

Advocate who pushed for safer streets killed while biking in Macon

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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Louis Michael Ryan knew better than most the dangers people on foot face on Middle Georgia roads.

That didn't stop him from walking or biking just about everywhere he went.

"I'm out a lot and I have a lot of close calls," Ryan told a reporter on the steps of city hall after a Macon-Bibb County Pedestrian Safety Review Board meeting he attended in November 2023.

Ryan was killed while riding his bicycle southbound along Gray Highway on Dec. 22. According to a crash report from the Jones County Sheriff's Office, Ryan was in the outer part of the right lane when a 73-year-old at the wheel of a white 2012 Ford Escape struck the bike from behind near Braswell Lake Road shortly before 3:30 p.m.

The impact knocked Ryan and his bike into a ditch, and he died instantly. The woman driving the SUV told a sheriff's deputy "she did not see the bicycle nor the rider until the bicycle struck" her car, according to a deputy's write-up of the crash.

The report also states that Ryan was "in the lane of travel and not on the shoulder and did not yield to the traffic traveling on the roadway." The investigation is ongoing, and no charges have been filed against the driver.

People who knew Ryan say he was a staunch advocate for safer streets, an environmentalist and a defender of low-income neighborhoods where road projects threatened tree canopies and further jeopardized the safety of those on foot.

"He rode everywhere on his bicycle," said Lee Martin, who befriended Ryan about 30 years ago after reading a newspaper article in which he was quoted about the need for safer streets.

Ryan's quotes resonated with Martin so much so that he called the reporter to ask for Ryan's phone number, which was unlisted in the phone book. Their friendship blossomed instantly, Martin recalled.

"We were like two peas in a pod, the way we thought," Martin said, adding that he didn't learn of Ryan's death until Christmas Eve. "I was devastated. ... It was a shock to me."

Ryan was an outspoken critic of local government and regularly wrote editorials for The Telegraph, a Macon newspaper, over the past few



SUBMITTED PHOTO
Louis Michael Ryan, a longtime advocate for safer streets in Macon, poses with his bicycle near his home. Ryan, who frequently walked or biked around the city and served on the Macon-Bibb County Pedestrian Safety Review Board, was killed Dec. 22 when he was struck from behind while riding along Gray Highway.

decades. His chosen topics ranged from opposing zoning decisions to protesting tax increases, reducing light pollution or filing civil rights complaints that charged the Georgia Department of Transportation with "ramrodding" road projects through minority neighborhoods.

The bespectacled cyclist was born in Peoria, Illinois. He graduated from the University of South Carolina with bachelor's and law degrees, according to his obituary. He taught students in Georgia, Japan, Poland and Germany.

Ryan could often be spotted walking with his wife, Yukiko Ryan, near their home, which is wedged between Mercer University's police department, its admissions office and Interstate 75.

In the early 2000s, Ryan fought to stop the county from allowing Mercer University to build too close to his home on Carling Avenue. The Stadium Drive connector, which cuts by his home on the edge of campus, was set to run straight through his house. He led the campaign against the connector, sued the county's planning and zoning board, and represented himself in court. Ultimately, the county chose a cheaper option, one that circumvented his home.

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After loss, Georgia mom pushes for change in pain and addiction care

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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Cammie Wolf Rice's son was 13 when he was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis in 1996.

He had surgery to remove his colon, spent three months in the hospital and was sent home with a 90-pill bottle of OxyContin — the brand name of a powerful prescription opioid pain medication — to alleviate his suffering.

It was the beginning of Christopher's 14-year battle with addiction, which culminated in his death in 2016.

For Cammie, that was the catalyst to start speaking out against addiction stigma so that other families don't experience the same loss.

"We have to talk about it because silence is deadly," Rice said. "If Christopher had cancer, I would have had casseroles at my door."

Two years after his death, on what would have been his 35th birthday, the grieving mother set out to establish resources that she said her son did not have — starting with in-hospital support.

She started the Christopher Wolf Crusade, also known as the CWC Alliance, to champion the idea of creating life care specialists who would work with medical staff to develop a holistic approach to pain management.

Rice partnered with Mercer

University's medical school to develop a curriculum for training such specialists. They focus on opioid education, addiction management and treatment strategies, positive mental health outcomes, and identifying and managing trauma and grief.

A pilot program launched at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta led to a 25% reduction in opioid prescription use. Rice has now zeroed in on rural Georgia, where Mercer specialists say the rates of overdose and deaths are significantly higher than elsewhere in the state. Rice's group collaborates with the university to determine which rural hospitals could most benefit from implementing a life care specialist role.

Rural places don't have the same resources — such as case managers or social workers — as their more urban counterparts, Rice said.

This doesn't mean rural areas can't be leaders in the fight against opioid addiction, said Dr. Jean Sumner, dean of Mercer's medical school and leader of the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center.

"Sometimes it is easier to move that needle in a small community than it is in a city," she said.

In September, Mercer and the CWC Alliance hosted a conference of students, health care providers and other agencies to facilitate conversations

surrounding opioid misuse in rural parts of the Peach State.

"I have a lot of hope for rural communities," Sumner said. In her mind, these areas "should be the laboratory ... we should find solutions and then scale them."

A new role at the bedside

Following her son's death, Rice began to think about the knowledge she lacked that could have led to a different outcome for him, such as the addictive nature of opioids like OxyContin.

Rice said she wondered whether other parents and families also lacked full information about the risks of prescription medications.

"It's like a fire inside of me to really warn people about the dangers of opioids and to know what questions to ask doctors," she said.

Some individuals don't even know they're taking opioids, Rice added.

Of those who abused opioids in the 2000s, 75% started with a prescription, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Nurses and physicians don't have the time to offer support and preventative education about opioids to every patient, Rice noted.

Life care specialists now op-

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SUBMITTED PHOTO
Prescription opioid pills are shown. Most people who misuse opioids began with a prescription, a reality that fueled Georgia advocate Cammie Wolf Rice's push for changes in pain and addiction care.

Periodical — Mail Label

POWER
A primer on authority boards in Macon-Bibb

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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In nearly every city across the country, there are small units of government that have immense power but often operate out of the spotlight.

Called local authorities in Georgia, these quasi-governmental bodies wield special powers and set the priorities for housing, transportation, water and sewerage, hospitals, land, industrial development and more.

Some authorities cover one county, while others operate in multiple jurisdictions. Macon-Bibb County has nearly a dozen authority boards.

Though board members for each of these agencies make consequential

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MOOD FOOD: 7 FEEL-GOOD PICKS BACKED BY SCIENCE



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Do you ever think about how a good meal can instantly lift your mood or how skipping lunch can make the whole day feel just a little harder?

Scientists have been exploring that connection for years, and the results are clear: What we eat can shape how we feel, think, and even sleep. This is especially important as we get older since our body processes nutrients differently over time.

This concept, known as “nutritional psychiatry,” studies how your diet affects your mental health. While there’s no one meal that can cure stress or sadness, research shows that certain foods and eating patterns can genuinely improve your mood, boost energy, and improve your emotional balance. Here’s what the science says — and how to put it on your plate.

1. A Mediterranean-Style Plate for Overall Mood

Think colorful produce, olive oil, whole grains, beans, and fish. This is a heart-healthy meal that’s great for your mind, too! In the SMILES Trial, participants with depression who adopted a Mediterranean-style diet saw significantly greater improvement in their symptoms compared to a control group who received social support.

Follow-up studies and 2025 meta-analyses have confirmed it: People who eat this way tend to have lower risks of depression and cognitive decline. Start small — add an extra serving of vegetables, swap butter for olive oil, and enjoy fish twice a week. This way of eating can help protect your memory and brain function as you get older.

2. Fatty Fish (or Other Omega-3s) for Low Mood and Worry

EPA and DHA, the omega-3 fatty acids found in salmon, sardines, and trout,

play a key role in brain health. A 2019 review showed that using EPA-rich supplements improved symptoms of major depression, especially when used side-by-side with things like therapy and medication.

If you don’t want to take fish oil supplements, you can still get omega-3s through food like walnuts, chia seeds, and flax seeds. These plant-based omega-3 foods also support heart and joint health, which is important for healthy aging.

3. Fermented Foods to Improve Gut-Brain Connection

The gut and brain talk through the vagus nerve, and a healthy gut microbiome can help regulate and improve your mood. In a Stanford study, participants who ate more fermented foods, like yogurt, kefir, kimchi, sauerkraut, and kombucha, had lower inflammation and higher microbiome diversity, which are both shown to improve emotional health.

Try adding one fermented food to your daily meals and see how your digestion and energy respond.

4. Sleep Helpers: Kiwifruit and Tart Cherry Juice

Better sleep often means better mood. In a small clinical trial, adults who ate two kiwis an hour before bed fell asleep faster and slept more soundly. Another study found that tart cherry juice helped older adults with insomnia get up to 84 more minutes of sleep per night thanks to its natural melatonin.

Both options are gentle, food-based ways to support your nightly rest. As you get older and are watching your blood sugar, consider picking sugar-free options.

