

Community Matters

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A DAY IN THE LIFE:

Officer Bill Pagan

Anabelle Howze

anabelle@cullmantribune.com

Long before the first school bell of the day rings, Cullman Police Department School Resource Officer (SRO) Bill Pagan is already hard at work, setting up traffic cones and directing cars outside West Elementary School, ensuring the safety of the community. Whether it's raining or sunny, hot or cold, he's there, waving, smiling and greeting parents and students as they begin their days.

"Most SROs direct traffic in the morning and the afternoon. In the rain and cold weather, it can sometimes be challenging. I have always enjoyed directing school traffic as I enjoy waving and speaking to parents and children in the car lines," Pagan explained.

This year will mark his third year in the position. His role extends far beyond traffic to monitoring the campus, checking doors and locks, scanning security footage and working closely with faculty and staff to ensure everyone's safety.

"As an SRO, our main responsibility is to ensure the safety and welfare of students and faculty," he said "We accomplish this by walking the campus regularly and viewing cameras daily. We assist principals and teachers with decisions on safety and general public information to help them achieve their daily objectives."

For Pagan, serving the

community is a calling born from his desire to help and serve others.

"Originally, I thought about joining the military when I was young, as I love aviation. I always wanted to be a fighter pilot. I guess, like many, we can thank the movie 'Top Gun,'" he said with a laugh. "Early on, I knew I wanted to go into a career where I helped people. And that is why I still enjoy my job as a police officer and school resource officer today. I get to help people navigate life every day as a life coach. The best life is one of service. I believe the happiest folks on Earth are those who serve others."

Before becoming a full-time SRO, Pagan taught the D.A.R.E. program in Cullman City Schools for 12 years. During that time, he taught more than 4,000 classes, ranging from Head Start to eighth grade, creating a lasting impact on students in the city school system.

"When I started teaching, I was scared to death of public speaking. But after a year or two, I became quite confident and really enjoyed teaching," he shared. "Through the years, I always look forward to seeing students that I had in my classes."

Officer Pagan recognizes that some may question the purpose and impact of the D.A.R.E. program, but he said he has seen the positive results firsthand.

"Through the years, I have heard some say that there is no evidence that programs like



BILL PAGAN

Officer Bill Pagan with his wife, Constance

D.A.R.E. positively influence students. I can 100% say that is not true. I have personally had multiple students and parents tell me that once the students have gotten older, many, if not all, of the topics we discuss are encountered in high school, if not before," he said. "Through the years, I cherish the most the sincere comments and questions from eager students."

Even though he no longer teaches, Pagan hopes to see education return to the department's daily outreach.

"Being full time at West Elementary as their school resource officer, I no longer have the opportunity to teach. I do believe the police department has plans to incorporate some educational curriculum

for students once they find someone who can teach full time."

To Officer Pagan, connection is the most powerful tool a police department has.

"I believe community policing is one of the best ways to reach a community in law enforcement... programs designed to engage the community build relationships and trust with those we serve," he said.

From digital investigations to school campus walks, law enforcement has changed over the years — but Pagan's favorite parts of the job have remained heartfelt and straightforward.

"I really enjoy making little people smile and laugh. I try to always have 'Dad' jokes »

ready on-hand for my students," he laughed. "I enjoy doing the little things others pass on doing... helping folks change a tire or helping someone get fuel for their vehicle was one of my favorite things to do when I worked patrol."

Around town, it's not uncommon for him to be stopped by a familiar face.

"That is, to me, the best part! I really enjoy seeing parents and students of all ages when I am around town. My kids laugh at me and tell me I know everyone," he smiled. "Knowing that, hopefully, I positively impacted someone is so encouraging."

His message for others is simple but powerful: serve

others, hold on to faith and keep getting back up.

"It has been well said that life is hard, but God is good! I believe that wholeheartedly. Without a relationship with Jesus Christ, I would not be able to have such a profound impact on the lives of young people today," Pagan said. "As for advice for young people:

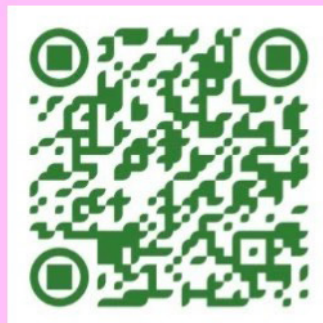
NEVER give up! Remember, it is not how many times you fall in life; it is how many times you get up that counts."

Whether giving words of encouragement or greeting a car full of kids on a school morning, Officer Bill Pagan consistently demonstrates that the smallest acts of service can have a profound impact.



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BACK-TO-SCHOOL TIPS FOR PARENTS

From lunchboxes to letting go



Katie Spicer

katie@cullmantoday.com

Wrapping up summer fun and preparing to head back to school can cause stress for both students and parents. Find comfort by easing into the emotional and hectic new school year with some practical advice and encouragement!

Preparing for success: Lunchboxes and supply lists

Keep an eye on school websites and social media pages for updated supply lists, and go shopping together! Letting students help in the selection of their supplies teaches them responsibility, and the personalization increases their sense of pride.

Plan ahead for your school day meals. Creating a weekly meal schedule helps simplify mornings and evenings (plus saves money on grocery trips!). Consider using leftovers for next-day lunches or taking advantage of services offered by the school system. Cullman County Schools has already announced it is excitedly

offering free breakfast and lunch to all students throughout the week!

Lastly, try to make it both healthy and fun! Be sure to incorporate a balance of protein, fruit and whole grains into packed lunches and consider adding a fun note, sticker or treat to your student's lunchbox or backpack as a special surprise!

Organizing the chaos: Routines and readiness

It is important to establish a consistent routine early on. Setting wake-up and bedtime routines before school begins will help make the transition easier. Creating morning or evening checklists for younger children can help them with these routines. Consider including items such as brushing teeth, eating breakfast or reading a story to the checklist.

Creating a central communication station can help ensure the whole family is on the same page. Consider purchasing a wall calendar or using a digital platform such as Google Calendar to keep track of school events, assignments

and appointments. This area can also be a great place to organize school essentials such as backpacks, homework folders and permission slips. Some families also use this place to set up a charging station for all their electronic devices. This helps students stay true to bedtime routines, not be tempted to stay up late on their devices and have them charged and ready for the next day!

Keep your expectations realistic. Mornings won't always go perfectly. It's important to emphasize progress, not perfection.

Supporting emotional transitions

First-day jitters and back-to-school nerves are to be expected! Normalize these feelings by talking about them. Ask your child, "What are you most nervous about?" and put a positive spin on it by asking, "What are you most excited about?" Asking open-ended questions will help get your kids talking!

Remember, confidence starts at home. Whether it's picking the first day of

school outfit or practicing those multiplication tables, it's important to praise effort, not just outcomes. Celebrate the wins and support them through the roadblocks. Some helpful advice is to use the PSP method: praise, suggestion, praise. If things aren't going quite right, point out what went well first, give a suggestion on how to improve and conclude by reiterating that you are proud of the hard work they are putting in.

Next up, establish a relationship with your student's teacher early on. Reach out and let them know if you have any concerns about your child prior to the year starting, and ask if there are ways for you to get involved to help in the school or classroom. Remember you are both on the same team, striving for the same goal – the success of your student!

Letting go: Encouraging independence

Giving your student age-appropriate responsibility is the first step to encourage independence. For younger students, this might mean picking between two »

weather-appropriate clothing options or helping place snacks and supplies into their backpacks. As children grow, they can take on more responsibility by managing a morning checklist, organizing their homework folder or making simple lunch choices. These small, consistent tasks build confidence, decision-making skills and a

sense of ownership over their routines. Support students from a distance. For example, create an expectation for older students to keep track of their own homework and grades, but check their status on parent portals and get involved when things start to slip. Consider setting boundaries for students' social interactions, both online

and in person. Installing apps like Bark, Boomerang or Qustodio on their electronic devices allows you to set up restrictions to keep students safe without having to micro-manage every interaction.

Being available but allowing the space for growth and mistakes is essential to cultivating independent learners.

Remember that the start of a new school year is an exciting time! Each day, you're celebrating new milestones as a family – a first bus ride, successful grades and positive comments from teachers. Acknowledging each small victory and keeping the school a positive, shared experience will benefit the whole family.



Thank you, Cullman, for the best 80 years of our lives.



In 1943, when the Paul R. Knight Insurance Company opened its doors in downtown Cullman, there was no way of knowing what the future would bring. Paul Knight was a 30-something father of three, registered for the World War II draft, with no idea that his new venture would not only succeed but would ultimately pass down through three generations of his family. Then his son-in-law Elliot Free joined the business in 1970, the agency was re-named Knight-Free, and the rest is history.

But it's a history that wouldn't have happened without you, Cullman. We never forget that. For 80 years, you've trusted us to insure your homes, your cars, your businesses, your lives. You've become our friends, our neighbors, and our reason to turn up at the office every day. You're also the reason that, after all these years, Elliot's son Wescoat Free is still running the independent insurance agency that bears his family name. And, for that, we can't thank you enough.



Your agents. Your neighbors. Your friends. For three generations.

The Tribune brings home 41 APA AWARDS

Staff Reports Contributor

At this year's Alabama Press Association Summer Convention, The Cullman Tribune was honored with 41 awards.

The Alabama Press Association is the state trade association of daily and weekly newspapers in Alabama. Its active membership includes 24 daily newspapers and 99 non-daily newspapers. In addition, its membership includes over 100 associate members, which represent newspaper vendors, colleges and universities and other organizations allied with the newspaper industry.

Active members must have been published weekly under a Publications Class (Second Class) Postal Permit for a period of one year.

Founded in 1871 as the Editors and Publishers Association of Alabama, the name was changed to Alabama Press Association in 1891.

APA represents the interests of the newspaper industry by offering two annual conventions and a number of workshops and conferences. It also represents the newspaper industry before the state legislature, focusing on government access laws and on business-related laws that impact the newspaper industry. It also offers media law advice

to active member newspapers through its APA Legal Hotline, media law guides and offers a number of other services.

Some of the notable wins earned by Tribune staff this year include first-place awards for Best Photo Essay, Best Headline, Best Local News Coverage, Best Podcast Series, Best Editorial, Best Single Ad half a page and under, Best Use of Video, Best Spot News Story and Best Feature Photo.

These wins — spanning editorial, photography, sports, feature writing, website design, podcasts, social media and more — reflect not just the work of a single reporter or department, but the entire Tribune team. This achievement would not be possible without the persistent efforts of our journalists, photographers, editors, graphic designers, marketing representatives and those behind the scenes who make sure each issue reaches our readers. It would especially not be possible without Dustin Isom, whose hands shape each edition from the ground up, every single issue.

From in-depth reporting that holds power to account, to photo essays that capture the heart of our community, and even headlines that bring a smile, every category we were honored in represents something bigger than a plaque or a



NOAH GALILEE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

The Cullman Tribune collected 41 awards at this year's APA Summer Convention in Gulf Shores.

certificate. It represents trust. Your trust.

But this isn't just about awards, it's about impact. It's about the stories that mattered most to you. The businesses that opened their doors. The voices that needed to be heard. The nights spent putting the paper together when the rest of the world was asleep.

We're proud of the recognition, yes, but we're even

prouder of the community that makes the work worth doing.

To our readers, thank you for continuing to believe in local journalism. To our staff, thank you for believing in the mission. And to every person who has contributed in any way to The Tribune, this moment is yours.

Here's to 41 awards and the next 41 stories waiting to be told.



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– SPEND A DAY IN CULLMAN – Around Lewis Smith Lake

Katie Spicer

katie@cullmantoday.com

MORNING

Start the day on the water by renting a boat from Cappy's Boats! Whether you're a licensed professional at piloting a pontoon, an adventurous kayaker or a laid-back lake lover looking for a charter, Cappy's has options for you! With prices starting as low as \$325 per day, Cappy's offers both full- and half-day rentals complete with all the necessities. For an additional fee, renters can add tubes, floats, snacks, drinks and more! Visit www.cappysboats.com for a full list of options and real-time availability and booking or call at 256-756-7946.

AFTERNOON

Enjoy dinner and entertainment at Drifter's Bar & Grill! With a menu ranging from gator bites to crab legs, there's something for everyone. Entertainment options include live music throughout the week or Singo Bingo every

Monday at 6:45 p.m. – free to play with prizes every round! Keep up with upcoming events and view the online menu via at Facebook/Drifters Bar & Grill Smith Lake. Drifters is open Thursdays from 4-9 p.m. and Friday-Monday from 11 a.m.-9 p.m. It's located at 173 County Road 312 Cullman, AL 35057.

