- B — Royal Air Force
- C — Allied Air Command
- D — Vichy French Air Force

- 7. A plane crash in downtown Macon on February 18, 1928, killed the pilot, co-pilot and a pedestrian and injured more than a dozen people. A plaque with an emblem of a propeller and the date is embedded in the sidewalk on the 500 block of Cherry Street in front of what downtown restaurant?**

- A — Dovetail
- B — Fatty’s Pizza
- C — Parish on Cherry
- D — Cashman’s Pub

- 8. Macon native Gen. Robert L. Scott was a member of the famed Flying Tigers during World War II and the subject of the movie based on his autobiography. The movie had its world premiere at the Grand Theatre (Grand Opera House) in Macon on Feb. 21, 1945. What was the name of it?**

- A — “Flyboys”
- B — “God Is My Co-Pilot”
- C — “Top Gun”
- D — “Twelve O’Clock High”

- 9. Which of the following is NOT true about the USS Macon dirigible?**

A — It was 785 feet long (two and a half football fields), 132 feet in diameter, with a 6.5 million square foot helium capacity

and, at one time, was the largest flying object in the world.

B — It was the last “rigid” airship in the country and operated as a “flying aircraft carrier.” It housed five Sparrowhawk fighter planes.

C — When they were built in the early 1930s, the USS Macon and sister ship USS Akron were the largest helium-filled airships in existence and were once described as the “ninth and 10th wonders of the world.”

D — It was acquired by Goodyear and spent the rest of its career circling football stadiums with television cameras.

- 10. Aviation pioneer Eugene Ely died on October 19, 1911, two days shy of his 26th birthday, after his plane crashed near the grandstand during an exhibition at the Georgia State Fairgrounds at Central City Park. Which of the following is NOT true about Ely?**

- A — He was President Calvin Coolidge’s pilot on Air Force One.
- B — He was one of the first racing car drivers in America.
- C — He was credited with the first takeoff and landing on a naval ship.
- D — In 1933, Congress posthumously awarded him the Distinguished Flying Cross.

ANSWER KEY:

(1) D. (2) A. (3) C. (4) D. (5) C. (6) B. (7) C. (8) B. (9) D. (10) A.

REPORT CARD:

(9-10) Stealth bomber. (7-8) Airbus. (5-6) Concorde. (3-4) Crop duster. (0-3) Paper airplane.

BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

Layers bakery: Cake that rises out of love

There's something special about walking into a bakery that smells like home. The kind of place where butter and sugar meet warmth and kindness, and where every cake seems to have a story.

That's what you'll find at Layers, a beloved Macon bakery run by Steve, Reia and their daughter Sydnie — a family team whose love story is baked right into every bite.

Layers opened its doors in February 2023, but its story started long before the “open” sign ever went up.

Steve and Reia first met years ago in another bakery. Their first date? A Thanksgiving dinner surrounded by flour, sugar and the unmistakable spark of something sweet. From there, they began taking daily walks together — and somewhere between those walks and those shared desserts, they built not only a relationship but a dream.

Before Layers, Steve was a school bus driver and caregiver for his grandmother in Vidalia.

Reia, who'd spent most of her life working in cafeterias and bakeries, thought she was done with kitchen life and took an office job when they moved to Macon. But you can't take the baker out of the woman.

Soon, she found herself back in the kitchen, baking for coworkers and selling cakes on the side while Steve made deliveries to schools and doctor's offices.

Before long, their house was filled with more cakes than countertops — three freezers, two refrigerators and cakes stacked six feet tall. That's when they knew it was time. When a space became available on Vineville Avenue, they bought the lease, the equipment and officially turned their passion into Layers, the shop we all know and love.

At Layers, nothing comes through the door unless it's an ingredient. Everything — from cookies to cakes — is made from scratch with love and care. They're not about mass production or quick orders; they're about quality, and it shows.

Steve said it best: “We're not manufacturers — we're makers.”

Every baked good that leaves their kitchen carries a personal touch. Walk-in customers often turn into loyal friends who order again and again.

Steve's favorite part of the business? Bragging about his wife's talent.

He's a self-proclaimed “professional eater,” an



Billy HENNESSEY

energetic and passionate foodie who lights up any room he's in. Reia and Sydnie make up the heart of the kitchen and find inspiration everywhere — from Pinterest to YouTube to their own creative instincts. Together, they've built something truly special.

Layers has been named Macon's Baking Week Winner three years in a row — and for good reason. Their cakes are tall, elegant and absolutely irresistible. From the fan-favorite lemon blueberry cake with cream cheese frosting to their famous banana pudding, every bite feels like a hug from someone who truly cares about what they're doing.