5. Coffee (In Moderation) and Tea (for Calm Focus)

Good news for coffee lovers: Extensive population studies suggest moderate coffee drinkers have a lower risk of

depression. Tea drinkers benefit, too. L-theanine, an amino acid in green and black tea, promotes relaxed alertness and may help lower perceived stress.

The trick is timing — coffee in the morning, tea in the afternoon — so you don’t disrupt sleep.

6. Folate-Rich Greens and Beans for Emotional Balance

Folate helps the brain make mood-regulating neurotransmitters. People with low folate levels are more likely to experience depression, and some studies show folate supplements can boost antidepressant effectiveness.

Load up on spinach, asparagus, lentils, and black beans — or talk with your doctor about methylfolate supplements if you take medication that affects folate absorption.

7. Dark Chocolate for a Small (but Real) Lift

Yes, chocolate makes the list. The flavonoids in dark chocolate improve blood flow to the brain and may boost mood and focus. According to a 2019 study, people who ate dark chocolate had lower odds of depressive symptoms compared to non-eaters.

One or two squares of 70–85% cacao is enough — mindfully savored, not mindlessly snacked.

Putting It All Together

You don’t need a total diet overhaul. Start by eating more like the Mediterranean plan, add a fermented food daily, and weave in one or two of the mood-friendly options above. Pair that with movement, sunlight, and social connection, and you’ll support both your physical and emotional health well into retirement.

As researchers like to say, there’s no single “happiness food,” but there is a happiness pattern. And it’s probably sitting on your dinner plate.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Cammie Wolf Rice (fourth from left), founder of the Christopher Wolf Crusade, stands with members of her organization’s team during a September conference hosted with Mercer University. The event focused on expanding conversations around opioid misuse and pain management in rural Georgia.

CARE

Continued from Page 1

erate in six different hospitals in Georgia, including the most recent addition in Valdosta. There is not yet a participating Macon medical facility, but the program has expanded to Arkansas.

In the past, many hospitals have not had systems for alternative pain control, according to Sumner, who also said she believes “every community should have a life care specialist.”

The specialist’s duties are modeled after the child life specialist role in medical facilities, Rice said.

Child life specialists are trained health care professionals who help explain the medical process to child patients. They offer therapeutic distraction, explain medical procedures, and provide emotional support to young patients and their families.

Rice said she wants something similar for adults.

Empathy as a form of care

All life care specialists are certified with the Trauma Resource Institute, an international nonprofit organization focused on recovery and resiliency, and trained in coping skills for pain management.

“I’m really looking for what you’re born with, which is empathy and compassion,” Rice said.

The rest can be taught, she said.

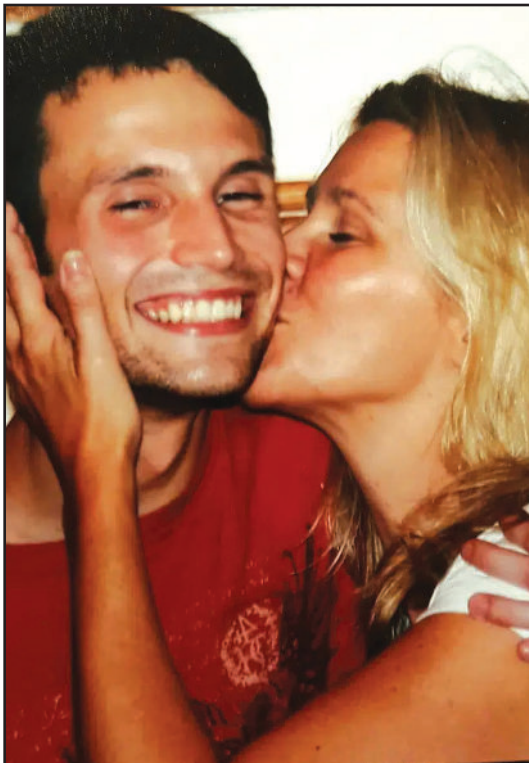
Life care specialist Mandy Kuntz works at Mountain Lakes Medical Center in Rabun County.

Kuntz, who has gone through the substance recovery process herself and is attending school to become a clinical mental health counselor, is the first life care specialist deployed in rural Georgia.

Rabun County is the northeasternmost county in the state.

“We’re very limited with the resources that we have in a small town,” she said, noting that they often have to send people to Atlanta for treatment.

Her mission is to treat patients like more



Cammie Wolf Rice kisses her son, Christopher, in an undated family photo. Christopher died in 2016 after a yearslong struggle with opioid addiction that began with a prescription following surgery.

than just a number or a nameless data point

At the medical center, she spends her day talking to those admitted for drug or pain reasons, and she sees all individuals who are deemed a risk to themselves.

Her work doesn’t end when the patient checks out. Kuntz also follows up with them to make sure they continue on the right track and have the resources they need.

The program is now funded through Georgia’s opioid settlement funds, which come from nationwide lawsuits against opioid manufacturers and distributors, with the resulting payments required to support addiction prevention, treatment and recovery efforts.

Rice said she hopes to pave a sustainable financial future for the program by designating it as preventative care and having it covered by health insurance providers. She said her “North Star” goal would be to see life care specialists placed at every hospital in the country.

ADVOCATE

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“He was fearless,” Martin said of Ryan. “He was very healthy for his age. He wore thick glasses and sometimes he would get in your space, but that was just Michael. He was very determined about what he thought. When it comes to road safety, he was 100% correct. Unfortunately, neither he or I have had much success improving the safety of our roads. ... But he got frustrated.”

Ryan served on the Pedestrian Safety Review Board, which Elaine Lucas helped create in 2015 when she served on the county commission.

Lucas said she was shocked to learn of Ryan’s death.

“He really was a true advocate for people, especially folks in lower-income areas,” Lucas said. “He rode all over Macon and hiked all over the world, but right here in Macon is where he worked with pedestrian safety to limit hazards especially for poor people. ... He joined in to help this community to be safer, and he was frustrated that things moved slowly. He just wanted to see some change. He was the kind who knew what he believed and couldn’t see why others didn’t think safety was a priority.”

Lucas described Ryan as “dogged” in his pursuit of safer streets. Sometimes the two

butted heads during meetings. Ryan did not use flowery language about the issue of deadly streets. He did not mince words — even if it landed him in hot water with politicians who have different priorities.

On trips around the globe with his wife, Ryan often sent emails to the board — quippy, short greetings from other continents to let everyone know why he wasn’t in attendance. In those notes, Ryan often mentioned hikes, bike rides or long walks he and his wife enjoyed in exotic places. He also would mention the rarity of pedestrian deaths at his locales.

“Yuki and Michael had walked and ridden bicycles all through Israel and Europe, possibly South America,” Martin said. “All of that and they never had any kind of accident. And then in his hometown, he gets hit by a car and killed. It makes no sense.”

Martin last saw Ryan three days before his untimely death.

Late that Friday, while Martin was helping a customer at closing time in his billiards store on Hardeman Avenue, Ryan wheeled in on his bike.

“It was dark and Michael walked in,” Martin said. “I hadn’t seen Michael in a while. We both pledged to try to see each other more often. ... I think he just loved to ride a bicycle. He did not like cars. ... I don’t think he ever thought he’d die.”



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PHOTOS BY JASON VORHEES
A paratransit bus operated by the Macon Transit Authority travels through Macon. The authority oversees fixed-route buses and specialized transportation services and has control over bus fares.

POWER

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decisions on behalf of the greater public, they are often appointed instead of elected by voters.

Before Macon and Bibb County consolidated to form one government in 2013, appointments to local authorities were made by both city council and county commission. Since the city council no longer exists, the power to make appointments lies solely with the mayor and commission.

In a series of upcoming articles, The Melody will spotlight these authority boards to inform the public about their powers, histories, impacts and the individuals who serve on them.

Let’s start with a primer:

Macon Housing Authority

- Founded: 1938.
- CEO: Mike Austin.
- Mission and purpose: “To add value to our community and the lives of those we serve through quality housing, support services and community development.”
- Website: maconhousing.com.
- Board: Six-member board with staggered five-year terms. At least one member must live in affordable housing.
- Meetings: Monthly at 4 p.m. on the second Thursday (except for July) in the board room at 2015 Felton Ave.
- Lawyer: Scott Spivey of Spivey Pope Green LLC.
- Power notes: Can issue bonds, create subsidiaries, make and purchase loans.

Macon-Bibb County Industrial Authority

- Founded: 1962.
- CEO: Stephen Adams.
- Mission and purpose: “Creating jobs and increasing the tax base of Macon-Bibb County” and “promoting and expanding, for the public good and welfare, industry and trade within Macon-Bibb County, and for the purpose of reducing unemployment to the greatest extent possible.”
- Website: mbcia.com.
- Board: Six-member board

with five-year terms. Membership includes the mayor of Macon-Bibb County, four appointees and one appointment by the authority.

- Meetings: Monthly on the first Monday at 12:30 p.m. at 439 Mulberry St.
- Lawyer: Kevin Brown, Seyfarth Shaw LLP
- Power notes: Can offer tax breaks to companies and developers via PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) agreements and other similar programs, such as the county’s Heartbeat Incentive.