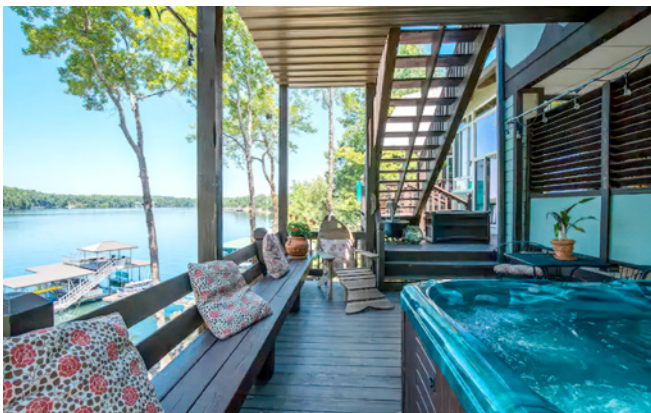
EVENING

Spend the night at your home-away-from-home by renting one of the beautiful estates at Smith Lake B&B. Rentals can accommodate up to five guests and even allow you to bring along your furry friends! Owners Jim and Alex Cox encourage the community to enjoy their waterfront properties or explore the option of owning a piece of their own. As owners of the establishment and agents with JCR Real Estate, they are passionate about helping people find homes on beautiful Lewis Smith Lake. Find the perfect rental and check availability at www.smithlakebandb.com.



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ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

The Snacklebox is a popular Smith Lake attraction, thanks to Cappy's Boats.

SPEND A DAY IN CULLMAN

THE CORNER

SOAK & SPA

Anabelle Howze

anabelle@cullmantribune.com

We live in a fast-paced, hardworking world where it can be difficult to find a moment for yourself, and when you finally do, how do you spend it? Luckily, there's a perfect way to answer that question. The Corner Soak & Spa is more than just a place to unwind and relax; it's the perfect oasis for self-care, rejuvenation and personalized wellness. Whether you're in desperate need of a reset or simply craving a luxurious escape, this locally loved spa offers a blissful experience. From the moment you walk through the doors, the spa's philosophy is clear: this is your time.

"Let your troubles stay at the door," said Manager Caitlyn Hardin.

Guests are greeted and invited in to select their favorite scents, body scrubs and other sensory touches that will personalize their experience. After check-in, you'll head to the locker room to store your belongings, change into a plush robe and begin your journey to relaxation.

The most popular experience at The Corner Soak & Spa is the Elizabeth Package — a full-day itinerary designed to completely reset your body and mind. It begins with time in the sauna, helping to jump start the detox process, followed by a Swedish or therapeutic massage that lasts approximately an hour. After a short break in the lounge,

guests proceed to an hour-long mineral bath soak, enhanced with essential-oil-infused bath salts. With nine custom soak options available, guests can tailor their soaks to their specific needs. Charcuterie boards, soft music and dim lighting complete the experience. From there, guests enjoy an hour-long facial, customized through a comprehensive consultation process to target a range of concerns, from acne to rosacea. Throughout the day, the lounge serves as a peaceful space between treatments, stocked with snacks, refreshments and even access to a back porch for those in need of some fresh air. The spa's Cottage Package is a half-day retreat for two, set in a secluded cottage at the back of the property. For a more private experience, each rental includes a massage, soak and a third customizable service, such as a foot scrub, body scrub or facial.

Every treatment is thoughtfully personalized. Guests seeking stress relief often opt for packages, while others looking for skincare are guided through a comprehensive consultation process to develop a treatment plan.

"Each person knows we're here to meet them exactly where they are," said licensed esthetician Bailey Fell.

Even pricing is approached with flexibility. If a guest has a budget, staff will work to build a service package around it, swapping or adjusting treatments to create the best possible value without sacrificing care or quality.

With over 300 five-star Google reviews, The Corner

The Corner Soak & Spa is located at 501 Third St. SW.



ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE



ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

A treatment room at The Corner Soak & Spa



ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

A soak room at The Corner Soak & Spa

Soak & Spa is praised not just for its services, but also for its consistency.

"Every guest gets the same experience every time they come," Hardin explained.

Monthly staff meetings and a strong emphasis on teamwork ensure quality remains high and the vibe stays welcoming. The spa operates an efficient schedule, maintaining a calm atmosphere and providing ample space for guests to transition between treatments, ensuring they never feel rushed. The goal is always a smooth, stress-free experience from check-in to check-out.

Ultimately, what sets The

Corner Soak & Spa apart is its genuine heart.

"We hear it all the time: 'I didn't realize how badly I needed this,'" said Fell.

Whether it's a full spa day, a facial or even a quick wax appointment, the environment allows guests to reconnect with themselves, often for the first time in a long time.

"We're giving people permission to slow down," Hardin added. "And in today's world, that's one of the most powerful gifts you can give."

To book an appointment or learn more, visit www.thecornersoakandspa.com.

-BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT- Cullman's Branch Books 2

Lauren Estes

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A family owned new and used bookstore opened a second location, Branch Books 2, in Cullman in 2024. Owners Robert and Cheryl Kahlstorf opened their first location in Hartselle, Branch Books, almost seven years ago.

"We are on Facebook and post pictures almost daily of what comes into the store," Cheryl Kahlstorf said.

Explaining part of the reasoning behind the store's name, Kahlstorf said they have a lot of books and figured one day they would expand to two locations. "We started in Hartselle close to seven years ago and have now 'branched out' to Cullman over the past year."

Some of the store's most popular authors right now are Freida McFadden, Colleen Hoover, Sarah J. Maas and Kristin Hannah. The store also carries other items.

Employee Stephanie Sprouse said one of her favorites is the Mr. Pen highlighter set.

"They come in a pack of 20 for less than \$10," she said. "I love them because they don't bleed through the pages and are great for highlighting in my Bible."

"The store is also very organized. Shelves are clearly labeled with genre and HB(hardback)/PB(paperback). Books are shelved alphabetically by author's last name and book title. All items are on the computer for both bookstore locations. Many people like to bring in books for store credit."

Sprouse and her daughter, Samantha, are both part-time



Top right: Branch Books 2 is open six days a week at 2038 Pear Drive NW, Suite E, in Cullman.
Main: Owners Robert and Cheryl Kahlstorf in their Hartselle location

employees.

"Samantha enjoys photographing new books that are uploaded to Facebook," Sprouse said.

"I enjoy barcoding new inventory and taking off discards to fill local Little Free Libraries. I have my bachelor's degree in education and enjoy helping parents and teachers select curriculum. You can also tune in nightly to

'Bedtime Stories' to hear me and others read some of my favorite children's literature for Cullman Tribune's Bedtime Stories. You can view these on Facebook and YouTube. New stories air nightly at 8 p.m."

Sprouse said there's always something new to look forward to at Branch Books 2.

"We have new books, DVDs and CDs that arrive daily," she said. "All new items are

posted on Facebook and can be claimed and held on the hold shelf. Transfer service is also available between Hartselle and Cullman locations, where the books are transferred to the location nearest you."

Branch Books 2 is open six days a week at 2038 Pear Drive NW, Suite E, in Cullman.

For more information, visit www.facebook.com/Branchbooks2.

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CULLMAN COUNTY SHERIFF - MATT GENTRY

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- BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT -

Farmhouse Midwifery

Anabelle Howze

anabelle@cullmantribune.com

Laura A. Reeder, CPM, LM, is more than just a care provider, she's also a guide, a listener and a friend. Reeder is a professional and licensed midwife serving the Cullman area. She has dedicated her time to helping and encouraging expectant mothers, building her practice on the belief that women are fully capable of giving birth naturally and deserve care that honors and empowers their strength.

"I've always loved health care. I started at St. Vincent's as a nursing assistant in college, then moved into community health education," she began. It was then that her journey took a turn, and a childbirth education class sparked a new passion. Reeder eventually went on to practice doula work, receive Bradley Method certification and engage in grassroots advocacy for midwifery rights in Alabama. "Even in college, I was meeting families who had to drive to Tennessee for home births because it was illegal here. That lit a fire in me," she recalled.

Reeder received her license in 2019 and officially opened her midwifery practice in 2020. Now in its sixth year, her practice offers more than just prenatal care. From the moment a client walks in, she is greeted with a warm and welcoming environment — appointments last between 30 minutes and an hour, longer than a typical doctor's appointment.

"We're doing the clinical side: labs, ultrasounds, vitals, but we're also asking about nutrition, exercise, stress,



Laura Reeder with a newborn

LAURA REEDER, MORGAN PAIGE PHOTOGRAPHY

spiritual health," she explained. "It's very relational." This personalized experience continues through birth, which for Reeder's clients takes place at home. "CPMs (Certified Professional Midwives) in Alabama provide out-of-hospital births, which can be wherever the mom chooses, just not in a hospital or birth center."

Reeder said she assists with approximately 32 births a year, sometimes more.

"Every birth is different. I've been to births in campers and outside in kiddie pools. Each one is memorable in its own way," she said. Her philosophy centers on informed decision-making and the utmost respect for the birthing mother. "I believe women know

their bodies best. My role is to educate and give them options and then support the decisions they make." She sees transformation in her clients, not just through the birth itself, but in their confidence. "It's amazing when a mom who never really paid attention to nutrition becomes an expert by the end of her pregnancy," she said. "She's not just doing this for her baby; she's changing herself and how her whole family eats and lives."

Midwifery work is not without challenges. Reeder is one of a small number of licensed midwives in Alabama, and that scarcity comes with systemic hurdles. Integration into the broader health system remains difficult.

"When a client needs to

transfer to a hospital, not every doctor understands or accepts our role. Thankfully, we've built some good relationships, but it can be tough," she said. Another pressing concern is the closure of rural hospitals across the state. "We're prepared for emergencies, but if the nearest hospital is over an hour away, that makes it risky," she explained. She is also involved in legislative advocacy to expand the scope of practice for midwives. "We're nationally trained, but in Alabama, we're not even allowed to do newborn screenings. It's frustrating because those limitations ultimately hurt families."

Despite challenges, Reeder's practice has flourished into a safe space for learning and connection. She hosts »

monthly moms' support groups and women's health meetups at Karma's Coffeehouse.

"We're lucky here. There's a whole collective of birth workers and women's health professionals who support each other. It's a space where women can ask questions, build friendships and feel less alone," explained Reeder, who said she wishes more people knew about the beauty and empowerment of midwifery birth. "Women's bodies are made for this. If we focus on keeping them healthy and low risk, home birth should be the first option, not the last."

If you or someone you know is considering midwifery care, Reeder advises considering your health, researching and interviewing different providers, including midwives and doctors, and ultimately trusting your instincts.

Learn more at www.farm-housemidwifery.com.

*"I've been
to births in
campers and
outside in
kiddie pools.
Each one is
memorable in
its own way."*

– Laura Reeder –



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- FAITH -

Journey Church: You are never alone

Journey Church Pastor Joel Coots baptizes a member.

PHOTO COURTESY JOEL COOTS



JOEL COOTS

A worship service at Journey Church in Eva

Katie Spicer

katie@cullmantoday.com

Journey Church was originally known by a different name, but in September 2002, with the arrival of new leadership and a renewed vision, it was relaunched as Journey Church to mark a fresh start for the community in the Eva area.

Pastor Joel Coots said the church is built on the belief that no church should walk alone.

"We value fellowship, accountability and spiritual covering," Coots said. "That's why we're proudly affiliated with ARC (Association of Related Churches) and Christian International (CI). Our vision is simple and powerful, summed up in four words: Real - Life - Purpose - Make a Difference. Know the REAL God; Live a LIFE of Freedom; Discover Your PURPOSE: Make a DIFFERENCE."

He said at the heart of Journey Church is a deep passion for worship and the transforming truth of God's word.

"Our worship experience is vibrant and heartfelt, led by a full band and praise team," Coots said. "We don't just sing songs — we worship. You'll find people standing, clapping, lifting their hands and even kneeling at the altar as they express their love and honor to God. We also place a strong emphasis on Life Groups — gatherings that meet outside the church at various times and locations. These groups are where real connections are formed, lasting friendships are built and people find encouragement in every season of life."

The children's ministry is dynamic and engaging, Coots said.

"It includes worship, Bible-based video interaction, fun

activities, prayer and small group ministry to help kids grow in their faith in a fun and meaningful way," he shared. "Journey Youth is all about equipping the next generation to know God and live out their faith with confidence. Through Wednesday gatherings, worship and relevant teaching, teens grow spiritually while building real, lasting friendships in a fun and welcoming environment."

Since 2020, Coots said, the church has experienced significant growth, and they believe it's the result of years of faithful sowing.