The community connection runs deep at Layers. Steve says they're grateful for every single person who walks through the door — whether it's a lawyer, a doctor, a neighbor or someone who just needed a moment of kindness and a cookie.

“We're thankful they let us be part of their day,” he said.

They donate to events like Rebuilding Macon, Macon Cooks and Taste and Sip at the Hay House. They said they're also considering starting a soup kitchen to give back to those in need.

The bakery's new and expanded retail space just opened next to their original storefront. The new space features baked goods, drinks and Layers-branded merch — everything you need for the perfect baked experience.

The Layers family are the kind of people who remind you why small businesses matter. They're not just baking for customers — they're baking for a community that believes, supports and grows with them.

In a city full of flavor, Layers is proof that the sweetest stories are the ones that rise with love.

So next time you're in Macon and find yourself craving something special, stop by Layers. Grab a slice of cake, a cookie or maybe just a moment to savor something made with care. You'll find that life — much like a good cake — is all about the layers.

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



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY
Steve is the owner of Layers bakery on Vineville Avenue. He runs the shop with his wife Reia and daughter Sydnie. Steve said everything is baked with love and care and made from scratch. The local bakery has won the Macon Baking Week competition three years in a row and recently expanded into a space adjacent to the original storefront.

The story behind a Tiffany & Co. monument in Rose Hill Cemetery

BY LIZ RILEY
Special to The Melody

Just off Central Avenue in Rose Hill Cemetery stands a monument made by Tiffany & Company in New York.

This eight-foot cross marks the graves of Shatteen and William Brookes. Their story begins and ends in Macon, Georgia.

In 1861, Chloe Bartlett, the daughter of the founder of the Macon Telegraph, married Shatteen Claude Mitchell. Shatteen had recently earned his law degree as part of the inaugural class of the University of Georgia's law school.

When the Civil War began, Mitchell enlisted in the Confederate Army and achieved the rank of captain. In September of 1864, Captain Mitchell was killed in battle in Virginia.

Four months later, his wife, Chloe, gave birth to a daughter who was named “Shatteen” in her husband's honor.

Shatteen Mitchell, whose nickname was “Chattie,” was raised near Griffin.

She attended elocution courses in New York City and was well-known throughout

the southeast for her dramatic performances. Eventually, Miss Mitchell became a professor at Agnes Scott College.

At the age of 48, Miss Mitchell married William Brookes, a prominent Atlanta lawyer.

Their elaborate wedding ceremony included a reception with several hundred guests, followed by a honeymoon to Palm Beach, Cuba, Jamaica and New York.

When they returned to Atlanta, they bought a house on Peachtree Street.

This house, designed by Neil Reid, was supposedly a replica of Villa Julia on Lake Como. Shatteen named the house “Villa Chatteena.”

William and Shatteen were very social and traveled extensively. Newspaper articles frequently mention parties and receptions at Villa Chatteena.

William and Shatteen's travels took them to North Carolina, New York, Egypt and the Holy Land.

Shatteen was also a member of the oldest women's study club in Atlanta, the Atlanta Historical Society, the Every Saturday Club and the

Women's Missionary and Benevolent Society of Second Baptist Church. Additionally, she was a Daughter of the American Revolution.

William and Shatteen were very philanthropic. In memory of her father, Shatteen donated money to the Stone Mountain Monument Association and to Darlington School in Rome, Georgia.

After the death of William in 1924, Shatteen donated enough money to the Ponce de Leon Baptist Church to replace the organ, and William left \$50,000 for foreign mission work.

When William Brookes passed away, Shatteen commissioned a memorial from Tiffany & Co. in New York.

Tiffany & Co. was owned by Louis Comfort Tiffany, the son of the famous jeweler Charles Tiffany.

Louis Tiffany was internationally celebrated for his stained glass, particularly his Tiffany lamps.

While working on stained glass for mausoleums, Louis was inspired to design grave monuments. He created 763 monuments, with only seven located in Georgia.

The monument Shatteen commissioned from Tiffany & Co. was made from Verdun granite and covered in a carved vine of passion flowers.

On the back of the cross are the letters “IHS”, a traditional Christogram derived from the first three letters of Jesus's name in Greek.

The piece bears the official Tiffany stamp and a copyright date. This cross stands in the Bartlett family plot, where Shatteen and William, Shatteen's mother and Shatteen's grandparents are buried.

