

2025: THE STORIES THAT STAYED WITH US

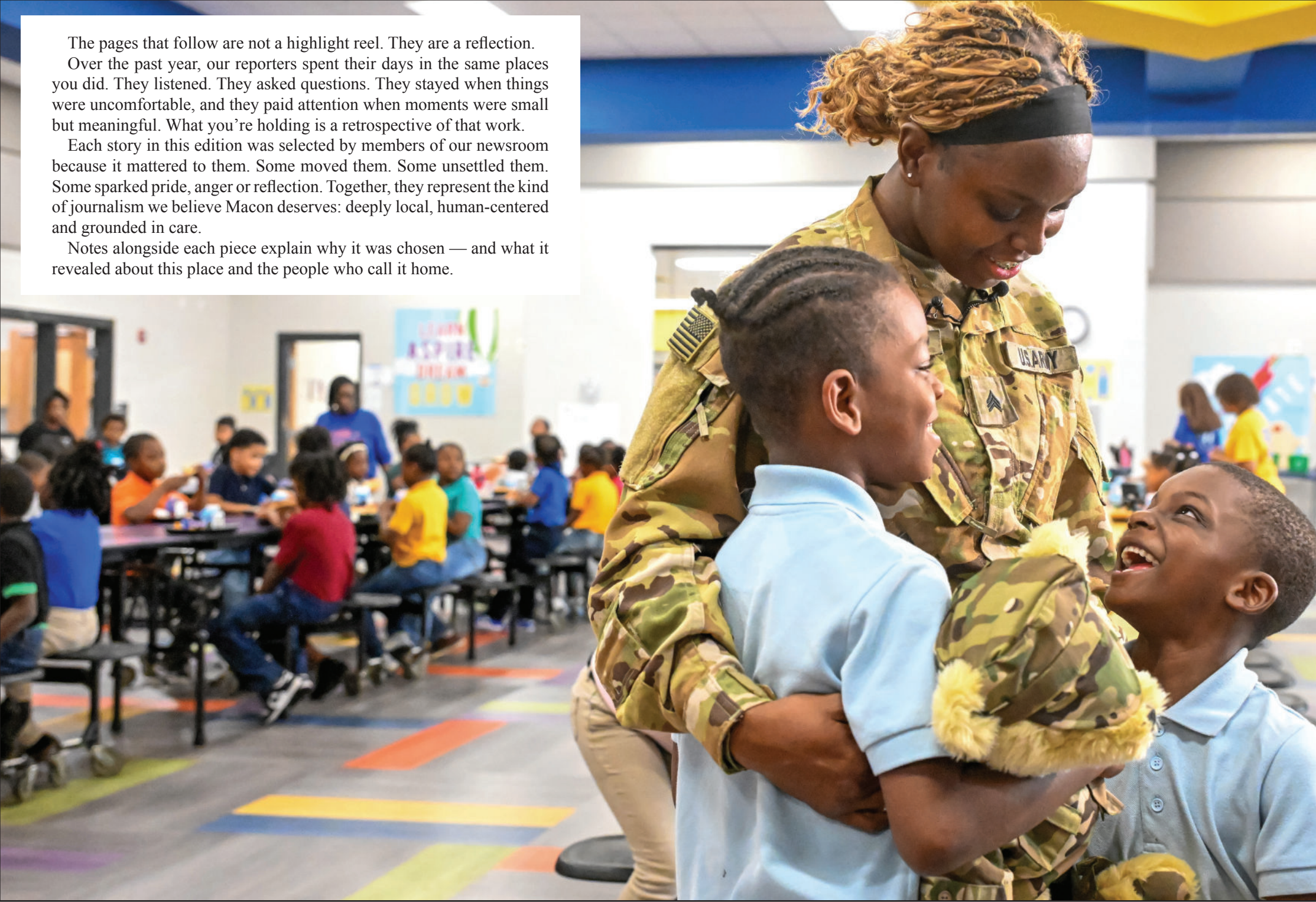


PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Sgt. Shanterria Rocker surprises her sons, Josiah, 7, and Jaxon, 6, at John R. Lewis Elementary School in November after returning from a nine-month deployment in Poland.

THE YEAR IN SNAPSHOTS





SEE PHOTO CAPTIONS ON PAGE 4.

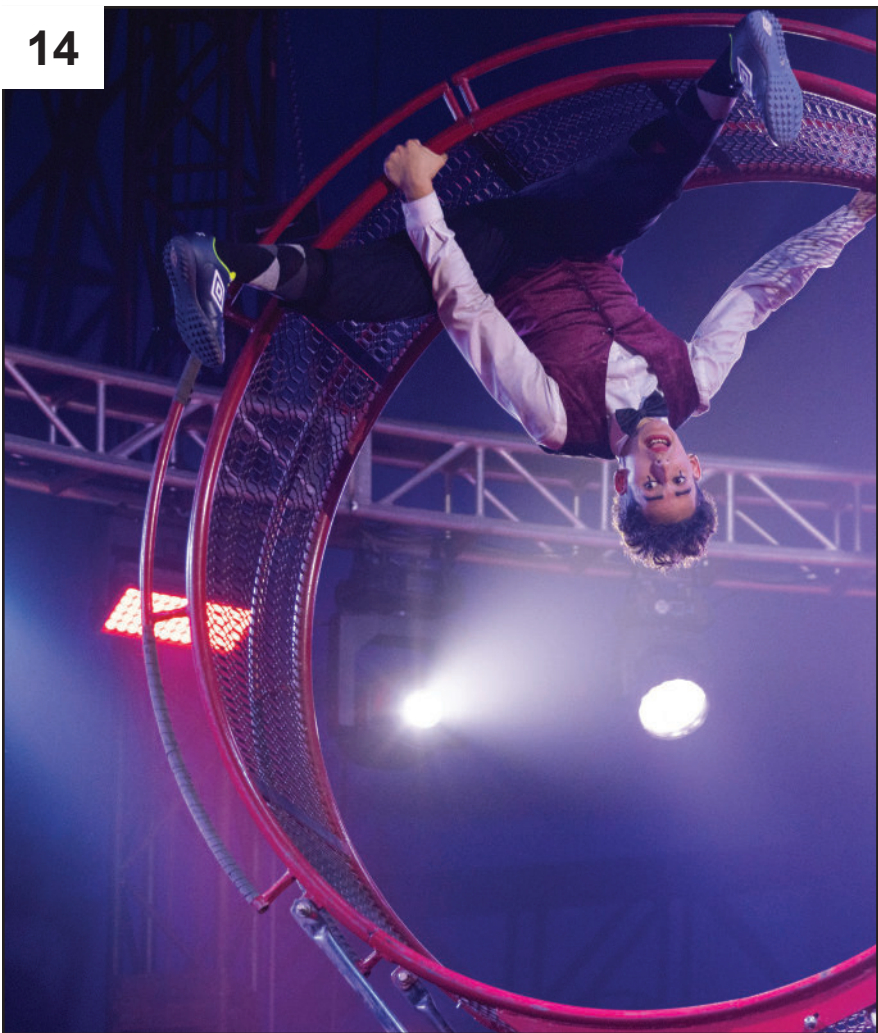
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13



