

The Macon Melody

\$2.00 • Bibb County's Community News Source • MaconMelody.com • Friday, December 5, 2025 • Vol. II, No. 24

Commisioner pushing for new Bibb Co. police force

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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Nearly a dozen years after the Macon Police Department was disbanded during the consolidation of the city and county governments, a Macon-Bibb County commissioner is drafting an ordinance that would let voters decide whether to create a new Bibb County Police Department.

Commissioner Bill Howell, who represents the southern part of Bibb County, said he witnesses the need for more traffic enforcement frequently on his daily commutes, during which he sees drivers running red lights and wheeling around town without lawful license plates. He's also aware of the often long wait times 911 callers experience due to the shortage of sheriff's deputies.

"I pay my taxes ... When I have a wreck or something happens, by God I think somebody ought to show up," Howell said, referencing long wait times and spotty responses previously reported. "I'm sick of hearing we don't have enough officers."

Sheriff David Davis, first elected in 2012, was elected for a fourth term in November 2024.

There were 200 cops on patrol countywide before the city and county consolidated into a unified government in a move that dissolved the Macon Police Department. Early in 2024, the sheriff's office had 83 patrol officers, roughly half the 162 patrol deputies budgeted.

In a phone call Wednesday, Davis said the sheriff's office has "turned the corner on staffing" and has about 800 employees, including 300 part-time workers and a budget for 500 full-time officers. Previously, Davis cited non-competitive salaries and fewer people interested in law enforcement careers as reasons for the shortage of deputies.

Davis said creating a new police department likely won't solve the shortage of

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Protesters gather out front of Sabor Latino Venezuelan restaurant earlier this year in Warner Robins during a rally against deportation and increased ICE presence. Immigration policies are impacting Middle Georgians.

How immigration policy is impacting Maconites

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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Ashley Deadwyler-Heuman has practiced immigration law for more than a decade, operating offices in Macon and Cordele. She said her immigration caseload has doubled since the beginning of the year.

Less than a year into his presidency, Donald Trump's crackdown on unauthorized immigration has shocked much of the country and sparked a growing sense of fear in Middle Georgia and elsewhere.

"I've built my whole life and career around this type of work," Deadwyler-Heuman said, who has handled 215 cases since January. "What I'm seeing is, in my professional career, the most rights violations I've ever seen."

Viral videos circulating online depict federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents detaining unauthorized immigrants outside of court-houses and targeting individuals in the streets.

Supporters of Trump's immigration policies and mass deportations cite a need to remove noncitizen criminals

from the streets and preserve more jobs for Americans.

ICE took hundreds of workers into custody at a Hyundai Plant in Bryan County in September.

Deadwyler-Heuman pointed to an unprecedented "disregard for due process" as the Trump administration ramps up enforcement.

In the past, noncitizens who entered the country illegally and remained for at least 10 years might qualify for bond if they had family legally residing in the U.S. and no criminal record, the immigration attorney said.

However, under Trump, these individuals aren't granted bonds and are detained while their cases remain active.

Many immigration cases are also being reopened, Deadwyler-Heuman said, such as those involving noncitizens whose children are ill but legally residing in the U.S.

Some of her clients received bold red-and-blue email notices from the federal government offering two options: self-deport or risk being fined or detained.

The notices warn of a \$998 per day

fine for an individual who refuses to deport after being ordered to do so and an even larger fine for someone who doesn't self-deport after promising they will.

People who entered the country and sought asylum under the previous Biden administration are receiving notices to self-deport and those in the country under victim-based relief are also being exiled, Deadwyler-Heuman noted.

The executive branch has too much control over the immigration system, she said, noting that ICE operates as a part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Board of Immigration Appeals and Executive Office for Immigration Review courts operate under the Department of Justice.

"We need independent judicial immigration courts," Deadwyler-Heuman said. "Not immigration courts that are doing the bidding of the DOJ under this administration."

She said that the Middle District of Georgia recently ruled against the gov-

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Wesleyan to close down arts market

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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Wesleyan College will bid farewell to its shoppers, vendors and volunteers Dec. 13 after more than 17 years of hosting its monthly outdoor market on campus.

From homemade jams and fine art to crochet masterpieces and fresh produce, Wesleyan Market attracted a community of shoppers and Macon business owners looking to highlight their locally-sourced fresh food and curated knicknacks.

Wesleyan announced the upcoming conclusion of its monthly market on Nov. 8 in a Facebook post, citing its plans to pursue "new ways to utilize campus space and resources to better align with our mission and future goals."

The announcement received mixed reactions from the community.

Many expressed gratitude for the market's community impact, while others inquired about alternative locations for future markets. Some questioned the college's decision and wondered about other potential cutbacks to Wesleyan's community spaces.

Retired teacher Debbie McClendon first attended Wesleyan Market in 2017 to sell her handmade jewelry. She returned to the market in 2021.

Although she hadn't participated in the market in a couple years, McClendon said she initially felt disappointed by the news of its closure.

"It was just such a great environment," she said. "All of the vendors were just very nurturing."

The market was friendly, affordable for participating

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Macon's Rapid Transit service eyes expansion

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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Rapid Transit, Macon's pilot program that allows public transportation passengers to use an app to request specific pick up and drop-off locations, is looking to expand into southern Bibb County.

The Macon Transit Authority's rides-on-demand program rolled out its microtransit fleet of five colorful vans in July with service in a zone that included the downtown area and extended to Walmart on Gray Highway and as far south as MLK Jr. Boulevard and Mercer University Drive. Passengers use an app to arrange rides — similar to Uber and Lyft ridesharing — instead of gathering at bus stops along fixed routes.

In Bibb County, just more than 1 in 10 households lack personal vehicles, according to a U.S. Census Bureau estimate in 2023. That's slightly higher than the national average of 8%.

The second phase of Macon-Bibb's Rapid Transit program, which was supposed to begin in November, will start offering service to the Middle Georgia Regional Airport when a payment wallet is integrated into the Rides on Demand app, said Mark Strozier, the authority's transit planner and the program's manager. While Rapid Transit was initially a free service, riders can expect to pay \$5 each way for rides before 6 p.m.

and \$8 each way for pick ups from 6 p.m. to midnight.

The microtransit service is funded through a Federal Transit Authority grant. Similar services are available in other parts of Georgia, including metro Atlanta and Savannah, as well as other areas of the country.

"Microtransit in general is really doing well across the state," said MTA Chief Operating Officer Tony Woodard. "We are excited that it's viable and it's gonna meet a need."

Locally, 967 trips were logged on Rapid Transit in September, compared to 70,816 trips on Macon's fixed route network, according to an operations report from that month.

The goal is to eventually reach 20,000 Rapid Transit rides a year while covering all of Macon, Strozier said.

Kai Monast, the associate director of the Institute for Transportation Research and Education at North Carolina State University, said the new form of transportation offers convenience and "richer" data so transit officials know exactly where and when rides are being called.

The Macon Transit Authority contracted TripSpark — which is responsible for the app along with Macon's bus tracking software and route optimization — to connect payment options to their app.

Expansion is stalling because of problems with integrating payment into the microtransit service's app,



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

An MTA Rapid Transit van pulls into the driveway outside the Terminal Station December 2nd. The program is set to expand soon.

Ride on Demand.

The app had yet to begin collecting payment as of Dec. 2. The expansion's original date of Dec. 6 has been postponed.

The biggest complaint officials hear is that the vans don't yet go to the areas people want, Strozier said. But the authority plans on expanding the service to the entire county by 2027.

The vans can hold six to seven passengers. The number of trips being carried out has doubled with each passing month.

The same vehicles will be used to service paratransit riders.

Paratransit services — which is

also an on-demand transit system and is federally required for individuals with disabilities — were recently cut to some areas for financial reasons.

There are a lot of rules and regulations when implementing paratransit, Monast said.

It's important for microtransit services to be mindful of riders with physical or cognitive disabilities and making sure technology assigns safe pickup areas and ensures passengers make it home safely, he said.

All of the Rapid Transit vehicles

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IMMIGRATION

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ernment preventing bond eligibility in certain immigration cases.

How it’s affecting Georgians

The ICE presence in Georgia is much smaller compared to blue states, Deadwyler-Heuman said, but she advised individuals to avoid traffic violations and minor run-ins with law enforcement that could result in ICE being called.

Some individuals are avoiding travel while others have chosen to self-deport or leave the country voluntarily, she added.

A culture of intolerance is “not just causing fear, it’s causing disdain for our country,” Deadwyler-Heuman said.

Warner Robins resident Stephanie Hernandez — the daughter of Honduran immigrants — organized a protest against mass deportation and increased ICE presence in February.

But a lot has changed since earlier this year. Hernandez said more people were standing up and speaking out in February. Now, many people have lost hope and have decided to lie low and ride out the rest of

Trump’s time in office.

“I don’t know if the people that were out there that day with me would want to come out anymore,” she said of organizing future protests.

Hernandez said she’s also struggling to find time to organize a movement as her efforts have shifted toward attending court or going to doctor’s appointments with members of her community who are too afraid to go alone.

Her uncle went to a scheduled ICE check-in in Atlanta to confirm that he was still in the country under asylum, she recalled.

ICE officers detained everyone in the waiting room, including him. He spent five months at Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin before being deported.

Deadwyler-Heuman also pointed to mounting concerns amongst immigration lawyers. She said one lawyer was detained at an airport earlier this year and had their phone — containing potentially confidential client information — confiscated.

ICE agents detained the Michigan attorney, Amir Makled, at the Detroit Metro Airport in April. The agents coerced him into giving up



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Stephanie Hernandez, a Warner Robins native, smiles as she participates in a rally in Middle Georgia earlier this year. Hernandez is the daughter of Honduran immigrants helped organized the protest and has dealt with new immigration policies firsthand, she told The Melody.

his phone’s contact list, before releasing him, according to NPR.

“If we’re not giving due process

to immigrants anymore, my concern is that a lawless administration... is then going to, possibly, violate the

due process of citizens or their political opponents,” Deadwyler-Heuman said.

TRANSIT

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are handicap accessible and ADA compliant.

“I think it’s a wonderful way of making public transportation accessible to different groups,” Monast said.

Monast said as microtransit programs reach capacity, it can become harder for people to book trips because of longer wait times, impacting people with higher-pri-

ority trips like going to school or work.