"We've expanded our parking lot, are currently adding more seating and are in the planning stages for a building addition later this year," he explained. "We are truly humbled and grateful for the unmistakable presence of God and His hand of blessing over all that's happening at Journey

Church. We're passionate about serving both locally and globally. Throughout the year, we lead several outreach projects — two of the biggest being National Serve Day and our annual Christmas Production. On Serve Day, we break into teams and head out to local schools, nursing homes, grocery stores, gas stations and more to bless our community through practical acts of kindness. Our Christmas Production draws people from all over and is a powerful opportunity to share the hope of Christ through creativity and excellence. We also fund a breakfast feeding program for children in Guatemala, helping ensure kids start their day nourished and ready to learn. At Journey Church, we believe you're not saved just to sit — but to serve. Everyone is welcome to get involved and make a difference using whatever gifts, talents or »

resources God has given them."

When asked what "the Church" means to him, Coots responded, "The Church is something God Himself established. In Matthew 16:18 and Ephesians 5:25; it's what Jesus is returning for. Scripture clearly reminds us in Hebrews 10:25 (NKJV) not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching," Coots said. "The Church was never meant to be just a building — it's the living, breathing extension of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, called to carry God's presence, love and purpose to the world."

He said he wanted to remind all new churchgoers of previous church attenders that there's no such thing as a perfect church, a perfect pastor or perfect

people.

"I once heard someone say, 'You can go to McDonald's, wait forever, get the wrong order, and find out the ice cream machine is down — again — and yet, you still go back. But one mistake happens at church, and people walk away,'" Coots said. "I'm not saying that church hurt isn't real — because it is. But maybe it's time we extend the same grace to others, and to the church, that we hope to receive when we fall short. None of us are perfect — but we serve a perfect God who calls us to love, forgive and grow together."

Services can be viewed live every Sunday — or you can catch the replay — on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JourneyChurchEva and www.journeychurcheva.com/sermons.

"You can also listen anytime through our podcast for



Journey Church Pastor Joel Coots leads a group in prayer.

messages on the go," Coots said. "We offer a no-hassle guarantee: come visit us, no pressure attached. If you feel at home, we'd love for you to join us and be part of what God is doing here. And if it's not the right fit, that's OK, too — we won't hassle you. We'll simply encourage you to find a

church where God is planting you, because what matters most is that you're growing in Him."

Journey Church is located at 3683 Eva Road in Eva. Services are Sunday mornings at 10 and Wednesdays at 6:30 p.m. For more information, visit www.journeychurcheva.com.



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All the zip lines offer amazing views.

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

Anabelle Howze

anabelle@cullmantribune.com

Smith Lake Zip Line Adventures is more than just a fun day at the lake; it's a family friendly adventure filled with sky bridges, breathtaking views and the longest zip line in the state of Alabama, and many people don't even know it's there.

When asked to describe the park, Owners Craig Chapman and Brian Waldrep didn't hesitate.

"Exciting," said Chapman. "Fast. Nature."

Waldrep chimed in with one more: "Adventure."

The thrill is woven into every part of the park — from the design of the courses to the names of the lines themselves. "King Kong" is the longest zip line, stretching nearly »



A group gears up to head out on an adventure.

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

3,100 feet across the park, which makes it the longest in the state. Other lines include fun names like "Godzilla," "Valley," "Island" and "Turtles," each inspired by natural elements in the surrounding landscape or the excitement they offer.

The park stands unique compared to other attractions in the area. It's nestled right beside the lake, easily accessible by car or even by boat. "It makes for a great day trip by water," Waldrep noted.

The location, the layout and the unique feel of the park all come together to create something unexpected in north Alabama. But there's more to the story than just an idea for an attraction.

When Chapman and Waldrep first bought the property, they weren't sure what to do with it. Then, a friend suggested a zip line park. With its steep terrain and natural tree canopy, the property turned out to be a perfect fit, and over time, the park has come to mean even more than imagined. In addition to families and thrill seekers, the men have made it a mission to cater to people of all ages and abilities.

Chapman and Waldrep recalled two standout memories: "We had a young teen with a disability. His parents had taken him to several zip line parks, and they all said 'no.' We said, 'Come on.' We were able to make it happen for him. Then we had an 83-year-old woman come to check 'zip lining' off her bucket list and completed level one with flying colors."

"If we can make it safe, we'll take them," Chapman said. "That's what it's all about. We choose our guides carefully, and over the years, they've gone above and beyond to take care of people."

The park features three levels of courses, which allow visitors to choose their



ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

The tower for the King Kong zip line, the longest in Alabama

adventure. Level one is perfect for beginners, younger children or anyone who is feeling nervous.

Level two ramps things up, and level three is for adrenaline junkies seeking impressive heights and speed. Regardless of the level, safety is a top priority. The park uses a closed belay system, which is the safest method available in zip line setups.

Visitors can expect not only high-flying lines but also five to six swinging bridges,

stunning forest views and an experience that feels miles away from everyday life.

And the best part? It's affordable. "You can zip line for less than it costs to go to the movies. And it doesn't take all day — you can run the whole course in about two and a half hours," said Chapman.

The park currently features two Airbnb accommodations on-site that can be rented by calling the park, with plans for additional ones, as well as a future campground. They're

also exploring fun additions, such as dual racing lines and tightrope-style challenges, so keep an eye out for all the exciting new features yet to come.

Whether you're a thrill-seeker, a beginner or a family looking for an exciting outing, Smith Lake Zip Line Adventures is one of Cullman County's true hidden gems, and once you visit, you'll wonder how you ever missed it.

Learn more at www.smith-lakezipline.com.

– FAITH –

World Changers in Cullman: 'Showing God's love'



KATIE SPICER/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

City of Cullman representatives celebrate World Changers' work.

Katie Spicer

katie@cullmantoday.com

Changing the world can start right here at home. That's something Steve Eddleman knows to be true. Eddleman first got involved with World Changers in 1998.

"I'm what is considered the site coordinator. I am the one who requested the project

here," he said. "I work with the local churches who provide meals and things for the kids, along with the City of Cullman who helps provide materials for the projects."

World Changers started in 1990 and has served communities every year since with the exception of the pandemic year of 2020.

Said Eddleman, "We mobilize students to do repairs

on houses for people – mostly senior adults, single parents, handicapped people and widows.

"We do all of these things with the pretense of being the hands and feet of Jesus so that we can show what God has done through us and we can give it back," said Project Coordinator Aleycia Skelton of Holly Pond.

Each volunteer has a specific

job while serving. Roles consist of break masters, safety team, medics and devotional leaders.

Students from youth groups and colleges across the country comprise the world changers staff.

"These kids come out here, they work hard, they pay for the expenses of their lodging, food and everything else. They are paying to work. We just help them get them out »

of their comfort zone and share Jesus with people....That way when they go back home, they can do the same in their own community," stated Eddleman.

The students who volunteered to serve in Cullman community projects were graciously hosted by Holly Pond High School. Principal Dr. Nate Ayers served as a World Changer himself in 2006-2007. All volunteers were able to use the facilities at HPHS to set up air mattresses as their lodging and home base during their stay.

The World Changers organization relies heavily on a supportive community to make projects a reality. Over the course of six weeks, the World Changers complete five projects in various communities. On Sunday mornings, the volunteers attend worship services at numerous churches, which provide them lunch. Many churches also provide lunch for the students as they work throughout the week.

The City of Cullman also played a huge role in supporting World Changers' projects financially.

Cullman Mayor Woody Jacobs told Eddleman, "I can't speak for future mayors and councils, but we will fund it as long as you'll come."

"In reality, this is a week to help homeowners who cannot repair their own home, and take the time to minister to them as Christians and connect them to a local church," said Summer Staff Team Leader Ben Smith.

This year is the second year that World Changers has visited Cullman.

"This year we have worked on five different houses in the city of Cullman. We are doing wood replacements, painting, deck repairs, vinyl siding and flooring in areas such as Fourth



KATIE SPICER/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

World Changers at work

Street and Cliff Road," stated Construction Coordinator Mike Skelton. "We total about 120 people serving this week."

For anyone interested in getting involved in World Changers, whether it be as a student volunteer or adult coordinator, information can be found at world-changers.net.

"We have projects taking place all across the East Coast - anywhere east of Missouri... You can serve as coordinators, by giving financially and by prayer," shared Smith.

Skelton said the most important thing for the community to know is: "It doesn't stop here. This is the way we used to be - people helping one another. We hope that after we leave it opens the door to get back to that. All while showing God's love."



KATIE SPICER/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

World Changers leaders and coordinators: left to right, Ben Smith, Alyssa Basham, Max Cupstid, Lydia Britton, Mike Skelton, Alecia Skelton and Steve Eddleman

- RESTAURANT SPOTLIGHT -

Cullman's Wissota Chophouse

Blending Midwestern flavors with Southern culture



Delicious steaks with mashed potatoes, asparagus and fresh bread

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

Anabelle Howze

anabelle@cullmantribune.com

Wissota Chophouse introduces a new dining experience to Cullman.

Tucked inside the Cobblestone Hotel & Suites on the city's southwest side, Wissota is a Wisconsin-rooted brand that is expanding steadily across state lines, bringing upscale flavors, an intimate ambiance and a fresh sense of culinary creativity to the South.

Leading the Cullman-based restaurant is General Manager Karli Duncan, who is proud to call the location home.

"This was the next step in my career," Duncan shared. "I've been in the service industry for 13 years, and stepping into management here at a place

like Wissota — somewhere I can be proud of — just felt right."

Cullman's Wissota Chophouse is part of a growing collection of restaurants located within Cobblestone Hotels, although not every Cobblestone location offers one. Their shared founder, Brian Wogernese, envisioned a hospitality experience where fine food and local character blend seamlessly.

"One of the biggest things our company stands for is offering a big city feel in a small town, and that's exactly what we're doing here — there's nothing else quite like us in Cullman," explained Duncan.

With dim lighting, smooth jazz music and a relaxed, posh ambiance, the restaurant has become the perfect spot »



ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

Left to right are Wissota Chophouse employees Dale Powell, Daniel Kurry, Karli Duncan and Tori Partridge.

for date nights and special occasions.

"We understand our prices are higher, but that's because we want every part of your visit — service, food and ambiance — to reflect the quality," Duncan said. "We want people to feel like they got more than what they paid for."

The menu features premium meats, classic flavor pairings and a flexible à la carte format that allows guests to build a personalized plate. Every steak is hand selected and graded upper two-thirds choice, a mark of quality that puts the chophouse a cut above.

Some guest favorites include the Mediterranean Flatbread, the Steak Flatbread and the top-selling ribeye, often topped with one of the house's creative enhancements. "You can add a crab cake, asparagus and bearnaise sauce to create

our Oscar-style steak," said Duncan.

In charge of the kitchen is Executive Chef Daniel Kurry, who's bringing his blend of creativity to the business.

"Food is sustenance, but it's also a sensory experience," he said. "A meal should leave you feeling good, and we try to create that through excellent ingredients and thoughtful preparation." He's especially passionate about the opportunity to blend Midwestern flavors with Southern culture. "We're a Wisconsin brand, but here in Alabama, we're creating dishes that pull from both traditions. It keeps the menu exciting and approachable."

The cocktail menu brings a balance of brand staples and bartender-driven creativity, with seasonal offerings rotating often. The Blackberry Lavender Mule is a must-try from the

signature cocktail list, along with Steve's Old Fashioned, a cherry twist on a classic, which was created in collaboration with one of the restaurant's regulars. For those avoiding alcohol, Wissota offers a growing list of non-alcoholic cocktails and wines, part of the team's push to make the experience inclusive without compromising the feel of a special night out.

Opening a new restaurant always presents challenges, and Duncan's team has worked hard to establish a presence in a town full of beloved staples. "I think one of the biggest challenges was just becoming part of Cullman's routine. People here are loyal to their favorites, so we have to earn our spot. And that takes time," she explained.

However, with two new chefs and a friendly front-of-house

team, the restaurant is finding its rhythm within the Cullman community.

"We've grown so much in the past year, from our efficiency to our team dynamic, it's all coming together. It's like we're hitting our stride, and I hope people come out and give us another try or a fresh look," Duncan said.

Looking ahead, guests can expect new wine list updates, expanded non-alcoholic offerings and the creative freedom of the culinary team.

"Our new chefs have so much passion and vision," she said. "They're excited to show the community what they can do, and that's where the magic really happens."

Reservations are recommended. Walk-ins are welcome. Visit Wissota Chophouse at the Cobblestone Hotel in Cullman at 1835 Main Ave. SW.