Macon-Bibb County Hospital Authority

- Founded: 1968.
- Chair: Ron Shipman.
- Mission and purpose: To “possess and exercise public and governmental functions and powers to own, operate, lease, construct, manage and govern all projects, including the hospital and related medical facilities in the City of Macon and Bibb County, Georgia, to the end that total excellence in hospital and related facilities will be made available for the citizens of Middle Georgia.”
- Website: navicenthealth.org/governance.
- Board: Seven members with three-year terms and a limit of five terms. All members are appointed.
- Meetings: Quarterly on the fourth Wednesday at 12:30 p.m. in the Weaver Board Room located on the 4th Floor at 877 Hemlock St. Dates for 2026 meetings include Feb. 5, June 4, Aug. 13 and Dec. 3.
- Lawyer: Michele Madison, partner in the Healthcare Practice Group at Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP.
- Power notes: Has powers of eminent domain. Other powers of the authority are spelled out in state law and then approved by a resolution at the local government level.

Development Authority of Bibb County

- Founded: 1973.
- Board president: Starr Purdue.
- Mission and purpose: “To fa-

cilitate the development and promotion of general welfare, trade, commerce, industry and employment opportunities in Macon-Bibb County. ... Also assists with providing financing for projects for air and water pollution control facilities by industries.”

- Website: None.
- Board: Seven members appointed by the mayor with commission approval for four-year terms, with no term limits. The authority’s first board included the same members as MBCIA and MBCIA provides administrative staff for the authority.
- Meetings: Meets each May.
- Lawyer: Chix Miller of Sell & Melton LLP.
- Power notes: Can grant property tax abatements to real estate developers by issuing tax-exempt bonds to fund projects.

Macon Water Authority

- Founded: 1973.
- CEO: Ron Shipman.
- Mission and purpose: “To provide public water and sewer services for Macon and Bibb County.”
- Website: maconwater.org.
- Board: Two county commissioners, appointed by the mayor, serve on this board, along with five elected members. They serve four-year terms.
- Meetings: Monthly on the first Thursday. Committee meetings begin at 2 p.m. and the regular meeting starts at 4 p.m. inside the second-floor board room at 790 Second St.
- Fiscal year: Oct. 1 through Sept. 30.
- Lawyer: H. Jay Strickland of Jones, Cork LLP.
- Power notes: Can issue bonds, unilaterally control how much it charges for water, wastewater treatment and stormwater services.

Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority

- Founded: 1974.
- Executive Director: Alex Morrison.
- Mission and purpose: “To carry out downtown redevelop-



Members of the Macon Water Authority board listen to a presentation on proposed rate structures during a public meeting at the authority’s headquarters in Macon. The authority sets water, wastewater and stormwater rates for Macon-Bibb County and has the power to issue bonds and specialized transportation services and has control over bus fares.

ment and revitalization.”

- Website: maconbibbuda.com.
- Board: Seven members appointed for up to two consecutive four-year terms. Unlike some other authority boards, members must be Bibb County residents.
- Lawyer: Blake Sharpton of Butler Snow.
- Power notes: Has eminent domain powers.

Macon Transit Authority

- Founded: 1973.
- CEO: Craig Ross.
- Mission and purpose: “Dedicated to delivering safe, reliable, high-quality and affordable transit services” and “ensuring accessibility and efficiency in every ride.”
- Website: mbcta.net.
- Board: Seven board members appointed to five-year terms, with no term limits.
- Meetings: On the last Tuesday of each month at 5:30 p.m. in the fourth-floor board room of Terminal Station at 200 Cherry St.
- Lawyer: Brad Wilson of Adams Hemingway Wilson Rutledge LLC.
- Power notes: Unilaterally controls the cost of bus fares in Macon.

Central Georgia Joint Development Authority

- Founded: 1995.
- Chair: James Vaughn.
- Mission and purpose: “Job creation, encouraging economic growth and improving the availability of regional opportunities for member counties.”
- Website: cgjda.com.
- Board: Includes 44 members representing 11 counties (Baldwin, Crawford, Houston, Jones, Macon-Bibb, Monroe, Peach, Pulaski, Putnam, Twiggs and Wilkinson). Board member terms are four years.
- Meetings: At 4:30 p.m. on the second Wednesday in the last month of each calendar quarter inside the Middle Georgia Regional Commission offices at the Macon Mall, 3661 Eisenhower Parkway.

- Power notes: Lawyer: Kevin Brown, Seyfarth Shaw LLP.

Macon-Bibb County Enhancement Authority

- Founded: 2012.
- CEO: Vacant.
- Mission and purpose: To alleviate poverty in Macon’s poorest neighborhoods.
- Website: Defunct.
- Board: A five-member board with four-year terms. One member is appointed by the mayor with county commission approval. The bylaws state one appointee is to be made by the city of Macon, but it is defunct. The board chair is appointed by the local delegation of the General Assembly. Two members are appointed by the chair. The county’s most recent appointment was in 2020.
- Meetings: Twice a year, 2026 schedule TBD.
- Lawyer: Blake Sharpton of Butler Snow.
- Power notes: Can issue revenue bonds.

Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority

- Founded: 1996.
- Executive Director: Everett Verner.
- Mission and purpose: “Returning non-tax-generating properties to productive use... providing land for housing production and creating jobs for low- to moderate-income citizens through residential, commercial and industrial development.”
- Website: maconlandbank.org.
- Board: Five-member board. Members are appointed to staggered four-year terms and have no term limits.
- Meetings: At 4 p.m. on the third Monday of each month via Zoom or in-person at the Land Bank’s headquarters at 688 Walnut St., Suite 102.
- Lawyer: Cater C. Thompson of Jones, Cork LLP.
- Power notes: Can extinguish back taxes on property it owns.

View authority bylaws as part of this story at maconmelody.com.

Bibb ends high school summer school, shifts to year-round credit recovery aid

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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The Bibb County School District will no longer offer summer school for high school students in favor of emphasizing credit recovery — or opportunities for students to pass classes after previously failing them — throughout the school year.

The district will continue summer school programs for elementary and middle school students, said Superintendent Dan Sims. He sent a Dec. 10 letter to high school parents noting the change and the implementation of Right Now Recovery, which aims to help students catch up on coursework missed during the academic year.

Administrators will issue progress reports every three weeks, and any students missing coursework can request to complete unfinished work.

“It’s not so much a change; it’s really just illuminating credit repair (and) credit recovery that we have in place for our students,” Sims said. “The emphasis is really just a shift in culture.”

While summer school for elementary

students is focused on rudimentary reading and math skills, summer school for high schoolers prioritizes credit recovery. Last summer, 738 students attended the district’s Graduation Ready program at Southwest High School — an increase of 184 students from the previous summer — with 645 of those students recovering at least one credit.

“Summer school costs money,” Sims said. “The school year costs money, so it’s just another example of us maximizing the use of funds while we can.”

The superintendent said he doesn’t want students to use summer recovery programs to avoid doing coursework during the regular academic year. He added students can use the summer to seek other social opportunities — like a job.

“The (recovery program) is in place for everybody, from kindergarten to 12th grade,” Sims said. “We need (parents) to take advantage of it right now by being in school, engaging with teachers and knowing where your child stands.”

Brian Butler, the district’s executive director of teaching and learning, said during an August meeting the dis-



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Bibb County Schools Superintendent Dan Sims speaks during a district event in July 2024. Sims recently said the district will no longer offer summer school for high school students and will instead shift its focus to credit recovery opportunities during the academic year.

trict was looking at expanding summer school for younger students who may need extra academic assistance.



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PHOTO BY JOSHUA WILSON

The former home of The Daily Leader newspaper on North Railroad Avenue in Brookhaven, Mississippi, now houses an office of MS LIFT, a child health and development resource center. The building housed the newspaper until staff reductions and the closure of its in-house printing press.

FROM THE EDITOR

Going home — and forward

I went home to Brookhaven, Mississippi, for Christmas.

Like most visits home, it was a reminder that time moves whether we are paying attention or not. Some things looked exactly as I remembered them. Others did not. Downtown had changed in small but noticeable ways. A few familiar businesses were gone. New ones had taken their place. The bones of the place, however, were still there.

I walked around downtown one afternoon and eventually found myself standing in front of my former office at The Daily Leader.

That building shaped me.

I started at the newspaper when I was 15. I wrote obituaries, which was not glamorous work — but it mattered. It taught me accuracy, responsibility and the importance of getting names right. I worked at The Daily Leader for the next six years, learning the craft of journalism one assignment at a time. That newsroom launched a career I am still grateful for.

The newspaper is no longer there. It's still in business, but its small



Joshua WILSON

staff now works from a tiny suite a few blocks away. It was sold to a for-profit media chain a few years after I left, and the cost-cutting and resource consolidation began. That's a rant for another time.

The building — once busy with a bustling staff and a huge printing press — now houses a child resource center. The sign is different. The purpose is different. The mission, in a broader sense, is not. The space is still being used to serve the community — just in a new way.