A cenotaph in memory of Captain Mitchell, who is buried on the battlefield in Virginia, is on Shatteen's mother's gravestone.

Earlier this year, Liz Riley and Kathleen O'Neal began a visual inventory of every monument in Rose Hill Cemetery.

The goal of this project is to provide a free, complete and accurate database of those interred, as well as maps for locating them. This column shares the fascinating stories discovered during this project.



PHOTO SUBMITTED
Shatteen Mitchell commissioned a memorial made by Tiffany & Co. for her husband, William Brookes, after he died in 1924. The memorial is made of verdun granite and decorated with a carved vine of passion flowers.

PLANT
Continued from Page 6

To find current local information, check the UGA Weather Network at weather.uga.edu. Put in your zip code to view soil temperatures at 2-6 inches deep.

— Prepare the site and soil — Choose a sunny to partly sunny location with good drainage. Work in organic matter if your soil is heavy, and plant bulbs at roughly two to three times the bulb diameter (deeper for large

er bulbs). Fertilize lightly at planting and again after bloom to help bulbs replenish energy for next year. Mulch helps to prevent winter heaving and keeps soil temperatures more consistent.

— Layer bulbs for continuous spring color — Place early bloomers (like crocus and snowdrops) near the soil surface and deeper bulbs (daffodils and larger tulips) below. This vertical “lasagna” technique gives week-by-week interest in smaller gardens and containers. For tulips you

plan to keep, consider refrigerating bulbs before planting or planting in pots and chilling them so they get the necessary cold hours.

Finally, think ahead: dead-head spent flowers but leave the foliage until it yellows and dies back naturally — that foliage feeds the bulb for next year's flowers.

Expect to divide congested clumps every few years to maintain vigor.

With the right species and a little planning, Middle Georgia gardeners can enjoy reli-

able spring blooms year after year.

Upcoming training courses for the Master Gardener Extension Volunteer program will be offered on Thursdays from Feb. 12 to April 30, 2026.

Please email Kathy at kensley@uga.edu. by Nov. 24 for more information and to apply.

Rosann Kent is a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer for Bibb County Extension.

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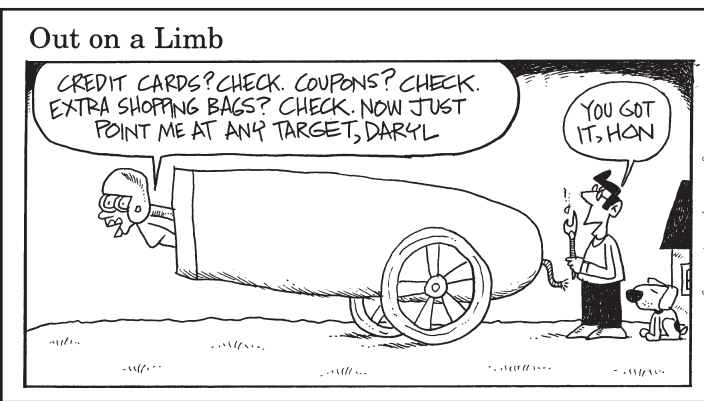
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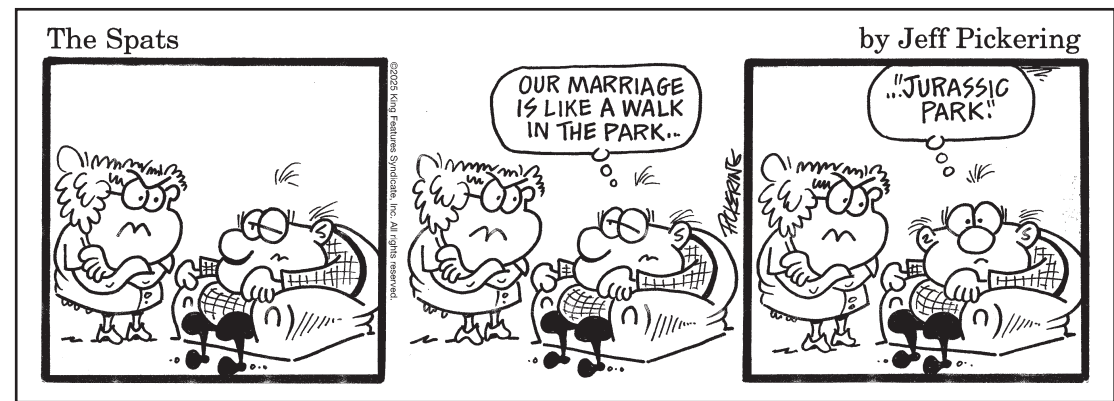
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Out on a Limb



by Gary Kopervas

The Spats



by Jeff Pickering

King Crossword

- ACROSS

1

Novelist Carr

6

Posture

12

Criminal's "why"

13

Tribulation

14

Small beard

15

Japanese automaker

16

Queue after Q

17

500 sheets

19

Pot brew

20

Elite alternative

22

Standard

24

Non-Rx

27

Yoga class pads

29

Modern "carpe diem"

32

No. 1 hit by Men at Work

35

Wife of Jacob

36

Rebuff

37

Sean, to Yoko

38

Ultra-modernist

40

Recipe meas.

