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## *Community Matters*

from The Cullman Tribune Feb. - April 2026 | Vol. 6 No. 1

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# CULLMAN

ALABAMA

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## CULLMAN CITY COUNCIL 2026 Meeting Schedule

Monday, January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Tuesday, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

Monday, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

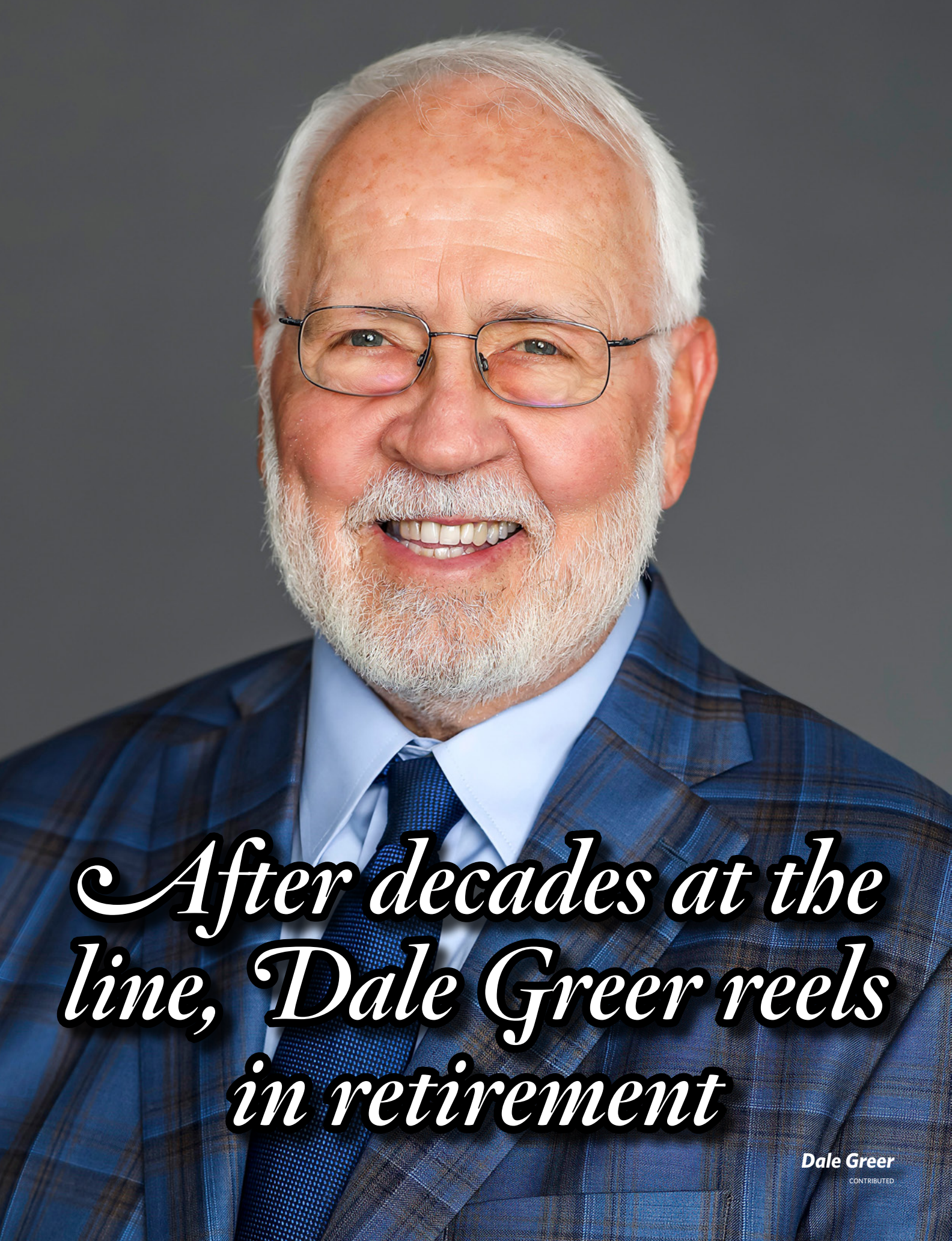
Monday, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.  
Monday, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2026 at 7:00 p.m.

The public is encouraged to attend. Meeting dates and times subject to change. Work sessions begin at 6:00 p.m. prior to each meeting. Residents wishing to speak must complete the speaker request form at [CullmanAL.gov/speak](http://CullmanAL.gov/speak).

Questions: 256-775-7104 or [cityclerk@cullmanal.gov](mailto:cityclerk@cullmanal.gov).

All meetings are livestreamed at [facebook.com/CullmanCity](https://facebook.com/CullmanCity).





*After decades at the line, Dale Greer reels in retirement*

**Dale Greer**  
CONTRIBUTED



**Noah Galilee**

noah@cullmantribune.com

**D**ale Greer, director of the Cullman Economic Development Agency (CEDA), is set to retire after decades of service in Cullman, bringing to a close a career defined by steady growth, long-term planning and an emphasis on relationships and collaboration.

Greer was named director of the CEDA effective June 1, 2017, following the retirement of longtime director Peggy Smith.

Greer had already spent approximately 25 years with the agency prior to assuming the director role, giving him more than three decades of total service with CEDA.

"This is a great community with a strong foundation already in place. My goal is to build on that foundation and continue working with our partners to make sure Cullman stays competitive for the future," Greer said during a 2017 transition interview.

During Greer's tenure as director, Cullman consistently earned national recognition among micropolitan communities from Site Selection Magazine, including top-10 rankings from 2017-2022, and 2024, with a No. 2 national ranking in 2023.

While the micropolitan designation is largely unfamiliar to the general public, it is widely used among economic developers to compare communities of similar size based on job growth, investment activity and long-term economic momentum. Cullman's repeated high placement signaled sustained performance rather than a single-year surge.

Between the early years of Greer's tenure as assistant director and today, Cullman's population grew from approximately 61,000 to more than 87,000, while the number of



W.C. MANN/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**The Cullman City Council officially accepted Dale Greer's resignation at its meeting Monday, Jan. 12, 2026. Left to right are Cullman Mayor Woody Jacobs, Greer and Cullman City Council President Kim Hall.**

major employers increased from fewer than 20 to more than 30, and local jobs grew from roughly 18,000 to more than 26,000.

CEDA also received state and international recognition during that period for agency performance and long-term development strategy.

"Our success comes from consistency. We've focused on creating an environment where businesses can grow and employees can succeed," Greer said in 2019 while discussing Cullman's national ranking.

Greer frequently emphasized collaboration as a defining factor in Cullman's development progress.

"This ranking reflects the teamwork between our city and county governments, our industry partners and our workforce. Economic development is never about one person," he said in 2024.

Former CEDA Director Smith said Greer's retirement marked the close of a partnership that shaped decades of progress in Cullman.

"After many years of dedicated service to our community,

I want to congratulate my friend and colleague on his retirement. Working alongside him for more than 20 years was one of the highlights of my career," Smith said.

"Together with our small staff we helped bring meaningful projects to our small town, and his commitment, vision and hard work made all the difference," she said. "We valued the vision put in place by The Flying Fifty, and they inspired our team to follow that vision."

Smith said the agency's evolution during that period laid the groundwork for Cullman's later success.

"We went from a handful of industries to marketing sites and parks that provided a good location for industry and helped drive the strong record of success that followed," she said.

Smith said Greer's leadership style combined professionalism with genuine joy for the work.

"Dale was known for his dedication and long hours, bringing vision, determination and professionalism to every project, along with a lot

of laughter," she said. "It has been my honor and pleasure to work with him."

She said Greer's impact will continue long after his retirement.

"I wish him every happiness in retirement and know he will be happy to have unlimited fishing days. He will be greatly missed, but his contributions to this community and state will be felt for years to come," Smith said.

As Greer prepares to step away from the agency, those who worked alongside him said his leadership style was defined as much by character as by accomplishment.

CEDA Assistant Director Jamie Troutman said Greer's influence was felt both professionally and personally.

"Dale Greer is truly one-of-a-kind. He's one of those rare people who is always in a good mood and will go out of his way to help someone or offer a kind word. People come to Dale because he is known for making things happen," Troutman said.

"It has been an honor to work with Dale for so »



many years. His impact on our community cannot be overstated. His contributions, whether through civic involvement, industrial recruitment or projects such as the Duck River Dam and Reservoir, to name just a few, have helped shape where we are today," she said.

Troutman said her time working alongside Greer helped shape her own approach to leadership and long-term planning for the agency.

"I have learned a great deal from working with him and am optimistic about the future. I wish Dale nothing but the best in a well-deserved retirement."

Cullman Parks, Recreation & Sports Tourism Executive Director Nathan Anderson said Greer's impact extended beyond individual projects and rankings.

"The truest measure of a public servant is simple: they leave the place they served better than they found it. By that standard, Dale Greer's legacy is unquestionable, measured in decades of steady leadership, collaborative progress and a Cullman that is stronger today and positioned for generations to come," Anderson said.

Former Cullman Mayor Max Townson said Greer played a key role in multiple industrial and retail development efforts during his time in office.

"I was blessed to work with Dale Greer for eight years. He was responsible for several industrial development projects and retail development projects during my time as mayor," Townson said.

"I've always appreciated Dale and his heart and enthusiasm for the city of Cullman and for Cullman County. He's not a bad fishing partner either."

Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce President Joey Orr said Greer's leadership style and commitment to collaboration played a central role in Cullman's long-term economic progress.

"Dale Greer's impact on Cullman's economic growth cannot be overstated. He believes wholeheartedly in collaboration and communication. This has been key to his success as he has helped to recruit investments to the area, support local industry, identify ways for long-term growth and create opportunities for our business owners and citizens. Dale knows that progress happens when people work together," Orr said.

She said Greer's influence also extended beyond professional collaboration into mentorship and personal leadership.

"Since taking my position at the Cullman Area Chamber of Commerce, Dale has been a mentor, friend and advocate. He is always ready with a quick joke, an encouraging word and a fishing story or two. Dale's ability to build relationships and lead people has made the Cullman area a better place to be. His legacy will be felt for years to come," Orr said.

Under Greer's leadership, CEDA focused on industrial recruitment, infrastructure development and workforce alignment, with those efforts tied to sustained growth across manufacturing, logistics and commercial sectors.

Infrastructure initiatives associated with the agency during Greer's tenure included coordination related to the Duck River Reservoir project, which expanded water resources and recreational opportunities for the region.

Workforce development and education alignment were recurring themes in public discussions involving Greer.

"We have to make sure students understand the opportunities available here and that our training programs match the needs of our employers," Greer said in 2022.

As Greer reflected on his years with CEDA, he said the most meaningful takeaway



CONTRIBUTED

**Undated photo of Dale Greer**

was the collective effort behind Cullman's progress.

"The growth and development of the community and the partnerships that made it happen stand out the most," Greer said. "Our agency worked closely with the mayor and council, industrial development boards, the county commission, the chamber of commerce, education partners, utility providers, regional economic development groups, State agencies, City departments and local and national legislative delegations.

"We always strived to showcase Cullman as a great place to live, work and play," he said.

Greer said the agency's evolution during his tenure was part of a much longer continuum of growth.

"Cullman has had a 40-year history of growth and progress, starting with industry

recruitment and expansion and the creation of jobs," he said. "I'm proud of the fact that I stepped in as only the second executive director in our history and that Cullman continued to rank among the best counties in Alabama for new and expanding industry.

"To maintain the remarkable track record of supporting existing industry and ranking annually in the top 10 among 550 micropolitan cities in America is something I'm very proud of," Greer said. "What pleases me most is how those measurable metrics contributed to other significant achievements throughout the community."

Greer said working alongside Troutman was an important part of the agency's continuity and future.

"Jamie is extremely task-oriented and focused on detail," he said. "She has a keen »



ability to grasp opportunities for personal and professional growth. When a door opens, she rarely misses an opportunity for improvement.

"She has 25 years of service to the Cullman community and is in tune with its needs and how to achieve goals," Greer said.

Greer said the behind-the-scenes work of economic development is often misunderstood.

"Every decision made is based on community involvement and consensus, with an eye on what is best for all of us," he said. "No one person controls actions. We strive to bring in the right groups and individuals into the decision-making process."

As he steps away from day-to-day leadership, Greer said he remains confident in Cullman's future.