14



15



16



17



18



CAPTIONS FOR THE YEAR IN SNAPSHOTS

01. A woman watches the annual Martin Luther King Jr. March from her porch along Monroe Street in January. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
02. Kristen Applebee makes a snow angel on a dock at Lake Wildwood while spending time with her children, Isaac and Lauren. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
03. Mercer radio commentator Rick Cameron sits at the broadcast table during his 1,000th game calling Bears athletics earlier this year. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
04. Protesters wave flags and gesture toward a passing car during an immigration protest in Warner Robins earlier this year. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
05. Karla Redding-Andrews cuts the ribbon at the opening of the Otis Redding Center in downtown Macon in March. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
06. Kavi Gupta photographs her husband, Abhi, and daughter, Sia, beneath cherry blossoms during the Cherry Blossom Festival in March. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
07. U.S. District Judge Tripp Self poses for a selfie with new citizens during a naturalization ceremony in Macon in April. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
08. Cranes rise above the Macon skyline during the city’s annual Sept. 11 ceremony downtown. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
09. Activist Shenita Binns speaks through a megaphone outside the Bibb County jail during a protest in May. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
10. Attendees view photographs at the Tubman Museum’s “Pioneers and Trailblazers” exhibit in June. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
11. Mercer and Stratford Academy students help place fish habitats in Javors Lucas Lake in Macon in July. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
12. Frankie, a guinea pig owned by Macon resident Takara Moseley, rests under a blanket at home in August. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
13. Cpl. Brandi Smith feeds Fergie, a pit bull-basset hound mix in the Bondable Pups program, as Deputy Alexis Mitchell looks on in July. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
14. An acrobat performs during Circus Hollywood at the Georgia National Fair in October. (Photo by Jessica Gratigny)
15. Students parade through Porter Elementary School during a Hispanic Heritage Month celebration in October. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
16. Windsor Academy wide receiver Dawson Sims reaches for a pass during a rivalry game against Central Fellowship Christian Academy in October. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
17. Brothers Angelo and Maurice Bellamy watch themselves on “Family Feud” when the episode aired Oct. 20. (Photo by Jason Vorhees)
18. Steve Moretti of Macon Pops addresses the crowd during opening night of the Macon Christmas Light Extravaganza in November. (Photo by Jessica Gratigny)

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‘He had the character of 50 people’: Macon remembers Famous Mike

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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Editor’s note: This article was originally published in July. Community Reporter Casey Choung selected it for this retrospective, noting “a great obit by Laura ... a real testament to her ability to connect with people in the community.”

A beloved downtown restaurateur died unexpectedly last week from heart-related causes.

Mike Seekins, owner of Famous Mike’s on Poplar Street, was 63.

A handwritten note taped to the front door of the Poplar Street eatery soon after his death on June 25 informed customers that the restaurant would be closed for the rest of the week.

In the days after Seekins’ death, people out and about downtown and in nearby businesses could be heard mourning the chef’s passing, speaking wistfully about his sausage breakfast biscuits and cooked greens that did not come out of a can. Some wondered aloud whether Famous Mike’s would continue business now that “Big Mike” won’t be in the kitchen.

Seekins’ son, Sam Seekins, plans to continue running the business for now.

Seekins, 63, opened Famous Mike’s downtown in 2018.

Nearly every morning since then, a small cohort of older gentlemen could be found “holding court” in the small restaurant.

Newton Collier is in that group, which usually splits a meal of three eggs over easy, bacon or a salmon bowl.

“Between 10 and 10:30 a.m., you must be there because, if not, there will be a fine; the one who gets there last will pick up the tab,” Collier said with a laugh. “Not really.”

Seekins fed Collier and the other three or four men breakfast for years and never once charged for it.

Collier, who walks from his apartment at the Dempsey on Cherry Street to Seekins’ restaurant every morning, played trumpet with the Sam and Dave duo in his younger years.

His pictures are hung on the walls of the restaurant with portraits of other musicians including the Allman Brothers and the Grateful Dead. Collier said he met Seekins decades ago “through the Allman Brothers system.”

“One day, Mike said, ‘It seems like y’all know the story of The Brothers eating with Mama Louise,’” Collier said. “We didn’t think about that.”

Whenever there was a lull during breakfast, Collier said Seekins would come out and join the group’s conversation.

He loved to argue about sports.

In busier times, Collier said Seekins might stick his head through the kitchen window, “and holler at us



and say, ‘eat up the damn food and quit talking so much!’”

“This guy had the character of 50 people,” Collier said. “Tough, tough character. He just had fun. He’d come up with some joke or something all the time.”

‘A mushy little soft core’

Despite his sometimes rough demeanor and brusque delivery, Seekins had a soft, generous side.

“He had a way of feeding homeless people,” Collier said, adding that Seekins would pass out some of his Sweet Melissa cinnamon rolls — named after the Allman Brother’s famous song — to people who looked hungry. “He had that heart. He had that way.”

Collier compared the late cook to Mama Louise, the legendary original owner of H&H restaurant who fed the Allman Brothers Band before its come up.

Candis Wilburn, a manager at the Your Pie pizza joint a couple of doors down from Famous Mike’s, recalled last year when Seekins put up a small poster board encouraging patrons to buy a homeless person a meal along with their own.

“Well, it got through the streets to the homeless community and then they started lining up at his door, waiting for someone to put something on the board, and it started making his customers mad,” Wilburn said.

Seekins had to take the sign down because patrons told him they didn’t like having to wade through a crowd of homeless people to get a table inside.

The negative reaction from his customer base broke his heart.

“Mike had to find a different way to do it,” Wilburn said, adding that he didn’t want to take down the board. “He eventually did take that board down and then just started feeding people when they come.”

Seekins continued feeding people he knew were in need of a hot meal.

“We know who is truly in hard times out here in these streets and we know who’s got the Colt 45 and two Zig Zags out here smoking and doing their thing,” Wilburn said. “Mike wasn’t about that.”

Seekins looked for people who were down and out and told them,

“Come on in. Yes, I got you right here,” Wilburn said. He would “give them a glass of orange (juice.) Whatever that he could do. Feed them. Love them. Take them to Daybreak if he had to. He would always be willing to give someone advice on where they could get their next set of help from.”