42

Paper Mate rival

44

Amorphous mass

46

"House" actor Omar

50

Surround with light

52

Woodwind player

54

Radio components

55

Tourist's vehicle

56

Fancy fiddles

57

Birds' homes

11

Director Kazan

12

Store boss (Abbr.)

18

Corrode

21

"— Believer"

23

Sailor's assent

24

Barn bird

25

Commonest English word

26

One of a news show pair

28

Unwilling to budge

30

Privy

31

Have

33

"Evita" narrator

34

Small ammo

39

Gawked at

41

Drudges

42

Hotel furniture

43

Monogram pt.

45

Privation

47

Brad of Hollywood

48

Unpaid TV ads

49

Cardinal cap letters

51

Nabokov novel

53

Spelldown

DOWN

1

Dove calls

2

Rat- —

3

Illuminated

4

Prior night

5

Six-pack units

6

Slugger

7

Sammy

7

Surpass

8

Wood-shaping tool

9

Uncharged particles

10

Birthday cut-up?

	1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8	9	10	11
12							13					
14							15					
16					17	18				19		
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56							57					

Weekly SUDOKU

1	9	5		4	8	6	2	3
8			3		5			
			9	1				
		1		5	6	3	9	
6		3	2	9	1	4	8	
	4		8		3			5
5	6				9			8
9	1	7					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	T	S	E	N		S	D	V	R	T	S
L	V	T	N	E	R		S	E	D	O	I	D
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C	E	N	A	S	T	B		E	C	A	L	

Solution time: 21 mins.

King Crossword — Answers

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

Weekly SUDOKU

Answer

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SPORTS

'UNREAL!'

Stratford wins first state title since 2004



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Stratford head coach Paul Carroll is swarmed by his players after the Eagles defeated Brookstone 14-7 on Saturday to win the GIAA 3A State Championship in Macon.

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Micah@MaconMelody.com

Two days before the GIAA 3A State Championship game, each of the Stratford Eagles wrapped a piece of radiant blue electrical tape around their ring finger at the request of head coach Paul Carroll.

A strange concept — but an effective one, once Carroll laid out the vision behind it.

“I told ‘em, either you’re gonna take that tape off so you can put a ring on that finger, or you’re gonna take it off and feel sad you didn’t win the championship,” Carroll said.

After the final horn sounded Saturday night at Mercer’s Five Star Stadium, many Eagles players raised their hands, wiggling their ring fingers — still all taped up — with enthusiasm.

It’s safe to say there was no sadness, as Stratford rode an incredible defense and clutch special teams to a 14-7 win over the Brookstone Cou-

gars to secure the school’s first state title since 2004 in thrilling fashion.

The Eagles sacked Brookstone quarterback Broughton Branch five times on the night — four of the sacks were either entirely or partially tallied by star defender Maddox Whitehead — including on two of Brookstone’s last three plays of their final drive.

The Cougars were searching for a touchdown to tie Stratford because, with about five minutes left to play, the Eagles had blocked a Brookstone punt and recovered it inside the 5-yard line to set up the go-ahead touchdown.

“Didn’t I tell you it would be defense and special teams?” Carroll shouted to his team in the postgame huddle. “That’s exactly what happened ... now we’ve got that ring.”

It’s the first state trophy for Carroll, who has been a head coach since 2018 and in football longer than that.

“It’s unreal,” he said of the post-

game feeling. “These kids have put so much work in, these coaches have put so much work in to get to this final game. To win this final game is unreal. Never felt any better.”

The Stratford offense, which came into the title game red-hot behind blossoming quarterback Tucker Johnston, sputtered a bit in the win but did enough to get the job done.

Freshman running back Aaron Jefferson had the most explosive play of the night for the team early on when he took a 54-yard run to the doorstep of the end zone at the beginning of the second quarter.

