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CITY OF CULLMAN

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LOCAL HERO

Susie Preiss is in it for the long haul



PHOTO: LAUREN ESTES / THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE



LAUREN ESTES / THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

The Busy Bee Cafe is located at 101 Fifth St. SE.



LAUREN ESTES / THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

Susie Preiss waits on customers at the Busy Bee Cafe.

BY LAUREN ESTES / lauren@cullmantribune.com

This October marked 37 years for Susie Preiss. That's how long she's been working at the Busy Bee Cafe in downtown Cullman.

The former upstate New York native followed a friend who was moving to Alabama, and on Sept. 1, 1988 met a guy on her move – Larry Preiss. She later married him.

"We were married for 32 years and have five children between the two of us," Preiss said. "He passed away, but we had a great life together."

Preiss said one day while driving home, she saw a "waitress wanted" sign in the window of Busy Bee Cafe.

"I went and applied for the job for the 9 a.m.-3 p.m. shift because I had to take the kids to school," she said. "On Monday, Oct. 12, 1989, I started working at the Busy Bee Cafe and have been here since. The hours have changed and times have changed, but all in all, the good food and good company are the same."

At different times she worked at the local sewing plant, Quincy's and even Denny's for a time, but nothing was home like Busy Bee.

"I feel that I do what I'm supposed to do and I like everything a certain way and it helps me be a good waitress and stay on top of everything," Preiss said. "One of the best parts of the job are the people I have met over the years and the memories I have made with them."

She said that on April 27, 2011, she left work because they had closed for severe weather, and she went to a nearby apartment complex to check in on her mom.

"I didn't know at the time, but I left about 30 minutes before the tornado hit Cullman," Preiss shared. "Just minutes before the tornado hit, I had gotten to the parking garage where my mom lived and it started hailing and I hurried and got mom and we got in the bathroom. And everyone remembers that day; April 27 changed Alabama and changed Cullman."

Preiss came to find that one of the oldest restaurants in Cullman and her home for two decades, the historic Busy Bee Café, was reduced to rubble.

"The tornado took our building, and for about a year, they worked and rebuilt it in the same place," Preiss said. "During that time, I worked at Denny's and did what I could, but it wasn't the same. A year later, they opened back up and I was so thankful. I missed my job and my people there. It's homey; there's nothing else like it."

Preiss has mostly maintained her same schedule for the better part of the last three and a half decades.

"I work five days a week, Tuesday-Saturday, and I am off every fourth Saturday," she said. "Every year, though for the Fourth of July, we are closed for the full week. I like to work; I'd rather be working. They make me take days off. I love the people here; they're generous. I mean, I've been here 37 years, I must like it."

The Busy Bee Cafe is located at 101 Fifth St. SE.

"When you choose your job or it chooses you, you need to enjoy it," Preiss said. "You better like it— especially if you plan on staying nearly four decades."

A TRIBUNE DAY OUT

Fall bliss

A pumpkin patch, a park stroll with a warm latte, a museum walk and a playlist to match

BY CHASADY WOODS / chasady@cullmantribune.com

As the leaves begin to transform into warm amber, fiery red and vibrant yellow hues it feels as though nature is taking a deep breath. We embrace the cooler weather, hastily bringing out warmer clothes that we will inevitably shed before lunch. It's a cycle we repeat each year because fall is the turning point of the season. It represents change and the art of letting go, just as spring symbolizes rebirth and new beginnings.

The days will become shorter and the sun will set earlier as time goes on. Though for the moment we are perfectly wedged between seasons. Not long ago you may have opened your front door to greet the Southern heat with a hiss. Not much later we'll do the same as the crisp, moist cold snaps at our noses. Pumpkins will be discarded after Thanksgiving and collections of snowflakes and holly will glimmer throughout windows along the city streets.

For this Tribune Day Out, I encourage all to gather with their loved ones and embrace change. Queue up the recommended songs of the "A Tribune Day Out playlist" and simply make memories. Take a stroll at a local park with a warm latte. Take in the fresh air and hold the memory of it in a special place in your heart.



CHASADY WOODS / THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

For your day out, I suggest a historical walk at the Cullman County Museum. One aspect of change is understanding the past. Visit www.cullmancountymuseum.com to see about upcoming events. When you've selected a date, plan to visit a pumpkin patch and sunflower field prior and enjoy a nice meal together.

This season comes and goes so quickly. It's a bittersweet bliss of pecan, pumpkin and praline delight. With each blink of an eye we grow closer to the withering of color scattered throughout branches. It's replaced with Christmas trees being lit and the end of yet another year. Remember to take it all in and be thankful, no matter what your holiday season brings!



CHASADY WOODS / THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

A TRIBUNE DAY OUT

Playlist

01	*Getting Married (Suite)*	SAM PHILLIPS
02	*Snow on the Bluff*	EVENING ELEPHANTS
03	*Closing Time*	SEMISONIC
04	*Harvest Moon*	NEIL YOUNG
05	*Sawteeth*	SPACEY JANE
06	*Young*	VACATIONS



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Simple ways to stay healthy this holiday season

BY LAUREN ESTES / lauren@cullmantribune.com

Anytime you are beginning a new workout regimen or program, always have clearance or consult with your doctor if you have any pre-existing cardiac or other health issues.

If you are trying to stay accountable during the holiday season with your health and wellness goals — you are like many who might need an extra push when it comes to nutrition choices, workout commitments and overall preparation.

Here are four ways to help you stay active during the holidays, which can be as easy as setting alarm reminders on your phone, writing out weekly goals or hiring someone like a trainer to hold you accountable.

1. Plan out your week's meals and workouts

I've always been told that the battle is won in the general's tent the night before. Preparation is always key in staying accountable and healthy during the busy seasons of life. Take time to lay out your clothing the night before a walk, run or workout. Download meal plan recipes or write down your food plan for the week. Set aside times to do these things so you are held accountable to follow through and there won't be an excuse to grab take-out or miss an exercise session. Write your goals down, set alarms and reminders. Do what you need to do to stay accountable.

2. Once your goals are planned out, take the time to meal prep each week

Meal prepping is key in preventing unnecessary eating out, grazing or making bad choices. If you take time to prep your meals for yourself and your family, you will always have something to fall back on instead of grabbing something fast. You can also look into healthy meal prep company options that offer home delivery or pick-up locations that cater toward helping you stay aligned with your nutritional goals. Downloading meal prep recipes and planning those with your family gets you a support system on board for the process.

3. Hire a personal trainer

One of the best ways to maintain accountability when your discipline is lacking is to hire someone to lead you and be your safety net to show up for workout sessions, classes or running clubs. A trainer will have workouts scheduled and planned, offer meal planning assistance and be that extra push, listening ear or support system to hold you accountable to your fitness and health goals even when life is fast moving.

4. Get the Big Five benefits daily (SSSNR)

What are the Big Five benefits? Sunshine, Steps, Sleep, Nutrition and Recovery.

Daily vitamin D, walking, adequate sleep, appropriate nutrition and recovery from exercises/events/stress all pair together to give you five solid health benefits. Managing them all will help in the process of building your healthy lifestyle and staying active.

Sunlight is the most natural form of vitamin D, which helps absorb calcium to build and maintain bone strength.

Getting your steps in daily (walking) is known to help with high blood pressure, diabetes, protecting against disease and strengthening muscles and bones.

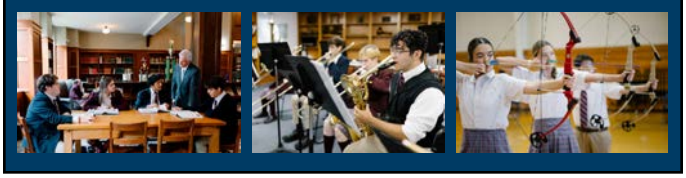
Sleep is essential for healthy brain function and maintaining your physical health.

Nutrition is vital in building stronger immune systems and lowering the risks of communicable diseases.

Lastly, **recovery time** and reducing stress allow the body to bounce back faster and be more present in daily tasks.

Combine all four and you are on the route to creating a healthy lifestyle. Doing these things daily and habitually are a sure way to hold you accountable for a healthy holiday season.

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Heather, Taylor, Lorelai, Rya and Elena Hollis

HEATHER HOLLIS

SMALL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

Hollis Family Sweet Dips

BY CHASADY WOODS / chasady@cullmantribune.com

SEASONAL FLAVORS

NOV. Pecan pie and pumpkin pie

DEC. Dark chocolate candy cane, gingerbread and snickerdoodle

Heather Hollis, owner and founder of Hollis Family Sweet Dips, started her business in May 2026 following the birth of her third daughter. "I've always dreamed of being a business owner and now that I have three girls, I wanted to show them that you can follow your dreams," Hollis stated. "My babies are my inspiration and my drive!"

After having their third child, Hollis explained, she had, "so much medical debt from having her and I didn't know what to do."

Not knowing where to turn, she decided to pray and ask for help and guidance.

"This is where God led me," she said. "I pretty much told God, 'If you give me a plan, I'll be obedient.' And that's what happened."

Her cake pops and other sweet treats can be found

at Festhalle Farmers Market and area festivals including the upcoming Cullman Christkindlmarkt.

One of her Oktoberfest flavors was "Bee Sting" or "Bienenstich." This is a sweet, German-inspired treat that features the creamy notes of white chocolate combined with crunchy almonds.

"These are just a few that I am really excited about! I try to put out 1–2 new flavors per week. But I also work on 1–2 new designs each week!" Hollis mused.

When asked about how she decides on what flavors and how she designs the "sweet dips," she said, "It's a balancing act between yummy flavors and gorgeous designs/details. I try to never be too far to one side because both are important to me!"

Hollis noted that the goal for her and Hollis Family Sweet Dips is to make customers happy with delicious treats.

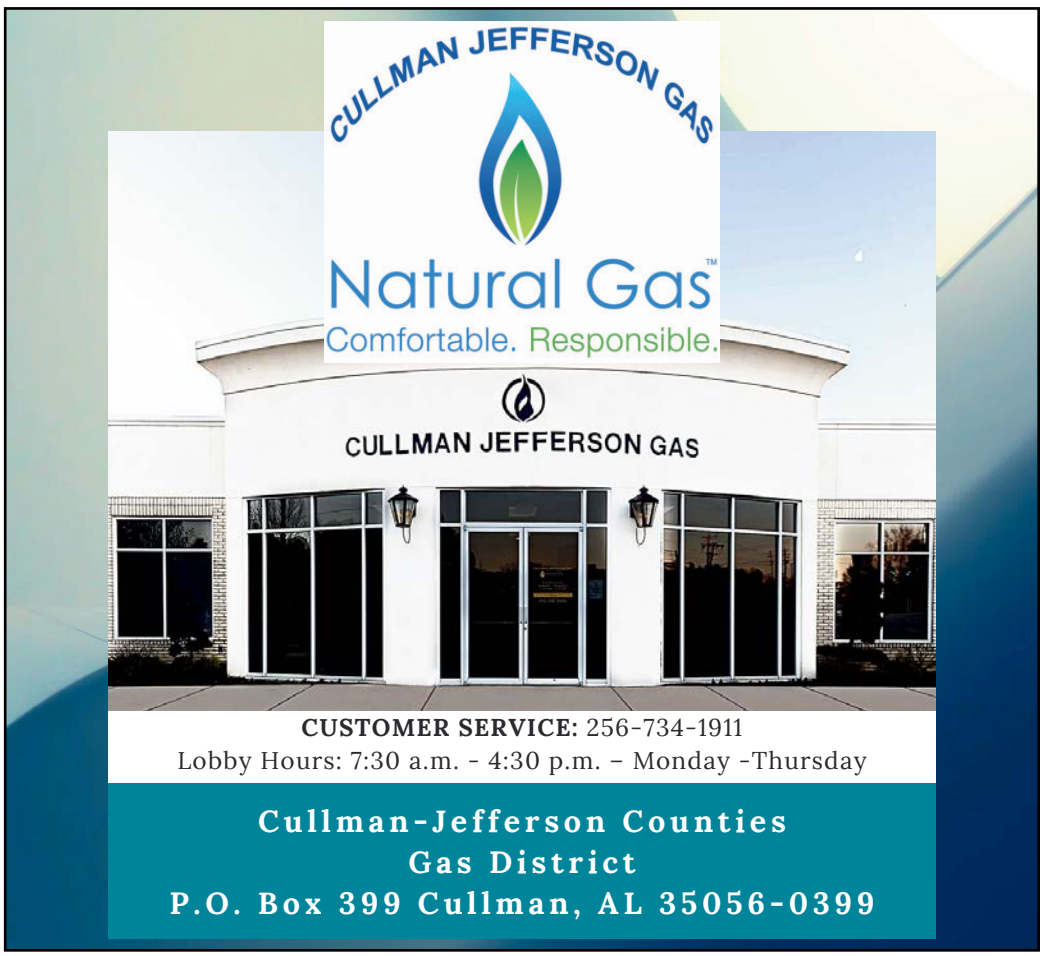
"It's exciting and scary getting new design orders I haven't tried, but I love it every time," she said. "It is so fun to challenge myself and see how I can tie in the customer's personality and make it truly unique to them."