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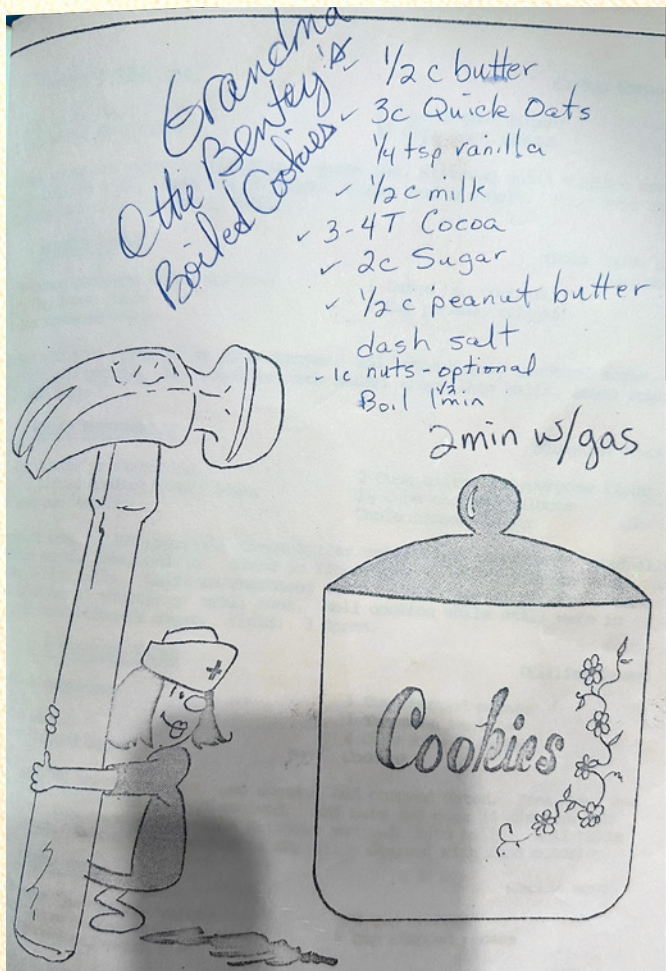
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RECIPE REVIVAL: Grandma Ottie Bentley's Boiled Cookies



Grandma Ottie Bentley's Boiled Cookies, made by her granddaughter Sharon Tucker



Grandma Ottie Bentley's Boiled Cookies recipe

Anabelle Howze
anabelle@cullmantribune.com

The aroma of cocoa and peanut butter bubbling in an iron skillet can be a magical memory. These sweets are more than just what a sweet tooth wants; it's a memory that connects to generations past. Sharon Tucker first made the treasured cookies as a child with her grandmother, Ottie Bentley. Those moments became one of the fondest times with her grandmother, spent in shared time in the kitchen.



Sharon Tucker with her dog

Courtesy Sharon Tucker

"I was born in Michigan, and the first time that we moved, when we moved to Alabama, it was the first cookie that I made with my grandma. And I have been cooking them ever since," Tucker said. "I have her original recipe."

The boiled cookies became the staple of every family gathering.

"Every family thing we have ever been to always has boiled cookies," she said. "These days, either I make them or one of my aunts makes them. But they are definitely a family favorite."

Tucker's beloved grandmother was renowned for her exceptional kitchen skills and dedication to preparing homemade meals.

"Everything was always homemade. She made biscuits every day, sometimes three times a day. My side of that family, we've been wonderful cooks, cooked from the garden, cooked from the freezer," Tucker recalled.

The boiled cookie recipe embodies simplicity and practicality, made from ingredients most people already have in their kitchens.

"It has butter, oats, vanilla, milk, cocoa, sugar, peanut butter and a dash of salt. And

if you like nuts, sometimes I put nuts in it," Tucker said.

She carries on her grandmother's tradition of cooking the cookies in an iron skillet.

"That's the way Grandmother always did

hers. And you put your butter and sugar together, and then, as your butter melts, add your cocoa. You then have to boil it. That's why they're called boiled cookies, taking anywhere from one-and-a-half to two minutes. That part's really crucial."

It's a delicate balance and one that Tucker had carefully perfected — even adjusting timing when she switched to a gas stove.

"If you don't cook them long enough, they're runny. If you cook them for too long, they become hard and flaky," she said. "So it's a fine line to perfection." After boiling, the process moves quickly. "You pull them off the stove, you add your peanut butter and you add your oats. You stir them, and then you just scoop them up by a spoonful and put them on wax paper. And then you let them sit, and then when they settle, they're ready to eat," she said. The whole process takes no more than 15 minutes.

Boiled cookies are just one piece of a rich culinary legacy passed down from Ottie Bentley.

"That was the first cookie I made with her when I was 7 years old," Tucker said. "And it's just probably the most famous and most well-known thing that Grandmother made because everybody loved them. When I talked to my aunt, she said, 'Do you make yours in an iron skillet like Mother did?' I said, 'Absolutely.'"

Tucker still makes them precisely the way Ottie did.

- RESTAURANT SPOTLIGHT -

Fan-favorite Mexican restaurant for more than 20 years

Lauren Estes

lauren@cullmantribune.com

Los Cabos, a family owned and operated Mexican restaurant, has been serving up goodness in Cullman since opening in April 2003.

Manager Adam Flores' family owns the local favorite.

"We've been in the restaurant business for a long time," Flores said. "My family started working in Mexican restaurants in the early 1990s. They even became partners at a Mexican restaurant in Nashville. Sadly that partnership didn't work out, so my family moved to Alabama where they continued to work at learning the trade."

Flores said one of his uncles has incredible cooking skills, which is why the menu at Los Cabos is so special.

"The majority of Mexican restaurants have the 'same' menu; however, thanks to his skills we've been able to set our food apart from the rest by making the recipes our own," he said. "With his cooking skills and our desire to grow, my family decided to open Los Cabos. Our theme has always been beach, sun and fun, and you can see that from our pirate logo. We're definitely not a seafood restaurant, but we're proud to serve a variety of meats in the best quality we can get and feel proud of."

With so many yummy menu options, Flores said it's hard to pick one item as a favorite.

"Our fajitas are always a popular choice among our regular customers, especially



NICK GRIFFIN/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

Los Cabos is located at 1600 Second Ave. SW in Cullman.

the Especial Los Cabos," Flores said. "It has all of our meat items, including a fall off the bone portion of ribs. It's so good and the portion is huge. Our locals enjoy a variety of vegetables, so our Fajita San Lucas is packed with an array of grilled vegetables such as squash, zucchini, mushrooms, etc. My uncle invented a massive burrito which we call Mr. Burrito and this is also a huge hit. Our cheese dip is made using the best quality cheese in the market, Land O Lakes Extra Melt cheese; it's not cheap but the quality and flavor is unbeatable. Nachos Mexicanos is also a top seller. Flour chips, steak, chicken and shrimp, cheese

dip - it's delicious. One of our newest and hottest entrees is the Quesabirrias! Our birria is cooked here at the restaurant and we serve the Quesabirrias with a side of esquite. I truly could go on and on with our food. We're truly proud of the food we serve."

Flores said his whole family is in the restaurant business, but Los Cabos in Cullman is run by his uncle and aunt, Carlos and Liz Flores.

"We just want to thank the community for their support and love these 22 years we've been in business," he said. "We have some of the best customers any business could ask for. That's the reason we strive to serve the best items and not

compromise when it comes to quality and flavor. We've evolved during these nearly three decades and have learned so much from everyone, so thank you for your support and patronage."

Flores said the family is open to ideas for specials if customers have anything in mind. He also said to stay tuned for some upcoming news.

"Thanks for the opportunity to share a bit of our story," he said. "Thank you again to the community for supporting our dream."

Los Cabos is located at 1600 Second Ave. SW in Cullman.

Get more information at www.facebook.com/LosCabosMexicanRestaurant.



A Witches Ride participant tosses candy during the October 2024 event.

SHERRY BROWN/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

4th annual Witches Ride coming Oct. 19

Lauren Estes

lauren@cullmantribune.com

Dust off your brooms and get your coven ready — the Witches Ride is coming back for its fourth enchanting year!

Hosted by the Les Dames of Cullman, this spirited, family friendly event has quickly become one of the community's favorite October traditions. On Sunday, Oct. 19, downtown Cullman's Warehouse District will transform into a whimsical wonderland of cackles, costumes and community.

"The day begins with witches and their teams staging mid-afternoon (exact time to be announced soon), while kids enjoy a magical carnival packed with bounce houses, face painting, games, food trucks and sweet treats," Les Dames Co-Founder Laura Quick said.

"As the sun begins to set, First Avenue comes alive with the Witches Ride Parade. This is a dazzling procession of moms, daughters, grandmothers and friends flying (OK, pedaling or

walking!) through the streets in full witchy flair. Candy flies, kids cheer and the whole town celebrates together. So grab your pointy hats, round up your broommates, and join us for a spellbinding Sunday that's full of fun — and purpose."

All proceeds benefit Les Dames of Cullman's mission to end period poverty for girls younger than 19 in the community.

"Thanks to incredible community support, Les Dames has already installed free organic feminine hygiene dispensers in every middle and high school in Cullman County. This year, we're flying even higher with our newest goal: raising \$65,000 to launch a digital education campaign that answers the hard questions for girls who may not get the information or support they need at home," said Quick.

This year's event will include exciting awards like Best Team Theme, Most Creative Costume and Most Money Raised.

Get registration info and learn more about Les Dames at www.lesdamescullman.com.

The Cullman Tribune

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**OKTOBERFEST
2025**



Bigger, brighter and steeped in tradition

Oktoberfest returns to Cullman Oct. 2-4, 2025



HOWARD COLE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

Cullman Oktoberfest returns Oct. 2-4, 2025.

Noah Galilee

noah@cullmantribune.com

With the clang of steins in the biergarten and the swirl of dancers in dirndls and lederhosen, Cullman's Oktoberfest

will return Oct. 2-5, 2025, with more energy, more attractions and a deeper sense of community than ever before. The three-day event will take place in Depot Park and the Warehouse District.

"This year's Cullman Oktoberfest is shaping up

to be our biggest and most dynamic celebration yet," said Nathan Anderson, executive director of Cullman Parks, Recreation & Sports Tourism (CPRST). "We've expanded the festival footprint and are excited to debut an additional biergarten presented by

Weihenstephan — the world's oldest brewery — bringing even more authentic German flavor to the experience."

In addition to traditional music, savory food and the beloved arts and crafts market, festivalgoers will find two show-stopping »



The keg is tapped to open Oktoberfest in 2024.

HOWARD COLE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

attractions: a 108-foot-tall Ferris wheel and a rare double-decker Venetian carousel.

Admission remains free, something Anderson said organizers are proud to continue offering the community.

Beyond the additions, Oktoberfest remains a tribute to Cullman's roots — honoring the city's German heritage while making space for new generations to create lasting memories.

"Our team sees ourselves as both stewards of Cullman's past and champions of its future," Anderson said.

"We work hard to infuse authentic German culture into the festival...while also thinking about the next generation."

This balance is reflected not only in the event's expanding footprint, but also in its cherished traditions — especially the naming of the Burgermeister and crowning of Miss Oktoberfest.

The burgermeister is chosen through a public nomination process and typically honors a community member who embodies the spirit of celebration and service.

Miss Oktoberfest, meanwhile, is selected during one of the event's most whimsical moments: each high school contestant selects a cupcake, and the one who finds a hidden pretzel inside is crowned.

"These traditions are a light-hearted nod to our community's spirit and shared joy," Anderson said.

That spirit is something City leaders say they're proud to celebrate.

"Oktoberfest is a shining example of what happens when a community works together," said Cullman City Council President Jenny Folsom. "From our City departments and sponsors to the volunteers and small businesses, everyone plays a role in making this event something special. It's one of the highlights of the year in Cullman."



HOWARD COLE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

Flags fly atop the Cullman County Museum during Oktoberfest 2024.

The preparation behind Oktoberfest is nearly year-round. CPRST begins planning the event almost a full year in advance — coordinating vendors, entertainment, permits, traffic flow, site layouts and emergency plans with dozens of partners across the city.

"One of the biggest challenges is designing a festival that feels authentic and exciting while also being safe, accessible and efficient," Anderson explained. "But our staff thrives on that kind of collaboration."

That dedication extends to the selection of vendors and performers.

The planning team prioritizes those who align with the spirit of Oktoberfest

— emphasizing authenticity, community connection and quality — while still ensuring there's "a little something for everyone," according to Anderson.

Public feedback has helped shape many elements of the festival. Families asked for more kid-friendly attractions, and this year's expanded children's zone and Ferris wheel came directly from those suggestions.

The booming arts and crafts section also grew in response to local artisans seeking greater involvement.

"The community has played a huge role in shaping the event," Anderson said. "We want it to feel like their festival."

For Anderson, one moment always rises above the rest.

"The opening ceremony always stands out," he said. "There's something powerful about seeing the whole community come together — young and old, locals and visitors — all honoring traditions of old while creating new ones."