Also, bus riders who are not as adept with technology or don’t want to engage with it might find themselves being left behind.

Bus service is not at risk of being cannibalized by Rapid Transit, Strozier said. From 2024 to 2025, fixed route ridership increased by “leaps and bounds” — 19%.

Monast questions how much microtransit can grow in Macon and elsewhere. “It’s a great laboratory,” he said. “But, eventually,

it won’t be financially feasible as the system becomes more popular.”

Strozier and transit officials are working through data on ridership, including trips per day, pick-up locations and total passengers. While not demographic heavy, data has shown preferences for trips on Thursdays and Fridays.

Strozier said the authority will facilitate bus ridership by rolling out “first mile, last mile” service at the end of next year. The microtransit vans will take passengers

short distances to and from bus stops for a reduced fare.

“We plan to expand as much and as quickly as we can,” Woodward said. “One of the things we are absolutely adamant about is we don’t plan on starting something and having to retract.”

Grant Goodrich, who lives and works downtown as a bartender, used the service three to four times a week coming back from work during the pilot program. He said he doesn’t own a car.

Although he hasn’t ridden as of-

ten since the program announced payments, Goodrich said the service is much more affordable than Uber, even with the \$5 charge.

He said the vans are clean, well-lit and it’s “easy to get in and out.” The only downside of the program is having to schedule rides 20 to 30 minutes in advance, he added.

“It’s one of the better things I’ve seen Macon do in a long time, hopefully they can expand it a little further,” Goodrich said.

WESLEYAN

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sellers and a good space for new business owners, McClendon noted.

The college, however, is not turning its market-goers and local entrepreneurs away for good, according to its Facebook post. Wesleyan announced plans to host two larger-scale markets on the second

Saturdays of April and December next year.

“This decision reflects our commitment to fostering meaningful engagement with the community while reimagining events that best

serve both vendors and attendees,” Wesleyan’s creative director Harrison Tarr wrote in an official statement.

Tarr also thanked market volunteers, businesses and customers for

their part in the market’s lasting success over the past 17 years.

McClendon said she liked the idea of two larger markets, but wondered if the markets will be indoors and where they will fit.

CITY OF WARNER ROBINS

2025 CHRISTMAS PARADE

We Believe

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SATURDAY
12.06.2025

10:00 AM

PARADE ROUTE:
N. DAVIS DR TO WATSON BLVD

11/26/25

No handing out food and water at polling places, court says

BY TY TAGAMI
Capitol Beat News Service

A federal appeals court has restored a state ban on giving food and drink to people waiting in line to vote.

The Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta on Monday cancelled a preliminary injunction issued by the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia two years ago that stopped the state from enforcing its ban on giving “gifts” near polling places.

The three-judge appellate panel decided that a ruling by the U.S.

Supreme Court in another case last year had changed the legal landscape for such decisions. The high court ruled in that case that lower courts had failed to fully analyze whether state content-moderation restrictions on social media companies violated the First Amendment.

The defendant in that case — Moody v. NetChoice, LLC — was an industry association for internet companies, but the same analysis applies in a case about regulating elections, the appeals court in Atlanta decided.

“The district court didn’t con-

duct the facial-challenge analysis now required by Moody,” the Eleventh Circuit Court opinion said. It said the district court had “failed to systematically assess the full sweep of the regulation and weigh the constitutional against the unconstitutional applications.”

Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican running for governor, applauded the decision, issuing a statement that said it “reinforces a simple truth: Georgia has the right and the responsibility to shield voters from influence and interference at the polls.”

The GOP-controlled General Assembly passed the gifts ban in 2021, as part of an elections overhaul in the wake of claims by Donald Trump that the 2020 election had been stolen from him.

Senate Bill 202 affected absentee voting and other election procedures, but one element in particular gained national attention: the ban on giving voters “any money or gifts, including, but not limited to, food and drink” while in line at polling places.

Civil rights groups sued, calling the ban a barrier to voting. The U.S. Department of Justice un-

der President Joe Biden sued, asserting the law violated the 1965 Voting Rights Act by intentionally discriminating against Black voters.

Then, President Donald Trump started his second term and named Pam Bondi U.S. Attorney General. In March, she ordered the Justice Department to drop the lawsuit.

The appeals court order on Monday returns the case to the district court in Atlanta, where U.S. District Judge J.P. Boulee has been overseeing the lawsuits and motions related to the 2021 law.

POLICE

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law enforcement officers.

“People think we’ll have two agencies and more people but that’s not the case,” Davis said. “We’d be looking for some of the same people.”

Davis said he has had conversations with Howell about his plan but had “not seen any specific proposals.”

“The ultimate decider on that would be the people,” Davis said. “The people voted in consolidation with the sheriff’s office being the law. ... Are we talking about now deconsolidating certain parts of the government? ... If the people were to vote for it, we would cooperate. ... But I think we have to look at the efficiencies.”

Davis said it took about a year to iron out the details of how the Macon Police Department would combine with the sheriff’s office.

Ultimately, the sheriff said it comes down to who the people want to be in charge of law enforcement in Bibb County.

“Do they want someone who is directly accountable and responsible to the citizens? Or a law enforcement person whose first re-

sponsibility is going to be elected commissioners, the mayor and leaders of the county?”

The Bibb County sheriff is a constitutional officer elected by voters, but police chiefs are typically appointed and serve at the discretion of the mayor.

Howell said he envisions the new police department would include about 30-35 officers and could “cost about another mill in taxes.”

“Traffic is from 6 in the morning to 11 at night, mostly,” he said. “So if you had 10 people on a shift and three shifts, 30 people could cover all of the time that you really need traffic (officers.)”

Howell declined to share a draft of the ordinance he is preparing as he “didn’t want that floating out there” and wanted to talk to the sheriff first. Macon-Bibb County also declined to produce the draft ordinance and said the document is “considered privileged communications or attorney work product not subject to disclosure.”

Creating a police department would require a change to the county’s charter, a governing document only the local legislative delegation can amend under the Gold Dome. Howell said he’s spoken to three of the eight state house representatives and senators in Macon’s delegation

and that they were on board with the plan, but he declined to name them.

Mayor Lester Miller has produced state legislators to make other changes to the charter, including an amendment to allow him to serve another four-year term, which would extend beyond the two-term limit in the current charter. Miller and Howell have been vocal in recent years about the need for a police department.

“I’ve talked about this since I was elected in 2020,” Howell said of his proposal for a second law enforcement agency in Bibb County. “It’s just taken me this long to get enough traction because obviously this has to pass the commission. ... I don’t want to do it with five votes; I want everybody on board with it.”

Howell said he plans to introduce the ordinance at a meeting early next year and that it could be on the ballot for voters as early as May or November.

At least four commissioners told The Melody they are in no hurry to create another law enforcement agency.

Commissioner Paul Bronson, who represents downtown, the East side of Pleasant Hill and part of East Macon, said he wants data and details on structure, cost and operations before considering a new po-

lice department.

“I think, if anything, we need to be looking at ways to retain our officers that we do have,” Bronson said. “My fear is that, would creating another police department help or hinder us? ... I’m in favor of working with what we have now and trying to get a good handle on that first before we start creating additional things. I’m not against it completely, I just want to see more of the numbers.”

Bronson said Davis has “done what he can with the resources he’s been provided.”

Commissioner Donice Bryant, who worked at the sheriff’s office in 2014 at the time of consolidation, said she remembers “we lost 54 officers” who were experienced and making higher salaries.

“People thought we were getting more officers but it didn’t happen that way,” Bryant said. “When we consolidated, it didn’t happen. ... They may have seven people working the whole city or county. We didn’t get any more.”

Bryant said she was unsure if it would be a conflict of interest for her to vote on the ordinance when it is introduced.

Though Howell’s idea would be only for traffic, Bryant worries about conflict between the two

agencies on who handles what.

“I’m a no,” Bryant said. “Unless they can put something in the charter that says traffic enforcement only and you can’t go outside those boundaries.”

Commissioner Valerie Wynn said her biggest concern was how the county would pay for a police department.

“There’s going to be a cost involved. I don’t know what that cost would be,” Wynn said. “The other factor is: where are we going to get the people to man or be part of that police department when we can’t even fill [positions] at the sheriff’s department?”

Wynn also noted police chiefs are typically appointed by the mayor and said, “how would we know that’s the right person? ... I just don’t know how it’s all going to work.”

Commissioner Stanley Stewart, who represents East Macon, said he is against the proposal.

“Why not finance a patrol division within the current structure that we have?” Stewart said. “That came with consolidation and now it seems like a power grab. ... Since we’re talking about changing charters, maybe we need to change the charter to have partisan elections again.”

FAMILY FUN NIGHT

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Downtown Macon transforms into an authentic outdoor German market and holiday wonderland

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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A Douglasville company has brought outdoor European Christmas markets to life since 2021, and this season it’s helping to bring the German tradition to downtown Macon. Visit Macon’s inaugural Marche De Noel: Macon Christmas Market will feature 20 wooden vendor booths or chalets on Cherry Street Plaza from Dec. 5-14. Macon locals and visitors alike can sip malt wine and peruse an array of authentic German products while also taking in the sights at the iconic Christmas Light Extravaganza. All that’s missing is the snow, according to Marcel Radovanovic of Munich Event Group — the only company in the U.S. to construct the German booths which are collapsible, weather-resistant and made from locally-sourced lumber. The booths are difficult to import from Germany, according to Radovanovic, who receives orders from Cal-

ifornia, Colorado, Pennsylvania and New York. Radovanovic grew up in Germany and comes from three generations of booth-makers. His family ran a Christkindlmarket in Munich and Florence, Italy. “This is my whole life,” he said. “For me, it’s Christmas the whole year.” Radovanovic came to the U.S. in 2019 and helped launch a Christmas market in Atlanta in 2021. He then launched a Christkindlmarket in Roswell that garnered 150,000 visitors last year and eventually he began his booth-making business in Douglasville. He chose Georgia because a business partner told him the Peach State is the best space for startup companies, he recalled.

How the idea came to Macon
Seeing successful European mar

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Justin Emerson, owner of Emerson Candle Company, decorates his wooden chalet in preparation for the Marche de Noel: Macon Christmas Market. The inaugural market takes place Dec. 5-14 in Cherry Street Plaza.