Hollis can do sweet dips for any occasion. Find Hollis Family Sweet Dips online at www.facebook.com/HollisFamilySweetDipsLLC.



HOLLIS FAMILY SWEET DIPS

"Bee Sting" or "Bienenstich" cake pops



CREATIVE SPOTLIGHT

Wayne Cook takes center stage

The Cullman High theater director, honored as 2026 Troupe Director of the Year, on 40-plus shows and why Cullman needs the stage



WAYNE COOK

Wayne, Carter and Robin Cook

BY CHASADY WOODS / chasady@cullmantribune.com

Cullman High School Theatre Director Wayne Cook grew up with performing arts and from a very young age, he said, it created a passion for performing.

"I first sang and acted in a children's choir at church and followed that with voice lessons, dance lessons, acting opportunities through my high school and college years," Cook said.

During college he used his calling for theater and turned toward the church. He went on to serve as a youth pastor, associate pastor and pastor. During this time, he also produced large-scale productions.

"It was a huge blessing. I have always had a desire to use my gifts and talents to share a message or tell an important story. It is so rewarding!" he exclaimed.

He pursued numerous careers within ministry and business before moving back to Cullman in 2010.

Cook explained, "I moved back to Cullman after I had been gone about three years to open a small business. It was at this time that I really felt the need to develop a theater outlet in our community. I saw Cullman growing and expanding and saw an investment in the

arts as an important part of our growth.

"The arts represent the soul of a community. People need artistic outlets to share feelings, emotions and to tell stories that need to be told. It was at this time that I began a campaign to restart a community theater."

Cook was given the opportunity to teach at Cullman High School. He started in 2014 as the new theater teacher. He said, "It was something I could not pass up."

He recounted his past experience with theater leading up to his position at Cullman High School, saying, "I have always worked well with young people and this was the perfect opportunity for me to share my passions and invest in a younger generation. It was a perfect match for me. I love what I do. No one would do this job if they did not love it. Cullman has so much talent and energy, I began to build a program that we are very proud of. We have been able to do so many things for the arts. Theater is truly alive and well in our school and also in our community!"

After beginning his teaching position at Cullman High School, Cook began to revive Cullman Community Theatre.

Soon after, the group staged its first production of "The Music Man."

"Now, between Cullman High and CCT I have been involved in 40-plus productions in the city of Cullman. I am in my 13th year at CHS and we have been doing community theater for 10 years. I directed many of the first musical productions of CCT including 'The Music Man,' 'Oklahoma,' 'Hello Dolly,' 'Seven Brides for Seven Brothers' and 'The Sound of Music,'" Cook noted.

He said as Cullman Community Theatre has grown and acquired more directors, he has been able to take on roles within the productions.

He recently played Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof" and this year took on the role as Alfred P. Doolittle in "My Fair Lady."

He also served as the original president of the Cullman Community Theatre Committee and continues to serve on the board by coordinating a collaboration between Cullman High School Theatre and the Cullman Community Theatre. He currently serves as treasurer for the



CULLMAN COMMUNITY THEATRE

Stepping out of the director's seat, Cullman Community Theatre's Wayne Cook rehearses his stage role as Tevye the milkman in 2025.

Alabama Thespians.

Cook was named 2026 Troupe Director of the Year by the Alabama Educational Theatre Association (Alabama Thespians).

"Thespians is an international organization of Educational Theatre for High School Students that spans the entire nation and many parts of the world. We serve the theater educators in Alabama with an annual Theatre Festival, Advocacy for Arts Education and Teacher Education. The award I received is through this organization that honors one director in the state of Alabama each year," he explained.

Cook went on, "It is humbling to be honored by my peers. These are the people who do what you do and understand the joys and challenges of high school theater. There are so many fantastic theater instructors and directors. I am just honored to be mentioned among them. I will truly cherish the Alabama Thespian Troupe Leader of the Year for 2026 as a »wonderful honor."

He has also received numerous other awards and accolades throughout the years, such as Cullman High School Teacher of the Year in 2019-2020 and the Distinguished Alumni Award 2025 from the Cullman City Schools Foundation.

When asked if he had a favorite performance throughout his time at Cullman High and the CCT, Cook responded, "It is hard for me to say what my favorite production has been. They all carry such wonderful memories on their own. I think the thing that I love is seeing students develop and grow through the experiences. We have seen so much through the years."

He gave credit to Cullman High School's choral and music director, saying, "I have to give a shout out to my partner in directing – Mrs. Sarah Jane Skinner. We have worked together at CHS for many years and we make a great team. I really don't think I could have done so much of what we have done without her help!"

Many students who partake in the »

school's award-winning theater program only have four years to indulge in the arts before moving on to build their own careers, though Cook remembers those who have come and gone throughout all forms of theater production. "We have seen many of our students go on to manage professional careers in theater. Some are becoming teachers, some are performing with semi-professional theater groups and some are in NYC and joining the cast of touring shows. We also have a large number of students who are working in the tech fields. It is so gratifying when you see students take your passion and make it their passion."

When asked about the most rewarding part of his job Cook replied, "That would be the people. Being able to influence and impact lives is why I do what I do. It just so happens to be a great place to shape lives. It's also a fun place to do it. Theater is fun, but it is also important. We are a society that needs to have outlets for entertainment and places that we can tell stories. Theater is the foundation for that art form and a way to share an important message that needs to be told in a way that is less threatening and more easily accepted. There is so much that needs to be said and theater can say it when other outlets might have trouble."







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SMALL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

‘We are here for everyone’: The Bullpen comes to life

BY GAUGE DAY
gauge@cullmantribune.com

Sometimes, all it takes is one conversation to get the ball rolling.

Literally.

Tamara Gourley, owner of The Bullpen, isn't one to shy away from a challenge. An International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) Pro League professional bodybuilder, Gourley is also a local business owner with several businesses serving the Cullman community. From her painting company to The Garage, a successful local gym she opened and operates, Tamara has never been afraid to pursue a new opportunity.

And as it turns out, all it took was a little inspiration from a close friend to get her next venture started.

That venture would become The Bullpen, a new indoor baseball and softball training facility in Cullman.

Her friend Ashley, who worked in local parks and recreation, frequently heard from families looking for places where their children could practice baseball and softball. The two often discussed the limited options available locally, from accessible training spaces to instructors offering lessons.

Then, one day, Ashley asked a question that would eventually lead to The Bullpen.

“She looked at me and just said, ‘I don't know why you



THE BULLPEN

Tamara Gourley, owner of The Bullpen, isn't one to shy away from a challenge.

THE BULLPEN AT A GLANCE

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THE BULLPEN

Tamara Gourley

just don't open something for us,'" Tamara recalled. "So, the seed was planted."

What started as a suggestion soon became a challenge Tamara couldn't ignore.

Having been part of the Cullman community for years, Tamara knew just how much baseball and softball meant to local families. From recreational leagues to travel ball, athletes of all ages spend countless hours practicing, competing and working to improve their skills year-round.

But as she began looking into the need Ashley had brought to her attention, Tamara realized something was missing.

"The more I looked into the thought, the more I realized that she was right," she said. "There wasn't anywhere that just anyone could go. A few home cages and a few that would let select people use their personal stuff."

For a community so heavily invested in baseball and softball, Tamara found the lack of accessible training space surprising.

"I realized quickly that for Cullman to be such a huge sports town, we just didn't have that one space," she said.

And for Tamara, recognizing the need was the easy part. It was there, and it was obvious.

Figuring out how to meet it was another story. »





"The biggest challenge once I decided 'why not' was actually 'where?'" she said. "And convincing my inner circle that I had indeed not lost my mind."

"And there just isn't a plethora of places to rent that would work," she shared. "I would prefer to build and own, but that was an entirely different set of challenges, and I needed to see if the community would back me and support us before I built a mega complex."

And so, The Bullpen began taking shape.

From the get-go, Tamara's vision was never as simple as finding a building and filling it with batting cages.

Having already gained experience operating The Garage, she knew the atmosphere inside a training facility would be just as important as the equipment it offered.

"One of the most important things that I had to consider when putting everything together was a relaxed, safe environment where people felt safe to relax, have fun and learn without judgment and fear," she explained. "A place for learning should feel worry-free so that you can concentrate on the task at hand, learning and improving on yourself."

And of course, creating that kind of environment also meant finding the right people to help athletes develop.

Tamara turned to fellow Cullman County native Brodee Bartlett, a Cold Springs High School graduate and former University of Alabama in Huntsville baseball player, for help identifying potential instructors.

"When figuring out staffing, I leaned a lot on Brodee Bartlett, who has been very successful in his baseball and baseball instructing career," Tamara explained. "I got a list of names from him and local referees to sift through to find a list of people I trusted to care and take pride in what they do."

"I think that I succeeded in finding the right ones."

Today, The Bullpen has approximately a dozen baseball and softball instructors, including former Division I athletes and state champions, along with coaches specializing in strength and conditioning and speed and agility.

"I'm very proud of our crew," she shared. "We have a group that isn't in it for the fame or money but to genuinely pour into their athletes to see them hit their full potential."

While much of The Bullpen's work centers on helping athletes develop their skills, Tamara has been intentional about making sure the facility isn't viewed as a place reserved only for competitive and elite players.

"I have stressed that The Bullpen is for all ages," she said. "I think it's so important because we hear people get in ruts or teens complaining about nothing to do here. Well, this is one more thing everyone can do. Just because we offer lessons doesn't mean that we are just for elementary, middle or high-school age kids."

"We are here for everyone."

In fact, she hopes people who haven't picked up a bat in years, or perhaps have never picked one up at all, will find a reason to walk through the doors and give it a try.

It's something Tamara has experienced firsthand.

"I'm 44 and just bought my first bat since I opened. I love it!" she shared. "I never played in school and never thought I would enjoy some of the Sunday afternoons I have had in the cages throwing balls with Adam, but I truly have. I want everyone to be able to come experience that again or for the first time."

And there it was. Those afternoons would begin to reflect the greater mission of The Bullpen for Tamara; a mission focused on giving families and young people another option for spending time together in Cullman.

That mission is reflected in the facility's offerings, which include individual and team cage rentals, private instruction, group classes and athletic training programs, along with opportunities to simply enjoy some time in the batting cages.

And so far, Tamara said the response has been encouraging.

"When talking about The Bullpen, I hear a lot of 'we really needed a place like this,'" she said. "Everyone seems to really be enjoying the space so far."

Still, success for Tamara won't be measured solely by how many athletes use the facility or how much their performance improves.

Much like her approach at The Garage, Gourley wants to invest in the people who walk through her doors, helping them build confidence, develop healthy habits and recognize what they're capable of accomplishing.

"I hope that when athletes walk through the doors that they become better hitters, catchers, pitchers, football players etc. but I also want them to take away **Continued on page 20**



Berry, Berry, Little & Chaney

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the knowledge of diet and strength training, the value of stretching, the knowledge that they can do whatever they put their minds to," she shared. "I want them to know that they have a support team to fall back on if they need to and I truly hope that they walk away not just better athletes but better people with better mindsets at the end of it all."

It's a goal that goes back to the kind of environment she wanted to create from the beginning, and one reflected in who Tamara Gourley is and how she invests in her people.

Looking ahead, she hopes The Bullpen will continue growing alongside the community it was created to serve.