Standing there, I felt the familiar pull of nostalgia. I also felt appreciation. Not everything is meant to stay the same forever. Change doesn't equal failure. Often, it's evidence of survival.

That's especially true in small towns, where reinvention tends to happen quietly. Brookhaven has never tried to be anything other than what it is. It adapts, moves forward

and keeps going.

So do we.

I'm older now. I have less hair, glasses and back pain — and I also have more perspective. The tools have changed. The industry has changed. The way people consume news has changed. But the core of the work has not.

I still want to tell great stories. I still believe information empowers people. I still believe strong local journalism matters.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

As we turn the page to a new year, I'm grateful for where I came from and for the people and places that gave me my start. I'm equally grateful for fresh beginnings.

I hope 2026 brings our readers the same — fresh starts, clear paths forward and plenty of good things.

Joshua Wilson moved to Macon in August to serve as executive editor of The Melody. He is a native of the Magnolia State and recently marked his 20th year in journalism. Write to him at joshua@maconmelody.com.

Sabotaging government is sabotaging democracy

When most people hear “authoritarianism,” they tend to imagine tanks in the streets or elections being canceled overnight.

But democracy is usually undone more quietly — through budget cuts, layoffs and the slow dismantling of the institutions we rely on every day. One of the fastest ways to weaken a democracy is to break the government from the inside. You target the people who make it work and make those who rely on them suffer by default.

When people no longer trust that the government will serve them, democracy becomes expendable.

This is Step 4 in the autocrat's playbook. And in few places is the destruction more visible than at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

Tens of thousands of Georgians work at the CDC or support its directive to protect the lives of Americans. They're our neighbors. They are parents picking up kids from school. They're scientists who keep us informed during illnesses. They track outbreaks and help local health departments do their jobs.

When Albany, Georgia, became a COVID-19 hotspot in 2020 — holding the No. 5 spot in coronavirus cases and deaths — it was the role



of the CDC to understand how to defend lives in the region.

Whether it was the coronavirus or the bird flu, Georgians knew that the medical knowledge was centered right up 75 and 85. Yet now, the vital charge of the CDC — and the livelihoods of those who serve the public good — is being deliberately hollowed out by the Trump administration.

Step 4 in the authoritarian playbook is simple: break the government by breaking the people who make it function. You don't have to abolish agencies outright. You just take away their funding, politicize them and push out anyone who won't comply.

That's what we're watching with the gutting of the CDC and the broader federal workforce.

What began with the CDC is spreading. In a few weeks, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs plans to slash 35,000 health care jobs, including here in Georgia, a state where 7.6% of the population

— or nearly 700,000 residents — are veterans.

Despite being chronically understaffed, the VA, like the CDC, will be asked to do critical, life-saving work with fewer people, fewer resources and fewer backup plans.

When Republicans eviscerate funding, freeze hiring, conduct mass firings or shut down the government entirely, they are sending a message: Do not trust us. Public service doesn't matter. The needs of the people don't matter. Only power does.

For Georgia, the stakes are enormous. The CDC helps protect us from outbreaks of measles, flu, foodborne illnesses and emerging diseases. It supports state and county health departments — especially in rural communities that already struggle to get basic care.

Given that agriculture is an economic engine, we have long relied on the CDC to spot problems before they can ravage communities. So, when the CDC is weakened, Georgians pay the price first.

Now, with cuts decimating veterans' health care, the harm will spread — and the solutions will be

See ABRAMS Page 5

Georgia's 40 mph interstate minimum is a safety problem

In the immortal words of notorious rock star Sammy Hagar, “I can't drive 55!” — a sentiment that still resonates in Georgia.

The speed limits on the Peach State's interstates vary, but they generally sit at 70 mph outside of congested areas. However, many drivers rarely approach this speed, and driving far slower than the pace of traffic — like the 55 mph that bedeviled Hagar — could be dangerous.

Despite that, the minimum speed limit on most Peach State interstates is set at the snail's pace of 40 mph.

This policy is both antiquated and even hazardous, but it might change soon. There is already legislation filed to address this in House Bill 809, which was authored by John Carson, a Republican state representative from Marietta.

A Capitol insider tells me the Georgia General Assembly may tackle this topic next year — and not a moment too soon.

If passed, the bill would make a small — but meaningful — tweak. Simply put, the state would increase the minimum speed by 10 mph in most cases, which would be the first major update to this policy in decades.

In 1953, the General Assembly passed legislation empowering the public safety commissioner, transportation commissioner or local authorities to set the minimum speed limit as they saw necessary. It isn't clear how early policymakers made 40 mph the norm as the minimum speed limit, but by the early 1970s, it was already well-established.

In 1974, the maximum speed limit on interstates was set to no more than 55, but the minimum speed remained the same. By 1987, states were authorized to increase the maximum speed limit to 65, but again, the minimum speed limit remained unchanged.

Now, the maximum speed limit is 70 mph, but 40 is still the minimum.

As comedian George Carlin observed, “Anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac.” Depending on your perspective, Georgia encourages drivers of both persuasions as the chasm between maximum and minimum speed limits continues to grow.

This policy permits drivers to maintain a broad range of speeds simultaneously, which is problematic.

In 2023, there were more than 370,000 auto accidents on Georgia's roads — and roughly 1,600 traffic fatalities. Of course, not all



Marc HYDEN

these incidents and deaths were related to driving slowly. Distracted driving, driving under the influence and speeding are top culprits, and seat

belt disuse is a major contributing factor to drivers' health outcomes associated with crashes.

Georgia has addressed each of these in the code relatively recently — but not the minimum speed limit, and legislators should do so.

According to one government manual: “If you drive slower than the minimum speed, you can halt the traffic flow and create a dangerous condition. Those driving too slowly can be as dangerous as those who drive too fast.”

Rigorous research backs up this statement, too.

“In a landmark study of speed and crashes involving 10,000 drivers on 600 miles (970 kilometers) of rural highways, Solomon [...] found a relationship between vehicle speed and crash incidence that is illustrated by a U-shaped curve. Crash rates were lowest for travel speeds near the mean speed of traffic and increased with greater deviations above and below the mean,” reads a U.S. Department of Transportation report.

In other words, driving faster and slower than the speed limit can be dangerous propositions.

Slow drivers — even when not involved in accidents — can also contribute to traffic congestion, which is an ongoing problem in Georgia. Earlier this year, U.S. News & World Report ranked Georgia's capital as the country's eighth-worst city for traffic.

Atlanta is also home to three of the nation's 10 worst traffic bottlenecks, and the metro area has the dubious honor of having nine of the country's 100 worst bottle-necks.

There are many variables contributing to these woes, and I imagine that exceptionally slow drivers are not helping the situation.

If Carson gets his way, the minimum speed limit might get its first major update in many decades, and if it does, then it may improve traffic and reduce auto accidents. Since it would set the minimum speed limit to 50 on most interstates, Sammy Hagar will be able to drive 55 (or faster if he wishes), which I imagine comes as a great relief to the rock star.

Marc Hyden is the senior director of state government affairs at the R Street Institute. Follow him on X at @marc_hyden.



The Macon Melody

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Executive director of Macon's Museum of Arts and Sciences passes the torch after 13 years

When Susan Welsh leaves her executive director role at the Museum of Arts and Sciences this month, she makes it clear she's not retiring — she's pivoting.

After 13 years leading the museum, Welsh leaves an impressive legacy at the museum and in her adopted home of Macon.

Welsh will now devote herself to her art appraisal practice, Welsh Art Appraisal and Advisory. But she said she'll still be around to lend a hand at the museum from time to time and in the community she's grown to love.

"Susan Welsh is a very special individual," said Gary Wheat, president and CEO of Visit Macon. "I worked closely with her as she chaired the Visit Macon board. In fact, she was instrumental in selling me on making the move to Macon to join Visit Macon nine years ago. I give her full credit for so much of what we've accomplished. Her leadership, visionary thinking and her goal of making Macon a music destination set a lasting tone."

Regarding the Museum of Arts and Sciences (MAS), Wheat called it "truly a gem in our community" and a major Macon tourist destination.

He said Welsh's leading hand in adding programs, exhibits, facility expansions, grounds upgrades and the overall evolution of the museum is obvious to anyone visiting or following the museum's progress since its 1956 beginning.

"I'm sorry to see her go, but I celebrate her and what she's been able to do at the museum and for Macon," Wheat said.



Michael W. PANNELL

Here's an added sampling of Welsh's accomplishments at the museum:

— The museum raised more than \$15 million for capital improvements, expanded programs and its endowment.

— Four major facility renovation projects were completed.

— The Museum of Arts and Sciences received the prestigious Governor's Award of Excellence in the Arts and Humanities.

— Welsh redefined the role of art in strengthening science programming to position the museum as a leader in arts-infused science programming.

— She curated more than 100 exhibitions focused on postwar, contemporary and emerging art, all usable by educators to meet math or science curriculum requirements.

— She positioned the museum as the most committed and best-equipped museum in the state for developing and delivering innovative STEAM programs.