Resource hub bolsters Middle Georgia entrepreneurs

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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A new AI-powered tool will “connect the dots” between business resources and Middle Georgia entrepreneurs, building on an existing dashboard for developing the region’s network of businesses. Macon’s Inclusive Innovation Ecosystem Dashboard received a \$40,000 grant in September from the Partnership for Innovation, an innovation lab out of Georgia Tech. Christele Parham is the project’s manager and founder of Macon Black Tech, a nonprofit with a similar function for tech entrepreneurs in Middle Georgia.

Parham said the dashboard is intended to connect resources across Macon’s business landscape, between educational organizations, nonprofits, healthcare organizations, the Chamber of Commerce, New-

"We don't have... a one-stop shop where entrepreneurs can find resources"

Town Macon and more. The expanded dashboard will contain information on everything from mentor programs to network-

ing events. An AI agent will present information to users in the same way a ChatGPT query works. “We don’t have a place right now that is a one-stop shop where entrepreneurs can find resources,” she said. Before landing the partnership’s grant, Parham mapped out Macon’s businesses in an online interactive web of connections, the first part of the Inclusive Innovation Ecosystem Dashboard. She and her team tried to figure out what innovation meant in Bibb County and understand how people were scaling up their ideas. “One of the things that came up was recognizing we might not al-

ways have capital, but what people have is relationships, like social capital,” Parham said. Parham hopes to add more businesses and organizations to grow the network and serve as a focus group to see what entrepreneurs are looking for and show them how they fit into Macon’s “ecosystem.” Entrepreneurs will also have access to data collected from the dashboard. Users will fill out forms about their experiences and project managers will use search data to see what entrepreneurs are looking for and to find gaps in resources. Parham and her project were funded along with two projects under the Partnership for Innovation’s

Regional Leaders cohort for 2025. The Georgia Tech public-private partnership hopes to build out an alumni network with cohort members that will act as a basis for a regional entrepreneur network in the South. Jamal Lewis, associate director of impact of the Partnership for Innovation, said members of the cohort attend workshops to learn about tech-based economic development, social infrastructure and public private partnerships. “Having a project that has AI that’s really looking to utilize technology to make sure that the local ecosystem is met is very exciting,” he said of the dashboard.

PICTURES WITH SANTA

ALL PROCEEDS BENEFIT THE ANIMALS AT WARNER ROBINS ANIMAL CONTROL

WARNER ROBINS ANIMAL CONTROL

DECEMBER 7, 2025
12:00 PM – 4:00 PM
208 STALNAKER AVE

\$5 PHOTO DONATION
\$10 MICROCHIPPING
VENDORS, FACEPAINTING
& MORE!

WARNER ROBINS
GEORGIA



PHOTO BY JOSHUA WILSON

This ceramic Christmas tree, a 1960s heirloom passed down from Joshua Wilson’s grandparents, is part of his annual holiday display.



PHOTO BY JOSHUA WILSON

This 2014 photo shows Joshua Wilson’s grandparents, Jerry and Bernice Wilson, who were married for more than 70 years.

What stays with me

In a recent e-newsletter, I mentioned one of my favorite holiday traditions: unpacking my antique ceramic Christmas tree, a gift from my grandparents.

They bought it in the 1960s and used it for years, and I’ve displayed it every December since they passed it down to me. When I moved to Macon earlier this year, it was in the front seat of my car — not because it’s delicate but because it represents something important.

I can’t put up a regular Christmas tree because of my cat, Henry, and his tendency to treat pine needles as snacks.

But he leaves the ceramic one alone, almost respectfully. I like to think he knows it’s part of the family story.

The tree reminds me of Paw and Maw, who were instrumental in my upbringing. They were married for more than 70 years, a partnership defined by consistency and quiet strength.

My grandfather died in 2016 at age 90; my grandmother followed in 2019, also at 90. They lived steady lives anchored by values they didn’t announce — they practiced them.

From them, I learned that character shows up in the everyday: treating people with respect, working hard, following through and doing what’s right even when it’s inconvenient. These were lessons delivered with actions — in how they approached work, faith, family and neighbors — not in speeches.



Joshua WILSON

The big reminders surface: a familiar recipe, a story retold, or in my case, a ceramic Christmas tree that has been part of my December for as long as I can remember.

These aren’t dramatic symbols. They’re everyday touchpoints that reflect the people who shaped us and the expectations they quietly set.

As I unpack the ceramic tree each year, I think less about nostalgia and more about responsibility. The qualities my grandparents modeled — steadiness, kindness, honesty and humility — remain relevant, especially in a time when communities depend on people who show up for one another.

I was fortunate to know Jerry and Bernice Wilson for as long as I did, and I remain grateful for their influence. The ceramic tree is a simple reminder of a much larger legacy — one that still guides me, year after year.

Executive Editor Joshua Wilson wants to hear about your family traditions and what the holidays mean to you. Your reflections may be shared in future editions. Send them to news@MaconMelody.com.

Raise the age of criminal responsibility

Working in government affairs and media, you form many personal bonds with members of the Legislature.

Not all of them last. Some officials leave public life, political differences can strain friendships and sadly some depart from this world far too young.

This is what happened recently with the passing of Rep. Mandi Ballinger, Republican of Canton. She was the chair of the House Juvenile Justice Committee and a force within the General Assembly. While she could be reserved and guarded, she treated me with kindness. Not long before her passing, she and I were scheduled to have dinner to discuss criminal justice reform — a favorite topic of hers



Marc HYDEN

— but she canceled due to an emergency. Now I understand what that emergency was, and she leaves a big void under the Gold Dome. Yet if lawmakers are judged by the people they hope to help, then Ballinger stands at the forefront. Her top priority — and the reason she and I knew one another — was working to keep more kids out of the adult justice system. The legislation that would have accomplished this never made it to the governor’s desk, but if lawmakers want to honor her memory, they should place it atop their 2026 agenda.

Over the course of several years, Rep. Ballinger hosted a study committee on the matter and introduced numerous bills to raise the age of adult criminal responsibility. Georgia is one of only five states, including Texas, Wisconsin, Louisiana and North Carolina, that treats all 17-year-olds as adults in the justice system. Ballinger had hoped to bring the Peach State into alignment with nearly all other states and raise the age to 18, and for good reason.

“It is so much better for the state — better outcomes for offenders, lower overall costs, and lower recidivism rates. It’s just the right thing to do,” she said via email to

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First step toward autocracy is already here

Here in Georgia, we have had a front-row seat to the erosion of democracy.

But it doesn’t look like the movies or come with a cinematic moment of revelation. Instead, we are watching it unfold day by day in small non-events and headlines that fail to capture our attention for more than a few hours. Over time, we get so used to the chaos, the disruption and the brokenness that we adapt — like a distant alarm that becomes part of the background noise or that rut on the road that has never been fixed, so we learn to drive over it.

We know something is wrong; we know there’s an issue that is causing harm — but we learn to accept it because that’s just the way it is.

But it shouldn’t be.

In recent months, I’ve been talking a lot about the “10 Steps to Autocracy and Authoritarianism.” This framework serves as a translator. The regime that’s attacking our way of life wants us to feel overwhelmed by what’s happening around us and to us. But the 10 Steps show how all of the pieces fit together. Over the next few weeks, I intend to use “Fine Print” to help us see how what’s happening around us is actually happening to us.

The bottom line is that authoritarians follow a playbook. By naming their steps, we expose their strategy. And by exposing their strategy, we empower ourselves to see their intentions — and defeat them. The “10 Steps to Autocracy and Authoritarianism” give us the intellectual scaffolding to recognize the danger signals, to see how each action by those in power fits into a broader design, and ultimately to arm ourselves with the information and tools we need to reclaim democracy for the people.

Today we’re talking about Step 1 — winning (usually the last) free and fair election. As always, I’d like to thank Kim Lane Scheppelle, who researched this framework and allowed me to slightly editorialize it.

Across recent history and the world, most of the politicians who eventually dismantled democracy were at first chosen in free and fair elections. Citizens cast their ballots believing they were participating in the normal democratic process, and election monitors certified those contests as legitimate. But in many of these cases, the warning signs were visible long before Election Day. Aspirational autocrats often make it clear — through word or action — that they are not fully committed to democratic values and ideals and that the institutions by which people exercise their



FINE PRINT STACEY ABRAMS

rights should be destroyed.

In Turkey, Erdogan won power in 2003 even after his party was banned and he was jailed for stoking religious hatred. In Venezuela, Chavez was elected in 1999 after trying to overthrow the elected government. In Hungary, Orban spent years attacking the legitimacy of elections he lost — and then rewrote the rules once he got back in power in 2010. And in Brazil, Bolsonaro openly praised Brazil’s 20th-century military coup and dictatorship long before his 2018 win — and has now been convicted and sentenced to 27 years in prison for plotting and participating in his own coup plot.

Of course, not every freely elected leader becomes an autocrat and not all authoritarians advertise their intentions in advance. But would-be strongmen often send unmistakable signals before winning the election that ultimately allows them to move against democratic institutions.

While Donald Trump’s election in 2016 may not have conformed to the classic trajectory of an autocrat, his behavior over the following years did. He refused to concede the 2020 election, incited supporters who violently attacked the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, and was ultimately indicted in both state and federal courts for plotting to overturn the election result. He tried to undermine the legitimacy of the judicial process by calling it a “witch hunt.”

Now, within the first months of the second Trump administration, the pattern seen in places like Turkey, Venezuela, Hungary and Brazil has fully revealed itself in the United States.

So, you might be asking: what do we need to know?

Step 1 on the road to autocracy is that the erosion of democracy often begins with a legitimate election — even when warning signs are already flashing — which means we cannot wait until democratic systems are formally dismantled to push back. We must recognize these signals early, call them out clearly and organize before the next election. Failure to do so makes resistance exponentially harder.

We can’t assume that because the election was legitimate, the resulting administration will be. As we’ve watched since January, an election cannot be used to justify the wanton cruelty and corrup-

tion that has marked every single day of this regime — like gutting health care or firing thousands of hardworking civil servants or the U.S. Coast Guard announcing that swastikas and nooses are no longer hateful, shameful symbols.

We also have to stop accepting that bad politicians do bad things because “they won fair and square.” A free and fair election is not a hall pass to tyranny. As long as we cling to treating this new American order as something we simply need to survive, we are missing the point.