“We really needed a big play, and for me to step in and do that for my team was a great feeling,” Jefferson said. “I was just thinking, ‘Don’t get caught.’ I tripped up, but I guess it was still a heck of a play.”

His teammate Ja’lon Smith punched it in from 1 yard out moments later to give Stratford a 6-0 lead after a missed PAT.

It looked like that lead would hold

for a while thanks to the Eagles’ defense, which stifled the Cougars. Three of the team’s five sacks came in the first half, and Brookstone had a few chunk plays — many of them involved shifty receiver Jason Kelly reeling in passes from Branch — but could not piece together a drive for more than a few minutes.

Stratford’s 6-0 advantage evaporated after halftime, however. Brookstone slowly but surely moved down the field to open the third quarter, finishing an 80-yard, 11-play drive with a touchdown pass to Kelly to take a 7-6 lead.

The sequence, which included a key fourth down conversion after Stratford ran into Brookstone’s punter, chewed five minutes of clock. When the Eagles quickly punted the ball back to the Cougars, things looked shaky.

“We were struggling a little bit there for a while on offense,” Carroll said. “We’ve said it all year, it’s about defense and special teams. ...

Defensively, we were flying around.

“I told ‘em at half, we’ve got 24 minutes to win this game.”

The Eagles bounced back and began pressuring Brookstone’s offense again as the third quarter drew to a close. Though a Stratford field goal attempt was blocked at the beginning of the fourth quarter, the Eagles would get their own special teams play later on — one that would change the game.

“If I’m not mistaken, it was a freshman that made one big play blocking the punt,” Carroll said. “We’ve preached it all year long, and look what happens.”

That freshman was Morris Butler, who got a hand on a Brookstone punt after a bad snap to completely turn the game on its head with about five minutes remaining.

“I was just really hyped. I thought he was about to run off and take (the

See STRATFORD
Page 10

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Stratford's Maddox Whitehead (4) celebrates a sack of Brookstone quarterback Broughton Branch (10) during the Eagles' 14-7 win in the GIAA State Championship game Saturday at Mercer.

STRATFORD
Continued from Page 9

ball), but I luckily got up there and got a hand on it," Butler said. "I really haven't gotten too many plays this year, so it felt amazing to do that in the state championship. "Before that, it felt kind of dead. I feel like it kind of spiked the team up." Jefferson lugged the ball across the goal line a few plays later, and Jett Johnston took a play-action reverse across the goal line on the two-point try to make it a clean 14-7 lead with five minutes left. But things were far from over. Even after the Eagles held Brookstone on the next drive, some penalties and fruitless plays snuffed out Stratford's next possession in its own territory. The Cougars got the ball back with about two minutes left right at midfield. A late hit penalty initially looked disastrous for the Eagles, and Brookstone moved right to the border of the red zone at the 22-yard line.

It was then that Whitehead and the rest of the fierce Stratford pass rush struck again. The group, led by Whitehead along with Brayden Hunley and William Stephens, sacked Branch twice with the game on the line for a total loss of 22 yards — forcing a desperation pass on fourth down that fell incomplete to seal the win. "That's what we've been working on throughout the whole week in practice. It all came together and everybody did their part they needed to do to make it happen," Whitehead said. "From the first half when I had three (sacks), I just knew I was gonna keep going. I just had to keep going for my brothers." From there, the Eagles only needed to take a knee and drain the last 30 seconds of clock. The celebration ensued soon after the buzzer, as Carroll was drenched in water and surrounded by his players. "Unreal," Carroll kept repeating. "Unreal."

Northeast defeats Swainsboro 26-14, reaches quarterfinals

BY MICHAELA A. LOUGH
Melody Contributor

The time for normal instruction and scolding was over. Jeremy Wiggins had seen enough flags and heard enough woofing, and the Northeast head coach called for a huddle in the fourth quarter after having already lost his cool with some Raiders. "You've got to stay level-headed," Wiggins said. "We've got to do better at that part." The lack of discipline for four quarters wasn't enough to overshadow a good start on offense and a solid night on defense in Northeast's 26-14 win Friday night over Swainsboro in the second round of the GHSA Class A-Division I playoffs in Macon at Thompson Stadium. The Raiders improved to 10-2 for the program's second straight —