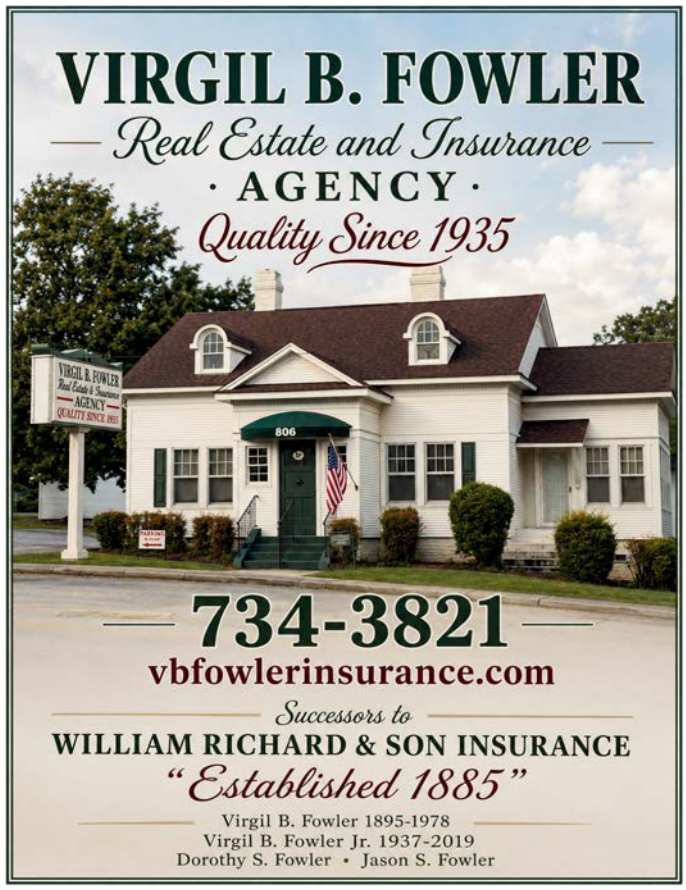
"I truly hope that we continue to gain the support of our community and one day we are a staple of such," she said. "I hope that in ten years we are still here, bigger than I ever imagined and a name synonymous with building phenomenal athletes as well as a place to go and take the family for something fun."

The Bullpen aims to serve as a place where young athletes feel comfortable learning something new. Where experienced players can continue pushing themselves. Where families can spend time together.

And where someone who has never played the game can discover something they didn't know they'd enjoy.

Even at the age of 44.

The Bullpen is located at 1644 John H Cooper Dr. SE in Cullman. For more information about lessons, rentals, training opportunities and available programs, visit www.thebullpen256.com or call 256-962-0463.





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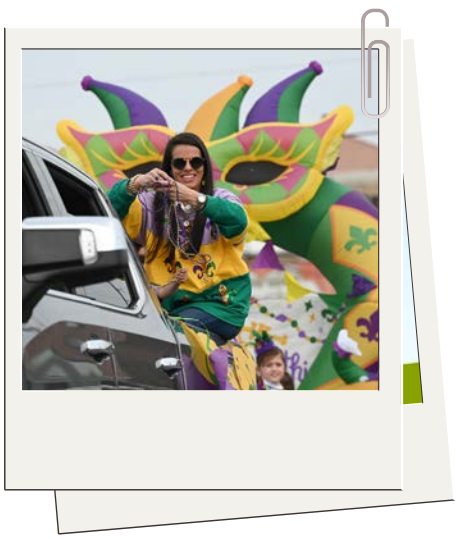
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SMALL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

Wulf Energy

BY LAUREN ESTES / lauren@cullmantribune.com

INSTAGRAM / WULF ENERGY

Wulf Energy was founded by veteran pilots and friends Taylor Hutchins (right) and JD Jackson (left).

A pair of friends and veteran pilots from Cullman founded Wulf Energy, a clean energy drink brand – just a few months ago.

Wulf Energy CEO and Founder Taylor Hutchins and his business partner and best friend JD Jackson said their business is located mainly in Cullman, with a few stores in Muscle Shoals and Florence.

"Our goals are not only to work for ourselves, but to give back to veterans and first responders," Hutchins said. "JD currently flies helicopters for the Alabama State Troopers. So having veteran and first responder ties, we want to give back to those communities."

You can find locations where you can buy Wulf Energy products on the company's website at www.wulfenergy.com. The drinks are currently available at more than 25 locations, and Wulf Energy can ship nationwide.

"I came up with the idea and image of Wulf Energy. Being hooked on caffeine like many people, I wasn't impressed with the current energy drink market," Hutchins explained. "So if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

"JD and I came up with our formula; it took us two years to fine-tune it. We wanted a formula that gives a clean energy, mental focus and clarity. We also wanted to give active individuals physical performance and recovery benefits. Think of it as an energy drink that will get you through difficult situations, mentally and physically, while providing your body what it needs to perform and recover at its best," he continued.

"Our formula is stacked; we have



INSTAGRAM/WULF ENERGY

the typical B vitamins you see in most, but to take it many steps forward we use carbonated natural spring water for our base (I believe we're the only company using spring water), and green tea for a clean caffeine source. We researched some clinically studied ingredients (Cognizin, Senactiv, AstraGin) to give actual data on performance to our consumers. We also have lion's mane mushroom extract, which has many neurological benefits, and last, BCAAs for muscle function and recovery," said Hutchins. "Wulf Energy is loaded."

Wulf Energy currently comes in three flavors: Original, Midnight Mango and Lemon Lime.

"Our Original is a mixed berry with a few other secret flavors. We wanted a flavor that people would have to do a little guessing. We get different answers for what people »



INSTAGRAM / WULF ENERGY

Wulf Energy currently comes in three flavors: Original, Midnight Mango and Lemon Lime.



think it tastes like," he said. "Mango is a very natural mango flavor (since we use natural flavors). It is one of our most popular flavors. Lemon Lime, very refreshing, what you would expect from lemon lime. We will start to expand with our future production runs. We wanted a broad variety across the flavors to cover everyone's tastes."

Hutchins said he and Jackson met in flight school in 2013 and became helicopter pilots.

"We are both veterans. Army for me, I was an Infantry Sniper, and JD was in the Navy," he shared. "We are both still currently helicopter pilots. I moved to Alabama over a year ago so we could get this going and launch in the same area. We have to juggle our careers with Wulf Energy. I travel for work; I'm out of town for three weeks then home for three.

"We're a small growing business, but overwhelmed with the way it's been going and growing. The feedback has been incredibly rewarding; everyone loves the flavors. We hear constantly that people feel the benefits of our formula by feeling very focused and clear without getting the 'crash' or 'jitters' that many other brands give."

Wulf Energy doesn't currently have a storefront, but you can find the products in more than 25 locations.

Get more information at www.wulfenergy.com or email info@wulfenergy.com.







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HIDDEN GEMS

Smith Lake Park's quirky water tower

Smith Lake Park's newly painted Mountain Dew water tower

PHOTO: CHASADY WOODS / THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

BY CHASADY WOODS
chasady@cullmantribune.com

Smith Lake Park draws visitors throughout the warmer months to take part in boating, camping and plenty of summer activities such as swimming in the lake or the nearby pool. One of its more quirky attractions is its water tower.

In 2017 the Smith Lake Park water tower was painted to resemble a Pepsi can. This lasted for nearly 10 years before being revamped in July 2026. The water tower is now (unofficially) the world's largest Mountain Dew can.

The artist behind the work is Kendall McCann.

She wrote, "Working through the Alabama heat was no joke. This one pushed my endurance and technical skill. I had to get it done in one week so I could make it to a beach trip."

See it for yourself. Smith Lake Park is located at 403 County Road 386 in Cullman.



LOCAL FLAVOR

Cookie's Cakes

A childhood nickname.
A lifelong love of baking.
A sweet spot in Hanceville.

BY LAUREN ESTES
lauren@cullmantribune.com



Toby Vaughn

TONYA HIPP PHOTOGRAPHY

Cookie's Cakes in Hanceville was an idea that flowed naturally for Colony native Toby Vaughn.

He started Cookie's Cakes in 2017, but officially opened to the public in 2023.

"In 2017, I began making my first decorative cake, then in 2023, it became a platform on Facebook," Vaughn shared. "The name Cookie's Cakes came into play from when I was a baby and when it was time to eat, eating cookies would be my food of choice."

The name "Cookie" just stuck, he said. It was a nickname given by his family.

Cookie's Cakes has several best sellers, including red velvet cake, pound cake and lemon cookies.

"I believe the red velvet edges out the other two by a smidgen," Vaughn said. "But my business idea actually just flowed together throughout my life. (From) starting to watch pound cakes being made and helping at age 8 to it growing as a business on social media."

He said his favorite thing to make is hard because, "I tell everyone, 'Once you make it, you don't want it'" He laughed, "Weight-loss tip!"

"If I had to choose a favorite, it would probably be a cookie of some sort," Vaughn said. "Since starting in 2023, I had no idea where to start. Luckily one day I was approached by a fellow (Hanceville) Bulldog and friend, Serah! She's an employee at Monograms Plus and they were having an event and needed dozens of cookies. From that event, my name grew!

"Thank you to (Monograms Plus Owner) Lynsey Todd for being gracious and taking a chance on me! Also, Initial Impressions were the first to help me with cake toppers. Wendy Kirk and her team are the best. Thank you to so many others that have boosted me up – you know who you are and how much it means."

Facebook is Vaughn's main platform. Find the business at Facebook/Cookie's Cakes. He's also on Instagram at cakes_bycookie.

Orders/inquiries can be made through Facebook Messenger or email at cakes-bycookie3@gmail.com.

FROM COOKIE'S KITCHEN



Lemon cookies



Fresh strawberry cake with cream cheese frosting



Red velvet cake

DESSERT PHOTOS COURTESY OF TOBY VAUGHN

Visit Cullman

Christmas in Cullman

Rooted in German heritage and wrapped in Southern hospitality, Cullman County transforms into a charming winter wonderland every holiday season.





Discover

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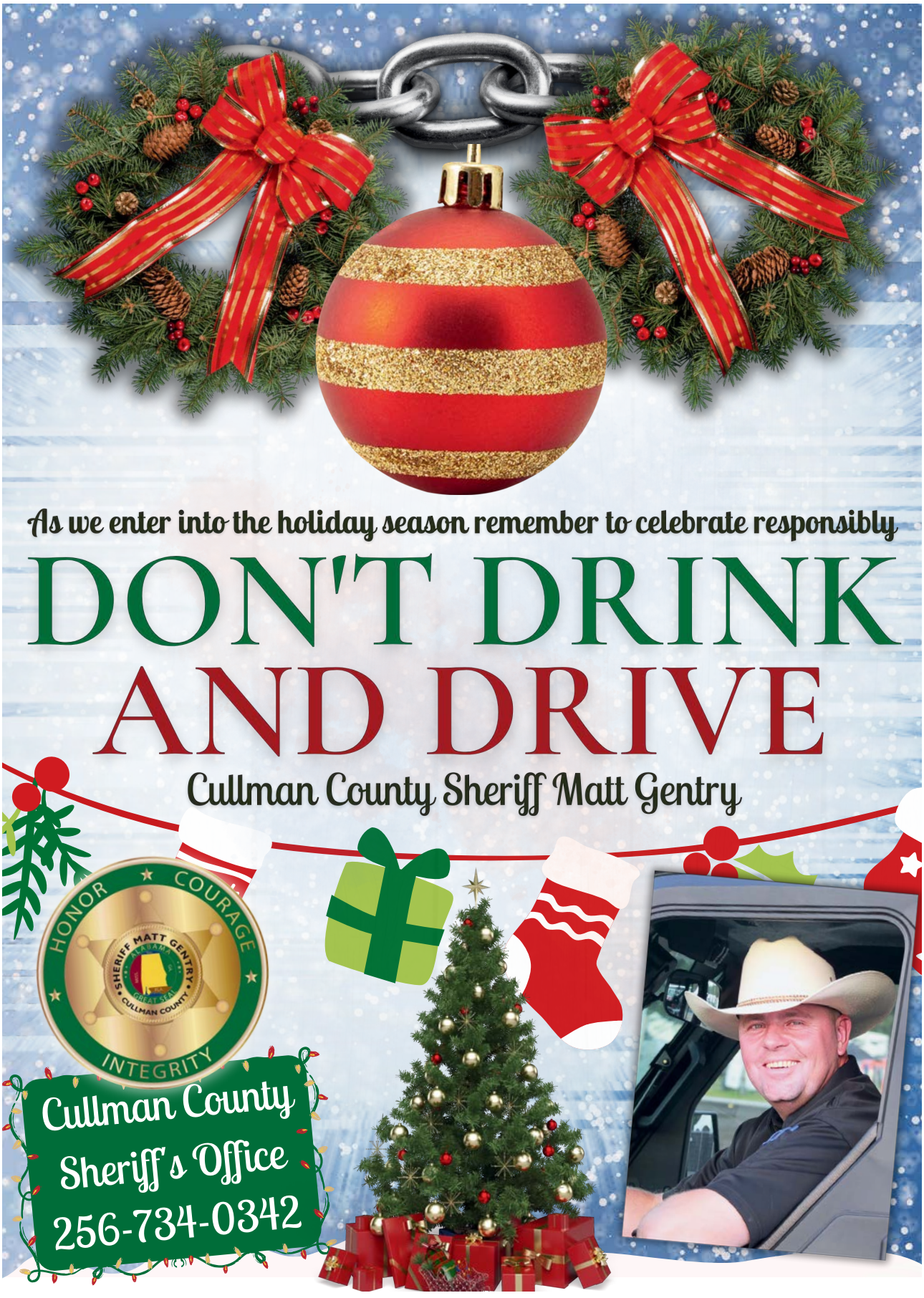
Left to right: Kelly Duke, place 3 - Kerry Watson, place 1 - Jeff Clemons, Chairman - Corey Freeman, place 4 - Garry Marchman, place 2



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500 2ND AVENUE SW CULLMAN, AL 35055 | MONDAY-FRIDAY 8:00 A.M. - 4:30 P.M.