Yes, Republicans won the election — and they brought with them Christian nationalists, tech bros who have your private data, masked secret police, and the military occupation of cities like Memphis and Portland. This isn’t normal, so assuming the next election will fix it simply won’t do. I’m not calling for panic — but we must pay attention right now.

Authoritarianism isn’t coming to America. It’s here. Our job is to accept where we are and to plot our way forward — starting today.

While some of us may understand the threats we face, the reality hasn’t quite broken through for a lot of Georgians. That’s by design. When everything feels out of whack, nothing feels completely wrong.

A few months ago, I spent time with a naturalized citizen here in Georgia who had escaped a South American dictatorship decades before.

We’d worked together many times, so I knew a bit of her story. When I asked about how she felt given what was happening in America, she shrugged.

“I don’t watch the news; it’s too depressing,” she said. “What’s going on?”

I spent the next few minutes updating her on the immigration ruling that authorizes racial profiling and the pending cuts to the Affordable Care Act. She is an independent contractor who gets her health care on the marketplace, and she has two children who could be targeted by ICE despite their citizenship.

She had no idea — but she wanted to know more.

You can be part of how we build the resistance.

Join us at 10stepscampaign.org. We’ve got work to do.

Stacey Abrams is a bestselling author, entrepreneur and host of the podcast “Assembly Required.” She previously served as minority leader in the Georgia House of Representatives. This column was originally published in her “Assembly Notes” Substack newsletter.

The Macon Melody

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The Melody (ISSN 93-4710374) is published with periodicals postage paid at Macon, GA 31201. All content is the copyright of The Macon Melody, 2025.

Heart health for the holidays

One of my favorite things about the holiday season is the opportunity to gather around the table with family and friends.

As a vascular surgeon, I try not to worry too much about how much butter and sugar are in the sweet potato casseroles and seven-layer cakes.

But like many others among us, sometimes I just can't help myself from eating them. Like you, I do enjoy a good meal, but I bring a different perspective to the table.

To put it plainly, I work every day with patients whose lives have been forever changed by clogged arteries, diabetes and stroke.

Now, I'm not saying that splurging on a holiday meal will cause these things, but it is a good reminder that a lifestyle of indulgent eating can lead to cardiovascular risks.

Those with a predisposition to these risks should be especially mindful of what goes on their holiday plates.

The Centers for Disease Control says that heart disease is the leading cause of death for people in the United States.

Heart disease includes several conditions, such as heart attack, stroke, heart failure and arrhythmia.

Risk factors for developing heart disease include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, diabetes, obesity, excessive alcohol intake, a sedentary lifestyle and an unhealthy diet.

Some of these risk factors are genetic, but some are within your control.

As you gather with your loved



MAGENDRAN DANAPAL

ones this holiday season, take a moment to consider what steps you can take — today — to make positive lifestyle changes to reduce your risk of heart

disease.

I love to travel, and to try new cuisine wherever I go. As I look forward to holiday travel and time with family, I also make sure I carve out time to stay physically active.

Even just a 20-minute walk can make a difference in risk factors for heart disease.

I echo the American Heart Association's recommendation that you aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity a week.

It's helpful to find an activity that you enjoy, such as walking, cycling or even pickle ball. If needed, break up your exercise into several short sessions throughout the day to reach your goal.

In addition to increased physical activity, resolve to make better food choices now and throughout the holiday season.

I suggest serving smaller portions of calorie-laden foods — like your favorite casseroles — and supplementing that with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Eating more slowly will allow you time to enjoy the meal, and for your stomach to register fullness.

Add more whole grains, fruits, vegetables, skinless poultry, fish, nuts, low-fat dairy products, lean meats and vegetable protein to your

diet.

Limit processed foods, saturated and trans fats, red meat, sodium and added sugars.

A great way to improve your heart health during the holidays is to enjoy healthier versions of your favorite foods. Try swapping:

— Low-fat mashed potatoes, pureed vegetables or a reduced-fat soup instead of creamed soup in casseroles

— Lean protein sources, such as fish or poultry, instead of cured meats

— Wine, broth or fruit juice instead of oil for sautéing vegetables

— Greek yogurt instead of sour cream or heavy cream

— Yogurt, applesauce or pureed pumpkin or banana instead of butter and oils

— Flavored water instead of eggnog, punch or alcoholic drinks

— Fruits and vegetables instead of starchy sides

— Whole grains, such as wild rice, instead of white rice

Small changes to your diet and lifestyle have been shown to improve your heart health and ensure that you and your family share special holiday traditions together for years to come.

Dr. Magendran Danapal is chief of vascular surgery at Atrium Health Navicent in Macon. He is board certified in general surgery and vascular surgery, and focuses on aneurysms, carotid disease, peripheral arterial disease, spine exposures, dialysis access, deep vein thrombosis and thoracic outlet syndrome.

Hot Dog Club embraces season of joy and giving



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
From left, Joanna Hardy, Dorothy McCranie and Shirley Duncan hold samples of supplies they will be handing out during The Hotdog Club's first giveaway at Duncan's home on Dec. 5.

It started with a knock on the door in the spring of 2018. David Duncan walked to the porch on his two prosthetic legs.

The visitor was a young boy who lived down the street at Lake Wildwood. He asked for a drink of water.

The youngster came back the next day ... and the next. He started bringing his friends. A few weeks later, David invited several neighborhood children to a hot dog supper on a Friday night. He and his wife, Shirley, served soft drinks and had cupcakes for dessert. He led a short devotional and Bible study.

They began meeting every Friday and called it the Hot Dog Club, even though hot dogs weren't always the main menu item.

Over time, David learned their names, where they lived and their family situations. They began to trust him. They shared their hopes, fears, dreams and prayer requests.

The children became regulars at the Duncan home. They often would drop by after school for snacks. At the weekly meetings on Fridays, they were provided with food, clothes, school supplies and spiritual nourishment. The program's outreach was later extended to a wide assortment of people, including adults.

In February 2020, David and Shirley were invited to speak at a Valentine's banquet at New Heights Church. David told the group he didn't always know where the food was going to come from on Friday nights at the Hot Dog Club but that "God always provides."

Dorothy McCranie, a member at New Heights, had planned and prepared a taco bar for the banquet that night. She sent the leftover food home with the Duncans for their Friday night gathering.

That was the beginning of McCranie's involvement with the Hot Dog Club. She started volunteering on Friday nights. Other church members soon began helping out, and the church hosted a party for the children, with a water slide, beach towels and a meal.

"We looked for any opportunity where we could bring in the church and make a difference," McCraine said.

McCranie helped Shirley shop for clothes, toys and personal hygiene items for the club's annual Christ-



Ed GRISAMORE

mas party. David had devoted more than 50 years of his life to ministry. He was a double amputee, having lost both legs to diabetes. In 1996, he received a pancreas and a kidney in a double organ transplant. Glaucoma robbed him of his sight in his right eye and he suffered from tunnel vision in his left.

But he never waved a white flag or threw himself a pity party. A man once told him: "You're the most 'unhandicapped' handicapped person I've ever met."

On December 11, 2022 — just a few days before the Hot Dog Club's Christmas party — his big heart gave out. He was 65.

The Friday night get-togethers have carried on in his memory. The club continues to provide food, clothes, school supplies and other assistance to needy families at Lake Wildwood.

Shirley said the club now averages about 170 on Friday nights. A few weeks ago, during the time SNAP benefits expired, the group provided food for 236 people.

For last year's Christmas party, the club selected 10 Lake Wildwood families and hosted a Christmas dinner. They also sent them home with snacks, blankets and artificial Christmas trees with lights and decorations.

This year, the Hot Dog Club decided to go big.

"It has been on Dorothy's heart for the past 12 months that God was doing something," Joanna Hardy, a church administrator at New Heights, said. "She didn't know quite what, but she has been praying about it."

McCranie said she came up with the idea three months ago for what is being called the "Season of Joy and Giving" For the first three Friday nights in December, families at the Lake Wildwood gathering will be provided with a hot meal and items and gifts from the "grace table."

The theme for Friday, December 5 is "Warmth and Comfort." Items from the grace table include socks,

See HOT DOG Page 7

'Tis the season to doze on the couch during a timeless Christmas special

Now that the halls have been decked, the mistletoe hung and the tree is fully trimmed, it's time to start another annual tradition — binge watching Christmas programs.

Fifty-six years ago this week, the holiday classic "Frosty the Snowman" first hit the airwaves.

The 25-minute cartoon, based on the 1950 Gene Autry song of the same name, was the first seasonal show watched in my house this year.

About half an hour is all I can seem to stay awake after I sit down on the couch. Yes, I've reached that stage of fatherhood where I near-instantly fall asleep when I try to watch television.

So don't ask me if I've seen the latest buzz-worthy program, but I have seen the intro seven times.

"Frosty" is probably the last of the great network television Christmas specials, with "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "A Charlie Brown Christmas" and the original production of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" all debuting within the previous eight years.

After the 1960s, small screen producers seemingly lost the ability to capture the magic and meaning of the season, though Mr. T made an impressive street Santa in 1984. He wasn't the jolly old elf people were used to.

I pity the fools that don't believe in Christmas.

Speaking of the Grinch, the older I get the more I understand this be-



KYLE DOMINY

loved character. The Grinch didn't hate Christmas, he liked peace and quiet, and we all know that if there are children around, there is little peace on Dec. 25, at least

while they are awake.

As for Christmas movies, let's set the record straight: "Die Hard" is a holiday story, and is best watched late on Christmas Eve while trying to put on the finishing touches, placing presents around the tree and doing the work that Santa Claus will take all the credit for.

It is not quite Christmas without bloodying your knuckles on a present assembly project and stifling your foul language by stuffing one of Santa's cookies in your mouth. Yippee ki-yay ...

Many people flock to a production of "The Nutcracker" to mark the holidays.

This timeless ballet essentially tells the tale of two spoiled children and a broken toy. The two-hour show could be cut dramatically if the father character would learn to control his unruly son.

I've been workshoping an update to "The Nutcracker." It's set in a trailer park and instead of a rat king there's a bunch of raccoons.

It will be a short show for all the dads that have trouble staying awake. I'll let you know when the casting call goes out. Rednecks



PHOTO BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
Kyle Dominy of The Courier Harold said he believes "Die Hard" is a true holiday classic and the perfect film to watch while wrapping gifts.

need apply.

Whatever you watch this Christmas season, I hope you have a couch full of folks to watch it with.