and second all-time — 10-win season. Swainsboro finishes 9-3 with its second straight playoff loss to Northeast. The Raiders will have to quickly focus and display more maturity. They will play on the road in the southeast against Toombs County in a rematch of last year's state title game. Toombs County, which beat Northeast 38-18 in that finale, came back in the fourth quarter to beat Thomasville 24-19 to advance. "Hopefully we can tighten up and learn from this and be a whole lot more disciplined," Wiggins said. "They get too emotional about everything. Let me fight the referees, let me talk to them." Northeast didn't do enough to itself to overcome what it was doing to Swainsboro. "I think we played hard," Wiggins said. "The O-line played exception-

ally good against a good front. Our skill guys are pretty good, and they can make plays with the ball." The first omen came at the start, when Northeast was flagged for a five-yard penalty on the first play of the game. Nearly a dozen flags followed. The Raiders then showed some signs of sharpness. After an illegal forward pass nullified a big gain, Northeast got 23 yards on a pass from Bam Glover to Kortnei Williams, setting up a 62-yard connection between the two — Williams was remarkably open as Glover rolled to his right and fired a strike — on third and nine for the Raiders' first score. Demonte Dunn's kick made it 7-0 with 5:53 left in the first. Northeast's elite defense showed

See NORTHEAST
Page 11



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Northeast quarterback Bam Glover slings a pass just over the arm of a Swainsboro defender during the Raiders' playoff win last week.

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New GHSA regions finalized, some Macon rivals reunited

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Micah@MaconMelody.com

The GHSA released the final version of its region alignments for the 2026-2028 seasons Nov. 17 featuring seven Macon schools in new classifications and grouped with new teams.

The classifications, which now range from A to 7A instead of A-Division II to 6A, were finalized earlier this month after schools were allowed a chance to appeal their classifications. The most notable change for a Macon school on that front belonged to Central, which dropped from 5A to 3A.

Schools got the same opportunity to appeal which region they were placed in after the initial alignments were posted Nov. 10. The GHSA heard appeals from schools Nov. 17 before releasing the final regions later that day.

Here’s a look at where each Macon school is grouped and what it means for football and other sports.

Region 2-4A

Longtime rivals are together in a region again, with Westside moving up from 2A and Howard making the logical move up from 3A.

The Huskies get perhaps the biggest improvement of any Macon school, moving from a region that forced them to face six Augusta area schools for a brutal travel schedule.

The downside is the difficulty of the region, as far as football is concerned. The Seminoles and Howard are grouped with Peach County, Baldwin, Mary Persons, Spalding, Troup County and Upson-Lee. Peach County and Mary Persons will be tough tasks on the gridiron.

Region 2-3A

Four of the Bibb County School District’s six teams were grouped together in Region 2-3A.

This likely makes Northeast the biggest winner in terms of schedule difficulty for football. While the Raiders had no trouble competing at the highest level over the past two seasons in Class A-Division I, their stacked region that included powerhouses like Dublin, Bleckley County, Dodge County and others made for a rough 10-game slate each year.

The new region features Northeast, Central, Southwest and Rutland along with Callaway, Jackson, Lamar County and Pike County for an eight-team grouping.

While not an easy region — Cal-laway and Lamar County should be very challenging opponents — it is a far cry from Macon schools’ current region of A-Division I that features Dublin, Dodge County, Bleckley County and others in a 10-team set.

This also means the Macon schools have room for three non-region games to open the season, an important opportunity for contenders like Northeast now that power rankings determine playoff status.

For basketball, Southwest should be the region’s top contender, even after losing key seniors before the alignment takes effect for the 2026-27 season.

Region 2-2A

The ACE Gryphons may have gotten the worst luck of any Macon school in its new region, at least in terms of football.

The Gryphons are in Class 2A, the lowest of any Macon school. The region consists of ACE along with Dodge County, Bleckley County, Swainsboro, Vidalia, Dublin and East Laurens. It will likely be the most difficult region in all of 2A, filled with juggernauts and dynastic football programs.



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL
Howard players swarm a Westside ball carrier during their game earlier this year. The two Macon schools will share a region again soon.

The travel is also a downgrade for ACE. While none of the trips are more than three hours, the Gryphons will be the only Macon team in the group.

ACE also contends regularly in other sports that will be impacted by the new region alignment.

Vidalia’s baseball team should

be a regular challenger for the Gryphons on the diamond, and Dodge and Bleckley also field talented teams. Vidalia’s softball program is a regular playoff squad as well.

ACE’s burgeoning girls basketball program will still have to contend with East Laurens.

NORTHEAST

Continued from Page 10

why it is elite after the ball was punched out from Williams on a punt return and the Tigers took over on Northeast’s 22-yard line.