Welsh said the latter accomplishments required an intentional focus on exhibitions highlighting artists who use math or science to inform their works, with more than 500 objects of contemporary paintings, drawings, ceramic sculpture, photography and multimedia works added to the permanent collection.

"Susan has dedicated more than a decade of unwavering leadership, vision and love to the MAS," said Geneva West, president of the muse-

um's board of directors. "We're profoundly grateful for her service and hope she now embarks on an even greater passion, knowing she will always be part of the heart and legacy of the MAS."

West noted Welsh was set to leave the museum earlier in the year, but when her replacement didn't work out, she returned. A new executive director, Jim Greenhouse, is set to join the museum in early January.

"Jim is no stranger to the MAS or Macon," West said. "He served as a science curator here from 1992 to 2002 and 2005 to 2012. He then expanded his distinguished career at the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science. With more than 30 years of experience in science education, museum outreach and planetarium management, Jim is a seasoned museum professional whose expertise and passion for inspiring lifelong learning make him an exceptional choice."

Welsh said she knew Greenhouse from his time at the Museum of Arts and Sciences and applauded his return.

"It's exactly what I was hoping for," she said. "Someone who loves Macon but has had exposure to larger science centers. I think we need a science leader in the museum's next chapter. We've never had a true science leader, so it's time."

While capable of leading and expanding the sciences at the museum, Welsh also has a strong background in the arts. Raised in Atlanta and Delaware, Welsh grew up in a family where the arts and creativity were emphasized for generations. She showed a proclivity for painting and



PHOTO BY MICHAEL W. PANNELL

Susan Welsh admires a work in her home by Macon artist Charles Ladson called "Rake." She leaves the Museum of Arts and Sciences this year after 13 years at its helm as executive director. Welsh said she intends to shift her focus to her art appraisal business.

creating at an early age.

At the University of Georgia, she focused on writing and journalism with added art courses. She and her husband, Steve, came to Macon for him to study law at Mercer University.

Before her work at the museum, Welsh worked for L.E. Schwartz & Sons, had a daughter and took on an artist-in-residence role at her school. She later joined Wesleyan College, providing leadership and strategic direction for the offices of develop-

ment, alumni relations and marketing communications.

She directed a \$20 million comprehensive campaign and the annual fund and said she "took every art history course they offered and probably every studio art course."

Then came the Museum of Arts and Sciences and other opportunities to serve and lead in the community via arts, business and commu-

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Planting seeds for the New Year: resolutions from a local gardener

Gardeners have their own brand of New Year's optimism — equal parts hope and compost, with plenty of denial thrown in. Somewhere along the way, I realized I don't need more resolutions. I need to keep the ones I've already set and broken repeatedly.

— I will not buy too many tomato seeds. Yet seed catalogs tempt me with their bright photos and clever marketing. I especially like the companies that treat seed packets as art palettes. Vintage-style prints! Watercolor illustrations! Take my money. I won't keep this vow. Instead, I promise to go to more seed swaps or donate to seed libraries.

— I will label my seeds like a responsible adult. I've traded and brought home seeds in envelopes (or my pockets), so I must keep this resolution. Once, I accidentally labeled a bunch of yellow cherry tomatoes that had popped up in our garden as "Aunt Cora's Sunburst," a lovely North Georgia heirloom that looked as if a mountain sunset lived inside it. My grandchildren ended up loving the little yellow cherries, which grew to Volkswagen size when I brought them to Macon. But the last year I had an Aunt Cora was 2015, all because of my labeling error.



Rosann KENT

— I will not start tomato seeds too early. Repeat after me: January is too early. Tomatoes will be weak and "leggy" by the time the ground heats up. However, after mid-February I

usually give into the craving to plant and put a few seeds on heat mats, then under intense lights once they've sprouted. By March, I've started so many it feels like I live in a green house.

— I will not start too many tomato seeds. Do I want to be in the tomato-selling business? No. Do I have enough friends who will take these babies? No. Will I end up with too many seedlings? Yes. I've discovered that if I put my seedlings in red plastic cups by the road, they will be gone by sundown.

— I will not plant those tomatoes too early. I'll keep this resolution too. The soil and the nights need to be warm. I am easily seduced by that one sunny weekend in late winter. But tomatoes are warm-season divas, and planting

**See GARDENER
Page 6**

Family over screen time: Tips for a healthier holiday break

With teens out of school for the holidays and Middle Georgia's weather unpredictable at best, it may be tempting for parents to offer video games and television as convenient entertainment options. However, too much screen time can be bad for adolescents.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about half of all children ages 12 to 17 spend four hours in front of a screen for entertainment each day. And these are just normal days. What happens when kids are out of school and offered no better alternative than video games and YouTube?

As an adolescent medicine physician, I've witnessed how too much screen time can lead to obesity. Statistics show that one in four teens with high screen time (four or more hours per day) reported symptoms of anxiety or depression in the past two weeks.

But, in today's world, the question becomes: How much screen-time is OK?

The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes a balance between screentime and other activities that promote healthy growth and well-being.

I advise families to develop



Paritosh KAUL

personalized limits that consider a child's age, health, personality and developmental stage. It's also important to consider how your child is spending their screentime. Are they connecting with friends and family, learning a new hobby or playing games? Are they spending hours watching videos and posting to social media?

During the holidays, a little creativity can go a long way to provide screen-free alternatives and balance. Here are some ideas:

— Taking a family walk can be a great way to take in the fresh air and exercise.

— Go on a lights tour: Gather the family on bikes, scooters, skateboards (with helmets) or on foot for a tour of your neighborhood's holiday lights. If there are no lights near you, hop in the car and head to downtown Macon's holiday light display or to another neighborhood.

— Make meal preparation a family activity. Invite your teen to participate in picking the menu

and helping out in the kitchen.

When the holiday decorations are all packed up, continue to be mindful of how much screentime your child has as they transition back to school.

Resolve to try just a few of these suggestions to help your adolescent make the shift to reduced screen time during the school year:

— Keep bedrooms free of televisions and computers.

— Eat meals and do homework away from the television.

— Use a radio or audio app for background noise rather than the television.

— Take note of your own screen time habits and make sure you set a good example.

— Be intentional about what programs you want your children to watch on television and stick to it.

Many families find it challenging to reduce screen time, but your commitment to introducing screen-free activities helps create a healthier community and a brighter year for our adolescents.

Dr. Paritosh Kaul is an adolescent medicine physician at Atrium Health Navicent.

ABRAMS

Continued from Page 4

even harder to come by. But that's the point.

Authoritarians want the government to fail in visible ways so people stop believing it can help them at all. When inspections slow, data disappears and responses lag, people understandably ask, "Why doesn't government work?"

When those who defended our nation cannot get a doctor's appointment or a prescription, they will wonder if their sacrifices were in vain. Yet most good people won't

blame sabotage — they will simply believe democracy failed to deliver because it's useless.

They won't use the words, but the sentiment will take root. Disappointment becomes disengagement, and shared trust in the social contract transforms into disbelief that it's worth the fight.

What's happening now builds on years of attacks — politicizing public health, demonizing scientists and using budget battles as leverage to further erode services. This Republican authoritarian regime has been explicit about their goal: dismantle government and remake it into a

hotbed of privatization and corruption.

However, the most insidious truth is that the damage is not always immediate or dramatic. The CDC will still issue reports, but the science is sketchy. VA offices will stay open, but getting an appointment takes even longer. Public service will feel more broken due to teacher shortages at Head Start and a lack of help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency or the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Fewer people will be willing to speak up when something's wrong. Over time, competence drains away,

and trust follows. Eventually, a small "d" democratic government stops being something that serves everyone and becomes something that only serves the powerful.

That's why defending good government matters and why speaking up for civil servants and bureaucrats is an act of bravery.

Making sure democracy delivers is not a talking point; it's a matter of self-interest.

These workers are scientists, nurses, inspectors, veterans and public servants who chose stability over profit because they believed in serving the public. Attacking them is

attacking Georgia families and our future.

If Trump and Republicans succeed, the consequences ripple outward and include weaker public health, fewer protections, more privatization and a public that's been taught not to expect anything from democracy at all.

That's the warning — and Georgia is once again on the front lines.

Stacey Abrams is a bestselling author, entrepreneur and host of the podcast "Assembly Required." She previously served as minority leader in the Georgia House.

Piecing together the puzzle: An Oak Ridge burial for C.B. Lewis



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN O'NEAL

A monument for C.B. Lewis sits in Oak Ridge, the plot of land in Rose Hill Cemetery where many of Macon's enslaved and free Black individuals were buried.

BY KATHLEEN O'NEAL
Special to The Melody

Ten years after the founding of Rose Hill Cemetery in 1840, Macon's City Council set aside acreage for the internment of enslaved and free people of color. This section is known as Oak Ridge Cemetery. Unlike other sections of Rose Hill, the city never created a map of burial plots for Oak Ridge, and many individuals were buried in unmarked graves. In one of the few marked Oak Ridge plots stands a large, capped column inscribed with the birth and death dates for C.B. Lewis and Lucinda Dawson.