“I think that that’s what made Mike an even better person is because he didn’t broadcast what he was doing down here,” she said.

Seekins and Wilburn, 35, struck up a friendship of sorts when he lent her a tool to fix an emergency leak at Your Pie.

Since then, when Your Pie ran out of lids or straws, Famous Mike’s would lend some to tide its neighbor over.

If the health inspector was knocking at the door and an employee was missing a hat, one would provide for the other to avoid any deduction of points.

“He used to always give me hell when I’d come in for being a Saints fan,” Wilburn said. “We could get along on Saturdays and he used to always say, ‘Glad I’m closed on Sunday and don’t have to see you,’ because the Saints would always play on Sunday.”

Wilburn noted Seekins was an emotional and tender man, even if his rough exterior didn’t always reflect that.

“He didn’t have the filter to process, ‘Don’t say it that way because I don’t mean it that way,’” Wilburn said. “So he spent a lot of time backtracking, (saying) ‘I’m sorry. Hey, hey listen, I didn’t really mean it that way.’”

“Like an ogre and an onion,” Wilburn said, “We get to the middle and there’s like a mushy little soft core of Mike, you know.”

Wilburn said Seekins’ funeral on Saturday was more like a celebration of life.

“There were a few tears shed, but it was more laughter and chipper and not one person there could find anything bad to say about Mike,” Wilburn said.

According to his obituary, Seekins was born in Miami and graduated from Stratford Academy.

He was an athlete and played football on scholarship at Presbyterian College.

He was known for his ability to hit a long drive when golfing with friends.

Others have said he also was a skilled tie-dye artist.

Before opening Famous Mike’s, Seekins owned Biscuits, Burgers & More on Millerfield Road in the C&J Supermarket near the Jones County line.

In the early 2000s, he owned Take Me to the River, a canoe rental and shuttle business based in Juliette.

In 1995, he and two business partners opened United Karma, a since-closed eclectic vintage and knickknack store in Ingleside Village.

New library will be in ‘Ivey’ league of its own

BY ED GRISAMORE
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Editor’s note: This article was originally published in October. Executive Editor Joshua Wilson selected it for this retrospective, noting “a great profile by the talented Ed Grisamore ... it made me love and admire someone I never knew. The detail about Mrs. Ivey’s husband, Ty, not touching the stack of books she left behind on her nightstand was heartbreaking and lovely. These pieces show the power of great storytelling and the impact everyday people can have on others through small acts.”

Cathy Ivey believed she was never fully dressed without a book in her hands.

She always seemed to have her nose stuck in one, turning pages and pressing bookmarks.

Whenever she sat down for a meal, she usually kept a novel within arm’s reach.

She scattered crumbs in the creas-



es of Erik Larson and Jane Austen.

“Cathy and the written word were extremely close friends,” said Dr. Ty Ivey, her husband of 53 years.

There are almost a dozen books stacked on Cathy’s bedside table. They have remained untouched for six months. Ty cannot bring himself to move them.

Cathy died April 7, the same week as the annual Friends of the Library Old Book Sale. She had been a

member of FOL since a few years after its inaugural sale in 1969. That was back when Amazon was just a river in South America and everyone knew how to use a card catalog.

I cannot read or hear those four words — Friends of the Library — without thinking of Cathy Ivey. She was the name and face of the organization. She advocated for the city’s libraries and literacy programs.

She was the truest friend of the Friends, serving on the board of directors since 1978 and as president during four different decades. Under her leadership, the old book sales generated more than \$2.5 million to help fund local libraries. Yes, all those \$1 and \$2 book deals added up.

Her bright yellow apron was a mainstay at the FOL sales, first at Westgate Mall and then moving around with more twists and turns than a paperback romance. Over the years, the sales set up shop at three

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

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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Editor’s note: This article was originally published in November. Executive Editor Joshua Wilson selected it for this retrospective, noting that it highlighted a problem and resulted “in accountability for those who needed it and solutions for those who sought it.”

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

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

The bills, from a company with offices across the globe, showed seniors living alone in one-or two-bedroom apartments were using 10,000 gallons of water each month. That’s about what a family of four would use in 30 days, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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

The three are doggedly pursuing answers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In search of a resolution, the trio of women also paid visits to the leasing office. They contacted the Georgia Advocacy Office. They called the billing company.

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

Her monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment was \$550 when she moved in when The Gardens first opened in 2019. Next year, she said her monthly rent will be \$1,200.

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

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

The Thunder Women also individually called the number listed on the bills from Yes Energy Management,

the worldwide company the apartment complex recently began using.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Though the tenants are billed by Yes Energy Management for water, they write checks or issue money orders to Investors Management Co., the Valdosta-based company that owns the complex. Meanwhile, the water authority sends the bill to a post office box in Hicksville, New York, for Gardens Macon LP.

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

Earlier this week, Thomas and Mason said maintenance workers changed the meters in their apartments.

Leah Daugherty, chief operating officer for Investors Management Co., responded to an inquiry from The Melody via email Tuesday and



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

said the company was not aware the meters had been painted over and is working on stripping the paint “so they are clearly visible to both the residents as well as our staff.”

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

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

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

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

to a developer to build or renovate low-income housing.

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

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

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

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

With style and positivity, artist Ballard creates beauty in his community

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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Editor’s note: This article was originally published in April. Davidson selected it for this retrospective, noting “it’s hard to distill someone’s energy into a written story, but I had a lot of fun painting a picture in the minds of our readers.”

Ask long-time Macon residents about Mark Ballard and a handful of things may pop into their minds: a cookbook author, a lime green aficionado, a bee-lovin’, little yellow taxi collector with a Christmas tree that gives the one at Rockefeller Center a run for its money and a porcelain vidalia onion plate in the Smithsonian.

Ballard’s eclectic style and infectious positivity are hard to forget. He taught a generation of Middle

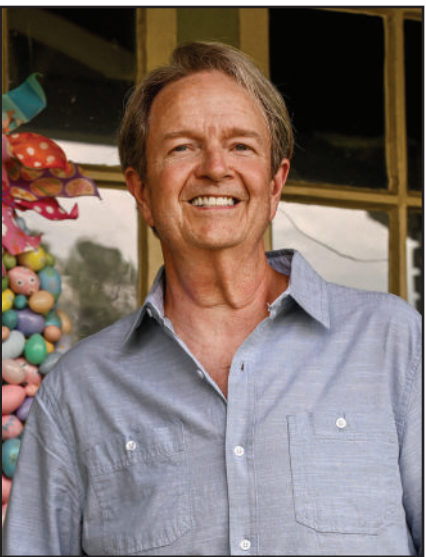
Georgians how to bake a homemade caramel cake and craft elaborate holiday wreaths as “The Artist” on 13WMAZ, and on his shows “Mark Being Mark” and the “Mark Ballard Show” on Cox Cable. Folks also looked forward to reading his Sunday column in The Macon Telegraph.