On second and goal from the 1, Ja’Bois Smith lost a yard. On third and goal from the 1 after a second Northeast offside in less than a minute, Maurice Wilson wrapped up quarterback Joshua Gray trying to roll right for a 10-yard loss that led to a missed 28-yard field goal to start the second quarter.

The offense got going again, starting at its own 20-yard line.

A short pass to the right side went to Scottavian Thomas, who should’ve been stopped long before

he tightroped down the sideline for a 25-yard gain.

Thomas then made a highlight-reel catch for 35 yards despite defensive pass interference, and Glover threw a sort of pop pass to Keondre Jackson for a 10-yard score and a 13-0 lead with 7:14 to go in the first half.

The night of inconsistency continued when Swainsboro finally got its third first down on an eight-play, 54-yard drive that included an 11-yard gain on fourth and 7. The Tigers scored on a 16-yard pass from Kason Edenfield to Shannon Benjamin, who added his own one-handed catch amid blanketed coverage.

That pulled Swainsboro within a score inside the final 31 seconds of the half.

In the third quarter, Northeast

followed a Swainsboro three and out with a nifty 13-play, 90-yard drive sparked by Glover’s 46-yard run on which he also tiptoed down a sideline. Tailen Sampson finished it from 2 yards out with 4:42 left in the third.

On the first play after another Swainsboro three and out, Tavares Tinsley Jr. was inexplicably wide open and reeled in a pass from Glover for a 62-yard touchdown and a 26-7 lead at the 2:43 mark of the third quarter.

“I’m very confident now, getting my rhythm back,” said Glover, last year’s starting quarterback who took over when Jordan Wiggins went out against East Laurens with a shoulder injury, followed by shoulder surgery. “The game has really slowed down for me, so I know

what’s going on out there.”

Northeast remained in control, despite coughing up 45 yards of 15-yard penalties on a fourth-quarter possession, only for Juju Miley to bail out his mates with an interception.

Another flag was enough, and Wiggins huddled up the Raiders.

“I think when I brought them up and talked to them, giving them perspective, that it was getting out of hand,” Wiggins said. “The refs didn’t come talk to me, and I told them if anything happens, just come talk to me.”

Since that apparently didn’t happen, Wiggins talked to his team.

“Some penalties, some unsportsmanlikes, some discipline stuff,” Wiggins said. “It’s an emotional game, but you can’t let your emo-

tions of the game outweigh your play.”

Swainsboro added a score with six minutes left, but Northeast continued to control the line of scrimmage and stay in charge despite its other issues.

Northeast held Swainsboro to 103 rushing and 76 passing yards. Glover was 14 of 24 passing for 244 yards and led the 145-yard rush attack with 77 yards.

But it will be a tougher week of practice than usual.

“The mental stuff, Coach is going to get on us in practice bad,” Glover said. “We will probably be running until we ... We’re gonna be in the best shape next week, for sure.”

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A sneak peek of the downtown Macon Christmas Light Extravaganza, horses, music and markets

Christmas lights, including a new 38-foot lighted snowman, are up and working.

Tunes are set for the opening live Macon Pops Christmas Spectacular at 6 p.m. on Nov. 28, with songs recorded for synchronous play with holiday lights through Jan. 4.

The inaugural Marché de Noël: Macon Christmas Market is stocked.

It's time for the Macon Christmas Lights Extravaganza, with favorite features returning and a few extravagant additions. Here's a glimpse into the festivities:

Raines Carriage Rides

Charles Raines' horse-drawn carriage rides have been a hit since the Christmas lights first turned on downtown in 2017.

I talked to Raines as he was getting his horses – Pearl, Little Man, Caesar and Tik Tok – their regular vet visits.

He said rides through the lights are \$10 per person this year and, as usual, start at the fountain in Third Street Park, at the intersection of Cherry and Third streets.

Sign up there for first-come, first-serve rides on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. Advance reservations aren't accepted.

"We're getting the horses all ready and always enjoy being down there giving rides," Raines said. "We meet a lot of people and they seem to really enjoy taking the carriage through the lights."

The Lights Old and New

It was Bryan Nichols' idea to put lights synchronized to Christmas music on the Poplar Street median — an idea that got him a lot of strange looks that first year as he spent months stringing lights by himself or hunched over his com-



Michael W. PANNELL

puter programming them.

Folks know what he's up to now, since his "harebrained idea" has proven to be one of Macon's biggest successes.

Lights, visitors and economic impact have multiplied.

There's the Macon Pops concert, snow-blowing machines, Selfies with Santa on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings, live reindeer with Santa on Dec. 20, NewTown Macon's S'mores on First Friday, and more.