Mayor Woody Jacobs agreed.

"Cullman Oktoberfest is more than a celebration — it's a reflection of who we are as a community," Jacobs said. "It brings people together, supports our local economy and showcases the best of Cullman to visitors from all over."

Anderson credited the success of the festival to the City's many departments and volunteers, noting that »

the event wouldn't be possible without their support.

"We're incredibly proud that Oktoberfest has grown into one of the largest and most celebrated German festivals in the region," he said.

"Most of all, we thank the community and visitors who show up year after year with such enthusiasm.

"Whether it's your first time attending or your 50th, we can't wait to welcome you — it's going to be unforgettable."

Cullman Oktoberfest returns this fall with all the fanfare, flavor and fellowship that has made it a cherished tradition for generations — and a must-experience event for anyone who calls Cullman home.

Cullman Oktoberfest returns Oct. 2-4, 2025. Get more info at www.cullmanoktoberfestival.com.



SHERRY BROWN/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

Gorgeous fall-colored mums are a staple of Cullman Oktoberfest



HOWARD COLE

Whimsical murals line a walkway at Oktoberfest in 2024.



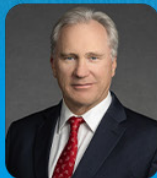
Six Years of Progress, A Lifetime of Community Impact



**Woody
Jacobs**
mayor



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Traffic Homicide Unit Created • #5 Micropolitan in the Nation
National Gold Medal for Parks & Recreation • Covered Pickleball Courts
Sewer Line Improvements City-wide • Automated Sanitation Services
Increased School Resource Officers at All Schools • #1 Expanding
Industry in Alabama • Airport Taxi & Runway Improvements •
Cullman's First Skate Park • Multiple Water & Wastewater Treatment
Plant Optimization Awards • Cullman's First Recycling Center •
Improved Benefits for Police, Fire, & Dispatch • New Community Theater
Performing Arts Center • USA Today #2 Best Small Town Cultural Scene*



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Oktoberfest in Cullman:

HONORING GERMAN HERITAGE THROUGH THE YEARS

The keg is tapped at Cullman Oktoberfest 2020

CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Noah Galilee

noah@cullmantribune.com

Once a single-day celebration tied to Sacred Heart Church's centennial, Cullman's Oktoberfest has blossomed into a three-day festival that draws tens of thousands yearly — a testament to the city's enduring connection to its German roots.

A rich German legacy

Founded in the 1870s by Col. John G. Cullmann, a native of Frankweiler, Germany, Cullman is a city whose identity has been shaped by its heritage. Cullmann's leadership attracted hundreds of German families, and German remained the common language in local churches well into the 1930s. After World War II, that identity faded — only to be revived in the 1970s, culminating in today's

vibrant Oktoberfest celebration.

The festival takes shape

In 1982, local civic organizations, businesses and churches united to formalize Oktoberfest, expanding it from a parish-centric event into a citywide celebration. Over the past four decades, the festival has grown to include traditional German fare, music, cultural exhibits and beer gardens — even serving authentic German beer for the first time in 2011, after Cullman reversed its dry status.

Modern-day Oktoberfest

Recent years have seen the festival continually up its game. In 2019, the celebration featured traditional Oktoberfest foods, stein-hoisting competitions, wiener dog races and German-inspired music.

By 2023, Oktoberfest expanded even further. It kicked

off Sept. 28, and ran through the weekend, aligning with Cullman's 150th anniversary.

Highlights included an expanded biergarten at the Festhalle, a lively parade featuring the horse-drawn Bierwagen, live music and a candlelight walking tour headlined by the historic depot.

Local staples like brat-eating contests, stein-hoisting competitions, pet parades (OktoFURfest) and family friendly Kids' Zone activities were also key attractions.

Leadership in the spotlight

A hallmark of Oktoberfest is the selection of a "Burgermeister" — a festival ambassador who presides over events. In 2024, Amy McAfee Wood was named Burgermeister.

A lifelong Cullman resident and vice president of Cullman Cabinet, she reflected, "I am

incredibly proud to say I am from Cullman and to represent my hometown as the 2024 Burgermeister."

Her appointment continued the tradition of locals guiding the celebrations.

2024's record-breaking celebration

In 2024 the festival was described as record-shattering by organizers: nearly 50,000 attendees — 13,000 more than the previous year and nearly double the 2022 turnout.

The festival's footprint now spans Depot Park and the Warehouse District, complete with multiple biergartens — including Hofbräu and Goat Island — German food vendors, live music stages, kids' activities and traditional competitions.

The city also welcomed out-of-state visitors and noted a significant boost to local »

businesses. Cullman Economic Development Agency Director Dale Greer pointed out that Oktoberfest, alongside other annual festivals, regularly leads to record-breaking business days for restaurants and shops.

Cullman Mayor Woody Jacobs thanked the many contributors, saying, "An event of this magnitude requires the collaboration and hard work of many."

He added the city is fortunate to have a "dedicated and creative team."

Looking to the future

With crowds swelling, organizers are planning the expansion of Depot Park to ensure infrastructure keeps pace. Cullman Parks, Recreation & Sports Tourism Executive Director Nathan Anderson said he believes the venue improvements should allow the festival to continue growing for years to come. Even the Hofbräu biergarten's co-sponsors praised the event's meticulous planning and vibrant atmosphere.

Despite the upbeat outlook, organizers continually seek feedback.

Some seniors at 2024's Senior Day were reportedly unclear about meal arrangements – expecting vendor purchases



CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

The fan favorite wiener dog races at Oktoberfest 2015

rather than the complimentary hamburger provided by Walmart Transportation. Organizers say clearer communication is a priority for this year.

Oktoberfest today is a community canvas

As the festival grows, it remains rooted in Cullman's German legacy. Authentic German menus, cultural exhibits at the Cullman County Museum, candlelight tours tracing

early histories, a traditional Gottesdienst (German-language church service) and family friendly events like the wiener dog race continue to reflect the city's identity.

Keep enjoying the growing festival

From a modest church celebration to a regional highlight drawing nearly 50,000 attendees, Cullman's Oktoberfest is more than theater

— it's a living tribute.

As Cullman looks ahead to expanded venues and record attendance, this German-inspired celebration remains a reflection of shared roots and collective pride.

Prost to another year of community, culture and Cullman spirit!

Cullman Oktoberfest returns Oct. 2-4, 2025. Get more info at www.cullmanoktoberfestival.com.



CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

The Hay People have been part of Cullman's Oktoberfest celebration since 2000.



CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Polkawagen's Kurt Heinecke helps kick off the 2020 Oktoberfest.

CULLMAN OKTOBERFEST

★ FESTIVAL GUIDE ★

THURSDAY

Welcome to Cullman Oktoberfest 2025! Your adventure begins Thursday with a visit to one of our four Biergartens: Hofbräuhaus Biergarten at Festhalle, Goat Island Festzelt, Weihestephan Festzelt, and Iron Ethos Biergarten—each offering a fantastic variety of brews to enjoy. Families can take in the excitement of our Kids' Zone, featuring a towering 110 foot Ferris Wheel and a charming double decker carousel. The Oktoberfest Celebration Parade in the Warehouse District kicks off the evening festivities, followed by the Opening Ceremony with the traditional Tapping of the Keg alongside our 2025 Bürgermeister, the crowning of Miss Oktoberfest, and festive live German music.

Throughout the festival, enjoy roving performances by The Good Bellows, playing classic German Polka, and marvel at We Flip's Bavarian themed juggling and acrobatics. Don't miss out on the Brat Eating Contest, Historic Cullman Candlelight Walking Tour, and both the Adult and Kids' Costume Contests. The excitement continues into the night with the thrilling Stein Hoisting Contest. And while you're here, be sure to snap a selfie with the iconic Hay People!

FRIDAY

Friday at Oktoberfest is packed with fun for all ages! Start your day with Senior Day under the Shade Structure at Depot Park, then explore the Vendor Market and let the kids enjoy the 110 foot Ferris Wheel and double decker carousel. Adults can visit one of our four amazing Biergartens—Hofbräuhaus, Goat Island Festzelt, Weihestephan Festzelt, and Iron Ethos—for a refreshing drink and lively atmosphere.

In the evening, kids are invited to participate in the costume, stein hoisting, and pretzel eating contests. Adults can join the fun with the Brat Eating Contest, as well as their own Stein Hoisting and Costume Contests. Most of our Biergartens will feature live entertainment to keep the party going. Be sure to grab a bite of authentic German cuisine from one of our amazing food trucks. Plus, Ballet South will be on-site throughout the weekend, offering traditional German dance lessons and performing beautiful Maypole dances.

SATURDAY

Saturday promises a full day of excitement at Cullman Oktoberfest! All four of our Biergartens will be open all day, featuring performances by The Happiness Band and The Sauerkraut Band, as well as plenty of opportunities to explore the Vendor Market and enjoy our amazing food trucks. The morning kicks off with performances by the Cullman Community Band and a talented group from Wallace State. You won't want to miss the adorable OktoFURfest, featuring Wiener Dog Races and a fun-filled costume contest for our furry friends.

Throughout the day, catch roaming entertainment from We Flip, along with local musicians and a magician, all adding to the festive atmosphere. Afternoon highlights include the always popular Brat Eating Contest and Kids' Contests, followed by evening fun with the Adult Stein Hoisting and Costume Contests. Don't forget to grab a memorable selfie with the Hay People, and make sure to savor plenty of delicious German food as you soak in the joy of this vibrant

SEE THE FULL SCHEDULE AT CULLMANOKTOBERFESTIVAL.COM

DAILY SCHEDULE

THURSDAY

4 PM-9PM	Vendor Market
4 PM-10PM	Hofbräuhaus, Goat Island, Iron Ethos, Weihestephan Festzelt Beirgatens Kids Zone
6:00 PM	Oktoberfest Parade
6:30 PM	Opening Ceremony, Tapping of the Keg, Crowning of Miss Oktoberfest, Street Entertainers, Live German Music
7:00 PM	Brat Eating Contest (16+) Historic Cullman Candlelight Walking Tour
7:30 PM	Adult & Kids' Costume Contest
8:00 PM	Stein Hoisting Contest (21+)
9PM-10PM	Live Music at Biergartens

FRIDAY

10:00 AM	Senior Day
10AM-9PM	Vendor Market
10AM-10PM	Kids Zone
10AM-11PM	Goat Island, Iron Ethos, Weihestephan Festzelt Beirgatens
2PM-11PM	Hofbräuhaus Biergarten
6:00PM	Kids' Contests (Costume, Stein Hoisting, Pretzel Eating)
7:00PM	Brat Eating Contest (16+)
8:00PM	Stein Hoisting & Consume Contest (21+)
9PM-11PM	Live Music at Biergartens

SATURDAY

10AM-11PM	Hofbräuhaus, Goat Island, Iron Ethos, Weihestephan Festzelt Beirgatens
10AM-9PM	Vendor Market
10AM-10PM	Kids Zone
10:00AM	Cullman Community Band
11:00AM	OktoFURfest (Weiner Dog Race, Costume Contest, & Parade)
3:00PM	Brat Eating Contest (16+)
4:30PM	Kids' Contests (Costume, Stein Hoisting, Pretzel Eating)
8:00PM	Stein Hoisting & Costume Contest (21+)
9PM-11PM	Live Music at Biergartens

Schedule Subject to Change

SEE THE FULL SCHEDULE AT CULLMANOKTOBERFESTIVAL.COM



Girl Gathered: Women's social club



SAVANNAH MAHAFFEY

Attendees created summer bucket lists at a Girl Gathered event in May.

Katie Spicer

katie@cullmantoday.com

When Savannah Mahaffey found herself longing for friendship and meaningful connections, she decided to do something about it. In May 2025, she founded Girl Gathered — Cullman's newest social club, designed to bring together women in their 20s and 30s looking for genuine connections, community and fun.

"About a year and a half ago I was feeling so lonely and was praying to the Lord, 'Please, I want and need friendship' and he answered me abundantly," she said. "I want to create a space where people who have felt what I felt can come, feel welcome, can socialize, can

network and just hang out and meet other girls in our area."

With a mix of affordable social gatherings, networking opportunities and hands-on workshops, Girl Gathered is all about cultivating authentic relationships and empowering women — all while supporting local businesses and having a good time.

Mahaffey shared, "My goal with this group is to host two events per month: a paid event and a free event. It will never be an expensive thing we do; the cost will just cover supplies so that we can do some fun activities."