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WELCOME TO

Cullman Christkindlmarkt!

Where German tradition meets Southern charm

There's something special about Christmas in Cullman, Alabama, and we're delighted to welcome you to the 2026 Cullman Christkindlmarkt!

What began as a dream to celebrate our German heritage and the traditions of European Christmas markets has become a nationally recognized holiday destination, welcoming more than 415,000 visitors last year. Through all that growth, our purpose remains simple: bringing people together to celebrate Christmas and create lasting memories.

This season, we celebrate three new honors that join the many recognitions received in previous years. Hallmark named Cullman among its 25 finalists for America's Merriest Christmas Town, Travel + Leisure recognized Christkindlmarkt as one of the 10 Coolest Christmas Markets in the United States and the Alabama Tourism Department named the market its Event of the Year. These honors belong to the entire community that helped bring this vision to life.

We're making this year's experience even richer, with more food and merchandise vendors, our strongest entertainment lineup yet and expanded hands-on activities. Enjoy the two-story Venetian carousel, explore the world-renowned Käthe Wohlfahrt Christmas shop and discover the festive sights, sounds and flavors throughout the market and Warehouse District.

But the heart of Christkindlmarkt isn't an attraction or an award. It's the people. We want everyone who visits, whether from across town or across the country, to feel genuinely welcome and treated like friends and family. That's the Southern hospitality we hope you'll experience in every corner of Cullman.

We're especially touched by stories of local families who once traveled elsewhere for Christmas gatherings and now host loved ones here because their relatives want to experience the Christkindlmarkt together. Seeing new traditions take root is one of our greatest rewards.

None of this would be possible without our festival committee, parks and recreation staff, fellow city departments, sponsors, vendors, volunteers and the support of our community, region and state. Their hard work and generosity make this celebration possible.

And Christmas magic doesn't end at the market. Visit Winter Wonderland at Sportsman Lake Park, enjoy a peaceful walk among the festive lights and decorations at the Ave Maria Grotto, drive through neighborhoods glowing with Christmas displays and attend a local church concert or Christmas service. Make time for our shops, restaurants and attractions, too. We hope your holiday visit is the beginning of a year-round connection with Cullman.

Whether this is your first visit or an annual tradition, we're glad you're here. May you leave with wonderful memories, new friendships and a little extra Christmas spirit.

Merry Christmas!

The Cullman Christkindlmarkt team

OPENING GREETINGS

What we make room for

A holiday rarely unfolds the way it appears in a photograph. Someone arrives late. The rolls brown too quickly. A child grows impatient. A phone rings from miles away.

Yet those imperfect moments often become the ones a family remembers because of the people who were part of them.

Behind the meals, decorations and full calendars is a simple choice to make room for one another.

We make room at our tables for family and friends. We make room in busy schedules for coworkers who have shared the weight of another year.

We make room for neighbors who need company, children building their first traditions and older generations carrying the stories that gave those traditions meaning.

Thanksgiving invites us to do more than privately count our blessings. It reminds us to express our gratitude while the people who have encouraged, supported and stood beside us can still hear it.

Gratitude does not erase the difficult parts of the year. It recognizes the people who helped us through them.

Christmas brings Christians back to the birth of Christ and the hope that entered the world through humble circumstances.

Its message is found not in extravagance, but in grace freely given, mercy extended and love demonstrated through action.

Then comes the New Year, offering less of a magical reset than an honest opportunity. We can decide what deserves to continue, what needs to change and which relationships require more of our attention.

Throughout this edition of Community Matters, we celebrate the history behind Christmas in Cullman, recipes that have traveled through generations and local businesses whose owners, employees and makers give our community much of its character.

A purchase made locally is more than an item exchanged. It supports a neighbor, strengthens a livelihood and keeps part of the season working here at home.

We also remember that the holidays are not easy for everyone. Some tables will have an empty chair. Some families will face distance, illness, financial strain or change. A thoughtful invitation, a telephone call or a little patience may carry more meaning than we realize.

This season, may we make room for faith, gratitude and one another. May we speak the words that matter, give with purpose and carry the best of this season into the year ahead.

On behalf of everyone at Community Matters and The Cullman Tribune, we wish you and those you hold dear a blessed Thanksgiving, a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

Noah Galilee
PUBLISHER



2025 CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO
The beautiful Christmas pyramid

CHRISTMAS IN CULLMAN

Where Christmas comes home

From a spinning silver tree and church carols to an award-winning Christkindlmarkt, Cullman's holiday story has always been about gathering

BY NOAH GALILEE / noah@cullmantribune.com



2025 CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

A wide-eyed spectator takes in the Cullman Christkindlmarkt Parade.

Long before a 108-foot Ferris wheel rose over Depot Park, long before rows of red-roofed vendor huts filled downtown and long before visitors arrived from all 50 states, Cullman had another Christmas landmark along U.S. Highway 278 East.

For 44 years, from 1958 through 2002, a giant silver tree turned slowly inside the Basch family's picture window. Ralph Basch decorated it with hundreds of ornaments, glittering tinsel and a color wheel that washed the branches in changing light. Travelers heading into Cullman to shop could see it from the highway. Some slowed down. Some stopped. Some knocked on the family's door.

"People will remember this tree, and remember my dad, how meticulous he was, how much he loved Christmas," Basch's daughter Nancy Harrison said.

That tree was not a city attraction or a ticketed event. It was one family's Christmas greeting to everyone passing by. But it became a public memory. It is a fitting place to begin Cullman's Christmas story because the story has always depended less on any one decoration than on what people did

around it: travel home, bring children, sing together, give to neighbors and pause long enough to share the light.

Tribune archive pages from Dec. 27, 1928, read almost like a map of people coming home. Cullman residents visited parents in Hanceville and Fairview. Relatives arrived by train and automobile from Birmingham, Nashville, Chattanooga, Akron and New Mexico. The same edition described trucks and cars leaving early on Christmas morning to distribute necessities, fruit, candy and dolls through the Community Chest, local churches and individual donors. The anonymous writer ended with a simple question.

"Now, isn't Cullman a good town to live in," the writer concluded.

Later clippings show the same pattern in different years. In 1945, with World War II just ended, the local columns recorded servicemen arriving home with discharges and furloughs as teachers prepared for an annual Christmas party. In 1951, Duck River Church invited everyone to its Christmas Eve program, families traded gifts at school gatherings and a former Cullman minister sent a card picturing his family reading the Christmas story. In 1962, the Berlin Sunshine Club gathered at Lorenz Restaurant to exchange gifts and sing carols while Cullman High's glee clubs performed Christmas music.

The details feel modest beside today's glowing skyline. They also reveal the foundation beneath it. Christmas in Cullman was a season of homecomings, worship, music, generosity and neighborly welcome before it became a tourism draw.

Cullman's German heritage runs even deeper. Bavarian native Col. Johann Gottfried Cullmann founded the city in 1873 as a settlement intended in part for German immigrants. In the early years, German was commonly heard in local stores and churches. That public identity was muted during World Wars I and II, then residents began deliberately recovering it during preparations for the city's centennial in the 1960s. Oktoberfest followed in 1977, and Cullman established a sister-city relationship with Frankweiler, Germany, in 1987.

By then, German heritage had become something Cullman did not merely preserve behind glass. It was cooked, sung, worn and celebrated. Christmas would eventually become one of its most visible expressions.

Cullman's modern downtown holiday celebration took shape before the Christkindlmarkt. In 2017, "Christmas in Cullman" brought a parade from the Busy Bee Cafe through the Warehouse District to Depot Park. Thousands gathered around a 41-foot tree, sang carols, listened to the Nativity story and watched artificial snow fall from its branches. The ingredients were already there: a public square, a shared story and a crowd eager to make a memory together.

Then came the Weihnachtspyramide.

The German Christmas pyramid arrived in 2019, handmade by Erzgebirgische Holzkunst Gahlenz in Germany. The original structure stood 30 feet tall on the Cullman County Museum grounds. Unlike its candle-powered tabletop ancestors, Cullman's version used a motor to turn six tiers of carved figures. Its scenes joined Old World Christmas imagery with local identity, from the Nativity and angels to nutcrackers, snowmen, first responders and Cullman's founder.

The structure has since grown to more than 40 feet. Cullman Parks, Recreation & Sports Tourism bills it as the tallest Weihnachtspyramide in North America, a centerpiece tall enough to change the city's skyline and familiar enough to feel like it has always belonged there.

Mayor Woody Jacobs had been thinking about a local German market after visiting one in Chicago. Once the pyramid was built, he told The Tribune in 2019, the timing felt unavoidable.

"When the Christmas Pyramid was constructed, I thought, 'This has to happen now!' So, we're starting small and growing into it," Jacobs said.

The city's first trial Christkindlmarkt followed in November 2019 as a one-day open-air market at the Festhalle alongside the parade and tree lighting. COVID-19 disrupted »



2025 CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

The lighting of the Christmas tree in Depot Park is a family favorite.

public celebrations in 2020, but the market returned in 2021 as a two-day German-themed event in and around the Warehouse District. It expanded to three days in 2022.

The decisive leap came in 2023. A renovated Depot Park gave the market room for more than 40 vendors, an outdoor ice rink, a restored carousel, Santa's village and weeks rather than days of programming. What had started as a trial run became a destination season.

Growth since then has been swift. CPRST's Placer.ai estimates recorded about 360,000 total visits in 2024 and approximately 415,000 in 2025. The 2025 season produced a single-day high of about 45,000 visits. CPRST also reported guests from all 50 states and seven countries, with 80% of attendance coming from outside Cullman County.

The Alabama Tourism Department named the Cullman Christkindlmarkt its 2026 Event of the Year, a recognition of both its tourism reach and community impact. But CPRST Executive Director Nathan Anderson said the local purpose came first.

"The Cullman Christkindlmarkt was built first and foremost to create a special experience for our community during the holiday season," Anderson said.

That balance, local tradition at a scale large enough to draw the nation, defines the 2026 market.

The Cullman Christkindlmarkt will return to Depot Park Nov. 19-Dec. 23. It will be open from 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and noon-8 p.m. Sunday. Beginning Dec. 10, the market will operate daily, with Sunday hours unchanged. It will be closed Thanksgiving Day. Admission and parking are free, while rides, food and merchandise are available for purchase.

The current market combines visual landmarks with the small pleasures that make a Christmas market linger in memory. CPRST says the 108-foot "Alpine of Alabama" is the state's largest Ferris wheel, and its outdoor skating rink is Alabama's largest. A rare double-decker carousel turns near the vendor huts. Children can ride the Christkindl Express, visit Kinderplatz and meet Santa, while Winterbahn offers alpine tubing. Artisan workshops feature glass, iron and copper work.