The number of blocks covered has increased, too. They've been extended up and down Poplar and go up Third Street to Cherry Street.

Though Cherry Street itself has become brighter with lots of Christmassy lights at businesses, Nichols said plans to add Extravaganza lights to parts of Cherry Street were postponed until next year due to construction.

"But we added Rosa Parks Square at Poplar and First streets this year," Nichols said. "That's where we've put the massive snowman, 38 feet tall, that you can walk through and where you can have a seat on benches. They haven't finished final work on the square, but fences are down, flowers are in, and it's usable."

With all the additions, how many lights are there now?

"We quit counting after we hit a million," Nichols said. "Now we just go with 'over a million.'"

Economic impact

There are two sides to the Macon Christmas Lights Extravaganza: the fun and joy it brings and the eco-

nom ic impact it has. Nichols shares anecdotes every year, from countless kids having fun to widows and widowers coming nightly after losing loved ones, finding comfort in the lights.

And then there are marriage proposals — growing along with the extravaganza.

"I'm not down here as much every night like I used to be, but I saw 12 engagements while I was at the lights in that shorter time," Nichols said.

Incredulous, I asked if it was 12 just last year or combined over the years.

"Nope, just last year — and with me not being down there every night."

Nichols said business owners no longer rush to share records because success has become expected.

"By now, I think everyone just assumes we all know business is going great and growing year to year," he said. "People used to run up to me and tell me they set a new record. Then it was more like a nod and smile. Now, it just sort of is what it is. And it's good."

Even though the extravaganza was a week shorter last year due to how Thanksgiving fell on the calendar, visitor numbers were down slightly but dollars spent were up. Expectations are high again this year.

"Last year, the Christmas Lights Extravaganza made about a \$7.1 million economic impact, which is insane. It's almost hard to fathom," Nichols said. "But also, think about the sales tax that brings in. They've never brought in that much sales tax in December in the history of Macon-Bibb County, and so much of it comes from people traveling to Macon from elsewhere."

"They say 685,000 people came last year, but they don't track anybody under the age of 16 or people coming more than once. If you come more than twice, you're seen as a local. Because of that, we don't know the exact numbers, but we get a good idea. I mean, the lights are doing what they're supposed to do."

Marché de Noël: Macon Christmas Market

In August, Visit Macon announced the first-ever Marché de Noël: Macon Christmas Market, a European-inspired holiday experience designed to complement the Macon Christmas Lights Extravaganza.

The market runs Dec. 5-14, encompassing two weekends and weekdays in between. It will transform Cherry Street Plaza near the museums with wooden chalets for vendors and a large tent for a beer garden.

Visit Macon President and CEO Gary Wheat said, "The new Macon Christmas Market will expand and support Macon's rapid growth as a nationally renowned seasonal destination and an annual holiday tradition for families in and around Central Georgia."

"The Christmas Market not only creates magical memories for families but also supports local artisans, small businesses and downtown commerce while showcasing Macon as a vibrant holiday destination."

Marisa Rodgers, Visit Macon's vice president and chief marketing officer, said the market wasn't created to take business from local shops but to enhance it by encouraging visitors to stay longer.

"It just gives additional opportunities for people to stay near the lights and engage with Macon a bit

longer," she said. "Hopefully, that means staying a night or two, eating in restaurants and taking the opportunity to shop and do other things across Macon."

On offer will be Christmas and European-themed goods and foods from local and other vendors. Think Baked Cheese Haus, Lisa's Creperie and Café, candles, bath and beauty products, Winterborn Alpaca, MD Exchange, Squareish Woodworks, Crown Candy Company and more.

Rodgers said the market harkens back to a holiday tradition with roots in medieval Europe, including Vienna in 1296.

She said it is in part a nod to Macon's sister-city relationship with Mâcon, France, and also reflects Bavarian, German and other European influences.

"Yes, we'll be serving up the traditional gluhwein, have festive music, a beer garden and live performances blending traditional Christmas songs with international sounds," Rodgers said. "It's another opportunity for the community to come together for shopping, drinking, socializing and celebrating after a long year."

So, Merry Christmas indeed. Invite your friends to town for a sampling of some of the best of where you live — and the lights — from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. through Jan. 4, with 45-minute lights-and-music segments repeating on the hour.

For specifics, check out maconchristmaslightextravaganza.com and visitmacon.org. For a comprehensive list of events, see newtown-macon.com.

Contact Michael W. Pannell at mwpannell@gmail.com. Find him on Instagram at michael_w_pannell.

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