Although it’s been 15 years since Ballard’s distinctive Southern drawl and artistic flair last graced Southeast Georgians’ TV screens, he says fans still recognize him.

Finding his way through the arts

A former South Macon resident, Ballard credits his mother for the sacrifices she made to support his love of the arts.

“She never got to see me on TV or any of that,” he said. “One person that would have been proud — it would’ve been her, because she



had sacrificed and was my biggest cheerleader.”

After his third grade teacher encouraged his mother to take him to art classes outside of school, Ballard enrolled in group lessons with artist Houser Smith. Smith used to teach

at the old Wesleyan Conservatory and hadn’t had a pupil as young as Ballard.

“Houser was so hard on me,” Ballard said. “He taught me a lot of discipline because he knew I could do it.”

He trained under Smith from elementary school through high school.

After graduation, Ballard set his sights on the seemingly “unreachable” Atlanta College of Art (now SCAD). Smith helped him apply for scholarships and Ballard headed to Atlanta, where he lived with his aunt and uncle.

He studied visual communications and graphic design, and learned to survive on what little money he had at the time.

“I had \$5 and I’m thinking, ‘Am I gonna go eat or am I gonna go get the art supplies?’” he said.

Ballard had known his future

wife, Debra, since he was 2. A pair of Macon natives, they attended the same church growing up.

During his time in Atlanta, he reconnected with her. His art teachers noticed he wasn’t as focused and asked if something had changed in his life.

Ballard and Debra married after he graduated. They raised a son and a daughter from Debra’s previous marriage together.

When Ballard’s mother got in an accident with an 18-wheeler that left her in the hospital for six months, the family moved back to Macon to be closer to her.

Ballard needed work and searched for ways to become involved with Macon’s patrons of the arts. He tried for weeks to connect with Neva

See BALLARD
Page 6

IVEY

Continued from Page 4

different buildings in Central City Park, followed by brief stints at the Macon Centreplex and Riverstreet Corners shopping center.

In late July, the Middle Georgia Regional Library closed its Riverside branch with plans to relocate to 5494 Forsyth Road. The doors will soon swing open at the corner of Marjane Drive, next to the FOL’s headquarters and bookstore.

Two weeks ago, library director Jennifer Lautzenheiser announced the new north Macon branch will be named the Cathy Ivey Community Library.

A sign has already gone up along busy Highway 41. The dedication will be held at 1 p.m. Oct. 13. Appropriately enough, the 20th annual National Friends of Libraries Week follows Oct. 19-25.

Those who knew Cathy are certain she would be honored and humbled. And, Ty added, she might even be a bit embarrassed at all the attention. Her modesty was unmatched. She was as low-key as they come.

Whenever the spotlight shined on her, she went backstage and brought out somebody to share it with her. She was content to be a foot soldier — even though she had the credentials of a five-star general.

The downtown Washington Memorial Library opened in November 1923.

It was named after Hugh Vernon Washington, a Macon judge and leader in the library community in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The only other branch library named after a person is the Dr. Charles A. Lanford library on Houston Road. Lanford was a longtime family physician and civic leader in the Rutland community.

Cathy was born in Philadelphia. Her family moved to Macon when she was 3. Her father was a dermatologist. She graduated from Miller High School for Girls.

Although Ty graduated from Lanier High for Boys, they did not meet until they went on a blind date years later.

“In her dormitory at Duke, most of her roommates would be sitting around playing bridge, and she would be over in the corner reading her book,” Ty said.

Not long after their first date, Cathy moved to Boston to start her job with a publishing company. Ty stayed in Macon and began his long and highly respected career as a dentist.

They married in the spring of 1971. They built a life together and enjoyed being in each other’s company.

Cathy immersed herself in reading

and volunteering with the Friends of the Library. She was passionate about her work with a local association to promote literacy in Macon. She served as librarian at Vineville United Methodist Church for 35 years.

When he wasn’t pulling teeth and filling cavities at his dental practice, Ty developed an interest in bird watching and photography.

“We had our own lives, different hobbies,” he said. “When we went on a trip, she had her books, and I had my birds. Nothing that I did kept her from reading. I can remember going on a search for a yellow-headed blackbird in Wyoming. We went out there, and I found a whole flock of them. I got back to the car, and she was reading her book.”

A month before she died, they were talking about reading lists. Ty told her he wanted to get back to reading more.

He mentioned a book he was interested in, “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo.”

“She didn’t say a word,” Ty said. “She walked out of the room and disappeared somewhere. When she came back, she handed it to me. I didn’t even know we had a copy.”

Cathy was beloved. There wasn’t an empty pew at her memorial service at Vineville Methodist — six months ago this week.

Dr. Jimmy Asbell, the senior pastor at Vineville, told those gathered they had probably never been given homework at a funeral.

“I have to say I have never assigned any before, but I am today,” Asbell said. “In honor of Cathy, read something. Pick up a book. Hold it in your hands. Curl up, if you like ... but read. Take some time to read.”

If you need a book, I know a good place to check out one. It’s an Ivey league library of its own.

Southwest punches ticket to first state title game since '89

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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Editor's note: This article was originally published in March. Johnston selected it for this retrospective, noting "while Southwest ultimately lost in that title showdown, the semifinal win was really electric. This was the most energy I've felt at a sporting event in all my years in Macon."

When Southwest junior Chase Dupree went up for a dunk against a defender in the fourth quarter of the Patriots' state tournament semifinal game, everything changed.

As Dupree soared through the air after receiving a pass in transition, much of the sizable Southwest crowd at Georgia College and State University's gym rose from their seats in one sweeping motion, hands extended upward.

Then Dupree dropped the hammer, posterizing the Toombs County Bulldogs player who stood in his way to draw a foul on the emphatic two-handed slam and give the Patriots their largest lead of the night so far.

"That was game over," Dupree said. "I knew it. Right then."

Though there were still about six minutes left to play, Dupree's gut instinct was right — the Patriots kept the lead and ran out the clock on Toombs County, riding the energy of the impassioned crowd to secure a 65-54 win in the Final Four of the GHSA Class A-Division I state tournament Saturday night and advance to the championship game in Macon next weekend.

"Here's the momentum,' that's the first thing I thought," Southwest head coach Monquencio Hardnett said of his star player's jam. "That was the play we'd been waiting on, that was what we needed... that play right there really turned it for us."

Southwest overcame some offensive struggles early and went down by as many as 11 points in the second quarter. A key part of that was shifty Toombs County guard Mike Polke, who made some tricky floaters look easy and beat Southwest off the dribble to score 11 of his 19 points in the opening half.