The epitaph reads "Another link is broken in our household band But a chain is forming in a better land."

The names Carter and Holley (Holley's name is spelled "Holly" in the inscription) are also carved into the stone.

This beautiful monument and its inscriptions raise the question, "Who were Lewis, Dawson, Carter and Holley?"

Uncovering their identities required piecing together clues from several sources.

The first puzzle piece I found was a death certificate.

According to his gravestone, C. B. (Charles) Lewis was born on May 26, 1861, and died on December 26, 1891.

A search of his date of death and name on Familysearch.org uncovered a death certificate for Charles B. Lewis, a waiter in Manhattan. The death certificate also noted plans to transfer the body for burial in Macon.

The second puzzle piece helped me connect the names.

A legal announcement dated March 7, 1892 in the Macon Telegraph, noted that A.L. Carter filed a

petition to be the executor of Lewis' estate.

The petition identifies Carter as Lewis' stepfather; Carter's wife, Laura, as Lewis' mother; and Lizzie Holley as his sister.

Carter most likely had to file the petition because in the 1890s, a Black woman faced significant barriers to being appointed as an executor of an estate, due to the prevailing racial and gender inequalities.

The 1900 census records — the third important piece of data — list Holley as the wife of Charles Holley and states that her mother, Laura, and her stepfather, Augustus "Gus" (A.L.) Carter, were living with Lizzie and her husband in the Pleasant Hill neighborhood on Madison Street.

Laura and Lizzie were seamstresses, and Carter was a day laborer. Lizzie's husband, Charles, was a mail carrier.

The final piece of the puzzle is a 1923 Bibb County death certificate for Laura, listing Lucinda Dawson as her mother.

This means that Dawson, who is buried in the same plot with Lewis, is his grandmother. The informant on the death certificate for Laura is her daughter, Lizzie Holley.

C. B. Lewis died with \$3,000 in his Brooklyn bank account. Today, that would be worth approximately \$103,500. This is an impressive sum of money and plenty with which to purchase his beautiful tombstone and lot.

In 2025, 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.

though, and I hope I've learned the value of patience. Maybe.

What gardening resolutions will you break this year?

Extension Master Gardeners will teach a seed-starting class Tuesday, Jan. 13 at 6 p.m. at the Washington Memorial Library. To register, call 478-310-5350.

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

GARDENER

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too early invites disease, wind damage and heartbreak. I use UGA's Georgia Weather Network for temperature information, or I go sit in my garden. If my jeans are muddy and I'm cold after 15 minutes, I need to wait. I've been known to turn a pottery studio into a make-shift greenhouse or build a hoop house. Those are big undertakings,

BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

A Sweet Legacy: Inside Eleanor's dessert shop

There's something magical about the smell of blended sugar and coffee in the air. It's like a hug in aroma form. And when you walk into Sweet Eleanor's Dessert Shop, that's exactly what you get — a warm, comforting hug that happens to come with frosting.

Sweet Eleanor's opened its doors on Nov. 1, 2023, right in the heart of downtown Macon. It's named after owner Scott's grandmother, Eleanor, who passed away just one day after the shop opened.

Scott tells me with a proud, emotional smile, "I got to tell her I opened the shop before she passed. She left with that memory — happy and proud." That moment, as bittersweet as one of his espresso brownies, became the heartbeat of this place. Every cup of coffee, cookie, and slice of cake is made with that memory in mind.

Scott designed the shop to look and feel like what he calls "the forbidden room" that every Gen-Xer remembers from their childhood — you know, that living room at Grandma's house where no one was allowed to sit. The one with the plastic on the couch, the fancy carpet, the cabinet full of crystal, and a faint whiff of lemon Pledge that could knock you out cold.

"It's that room you only went into when Grandma wasn't looking," Scott said, laughing. "I wanted Eleanor's to have that same feeling — like you're breaking a rule just by sitting here and enjoying something too beautiful to eat."

The result is stunning. The furniture looks vintage but cozy, the art has meaning and the atmosphere feels like an invitation to stay a while — maybe longer than you planned.

Let's get one thing straight: this isn't a bakery. Sure, they bake things. But Sweet Eleanor's Dessert Shop is meant to be a destination — a dessert retreat for people who want to slow down, sip some coffee and savor something special.

Their coffee comes from PERC Coffee in Savannah, a roaster known for its small-batch beans, bright flavors and joyful personality.

PERC's slogan is "We roast coffee for people who love life," and that energy fits Sweet Eleanor's like a glove.

Their chocolates are sourced from Atlanta, and the menu changes seasonally. Right now, Scott's personal favorite is the Citrus Olive Oil Cake, which sounds fancy until you take a bite and realize it's just plain good. Moist, slightly tart, a little sweet and a whole lot of comfort.

Customers, though, have their own favorites — the coffee and cookies are the top sellers.

Scott said he's not surprised, "It's that downtown Macon vibe — people love something they can



Billy HENNESSEY

hold while they stroll."

And he's right. Macon is a walkable city, and Sweet Eleanor's fits right in, giving everyone that perfect "sweet treat and caffeine boost" combo to go.

One of the most stunning features inside Sweet Eleanor's is the mural that stretches across the right wall. It's a spray-painted portrait of Scott's grandmother — done by local Macon artist Kevin "Scene" Lewis, who's known for turning blank walls into soulful storytelling pieces all over town. Kevin's work is bold, heartfelt and full of personality — much like the woman who inspired it.

The mural isn't just decoration. It's a reminder that this shop isn't about transactions — it's about connection.

Scott said it best: "She's watching over me. I like to think she sees every smile that walks through that door."

Scott is as Macon as they come. Born in Barnesville, he started his career working at McDonald's, where he spent seven years climbing from crew to area manager.

"McDonald's taught me leadership, consistency, and the importance of treating people right," he said. "Everything I learned there, I use here."

And boy, does it show. During the government lockdown, when SNAP benefits were paused and military families in Warner Robins weren't getting paid, Scott quietly started giving out free sausage biscuits to anyone who needed them. No fanfare. Just kindness, straight up.

When I asked him why, he said, "Maconites — first, second and

always." That hit me right in the heart.

He's also deeply involved in community organizations like Macon Pride, The Mentors Project, Macon Street Board, Macon Film Festival and countless others. Scott's not just feeding people — he's building something bigger. A city that supports, uplifts and celebrates one another.

Here's an exclusive scoop: Sweet Eleanor's will soon be expanding its menu to include soups and sandwiches! That's right — soon you'll be able to grab a lunch that's every bit as satisfying as their desserts.

And if that's not enough to make you fall in love, Scott also owns The Bohemian Den, a colorful downtown retail shop filled with unique gifts, local art and good vibes. It's basically Eleanor's cool younger sibling — a little eccentric, a lot of fun and full of heart.

When I walked out of Sweet Eleanor's Dessert Shop, I didn't just leave with a sugar rush — I left with a full heart. Scott took his grandmother's legacy and turned it into something Macon can be proud of.

So, next time you're strolling downtown and need a break from the world, stop in. Order the Citrus Olive Oil Cake, sip on a PERC latte, take in that mural and remember that behind every bite is a story — one that started with love, loss and a promise to make people smile. Because at Eleanor's, dessert isn't just dessert. It's joy, baked daily.

Until next time fellow Maco-nites, Let's Eat!

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



PHOTO PROVIDED BY SCOTT MITCHELL

Scott Mitchell opened Sweet Eleanor's in 2023 in honor of his grandmother. Since then, it's become a staple of downtown Macon.

MUSEUM

Continued from Page 5

nity involvements. She has done everything from serving on Visit Macon's board to Rotary Club leadership and roles with Middle Georgia State University.

"Susan Welsh is first an artist in her own right, but then she's an incredibly thoughtful and intentional leader," said Jim Crisp, founding artistic director of Theatre Macon, who knows Welsh through arts and community associations. "She's a visionary, someone who can think and envision in many dimensions. She builds consensus, allowing everyone around her to participate."

"In my opinion, we wouldn't have the museum we have if Susan hadn't come along when she did. She's a very credible ambassador for the arts and for the com-

munity — the whole community. She's someone I admire as much as anyone and someone I sought advice from. Macon is richer for having her here."

So now, Welsh pivots. What's Welsh Art Appraisal and Advisory about?

"I love the museum, but this next chapter of life is like, what would I do if I could do anything?" Welsh said. "I get to look at art, research art and help people understand what they or a family member might have spent years or a lifetime collecting. Or I might help a business or organization choose the right works for their facility."

By design, the bulk of Welsh's appraisal and advisement work is not far from her museum work.

It involves helping collectors or art inheritors prepare collections for donation to museums.

She said it can be a daunting

process without guidance and that there's no one doing similar work in the Southeast.

At present, she's focusing on regional clients up to Washington, D.C.

Welsh said Macon is home and will remain so as the base of Welsh Art Appraisal and Advisory. She called it "the perfect place" because of its people, its future and its proximity to Atlanta's airport and cities and museums worldwide.