Reflecting on some of the group's successful events, Mahaffey discussed its first summer event, "Money Talks," saying, "Our June event was a great night of learning and

connections as we talked about what it means to be financially free as young women. Dr. Nicole Wadsworth spoke to us about all things money, as well as a little politics, since she is now campaigning for lieutenant governor! It was great networking and learning. We are also partnering with Gracie Barra for our July event for a women's self-defense class, which is set to be a success!"

Mahaffey not only encourages women to participate, but also local businesses. "We love partnering with local businesses and building meaningful connections in our community!" she said. "We are always looking for spaces to gather together and would always prefer to support locally owned businesses as we host."

Remaining summer events

include pickleball at Ingle Park on Aug. 9 and a trinket dish creation night (time and place TBD) in September. "I would love for young women to know that Girl Gathered is a place they can come and make genuine friendships. It can be hard to be a post-college, or never-been-to-college, girl in their 20s and 30s, trying to navigate friendships based on who you truly are — often without common ground like school or kids," Mahaffey explained. "My goal is to provide space for women to have fun and learn new things — from crafting to money talks — we're open to trying anything!"

Cullman women in their 20s-30s interested in getting involved in Girl Gathered can request to join the Facebook group at <https://tinyurl.com/girlgathered>.



"I am honored to serve you as your Alabama state senator in District 4 (Cullman, Marion and Winston). I will continue to listen and be your voice in the Statehouse of Alabama. Thank you for your support while I continue to work with you to make our community the best it can be."

Sincerely,
Sen. Garlan Gudger, District 4



'Vinemont has been a very special place to me'

Shayla Colchado reflects on Eagle years

Sammy Confer

sammy@cullmantribune.com

Vinemont senior Shayla Colchado earned her diploma in May and in this interview, she talked about her experience at school and what she'll miss most about her years as an Eagles. She participated in several clubs during her time at Vineont and what she gained most from the experience.

"I was in the National Honor Society, the Leo Club, the FCCLA, and I was also the president in SGA. At CATA, I was involved in HOSA, and I was the vice president in Community Service in my shop, which was Health Science. I was also in NTHS at CATA. Being involved in so many activities during high school was honestly one of the best parts of my experience. It helped me grow in ways I never expected. I gained confidence, stepped into leadership roles, and learned how to work with all kinds of people. It definitely got me out of my comfort zone, but in a good way. I had so much fun doing community service and getting to meet amazing people along the way. Looking back, I'm really glad I said yes to those opportunities, because they helped shape who I am today," Shayla said. "In SGA, I learned important lessons about leadership, communication, and how to work as a team to plan events and make decisions that impact others. It taught me to be more

responsible and confident in sharing my ideas. With HOSA, I had the amazing opportunity to attend state competitions all three years, which helped me grow both professionally and personally. Through Health Science, I learned hands-on skills and gained a deeper understanding of the medical field, which confirmed that this is the career path I want to pursue. Overall, these experiences gave me a strong foundation and motivated me even more to continue working hard toward my goals."

Shayla competed in a special event in Montgomery, and she was around so many amazing people during that experience.

"I had the opportunity to compete in Montgomery, where I placed in the top six in Alabama for Medical Photography. It was a great experience that helped me grow, learn more about my interests, and connect with others who share the same passion," Colchado said. "For me, the experience was humbling. It's common to see a wide range of student attitudes: some who are highly motivated and some who are content with doing just the minimum. However, being in Montgomery was a completely different environment. I was surrounded by students who were truly the best of the best-driven individuals who were passionate about their goals and committed to working hard to achieve them. It was inspiring to witness »



Vinemont's Shayla Colchado

COURTESY

such determination and focus, especially because that level of ambition isn't something you often see in a typical school setting. In addition to the competitive atmosphere, I also had the opportunity to learn about several healthcare careers that I had previously known very little about. These professions may not be as well-known, but they play vital roles in the medical field and offer rewarding paths for those who pursue them. Overall, the experience opened my eyes to new possibilities and left me feeling both inspired and motivated for the future."

Colchado felt very blessed to be at Vinemont and will deeply miss being an Eagle in August.

"Vinemont has been a very special place to me. It's been a part of my life since kindergarten. Growing up in the same school community has given me a strong sense of belonging and connection. Over the years, I've had the privilege of learning from some truly outstanding teachers, who have not only been knowledgeable and dedicated, but also incredibly supportive and encouraging. Their guidance has played a big role in shaping who I am today, both academically and personally. The positive environment at Vinemont has made it feel like more than just a school. It has felt like a second home. I'm truly grateful for the lasting relationships, valuable lessons, and meaningful experiences I've had there throughout the years," She said. "What I will miss the most about Vinemont is the teachers and faculty. They have truly become like a second family to me. Their constant support, encouragement, and care have made a lasting impact on my life, and it's hard to imagine not seeing them every day. They've been there through so many important moments, and their presence has shaped my school experience in the best way possible. Along

with them, I'll also deeply miss all the memories I've made at Vinemont over the years. From the classroom, to school events and friendships, every experience has played a role in creating a meaningful and unforgettable journey. Vinemont will always hold a special place in my heart, and I'll carry those memories with me wherever I go."

Shayla worked hard to earn her fair share of scholarships, and she feels grateful to have received those opportunities.

"I received a \$25,000 scholarship to the University of Alabama, as well as a \$32,000 Provost Scholarship from UAB. In addition, I received a \$1,000 CTE Student of the Year scholarship from the Cullman Chamber of Commerce, and a \$500 Community Service Award scholarship from the Cullman Area Technology Academy. I am incredibly grateful for these opportunities, as they not only help support my educational goals but also serve as encouragement to continue striving for excellence in everything I do," she said. "I will be attending UAB in August, and I'll be majoring in Biology with a minor in STEM Education. Visiting UAB was a great experience, and it made me even more excited to become a UAB Blazer. There are so many clubs and organizations that allow students to get involved and feel part of the community. I also saw how supportive the environment is. There are people who truly want you to succeed and are there to help you reach your goals. I'm proud to be joining such a welcoming and motivated campus."

Shayla shared some advice with the upcoming high schoolers, and setting a good example for the younger kids has always been important to her.

"Branch out and get involved. Don't be afraid to join clubs that seem fun, even if they're

outside your comfort zone, or to try a class or sport you're unsure about. You might discover something you truly enjoy. Some of the best high school experiences come from taking those chances, and you don't want to look back with regrets when it's too late. I also encourage you to find a true friend: someone who will support you, motivate you, and bring out the best in you. I was fortunate to have a great friend throughout high school, and we helped each other grow and accomplish so much simply by being there for one another. Having that kind of support can make all the difference in your high school journey," She said. "I've always focused on being the best I can be, especially for my parents. They work hard to provide for me, and I've always felt that doing well in school is one way I can show them how grateful I am. It's my way of giving back and honoring their sacrifices. In doing so, I've come to realize that setting a good example can have a bigger impact than I expected. I used to be shy and not very involved in sports, but I still found ways to participate and stay active in school life. It means a lot to know that just by trying to do my best for my family above all, I've also inspired others who might be in a similar place. Being seen as a role model while simply doing what feels right is something I'm truly proud of."

God has played a huge role in Shayla's life, and she shared one of her favorite Bible verses.

"God means a lot to me. Talking to Him has brought me peace during some of my most stressful moments, especially when I've faced challenges at school. He has also been the first one I thank when something good happens. I've been working on strengthening my faith and learning to appreciate every moment, trusting that He is always by my side. My

relationship with God is what keeps me going, even when things get difficult or when I feel like giving up. His presence in my life gives me purpose, motivation, and the strength to keep moving forward, no matter what I'm facing," she said. "One of my favorite Bible verses is Colossians 3:23-24: 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving'. I love this verse, because I truly relate to it, I've always believed in working hard, not for recognition, but out of love for God, for my family, and for others. It reminds me to give my best in everything I do and to do it with a heart full of purpose and gratitude."

Shayla wants people to remember her for her journey, and the person that she was in and outside of school.

"I want to be remembered for my dedication, determination, and the effort I put into everything I do. My hope is that others can look at my journey and see that hard work truly pays off, especially when you have a clear goal in mind. Whether it's academic success, personal growth, or pursuing a passion, I believe that if you commit yourself and stay focused, you can achieve more than you ever imagined. I want people to understand that it's okay to dream big and more importantly, to chase those dreams without fear. Fear and doubt often stop people from reaching their full potential, but I've learned that believing in yourself and trusting the process makes all the difference. No goal is too far out of reach when you're willing to put in the work and stay true to your purpose. I hope my journey encourages others to push past their comfort zones and go after the future they envision for themselves."



LOCAL HEROES Judy Snead and the impact of Snead's Farmhouse

JUDY SNEAD

Judy Snead

Anabelle Howze

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What began as a spontaneous decision to raise a few chickens quickly blossomed into a life-changing mission for Cullman's Judy Snead — a mission now known as Snead's Farmhouse Sanctuary.

Five years ago, Snead's husband's job transfer brought the couple to Cullman County, and along with their new home came a chicken coop and a decision to fill it. Starting as someone with no experience with chickens, the learning curve was steep but incredibly life changing, according to Snead.

"I didn't grow up with chickens. I barely connected the dots that eggs actually come from chickens. But something about that day made me say,

"You know what? Let's try it," Snead laughed.

That simple decision to "try chickens" was the start of an unexpected, significant journey for her and the people who would one day visit her farm.

Snead's Farmhouse is no longer just a hobby farm; it has evolved into a nonprofit sanctuary that welcomes children, families and individuals seeking connection, healing, peace and fun. The farm is home to a diverse selection of animals, each with its own unique personality. But there is more to the farmhouse than the beloved animals. Snead's Farmhouse offers the spirit of a sanctuary, making visitors feel seen, accepted and loved for who they are.

"When people hear the word 'sanctuary,' they think of rescued animals — and yes, we have those, but here, sanctuary means more than that. It's a safe

haven for people, too. A place where there's no judgment, no pressure, no need to be anything but yourself," Snead explained.

Snead's Farmhouse has evolved into a beautiful, accessible, thriving community, offering hands-on tours, school visits, special needs programming and even a mobile chick incubation experience that brings the miracle of life into classrooms.

"The very first time I watched a baby chick hatch out of its egg, I was in absolute awe. I knew right then that kids needed to see this. They need to witness the miracle of life," Snead said.

Her dedication to education and inclusion is evident not only in the Farm's programs, but also in the way every visitor is treated. Whether it's a young child befriending a goat or a teen finding peace brushing a cow, the healing is real, Snead

said. "It's not therapy with titles or paperwork; it's soul work. The animals don't care about your past. They just show up, and that simple presence can change everything."

But the path hasn't been without challenges. The farm faced regulatory setbacks that temporarily shut down tours due to obscure USDA rules.

"I built a beautiful peacock enclosure — only to find out it wasn't allowed to be visible to the public without a license," Snead said. "I could've given up. But instead, I got creative. We hung curtains around the enclosure. It wasn't ideal, but it kept us open."

Despite all the challenges, she has leaned on the community and her unwavering faith, saying "This farm didn't start because of me — it started because of God. Every single step I take, I take with my eyes on Him »

and my heart anchored in faith."

Although the farm is not physically expanding — Snead balances its management alongside caring for her father, who is in hospice — its reach continues to grow. With over 100,000 followers on Facebook and thousands more on YouTube, Snead uses her platform to spread messages of kindness, encouragement and love. Her children's books and school programs convey the same themes, sowing seeds of empathy and inclusion in young hearts.

Snead's favorite animal is Bad, Bad Leroy Brown, a donkey who stands alone but always stands up for others. "Rain, sleet, snow or ice — you'll find Leroy outside the barn, standing guard. While the others cozy up inside, he braves the storm to protect his herd. He reminds me that being different can be powerful... and sometimes, the ones who stand

alone are the ones who hold everyone else together," she said.

Each week, the farm hosts volunteers from the Margaret Jean Jones Center, creating space for individuals with disabilities to engage, work and find joy in the rhythm of farm life.

"They don't just help around the farm — they bring heart, light and so much love," Snead said. "Their presence reminds me that abilities aren't defined by limitations — they're defined by spirit, effort and the joy you bring to others."

Looking ahead, her mission is clear: expand the mission, not the footprint. "I'm one person, I run this farm with my own two hands," she said. "But I can reach more people through stories, videos and connections. That's where I'm being called right now."

The farm offers more than just animals. It imparts a feeling of



JUDY SNEAD

Visitors get up close and personal at Snead's Farmhouse.

belonging. Visitors leave feeling seen, heard and genuinely loved.

"I want people to feel unjudged," Snead said. "Free to laugh, cry, breathe or just be. If you leave carrying even a little bit of that love with you, then I've done what I came here to do."

Snead's journey with Snead's

Farmhouse hasn't always been easy, but it's been worth every step, she said. "This isn't just a job; It's a calling, and I'm beyond grateful for the life I never dreamed I'd love this much."