The Patriots used the third quarter to get it down to a one-possession game before matching the Bulldogs basket-for-basket, though. A

See **SOUTHWEST**
Page 7

BALLARD

Continued from Page 5

Fickling, Miss America 1953 and wife of William A. Fickling Jr. of the prominent Macon real estate family.

One day, Neva invited Ballard to the Fickling home to see his art portfolio. As a Wesleyan College alumnus, she was drawn to a charcoal depiction of the Old Wesleyan Conservatory.

During his visit, the interior decorating firm for her husband's Charter Medical Hospitals rang Neva — a moment that Ballard describes as being in the right place at the right time.

Neva recommended Ballard, who began creating art for the hospitals. From there, he began building an artistic name for himself. He designed T-shirts and other souvenir items for the Cherry Blossom Festival and became their official artist. Ballard and Neva remained lifelong friends.

From canvas to TV screen

What began as a simple invitation to decorate a Christmas tree for the Channel 13 set transformed Ballard into a household name that garnered loyal fans throughout Middle Georgia and beyond. After designing the festive tree for the Channel 13 set, Ballard was encouraged to ask for a spot on TV.

During his first segment in 1995, Ballard captivated viewers as he demonstrated how to make elaborately decorated gift boxes for the holidays.

Unable to finish the full tutorial in a two-minute time frame, viewers wrote the station asking to see more of Ballard. The next week he had a four-minute segment, then a half hour, then full hour.

"I was a real person," he said of his magnetic personality on screen.

Ballard spent 15 years showing audiences everything from decorating to baking. He published his first cookbook "Blossoms and Bees, Peaches and Pound Cake" and has published a total of five cookbooks.

People couldn't find the ingredients for Martha Stewart's recipes in the grocery store, Ballard said, they had to make a trip to Atlanta for ingredients.

"I enjoyed that whole ride of all that. It was totally unexpected," he said, reflecting on his

time on TV and as a columnist. "I do believe that if you're meant to do things, it will happen."

New challenges, new artwork

Ballard's front living room, painted Tiffany and Co. blue, is a testament to his life's work.

Seated on a vintage chair adorned with a palm tree pattern, Ballard is framed by a sparkling Christmas tree that nearly touches the ceiling and dozens of other carefully curated holiday knickknacks, remnants of his favorite time of the year despite the warmer months catching up to him.

From his paintings on the walls to his T-shirt designs displayed as throw pillows to a set of handmade Camellias made of typewriter paper, Ballard had a hand in creating almost everything on display.

His bee logo — an homage to his mother, who went by Mrs. B. — is permanently set into the black and white tile of his sun room, where more of his bee art has also crept onto the walls and furniture. He joked that the next owner of his house will either have to like it or get a rug.

Since leaving the TV screen, Ballard has tried his hand at comedy, teaching art classes and speaking at conferences. Although readers can't find him in the Sunday paper anymore, he still radiates positivity on his Facebook blog.

In the last year and a half, Ballard and his wife have been absent in Macon. After an infected knee replacement and a stroke, Debra's leg was amputated and the couple spent most of their time in Columbus receiving treatment.

They are a pair meant to be, according to Ballard. He's the artist, she's the organizer and planner.

Upon returning to Macon, Ballard is just starting to create art and doing what he loves. He does commissioned artwork such as pet portraits and recently began dabbling with abstract art — a departure from his classical-trained background in realism.

Ballard also has watercolor paintings set to be featured at the Macon Arts Alliance from May 2-23.

Viewers might remember that Ballard used to close out his TV segments by telling viewers to "go out and create something beautiful" — a motto he continues to live by today.

The Macon Melody

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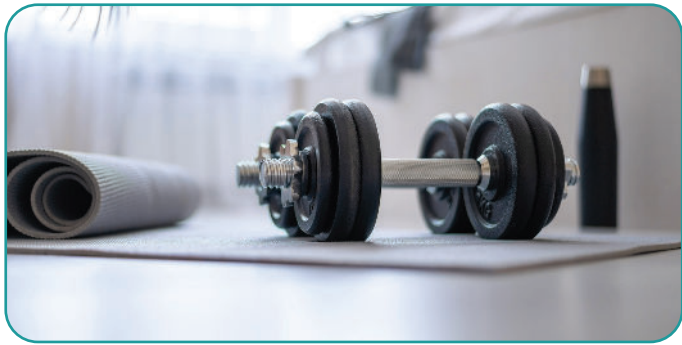
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TRAIN LIKE AN EXPLORER WITH THESE 3 EXPEDITION ROUTINES



Sponsored by: Carlyle Place

A Life-Plan Community of Atrium Health Navicent

Staying active during the cold winter months is essential, but doing repetitive workouts gets boring! Change things up this season with fun exercise routines that mimic famous winter expeditions.

These routines are fine alone, but they're best with a big group! Even though you'll be working inside with temperature-controlled rooms, you'll feel like an explorer off to discover new adventures in the Arctic.

Sailing Across the Bering Strait

Credited as the first Russian to "discover" the western edge of the American continent, Vitus Bering undertook a voyage in 1725 towards what is now Alaska.

He used several ships and crossed thousands of miles by land and by sea. Have fun replicating the skills needed for this journey of exploration!

- Start with a warmup that includes upper and lower body stretching.
- Time to row! Even though Bering's ships had sails, the crew needed to row during calm weather or in emergencies. Use a rowing machine for 10 minutes at your local gym, do seated rows with free weights, or use resistance bands. If you're using weights, try for three sets of 12 reps each.
- After rowing, it's time to hike. The trek included walking across rocky terrain at times, so use "high knees" during your walking time to avoid tripping over the obstacles. Try to walk for 10 minutes!
- Cool down by stretching both your upper and lower body.

Peary's and Cook's North Pole Expeditions

In 1908, two different expeditions headed to "discover" the North Pole. While both Cook and Peary separately claim that they reached this northernmost spot, their records are inconclusive.

It's clear that both, at least, came very close! Their journey included dog sled rides and snowshoeing, so model your workout after these skills.

- Start with a warmup that includes upper and lower body stretching.
- Time to ride on the dog sled. You'll need strong legs and core muscles to guide the sled. Do a set of these four exercises, each with eight reps. Rest for 3 minutes between sets, then go again for a total of three sets:
- Squats: You can do these assisted with a chair/wall or standing independently.
- Try these three seated core exercises: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4R9sfB0kGog.
- After your dogsled rides, it's time to snowshoe! There are three main muscles active when you snowshoe: hip flexors, hip adductors, and glutes. Let's work all three during a slow 10-minute walk: Take wider steps than usual. Stay perfectly upright. Lift your knees up high with each step. Move your arms!
- Take wider steps than usual.
- Stay perfectly upright.
- Lift your knees up high with each step.
- Move your arms!
- Cool down by stretching both your upper and lower body.