"I'm also looking forward to walking into MAS one day, not long from now, and being surprised and awed by some wonderful new exhibit," she said.

Contact Welsh through welshappraisal.com.

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

SPORTS

STORIES FROM THE SIDELINE

After 60 years of officiating, Charles Adkins has thick skin... and stories to tell

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Micah@MaconMelody.com

When Charles Adkins first donned the black-and-white stripes and put a whistle around his neck, it was out of necessity.

Sports always interested Adkins, a self-proclaimed “farm boy.” He wanted to play football and basketball, but his father did not have time to “get off the tractor,” Adkins said, meaning no one could pick him up from practice.

So a young Adkins found another way onto the fields and courts. He learned the rules, memorized the signals and became a referee for high school basketball games.

That was back in 1965. In 1971, Adkins added football to his list of duties.

Since then, Adkins has been dedicated. Even at the age of 82, he has not slowed down — in fact, he’s somehow added another sport, calling high school volleyball games as well. He was

recently honored by the Georgia High School Officials Association for his six decades of work as a referee.

“I’ll admit I never thought I’d do it this long, but when I got older I figured I could give something back to the kids,” Adkins said. “If they want to play sports, they need officials to be there.”

In his 60 years of officiating games across Middle Georgia, Adkins has seen it all. He’s interacted with legendary coaches. He’s called state championship games. He’s seen the rulebook change.

The only thing that has not changed is his motivation, his reason for putting in the work as each new basketball and football season rolls around.

“I enjoy it, and I think I can contribute to the development of the students,” Adkins said. “I

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Longtime referee and Middle Georgia native Charles Adkins poses with a football in front of his church, where he runs finances. Adkins has been a ref in the area for 60 years.

Stratford girls earn 10th win, defeat Trinity 63-52

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Stratford girls basketball team continued its hot start to the 2025-26 season and notched its 10th win Monday afternoon, defeating Trinity Christian 63-52 in the first game of the Tattnall Christmas Classic.

The Eaglettes fought through some foul trouble and some timely shooting from the Knights and eventually pulled away thanks to a potent offense fueled by junior sharpshooter Shannon Smith (19 points) and star senior Camiya Hudson (18 points).

It was Stratford’s third time defeating Trinity Christian this year, and Eagles head coach Ed Smith knew it would be a scrappy game.

“I coached (Trinity head coach) Lacey Shepherd in high school, so I know what kind of team she’s gonna bring. We’d beaten them twice soundly, but I told the girls that it all starts over at 0-0,” Smith said. “Maddy George can score with anybody, and (Brinley Vinson) is pretty incredible down low.”

George finished with 18 points and Vinson had a game-high 20 points for Trinity Christian. The two of them accounted for more than two thirds of the Knights’ points.

“People get fired up to play us, that’s what I told the girls the other day too,” Smith said.

The gumption of Stratford’s opponents that Smith mentioned reflects the team’s lofty expectations this season.

At 10-2 with only a few more non-region games left before crucial rivalry games come around, the Eaglettes are looking like one of the top GIAA teams in Middle Georgia. They went 23-3 last season and appeared in the GIAA Class 4A semi-finals.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Stratford’s Camiyah Hudson (11) attempts to steal the ball from Trinity Christian’s Maddy George (4) during Stratford’s win Monday.

Those high expectations also meant that Smith was not satisfied with what he saw on the floor, even in an 11-point win.

“We’re not playing defense like we should be. We’re just not consistent. It’s way too many points for us, it’s hard to score 60 a game,” Smith said. “We need to get better on the other side of the ball.”

And yet the Eaglettes are, in fact, finding ways to score 60 points. They’ve done so in nine of their 12 games — and they scored 53, 56 and 59 in those other three games, not far off from that benchmark.

“That starts when you have a quality point guard. A good point guard lets you do a lot of things, and (Daila Lowe) is as good as there is,” Smith said of his team’s high-flying offense. “She opens things up for Camiyah, and it really provides shots for everybody. Hayden (Cradock) gets in there, Katherine (Caussey) got some important minutes for us today as well, and Shannon can

always get hot.”

Shannon Smith hit five shots from beyond the arc en route to her team-best performance. Her contributions paired nicely with Hudson and Lowe, who each routinely lead Stratford in scoring.

But every time anyone for the Eaglettes would get hot, Trinity Christian would piece together a short run to keep things close. During a two-minute run early in the second quarter, Stratford went from a 19-15 lead to a 28-15 lead and appeared to be taking control only for the Knights to bounce back and make it 32-26 before halftime.

The Eaglettes often got a bit too physical on defense, drawing fouls on the floor that kept the offense from getting too much momentum. Smith again cited the team’s recent trend of high-scoring games, including one of their only two losses this

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PHOTO BY DONN RODENROTH

Mayhem center Alex Cohen guides the puck forward as a defender approaches during a game earlier this season. Cohen recently returned to the team after a call-up to the ECHL.

NOTEPAD

Mayhem lose fourth straight, MGA hoops teams get victories

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Macon Mayhem lost four straight games to fall into last place in the SPHL standings last week ahead of their New Year’s Eve matchup, which was played after The Melody went to print.

The last loss of the four-game skid was a 7-3 defeat at the hands of the Birmingham Bulls on Dec. 27, a brutal conclusion to a run that killed the Mayhem’s momentum. Macon had a 2-1 lead after the first period, but three goals for the Bulls in each of the final two periods left the Mayhem reeling headed into the new year.

It’s been a difficult season for Macon so far. The recent stretch of losses came directly on the heels of a four-game winning streak that saw optimism rising for the team

in head coach Dave Pszenyczny’s second season at the helm. That run culminated in an overtime win that featured a game-winning goal from Jake Goldowski after a comeback in regulation for Macon.

Macon also brought back Alex Cohen from a brief call-up stint with the ECHL’s Orlando Solar Bears on Dec. 20, making the ensuing losing streak all the more baffling.

Last week’s blowout loss was even more shocking considering the Mayhem’s preceding effort, a 1-0 loss to Birmingham the night prior in overtime despite a stellar effort from goaltender Josh Boyko.

The slump has moved Macon to 7-10-2 overall as of Tuesday, good for 10th and last in the SPHL with

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like to be associated with the sport. When I met the young players and the captains, I would not only be talking about football but ask about their grades and what they want to do in life.”

Iconic coaches and tough conversations

Almost as entertaining as Adkins’ conversations with young athletes are his interactions with coaches.

Throughout his career, Adkins said one of the most important parts of the gig is standing his ground with coaches. While a challenge for some referees, Adkins never had a problem with it.

“A lot of coaches try to intimidate the officials. I never let ‘em, because that’s what they want. Then they’ll try to mess with the game,” he said.

Whether it was basketball — boys and girls — or football, coaches and sometimes even fans would get in Adkins’ face. One picture of Adkins published in a 1984 edition of the Peach County Leader-Tribune shows him calmly looking towards then-Peach County head coach Shirley Troutman as she disputes a call.

“You get used to it,” he said. Sometimes that was a good thing, according to Adkins, who recalled a memorable moment against one of Middle Georgia’s most highly-regarded hoops coaches.

Don “Duck” Richardson led the Southwest Patriots to multiple state championships in the 1970s and

’80s. He once led a starting lineup that saw all five players start at the Division I level in college. Richardson was known just as much for his fire and occasional fury on the court as he was for his winning ways, though.

One night when Adkins was officiating a Southwest home game — this was at the little gym they used to call “The Matchbox,” Adkins noted, not the shiny new surface the Patriots play on nowadays — the spirited head coach got very upset about a foul called by Adkins.

“As I reported the foul, of course, you had to come by his bench. Over there the fans are right behind the coach, they can hear everything he says. So he says, ‘That was a bad call,’ except he sure didn’t use the word ‘bad,’” Adkins said, smiling. “He used a word I won’t say.”

Adkins is a churchgoing man, after all — the only place he might have spent more time than the sidelines is his church in East Macon, where he helps manage finances.

So Adkins calmly kept walking and reported the foul to the scorer’s table. He relished Richardson’s ruckus the whole way. It was only after letting Richardson wind himself up a bit that Adkins turned around.

“I T’d him up,” Adkins said, laughing as he described giving the iconic Macon coach a technical. “He understood he was wrong. I later invited him to be the speaker at a banquet, and he accepted. I always loved officiating for (his games).”

Other precious memories for Adkins include calling state championship basketball games in Atlanta,

seeing girls basketball teams play halfcourt games back in the day and watching special players rack up points faster than he could believe.

“I once saw a girl put up more than 50, that was in ‘71,” Adkins said, though he wasn’t sure of the athlete’s name. “When you see things like that, you love the job.”

Correcting mistakes and knowing the rules

An encounter with well-travelled Middle Georgia football coach Jesse Hicks was memorable for a different reason. The current East Laurens coach was still at the helm for Central when Adkins officiated a game at the iconic Henderson Stadium in Macon around 2016.

“(Hicks) asked how many timeouts he had left. Another ref told him three left. Well, he didn’t. He had two. That ref wasn’t doing his job,” Adkins said.