Snead's Farmhouse is located at 820 County Road 1225 in Vinemont. Find it online at www.sneadsfarmhouse.com.



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- SENIOR SPOTLIGHT -

Angie Carter makes her mark in the pageant world



Lauren Estes

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She's the reigning Ms. Senior Cullman, and in June, Fairview's Angie Carter, 63, came in as first runner-up in the Ms. Senior Alabama 2025 Pageant.

Carter said she'll be 64 in October. She's originally from Etowah County, but has called Cullman County home since age 13.

"I've been married to my high school sweetheart Kevin for 46 wonderful years," Carter said. "Together, we have three children - Jeremy, Blake and Maegan; two daughters-in-laws - Misty and Katina; and six amazing grandchildren - Kelsey, Brilee, Barrett, Liam, Braxon and Charlie Ann. For me, family means everything, and their love inspires me every day to live fully."

Carter said she began her pageant journey in honor of her late mother.

"It was always her dream for me to compete," she said. "At the age of 60 the opportunity came my way. I stepped up not for me, but for her. I believe God placed that opportunity in my path, and he used it to bless me in ways I never expected. I walk with faith, strength and her memory in my heart."

Carter's favorite aspects of competing in pageants are the friendships she's made, and the chance to give back to the community.

"I love sharing my story, and inspiring others to do the same," she explained. "Most of all, it's about proving that it's never too

late to shine and that every story matters. Some memories that have stuck with me aren't just the moments on stage; it's the ones behind the scenes. Like comforting one of the ladies before her interview, or going over stage questions and helping her with her answer. Those moments remind me why I did this - not for the crowns or titles, but to make people feel seen, strong and valued."

A typical day for Carter includes staying active at the Fairview Senior Center (where she's the manager), volunteering, planning events and making sure everyone feels included.

"My hobbies include crafting, decorating, inspiring others and racing to the next person who needs a hand," she said. "Every day is a mix of purpose, people and plenty of smiles. It's never too late to chase a dream, or honor one."

Ms. Senior Alabama is a nonprofit senior women's organization, encouraging senior women that they all have a purpose, offering opportunities to get involved in local communities and providing a sisterhood of support throughout the state.

Delegates volunteer at hundreds of events across the state throughout the year. Some of Carter's events include numerous local engagements like the Cullman County Senior Health Fair, Senior Day at Cullman Oktoberfest, Senior Day at the Cullman County Fair, Senior Night at the Winter Wonderland at Sportsman Lake, the Cullman County Senior Christmas Party and more.



Angie Carter

FACEBOOK/MS. SENIOR ALABAMA, INC

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'Hanceville will forever have a place in my heart'

HES principal Stacie Olinger retiring

Sammy Confer

sammy@cullmantribune.com

Hanceville Elementary School principal Stacie Olinger has decided to retire after six years at the school. Before coming to Hanceville, she was the assistant principal at Austinville Elementary in Decatur for a year and she said that experience helped prepare her for the assistant principal job at Hanceville.

"Being an assistant principal significantly helped me in obtaining a principal position. Before coming to Hanceville, I was the assistant principal at Austinville Elementary in Decatur City.

"That experience helped me get the assistant principal position at Hanceville Elementary. I built a great relationship with faculty, staff, and parents at Hanceville Elementary. Knowing the students personally and the parents makes a school feel like home, which I think is so important when managing a school.

"A family setting is a big part of helping students feel supported and valued. When my students walked through the doors, they were greeted with hugs and a good morning. Building personal relationships is so important." »



Hanceville Elementary Principal Stacie Olinger

COURTESY

Susan Melton, who retired as principal before Olinger took the job, helped prepare Stacie for the role as well.

"My principal, Susan Melton, was retiring. She was the best. She always encouraged me and involved me in decision making.

"She never made me feel like I only had certain roles as the assistant principal. She made sure I knew what was going on and involved me in the leadership role," Olinger said.

"I learned how to multi-task and wear many hats. Being an assistant/principal is just a title. My parents taught me the value of work. Be involved in it. As an assistant principal or principal, you need to be ready to take on many tasks: counselor, janitor, teaching, nurse, wherever you are needed. Be present. Listen. Give love to students, parents, and faculty.

"Our kids have seen and been through so much in their short lives. I have so many students I would love to take home with me."

Stacie had her fair share of role models during her time working in education and she soaked up as much as she could from each of them.

"My role models were Brandon Payne, Frank Harris, Tony Willis, and Susan Melton. They all encouraged me and guided me. I can't thank them enough.

"Another one of my role models was my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Joyce Patterson. She believed in me and encouraged me to be my best. I learned to listen, be where your feet are, be open, be ready for change, make unselfish decisions, and have a vision," Olinger said.

"I love to make people

laugh. I have scared students and teachers. I hid in closets and jumped out to scare them (laughs). I loved getting hugs every morning, and the students always noticed changes in my hair or appearance. Hanceville Elementary will forever be my home."

Stacie wanted to make an impact on students' lives at Hanceville, and she will deeply miss them when the school year starts in August.

"I hope I made an impact on their lives. I love all of them. I'm going to miss them so much," she said.

"I wanted Hanceville Elementary to feel like a home, not only a school. Frank Harris, my first principal from East Elementary, came to Hanceville Elementary on my first day as principal there to give me words of encouragement and wisdom.

"I will never forget seeing him and his wife, Dianne, at the doors of Hanceville Elementary and crying so hard. I will forever be grateful."

Stacie became a grandmother not too long ago, and even though it was a tough choice to retire, she's excited to start her new role as a grandmother.

"My daughter had her first baby, my first grandbaby. I am so excited to keep him and make new memories.

"Although I am sad to leave my Hanceville Elementary family, I'm excited to be a grandmother," she said.

"I will never forget the relationships I made at Hanceville Elementary. Hanceville will forever have a place in my heart. My advice to them is to keep working hard, don't give up, and lean on God to help direct and guide you."

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- FAITH -

'God works miracles'

Cold Springs' Hollyn Bruer reflects on her relationship with her faith

Sammy Confer

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Cold Springs High School's Hollyn Bruer is preparing to start her junior year in August, and in this interview, she discussed her faith, her battle with epilepsy and how much God helped her get through that difficult time in her life.

"He has changed my life tremendously. Most people don't know this, but two years ago, I was diagnosed with epilepsy in August, and I didn't know how to handle it. Everything wasn't making sense. I was like, why me? Why did I have to have seizures occasionally? Then I remembered, 'Everything happens for a reason'. He has a plan for me, but I put my faith in Jesus and let Him take care of everything.

"Yes, this set me out of sports, and it was hard, but I kept my faith. When being diagnosed, I was unable to get my learner's permit, so I had to wait six months after my last seizure to get my permit, but I prayed and prayed, not only to get my permit, but to be grateful for every day. After that, I went seizure-free.

"Without God, I would be lost and lonely. I pray before every game or track meet to thank God for Him letting me play and do the things I love so much," Bruer said.

"I learned that I have an amazing community behind me. It was a very scary moment in my life. I didn't like that everyone was looking at me in the gym, but I had fellow fans in the stands that came down to help me.

"My pastor came down there, and I remember him praying over me. Hearing

him pray made me realize that God works miracles. He has most definitely worked them for me, and I felt very blessed to be okay."

Hollyn shared a couple of her favorite Bible verses, and she wants to play a part in helping other people find God.

"Philippians 4:13 is a big one for me: 'I can do all this through Him who gives me strength'. Another one is Isaiah 41:10: 'Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand'. Isaiah 41:10 is written on the side of my basketball and volleyball shoes, so I can look at it and remember that God will handle this," Bruer said.

"It is very important to me that kids, adults, and teens know and understand God. I want everyone to have eternal life with Him.

"I help out at my small church, Ryan's Creek Baptist Church, with the kids, and I was a part of Vacation Bible School.

"Me and my sister, Ella, we do the music and the dances. Most of the time, kids will ask us questions about Jesus, and it's always good to hear, because they want to know and want to understand.

"I love telling them all about Him and telling people my story and how He's worked miracles for me."

Hollyn's mission field is in her sports right now. She was a part of a youth group that shared the gospel with other people and being a Godly role model for younger kids and sharing the Word with them is so important to her.

"I think my mission field for now is



COURTESY

Cold Springs' Hollyn Bruer

in my sports. I have the opportunity to take Jesus into every gym that I play in. Isn't that cool? I was part of a youth group that got to share the gospel with other people who probably didn't know who He is," she said.

"It is important, because if I stayed selfish, kept to myself, and didn't go out and share the Word, I would be hurting God. He wants us to share His Word so He will have more of us in heaven.

"I have a T-Shirt that says, 'Make heaven crowded', and I love it so much. I believe I have impacted people with my story. I hope the people that I have spoken to have been building a relationship with Jesus."

She talked about her Godly role models in her life, and shared some of her favorite traditions that she has for sports and at school.

"My mom is a huge one, and she always makes me feel better when I have a problem. If I'm upset about something, she tells me to focus on Jesus, and He will guide me through the toughest times.

"My dad is another big one. He helps teach our youth group, and he makes a huge impact on our group with his story," she said.

"My team prays before every game in a group, and we thank God for allowing us to play, and we pray for no injuries,

but we can't control injuries. He can.

"At school, I pray before I eat lunch. I thank God for giving me food to eat to keep me healthy."

Hollyn shared some advice with anyone that wants a relationship with God but might be struggling when it comes to doing that.

"I would love to sit and have a conversation with them and talk about what exactly is holding them back or what is making them struggle. I think most importantly is for them to let God all the way into their heart.

"I struggle sometimes with holding grudges with people, but that's me pushing Jesus out. I need to have grace for them and forgive them like Jesus has forgiven us and given us grace for our mistakes.

"I think that's the biggest thing: forgiveness and grace to others. We want to hold grudges and stay mad at one another for someone doing us wrong when we have done wrong.

"We expect Jesus to just give us grace without apology or accepting what we have done wrongfully to others," she said.

"What I've learned during my journey so far is to never lose faith and never take your eyes off Jesus. Never let distractions get in the way of your relationship with God."



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From small-town roots to YouTube stardom: Brad Steele's journey to the Silver Play Button

Brad Steele shows off his hard-earned YouTube Silver Play Button, an award only given to those who surpass 100,000 subscribers on YouTube.

PHOTO COURTESY BRAD STEELE

Gauge Day

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Brad Steele never set out to become a YouTube star. In fact, Steele would tell you that it was “almost by accident” that his journey led him to YouTube stardom. If you had told him in early 2020 that his channel would amass over 242,000 subscribers, he might have laughed. But today, his music-focused “reaction” content and passion for entertainment have cultivated a thriving YouTube community, connecting him with fans across the globe.

Born just north of Nashville, Steele grew up surrounded by music. “I’ve been singing my whole life,” he recalled. “I’m pretty sure there are videos of me at 3 years old singing along to cassette tapes in the garage. Some of you will have to ask your parents what cassette tapes are,” he laughed. “So I’ve always been involved with music, whether it be traveling and singing, singing at church, leading worship, College Choir, playing weddings, you name it.”

His early years were spent traveling the country with his family, performing gospel music before his father accepted a pastoral position in Cullman. This move ended up being a turning point, giving Steele a sense of stability. “When we moved to Cullman, I was entering my teen years and trying to figure out who I was,” he explained. “Being able to settle down and make friends and be in one place without having to be gone all the time really helped me develop my interests and to even view music and singing in a whole different way.”

It was these formative years in Cullman that led Steele to the “accident” of his YouTube beginnings. As with many content creators, Steele’s journey on YouTube wasn’t a guaranteed success



Between being a worship leader at Redeeming Grace Church in Cullman to playing with friends in a local band at various events, Steele's focus continues to be his music.

and he had no idea where it would take him. “It was early 2020, and I was bored in my apartment with nothing to do,” he said. “I thought, ‘Hey, I’ve seen these people do reaction videos to songs and singers on YouTube. I wonder if I do that from a singer’s perspective, will people find it interesting?’ I set up the camera, hit record, and the rest is history.”

What Steele didn’t realize at the time was that his new journey into the world of content creation coincided with a global shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With millions of people confined to their homes, online content consumption soared. For Steele, it was the perfect time to start.

That start quickly turned into a new community that rapidly exploded in growth,

something Steele wasn’t prepared for. “I thought this was just a hobby that would die down within a few weeks,” he admitted. “But once people started subscribing, it was a whirlwind. In the early days, I would check the subscriber count every morning and I would just be amazed at how much the channel had grown overnight.”

His original vision, to establish a community centered around music and singing, where people could engage with him and appreciate his passion for all things music, grew. Ultimately, Steele used that community as the foundation to share his own original music with an audience that was already engaged with him.