Winter Survival Training

No matter the expedition, having winter survival skills was essential. Complete this fun training course to move your body and practice the activities you might need if you're trekking in polar climates.

- Start with a warmup that includes upper and lower body stretching.
- Time to practice compass navigation. If you need basic compass-reading instructions, this guide is great: www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/navigation-basics.html! Once everyone in your group knows the skill, it's time for a relay.

- Split into two teams and start in the center of the room. Each team gets one compass and a roll of colored tape. Keep furniture and obstacles for an additional challenge. Have a game leader call out a compass direction (use this online generator: <https://www.randomlists.com/random-direction>). The first person on each team navigates as fast as they can to that spot and puts a piece of their colored tape. The next team member from each group follows the same process, but with a new direction. Every team member should have at least three turns.
- Have a game leader call out a compass direction (use this online generator: www.randomlists.com/random-direction).
- The first person on each team navigates as fast as they can to that spot and puts a piece of their colored tape.
- The next team member from each group follows the same process, but with a new direction.
- Every team member should have at least three turns.
- After compass reading, it's time to strengthen the muscles for building a survival ice cave. You'll need a strong upper body and core to carve out the ice and crawl inside. Do a set of these three exercises: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyaX-TpBiFY>, eight reps of each move. Rest for 3 minutes, then repeat the set two more times. Do this set of seated core exercises for 10 minutes.
- Do a set of these three exercises, eight reps of each move. Rest for 3 minutes, then repeat the set two more times.
- Do this set of seated core exercises for 10 minutes: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyaX-TpBiFY.
- Cool down by stretching both your upper and lower body.

Grab a few fitness friends, standard equipment, and enjoy working out like the great winter explorers of centuries past.

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PHOTO BY MARK S. POWELL
Kim Lander has been a fixture in the Macon hockey scene since it started in 1973.

For longtime Macon hockey official Kim Lander, the ice is everything

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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Editor's note: This article was originally published in February. Johnston selected it for this retrospective, noting "Lander was not only a pleasure to talk to but a font of information and anecdotes ... the perfect subject for a feature."

As far as Kim Lander was concerned, the Macon Mayhem changing their name for a night was nothing new.

The local hockey team became the Ocmulgee River Monsters for one evening earlier this month, donning brand-new, bright green uniforms instead of their typical red-and-blue fare and changing their logo.

From his compact glass box at the end of the ice closest to the Macon Coliseum's lob-

by, Lander said he liked the new, one-night-only uniforms. It was another name and logo to add to his list, at the very least.

After all, the hockey veteran has seen plenty of Bibb County teams hit the ice only to move to another city — or go extinct entirely — in no time flat. He's been a fixture amid Macon's often low-profile hockey scene, in one way or another, since it began in 1973.

Lander has seen it all, from the Whoopee to the Mayhem and everything in between. He's skated with star players. He's driven a Whoopee van across the country and gone to training camp. He's fashioned his own makeshift jersey with leftover logos.

What Lander has done the longest, though, is his current job as an off-ice official for the

See LANDER
Page 8



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Southwest guard Chase Dupree celebrates after the Patriots' 65-54 semifinal win.

SOUTHWEST

Continued from Page 6

buzzer-beater from downtown by junior C.J. Howard then gave the Patriots a 42-40 lead going into the fourth quarter.

"We didn't necessarily come out how I wanted to, but we picked it up defensively," Dupree said. "I'm just so proud of them."

With the score at 44-43 with about seven minutes left, Southwest took control. Dupree's massive play at the rim was the coup de grace of an 8-0 run that took the wind out of Toombs County's sails and made the swaths of Southwest fans scream in approval.

The Bulldogs would score a few more buckets but could not piece together the comeback. After senior Brandon Ashley hit a 3-pointer with 1:30 left that kept it an eight-point game, the celebration more or less began.

"I knew when I dunked it, but then it was really over," Dupree said of his teammate's dagger from beyond the arc. "We trust Brandon, so when he shot it I knew it was going in."

The three star players — Dupree, Howard and Ashley — have been focal points for Southwest all season and each hit crucial shots down the stretch. Howard led the team with 23 points on the night. Dupree followed closely with 21 points, while Ashley scored 17.

The Patriots will play B.E.S.T. Academy, a boys-only public school in Atlanta, for the championship in the Macon Coliseum March 8 at 1 p.m.

It will be Southwest's first state title appearance since it won the trophy in 1989, according to Hardnett.

"It means everything to me and the team," he said. "We've worked for this for years. To do it with these kids that I've worked with since ninth grade, it's fitting that they're in this position... we haven't done it since '89, and doing it with this group makes me so proud."

While Hardnett himself played for Central back in the day, he's still an authority on the

Patriots' illustrious history, which includes a dominant run of six state titles between 1973 and 1989 and a National Championship in 1979.

Two of Hardnett's uncles played on some of Southwest's championship teams under head coach Duck Richards in the '70s and '80s. His family and Southwest have been tied together for generations.

Plenty of those family members were at the semifinal game Saturday night. Hardnett ascended the steps at the side of the court not long after the buzzer sounded, making his way through a long line of grinning friends and embracing each of them.

He could not decide which hug meant the most.

"My mom, my fiance, so many family members. And the players, man, they brought me here," he said. "They all mean the world to me."

The Patriots had a marked crowd advantage that gave them a boost as well, despite the game being in Milledgeville instead of Macon.

At least 200 Southwest students, parents and fans crowded the GCSU arena — many of them wearing white T-shirts adorned with "The South Got Something To Say!", an adage of Outkast rapper Andre 3000 the school adopted as a rallying cry — and easily outnumbered Toombs County's supporters.

"The whole city out now. When the whole city come out to support us, it brings us a different energy," Dupree said. "It makes us on fire."

Dupree, a leader all year for the Patriots, said the victory made him think back to the offseason.

"This year it started off by getting up at six in the morning. And I made my team get up at six in the morning, get involved, get the work," he said. "That's how we got here."

The work will resume this week as Southwest preps for B.E.S.T. Academy.

"It might feel like a month," Dupree said of the long layover between games. "But we want to dominate. I want to dominate and give my team the ball."



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Kathleen O'Neal, left, records headstone details at Rose Hill Cemetery in Macon in September. She and fellow Macon native Liz Riley are cataloging every burial in the 50-acre cemetery to create a public, searchable database.

Rose Hill registry helps Maconites trace lineage

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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Editor's note: This article was originally published in September. Senior Reporter Laura Corley selected it for this retrospective, noting "Evelyn did a great job highlighting work by individuals who are trying to preserve fast-fading records in one of the most interesting places in Macon. It informed, intrigued and sparked public interest."