"Every aspect of the community is solid," he said. "Industry, retail, workforce development, housing, quality of life, health care, parks and recreation, tourism, education and leadership."

"There is no glaring weakness or downturn in any single area of the economy that could dramatically alter Cullman's ability to continue to prosper," he said. "I am convinced that our future has never been brighter."

Wallace State Community College President Dr. Vicki Karolewics said Greer's influence extends beyond economic development into education and long-term workforce investment.

"Dale Greer is an uncommon professional. Dale's inescapable, energetic, relentless focus on developing infrastructure, creating jobs, building the workforce, expanding partnerships, launching entrepreneurs and elevating Cullman's quality of life makes him truly exceptional, and his legacy will endure for generations," Karolewics said.

She said Greer's commitment to education was reflected in his direct support of students.

"Dale is such an advocate for education. As a long-serving member of Wallace State's Future Foundation, he has a heart for Wallace State's students," she said. "It was Dale's idea to implement the Second Chance scholarship to provide financial support for students who just need another opportunity and who need someone to believe in them. Countless students have benefited from his investment, and ultimately they will pay it forward into our community."

Greer's work also left a lasting impression on local entrepreneurs and private-sector leaders.

Joey Robertson of Wagon Trail Hemp said Greer played a key role in helping Med-Serv navigate local and state-level support during its development process.

"Without the assistance and guidance of Dale Greer, Med-Serv could not have gained the traction and support garnered by our local and state government," Robertson said. "Without hesitation, Dale went to bat for us locally and as part of our presentation to the AMCC (Alabama Medical Cannabis Commission)."

"Hearing that Dale is retiring fills my heart with joy for him and simultaneously a hole knowing that his knowledge, abilities and friendship are impossible to replace," Robertson said. "Cullman is a better place due to his years of tireless dedication."

In addition to recruitment and expansion work, Greer was instrumental in incubating locally rooted companies such as Sequence Health, DB Technologies and ZeroRPM. He also played behind-the-scenes roles in expansions involving RWC and HomTex, as well as the addition of the REHAU paint line.

Before entering economic development, Greer worked in journalism, an experience colleagues said shaped his understanding of trust, discretion and long-term relationships.

Lorraine Greer said family and community have always been central to her husband's life and career.

"Dale is such a great husband, father and friend. Family is very important to him. He has a big personality and he loves Cullman. He loves showing off our town. He is so proud of what he has gotten to play a part in over the years," she said.

"He loves people. Being the 2023 (Oktoberfest) Burgermeister may be the most rewarding job he has ever had. I know for a fact it was the most fun for him," she said. "Community is so important to him and I think he can look back on his career and see how very important he was to ours."

Beyond economic development metrics, Greer was recognized for civic leadership and community involvement. In 2023, he received the Emma Marie Eddleman Citizenship Award.

"This community has given me far more than I could ever give back. I've been fortunate to work alongside people who truly care about Cullman," Greer said at the time.

At the first Cullman City Council meeting held in 2026, the council formally accepted Greer's resignation.

"Dale Greer is a true visionary leader. His impact throughout our community will be felt for generations to come. I will forever be grateful for his selfless service to the citizens of Cullman," Cullman City Council President Kim Hall said. "His background in journalism and economic development has provided him with a unique perspective that he has used for the advancement of our community. I appreciate his

leadership, heart and wisdom."

Former Cullman City Council President Jenny Folsom said Greer's leadership combined vision with personal connection.

"Dale Greer has been a community builder, visionary leader and navigator of complex economic landscapes throughout his service to Cullman. Dale never meets a stranger and people always gravitate to his kindness, sense of humor and trustworthiness. It has been an honor working with Dale and I am proud to call him my friend," Folsom said.

Cullman Mayor Woody Jacobs said Greer's impact extended well beyond economic metrics, pointing instead to character, leadership style and the way Greer treated people.

"Dale Greer has played an instrumental role in getting Cullman to where it's at today. Dale is a man of honesty and integrity. He's helped to shepherd our town into a golden age through his long-term vision," Jacobs said.

Greer's leadership was defined not by recognition but by humility, according to Jacobs.

"Dale is also a man who will never take the credit; rather, he is always the first to give the credit. I feel confident that Dale is considered a friend with everyone he's ever interacted with," he said.

Jacobs said those qualities are increasingly rare in modern public service.

"In today's world, and especially with the way government is run, finding a person who truly loves people and places others' needs in front of their own is a rarity," Jacobs said.

He said Greer consistently modeled what effective, people-centered government should look like.

"We preach that the customer service portion of government is lacking, and whether we are dealing with one person's complaint or putting a major economic »



deal together, you have to treat people right and let their needs be heard. Dale built a career this way," he said.

Jacobs said Greer's reputation was built on personal connection rather than accolades.

"Dale never meets a stranger.

He's been a pillar in our community, winning probably every award out there; however, that's never been what Dale is about. He's about leaving something better than when he found it and loving people," Jacobs said.

He said those relationships define Greer's lasting legacy in

Cullman.

"Dale is my friend, and I know there are many more who would use the same term whenever the name Dale Greer is brought up. That's what a true legacy looks like, building and maintaining relationships during our time here," he said.

Greer's retirement marks the end of a long chapter in Cullman's economic development history, closing a period defined by steady growth, quiet leadership and an enduring commitment to community.

Troutman has been named interim director of CEDA.

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# Alabama Strawberry Festival balances tradition and growth heading into 2026

Noah Galilee

noah@cullmantribune.com

**A**fter a record-setting year in 2025, Alabama Strawberry Festival organizers are preparing for another large turnout in 2026, guided by lessons learned as the event continues to grow beyond its traditional footprint.

Cullman Parks, Recreation & Sports Tourism Executive Director Nathan Anderson said last year's attendance marked a turning point for the festival.

"Record attendance in 2025 confirmed that the Alabama Strawberry Festival has grown beyond a statewide event into a true Southeast regional destination," Anderson said.

"That growth has shaped how we approach 2026, with a focus on refining the guest experience, expanding music and arts offerings and ensuring the festival remains welcoming and well organized as more visitors discover it each year."

Much of that planning centers on Depot Park, which has served as the festival's home in recent years and has become closely tied to its identity.

"The park has truly become part of the festival's identity," Anderson said. "Depot Park provides the space, flexibility and infrastructure needed for a growing festival while still maintaining a comfortable, family-friendly atmosphere."

He said improvements made ahead of the 2025 festival helped ease congestion and improve movement throughout the park - changes that will continue to influence layout decisions this year.

"One of the most impactful changes last year was the expansion of Depot Park, which significantly improved traffic flow and reduced congestion throughout the festival," Anderson said.

"In 2026, we're building on that success by further refining the layout and launching a new festival app that will feature an interactive, GPS-enabled map."

The app, he said, will allow

attendees to locate vendors, stages, rides and attractions more easily as they move through the festival.

Live entertainment remains a central component of the event, with organizers continuing to emphasize a broad mix of performances designed to appeal to a wide audience.

"Those who have attended the Alabama Strawberry Festival know it's not only a celebration of agriculture, but also a celebration of the arts, and that will be even more evident in 2026," Anderson said.

"Guests can expect more vendors, expanded live entertainment, larger rides and family-friendly attractions, enhanced food offerings and a broader arts and crafts showcase."

Vendor participation has continued to grow alongside attendance, becoming one of the festival's primary draws.

"We're very intentional about creating a balanced vendor mix," Anderson said.

"That includes strawberry-themed foods and merchandise, high-quality arts and crafts and strong representation from local and regional businesses."

Family programming also remains a priority as organizers work to accommodate growth without losing the atmosphere longtime attendees expect.

"Our focus is on thoughtful programming and design," Anderson said. "Family-friendly attractions, clear layouts and activities for all ages naturally create a safe and enjoyable environment."

Children's activities, he said, help define the festival experience and encourage families to return year after year.

"Children's activities and family programming are essential to the festival's success," Anderson said. "Those shared experiences are what turn a visit into a tradition for many families."

Behind the scenes, Anderson said, the festival continues to rely heavily on partnerships and community involvement.

"The festival is a true

community effort," he said. "Sponsors, volunteers, community organizations and other partners all play a vital role in making it happen."

As planning continues, Anderson said organizers remain focused on honoring the festival's agricultural roots while welcoming new visitors from across the region.

"At its core, the festival celebrates Cullman's agricultural heritage and the farmers who helped shape the region," he said.

"By pairing that tradition with live music, arts and modern festival experiences, we're able to honor our roots while appealing to visitors from across the Southeast."

For both returning guests and first-time attendees, Anderson said the goal is to deliver a memorable experience.

"For longtime attendees, we want the festival to remain a cherished tradition," he said. "For first-time visitors, we want it to be an unforgettable introduction to Cullman and a reason to come back year after year."

The 2026 Alabama Strawberry Festival is scheduled for April 24-25 at Depot Park in downtown Cullman. Additional updates and event information will be shared at [www.alabamastrawberryfest.com](http://www.alabamastrawberryfest.com) and [www.facebook.com/AlabamaStrawberryfest](https://www.facebook.com/AlabamaStrawberryfest).

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# Event calendar

## Anabelle Howze

anabelle@cullmantribune.com

### Cullman Area Chamber Foundation Mardi Gras Parade & Gumbo Cook-Off

- Saturday, Feb. 14, at 1 p.m. in the Art District (Fourth Street Southwest and Cotton Creek area). Attendees can enjoy delicious gumbo tastings, festive décor, live music and the vibrant energy of Mardi Gras right here in Cullman! Grab your beads, bring your friends and family and join us in the Art District.
- Get more info at <https://tinyurl.com/y4a8zrc8>.

### Hope Horses Casino Night

- Saturday, Feb. 28, from 6-10 p.m. at Cotton Creek, 417 Third Ave. SW. Tickets are \$100 and include dinner, drinks and starter chips.
- Get more info at <https://tinyurl.com/yav6zwx4>.

### The Something Blue Shoppe Bridal Show

- Sunday, March 1, from 2-5 p.m. at Cotton Creek, 417 Third Ave. SW. Admission is \$10.
- Tickets are available at <https://tinyurl.com/aarsywj2>.

### Cullman Area Chamber Annual Meeting & Gala

- Thursday, March 26,

beginning at 6 p.m. at Stone Bridge Farms - Brownstone Center, 281 County Road 717.

- Get more info or register at <https://tinyurl.com/yvu2d54n>.

### Cullman Family Expo

- Saturday, April 11, from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. at the Cullman County Agricultural Trade Center, 17645 U.S. Highway 31.
- Get more info at <https://tinyurl.com/f9aps32d>.

### 42nd Annual Bloomin' Festival Arts and Crafts Fair

- Saturday and Sunday, April 18-19, from 9 a.m.-4 p.m. on

the campus of St. Bernard Abbey and Preparatory School, 1600 St. Bernard Ave. SE, Cullman. Admission is \$10. Children 12 and younger are admitted free.

- Get more info at [www.bloominfestival.com](http://www.bloominfestival.com).

### Alabama Strawberry Festival

- Friday and Saturday, April 24-25, at Depot Park, 309 First Ave. NE in Cullman. Festival gates open at 11 a.m. Friday and 9 a.m. Saturday. Concert gates open at 3 p.m. both days, with bands beginning around 4:30.
- Get more info at [www.alabamastrawberryfest.com](http://www.alabamastrawberryfest.com).

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# *How to Spend a Day in Cullman:* **Cullman County Parks**



**Ducks at Sportsman Lake Park**

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**Anabelle Howze**  
anabelle@cullmantribune.com

**W**ith four diverse parks (and an agricultural trade center) under the care of Cullman County Parks and Recreation, visitors can move from lakeside walks and playgrounds to historic landmarks and rugged off-road trails all in a single day.

According to Director Kenneth Cornelius, the key to seeing all the beautiful sights is to start early and choose experiences that match your pace and interests. "We've got a lot »



**Clarkson Covered Bridge**

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE





ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

### ***Stony Lonesome OHV Park***

to do, and there's distance between parks," he said. "Start early and enjoy each one."

### ***Morning***

Cornelius recommends beginning the day close to town at Sportsman Lake Park, where a paved walking trail with an exercise circuit circles the lake, while wooded paths branch into nature areas suitable for walking or biking. There is a bird observation deck near the flower gardens. Bicycles or paddle boats are available for rent in warmer months, and younger children enjoy the giant playground and splash pad when open. The park also offers picnic pavilions and fishing access, making it a popular morning stop for families.