Inside the Festhalle, Käthe Wohlfahrt, the German family-owned Christmas retailer founded in 1964, offers a 3,500-square-foot shopping experience filled with nutcrackers and traditional decorations. Across the market, visitors find wooden crafts, ornaments and gifts alongside bratwurst, currywurst, flammkuchen, raclette, potato pancakes, roasted nuts, chimney cakes, hot chocolate and Glühwein.

At Depot Park's south entrance stands another bridge between Cullman and Germany, a walk-on Schwibbogen Christmas arch unveiled in 2025. It stands 20 feet, 4 inches tall and 47 feet, 5 inches wide. CPRST identifies it as the world's largest walk-on example. Built in Cullman with decorative figures crafted in Germany, the arch draws from a tradition that has symbolized light, hope and community since the 1700s.

The market's opening weekend carries forward one of Cullman's older civic traditions. The Christkindlmarkt Parade will begin at 6:30 p.m. Friday, Nov. 20 and travel seven blocks through downtown. The tree lighting will follow at 8 p.m. with music, fireworks and a new Christmas drone show.

For all the scale, the giving remains as important as the gathering.

The charitable program that grew from the 2025 market raised $60,923 for 14 local organizations through vendors, volunteers and other fundraisers. In 2026, the Christkind Season of Giving will spotlight local organizations that serve children. Visitors will be able to find participating vendor signs, visit the Charity Hut or use QR codes around the grounds.

It is a modern echo of those 1928 cars and trucks carrying food, candy and dolls to Cullman neighbors on Christmas morning. The platform is larger. The impulse is familiar.

The market is now the center of Cullman's Christmas calendar, but it is not the whole of it.

At St. Bernard Abbey, Christmas at the Grotto has placed lights around the more than 125 miniature structures created by Bavarian-born Benedictine monk Brother Joseph Zoettl. The event began in 2019 and gives families a quieter, more reflective way to experience one of Cullman's best-known attractions. At Sportsman Lake Park, the long-running Winter Wonderland Christmas Light Display has turned a drive around the lake into a path through millions of lights, with a Christmas train, carriage rides, Santa and hot chocolate on select nights.

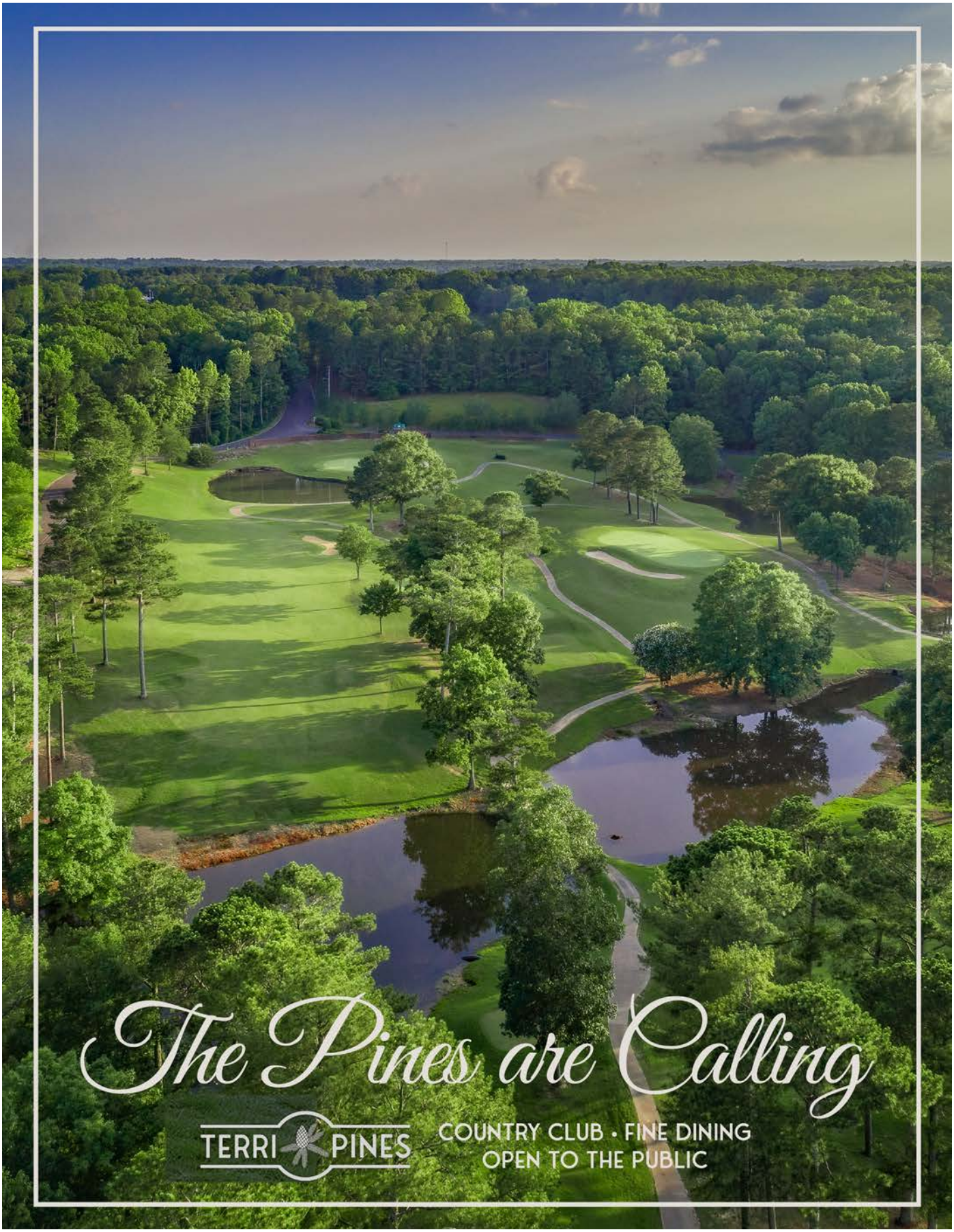
In 2025, CPRST, Cullman County Parks and Recreation and the Ave Maria Grotto connected those three destinations with a free shuttle. That collaboration showed how the attractions can work as a single holiday circuit while retaining their distinct characters: the market's bustle, the Grotto's reverence and Winter Wonderland's drive-through glow.

Beyond the three largest attractions, Christmas spreads through the county in school concerts, church cantatas, community meals, home light displays, charity drives and parades from Hanceville to Holly Pond and beyond. Some traditions fill a downtown. Others fill a sanctuary, a gym or one family's front window. Together, they make the season feel less like a production delivered to Cullman and more like something Cullman builds together.

That may be the clearest line through nearly a century of newspaper clippings and the newest market plans. The scenery changes. The reason people gather does not.

Motorists once slowed on U.S. Highway 278 to see Ralph Basch's silver tree turning behind glass. Today, families cross state lines to stand beneath a German pyramid, circle the ice rink or watch Depot Park brighten at dusk. Yet the invitation is much the same.

Whether the light comes from a family window, a church candle, the miniature shrines at the Grotto or the towering pyramid above Depot Park, Christmas in Cullman still asks people to pause, look toward the light and come home to one another.

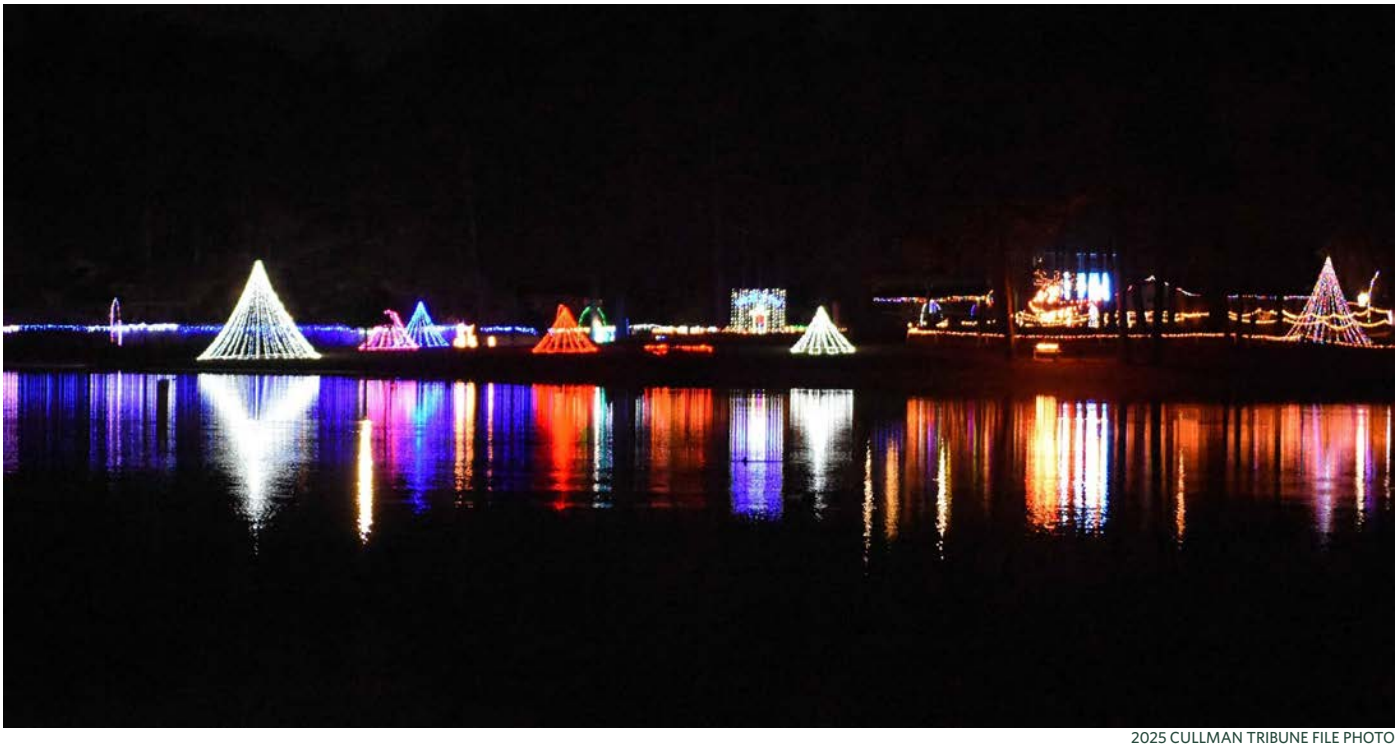

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CHRISTMAS IN CULLMAN

Where the lake glows: Winter Wonderland returns for 24th season

Run-Run-Rudolph will give walkers and runners the first look Nov. 19, before the drive-through display opens Nov. 20

BY NOAH GALILEE / noah@cullmantribune.com



2025 CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Millions of lights illuminate Sportsman Lake Park for its annual Winter Wonderland event.

By daylight, Sportsman Lake Park is a familiar place of water, walking trails, playgrounds and shade. As Christmas approaches, the road around the lake becomes a ribbon of color, framed by glowing arches, animated scenes and reflections dancing across the water.

The 24th annual Winter Wonderland Christmas Light Display will open to vehicle traffic Friday, Nov. 20, at Sportsman Lake Park.

One night earlier, on Thursday, Nov. 19, Run-Run-Rudolph will give participants the season's only opportunity to run, walk or stroll through the light route before cars begin making the trip.

"You can run, walk or you can just stroll through the lights," Cullman County Parks and Recreation Director Kenneth Cornelius said in an August interview with The Cullman Tribune.

The parks department had not announced a start time, registration fee or signup information for the 2026 Run-Run-Rudolph event at press time.

Winter Wonderland will again combine its drive-through route with activities beyond the car.

Cornelius said this year's plans include light displays, running lights, illuminated arches and other drive-through elements, along with the park's snow machine, cartoon figures, visits and photos with Santa Claus and a full concession stand serving hot chocolate and hot coffee.

The Christmas train is also scheduled to return, with horse-drawn carriage rides planned on weekends. The 2026 prices and operating times for those attractions have not yet been released.

For many Cullman County families, the display is less a one-night outing than a marker on the calendar. Cornelius said some visitors have told park staff they have returned every year since 2002 and now share the experience with another generation.