So where did Steele begin? His very first video was a

reaction to a live performance by Whitney Houston. “It was the most awkward thing I’ve ever done in the moment,” he laughed. “I felt almost embarrassed to upload it but I learned pretty quickly that if someone is going to laugh or judge, sometimes it’s okay just to let them laugh and judge. I didn’t see anyone laughing when YouTube sent me a Silver Play Button, baby!”

However, growth on such a large media platform came with its own challenges. “Honestly, my biggest challenge was being worried about what people would think. I hate even saying that because nowadays I could not care less,” he explained. “But in the early stages, I almost didn’t want anyone to know I had the channel going because I was afraid people would »

think it was lame."

Over time, that concern diminished and success covered any hesitancy he had before. His channel began to soar as the subscriber count took off. The moment he realized his channel was truly taking off came in the form of a private message from Scott Hoying of Pentatonix. "He had seen one of my covers and actually knew who I was," Steele said. "That's when I thought, 'Okay, this channel is doing pretty well.'"

While much of his channel growth is built around "reaction" videos - videos where content creators "react" to music, funny videos or other types of content - Steele has always made it clear that he is a musician first. "People love the reaction videos, and while I love doing those, I also want people to know that I am a singer and I have my own music as well," he shared. "I make sure to start each video with me singing and then at the end of each video I include one of my songs or covers."

Beyond music, Steele's deep faith and relationship with Jesus Christ play a significant role in his life and career. As a worship leader, he finds that YouTube provides a unique opportunity to reach people from all walks of life. "I encounter people from all walks of life on YouTube. Every religion, every nationality, from so many different parts of the world," he shared. "I meet people who are public in their Christianity like me and others who are adamant in their disbelief. What is cool is that every single one of those people will listen in on a livestream where I'm performing a worship song or an original faith-based song. So, without making it a formal thing, I can minister to all sorts of people and lead worship on YouTube...I think sometimes you can lead worship by being kind to people and sharing a laugh with them and listening as they tell you what is going

on in their world."

With internet fame comes scrutiny, and Steele has had his fair share of critics. When asked about how often he faces critics, he chuckled, "Oh, every day. Some people have constructive criticism that I can appreciate - like when they tell me my intro is too long or my mic is too loud. But then some make it personal. People get mighty brave behind a computer screen."

With time, he's learned to ignore the negativity. "After a few years on YouTube, I've quite literally become numb to it," he said. "If I see something that is really over the line, I just delete the comment and move on."

While music remains his primary focus, Steele has found another passion - sports commentary. A devoted fan of the Tennessee Titans, he began discussing the team on his channel, and the response was overwhelming. This led him to create a second channel, Two Tone Talk, dedicated to football analysis and discussions.

"It's about to pass 4,000 subscribers, and last summer I actually reached the point where I make money off of it," he said. "I'd talk about the Titans for free, but the fact that I get paid to? That doesn't even seem fair! I love doing the sports stuff because after years of doing music content, it's like having another creative outlet."

Whether music or sports content, YouTube has provided Steele with numerous opportunities to connect with celebrities and his unique viewers and supporters across the globe. "I got to go backstage and meet the acapella group Voctave and one of their members saw me and said, 'I can't believe I'm meeting you...' and I laughed in his face. Me? I'm freaking out meeting you, dude!" he smiled.

For Steele, those opportunities never get less surreal.

"I went to a Titans game in September and people were calling out my name at the concession stand telling me they listen to my podcast every week. That was absolutely wild to me," Steele laughed. "I had a subscriber from Ireland comment and tell me that they listen to my videos on their morning commute to work because my voice calms them. That kind of stuff I just can't comprehend."

From the success to the opportunities to present his faith on his platform to unique fan encounters and achieving the fabled Silver Play Button, an award only given to those who achieve 100,000 followers, Steele said he hopes his content - whether it's his reaction videos, music or podcasts - leaves people with something positive.

"At the very least, I hope it leaves them with a smile and helps people get their mind off of what may be going on in their life, even if it's just for a few minutes," he shared. "When it comes to my faith, though, I mentioned earlier how many different types of people watch and listen to my songs and videos. I always hope that no matter what they believe or where they come from, they can walk away seeing the love of God and the hope of Christ in something I've said or done. If they don't know Him, I hope they see something in me that

says, 'That big guy with the beard has something I want.'

Looking ahead, Steele hopes to continue to grow his podcast channel and release another album. "I released an album in 2017 before all of this YouTube stuff happened, and it was good. But I'd like to do another one," he said. "My main goal has always been to put my music out there and hope it finds the right person. The best compliment you can get as a singer-songwriter is hearing someone say that your song helped them through a hard time."

For those looking to break into content creation, Steele has simple advice: "Just stop worrying what everyone is going say or think. If you're waiting on everyone's approval before you do something, you'll never do anything. Just get started. You don't have to have the biggest and best equipment or the fanciest setup. Just be genuine, be dedicated and use whatever you have."

With a rapidly growing audience of over 242,000 now, a thriving sports podcast that talks about all things Tennessee Titans and music that continues to reach new listeners, Steele believes his journey is far from over. And if his past success is any indication, the best is yet to come.

Find Steele's YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/@BradSteele.

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- PREP BASKETBALL -

'It was an opportunity we just felt we couldn't pass up'

Coach Drew Adams headed to Cold Springs

Nick Griffin

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After serving the last nine seasons at the helm of Good Hope's varsity boys' basketball program, head coach Drew Adams is headed for a new destination. Adams confirmed this spring that he was officially hired by Cold Springs High School and is set to take the reins of the Eagles' varsity boys' program. For Adams, there were several factors in making this decision but the biggest one in his mind was how it would affect his family life. His wife Paige Adams was recently promoted to head coach of the varsity girls' team at Cold Springs and that was when Drew really saw an opportunity begin to take shape.

"I have loved every minute of my nine years at Good Hope and at no point had I ever really thought about going anywhere else or doing anything different. But when the girls job came open at Cold Springs and my wife got the job things sort of shifted in my mind a little bit.

"We have always wanted to one day be at the same place and with the boys' job being open there was a very rare opportunity for us to not only be at the same place but to be head coaches for »



NICK GRIFFIN/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

Former Good Hope Head Varsity Boys' Basketball Coach Drew Adams is headed to Cold Springs as the Eagles' next head coach.

the same sport. Combine that with the potential that the Cold Springs basketball program has and the love that their community and administration have for basketball, it was an opportunity we just felt we couldn't pass up as a family," Adams said.

"From a family perspective, a few things come to mind. First is we can be with our son Parker so much more November through February.

"Basketball season is crazy busy and us being head coaches at different schools would be really difficult.

"I rarely got to see Parker or Paige many weeknights this past season because we were always playing at separate places.

"Now we can be at the same place on a nightly basis. Secondly, being a head coach can be difficult at times. Us being at the same place and being able to support each other through the ups and downs was important to us.

"And lastly, getting to have a front row seat to watch Paige starting her journey as the head girls coach at Cold Springs is special to me. I can't wait to watch her get to work with her girls and I'm looking forward to meeting my guys."

Adams led the Raiders to a pair of Sweet 16 appearances and five county championships during his tenure at Good Hope and he'll look back on those years fondly.

In addition to all the players he's mentored during that time, Adams also credits the assistant coaches that have been at his side for helping the program achieve that success.

"Man, I don't know where to start when reflecting back on my time at Good Hope. They welcomed me with open arms

from day one and I have loved every second there.

"It truly became home to me. A head coach is only as good as his players and assistants, and I have been so blessed with both.

"We have been blessed with a group of guys for nearly a decade that work their tails off, compete on a nightly basis, and represented their school proudly each night.

"We have had an all-state player for seven straight years which is rare for a head coach to get to have. Players win games and we have had some good ones," Adams said.

"And I also considered myself to have one of the best support staffs in the state. Working with my dad had been a dream come true.

"He is a high-level coach, but he is also an elite leader of young men, and he did so much behind the scenes for me, our guys, and our program. Griffin Morris is like a little brother to me.

"We snagged Griffin as soon as he graduated college and he has been a tremendous asset to our program. Griffin's an incredible guy who our guys love, and he has made our program better since the moment he was hired at Good Hope.

"Both guys love basketball but most importantly they love Jesus and spoke with our guys often about the things that truly matter. I'm thankful for them both."

With the familial connection to Cold Springs, Adams has been able to stay familiar with the Eagles' basketball program and he's excited to get started with a team that he believes has a lot of potential.

"With Paige being at Cold Springs the last several years

I have been able to keep up with Cold Springs basketball from afar.

"We've obviously competed against each other for nine years, but I have kept up with them like I do most of the nearby programs.

The Cold Springs Boys program has a lot of potential over the next several years," Adams said.

"Their varsity was really young this past year and had

a good postseason, their JV team had an extremely good year, and their middle school was county runners-up. You never know what the future holds so I would never speak on what I think will happen but I do think the future is bright and I'm excited to get to work with the guys.

"My prayer is that I help them reach their potential and that I'm a godly mentor for them on a daily basis."

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– PREP SOFTBALL –

'This is where I feel like God led me'

Drew Bryson returning to Cullman to lead Bearcats softball team

Nick Griffin

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After serving seven seasons as the head baseball coach at West Point High School, Drew Bryson is returning home to his alma mater to take the reins of the Cullman High School softball program. Bryson collected six county championships and led the Warriors to a pair of playoff berths in his tenure and leaving a place where he has made a lot of memories and relationships wasn't an easy choice.

"It was an extremely tough decision. But at the end of the day this is where I feel like God led me and we're excited about that journey," Bryson said. "At the same time, it's sad because we spent eight years as a family in West Point and made a lot of friendships as part of that community and that school. I also got to coach a lot of great baseball players so for me the wins and the county titles are something we're proud of but it's the relationships with those guys. Seeing them come into the program as middle schoolers and seeing them graduate and go on to college and get careers is what I'll value the most. I still stay in touch with a lot of those guys so just because I'm somewhere different, it's not going to change my relationships with those guys."

Bryson knows that shifting from baseball to softball will bring some new challenges, but he's spent a lot of »



Samantha Bryson and Drew Bryson with their daughters Hadley and Bryleigh at the CCBOE meeting on May 21

NICK GRIFFIN/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

time watching his daughters play and he's excited to begin a new journey with a new sport.

"It's definitely going to be a learning curve for me. I've been involved in softball for the last few years because of my daughters playing so I've gotten to where I love the game. I watch a lot of college softball on TV and it's just so much faster than baseball. It's fun to watch and fun to be a part of," Bryson said.

"Coming back home to Cullman to start from scratch and building a program and getting to know the girls and developing those relationships is something that won't happen overnight. It's going to take time just like when I first got to West Point. You have to build the trust and build those relationships with the kids. They have to know you're there for them and that you care about them and at the end of the day we want to compete. We want to

compete at a high level and play for championships, but I think it's also critical that we make sure the focus is on building great student athletes. Young ladies that are great on the field but great off the field too."

As a player, Bryson helped lead the Bearcats baseball program to back-to-back state championships in 2007 and 2008 and his coaches at Cullman had a big impact on his career as a player and later on as a coach.

Another big factor in his decision to return to Cullman was the opportunity to coach his daughters on the diamond a few years from now.

"Cullman means a lot to me. I will forever be grateful to Bryan Bowen and Brent Patterson for the impact they had on my life. I'm doing what I'm doing now because of them. That's why I chose to go into coaching so as mentors, the role they played in my life was huge," Bryson said.

"I'm also making the switch for my daughters. I've spent pretty much my whole adult life coaching baseball and I knew as my girls got older that at some point, I was going to have to step away from coaching to go be dad and watch them or shift over to softball. This allows me to coach and keep doing what I love and at the same time I get to be dad and get to see them play as they come up."

CHS Athletics Director Mike Dean saw Bryson's coaching acumen up close when he coached his own kids and believes he'll be a great new leader for the Bearcats softball program.

"He has a strong background in coaching and he began his career here at Cullman High School where he spent three years under head baseball coach Brent Patterson. He then served as an assistant at Curry High School for one

year before moving to West Point High School where he has been for eight years. Drew has coached at various levels in athletics from youth sports to travel teams to high school programs. He emphasizes discipline, sportsmanship and teamwork and believes that sports provide valuable lessons," Dean said.

"Through athletics, Drew instills leadership, perseverance and collaboration, qualities that we all strive to develop in our student athletes. The biggest endorsement for Drew is that he coached my youngest son in baseball for three or four years and I don't know if remembers the conversation but after he coached my kid I went to him and said 'Drew, you're going to be a really good head coach one day'. I think it's kind of a full circle moment to have him come back home and we'd like to welcome him to Cullman High School."

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