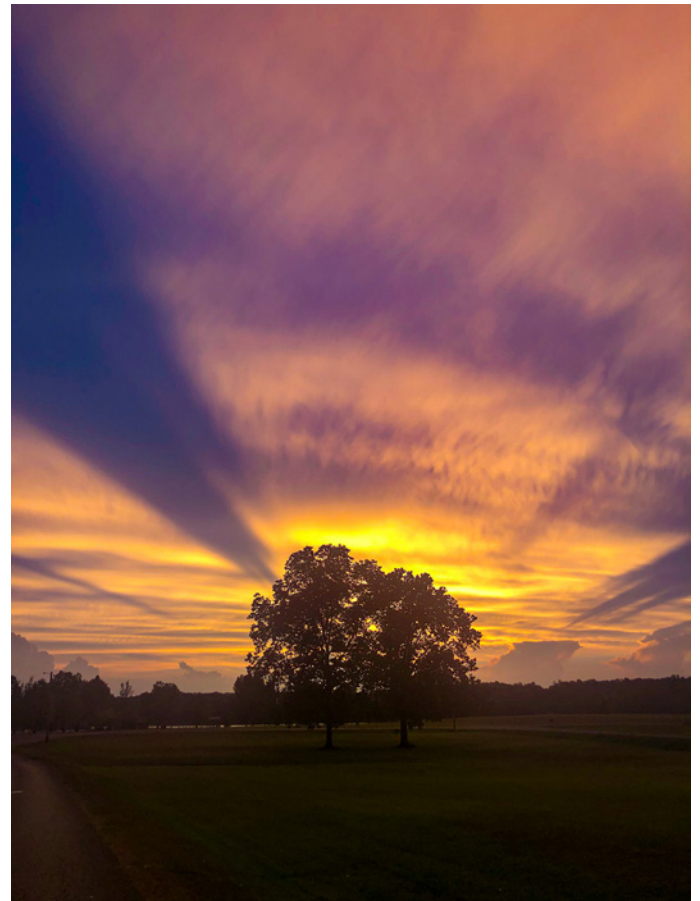
1544 Sportsman Lake Road NW, Cullman

### ***Late Morning***

From there, Cornelius suggests heading out to Trimble to visit Smith Lake Park, which offers a more expansive waterfront setting. The park includes boat launches, swimming areas, pavilions and roadways that double as walking routes through campgrounds. Visitors can take advantage of basketball courts and a pickleball court added within the past year. Like Sportsman Lake, Smith Lake Park is designed to accommodate all ages and activity levels.

403 County Road 386, Cullman

»



ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**Sunset at Smith Lake Park**



## Afternoon

For a quieter stop embedded with some local history, Cornelius encourages exploring Clarkson Covered Bridge Park, one of the system's most underutilized gems. "There's a real opportunity to go back in time there," he said. The park features a historic wooden covered bridge, walking trails along the creek and wooded paths that showcase Cullman County's natural beauty and early history. It's a popular spot for photography, light hiking and anyone seeking a slower pace.

1240 County Road 1043,  
Cullman

## Late Afternoon

Those looking for a high-energy and fast-paced adventure can head to Stony Lonesome OHV Park, a favorite among off-road enthusiasts. Spanning more than 1,500 acres with over 80 miles of trails, the park accommodates ATVs, side-by-sides and other off-highway vehicles.

10075 Alabama Highway 69,  
Bremen

The system's parks also serve as venues for community events, company picnics and festivals.

Sportsman Lake frequently hosts group outings, while Smith Lake Park's stage and open areas can accommodate large-scale gatherings like its annual Memorial Day and Fourth of July celebrations and the Sweet Tater Festival on Labor Day weekend.

Behind the scenes, Cornelius said maintenance crews work year-round to prepare the parks for heavy use,

focusing on repairs, upgrades and new features even during slower winter months.

With playgrounds, fitness amenities, historic landmarks and outdoor adventure all within reach, Cullman County's park system offers something for nearly every interest. Cornelius' advice for first-time explorers is simple: plan, pace yourself and make a day of it.

"There's a lot here," he said. "Take your time and enjoy it."

Find more info at [www.cullmancountyparks.com](http://www.cullmancountyparks.com).



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## – BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT –

# Small Town Vibes Boutique

**Lauren Estes**

lauren@cullmantribune.com

**T**wo sisters-in-law with a keen eye for fashion and community decided to put their skills to the test and opened a boutique shop in 2025.

Krystal Turner and Alexis Turner opened Small Town Vibes Boutique in January 2025 and have loved every minute since.

"We are a locally owned boutique by two sister-in-law, but also best friends," Alexis said. "We prayed about owning our own store for a long time and one night we decided to go for it. We both have always wanted to do more; we work in health care so this adds a little dynamics to our lives. We love clothes and keeping up with all the trends, but we also wanted to be affordable. We wanted to be a place where everyone could find something."

She said the most popular items in the boutique world right now are sets.

"Sets are probably the most trendy item right now. The set is everyone's favorite because you can just throw it on and go. You can dress it up or keep it casual and dress it down. And of course jeans always do really well. Kancan jeans are our favorite/bestsellers."

Although the SILs are always running online drops and taking orders, they also love to support local events.

"You typically can find us at events like 2nd Fridays, Oktoberfest, Strawberry Fest, etc.," Alexis shared. "We are local, so we love to support locals."



KRYSTAL TURNER

**Small Town Vibes Boutique Owners Alexis Turner and Krystal Turner**



KRYSTAL TURNER

There is a Facebook group where buyers can be added for the latest trends and deals. Find it at <https://tinyurl.com/uwz5jpcn>.

"You can locate us on the Small Town Vibes Boutique page and we post our new arrivals there first," Alexis said. "We ship or can pick up in Dodge City/Cullman."

Small Town Vibes Boutique is located at 885 Alabama Highway 69 S, Ste. D in Dodge City, next to S&S Foods.

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## - HIDDEN GEM -

# Ryan's Creek Produce

**Anabelle Howze**

anabelle@cullmantribune.com

**A**long County Road 222, headed out toward Smith Lake, a modest business has been quietly serving customers, offering fresh food, quality service and a reminder that some of the best places don't need much fanfare. Ryan's Creek Produce is exactly what owner Terry Phillips calls it: "a country store." Inside, customers will find an ever-changing mix of fresh produce, homemade foods, local goods and barbecue favorites that draw regulars from across the county.

Ryan's Creek Produce traces its roots back nearly 40 years, when Phillips' mother operated a small produce stand in front of her home.

Beginning as a simple roadside setup, the business steadily evolved into the store customers know today.

The current building was constructed in 2012, marking a new chapter for the family business while preserving its original spirit. Since then, Ryan's Creek has grown into a gathering place, part market, part café.

The shelves and coolers at Ryan's Creek reflect the seasons. When local produce is available, Phillips sources it close to home.

During the off-season, he turns to area farmers markets to keep offerings fresh and reliable. Customers can browse a wide variety of items, including pork and chicken, local honey, green



*Some of the goods sold at Ryan's Creek Produce*

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

beans, vegetable soup, jellies, salsa, boiled and parched peanuts and assorted canned goods. Antiques line the store, adding to its old-fashioned charm.

In the fall, the menu expands with barbecue plates featuring Boston butts, ribs, chicken, hams and turkeys, along with homemade pecan pies that Phillips recommends to every first-time visitor. "If you're new, try the pecan pie and a barbecue plate."

Ryan's Creek Produce also offers dine-in seating, take-out options and catering services, but its impact reaches beyond food.

Phillips said the business

regularly donates to local charities, schools and families in need, helping with sponsorships, meals and assistance during difficult times. "We donate where we can," he said. "To people, families, schools. Whatever's needed."

In an era when many small, rural businesses struggle to survive, Ryan's Creek Produce continues to serve good food, support its neighbors and keep things simple, making it one of Cullman County's true hidden gems.

Ryan's Creek Produce is located at 3485 County Road 222. Find it online at [www.facebook.com/Ryanscreekproduce](http://www.facebook.com/Ryanscreekproduce).



ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

*Porky Pig sign on the front porch of Ryan's Creek Produce*



# A lasered leap of faith:

## Jessie Zujkowski and ZewCru Creations

### Gauge Day

gauge@cullmantribune.com

**O**n any given weekend in Cullman, you're likely to find Jessie Zujkowski behind a table filled with hand-painted earrings, laser-cut wood signs and custom pieces that invite people to stop, shop and ask questions. From the Sweet Tater Festival to the Grilled Cheese Festival, she has become a familiar face at local community events where she shares her work with locals. Behind the display is a piece of Jessie's dream, ZewCru Creations, a small business she has built out of passion that stemmed from her childhood.

From an early age, Jessie was already acclimated to the woodworking process, spending many afternoons helping her grandfather and father with their projects. That foundation would later be renewed in adulthood, where it would take a life of its own as she delved into modernizing what she knew of the craft, using laser technology to bring hers and other creators' designs to life. Today, ZewCru Creations is known for its detailed laser-cut pieces that have become meaningful gifts for customers across the community.

"I've loved working with wood since I grew up helping my grandpa and daddy as a little girl," Zujkowski said. "More recently, I reconnected with a former work friend who rekindled that love with her lasers. It didn't take long after that to convince my husband I 'needed' my own machine."

With her husband, Frank, on



JESSIE ZUJKOWSKI

**One of the many hand-painted pieces offered by ZewCru Creations**

board, the two took a leap of faith. 18 months would come and go, but in that short time, ZewCru Creations has become a familiar name at festivals and markets across Cullman. Jessie's booth now features everything from earrings and ornaments to door hangers, signs and seasonal laser-cut pieces, each one reflecting her creativity and offering shoppers a wide variety of hand-painted options.

But the journey didn't start there. Her very first creation was symbolic and personal to

her; a dollar bill-shaped piece engraved with the date she powered on her laser for the first time. Not long after, she sold her first commissioned project: a "family/love" sign made for her pastor's wife. It was then that business started to get real for her, and while she didn't have a clear picture of where it all would go, she knew one thing; she had momentum.

"I'm excited to see where we go from here," she said.

With ZewCru Creations freshly motivated with its first successful business sale, each

sale thereafter would become her "most rewarding moment". "From a simple pair of hand-painted earrings to a laser-cut purse, everything in between," she said, noting that even now, each sale feels like a win.

With fueled ambition and potential growth on the horizon, Jessie would seek inspiration, often finding it online, where she connects with other makers and designers. "A few of my designs have been custom requests," she said, "but most of my ideas come from fellow makers on »



Facebook. Once I get to their Etsy or website, I go down an amazing rabbit hole of 'what's the next thing people will love?'"

That curiosity carries over into her creative process. Each piece begins with research, finding the right file or design concept, followed by customization and personalization in her software. Once the laser cuts and engraves the piece, the real magic begins.

"I begin to plan the colors that I want to use to bring it to life. I think now that my favorite part is the painting," she said. "I love watching the personality shine through my colorful ideas."

While creativity is a core piece of ZewCru Creations, it's the behind-the-scenes of running a handmade small business that requires far more than creativity alone. When asked about the most difficult part of running her business, she shared, "Time management, supply tracking and organization are constant challenges. I'm still a huge work in progress in all three of those areas," Zujkowski laughed. "Anyone want to come help me?"

"Focusing on planning for the next holiday, ensuring that I am lined up for the correct events or sales takes a lot," she added. "Without the festivals and markets, you can definitely still build a business, but it would take so much longer to get it done. So, making sure I am on top of that is important."

That commitment to showing up is one reason Jessie remains so active in local markets and festivals. While she describes herself as an introvert, connecting with customers face-to-face has helped her grow, not just as a business owner, but as a person.

"It's definitely challenging to be an introvert when you're trying to sell yourself," she said. "But the friendships and

connections that we make will make each of us stronger, and they are certainly bringing me out of my shell."

Supporting local business has always been something that mattered to her and now she sees it from the other side.

"I've always tried to support local businesses when I'm able," she said. "Now that I fall into those ranks, I see how important it is to walk out that support and be an example for others. We are better together."

Looking ahead, her goals are ambitious but grounded. She hopes to invest in larger, faster machines and eventually add a portable laser to offer on-site services at events.