The most wonderful time of year is often the most stressful, and moments with family can be few and far between.

I'll let you know what movie or television show I watch next with mine, and I promise I'll try to stay awake this time.

Better known as "The New Southern Dad," Kyle Dominy lives in Dublin and writes for The Courier Harold.

HYDEN

Continued from Page 5

me once.

She was right, and it is also inconsistent with the rest of Georgia's laws. You need to be at least 18 years old to buy a lottery ticket, get a tattoo or open a checking account, and you need to be 21 years old to purchase cigarettes or alcohol. The reason for this is that youths can be impressionable and are sometimes not mature enough to make decisions that might haunt them the rest of their lives.

There is plenty of science behind this too, but Georgia's criminal code is incompatible with the truth about

brain development. In fact, 17-year-olds are still developing. They lack the cognitive maturity to more effectively process cause and effect and tame spontaneous impulses. Anyone who has ever been 17 years old understands this, but the lack of cognitive development calls into question how culpable youths truly are for their actions.

Despite this obvious reality, Georgia treats every single 17-year-old as an adult in the justice system. As a result, minor mistakes made as a teenager can saddle youths with a permanent mark on their background that follows them for the rest of their lives. This can prevent them from ever obtaining good jobs,

housing and even higher education. Suddenly a lapse in judgement as a youth starts to look as though it comes with a kind of life sentence.

Their actions can also land them in jail alongside career criminals, and the data behind this is highly concerning. Youths who are incarcerated in adult facilities are more likely to be the target of sexual and violent abuse and to commit suicide than those housed in juvenile facilities. What's more, youths who spend time in adult facilities are more likely to recidivate, in part, because adult correctional centers do not have programming and counseling tailored for juveniles.

Georgia's policy imperils youths

and leads to more crime, but the policy may be even more wasteful than just this. Studies have shown that it might cost more taxpayer money as well.

A Wisconsin study concluded, "For every 1,000 youth returned to the juvenile system there will be \$5.8 million in direct savings each year through reduced law enforcement costs, court costs, and losses to victims."

Rep. Ballinger recognized this, and she hoped to treat youths appropriately for their age and put Georgia on a safer footing. Her bills to raise the age of adult criminal responsibility to 18 would have done just this, but they wisely left open

the ability to try certain youths accused of serious crimes as adults on a case-by-case basis.

With her passing, Rep. Beth Camp, Republican of Concord, replaces Ballinger as chair of the Juvenile Justice Committee. I hope she carries the mantle of reform proudly, and if the Legislature wants to honor the late Ballinger, they can start by working toward the passage of a raise the age bill and finish the passion project that she started years ago.

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

BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

The heart and soul behind Guitarras Mexican Grill

If you've ever walked into a restaurant and immediately felt like you were stepping into someone's home, then you know exactly what it feels like to walk into Guitarras Mexican Grill.

From the bright art on the walls (brought straight from Mexico) to the aroma of fresh tortillas on the grill — this isn't just a meal, it's an experience.

Opened in 2015, Guitarras has grown from one cozy location to three, plus a wildly popular food truck that's become a staple at community events all around town. But don't let the expansion fool you, this place has managed to hold on tight to its heart and soul.

Everything here is made from scratch, the corn tortillas, the chips, even the agua frescas (those refreshing fruit drinks that taste like sunshine in a glass). It's the kind of attention to detail that lets you know somebody back there is cooking with love.

Owner David Resendiz knows a thing or two about that love. Years ago, before Guitarras even existed, he worked in the kitchen of this very same building when it was a different restaurant. His wife? She was a dishwasher right next door.

Fast forward a few years, and these two not only built a family together, they built a



Billy HENNESSEY

business — one that would eventually become a beloved local favorite. Guitarras isn't just a restaurant, it's a family affair. Their second and third locations were opened so that Mom and Dad could teach their kids how to run a successful business.

David will be the first to tell you: he might be the engine that keeps things running, but his wife is the transmission and the engine only goes where she allows. She's the backbone, the matriarch and the heartbeat of the family — the kind of woman every strong family needs.

When it comes to community, the family doesn't just serve Macon, it loves Macon. One of their locations was opened near a hospital specifically to feed the healthcare heroes who give so much of themselves. And let's talk about that famous food truck! If you're a Macon resident, you can request it for your event for free.

Most food trucks will charge you a setup fee before they even turn the grill on. Not Guitarras. You just invite the folks, and they'll roll up with the tacos. Because that's what family does, they show up.

When I asked David why they offer that, his answer hit me straight in the heart. "During COVID, Maconites came every single day," he said. "They made sure we stayed in business. Now we do the same for them."

That's love. That's gratitude. That's Macon.

David has called this city home for nearly 25 years, and his pride for the community is undeniable. The way he lights up talking about Maconites could make even the spiciest salsa feel mild. His passion is contagious and it's part of what makes this place so special.

Now let's talk food. David's favorite? The Tacos Al Pastor which is marinated pork sliced fresh off the grill, smokey, juicy and served with that perfect little kiss of pineapple.

Evelin, Guitarras' social media manager and one of the daughters, swears by the



PHOTO SUBMITTED
David Resendiz and his wife operate Guitarras Mexican Grill, a popular eatery in Macon with three different locations and a food truck that attracts foodies from all over town.

Macon Special, a sizzling platter loaded with steak, chicken and shrimp, all tossed together with grilled onions and peppers and served with warm tortillas so you can build your own masterpiece.

Every bite feels like a trip to abuelita's kitchen, comforting, soulful and made with love. This isn't one of those places you rush through. It's a spot to slow down, share a laugh and enjoy good company.

Whether it's a family dinner, a first date

or one of those days when only tacos can fix your mood, Guitarras has a seat waiting for you. You're not just a customer, you're family... except after dinner, you don't have to clear the table or do the dishes.

Until next time fellow Maconites, Let's Eat!

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



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY
Guitarras Mexican Grill serves everything from scratch, including the fresh tortillas and refreshing agau frescas.

Poinsettias add festive color to any flower arrangement

BY GRACE KRAUSS
Special to The Melody

After Christmas trees, poinsettias are probably the most purchased plant during the holiday season.

In fact, their popularity makes them the best-selling potted houseplants in the United States.

A quick way to provide stunning, long-lasting holiday color and easy decorating is to purchase poinsettias. They look great, whether used as a stunning single specimen or massed as a group.

Poinsettias are native to Mexico, where the Aztecs used them for fabric dye and the sap as a remedy for fevers.

What we think to be the "flowers" are modified leaves, called bracts. The actual flowers are the tiny yellow bits in the center.

Classified as "short-day" plants, poinsettias require long, dark nights for the green leaves to change color.

They have been selectively bred to produce a wide range of colors — from the traditional red to pink, salmon, white, speckled and even light orange!

Whether you purchase these colorful plants to brighten your home for the holidays or to give as a gift, here are a few tips to make sure your poinsettia remains healthy and attractive throughout the holiday season:

— **Pick a winner:** Make sure the plant is well shaped and balanced all around. The bracts should be thoroughly colored and there should be dark green, healthy leaves all the way down strong stems. Look for the yellow flowers in the middle barely opened. Avoid plants with broken stems and wilting leaves.

— **Choose a bright location:** Poinsettias prefer six hours of bright, indirect light a day.

— **Keep away from heat sources:** Indoor heating vents, fireplaces or small heaters create low humidity which can cause plants to dry out more quickly. Excess heat or drafts can cause the leaves to wilt and drop.

— **Provide water needs:** Water when the soil is almost dry to the touch. Don't allow your plant to completely dry out.

— **Allow for drainage:** If the plant is gift-wrapped in foil, remove the wrap-

ping and place the pot on a saucer to protect furniture. If you want to use the foil wrap for décor, remove it when watering so the plant doesn't sit in excess water.

While poinsettias are not poisonous, the sap is an irritant that causes stomach upset if ingested.

The leaves and stems also produce a white, milky sap that can cause skin irritation.

Gloves should be worn when working with them and tools should be cleaned to prevent leaving a sticky sap residue. If it gets on your skin, wash with soap and water.

Poinsettias can be kept to re-flower next year, but the process can be demanding so they are often used as annuals.

The colorful bracts can stay bright for months if they can receive bright, indirect light and frequent watering. By following these tips, you can enjoy your poinsettias well into the new year!

Grace Krauss is a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer for Bibb County Extension.



PHOTO FROM UGA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
Poinsettias are most recognizable during the holiday season for their large red petals.

MARKET

Continued from Page 4

kets in Roswell, Atlanta and even larger cities throughout the country, Visit Macon's Marisa Rodgers wanted to bring the holiday magic to Macon.

Rodgers said the idea to host a European-inspired hol-

and then left, Rodgers said.

She noted their goal of encouraging overnight stays and attracting more shoppers to downtown storefronts.

Macon's Christmas market will include entertainment, free gift wrapping for any items purchased in downtown shops, German boot collectors mugs and 18 different vendors.

There will also be a bier garden with traditional European malt wine, Kaitlyn Kressin, owner of Fall Line Brewing Co., said, and Skipper Family Farms will offer live trees for sale.

"We want to keep adding to it and making sure that it's special and something new is there every single year," Rodgers said.

HOT DOG

Continued from Page 6

gloves, stocking caps, hoodies, sweat shirts, jackets. McCranie said the club has enough of those clothing items for the 175-80 people who are expected.

She said additional donations are still needed for Friday, December 12, when the theme is "Cleanliness," and for Friday, December 19, when there will be a Christmas party in the Duncan's back yard. The theme for that night is "Rest."

Items for "Cleanliness" include shampoo, soap, body wash, deodorant, powder, toothpaste, toothbrushes and feminine hygiene products. Items for

"Rest" include pillows, pillow cases, throw blankets, story books and devotionals.

"Whoever God sends to us on those Friday nights will have things to take home," McCranie said. "It's a whole lot of faith. David always said if somebody shows up, and they need it, we're going to give it to them. As long as God provides, we're going to do it."

Donations for the "Season of Joy and Giving" can be made at New Heights Church, 158 Lamar Road.

For more information, phone 478-757-2240 or email joanna.hardy@newheightsmacon.com

"This is my whole life. For me, it's Christmas the whole year."

iday market came from a desire for visitors to stay longer in downtown Macon.