2025 CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Have you driven through Winter Wonderland at Sportsman Lake Park?

The display has grown with those families. The Tribune reported approximately 1.5 million lights in 2023, 1.7 million in 2024 and about 2 million in 2025. More than 11,000 vehicles traveled through the park during the 2024 season.

Each year's finished display is the result of weeks of work that begin while Christmas still feels far away.

In 2024, the installation began the week after Labor Day and continued until opening night.

For the event's 20th anniversary in 2022, seven Sportsman Lake Park employees performed most of the installation, with staff from other county parks joining them for part of the work.

Some displays stood as tall as 14 feet and required five people to raise.

That work transforms the same roads, grounds and facilities used by daytime visitors throughout the rest of the year. It also requires the park to restrict normal access before the holiday event begins.

When will the park close for setup?

At press time, Cullman County Parks and Recreation had not announced the 2026 date when the main vehicle gate will close for Winter Wonderland installation. The park's official website continued to list its regular hours as 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily.

In previous seasons, the front gate has closed while crews decorated the park. Pedestrian access through a walk-through gate has sometimes remained available for the walking trail, but access to the playground, pavilions and other amenities has varied during setup.

Visitors planning a daytime trip once installation is underway should call Sportsman Lake Park at 256-734-3052 before leaving home. The park will also post closure and access updates on its official Facebook page.

Dates, hours and admission

The two dates confirmed for 2026 are:

- **Run-Run-Rudolph: Thursday, Nov. 19**
- **Winter Wonderland opening night: Friday, Nov. 20**

The complete calendar of operating nights, nightly hours, closing date and 2026 admission prices had not been announced at press time.

For comparison only, the 2025 display operated from 5-9 p.m. on selected nights from Nov. 20-Dec. 28.

Admission that season was $10 per car or $20 per bus, and the final three nights offered the drive-through lights without the train or other activities.

Those hours, dates and prices should not be treated as the 2026 schedule.

Weather can also affect operations, particularly the train, carriage rides and other outdoor activities. Guests should check for same-day updates before traveling.

Sportsman Lake Park is located at 1544 Sportsman Lake Road NW in Cullman.

For the latest schedule, prices and closure information, follow Sportsman Lake Park or Cullman County Parks and Recreation on Facebook, visit www.cullmancountyparks.com or call 256-734-3052.

As the final strings are hung and the last figures take their places around the lake, the work will remain mostly out of sight.

Then the gates will open, headlights will dim and another season of Cullman Christmas memories will begin.

CHRISTMAS IN CULLMAN

Christmas in the Byre: St. Bernard Prep concert set for Dec. 8

Seasonal performance gives student musicians a stage as exams and Christmas break approach

BY NOAH GALILEE / noah@cullmantribune.com

Before St. Bernard Preparatory School students close their books for Christmas break, the semester will pause for a different kind of lesson: listening to one another.

The school's 2026 Christmas Concert is scheduled for 6 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 8, in the Byre on the St. Bernard campus.

Set one week before semester exams begin, the performance will offer student musicians an opportunity to share the work they have done in classrooms and rehearsals throughout the fall.

The concert is also a seasonal gathering for the wider St. Bernard community, bringing students, instructors, families and guests together in a room that has become a familiar home for the school's performances.

Music at St. Bernard is part of a broader fine arts program designed to give students several ways to create and perform.

The school's current fine arts offerings include concert band, jazz band, choir, instrument classes such as dulcimer and guitar and a chamber ensemble offered periodically.

St. Bernard had not announced which ensembles would take part in the 2026 Christmas Concert at press time.

For band instructor Jonathan Farley, the purpose of the program extends beyond notes, rhythms and concert preparation.

"I don't teach music," Farley said on the school's fine arts page. "I teach kids."

Farley describes the arts as a place where young people can follow their interests, develop confidence and learn to be fully present with the other members of a group.

A live concert makes those lessons visible. Every entrance depends on attention, every harmony requires listening and each student contributes to something no performer could create alone.

That process can be especially meaningful at a school where some students arrive with years of musical experience while others pick up an instrument or join a choir for the first time.

The range was evident during St. Bernard's 2024 Fall Concert, also held in the Byre.

The program featured 53 students and included an Appalachian dulcimer class, concert band, choir and jazz band.

Selections moved from traditional hymns and sacred choral music to jazz standards and contemporary instrumental works.

Following that performance, School Chaplain Fr. Linus Klucsarits praised the students who were new to music.

"For many of these students, this year is their first time touching an instrument or singing, and they have impressed us all," Klucsarits said.

The Christmas Concert gives those developing musicians another milestone and allows experienced performers to take on more demanding roles.

It also arrives at a natural turning point in the school year. St. Bernard's second quarter ends Dec. 14, exams are scheduled for Dec. 15-17 and Christmas break begins Dec. 18.

The event has become a recurring part of the school's December calendar. St. Bernard scheduled student Christmas concerts in the Abbey Byre for the 2024 and 2025 seasons before setting this year's performance for Dec. 8.

The setting connects the concert to a longer story. Benedictine monks established St. Bernard Abbey and St. Bernard Preparatory School in Cullman in 1891.

Today, the school remains a coeducational Catholic boarding and day school, and its Benedictine heritage continues to shape campus life.

Past student concerts have reflected that identity while showing the breadth of the music program. Sacred choral selections have shared programs with concert band pieces, jazz numbers and traditional instruments.

The repertoire for this year's Christmas Concert had not been released at press time, but the program's history points to an evening built around both musical growth and the meaning of the season.

For the students onstage, the concert will represent weeks of individual practice joined into one shared performance.

For the audience, it will be a chance to slow down during a crowded month and hear Christmas arrive one voice and one instrument at a time.

AT A GLANCE

What: St. Bernard Preparatory School Christmas Concert
When: 6 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2026
Where: The Byre, St. Bernard Preparatory School, 1600 St. Bernard Drive SE, Cullman
Admission or ticket information: Not announced at press time
Program: Participating ensembles, repertoire and estimated running time had not been announced at press time
More information: Call St. Bernard Preparatory School at 256-739-6682

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CHRISTMAS IN CULLMAN

Little Jerusalem aglow as Christmas at the Grotto returns Nov. 19

The eighth annual holiday tradition offers 27 dates, a Dec. 11-12 special weekend and a St. Bernard Prep Christmas concert

BY NOAH GALILEE / noah@cullmantribune.com



2022 CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

The eighth annual Christmas at the Grotto will open Thursday, Nov. 19, and continue on selected dates through Sunday, Dec. 27.



2022 CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Lights will come on at 5 p.m. each event day, giving visitors the rare chance to walk through Brother Joseph Zoettl's life's work after dark.

When twilight settles over St. Bernard Abbey, the miniature basilicas, churches, castles and biblical scenes of Ave Maria Grotto will once again emerge beneath the warm glow of Christmas lights.

The eighth annual Christmas at the Grotto will open Thursday, Nov. 19, and continue on selected dates through Sunday, Dec. 27.

Lights will come on at 5 p.m. each event day, giving visitors the rare opportunity to walk through Brother Joseph Zoettl's life's work after dark.

This year's expanded calendar includes 27 dates over more than five weeks, with extended daytime and evening hours. The schedule begins with four nights before Thanksgiving, resumes Thanksgiving weekend and becomes a daily event from Dec. 10-23. Two final nights will follow Christmas.

The centerpiece of the season will be a special Christmas weekend Friday and Saturday, Dec. 11-12. Both evenings are scheduled to include Santa Claus, live music and entertainment, food trucks and horse-drawn wagon rides. Wagon rides will cost an additional $7.

Christmas at the Grotto began in 2019, the same year Roger Steele became director of the Grotto.

The attraction had been open for more than eight decades, but Brother Joseph's miniatures had never been presented as a full nighttime Christmas experience.

What began with only a few evenings grew each season as families returned and visitors discovered a holiday display built around contemplation as much as celebration.

Steele told The Cullman Tribune in 2022 that organizers saw an opportunity to offer something distinct among the area's growing collection of holiday attractions.

"We wanted to add a spiritual element to the Christmas season," Steele said.

That purpose remains central to the event. The lighting is intended to reveal the details of the Grotto after dark without overwhelming the art itself.

Music, pathways and carefully placed decorations invite guests to slow down, look closely and experience the park from a perspective unavailable during most of the year.

"Whether you're Christian or not, there's something here that brings peace," Steele told The Tribune in 2025.

AT A GLANCE

Scheduled event dates:
Nov.: 19-22, 27-29
Dec.: 3-6, 10-23, 26-27

Open 9 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Saturday and noon-9 p.m. Sunday. Holiday lights will be turned on at 5 p.m.

Admission:
Adults: $12
Seniors: $10
Military members, veterans and first responders: $9
Teens ages 13-17: $10
Children ages 5-12: $9
Children 4 and younger: free

That sense of peace is rooted in the unusual story of the place. Ave Maria Grotto occupies four acres of a former quarry on the grounds of St. Bernard Abbey, Alabama's only Benedictine monastery of men.

Brother Joseph, a Bavarian-born Benedictine monk, spent more than 50 years building more than 125 miniature structures representing sacred sites, famous buildings and scenes from around the world.

Using photographs, postcards, donated materials and his imagination, he recreated places such as St. Peter's Basilica and the holy sites of Jerusalem.

The collection became widely known as "Little Jerusalem," and the present park opened in 1934.

The 2026 Christmas season also arrives as preservation work continues throughout the Grotto. St. Bernard Abbey and Ave Maria Grotto announced a two-year conservation project in 2024 intended to address every structure in the park.

The effort is supported by the Kohler Foundation, with treatment performed by the Williamstown + Atlanta Art Conservation Center.

In an April 2026 update, the Grotto reported that its model of St. Peter's Basilica had received major foundation and ornament repairs, cleaning and fresh paint. The park has remained open throughout the conservation work.

St. Bernard Prep Christmas Concert

Families can add another St. Bernard tradition to their December calendar. St. Bernard Preparatory School will present its Christmas Concert at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 8, in the Byre on the St. Bernard campus.

The concert comes two days before Christmas at the Grotto begins its uninterrupted Dec. 10-23 run. At press time, the school's official calendar did not list an admission charge or additional program details for the concert.