"They always say dream big, right?" she said. "Our goal is to grow in whatever way best honors our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and at the same time build a brand our customers can trust."

And at the heart of ZewCru Creations is gratitude, for the customers who support her, the community that shows up and the opportunity to bring ideas to life.



JESSIE ZUJKOWSKI

**The symbolic, first laser etching marking the official beginning of ZewCru Creations**

"First and foremost, thank you to everyone who has helped us get this far, and to those who will help us move even further," Zujkowski said. "You are the reason we are here. We are always looking for ways to help you bring your ideas to life! Whether it's that one small personal gift for your special someone or that handmade, unique gift for

your employees or corporate contacts, we would be blessed and honored to help in any way we can!"

For more information about ZewCru Creations and the products offered, follow ZewCru Creations on Facebook, check out [www.zewcrucreations.com](http://www.zewcrucreations.com) or email Jessie at [zewcrucreations@gmail.com](mailto:zewcrucreations@gmail.com).

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– LOCAL HEROES –

# Capt. Joey Collier

Lauren Estes | [lauren@cullmantribune.com](mailto:lauren@cullmantribune.com)

**Cullman County Sheriff's Office Patrol Captain Joey Collier has many accomplishments in his pocket, including earning a Purple Heart, but because of his humility, you wouldn't know it.**

Collier is over school resource officers (SROs), civil process and courthouse security. He's a true servant of the community and country. "I served in the Army for four years," Collier said. "I completed two combat tours to Iraq. On May 1, I will have served 20 years with the sheriff's office."

He's held many titles – patrol captain, narcotics investigator, DEA task force officer, sergeant, lieutenant and captain – and has very few words to say about himself, but his fellow department leaders stepped up to do so.

Communications Director

Lt. Chad Whaley said Collier is not only a remarkable leader, but also a trusted friend.

"I've had the privilege of knowing him for well over a decade, and what continues to impress me most is the deep respect he earns from everyone around him," Whaley said. "From his service in the military to his career with the Cullman County Sheriff's Office, Joey has quietly built a reputation defined by integrity, humility and unwavering dedication."

Whaley said that many may not realize Collier is a Purple Heart recipient — he rarely speaks of it.

"I, myself, didn't learn of it until last year despite working alongside him for more than 10 years," Whaley said.

"That humility only deepens the admiration he inspires. In his current role as captain on patrol, Joey leads by example. Those under his command follow him not out of obligation, but out of genuine respect and trust. Beyond the uniform, he is a devoted family man and a loyal friend. It is an honor to know him, to work beside him and to call him a friend. Captain Joey Collier is the very definition of a local hero."

Collier's accolades with the sheriff's office are Top Gun and Top PT when he graduated the academy, along with Officer of the Year.

"I believe bridging the gap is important because it builds trust with our citizens," Collier said. "My favorite thing about serving our community is that they still stand behind us."



**Cullman County Sheriff's Office Patrol Captain Joey Collier**



**Joey Collier, left, in uniform in an undated photo**

JOEY COLLIER





"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."

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Sincerely,  
Sen. Garlan Gudger, District 4





## - BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT -

# Bread Zeppelin - Sourdough

## 'Your stairway to leavened'

**Chasady Woods**

chasady@cullmantribune.com

**M**egan McDaniel moved to Cullman roughly 20 years ago after Hurricane Katrina. She is a wife, mother of five and entrepreneur. She started Bread Zeppelin - Sourdough in 2023, when she was pregnant with her youngest.

McDaniel said she picked the name "Bread Zeppelin" as a tribute to her son, Zeppelin.

"He is the middle child so he gets the honor," she laughed.

McDaniel was asked what inspired her to start her business. "It started out as a hobby," she answered. "It turned into a huge selling point and is something I really enjoy."

Primarily, she makes sourdough and artisans loaves.

"I will make sweets on occasion, especially during the holiday season," she said. "Holiday sweets and dinner rolls are highly requested around this time."

When it comes to the process of making bread, she advised, "It takes time to make. You have to feed the starter appropriately, maintain the correct temperature levels and on top of that you have to wait roughly 24 hours or more for the starter to double to start making bread."

She added, "I also use a flour starter, not a potato starter."

She advised beginners that she lets her starter ferment for 24-48 hours so it will not spike your sugar.

Bread Zeppelin-Sourdough has previously sold its goods at Cornerstone Christmas Market and more. Follow Facebook/Bread Zeppelin - Sourdough to stay updated.



**Megan McDaniel at Cornerstone Revival Center**



**Homemade waffles**



**Sourdough bread**



## - LOCAL EATS -

# Bubba Ritos

**Chasady Woods**

chasady@cullmantribune.com

**B**ubba Ritos is a locally owned, casual eatery located off Exit 299 in Dodge City. Jennifer and Scott McGill opened the restaurant in March 2022. It has two sister locations - Boaz and Guntersville - that opened in 2009.

"My sister and her husband own the other two locations," Jennifer McGill stated. "I was in the automotive industry and my husband was in heavy equipment. We finally decided we wanted to do something different and, ya know, it's all family owned."

The restaurant offers tacos, quesadillas, nachos, burritos and its signature "Bubba Bowls." Meat choices include the classics: steak, beef, chicken and pork, with a variety of vegetable toppings. You can complete your entree with a selection from the popular salsa bar. There's a highly praised pineapple salsa if you're looking to mix things up!

"All of the food and salsa is all made in-house," said McGill.

Feedback from the customers has been tremendously positive, she shared. "They say it's very fresh. We make everything that day in-house. They also like that it's pretty fast. They can have their food made quickly and they don't have to wait on the kitchen or staff."

Customers walk up to the bar and put in their orders and are eating within the five minutes or less. It's very efficient for workers who want a quick, high-protein lunch. If you



CONTRIBUTED

### **Bubba Ritos Chicken Burrito**

operate under a time crunch and wish to dine in a relaxed atmosphere, Bubba Ritos is the place to go!

Bubba Ritos also caters, with the most popular option being the taco bar. (Call 256-281-6070, ext. 0 for more info).

McGill said another Bubba Ritos location is in the works. They are looking to open a restaurant in Hartselle. "We're gonna guesstimate around March."

In the meantime, if you're looking for a place to grab lunch, swing by at 520 Alabama Highway 69 Hanceville (Dodge City). Bubba Ritos is open Monday through Saturday from 10:30 a.m.-8 p.m. Find it online at Facebook/Bubba Ritos-Dodge City.



CONTRIBUTED

**Bubba Ritos Owners Jennifer and Scott McGill**





Animals  
from  
Holly  
Pond's  
Fortner  
Farm  
featured in  
Hallmark  
movie

**Animals from Holly Pond's Fortner Farm were featured in the movie "Double Scoop" on the Hallmark Channel in August 2025.**

**Lauren Estes**  
lauren@cullmantribune.com

**A** local farming family made its mark after its farm animals were featured in a Hallmark Channel movie in 2025.

Fortner Farm, owed by Stephanie and Benny Fortner, has been going strong for five years. It's an adventure that began when Stephanie was undergoing

chemotherapy; it helped her become more mobile outside the home.

"I never thought cancer would bring us so many cool opportunities," Stephanie shared.

"A scouting agent called me, and she was from Birmingham and wanted to come see our property even though she was looking for a dairy farm. She came and looked at our property and fell in love with the »



STEPHANIE FORTNER

STEPHANIE FORTNER



animals and farm. She asked if they found another farm would we be interested in bringing our animals to the location — I said absolutely."

Stephanie said they loaded up, and the closer we got to the day of filming, they had to work around their schedules because of rain and weather.

"We took off headed to Harpersville the 1st of May in 2025, and filmed for 10 hours," she said.

"We are not in the movie until 1 hour and 15 minutes. The name of the movie is 'Double Scoop.' It came out Aug. 23, 2025. It's on Hallmark Channel and you

can search and watch it. The main characters are Ryan McPartlin and Taylor Care."

Stephanie said along with having such a fun venture in the movie world, Fortner Farm offers many things to the community.

"We offer petting zoo tours. The cost is \$15 per person and have the pasture experience with all of our animals," she said.

"We have been in a movie. We host church festivals, birthday parties, mobile events, nativity scenes, weddings, and have been in the Cullman County Fair for four years."

Stephanie shared that



**Stephanie Fortner of Fortner Farm in Holly Pond is seen on-screen on the Hallmark Channel.**

she and her husband work on the farm and manage it.

"I also make sourdough bread and we do sell animals from time to time," she said.

Fortner Farm is located at 1620 County Road 1682 in Holly Pond. For more information, visit [www.fortnerfarmalabama.com](http://www.fortnerfarmalabama.com).



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## - LOCAL EATS - Lucy's on 3rd

**Lucy's on 3rd (formerly Carlton's Italian) is located at 208 Third Ave. SE.**

CHASADY WOODS/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

### Chasady Woods

chasady@cullmantribune.com

**H**arry Blaylock bought Carlton's Italian Restaurant from its original owners in 2009. The restaurant has been a Cullman favorite since it was established in 1972 and held the familiar name for 53 years. In October 2025 the restaurant was rebranded as Lucy's on 3rd.

Following her father's retirement, Lucy Blaylock Gable took over the beloved restaurant. She said the community response to the change has been wonderful. "Of course there are a few people who are not happy about the name change, but the restaurant is the same," she shared. "The same menu and hospitality,

just a different name."

Gable stressed how grateful she is for the community. "When I took it over, the next day we were having to answer the phones by the new name," she laughed. "It was a lot for everyone to get used to, but I am so thankful for how easy it has been."

There will be some new items added to the menu. "We are going to try out eggplant parmesan since that has been highly requested," she said.

She also advised that a fryer or two would be placed in the kitchen, with time, as they aim to introduce fried ravioli to the menu as well.

Find the restaurant online at Facebook/Lucy's on 3rd. Lucy's on 3rd is located at 208 Third Ave. SE.



CHASADY WOODS/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**Lucy's on 3rd Owner Lucy Blaylock Gable**





**Cullman County Parks  
Stony Lonesome OHV Park  
Smith Lake Park - Cullman County  
Ag Center - Clarkson Covered  
Bridge - Sportsman Lake Park**







# 'My family is this journey'

**Mike Marks' path to his purpose**

*Smith Lake Electrical's very own Mike Marks*

BRITTANY SAYERS





BRITTANY SAYERS

### Mike and his family

#### Gauge Day

[gauge@cullmantribune.com](mailto:gauge@cullmantribune.com)

**F**or Mike Marks, work has never been something you clock into and forget about. It has always been something you do, something you learn by watching, by trying and by figuring it out, even when the instructions are minimal.

Long before submarines, nuclear programs or starting his own electrical business, that mindset was shaped on his grandfather's cattle farm and construction sites. From the age of 9 on, if Mike wasn't participating in a required function,

he was expected to be working somewhere.

"If I wasn't at school or practice, I was cutting or putting up hay, running a fuel truck to the field equipment, helping repair equipment or doing general labor on the farm," he said. "He had me driving a modified bus to carry hay at 11 years old and I made it through it!"

There wasn't much hand-holding in Mike's upbringing. There didn't need to be.

"Instructions were minimal, but I felt like he trusted that I could do it, and I found a way," Mike said. That trust and the quiet expectation to pull your

weight left a lasting impression on him.

"My grandfather did nothing but work, and I feel like that is what shaped me the most," he added. "I don't think he ever told me I did a good job, but I heard his approval through others, which was enough."

That work ethic followed him into adulthood, even when his early plans didn't go as expected. Mike entered college as a biology major, but a career day quickly forced reality into focus. With a young family starting, the career outlook wasn't encouraging. He turned to installing satellite dishes, "West Virginia State

flowers," as he jokingly called them, and saw early success. Then, in what felt like an overnight shift, the analog market disappeared with the rise of digital technology.

Facing financial pressure and the perceived collapse of the industry, Mike found himself searching for a new direction when an ad for nuclear training caught his eye.

"It mentioned three specific trades with a lucrative future," he said. "I made the call."

Only later did he realize the ad led straight to the U.S. Navy. Initially turned off by the military aspect, Mike was eventually convinced »



by recruiters who framed it as a place to excel for those willing to work. After passing the ASVAB, he advanced to the Nuclear Field Qualification Test, ultimately testing into the Naval Nuclear Power Program. That decision set him on the path to becoming a nuclear electrician, a role that would define some of the most intense and formative years of his life.