Data showed that most people came to see the lights

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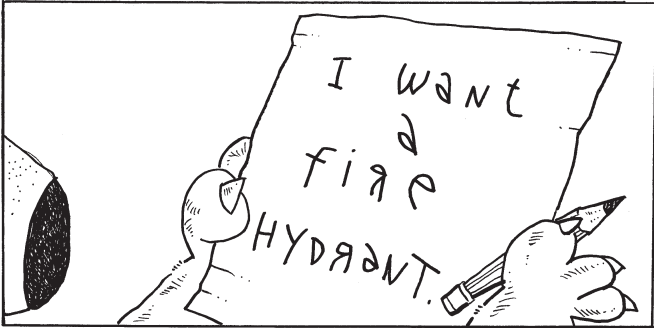
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Out on a Limb

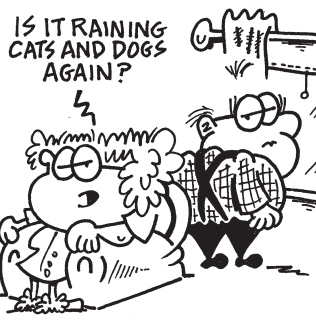
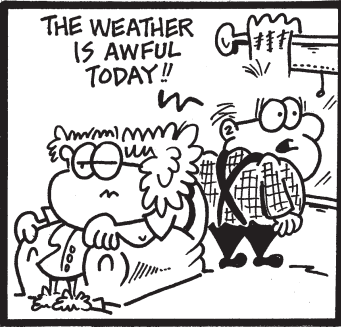


by Gary Kopervas

BUSTER ASKS
SANTA CLAUS FOR
THE SAME THING
EVERY CHRISTMAS

KOPERVAS

The Spats



by Jeff Pickering



PICKERING

King Crossword

ACROSS

- 1 Roughly
5 Texter's "Wow!"
8 Nero's 1300
12 Stead
13 Museum-funding org.
14 Vicinity
15 In — (miffed)
16 Deception
18 Fawcett of '70s TV
20 Goodies
21 Skater's leap
23 "Delicious!"
24 Tobago's island neighbor
28 Salon request
31 A billion years
32 Whiskey drinks
34 Fish eggs
35 Privation
37 Three-paneled artwork
39 "Friendly skies" co.

- 41 Chevy sub-compact
42 Pulpit delivery
45 Painter Hopper
49 Homages
51 Always
52 Forearm bone
53 Depot (Abbr.)
54 Sultry Horne
55 Pleads
56 Wager
57 Highlander

DOWN

- 1 "Frozen" snowman
2 TV host Kelly
3 Crystal gazer
4 Defeated in a footrace
5 Promptly
6 Mal de —
7 Pace
8 Cosmetics
9 Butter producer
10 Birth doc.
11 Low isles

- 17 Sob
19 Pivot line
22 "Kinsey" actress Linney
24 — Aviv
25 Aussie hopper
26 Making certain
27 Tries to convey
29 Sinbad's bird
30 "Whatever"
33 Raced
36 Brazilian dances
38 Hair dryers
40 Baseball's Gehrig
42 Ticket half
43 — Stanley Gardner
44 Fed. accident investigator
46 Opposite of "sans"
47 Gambling mecca
48 "Phooey!"
50 Summer in Paris

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Weekly SUDOKU

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King Crossword — Answers

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Answer

Weekly SUDOKU

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SPORTS



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL
Malik Simmons (14) shakes off a tackler on the way to a touchdown during Mercer's game against Chattanooga earlier this season. The Bears will host South Dakota in the second round of the FCS Playoffs.

Mercer ready to host South Dakota in FCS playoff game

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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Mercer football has come a long way since its first game, and head coach Mike Jacobs would be the first person to tell you.

All the way back on Aug. 30, the Bears lost at home against Presbyterian College, a non-scholarship program out of the Pioneer Football league. The defeat left players, fans and even Jacobs a little shell-shocked.

"The bye week after the Presbyterian loss, we challenged everybody in the building," Jacobs said. "There were some big questions that needed to be answered."

Mercer has certainly answered those questions in resounding fashion.

The Bears reeled off nine straight wins after the unexpected loss in their home opener, finishing the year 9-2 with an undefeated Southern Conference record to claim the SoCon title outright for the second straight year.

The streak was fueled by freshman quarterback Braden Atkinson, who took the starting role ahead of Mercer's third game and caught fire in the pocket.

Atkinson finished the regular season with 3,348 passing yards, 34

touchdowns and only seven interceptions. Before last week's game against Auburn, he led the entire country — including FBS schools — in passing yards.

"Obviously we made a quarterback change that week. Brayden's been a big part of our success," Jacobs said. "The kid went 9 for 9 on his first nine passes and it was like, 'Alright, maybe we made the right decision."

"The kid studies and prepares each week like a senior ... It's not just the confidence he has in himself, it's the team. Whether it's third and 2 or third and 14, it's the belief that we're gonna be able to get this thing moving."

Though he did win the SoCon's Freshman of the Year award, Atkinson has not carried the team by himself. His stellar offensive line has only allowed five sacks all season, the second-lowest in the FCS. Running back CJ Miller has amassed 848 rushing yards and 14 touchdowns. Mercer finished with the most total offense in the entire country among FCS teams.

The defense has been almost as dominant despite graduating several key players, including the top two tacklers in Mercer football history. The Bears lead all FCS teams with 42 sacks in 11 games and rank in

the top 25 in total defense, the latter number skewed by a shootout with Western Carolina and the aforementioned game against Auburn.

"Any time you rip off nine in a row, everybody's getting better," Jacobs said of who improved most. "I don't know if I'd use the word turnaround. I expect to win every game we play in, frankly. That's just the way I'm wired."

All the success has set Mercer up to host a home game in the FCS playoffs for the third consecutive season. The Bears, who earned the No. 6 seed in the 32-team tournament, will host No. 11 South Dakota at noon Saturday in Five Star Stadium.

It was Mercer's second year in a row earning a bye in the playoffs. The South Dakota Coyotes are 9-4 after defeating Drake 38-17 in the first round of the tournament last weekend.

"They're a team that's playing really good football here late in the season. They were a team that had really high expectations, they were a Final Four team a year ago," Jacobs said. "They're playing in what many would call the toughest conference in the FCS, the Big Sky, and they

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Northeast defenders tackle Toombs County running back Justin Powell (3) during their quarterfinal game in Lyons on Nov. 28.

A dominant Northeast season comes to an end

Raiders pestered by penalties in 24-6 quarterfinal loss to Toombs County

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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Northeast's southbound revenge tour to Lyons ended in gut-wrenching fashion Friday night after the Raiders were hampered by penalties in a 24-6 loss to the Toombs County Bulldogs in the GHSA Class A-Division I quarterfinals, ending what was nonetheless another milestone season for Bibb County's top football program.

The night was — much to head coach Jeremy Wiggins and the Northeast fans' chagrin — defined by Northeast's 16 total penalties, which deadened an already sputtering offense and often gave the Bulldogs' offense a boost. Most of the fouls were false starts or encroachments.

"It was just penalties. Way too many. It wasn't our night, we didn't play well," Wiggins said. "Just not our night."

It was the Raiders' lowest point total since a 41-0 playoff loss to Appling County in the 2023 playoffs.

Prior to that game, Northeast had not scored six or fewer points since a 9-6 loss against Bleckley County in 2021.

Northeast's offensive woes did not sting as much thanks to its defense, which stepped up in crucial situations to stop Toombs County inside the red zone multiple times early on, even if the Bulldogs eventually found their footing later.

Defense played a much larger role than it did in last season's A-Division I championship game between the two teams, which Toombs County won 38-18 thanks to an explosive offense.

"I don't think the cold was a factor, I just think a lot of it was self-inflicted," Wiggins said. "The penalties wore our defense out because the offense couldn't get anywhere after the false starts."

The loss ends another stellar season for Northeast, which won 10 games for the second straight year and took home its first region cham-

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Page 10

Westside tops Howard for first win

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Westside Seminoles snagged their first win of the season Monday night, defeating the Howard Huskies 61-56 at home in a back-and-forth affair that ended with a clutch three-point shot and steal to give the Seminoles the edge.

After a second half that featured four lead changes and two ties — each team led by at least eight points at least once during the game — Westside had the ball with about a minute left and a 56-54 lead. Freshman Quincey Sallette stepped up for the Seminoles after a long possession, draining a huge three-pointer with about 30 seconds left to extend the lead.

Westside star Jalen Whitley then swiped the ball back at halfcourt on Howard's ensuing possession and took it the distance for the layup, completing an explosive sequence that gave the Seminoles an insurmountable lead in only about 15 seconds.

"One thing about Quincey, he's not scared to take the shot," Westside head coach Josh Grube said of his freshman's clutch trey. "We open the gym up every Sunday, and he's



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Westside's Jayden Marshall (11) loses control of the ball while going up for a shot during the Seminoles' game against Howard this week.

in here every day. You want those kind of guys who will work and step up and shoot it."

The Seminoles are now 1-2 after opening with losses to higher classification schools Northside and Warner Robins. They struggled in the second half of those two games, something Westside improved on against Howard.

"We've struggled in the second half in our first two games ... I re-

ally challenged 'em at halftime. The third quarter was not so good to us, but the fourth quarter was better," Grube said. "We're down two seniors right now, so we have two freshmen having to play a lot more minutes. We just needed a win, so it was good to get it."

Whitley led the Seminoles with

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Looking back on 2025's best football moments

When Northeast allowed the Toombs County Bulldogs to score a backbreaking touchdown with only a few minutes left in last week's playoff game, something in the air changed.

Said air certainly did not leave the building — it was a Toombs County home game, after all. Lyons was lively, the stadium's blue-and-red accent lights twinkling in the cold night.

There was, however, a deflating sensation on Northeast's side of the stadium. I suspect that almost everyone on that sideline and in the stands felt it, despite the November chill numbing fingers and toes.

How could football season finally be over?

A week later, it's still hard to believe that Northeast — Macon's last football team standing after an arduous season that began way back in August — fell in the quarterfinals. The sting isn't helped by the fact that the 24-6 loss was a painful one marred by false starts and other mental mistakes.

But I am not a Northeast football fan. I don't know the pain of the team's supporters, and I most certainly will never understand the way the players — particularly the seniors who wore those black, red and yellow uniforms for the final time that day — felt on that chilly South Georgia evening.