After hearing he had three timeouts, Hicks took one of them. Adkins walked over and informed Hicks he only had one timeout left.

“He said, ‘Whoa whoa whoa.’ He started talking about what the other official said, and I had to correct that mistake,” Adkins said. “And then — I probably shouldn’t have said this — I said, ‘Weren’t your assistants keeping track?’

“Isn’t that what they’re supposed to do, assist?”

Humorous as it was — the memory still evoked a laugh from Adkins as he stood on the steps of his church almost a decade later — that quip was not his typical style. The longtime official takes the rules very seriously. As the regulations of



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Charles Adkins totes the pigskin in one of the rooms of his church in East Macon. Adkins emphasized the importance of staying level-headed when dealing with coaches as a referee, no matter the sport.

the game have evolved over the past 60 years, he has stayed diligent.

“I read through the rules thoroughly every year. Usually it’s the same, but you have to take care,” Adkins said. “If you don’t take things seriously, you will make a mistake.”

Even if he does slip up, Adkins said it's important that he holds his ground. Coaches will take advantage and complain more, which only leads to fans taking a similar approach.

“When I became a (football) referee, that was my favorite spot because I didn’t have to run as far, but also because I could tune those fans out,” Adkins said. “I could cut them out. I liked being a decision maker. ... But even if you tune them out,

you really can still hear them.”

It can sometimes still be tough to deal with criticism, Adkins said, but he is relatively mellow about it all.

“Before they criticize the official, they need to know the rules,” he said. “You can go online now and get the rule interpretations.”

After 60 years on the sidelines Adkins has settled in — and he seems to have a few more years left in him, even if it’s not spent on the football field or basketball court.

“I think I’ll go for a few more years before I retire,” Adkins said.

He mentioned how his newest sport, volleyball, has kept him going.

“As long as I can climb the ladder, blow the whistle and point,” Adkins joked, “then I can keep it up.”

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18 points. The Mayhem have not gotten the bounceback they wanted after a ninth place finish last season.

Macon played the Pensacola Ice Flyers back at home Wednesday, after The Melody went to print. The Ice Flyers represent the turnaround the Mayhem were seeking this season but have yet to find, as Pensacola was the only team to finish below Macon in the standings last year but started this year with a blistering hot 15-5-3 record. The Ice Flyers are first in the SPHL.

Holiday hoops events in full swing

Several Macon basketball teams spent parts of their Christmas breaks playing in holiday events,

with some even leaving the state.

The Southwest boys team played in Florida on Monday as part of a tournament at North Broward Prep in Coconut Creek, a suburb just outside Fort Lauderdale.

The Patriots played the host team first, losing 73-27 in a difficult matchup. North Broward Prep, one of the top teams in the entire country and a top-10 team in the state of Florida per MaxPreps, moved to 12-0 with the win.

The loss dropped Southwest to 9-5 on the year, though a difficult schedule has contributed to the somewhat unexpected record thus far. All of the Patriots’ losses have come against teams in higher classifications, including multiple 6A schools.

Southwest remains a state title contender in GHSA Class A-Division I, though the Patriots did drop

one spot to No. 3 in the Sandy’s Spiel rankings for the classification. They were behind only Rabun County and Putnam County.

Central also played a holiday game Monday. The Chargers showed growth, nearly defeating 3A Cairo but falling 82-75 in overtime.

Northeast’s boys and girls teams and the Westside girls all participated in the Oscar Wimberly Classic at Lamar County High School, which boasts a tournament format and began Dec. 27.

The Northeast boys fell in two games, falling 74-68 against Whitewater before a 61-40 defeat against Creekside Christian Academy knocked them out of the loser’s bracket. The Raiders dropped to 7-6 with the losses.

The Northeast girls lost their first game of the tournament but defeated Whitewater Monday to stay alive

in the loser’s bracket. Westside won its first game over Whitewater but lost to Tri-Cities. They were set to face Spalding in the loser’s bracket Tuesday, after The Melody went to print.

MGA hoops teams hitting milestones

The Middle Georgia State men’s basketball team earned its first conference win Dec. 16 to stop a brief losing streak against Peach Belt Conference, dovetailing with the red-hot 9-2 start of the women’s basketball team as both programs settled in at the Division II level.

The men defeated the Flagler Saints 62-51 earlier this month to snag a PBC win and snap a five-game skid. Flagler brought a three-game conference winning streak into the matchup, but the Knights took advantage of their home court

and a well-balanced offense in the win.

Joshua Robertson and OT Delancy both scored 13 points for Middle Georgia State, while Krishen Atwal followed closely with 12 points. The team improved to 5-7 on the year and 1-4 in conference play.

Meanwhile, the Middle Georgia State women’s team got another victory over Claffin University on Dec. 20, defeating the Panthers 63-58 to improve to 9-2 on the year. Milanni Abdus-Salaam poured in 16 points for the Knights, with Kristen Foglia netting 14 points.

The women’s team faced Agnes Scott on Wednesday, after The Melody went to print, and are set to host Augusta University on Saturday. The men will also face Augusta on Saturday.

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year that came in overtime against Loganville Christian Academy recently.

“In that game, we blew a 12-point lead in the fourth quarter. People don’t think about it, but problems on defense cause panic on offense,” Smith said. “We’ve got to find that balance. This was a good team right here, but we’re gonna play some teams that we should play well against and we need to stop giving them chances.”

Nonetheless, Stratford’s star-studded offense has put them in good position to try and replicate last year’s region championship. The Eaglettes are right at the top of the GIAA Class 4A/3A District 6 standings with Mount de Sales. The Cavaliers were 9-1 as of Monday.

Stratford rematches with George Walton on Jan. 3 before region play opens against John Milledge on Jan. 6.

Mercer hoops enter SoCon play as 2026 begins

By MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Mercer men’s and women’s basketball teams begin their Southern Conference slates as the new year begins with crucial games.

The men’s team gets started with SoCon play first. The Bears face Furman at noon Dec. 31 before taking on East Tennessee State on Jan. 3. Both games are on the road.

Both games could potentially be previews of the top of the Southern Conference standings. Mercer and ETSU both went 8-5 in non-conference play while Furman went 9-4.

It should be a challenging pair of road games for the Bears, who stumbled a bit as they closed the non-conference schedule. After putting up an impressive fight against Clemson, the Bears struggled against UCF and took a closer loss against Washington State.

That three-game road stretch, possibly the most difficult trio of showdowns on Mercer’s itinerary this season, still provided a learning experience.

The Bears have strengths in a

consistent rotation led by Baraka Okojie and Armani Mighty and supplemented by strong performances from Brady Shoulders, Zaire Williams and others. The Bears made 18 free throws against UCF, their highest total this season.

The squad has still suffered dry spells shooting the ball that have proved costly, however. The blow-out loss to UCF saw the Bears go quiet offensively around the middle portion of the first half. Size has been a problem for Mercer as well, with UCF beating the Bears in rebounds handily.

Mercer fought to keep the game from getting out of hand and only trailed by eight at halftime against the Knights. UCF was Mercer’s second team inside the top-40 in the country in NET rating after Clemson. Mercer also bounced back with a 122-49 win over Division II Baptist University of Florida.

The Bears, in turn, boast the highest net rating (135th) of any Southern Conference team. East Tennessee State follows at 149th, while Furman is at 159th.

Mercer will likely have an easy

point to focus on against Furman. The Paladins are clearly driven by Alex Wilkins, who is averaging 16.8 points per game and has 62 assists for Furman. Solid defender Cooper Bowser and guard Tom House are also key players for the Paladins and were named preseason All-Southern Conference players earlier this year. Asa Thomas is a threat from beyond the arc, hitting three-pointers at a 40% clip with more than 100 attempts.

East Tennessee State’s offense is a bit more balanced, but the lengthy Cam Morris III could prove problematic for Mercer considering the Bears’ lack of size. Morris has 18 blocks so far while also chipping in with 13.8 points per game.

An improved offense

The Mercer women also rank at the top of the Southern Conference in NET rating and, contrary to the men’s more tumultuous finish to the non-conference slate, got solid wins in the Tulane Holiday Tournament over the host Green Wave and Detroit Mercy to finish 9-5 before starting SoCon play.

The Bears’ offense has improved significantly since last year’s lackluster finish, as Mercer ranks third so far in the Southern Conference in points per game after finishing last in the conference last season.

That effort has been led by returning stars Nahawa Diarra, who is eighth in the SoCon in points per game, and Ariana Bennett, who follows at 12th in the conference in scoring. Newcomers Abigail Holtman and Micah O’Dell have also been key contributors.

This led to the Bears winning their last four games in a row before the break. Mercer now ranks 229th in the country in NET rating, nine spots ahead of the next-best Southern Conference team, Wofford, at 238th. Chattanooga is right behind at 240th.

The Bears get a much easier task for their first SoCon game when they face Western Carolina on Jan. 8. The Catamounts are 2-11 in non-conference play. Things get a bit tougher when Mercer takes on UNC Greensboro (8-5) on Jan 10. Both games are on the road.

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