After boot camp, Mike entered Nuclear Power School, one of the most demanding academic programs in the country. Classes ran eight hours a day, with classified materials that couldn't leave the building, meaning no studying off-site was permitted.

"We were allowed to stay until midnight studying, and that's what I did," he said. Despite his confidence going in, reality hit fast. "I scored just above passing and had to attend a review board. '2.5 Stay Alive' was the mantra. Attrition of 40-50% was the goal."

Fear would become his motivator. "I had to learn how to study out of fear," he said. "I finished just above the top half, not because of intelligence, but due to necessity."

Mike would then be assigned to fast-attack submarine duty, a post he wanted, but not quite the one he expected. Life aboard a submarine was isolating and relentless.

"If you can imagine getting in a closet for six months at a time," he said. "You'd be close to understanding how it feels."

Crews lived on 18-hour days aboard the fast-attack submarines, rotating between watch, maintenance and brief rest. Privacy was nonexistent, with some having to share their beds with two others.

"In all seriousness, you'll see things from others you never thought you'd see. We're down there with 18% maximum oxygen. Not a single guy is normal after the second day," Mike said. "Guys went crazy.

Guys died. Most just changed."

But for Mike, work on the submarine would give him purpose and keep him grounded.

"Nuclear Electricians on fast attacks were tasked with everything with a wire on the boat," he explained. "I just wanted to fix things. No room for conventional electricians. Plus, we ran the nuclear reactor on watch."

And when the mission demanded it, the crew came together in ways few ever experience. "When the duty became real, we came together like no other."

After leaving the Navy, Mike stayed in the electrical field, spending more than 15 years working in industrial settings. Over time, something stood out to him that he grasped onto.

"I learned that I understood the flow of electricity better than most," he shared. "I have never felt anything more rewarding than opening a young guy's eyes to this trade. There are many young people who are hungry for the right teacher, and I feel I can teach them. Nothing is better than watching a man diagnose and correct an electrical issue when he's got the work ethic to boot."

"In short, I love fixing problems and enjoy even more watching our apprentices fix them."

That passion for teaching and problem-solving never faded. And in 2020, amid the uncertainty of COVID and with a large family depending on him, Mike took a leap that many never risk taking, starting his own electrical business, Smith Lake Electrical. What began with dock electrical work at Smith Lake quickly revealed a deeper need.

"There was an obvious lack of competence when it came to Smith Lake boat dock wiring," he said.

"Every injury or incident that I could find was preventable. That took me down the residential road. Soon after,



BRITTANY SAYERS

### Mike and a crew member in action

I started to be asked to do other residential work, and it was obvious that more work was needed in homes as well. Residential work is where I felt I am needed the most, so that's where I went."

Today, his veteran-owned business focuses heavily on residential electrical work, with three of his children involved in operations, from managing the office to working in the field with him.

"My family is this journey," he said. "My son will run this company in my after years. I firmly believe he's a better electrician at 23 than I was at 35.

"But I also want every customer to be happy that they called us," he added. "That is how my family influences the way I do business. I want my family to be proud of this."

With his family alongside him and the business continuing to grow, Mike credits much of the company's success to word-of-mouth, something he takes great pride in. "It's amazing that most of our business is from recommendations," he said.

"That makes me proud that

we're keeping customers happy and safe. I truly believe we have filled a niche at the Lake that was definitely needed."

Looking ahead, Mike plans to expand residential work throughout Cullman and Morgan counties while continuing to grow the company's partnership with Generac as a dealer and warranty service provider, with hopes of branching into additional installation services. But when asked what he's most proud of, his answer comes back to people.

"My children see the benefit of hard work and understand that it's what they do that decides what they are in the end," he said. "And I can't help but mention, I have trained more than 20-plus 'youngens' in my career. Even if they are not working in this field, I know they learned and hope they are succeeding. I am very proud and appreciative of my time with each and every one of them."

For more information on Smith Lake Electrical and the services they offer, call 256-606-1378 or visit [www.smithlakeelectrical.com](http://www.smithlakeelectrical.com).



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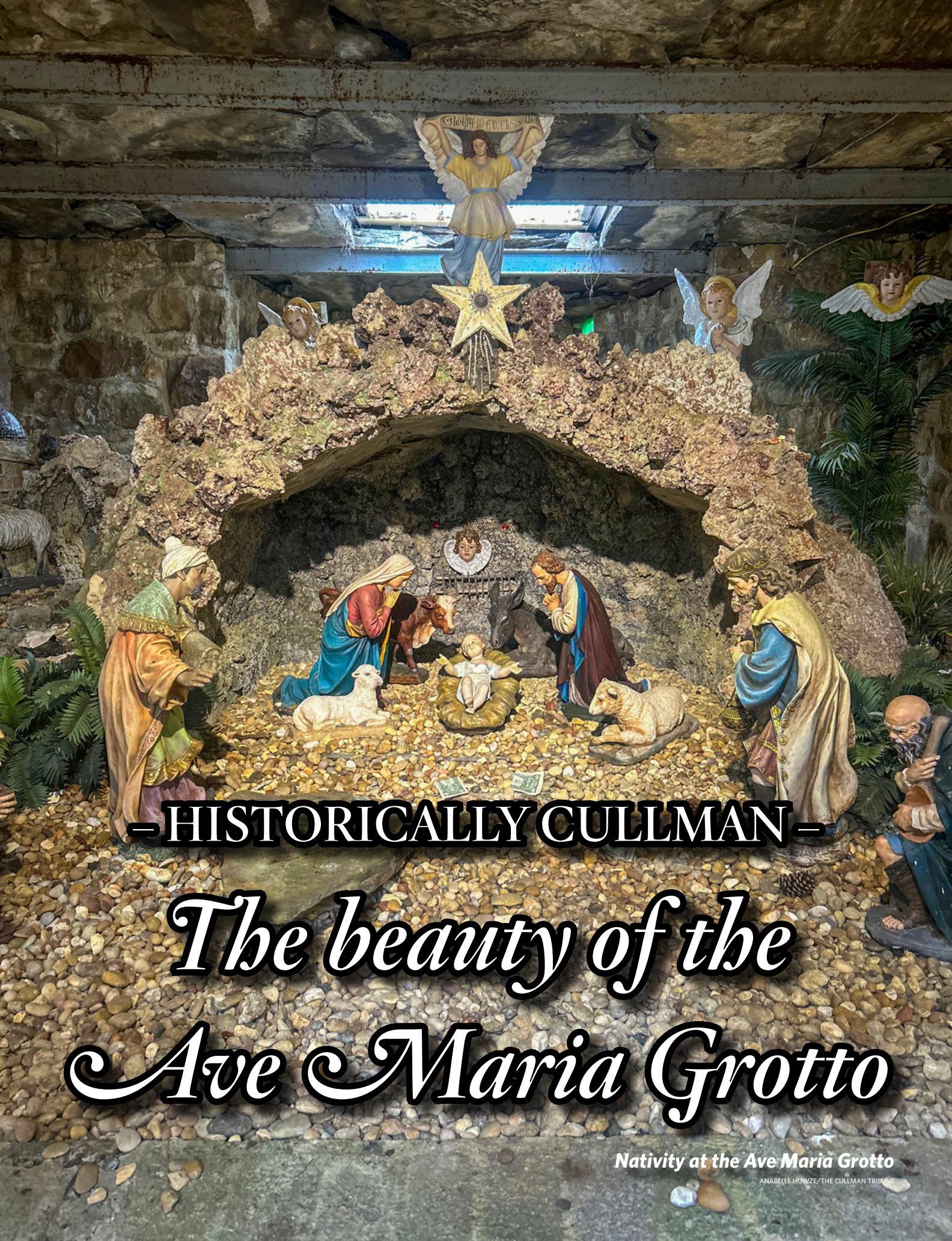
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**- HISTORICALLY CULLMAN -**

# *The beauty of the Ave Maria Grotto*

Nativity at the Ave Maria Grotto

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE





**Outline of St. Peter's Church in Rome at the Ave Maria Grotto**

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**Anabelle Howze**  
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Tucked into the wooded hills, the Ave Maria Grotto is more than a roadside attraction. It is the life's work of a quiet Benedictine monk whose devotion, imagination and persistence transformed discarded objects into one of the most remarkable examples of folk art in the United States. The Grotto is home to more than 125 small-scale replicas of religious and historical structures from around the world. Its creator, Brother Joseph Zoettl, spent more than five decades shaping the site by using little more

than cement, creek rock and whatever materials happened to be within reach.

"He never set out to be famous or even noticed," said Roger Steele, director of the Grotto. "He just loved working with his hands."

Brother Joseph arrived at St. Bernard Abbey in the 1890s in his teenage years after being recruited from Bavaria to join the Benedictine monastery founded to serve German Catholic settlers in the region. Small in stature and later physically disabled after a serious injury, he never became a priest and instead lived his life as a lay brother.

His daily work was humble, including hauling »



ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**Hansel and Gretel Visit the Castle of Fairies at the Ave Maria Grotto**





**Statue of Brother Joseph at the Ave Maria Grotto**

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

firewood, shoveling coal and eventually overseeing the Abbey's steam plant, which once powered the campus.

His idea for the Grotto began simply. After the monastery purchased hundreds of small religious statuettes, Brother Joseph began building tiny cave-like shrines to house them.

The pieces sold quickly, and what began as a practical solution slowly evolved into something far more ambitious. Using photographs, postcards and books as references, Brother Joseph began constructing miniature replicas of churches, shrines and famous landmarks.

Over time, the collection expanded beyond strictly religious structures to include whimsical and secular designs, Hansel and Gretel scenes, the Leaning Tower of Pisa and even the Roman Colosseum.

Steele said he built with whatever materials he could find or that were given to him. "You'll see everything from broken glass and marbles to makeup jars and cosmetic lids; that's what makes it folk art in the truest sense."

Much of the stone came from nearby Eightmile Creek or from the former quarry where the current Grotto sits.

Slag from Birmingham's steel industry, pumice rock and shards of marble, some salvaged from a train wreck north of Cullman in the 1920s, were incorporated into major shrines and stalactite-lined caves. "He wasted nothing," Steele said. "If it had shape, texture or shine, he could use it."

Its growing popularity, spread entirely by word of mouth, eventually prompted monks to relocate the Grotto to its current site, where it officially opened to the public in 1934.

Brother Joseph continued building until 1958, just three years before his death in 1961.

What visitors see today is largely unchanged from the final years of his life. Among the most famous structures is the miniature St. Peter's Basilica, a centerpiece of the Grotto's Roman section and a symbol of its Catholic roots. Yet Steele said the appeal has broadened significantly over time. "By the 1960s and 70s, most of our visitors weren't Catholic. Today, many aren't religious at all."

Modern visitors come for a variety of reasons: art, history, architecture or simply quiet. Steele believes the Grotto's power lies in its ability to meet people where they are. "People sense something here," he said. "There's the beauty of nature, and then there's one man's devotion expressed through art. Together, that creates a sense of peace."

He said he has seen visitors moved to tears, particularly during the holiday season, and recalls comments from people of many faiths, including a Muslim visitor from Egypt, who found the space familiar, comforting and deeply human. "That tells you something. This place speaks beyond religion."

The monks of St. Bernard Abbey continue to honor Brother Joseph's legacy through stewardship, hospitality and service. Postulants help decorate the Grotto seasonally, monks assist with visitors and the Abbey's bakery supplies bread and goods sold on-site.

For Steele, working at Ave Maria Grotto has reshaped his understanding of faith, art and community.

"In a world that feels divided and loud, people come here to remember that something quieter and more real still exists. That's Brother Joseph's gift."

Visit the Grotto at 1600 St. Bernard Dr. SE in Cullman. Learn more at [www.avemaria-grotto.com](http://www.avemaria-grotto.com).





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—BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT—

# Karma's Coffee House



ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**Above:** Karma's Coffee House is located at 103 First Ave. NE #140 in Cullman. **Opposite page:** Bakery items at Karma's

## Anabelle Howze

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Ten years ago, a dream and a leap of faith laid the foundation for what has become one of Cullman's most recognizable gathering places.

Karma's Coffee House began when Founder Katie Fine, a longtime coffee industry professional, set out to open her own shop. An early opportunity to purchase an existing coffee business fell through, but instead of walking away, she found people who believed in her vision. With their support, Karma's opened its doors a decade ago and has since grown into a cornerstone of the Cullman Warehouse District.