Micah
JOHNSTON

No, the sting is different for me. As a sports journalist, I am rooting for every team I cover. I am rooting for stories, preferably good ones. I love doing what I do, and for football season to last just one more week, I needed Northeast to win. So, of course, I was rooting for them.

So instead of mourning Northeast's loss, fun to cover though the Raiders were, I was instead mourning the end of another high school football season. Another year gone, another class of superb athletes with their careers finished.

It reminded me of a quote from the baseball flick "Moneyball." I'll paraphrase it to avoid some colorful language: "If you don't win the last game of the season," Brad Pitt says as notorious Oakland baseball GM Billy Beane, "nobody gives a crap."

I respectfully disagree, Mr. Beane.

There were plenty of moments worth remembering in the 2025 high school football season, even if many teams did not get the outcomes they wanted.

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MERCER

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play good defense. We’re in for a challenge this weekend.”

That 9-4 record has been fueled by a balanced offense that has won its last four straight games, and two of the Coyotes’ losses came against Power 4 Iowa State and FCS juggernaut North Dakota State.

South Dakota quarterback Aidan Bowman has tossed 22 touchdowns against six interceptions for more than 2,400 yards. Running back L.J. Phillips Jr. has had a great season, tallying 1,686 yards on the ground and 16 touchdowns.

Phillips has had 100 yards rushing in eight different games this season, including an incredible 301-yard performance in an overtime win over Northern Colorado and a 244-yard effort against Murray State. The talented rusher should have a good matchup against Mercer, which is one of only six FCS teams allowing less than 100 rushing yards per game on average.

Despite the dual threat offense for

South Dakota, Jacobs said the team would try to play the same way it has all year.

“We’ve won in different ways. We’ve shut people out, we’ve had to outscore folks,” Jacobs said. “There’s nothing specific, we just need to play really good football. We have to play the best football we’ve played all year.”

The same mantra goes for Mercer’s players who haven’t experienced a playoff game yet — the quarterback Atkinson chief among them.

“I think it’s really important to keep the main thing the main thing and prepare. Don’t do more than what you’ve done to be successful... don’t force things. Be who you are. Don’t be afraid to make plays,” Jacobs said. “I look at the playoffs as house money, right? You’re here. You gotta do whatever it takes to move on.”

Mercer’s playoff game kicks off at noon in Macon on Saturday. The game is also available for livestream via ESPN+ with the radio feed available via 100.9 The Creek and the Sportsmic app.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Mercer head coach Mike Jacobs talks to the media during the Bears' press conference Monday ahead of their playoff tilt with South Dakota this Saturday. The Bears lost to Auburn in their season finale but remain one of the most formidable teams in the FCS, earning the tournament's No. 6 seed and a bye.

NORTHEAST

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pionship since 2009. It was also Wiggins’ first region title as a head coach, a milestone for the architect of the Raiders’ recent success.

That was something the head

coach wanted to focus on, even after a heartbreaking defeat.

“You just have to build off that, look at what you did well and take the offseason seriously. 10 wins back-to-back and the region is a big accomplishment for this school. We just want to take a step back and

see what we need to re-evaluate,” Wiggins said. “We want to look at ourselves.”

The team was led by a stacked senior class. Reginald “Bam” Glover” was a driving force for the Raiders, the team’s quarterback during last season’s run to the title game and

Northeast’s passer during the playoffs after an injury to Jordan Wiggins in the regular season finale.

“He’s just played a lot of football and played really well. We’re proud of him. There’s so many guys on this team that put everything into football,” Wiggins said. “We just need to recognize this senior class and celebrate them.”

Amari White and Tailen Sampson were two other standouts Wiggins mentioned, though the entire group was clearly crestfallen as their final season in the red and black came to an end.

It seemed like the Raiders could play around the penalties in the first quarter because of their defensive prowess. The Bulldogs came away with no points after their first two trips inside the 20-yard line, then had to settle for a field goal despite getting inside the 5 in the second quarter.

Those three points were the only ones scored by either squad in the first half, which saw Northeast struggle to move the ball. The Raiders committed a whopping eight false start or encroachment fouls in the first half in addition to a holding call.

Even disregarding the mental mistakes, the Northeast offense fell flat. The Raiders’ typically explosive passing game dried up almost entirely. Glover managed only 29 yards through the air in the opening

half on 3 of 11 passing.

The Raiders crossed the 50-yard line only once in the first two quarters, and it was with about two minutes left until halftime. The drive stalled after more flags were thrown, keeping the score at 3-0 headed into halftime.

The exhaustion Wiggins mentioned kicked in during the second half. Despite a big 38-yard catch from Scottavian Thomas that seemed like it would break Northeast out of its slump early in the third quarter, the Raiders still failed to kick things into gear.

Toombs County punched in the game’s first touchdown on a 14-yard run from Justin Powell, who finished the night with three scores, with about two minutes left in the third quarter.

An interception by Northeast’s Tayvon Shivers early in the fourth set up a slick touchdown on a double pass from Glover to Jacory Sherman to Kortnei Williams, but it was all the offense the Raiders could muster.

Powell and the Bulldogs took advantage of a worn-out Northeast defense and chewed up the rest of the fourth quarter with relative ease, scoring a touchdown to put the game out of reach with about five minutes left and then tacking on another for emphasis in the final two minutes to wrap up the 24-6 victory.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Northeast senior linebacker Tailen Sampson reminisces as he looks at the crowd while time expires during the Raiders' playoff loss to Toombs County on the road last week. The 24-6 defeat ended another solid Northeast season — the last season for Sampson and other notable seniors like quarterback Bam Glover.

JOHNSTON

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Top moments of the year

There’s an obvious elephant in the room — er, in the pages — with us here: one Macon team did reach its ultimate goal.

The Stratford Eagles captured the GIAA Class 4A state championship this season, finishing their journey with three playoff wins capped by a 14-7 victory over Brookstone in the title game to hoist the trophy.

Like any team, the Eagles had their ups and downs. For my money, though, the greatest memory from their championship year came when unheralded freshman Morris

Butler blocked a Brookstone punt in the state championship, getting the Stratford crowd riled up and putting the Eagles in position for the game-winning, trophy-clinching score.

Another notable blocked kick by a Macon team happened all the way back at the beginning of the year, too.

The Westside-Howard rivalry game tends to provide Maconites with some theatrics, and this year’s edition of the crosstown tilt was no different. The two squads traded blows until the end, but it looked like Howard might come out on top for the first time in several years as they set up for a game-winning

field goal with only three seconds left.

Instead, Westside head coach Spoon Risper called a timeout to ice Howard’s kicker. The Seminoles then blocked the field goal try and returned it for a touchdown, flipping the script and crushing the spirits of the Huskies and their fans.

That started the season off with a bang, but not every great moment is so singular and impactful.

There were some pretty stellar individual plays, happenings memorable not because of a grander impact on a game or season but instead because of sheer athleticism.

Howard star Ta’Shawn Poole,

usually known for his prowess as a defensive back, had a sweet punt return against the Rutland Hurricanes this year. In that same showdown, Rutland receiver Troy Lester made an incredible one-handed catch that still replays in my head occasionally.

Unfortunately these two teams, like many of Macon’s public schools, struggled in the long run.

Excluding Northeast, public schools in Macon went a collective 13-49 this season. ACE got five of those wins, and Rutland and Central both finished 0-10 for the second consecutive year.

It was a rough time for some private schools as well. Tattnall

had its first 0-10 season since 1974 despite coming off a 7-3 finish last year. Mount de Sales struggled to a 2-8 record. Windsor finished strong despite a 4-8 mark, and Central Fellowship finished 5-6.

The rough records have to be remembered, though. Without them, there’s no joy in winning.

And even for the winning squads, there is always heartbreak. The Northeast Raiders could tell you all about it last week.

After recalling all these emotions — both good and bad — I’m already looking forward to next season. What will these teams accomplish?

Only time will tell.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Stratford’s Brady Flournoy (13) picks up a blocked punt during the Eagles’ 14-7 win over Brookstone in the GIAA State Championship game at Mercer this season.



PHOTO BY DONN KESTER
Rutland receiver Troy Lester makes an incredible one-handed grab despite a Howard defender getting hands on the ball during the two teams' game this year.

Macon teams compete in HypeSouth hoops event

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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Several Macon basketball teams competed in the Hypesouth Hardwood Invitational on Central High School’s court in Macon last week. The event pitted teams from across Georgia against each other in non-region showdowns in boys games Nov. 29 and girls games Nov. 22.

The event featured Southwest, Westside and Central in addition to other Middle Georgia teams like Baldwin, Warner Robins and Houston County.

On the boys side, the Southwest Patriots unsurprisingly looked solid. The Patriots, who are 3-2 so far and still ranked No. 2 in the state among Class A-Division I schools, snagged an 80-74 overtime victory against Monroe-Albany in the fifth game of the invitational with another superb scoring effort from star guard CJ Howard.

Howard netted 30 points — the second-most of any player at the invitational, according to Hypesouth — to continue his hot start to the 2025-26 campaign. The senior is averaging more than 21 points per game and added six rebounds, three assists and three steals in the win over Monroe.

Fellow senior leader Chase Dupree was no slouch either, chipping in 20 points in the win over

Monroe along with six boards and three assists. Dupree has been an even more prolific scorer than Howard thus far, averaging 30 points per game through Southwest’s five games, per MaxPreps statistics.

The Westside boys had a tougher go of it during the invitational, losing to Warner Robins 63-43 after the Demons exploded for 27 points in the third quarter to run away with the contest in the second half.

Warner Robins only led 20-18 at the break, but things got out of hand for the Seminoles after intermission. Junior Jalen Whitley led Westside with a 19-point effort, but no other Seminole had more than eight points.

The Central boys played the invitational’s first game at 11 a.m., losing 65-56 to New Hampstead despite getting 26 points from returning star Jarvis Williams. The Chargers have an inexperienced roster after several players graduated or transferred during the summer.

The Westside girls appeared at the Nov. 22 edition of the classic, falling to Washington County 60-54. Standout guard Dominique Billue continued to put up numbers for the ‘Noles with 18 points. D’asja Harris followed with 16 points. Westside followed the loss up with an impressive 55-48 victory over Northside-Warner Robins on Nov. 25 in which Billue dropped 24 points.