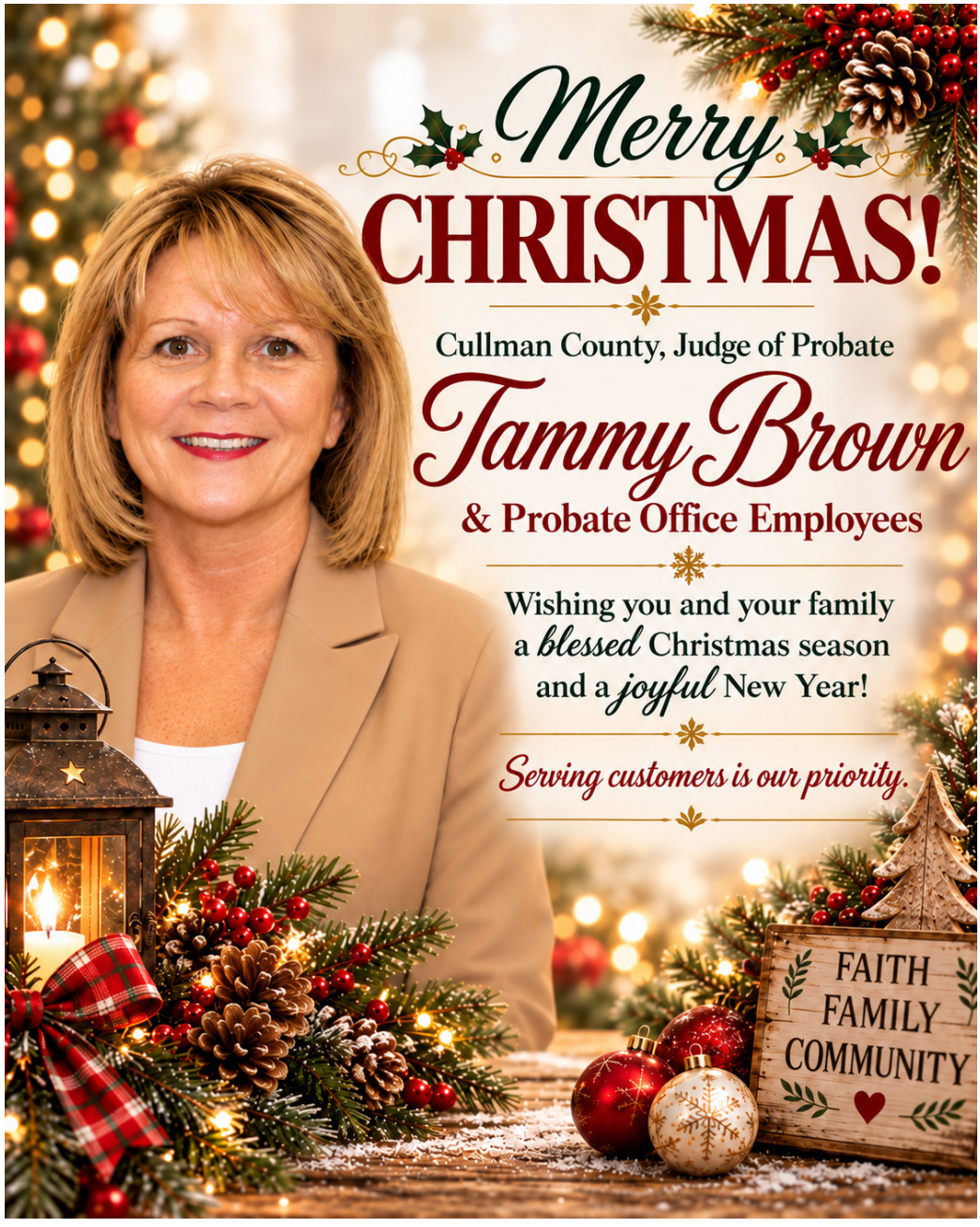
Know before you go

Ave Maria Grotto is located at 1600 St. Bernard Drive SE in Cullman. Christmas at the Grotto is an outdoor walking experience, so visitors should dress for the weather and check the attraction's official social media accounts for any schedule changes before traveling.

The Grotto's visitor information states that dogs are not allowed and that the park is not wheelchair accessible.

For the latest information, visit www.avemariagrotto.com, follow Ave Maria Grotto on Facebook or call 256-734-4110.

Information about St. Bernard Prep and its Christmas Concert is available at www.stbernardprep.com or by calling 256-739-6682.





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From

Cullman's German Kitchens

Recipes, traditions and flavors passed from one generation to the next



From Cullman's German kitchens: A winter table

Warming recipes, familiar traditions and something sweet to share

BY NOAH GALILEE
PHOTOS FROM PIXABAY

A winter kitchen has a welcome all its own. There is the sound of a knife moving through a head of cabbage, the gentle simmer of soup on the stove and the smell of bread beginning to brown in the oven.

A roast takes its time. Apples soften beneath a filling of butter, raisins and almonds. On the counter, a tray of cookies waits for its final coating of sugar.

In a community with German roots, preparing these foods offers another way to explore the heritage that remains part of Cullman's identity.

The winter edition of "From Cullman's German Kitchens" moves from the festival table to the family table.

These are dishes for an early supper after a cold afternoon, a Sunday meal with room for another guest or a quiet evening spent baking something to give away.

Potatoes and leeks become a substantial soup. Bread rolls become tender dumplings. Cabbage leaves wrap around a savory filling, while mushrooms and cream make a simple meal feel generous.

Not every dish requires hours of work.

Some ask only for a heavy skillet, a little chopping and enough patience to let the ingredients develop their flavor. Others are worth setting aside an afternoon to prepare.

The recipes that follow are contemporary home-kitchen interpretations of German dishes, written with familiar ingredients and practical instructions.

Prepare a whole meal or begin with one recipe.

There is no need to wait for a holiday to set a welcoming table.

Willkommen.

Come in from the cold. Supper is on its way.

All temperatures are given in degrees Fahrenheit. Preparation, rising and cooking times are approximate.



German-style wheat-and-rye bread

Weizenmischbrot

Makes: 1 loaf, approximately 12 slices
Preparation time: 25 minutes
Rising time: Approximately 1 1/2-2 1/2 hours
Baking time: 35-45 minutes
Cooling time: Approximately 2 hours

This modestly enriched loaf combines bread flour and rye flour with a little honey and an optional sprinkling of caraway. It is intended as an everyday table bread, equally useful beside a bowl of soup or toasted for breakfast.

This version uses commercial yeast rather than a sourdough starter. It is a home-kitchen adaptation, not a reproduction of a particular regional bakery loaf.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 1/4 cups warm water, approximately 105-110 degrees
- 1 Tbsp. honey
- 2 1/4 tsp. active dry yeast
- 3 cups bread flour, plus more as needed
- 1 cup medium rye flour
- 1 1/2 tsp. fine salt
- 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil, plus more for greasing
- 1 Tbsp. apple cider vinegar
- 1 tsp. caraway seeds, optional

DIRECTIONS

1. Combine the warm water and honey in a large mixing bowl.
2. Sprinkle the yeast over the water. Let it stand for five to 10 minutes, or until foamy.
3. In a separate bowl, combine the bread flour, rye flour and salt.
4. Add the flour mixture to the yeast mixture. Add the oil, vinegar and caraway seeds, if using.
5. Stir until a rough dough forms. Let it rest for 10 minutes.
6. Turn the dough onto a lightly floured surface. Knead for approximately eight to 10 minutes, or until it becomes cohesive and elastic. It may remain slightly tacky.
7. Add flour sparingly, 1 tablespoon at a time, only if the dough is too sticky to handle. If it feels dry and stiff, work in water 1 teaspoon at a time.
8. Place the dough in a lightly oiled bowl. Turn it once to coat the surface.
9. Cover and let it rise in a warm, draft-free location for approximately 60-90 minutes, or until noticeably expanded and puffy.
10. Lightly grease a 9-by-5-inch loaf pan.
11. Gently press the risen dough into a rectangle approximately 8 inches wide.
12. Roll it into a compact loaf, pinching the seam closed. Place it seam-side down in the pan.
13. Cover loosely and let it rise for approximately 30-60 minutes, or until the center crowns about 1 inch above the pan.
14. During the final portion of the rise, heat the oven to 375 degrees.
15. Bake for 35-45 minutes, or until the loaf is well browned and its center reaches approximately 195 degrees. Cover loosely with foil if the top browns too quickly.
16. Let the bread stand in the pan for five minutes.
17. Remove it from the pan and cool completely on a wire rack before slicing.

German kitchen note

Give the loaf time to cool before cutting it. Rye-containing breads can seem gummy when sliced while still hot. Measuring flour lightly rather than packing it into the cup also helps prevent an unnecessarily heavy loaf.

Serving suggestion

Serve with potato soup, sliced cheese or butter. Toast leftover slices to accompany eggs the following morning.

German potato soup with leeks and vegetables

Kartoffelsuppe mit Lauch

Serves: 6
Preparation time: 20 minutes
Cooking time: Approximately 40 minutes

A substantial potato soup needs little decoration. Potatoes provide the body, while leeks, carrots and celery add flavor and color. This version leaves some vegetables in pieces and mashes others directly in the pot.

Potato soups appear in historic German cookbooks, including Lina Meier's 1922 collection, which describes both broth-based and simpler preparations.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 Tbsp. unsalted butter
- 1 medium yellow onion, diced
- 1 large leek, white and light green portions only
- 2 medium carrots, peeled and diced
- 2 celery ribs, diced
- 2 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 6 cups low-sodium vegetable or chicken broth
- 1 tsp. dried marjoram
- 1 bay leaf
- 1/2 tsp. salt, plus more as needed
- 1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- Pinch of ground nutmeg
- 1/2 cup heavy cream, optional
- 2 Tbsp. chopped fresh parsley

DIRECTIONS

1. Cut the leek lengthwise and rinse carefully between the layers to remove any grit.
2. Slice the cleaned leek into thin half-moons.
3. Melt the butter in a large soup pot over medium heat.
4. Add the onion and leek. Cook for approximately five minutes, stirring occasionally, until softened.
5. Add the carrots and celery. Cook for an additional five minutes.
6. Stir in the potatoes, broth, marjoram, bay leaf, salt, pepper and nutmeg.
7. Bring the soup to a gentle boil.
8. Reduce the heat and partially cover the pot.
9. Simmer for approximately 20-25 minutes, or until the potatoes and carrots are tender.
10. Remove and discard the bay leaf.
11. Use a potato masher to mash some of the potatoes directly in the pot, leaving enough pieces to give the soup texture.
12. Stir in the cream, if using. Heat gently for approximately three minutes without allowing the soup to boil vigorously.
13. Add a little additional broth if the soup is thicker than desired.
14. Taste and adjust the salt and pepper.
15. Stir in the parsley just before serving.

German kitchen note

Marjoram gives this soup a gentle herbal flavor. Begin with the amount listed rather than adding a large handful of dried herbs, which can overwhelm the vegetables.

Serving suggestion

Serve in deep bowls with wheat-and-rye bread. For a lighter version, omit the cream and rely on the mashed potatoes to thicken the broth.

Slow-cooked pork roast with onions and caraway

Schweinebraten mit Kümmel

Serves: 6-8
Preparation time: 25 minutes
Cooking time: Approximately 3-4 hours
Resting time: 20 minutes

Pork roast and dumplings are a familiar pairing in Bavarian cooking.

This version uses a boneless, skinless pork shoulder, cooked slowly with onions, carrots and broth. It does not produce the crackling associated with a skin-on roast. Instead, the emphasis is on tender meat and a flavorful pan gravy.

INGREDIENTS

For the roast

- 1 boneless, skinless pork shoulder roast, approximately 3 1/2-4 pounds
- 1 1/2 tsp. fine salt
- 1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 2 Tbsp. vegetable oil
- 1 Tbsp. Dijon mustard
- 2 tsp. caraway seeds, lightly crushed
- 3 garlic cloves, finely minced
- 2 large yellow onions, cut into wedges
- 2 medium carrots, peeled and cut into thick pieces
- 2 1/2 cups low-sodium chicken broth, plus more as needed
- 1 bay leaf

For the gravy

- 2 Tbsp. cornstarch
- 2 Tbsp. cold water
- Additional salt and pepper, as needed

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat the oven to 325 degrees.
2. Pat the pork dry. Trim away any unusually thick deposits of exterior fat, leaving a thin layer.
3. Season the roast with salt and pepper.
4. Heat the oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat.
5. Brown the pork on all sides, allowing approximately three minutes per side.
6. Transfer the roast to a plate.
7. Reduce the heat to medium. Add the onions and carrots to the pot and cook for five minutes.
8. Combine the mustard, crushed caraway and garlic in a small bowl.
9. Spread the mixture over the browned roast.
10. Pour the broth into the Dutch oven, scraping the bottom to loosen the browned bits.
11. Return the pork to the pot and add the bay leaf. The liquid should reach approximately one-third of the way up the meat. Add more broth if necessary.
12. Bring the liquid to a gentle simmer.
13. Cover and transfer the pot to the oven.
14. Cook for approximately 2 1/2-3 1/2 hours, checking occasionally to make sure liquid remains in the pot.
15. When the meat is nearly fork-tender, remove the lid and continue cooking for approximately 20-30 minutes.
16. The roast is ready when a fork enters easily and the meat yields with little resistance. Continue cooking if it remains firm.
17. Transfer the pork to a cutting board. Cover loosely and let it rest for 20 minutes.
18. Strain the cooking liquid into a heat-safe container. Discard the bay leaf and reserve the vegetables separately, if desired.
19. Skim excess fat from the liquid.
20. Measure approximately 2 cups of the strained liquid into a saucepan. Add broth if needed.
21. Mix the cornstarch with the cold water until smooth.
22. Bring the cooking liquid to a simmer. Whisk in the cornstarch mixture a little at a time until the gravy reaches the desired thickness.
23. Simmer for one to two minutes. Taste and adjust the seasoning.
24. Slice the pork across the grain or separate it into serving pieces. Serve with the gravy.

German kitchen note

Pork shoulder needs time to become tender. Do not substitute pork loin and follow the same long cooking schedule.

Food-safety note

Whole pork roasts must reach at least 145 degrees and rest for at least three minutes. For this shoulder preparation, continue cooking beyond that minimum until the meat becomes tender; reaching the safe minimum does not mean the braising process is finished.