Today, that vision is carried forward by a team led by Manager Magan Bartlett, who describes Karma's as much more than a place to grab a drink. "It's welcoming," Bartlett said. "It has that coffee shop vibe where you can meet friends or family to catch up, read a book or study. There's always something going on."

Inside Karma's, conversations flow easily between tables, baristas greet regulars by name and customers are encouraged to take their time and enjoy the space. Bartlett hopes visitors leave feeling connected, not just caffeinated. "We expect friendly service and being able to answer questions as customers navigate the menu. Coffee can be

overwhelming with different options. We encourage you to ask questions! Even if coffee isn't your favorite, we have non-coffee options plus a full breakfast (served all day) and lunch menu!"

Many of Karma's most popular drinks were crafted by baristas in the shop's early days, each recipe with its own story. The Mona Lisa was created by a barista named Lisa, while another team member developed the Kurt Koebean, one of the shop's best sellers alongside the Golden Yang. Karma's açai bowls have also earned a loyal following, especially the Sweet Home Alabama bowl, which remains a year-round favorite.

Seasonal creativity is a

hallmark of Karma's. Each year, the shop rolls out five seasonal menus: Valentine's Day, spring, summer, fall and winter, along with festival-themed offerings tied to events in Cullman's entertainment district, such as Strawberry Festival and Oktoberfest.

Like many small businesses, Karma's has had its share of challenges. One of the most defining moments came during the COVID-19 pandemic. The team adapted quickly, introducing curbside service, which is still available today, and changes that not only helped the business survive, but also enabled it to continue serving customers today.

As Cullman grows, Karma's has focused less on »



competition and more on connection. Community involvement is woven into daily operations, whether through offering free meeting space during business hours, hosting nonprofit roundup campaigns, sponsoring Lunch and Learns at the North Alabama Agriplex, hosting the Chamber's YP Coffee and Connections or supporting local schools and organizations. "We've seen engagements, new parents on their first outing with their baby, birthday celebrations, realtors meeting with new residents, Wallace State students studying together," Bartlett said. "We're a common place for people to meet. I don't know of another place in town that offers that."

Karma's coffee is roasted in Birmingham by Nonfiction Coffee, a partnership Bartlett describes as deeply supportive. "They're incredible. If we're

running low, they'll meet us halfway just to make sure we're taken care of." Looking ahead, Karma plans to expand mobile services and catering for celebrations and regional festivals, as well as deepen collaboration with its sister store, Jubilee Kitchen + Bar.

Karma's overall goal as it enters into its next decade of service is to remain consistent. "We want to continue offering the same quality we've provided for the past 10 years," Bartlett said. "Katie wanted to create a place where everyone felt welcome, their home-away-from-home; she has done that. Our team is one-of-a-kind. They love to create new drinks, connect with customers; they lock-in during peak times and keep us running day after day. I'm so thankful to be a part of Karma's story and truly excited for the next 10 years!"



The shop remains rooted in the same belief that launched it: Where good people come for good coffee, and the strongest businesses are built on community.

Karma's Coffee House is

located at 103 First Ave. NE #140, Cullman. Get more info at [www.karmascoffeehouse.com](http://www.karmascoffeehouse.com).

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# *A Day in the Life*

**Shelby Creekmore of the Cullman County Public Library System**



**Above: Cullman County Public Library System Assistant Director Shelby Creekmore at Oktoberfest; Opposite page: Cullman County Public Library System Assistant Director Shelby Creekmore reads to children at the library.**

PHOTOS COURTESY SHELBY CREEKMORE



**Anabelle Howze**

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**A**s assistant director of the Cullman County Public Library System (CCPLS), Shelby Creekmore starts her mornings ensuring every service desk and department is staffed and ready. Patrons often wait outside before opening hours, and when the doors unlock, they're greeted not only with access to books and computers, but also with smiles and loving kindness.

"No two days are the same at the library," Creekmore said. "That keeps me on my toes, but I love my job. It's a privilege to serve."

Much of her role takes place behind the scenes. As an administrator, Creekmore helps manage staff across the system, oversees the library's website and social media presence, writes grants and helps guide the operations of the main library and its branches.

But her favorite moments happen away from her desk. "The best part of my day is getting to step away from my office and work side by side with my staff, assisting our patrons. The front desk is the best place to learn about our patrons and our community."

Those interactions often reveal a side of librarianship that surprises many. Staff regularly help people navigate tasks that feel overwhelming or inaccessible elsewhere. Creekmore has assisted people with creating documents, printing and notarizing paperwork and finding legal forms online. Moments like that, Creekmore said, aren't always spelled out in a job description, but they define the heart of librarianship.

Deciding which resources the library offers is a collaborative process heavily driven by the community. Book selection begins with technical services

staff who track industry lists and publisher trends, but requests from patrons also play a significant part in determining which books appear. If a requested title isn't available locally, staff work to purchase it or borrow it through interlibrary loan.

Programming decisions are shaped by listening just as closely. Each year, the library assesses community needs and designs free programs to meet them. One recent example is the launch of a STEAM program for children.

"We put out a survey to see how many people would be interested," Creekmore said. "Over 120 parents responded, and almost half said their children had never experienced a STEAM program. That's how we knew it would have a real impact."

For Creekmore, the most meaningful moments often come quietly. Watching a child discover a love for reading is one of them. Each summer, the library hosts a reading challenge to help students maintain literacy skills during the break from school. "Every summer, we hear stories about kids who were struggling to find joy in reading and finally find something that motivates them. Those are the small victories that make this job worthwhile."

The library's impact stretches well beyond its walls. Digital literacy has been a growing focus, with staff working to help close the digital divide. Visitors have access to online tutoring, homework help, research databases, genealogy tools and e-book and audiobook apps.

"A library is not just a building with books in it," Creekmore said. "Offering services that meet the needs of the people around us is a significant part of our job."

One of the moments that stands out most from Creekmore's two years at the

library involves a family she watched grow through storytimes, Lego clubs, reading challenges and preschool visits. Last summer, the library held a raffle for WildWater tickets; entry required only registration for the summer reading challenge. When the family won, Creekmore reached out to share the news. "She told me they had never been to WildWater in all their years of living in Cullman. Their children got to experience something new, all because they attended the library."

Community engagement plays a major role in the library's mission. Staff regularly attend events, partner with local organizations and advocate for library services throughout the county. Partnerships include Wallace State Community College, Cullman Electric Cooperative, Captivate Learning Center, Cullman Christian School and Happy Time Daycare, among others. The work done outside of the library is just as important as the work done inside.

Balancing the constant flow of questions, needs and challenges requires calm and empathy. Creekmore believes that how librarians present

themselves directly shapes a patron's experience. "It can be hard for people to ask for help with something they feel like they should already know," she said. "Our job is to be welcoming and helpful, even if that means admitting we don't have the answer and helping them find it."

Creekmore sees the public library as essential infrastructure, supporting residents at every stage of life. "The library is one of the last true 'third spaces,'" she said. "You don't have to buy anything or even have a library card to be here."

Looking ahead, Creekmore is excited about what's next. Plans are underway for a major renovation and expansion to bring the building up to code and create much-needed space. The library also hopes to grow its staff, expand programming, and is already planning the 2026 Summer Reading Program. "Sometimes people ask if libraries will ever go away," she said. "My answer is always the same. We're not just a building with books. We're a community hub, and we're just getting started."





- LOCAL EATS -

# The Chubby Crow



The dining area at The Chubby Crow

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

## Anabelle Howze

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It's that steady hum of familiarity and care that defines The Chubby Crow, a family-owned country-cooking restaurant that has quietly become a cornerstone of the Jones Chapel community, offering classic Southern cooking sure to warm your soul.

"We're just country cooks," Owner Jan Lemski said. "Homemade biscuits, gravy, fresh meat ground every day."

The Chubby Crow offers an all-you-can-eat breakfast bar, as well as an all-you-can-eat hot food bar in the evenings on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, plus Sunday mornings until 11 a.m. The menu

leans heavily into Southern comfort food, scratch-made, hearty and familiar, served in a space that feels more like a neighbor's dining room than a typical commercial or chain restaurant.

Before the restaurant opened, dining options in Jones Chapel were limited, often requiring residents to drive to Cullman or Addison. "The community here really didn't have much to choose from," Lemski said. "This just seemed like a good fit, and the community has been loving it ever since."

The restaurant's name carries its own piece of family history. Lemski kept the original name when she took ownership, honoring her sister in

Christ's grandfather, a Crow Indian who was tall and thin but affectionately nicknamed "Chubby." Having known the family for more than 15 years, Lemski said keeping the name felt right.

When it comes to customer favorites, the list is long and dependable. Cheeseburgers, Philly steak sandwiches, fish and grilled pork chops consistently draw repeat diners.

The hot bar rotates daily, featuring dishes like hamburger steak, meatloaf or pork chops paired with a changing lineup of vegetables. Desserts, like the rest of the menu, are homemade, another detail the restaurant keeps consistent, drawing people back for more.

For Lemski, comfort food

goes beyond what's on the plate. It's also about how the food is prepared and who it's prepared for. She makes a point to avoid boxed or canned items when possible, sourcing produce locally and preparing vegetables by hand. "I'll go to the local produce around here, buy bushels of peas and potatoes, and I'll sit here and shell them myself just to make sure it tastes good. That's something I enjoy doing."

That hands-on approach extends to how the restaurant serves its customers. Many patrons are elderly, and accommodations are made without hesitation, whether that means walking food out to cars for those with mobility issues or making sure hot meals »



are available in the evenings for residents who can't cook for themselves. "That was the reason why I started the hot bar at night," Lemski said. "So they could have hot vegetables and stuff."

The restaurant offers dine-in, takeout and occasional catering, with curbside service often tailored to regulars who simply call ahead.

Running The Chubby Crow as a family operation shapes the atmosphere both behind the scenes and out front, Lemski said. "We treat the customers like they're family. And being a family unit working here, we get to spend more time together. It's close quarters sometimes, but it all works out."

Menu planning is guided as much by practicality as tradition. Increasing meat prices

often influence what appears on the hot bar each week, with flexibility built in to keep offerings fresh and affordable.

Some staples, however, are nonnegotiable, like the ribeye steaks. As Lemski says, "Nobody wants to do without that."

Lemski's focus is on listening to the community and growing thoughtfully. A salad bar is next on her list, an addition requested by regulars and one she hopes to introduce in the near future.

Above all, Lemski hopes guests feel welcomed when they walk through the door and satisfied when they leave.

The Chubby Crow is located at 11543 U.S. Highway 278 W, Cullman, AL 35057. Find it online at Facebook/The Chubby Crow.



*The rainbow crow mural at The Chubby Crow*

ANABELLE HOWZE/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE



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## - BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT -

# Fairytale Cottage

**Chasady Woods**

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**S**hannon Berse opened her thrift boutique in spring 2025. She chose the name Fairytale Cottage, she explained, because everyone deserves a fairytale. She has kept the name over the years when she has sold merchandise, provided charity and also had it as the name of her previous store.

"It fell together," Berse said. "We had a building on this street before and when this one opened up we were contacted and it just fell into place."

She said having the opportunity to open up shop again has been "awesome." "It is definitely a God thing. I get confirmation from God daily on what is going on. Someone will ask for something, then it comes through the door and I give it to them. That has happened here several times where they are standing here asking - then someone shows up to donate and it will be right there."

Berse is very diligent when it comes to helping the community. She volunteers often with The Link of Cullman County, Curt's Closet, Victoria's Hope and Home Street Home.

"We all communicate back and forth. If someone, for example, is outside their age limit or they are too booked for them to be able to come in, they will send them to me," she said of the collaboration among local nonprofits.

"We make sure I have whatever is needed with the donations I've gotten to get them situated first and if I do they come in. Everyone that



**Fairytale Cottage has many treasures to hunt and sort through, ranging from clothing, books, home decorations, jewelry and more.**

I work with puts back into the community and all of my proceeds go into the community as well."

Berse has helped individuals buy pet food, pay for medication and even keeps a small pantry for those who need it.

"We even have a box truck now to pick up donations," she said. "We've been very blessed and we are growing tremendously."