Two Macon natives, Kathleen O'Neal and Liz Riley, are shedding light on the everyday people buried in Rose Hill Cemetery, a 50-acre site listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

O'Neal is a historian, and Riley has a background in information technology. They have teamed up to document and catalog each grave in a database accessible to the public.

Both women have generations of family buried in Rose Hill and frequently visit the walkable cemetery located on Riverside Drive. O'Neal has led the Historic Macon Foundation's Rose Hill Ramble tours for the past two years and knows many of the stories behind the headstones.

The 150-year-old cemetery is the final resting place for many notable Maconites and historically significant figures, including music icons Duane Allman and Gregg Allman of The Allman Brothers Band. Thousands of individuals are buried on the cemetery's grounds.

"This is an enormous amount of history that needs to be recorded," Riley said.

Their efforts are a race against time as weeds take over the land and aging headstones deteriorate. The last official map of Rose Hill, containing numbered plots, came from the city's engineering office in 1959.

Records are outdated and incomplete, O'Neal said. She called the existing documentation a "mishmash" of information available in the form of books, publications and government records.

Rose Hill has 16,000 recorded burials. The cemetery is divided into 2,500 plots, or parcels of ground that can hold multiple burials. That number does not include sections that remain unplotted.

O'Neal's husband, a surveyor, created a map of the cemetery that organizes the plots into nine grids. O'Neal and Riley

visit each grave with a pen and a sheet of paper, documenting the name, location, dates and military information contained on each headstone.

O'Neal carries a pair of pruners for when she needs to cut through a tangle of weeds to read the faded engravings on certain memorials.

The process can be tricky when the number of graves in a plot don't match existing documentation or when records contain misspelled names and incorrect dates. They must also document any graves not previously recorded.

"We're writing down and starting an inventory of all of these monuments — before they fade away," O'Neal said.

She keeps a separate record of the companies that produced each marker. Some gravestones were made by the Artope family of Macon, who once owned a marble business located at Plum and Third streets.

There's even a monument in Rose Hill made by Tiffany & Co. — one of just three of the luxury jewelry house's monuments in Georgia, O'Neal and Riley noted.

"The symbolism on these monuments is incredible," Riley said.

The stone designs aren't just aesthetic. They often hold a deeper meaning. A flying hourglass represents how time flies, and a pair of carved hands reach up to heaven.

O'Neal and Riley also trace the history of those buried in the cemetery through newspaper clippings and census records.

O'Neal traced an engraved bench placed in memory of a man lost at sea in 2007 to a matching monument in a Rhode Island state park — where the man lived before his disappearance.

The two even created a Facebook group to document and keep these stories alive.

They began their work in March and have cataloged 600 plots so far. O'Neal and Riley said they expect the project to take another year.

Visitors frequently mistake the pair — donning brightly colored vests with notebooks, flashlights and gardening tools in hand — for cemetery employees and ask for directions to a specific grave.

"What good is it knowing that they're in here if you can't find them?" O'Neal said, noting the importance of remembering and honoring the thousands of stories buried within the cemetery.



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Macon man turns 40 — and lands role in ‘Superman’

BY ED GRISAMORE
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Editor’s note: This article was originally published in August. Community Reporter Casey Choung selected it for this retrospective, noting “it’s a Maconite doing cool things on film.”

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

He woke up the next morning ... and he was 40.

“It wasn’t a midlife crisis,” he said. “I just told myself I wanted to try something different.”

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

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

He simply announced his intentions of appearing in a movie.

“I wanted to be an extra,” he said. “I didn’t have to say anything. I just wanted to experience it.”

Growing up, he had no acting experience in school plays or community theater. He did, however, make an appearance on national television. He later joined a band called Rookie of the Year and went on tour.

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

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

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

His part in the movie required spending “long days in the sand.” Battle scenes for the movie were filmed at Atlanta Sand and Supply Co.’s mining operation in Crawford County. The corporate offices of Atlanta Sand are located on Peake Road in Macon.

Spears took his minor role seriously. For four days, he got up at

4 a.m. and arrived early on the set, dressed in full army fatigues with a vest and helmet. Some of the other extras had difficulty with the heat and keeping up with the rigorous physical demands of running in the sand.

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

Spears and his wife, Emily, later saw Gunn one evening in downtown Macon. The director was having dinner at Oliver’s Corner Bistro with some of the movie crew.

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

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

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

His networking has paid off. On the final day, he was scanned by more than 200 cameras for use in 3D character modeling. He later signed with a talent agency and has since appeared as an extra on HBO, Peacock and Apple TV shows.

Macon house where Duane Allman lived hits Airbnb

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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Editor’s note: This article was originally published in September. Choung selected it for this retrospective, noting “it’s cool to see people doing quirky stuff, and I like doing hands-on reporting like this.”

Fans of rock music can now stay in Duane Allman’s one-time residence.

The two-story, bright orange house — located at 1125 Bond St. — was recently listed on the Airbnb online homestays service by its owners, Ed and Angie Hubbard. The 3,500-square-foot residence can sleep up to 11 guests for a price tag of around \$1,000 per night, according to the listing.

The Hubbards visited Macon in 2019 and enjoyed how “accessible” live music was in the city, Ed said. Ed is a longtime fan of the Allmans and was eager to visit The Big House, home to the band’s museum.

The couple decided to move to Macon from Greenville, South Carolina, in 2024.

They bought the Bond Street house for \$406,000 and spent six months making minor fixes.

“It’s a quirky old house,” Ed said.

The home — built in 1890 — is stuffed with local art and furniture,

including a reclaimed wood picnic table that anchors the dining room. Record covers layer the ceiling in one room, and concert posters, paintings and vinyl can be found on walls throughout the house. A mural by local artist Kevin Lewis wraps around the inside of the stairwell, and a stained glass window casts colorful reflections.

Allman, a famed rock and blues guitarist who founded the Allman Brothers Band in 1969, lived in the residence with his girlfriend Donna and their child Galadrielle. Before his stay on Bond Street, he lived at the Hippie Crash Pad on College Street.

In the foyer is a shrine to the musician. It features small ornaments, pamphlets from Visit Macon, Capricorn Studios and The Big House, and even a menu from H&H, the soul food restaurant known for its Allman Brothers connection.

“We wanted to give folks a place to learn about Macon,” Ed said of the shrine.

The Hubbards recently hosted an open house in partnership with the Historic Macon Foundation, and next June, the couple plans to lend the house to the Otis Redding Foundation as temporary lodging for visiting musicians.

“Macon is just the right size of community for us — not too big, not

too small,” Angie said.

Allmans and Macon

Before reaching Macon and the house on Bond Street, the Allman Brothers Band came together in Jacksonville.