The Central girls lost a heartbreak-



PHOTO BY CLAY BROWN / HOUSTON HOME JOURNAL

Southwest guard CJ Howard leaps in the air and tries to maneuver the ball around a Monroe defender during the Patriots' overtime win in the HypeSouth Hardwood Invitational last weekend. Howard won Player of the Game in the contest after pouring in 30 points to continue his hot start to the season.

er as the host team of the invitational against Bacon County. The Raiders defeated Central 63-57 in overtime, giving the Chargers an uncharacteristic loss for the second time early this year. JaMyree Simmons starred for Central despite the loss, netting 23 points and 10 rebounds.

Here’s a complete list of scores from the boys and girls invitational.

Girls scores (Nov. 22):

- Bacon County 63, Central-Macon 57 (OT)
- Spencer 41, Veterans 30
- Washington County 60, Westside-Macon 54
- Warner Robins 65, Thomson 59
- Monroe-Albany 76, Baldwin 52
- Jones County 55, Lee County 33

Boys scores (Nov. 29)

- New Hampstead 65, Central-Macon 56
- Warner Robins 63, Westside-Macon 43
- Peach County 58, Johnson-Savannah 49
- Baldwin 73, Beach 46
- Southwest-Macon 80, Monroe-Albany 74
- Houston County 65, Putnam 64

HOOPS

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16 points, but it was a group effort. Jayden Marshall followed with 13, while Sallette chipped in with 11. Whitley had 19 in the loss to Northside but little support from the rest of his team.

“I think it was a relief this game, because Howard didn’t jump and trap us. They didn’t trap Jalen a bunch like Northside and Warner Robins did,” Grube said. “Some of the guys are not ready for that style of play ... Howard did it a lot less.”

It was a crucial early game for Howard as well. Much like West-

side, head coach Jay Lunce and the Huskies are trying to find the right chemistry before region play heats up around the corner.

“We just got to get to the point of these guards (not) turning the ball over. They need to be able to step up with this pressure. It’s a process right now, these guys aren’t com-

pletely used to playing with each other yet,” Lunce said. “It’s still early. We showed a lot of promise. These guys fight and play hard, we just gotta eliminate our mistakes.”

Aiden Jefferson led the Huskies with 16 points, followed by Andre Christian with 11. Jefferson got many of his points on putbacks after hustling for offensive boards, always appearing in the right place at the right time.

“Aiden’s a scrapper, he’s a good scorer and an athletic guy for us. A great kid,” Lunce said. “He just needs a little more experience and needs to step up and fully take that leadership role for us. No one’s doing that for us right now. ... We just have to find the right combination. That makes a big difference. I’ve got to do a better job managing my timeouts as well.”

Howard dropped to 1-4 with the loss, which rounds out a tough first portion of the schedule for the Huskies that included Houston County and Southwest.

It was evident that both teams needed to gel a bit more as the game began. Though neither team was very sharp offensively in the opening period, the Seminoles had the better shooting early as Howard struggled to convert good passes or turnovers into points.

The Huskies finally broke through in the final minute of the period, though, getting a nice layup from Jefferson before a slam dunk from Christian off a smooth steal got the away crowd on its feet. By the time the quarter ended, Howard had bounced back to make it a 15-

13 game.

The second period was almost a mirror image of the first, with Westside pulling away again until a torrent of shots right before the half pulled the Huskies closer. Jaylen Wallace hit a key three-pointer just prior to intermission to cut Westside’s lead to 26-25 at the break.

Both teams found their stride a bit more in the second half. Howard put together an impressive 22-point quarter in the third to flip the script on the Seminoles, eventually going up 51-43 in the fourth quarter for their largest lead of the night.

The Seminoles then did exactly what the Huskies had in the first half — they got an offensive burst at just the right time. Westside closed that six-point gap with a smooth, 6-point scoring run of about two minutes which set the stage for the finale with Sallette and Whitley’s clutch plays.

“I thought Trent Pearson, a sophomore for us, came in and really gave us a spark in that second half. Justin Releford is slowly coming on, he’s come over from Central. We have so many new pieces, it’s just taking a little time,” Grube said. “We’re gonna be alright.”

Westside plays Veterans on the road Dec. 9 for its next game, while Howard is set to travel to Augusta twice this week for games against Hephzibah and Aquinas to begin region play.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Howard’s Aiden Jefferson (5) goes up for a shot during the Huskies’ game against Westside Monday night. Though Howard eventually lost the back-and-forth rivalry game 61-56, Jefferson finished with 16 bounds and several rebounds in the competitive game for the Huskies, who dropped to 1-4 with the loss.

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Nutcracker of Middle Georgia brings 40 years of holiday tradition to the Macon community

The Nutcracker of Middle Georgia celebrates its 40th anniversary this year with performances at the Piedmont Grand Opera House Dec. 10-14.

Founded in 1985, the nonprofit has performed for 39, missing only one year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Macon dance instructor Jean Evans Weaver envisioned an annual production of Tchaikovsky's holiday-themed ballet that would rival the best city ballet companies in the country.

The first production was presented at Wesleyan University with modest costumes and sets, but soon moved to The Grand, where costumes, sets and dancers dramatically improved year by year.

Talk to anyone involved with the organization — then or now — and you'll hear the same goal repeated: to be a little better every year.

Though the production has long been spectacular and has become a solid Macon Christmas tradition, the goal remains the same.

The early vision

"I tell you what," Tony Long said without prompting. "This is going to be the best year ever."

Long is a local businessman, arts lover and second-generation owner of A.T. Long and Son Paint Contractors.

He's an original Nutcracker of Middle Georgia board member and volunteer who still handles sets, production and other backstage issues.

He said Weaver got him involved that first year because "it was so doggone hard to say no to Jean" and because she had a clear and determined vision for the show.

Weaver retired as artistic director



Michael W. PANNELL

in 2016 and died in 2022.

Asked if he thought Weaver initially envisioned what the production was to become, Long didn't hesitate:

"Oh, I absolutely do."

"Jean had danced professionally and seen big Nutcracker productions across the country," he said. "She envisioned a Nutcracker equal to any of them. From day one, she pushed for the best quality in every area. She wouldn't settle for anything less than the best possible productions and the best possible experience for our young dancers and the handful of professionals she brought in each year."

That included set design. Enter Bobby Berg from Macon, who had made his way to New York and begun work as an art director for television, film, stage, opera and ballet.

He first gained recognition as art director for the soap opera Another World, then went on to contribute to many award-winning projects.

Though nationally known, Long said Berg's heart remains in Macon and with the local Nutcracker production.

"He built a model back then and basically designed what you see on stage today," Long said. "We didn't get it all at once — we couldn't afford it."

The group rented much of the set, he said, and every year they saved money to buy another piece and make the production even better.

"It was Jean and Bobby who made things what they are," Long said. "Jean was the dancer, the choreographer. She made sure that was

top-notch. Bobby handled the stage design and made sure it was something to behold."

A lasting tradition

Alice Sheridan danced professionally and built a career teaching locally. A protégé of Weaver, she worked with the organization for 25 years before becoming artistic director upon Weaver's retirement nine years ago.

She has maintained the same commitment to quality and opportunity for young dancers — and to their parents and Macon audiences — as Weaver.

"The fortieth is deeply meaningful for all of us because it represents four decades of tradition, artistry and community coming together to create something truly special in Middle Georgia," Sheridan said. "Very few regional productions have sustained this level of excellence for so long, and I'm incredibly proud to help carry forward a production that has touched so many lives."

Sheridan cited highlights including the thousands of dancers who grew up performing with Nutcracker of Middle Georgia, the consistently sold-out shows at The Grand and the annual free performances for about 960 third graders from Title I schools.

Other points of pride include bringing world-class professional dancers to Macon each season, the production of a grant-funded 20-minute documentary and maintaining a professionally designed production entirely in Middle Georgia.

"For me personally, highlights are seeing the confidence and artistry dancers develop each year and watching former students return as

parents or volunteers," Sheridan said. "I've even had parents come back to perform in the party scene or battle scene alongside their children, which is incredibly special."

Celebrating 40 years, it's only natural to ask what has brought the organization such longevity.

Sheridan credits two pillars: a true working board of directors, many of whom have served since the '80s, and artistic consistency with high standards.

Sheridan called Weaver "the heart of Nutcracker of Middle Georgia."

"Most dancers who passed through this production will tell you how she influenced them not just as dancers but as people," she said. "She created this production and led it with grace, discipline and vision. It's an honor to continue her legacy."

Looking ahead

"We're committed to keeping the production vibrant while preserving its traditions," Sheridan said about the future. "Each year, we introduce new costumes or design elements thoughtfully created by our talented costume designer, Lauren Parris."

"We plan to continue expanding our community outreach, fostering stronger connections with dance schools and dancers throughout Middle Georgia and ensuring that new generations of families experience this cherished holiday tradition."

She added that a growing scholarship program at the Jean Evans Weaver Center for Dance is expanding access to classical ballet training, especially to underserved communities.

Long noted that while interest in classical ballet seemed to falter several years ago, recent summer work-

shops at the Weaver Center drew an unexpected number of applicants from across Georgia.

"The interest is surely there," he said. "In fact, Alice started asking me how we could come up with a couple more studios to meet the need."

A few fun facts

-At least six local dancers who performed the lead role of Clara are dancing professionally today.

-The production rehearses intensively over 18 days across nine weekends.

-Several board members have served for more than 30 years, making Nutcracker of Middle Georgia home to one of the most dedicated arts boards in the region.

-This year's production features 120 cast members from 13 Middle Georgia dance schools, along with six professional guest artists and a large team of volunteers and board members

-Since its founding, more than 4,500 regional dancers have performed in the organization's Nutcracker

-Mother Ginger's iconic costume weighs nearly 80 pounds, cleverly concealing nine jesters

-Each night, a volunteer crew of more than 50 works alongside the professional Grand Opera House crew to bring the show to life.

-The downstairs, under-stage door must remain closed before the start of the snow scene. The slightest draft can affect how — or if — the beautiful silk drop falls, creating the snow illusion.

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PHOTOS WITH SANTA

DECEMBER 19, 2025
1:00 PM - 5:00 PM

SANTA HOLIDAY PHOTO OP
HOT COCOA BAR & COOKIES
CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

TED WRIGHT PARK
2841 MOODY RD
BONAIRE, GA 31005

WARNER ROBINS GEORGIA