Fairytale Cottage Thrift

Boutique is not only a great way to give back to the community, it is also an intriguing place to shop. Berse said she aims to ensure there is a warm, uplifting and magical atmosphere when you enter her shop. The store has many treasures to hunt and sort through, ranging from clothing, books, home decorations, jewelry and more. It even offers custom framing at reasonable prices.

Fairytale Cottage is located

at 320 First Ave. SE in Cullman. It's open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Berse said she will likely open the shop on Mondays as well. Any updates will be posted on her Facebook page, along with pictures of recent donations.

For more information or questions about donations, message Fairytale Cottage on its Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/FairytaleCottage2](https://www.facebook.com/FairytaleCottage2).



## - VETERAN-OWNED BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT -

# Kreative Engraving and Design

**Chasady Woods**

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**K**reative Engraving and Design was officially launched by Scott and Brandie Thrasher in August 2013. At the time they were stationed in Fort Carson, Colorado. Though Brandie Thrasher, a Cullman native, started her crafting journey while her husband was stationed in Germany.

"He was stationed in Germany in 2010 so I worked at the arts and craft center at the base." She explained. "I would help make awards and participate in other art opportunities. During my off hours I got permission to make personal items."

The two moved to Colorado from Germany in 2012, and within the next year they made the decision to buy tools to start engraving.

"Around that time I mainly made personalized name signs, door signs and cutting boards," said Thrasher.

She explained that being in Germany inspired her best seller: customized cedar blocks. She uses the blocks for games like Yahtzee or wedding gifts, memorial blocks and dice. A popular selection is their Keepsake Baby Block. The blocks themselves are made by the Thrashers in their home in Vinemont from fresh cedar wood.

Scott Thrasher is originally from New York. He joined the Army at 29 and served for 22 years before retiring in February 2023 at age 50.

"He is a Bronze Star recipient and retired from the Army as first sergeant,"



**Brandie and Scott Thrasher**

CHASADY WOODS/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE



CHASADY WOODS/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**Car charms/ ornaments made by Kreative Engraving and Design**

Thrasher added.

The family moved back to Cullman in July 2018 and have, since Scott Thrasher's retirement, devoted

themselves to Kreative Engraving and Design full time.

Kreative Engraving and Design will have a booth at



CHASADY WOODS/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**Yahtzee dice made by Kreative Engraving and Design**

the Alabama Strawberry Festival this April. For more events or design pricing, keep an eye on [www.facebook.com/KEngvDesign](http://www.facebook.com/KEngvDesign).



- LOCAL HEROES -

# Jason Spears, AKA 'Papa Spears'



**Jason Spears**

COURTESY THE SPEARS FAMILY





SPEARS FAMILY

**Left to right are Jason, Jared, Charlene and Jayden Spears.**

### Chasady Woods

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Local National Guardsman Jason Spears has served in the military for 36 years and counting. He began his journey at 17. Right out of high school, he said, he was met with an ultimatum by his father.

"It was either go to college or join," Spears stated. "So I joined."

He started out in the Navy in 1990. During his time in the Navy, Spears deployed to Japan in 1991 for Operation Desert Storm. In 1994, he joined the National Guard.

In 1995 he met his future wife, Charlene Spears, and they married in January 1995. Jason and Charlene Spears have been married for 30 years and have

two children, Jared and Jayden Spears.

Since having his family, Spears said, he has deployed twice. Once was to Houston, Texas for a year and then to Afghanistan for a year as well.

"The hardest part is leaving the family. It takes a few months to get used to being homesick," Spears said.

When asked what the most rewarding part of his service has been, he shared, "The camaraderie. They're a second family. Serving with your friends and being able to teach the younger generation."

Spears also taught land navigation at Officer Candidate School in Fort McClellan from 2009 to 2024.

Among his many titles, he said, "Father" is most important.

His daughter Jayden Spears

said, "My dad is unlike any man I have ever met before. He is the most funny, yet cut-and-dried person you will ever come in contact with.

"He truly cares with his whole heart and soul about the people in his life, and goes above and beyond just to make them feel seen, heard and loved. Thanks to that man I never had to grow up wondering if I was enough for my parents as he alone displayed so much pride in his two kids."

She continued, "He taught me and my brother how to be the people we are today. I don't think there's a single person who's met Jason that doesn't have a funny story to tell, or won't immediately divulge into what a great, hardworking man he is. Jason Spears is the definition of a hardworking, loving, caring family man. I'm so lucky

to have him as my dad."

His son Jared Spears shared, "Jason Spears is more than a decorated soldier. Jason Spears is more than a veteran. He's a lot more than Chief Warrant Officer 4 Jason Spears. He's my hero; he's my dad. Most kids my age grew up with Jeter, Kobe or Tom Brady, but I grew up with the good ole boy from Jasper, Alabama who decided to serve his country for 35 years. My dad is not only an American hero, but he's still my hero."

His nickname "Papa Spears" doesn't go unnoticed, either. He doesn't hesitate to take on the role of Papa Bear, but his cubs also know no limits. Any and all of their friends are welcomed into his home with a smile. If anyone were ever in need of sanctuary, Mama and Papa Spears are always there for you with open arms.



# *Hidden Gems:* **Larkwood Falls**

– Chasady Woods | [chasady@cullmantribune.com](mailto:chasady@cullmantribune.com) –

**L**arkwood Falls, located in Cullman, Alabama, is a result of Lake Catoma's overflow. In recent years it was added to the North Alabama Waterfall Trail. It is a natural attraction in a residential subdivision on Larkwood Drive Northeast. The water plunges down the concrete spillway off a 75 foot drop, showcasing nature's scenic force.

It's a great place to visit. Tourists and residents often stop by for photos, a short rest, relaxation, to simply take in the view and possibly hike. Though one of the best features of Larkwood Falls is that not a lot of hiking is required. It's easily viewed from the roadside and if you want a closer look there's a grassy embankment before you trek the rocks leading up to the falls.

It's recommended for the best viewing to visit during the wet season (winter and spring). The day after a nice rain will reveal the waterfall at its strongest and most photogenic. However, be mindful of water levels and potential hazards. You can hike closer to the falls, but ensure a safe distance depending on its condition.

*Pictured: (main) Gabby Schwaiger at Larkwood Falls; (bottom) Colorful rocks at the bottom of the falls*





– LOCAL HEROES –

# Former Mayor Max Townson

Anabelle Howze | [anabelle@cullmantribune.com](mailto:anabelle@cullmantribune.com)

**F**or former Cullman Mayor Max A. Townson, public service was never about politics, but about people.

"I've always been community-minded," Townson said, reflecting on the path that led him to city hall in 2008.

After decades in pharmaceutical sales and years of service with civic and church organizations, friends encouraged him to run, precisely because he was not a career politician. "They told me that's why I'd be a good mayor," he said. "They said, 'You're a salesman. Go sell Cullman.'"

Townson was elected mayor that year with a clear goal: to make Cullman the best place to live, work, play and worship, while ensuring City employees were treated fairly and local government worked cooperatively with the County. "What's good for the city is good for the county, and what's good for the county is good for the city," he said.

Townson's term was defined by one of the most challenging moments in Cullman's history: the devastating EF4 tornado that struck the city on April 27, 2011. In its aftermath, rebuilding became his top priority. "That storm didn't just damage buildings, it woke Cullman up," Townson said. Under his administration, the City established grants to help downtown business owners rebuild and restore damaged properties. The recovery effort also sparked renewed investment and long-term growth.

One of the most visible successes was the revitalization of the Cullman Shopping Center, which had been struggling before the tornado. Through collaboration

between the city council and private developers, the center was transformed into a major retail hub, now home to national retailers and restaurants. "That project has brought in jobs and tax revenue," Townson said. "It's something I'm very proud of."

Among Townson's most lasting accomplishments is the approval and construction of the Duck River Dam, a project that secured Cullman's water supply for generations. Before the dam, the city relied on a single water source that at times dropped to dangerously low levels. The Duck River Dam created a second, stable supply capable of serving both the city and county for the next 100 years. Townson said the project was critical and would not only impact the present, but also the future of Cullman. The effort required coordination among the city council, Cullman Power Board, engineers and state agencies, and Townson said teamwork was essential to completing the project on time and within budget.

Throughout his time in office, Townson emphasized transparency and public engagement. He regularly met with other mayors across Cullman County, worked closely with economic development leaders and kept residents informed through local media and public forums. "We tried to tell people what was going on. Even when we couldn't share everything, we wanted them to know we were working for them."

After leaving office, Townson intentionally stepped back, believing leadership should be handed fully to those elected to follow.



MAX TOWNSON

**Max and Kay Townson**

Retirement has allowed him to focus on family, church and health. He and his wife Kay spend time with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, attend community events and stay active at the gym.

A Cullman native and graduate of Cullman High School's Class of 1962, Townson said watching the city continue to grow has been deeply rewarding. Since the tornado, Cullman has seen steady expansion in infrastructure, industry and transportation, including airport growth and highway improvements. "I'm proud to say I'm a Cullmanite," he said.

For young people who

hope to make a difference in the Cullman community, Townson's advice is to look around, listen and care deeply about your community. "Cullman doesn't need to become a metropolitan city, but it does need opportunity." He pointed to strong schools, health care, parks and recreation as key reasons Cullman remains a desirable place to raise a family and a place worth investing in. "If we keep creating jobs and improving the quality of life, Cullman will always be the best place to live and raise a family. It was an honor for me and my family to serve Cullman as mayor from 2008 to 2016. Thank you."



## - HIDDEN GEMS -

# Demonstration Garden

**Chasady Woods**

chasady@cullmantribune.com

As we enter spring and venture outdoors looking to escape into nature, don't overlook the Demonstration Garden. The perfect spot for an afternoon stroll, the garden is tucked away downtown by the Hubert Richter Chapel (the "Tiny Church") and the historic Weiss Cottage.

The garden represents a variety of gardening techniques that provide great inspiration for visitors. It was started in spring 2009 by the Cullman County Master Gardeners Association, aiming to inspire current and aspiring gardeners. A true representation of the many wonders that can blossom from togetherness, it's fitting that it's in the heart of Cullman.

The Demonstration Garden has a beautiful array of beds that showcase craftsmanship and meticulous work. During the spring months each flower blooms to reveal the careful artistry. The front entrance showcases an arch with stone pillars topped with a curved branch, setting up the enchanted atmosphere. As you follow the winding paths you'll see the most vibrant flowers blooming in stone-lined beds.

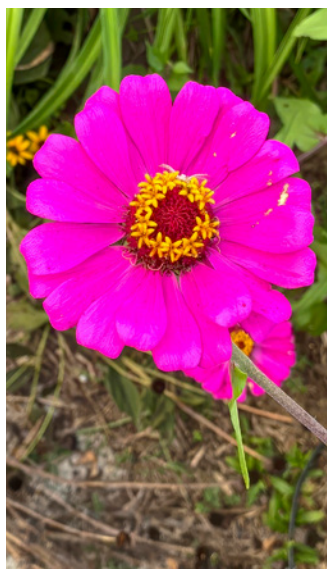
If you're ever in Cullman we suggest you visit the Demonstration Garden - whether you have a green thumb or would just like to admire others who do. Gardening enthusiast or not, who doesn't love a relaxing view!

Find out more at [www.cullman-master-gardeners.org/gallery](http://www.cullman-master-gardeners.org/gallery).



CHASADY WOODS/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

**The Demonstration Garden is located near the 600 block of First Avenue Southeast in Cullman.**



GABBY SCHWAIGER

**Flowers in the Demonstration Garden**



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# Spring gardening tips with Sherry Burns

**Chasady Woods**  
chasady@cullmantribune.com

## Oneonta's Sherry Burns loves gardening.

**I** I grew up helping my parents work in the garden, and we lived in a farm community also," she said. "One of my uncles had a dairy farm and the other raised pigs. So we gardened every year and that was just a part of life."

Burns explained that though she had the experience from her younger years, she decided to try it for herself. "We decided that we would like to know where our food comes from."

For the past seven years, she and her husband have been tending to their garden and canning their goods quite successfully. Of course, the success didn't come without its share of hardship.

"We just had to learn by trial and error," Burns stated. "Every year we would look at different things and tell ourselves it would be better to do it this way next year. Then so on."

She suggests direct seeding all of plants. "We direct seed all of our plants except for our eggplants. We plant those seedlings."