Otis Redding’s manager Phil Walden scouted Duane Allman while the rocker was playing in the Florida city.

Allman then began assembling the Allman Brothers Band, starting with drummer Jaimoe and then adding Dickey Betts, Berry Oakley and Butch Trucks before finally joining up with Duane’s brother Gregg.

Kirk West, the band’s former assistant tour manager, said the brothers moved to Macon in March 1969 and stayed at the Hippie Crash Pad on College Street — next to where Hotel 1842 is now.

“Young bands, they need to be together all the time or they never actually gel,” West said. “They were developing music and they needed intense interaction.”

The band played its first gig in May 1969 at The College Discotheque on Mulberry Street. Duane was the first to move out of the Hippie Crash Pad. Oakley and Trucks followed.

The band would later reunite at The Big House on Vineville Avenue, where they lived there until 1973. In



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Ed and Angie Hubbard stand inside Duane Allman’s former Macon residence, now listed as a short-term rental, alongside a stairwell mural honoring the rock and blues guitarist.

2009, an interactive museum spotlighting the band opened in the former residence.

There was barely a rock ‘n’ roll scene in Macon when the band arrived — except for one local band, “Boogie Chillen,” West said.

West recalled Duane Allman being asked about the band’s choice to locate in Macon.

“There’s not a damn thing going on down here,” Allman responded.

West said the lack of distraction helped the band focus on their music.

“The music industry came because they were here,” he said.

West and his wife Kirsten bought The Big House in 1993. They lived there for 14 years before deciding to make it a museum.

He photographed the band during their performances and later produced archival releases with tapes he found over the years.

“The relationship and my involvement with the Allman Brothers Band is basically the greatest thing that’s happened to me — except for my wife,” he said.

LANDER

Continued from Page 7

SPHL. Since 1996, the goal judge has sat in those aforementioned tight quarters, encased in glass behind the net at one end of the rink, ready to light the lamp if he sees that black puck cross the red goal line.

It is a strange job, one of simultaneous anonymity and infamy.

“It is a job no one wants,” Lander said.

It is a responsibility that draws the ire of fans and players alike, despite the fact that many of the former — and probably a few of the latter — would not recognize Lander if they saw him.

But, most of all, it is the job of a man who has loved hockey for his entire life — and a man who wants others to love it, too.

Pond skating, van driving

Lander, originally from New Jersey, grew up with skates on his feet. He started tearing up his local frozen pond when he was just 3 years old, and his love of hockey followed soon after.

After he moved to Macon and graduated from Central High School (when it was still called Lanier), it was only natural that he wound up on the ice during a public skating session and encountered a player for Macon’s first-ever hockey team.

“I was just out there skating and one of the top draft picks for the Macon Whoopees was nearby. We just started talking,” Lander said. “We became friends pretty fast, and then I was working for the team.”

Lander was a jack of all trades for the Whoopees in their inaugural 1973 season. He sold advertisements, he worked with team equipment — he even drove the team’s Whoopees-branded van all the way to Canada for the team’s training camp.

The vehicle drew quite a bit of attention given the team’s novel moniker inspired by a hit Doris Day track, even drawing the eye of a news crew that filmed Lander and his friend as they drove.

“It was a blast. It was really an experience going through training camp with a professional team. I even had a uniform they made me, ‘just in case you have to get out there,’ they said. But then the IRS came and shut them down nine games before the first season ended in 1974,” Lander said. “The first owner was a great guy, but you gotta pay your taxes.”

And just like that, hockey in Macon went dormant. But Lander waited patiently for the sport of his childhood to return.

It only took a little more than 20 years.

“When they brought hockey back

down here in 1996, I was the most excited,” Lander said. “That’s when I started doing the job as the goal judge, and I’ve been doing it ever since. It’s a way to be involved.”

‘I have a conscience’

The new team dropped the “S,” calling themselves the Macon Whoopee after getting permission from the original 1973 team and league, but Lander couldn’t be partial to them anymore. He had a job to do.

“That’s the most important thing. I love Macon hockey, but I have a conscience, and I love hockey more. I have to call it like I see it,” he said.

Lander means it, too. Just earlier this season, he had one controversial call that, in the eyes of some, cost the Mayhem a seemingly crucial goal when he chose not to press his button to light the red LED bulb atop his glass box.

Though Macon went on to win the game in a blowout, the key call by Lander — or no-call, as it were — did mean the player who shot the puck came up a goal short of a hat trick that night.

Even on “River Monsters” night a few weeks ago, some fans griped as the Mayhem failed to net a goal on Lander’s end of the floor.

“That’s the toughest part, by a mile, when folks get upset. Somebody told me, ‘you better remember

what city you live in.’ But that stuff I just have to let go. I feel bad for ‘em, because they really want the goal,” Lander said. “I’ve had guys get mad at me and come up trying to get through the glass, but I don’t worry too much.”

Lander has seen a lot of antics in his decades with the game — coaches throwing bundles of hockey sticks onto the ice in protest of a ref’s call; a fan accidentally throwing a real, hard puck right next to him during a contest where the crowd throws rubber ones onto the rink — but he’s loved every second of it.

He’s done everything he can to spread that love of hockey, too. He and his first wife enjoyed the sport until she passed away. Lander married his second wife in 2015 — he’d actually dated her in the early ‘70s when she was a student at Wesleyan College — and turned her into a fanatic as well.

“Before she moved back here she was down in Florida, we would call each other and keep up with hockey games together on the phone,” Lander said. “Now she can tell you just about everything — who’s been cut, waived, moved around, you name it.”

Though Lander can’t be a fan of the Mayhem himself, he wishes everyone else was. He commended the dedicated fanbase developed by the team over the last decade, praising

the watch parties for road games and the fervent support at home games.

“I love the people who run and comment on the Mayhem fan page. I can’t say anything on it, but I do like to read it,” Lander joked. “I just wish more people knew about hockey being in Macon, or hockey in general... Some people come for a fight and then enjoy the hockey game, then they might learn more about it. Hockey is such a great thing.”

When Lander says it, it’s easy to believe. Why else would a man spend decades in this glass box, bidding his time until a puck crosses that line?

Lander’s cubicle seems a bit lonesome on its own. The pucks during warm-ups firecracker off the glass and boards with shocking intensity. The button sits on a stool, ready to light the lamp at the earliest sign of a score.

But when Lander steps into the coop and shuts the door behind him, getting ready to work, his confines change.

He does not flinch at the rapping of pucks against the nearby wooden boards.

He’s all business during the game, but he cracks a smile long enough for a picture in front of the spot where he’s spent hundreds of nights intently watching the ice.

With Kim Lander inside it, that little box looks a lot like home.

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