When asked what plant is the easiest to grow Burns said squash and okra. She has noticed the best luck

with planting them the weekend after Easter. They usually plant about six of each kind.

"Some just won't take so it's best to have more, but we usually have five good ones of the six we plant," she said.

"The other thing that's easy to plant if you want quick yield is radishes. You plant those and in three weeks you're ready to pull up radishes. Then you plant more and in three more weeks you'll be ready to pull 'em again."

The most difficult plants to grow, in her opinion, are eggplant and cabbage.

"We've had the worst time with cabbage simply because of trying to keep the bugs from eating it," Burns said.

"We have had some success with neem oil, but the main thing with cabbage is the bugs. Eggplant is finicky because the weather and soil and everything has to be just right."

When it comes to processing the soil and getting ready for planting, Burns said they till the area a month in advance.

"We till the ground up real good and fine and then let it sit for a month. Then right before we plant we mix a little bit of fertilizer in it." She advised to keep egg shells, coffee grounds and banana peels for fertilizer. They collect the items in a compost bucket, and »



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**Sherry Burns**

**Gary Burns on a tractor**  
»



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CONTRIBUTED

**White eggplant**



CONTRIBUTED

**Basil**





CONTRIBUTED

***Pie pans scare deer and birds.***

when it's nearly full, mix it in the garden soil.

Burns and her husband also place irrigation lines in their garden.

They add a layer of plastic on top of the rows to form a type of greenhouse effect, which aids the plants' growth. The plastic can also help protect plants during harsh weather conditions.

"The plastic essentially prevents the water from evaporating too quickly and it really helps with weeds," she added.

She said it's easy to grow tomatoes and peppers in buckets. "If you drill holes in the bucket and add potting soil they'll grow really easily."

When it comes to herbs Burns suggested buying the tiny, plastic kids' swimming pools you see for sale outside stores every

summer. She places these on wooden pallets, drills holes in the bottoms and adds potting soil.

The pallet allows the water to properly drain. Burns said she thrifts window screens and warps them to fit over the top of the pool. This protects her basil, parsley and thyme from any bugs and pests.

"I plant those at the same time as the rest of the garden," she added.

"If you put these in a garage or something with a grow light or heat lamp you can keep these going year-round!"

Gardening can be intimidating when you don't know where to start! Hopefully these tips help you with your home-grown journey.

Said Burns, "If I can do it in a wheelchair, you can do it with two legs!"

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# RECIPE REVIVAL

## Kay Gamble Neel's Lemon Pie

Anabelle Howze

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A recipe card is more than just a worn, thin piece of paper; it can be a record of family gatherings, birthdays and holidays stretching back nearly a century.

Longtime Cullman resident Kay Gamble Neel shares her family's lemon pie recipe, one she returns to again and again. Originally passed down from her mother, and dating to around 1930, the pie has become Neel's signature dessert at all family gatherings, holidays and celebrations. When the event calls for it, she often makes two, one to share and another for the guest of honor to take home.

Neel says pie has always been her favorite dessert to make, and this recipe remains one of the easiest and most dependable. While modern cooks now have access to

store-bought crusts and ready-made toppings, her mother never did. Though ready-made ingredients are used, the heart of the pie remains unchanged and still tastes just as delicious. The filling relies on a simple chemical reaction: the acidity of lemon juice naturally thickens egg yolks and sweetened condensed milk, eliminating the need for baking.

Some believe similar lemon pies may have served as early versions of what later became known as key lime or magic lemon pies, but for Neel, the recipe's value lies less in its origin and more in its consistency. It is the pie she always brings, the one family members look forward to and the one tied most closely to precious memories throughout the years.

### Kay Gamble Neel's Lemon Pie

#### Ingredients

- 1 baked 8-inch pie shell



KAY GAMBLE NEEL

### Kay Gamble Neel's Lemon Pie

(graham cracker crust preferred)

- 1 can sweetened condensed milk
- 1/2 cup lemon juice
- 2 egg yolks

#### Directions

1. In a medium-sized bowl, combine the sweetened condensed milk and egg yolks.

2. Slowly add the lemon juice, whipping until the mixture

thickens. The acidity of the lemon juice curdles the egg yolks, creating a smooth, creamy filling.

3. Pour the mixture into the prepared crust and refrigerate until set.

#### Topping

Neel prefers topping the pie with Cool Whip and finishing it with a light sprinkle of grated lemon rind.

## REMEMBERING

### 'Her sweet potato casserole was basically a hug'

Chasady Woods

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Sweet potato casserole is a sweet walk down memory lane for the Hawkins family.

"I can never resist the candy pecan topping with the warm softness underneath. Though what made it so special was the person that made it, Memaw Betty Hawkins," her granddaughter, Emily Hawkins McMunn, said. "Her sweet potato casserole was basically a hug in food format."

She went on, "We all looked forward to sweet potato casserole for Thanksgiving and

Christmas, but above all we looked forward to sitting with our Memaw in the kitchen while she told us how to make it."

Betty Carolyn Hawkins passed Dec. 12, 2024, at the age of 90. Though she is no longer living, she remains in the memory of her family. Her kindness and devotion to those around her are not forgotten. She will live on through them and will warm their hearts through the many things she left behind for them, including her casserole.

"The love, laughter and devotional care that took place in that kitchen could never be

matched with any other event. There is no one in this world, in my family's opinion, like Betty Hawkins. She was warmer and sweeter than any sweet potato casserole," McMunn said.

The best recipes aren't defined by ingredients, but how they're made. The home created around the recipe defines the dish. During the holiday season we often embrace family tradition. It's customary to carry down recipes from our loved ones. We learn from those still with us as they craft new recipes, but we also learn from what has been passed down to them. These recipes, while



CONTRIBUTED

### Betty Hawkins in 1951

tasty additions to family gatherings, are also a mosaic of those who've passed - those we've loved and will continue to remember.



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# Community Matters Q & A:

## Talking youth ministry with Tommy Hutchins

### Gauge Day

gauge@cullmantribune.com

**W**ith Community Matters, the goal has always been to offer readers a closer look at the people who pour into the Cullman community each day. Some serve in visible roles, while others work quietly behind the scenes to make a lasting impact. In this edition, Community Matters begins a new Q&A-style feature, sitting down with a local youth pastor to better understand the heart, challenges and calling behind youth ministry. Through a series of questions, readers are invited into the thoughts and experiences of someone who walks closely with local students during some of the most formative years of their lives.

From ministry beginnings to the challenges facing the next generation today, this conversation offers an honest look at what it means to lead, mentor and serve young people in our community.

Questions with Tommy Hutchins, youth pastor at Smith Lake Baptist in Crane Hill

**For readers who may not know you, can you share a little about who you are and a little bit about your youth ministry?**

My wife, Jamie Hutchins, and I have been fortunate to be youth directors for close to 18 years now at Smith Lake Baptist Church in Crane Hill.



**Tommy Hutchins (back right) and Jamie Hutchins (front middle) with their Smith Lake Baptist Youth Group at FUGE Camps 2025**

It is a relatively small church, so we wear multiple hats. I'm also the music minister and my wife is the Vacation Bible School director. We are not paid staff, and we didn't go to school for this, but God called us to do it anyway and fully

equipped us along the way.

Jamie is a sales representative for a large mattress company, and I am a senior manager in the IT department of a large insurance company. We have been fortunate enough to begin with our employers for

a long time, which allows us the vacation time needed to take youth trips. After 18 years, it feels odd now that a lot of our former "youth" kids now have kids of their own, so we have considered it an early start with "grandchildren." »



**What originally drew you to working with students, and what keeps you invested in youth ministry today?**

Jamie and I met in a youth group when we were teenagers and wanted the youth at our church to have something similar. We completely underestimated the journey we were in for, but what a blessing it has been.

**What is one word that best describes how you approach youth ministry, and why?**

Personal.

For a lot of reasons. Obviously, my goal is each student develops their own personal relationship with Jesus. I try to spend time with our students communicating outside of church to understand what is going on in their lives on a personal level. I want to check on them throughout the week, show up for their games, contests, etc. I want them to know that I am available if they want to talk with someone.

The “delivery” of some Wednesday night Bible studies may change to help provide more personal examples for those that are attending that night. Don’t get me wrong, the lessons will always be Biblical but using personal examples they can relate to helps them understand.

For example, I can’t use a basketball analogy if the students attending that night don’t play basketball.

My goal is always going to be that I am an open book with students and be personal with them. From the fact I call my car Bathsheba (Biblical reasons – looks good after a bath and can get me into trouble) to the fact that I sometimes struggle with life in general.

It is also about personal growth for me. My mother told me a long time ago that if you really want to learn something, try and teach it. If you want to be expert on something try and teach it to teenagers.

**What do you see as the biggest**



JAMIE HUTCHINS

**Tommy Hutchins in his natural environment, doing what any good youth pastor does: putting students in just enough awkward situations to get them laughing together.**

**challenges facing today's youth?**

Expectations! The “good” kids have so much pressure because everyone expects them to be good while the world is waiting to magnify any mistakes they make. The kids who “struggle” are just expected to struggle. Society provides excuses for the struggles, and the kids don’t expect anything different from themselves. Social media highlights those expectations 24 hours per day. Youth today don’t seem to realize that expectations and reality are two different things.

**How do you create an environment where students feel safe, valued and heard?**

I do everything I can to make sure they know they can trust me. That also means being honest with them. I’m never going to shy away with struggles I have had and continue to have. Show up when I say I’m going to show up. Listen

to them and always reassure them that I love them. This is what I tell my students often:

- I’m not going to run and tell your parents/friends/anyone anything you tell me. I want you to be able to trust me.
- If it is something that needs a female perspective, I make sure Jamie is in the conversation and I may even just let them two of them talk.
- However, if it is serious enough that I do think a parent should know about it, I would go with them when they talk to their parents about it.

**What role does your faith in Jesus play in helping young people navigate the world today?**

My prayer is that young people develop their own faith through the personal relationship they have with God. My faith is not going to help them. Now don’t

get me wrong, I will do everything I can to tell them and show them how my faith in God has helped me and my family, but it is not something I can just give them.

**Is there a moment or experience in your ministry that reminded you why this work matters?**

I have lost count of how many blessings God has given me because I was involved in youth ministry. I will share a personal example. The story, however, does need some background:

- The youth were involved in a challenge/game where members of the youth group were trying to memorize Bible verses to get extra points to win a game.
- The weather was beautiful one night so randomly we decided to meet outside on the picnic tables instead of inside our youth building. »



▪ This was the first Wednesday night back after one of our student's father had passed unexpectedly and I was praying that God would provide me with the right words to say.

We started going around to all the youth as they starting sharing Bible verses to get points for the challenge. As usual, they will try to find the shortest verses to make it easier.

We got to our last person, and they were trying to memorize verses from the book of Psalm. The student quoted Psalm 121:2 "My help comes from the Lord, which made heaven and earth."

I don't remember the lesson I had planned for that night, but I do remember the lesson God provided. We spent that night talking about our struggles, hurts, problems, etc.

and more importantly God reminded us that our help comes from the One who made everything. Looking up at the stars that night realizing how God had planned everything for us to have this moment is something I can't describe with words.

The verse became a rallying cry for our youth, and yes, we even put it on T-shirts. To this day if someone asked me my favorite verse, I'm going to answer Psalm 121:2 because of that night and will serve as a reminder that I always have help.

**If you had the opportunity to share the Gospel with a student that has never heard before, how would you do it? What would you say?**

Try to keep it simple as possible but would explain that the same God that created everything, created

them and wants to have a personal relationship with them not just on this earth but forever.

So much so that He conquered death for them. Right now, my youngest son is working on getting his first song released, and this question brings me back to the song he wrote.

The song title is "Paid My Fee" and the bridge to the song has a lot of what I would say: "I admit it, believe it, confess it; He's not done with me yet."

**What is one thing you wish parents or the community better understood about today's youth?**

They ask questions or probe "traditions" not because they are trying to be disrespectful, but it is a thirst that they truly want to understand. We can't build a generation without being willing to answer tough

questions.

What do you hope students carry with them long after they leave your youth ministry?

**There are some things I hope they remember.**

- It is about their personal relationship with God. It is not a decision anyone can make for them and is not something they get from being part of a group.

- That they are never too far from God.

- Help can come from the one who created everything (Psalm 121:2).

- That Jamie and I will always love them.

- God loves them even more.



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