Serving suggestion

Serve with bread dumplings, pan gravy and a crisp green salad.

Savory stuffed cabbage rolls

Kohlrouladen

Makes: 8 cabbage rolls
Serves: 4-6
Preparation time: 35 minutes
Cooking time: Approximately 1 1/2 hours

Softened cabbage leaves make practical wrappers for a seasoned filling of beef and pork.

The rolls are browned, then gently braised in broth. A small amount of tomato paste adds depth to the gravy without turning it into a heavy tomato sauce.

Meier's historic cookbook includes a similar preparation of meat-filled cabbage leaves, rolled, tied and browned before finishing with gravy.

INGREDIENTS

For the cabbage and filling

- 1 large head green cabbage, approximately 3 pounds
- 1/2 cup plain dry breadcrumbs
- 1/4 cup whole milk
- 1 pound ground beef
- 1/2 pound ground pork
- 1 large egg
- 1 medium yellow onion, divided
- 1 Tbsp. Dijon mustard
- 2 Tbsp. chopped fresh parsley
- 1 tsp. fine salt
- 1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

For the braising liquid and gravy

- 2 Tbsp. vegetable oil
- 1 Tbsp. tomato paste
- 2 cups low-sodium beef broth, plus more as needed
- 1/2 tsp. caraway seeds, optional
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 Tbsp. cornstarch
- 1 Tbsp. cold water
- Additional salt and pepper, as needed

DIRECTIONS

1. Bring a large pot of water to a gentle boil. Leave enough room for the cabbage without causing the pot to overflow.
2. Remove any damaged outer leaves. Carefully cut around and remove the core.
3. Lower the cabbage into the water. Simmer for approximately five minutes.
4. Use tongs to loosen and remove softened outer leaves. Continue until you have eight large leaves, returning the cabbage to the water as needed.
5. Drain the leaves and let them cool enough to handle. Reserve the remaining cabbage for another meal.
6. Shave down the thick central rib of each leaf without cutting through it.
7. Combine the breadcrumbs and milk in a large bowl. Let them stand for five minutes.
8. Finely grate half the onion and finely chop the other half.
9. Add the grated onion, beef, pork, egg, mustard, parsley, salt and pepper to the soaked breadcrumbs.
10. Mix gently until evenly combined.
11. Divide the filling into eight portions.
12. Place one portion near the stem end of each cabbage leaf. Fold the sides inward and roll the leaf around the filling.
13. Secure each roll with food-safe kitchen twine or a toothpick.
14. Heat the oil in a wide, deep skillet or braising pan over medium heat.
15. Brown the rolls in batches, beginning seam-side down. Turn carefully, then transfer them to a plate.
16. Add the chopped onion to the pan. Cook for approximately four minutes.
17. Stir in the tomato paste and cook for one minute.
18. Add the broth, caraway seeds and bay leaf. Scrape the bottom of the pan to loosen the browned bits.
19. Return the cabbage rolls to the pan in a single layer. Add a little broth if needed to bring the liquid approximately halfway up the rolls.
20. Cover and simmer gently for approximately 50-60 minutes, or until the cabbage is tender and the center of the filling reaches 165 degrees.
21. Transfer the rolls to a serving dish. Remove all twine or toothpicks.
22. Discard the bay leaf.
23. Mix the cornstarch and cold water. Stir into the simmering braising liquid.
24. Cook for one to two minutes, or until lightly thickened. Adjust the seasoning and spoon the gravy over the rolls.

German kitchen note

Choose a cabbage with large, flexible outer leaves. Small tears can be patched with a second piece of softened cabbage before rolling.

Serving suggestion

Serve with boiled potatoes or thick slices of bread to catch the gravy.



German bread dumplings with parsley

Semmelknödel

Makes: Approximately 8 dumplings
Serves: 4-6
Preparation time: 20 minutes
Resting time: 25 minutes
Cooking time: Approximately 30 minutes

Bread dumplings turn yesterday's rolls into a side dish worth planning a meal around. They are especially associated with Bavarian cooking, where they accompany pork roast and other dishes with gravy. This version uses crusty white rolls, milk, eggs, onion and parsley. The mixture should hold together without becoming a stiff dough.

INGREDIENTS

- 10 ounces day-old crusty white bread rolls, cut into small cubes
- 1 cup whole milk, warmed
- 2 Tbsp. unsalted butter
- 1 small yellow onion, finely diced
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 2 Tbsp. chopped fresh parsley
- 1/2 tsp. fine salt, plus more for the cooking water
- 1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1/8 tsp. ground nutmeg
- 2-4 Tbsp. plain dry breadcrumbs, only if needed
- Additional milk, only if needed

DIRECTIONS

1. Place the bread cubes in a large bowl.
2. Pour the warm milk evenly over the bread. Toss gently and let it stand for 15 minutes.
3. Melt the butter in a small skillet over medium heat.
4. Add the onion and cook for approximately five minutes, or until softened. Let it cool slightly.
5. Add the onion and butter to the bread mixture.
6. Once the mixture is lukewarm rather than hot, add the eggs, parsley, salt, pepper and nutmeg.
7. Mix gently with clean hands, pressing enough to combine the ingredients while leaving some bread texture.
8. Let the mixture rest for 10 minutes.
9. Bring a wide pot of lightly salted water to a boil, then reduce it to a very gentle simmer.
10. Shape a small, walnut-sized test dumpling. Lower it into the water and simmer for approximately five minutes to check whether it holds together.
11. If it breaks apart, add breadcrumbs to the remaining mixture 1 tablespoon at a time. Let the mixture rest briefly before testing again.
12. If the mixture is dry and crumbly, add milk 1 tablespoon at a time.
13. With damp hands, shape the mixture into approximately eight dumplings. Smooth the surfaces without packing them excessively.
14. Lower the dumplings into the barely simmering water. Work in batches if the pot is crowded.
15. Cook for approximately 20-25 minutes, turning gently once. The centers should be set rather than wet and should reach at least 160 degrees because the mixture contains eggs.
16. Lift out the dumplings with a slotted spoon. Drain briefly and serve warm.

German kitchen note

Keep the water below a rolling boil. Rough boiling can damage the dumplings before their centers have set.

Serving suggestion

Serve with pork gravy or the mushroom cream sauce that follows.

Mushrooms in parsley cream sauce

Rahmchampignons

Serves: 4 as a main dish with dumplings or 6 as a side
Preparation time: 15 minutes
Cooking time: Approximately 30 minutes

A pan of browned mushrooms makes a satisfying companion to bread dumplings.

Cream, broth and a little lemon juice bring the sauce together without hiding the mushrooms' flavor.

Mushrooms prepared with butter, cream and a small amount of flour also appear in Meier's historic German cookbook.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 1/2 pounds cremini or white button mushrooms
- 3 Tbsp. unsalted butter, divided
- 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil, divided
- 1 medium yellow onion, finely diced
- 1 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
- 3/4 cup low-sodium vegetable broth
- 3/4 cup heavy cream
- 1/2 tsp. fine salt, plus more as needed
- 1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tsp. fresh lemon juice, plus more to taste
- 2 Tbsp. chopped fresh parsley

DIRECTIONS

1. Clean the mushrooms, trim the stems and cut the mushrooms into thick slices.
2. Heat 1 tablespoon of butter and half the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat.
3. Add half the mushrooms in an even layer.
4. Let them cook briefly before stirring. Continue cooking for approximately five to seven minutes, or until their released moisture evaporates and they begin to brown.
5. Transfer them to a bowl.
6. Repeat with another tablespoon of butter, the remaining oil and the remaining mushrooms.
7. Reduce the heat to medium. Add the final tablespoon of butter and the onion.
8. Cook for approximately four to five minutes, or until softened.
9. Sprinkle in the flour. Stir for one minute.
10. Gradually add the broth, stirring to prevent lumps.
11. Stir in the cream, salt and pepper.
12. Bring to a gentle simmer. Return the mushrooms and any collected juices to the skillet.
13. Simmer for approximately five minutes, or until the sauce lightly coats a spoon.
14. Stir in the lemon juice and parsley.
15. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Add a little broth if the sauce becomes too thick.

German kitchen note

Brown the mushrooms in batches rather than crowding them into one pan. Letting their moisture evaporate before adding the cream gives the finished sauce more flavor.

Serving suggestion

Spoon over warm bread dumplings. For a simpler supper, serve over thick slices of toasted bread.

Baked apples with almonds and raisins

Bratäpfel

Serves: 6
Preparation time: 20 minutes
Baking time: Approximately 40-55 minutes
Resting time: 10 minutes

A baked apple needs no elaborate decoration.

Its filling becomes fragrant with cinnamon and orange zest, while the fruit softens enough to eat with a spoon. This version uses almonds and raisins, with a little apple juice in the baking dish to keep the pan from drying out.

INGREDIENTS

- 6 medium, firm baking apples, such as Braeburn, Pink Lady or Honeycrisp
- 4 Tbsp. unsalted butter, softened
- 3 Tbsp. packed light brown sugar
- 1/3 cup finely chopped almonds
- 1/3 cup raisins
- 1 tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp. finely grated orange zest
- Pinch of salt
- 3/4 cup unsweetened apple juice
- Additional water, as needed
- Vanilla ice cream or lightly sweetened whipped cream, for serving, optional

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat the oven to 375 degrees.
2. Wash and dry the apples.
3. Use an apple corer or small knife to remove the cores from the top, leaving approximately 1/2 inch of flesh intact at the bottom.
4. Widen each opening slightly to make room for the filling.
5. In a small bowl, combine the softened butter, brown sugar, almonds, raisins, cinnamon, orange zest and salt.
6. Divide the filling among the apples, pressing it gently into the openings.
7. Arrange the apples upright in a baking dish large enough to hold them without crowding.
8. Pour the apple juice into the bottom of the dish, not over the filling.
9. Cover loosely with foil and bake for 20 minutes.
10. Remove the foil and continue baking for approximately 20-35 minutes, or until the apples are tender when pierced with a small knife.
11. Check the pan occasionally. Add a little water if the liquid is nearly gone.
12. Spoon some of the pan juices over the apples.
13. Let them rest for 10 minutes before serving. The filling will be very hot.

German kitchen note

Apple size and variety affect the baking time. Begin checking early and remove individual apples when tender rather than allowing them to collapse while waiting for the others.

Serving suggestion

Serve warm with a small scoop of vanilla ice cream or a spoonful of whipped cream.



Chocolate-dipped hazelnut triangles

Nussecken

Makes: 24 triangles
Preparation time: 30 minutes
Baking time: Approximately 35-40 minutes total

Cooling and setting time: Approximately 2 hours

Nussecken combine a pastry base, a thin layer of preserves and a nut topping. Chocolate finishes the corners or edges. This version is sized for a 9-by-13-inch pan and cut into small triangles suitable for a dessert tray or a package of homemade treats.

INGREDIENTS

For the pastry base

- 1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 tsp. baking powder
- 1/4 tsp. fine salt
- 8 Tbsp. unsalted butter, softened
- 1/3 cup granulated sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract

For the topping

- 1/3 cup apricot preserves
- 6 Tbsp. unsalted butter
- 1/2 cup packed light brown sugar
- 2 Tbsp. water
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 2 cups finely chopped hazelnuts
- Pinch of salt
- For finishing
- 4 ounces semisweet or dark chocolate, finely chopped

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat the oven to 350 degrees.
2. Lightly grease a 9-by-13-inch metal baking pan. Line it with parchment paper, leaving an overhang on two sides.
3. Whisk together the flour, baking powder and salt.
4. In a separate bowl, beat the softened butter and granulated sugar until combined.
5. Beat in the egg and vanilla.
6. Add the flour mixture. Mix just until a soft dough forms.
7. Press the dough evenly into the prepared pan.
8. Bake for approximately 12 minutes, or until the surface is set but still pale.
9. Meanwhile, combine the topping butter, brown sugar and water in a saucepan.
10. Heat gently, stirring, until the butter melts and the sugar dissolves.
11. Bring to a brief simmer, then remove from the heat.
12. Stir in the vanilla, hazelnuts and pinch of salt. Let the mixture cool for approximately five minutes.
13. Spread the apricot preserves in a thin layer over the warm pastry base.
14. Spoon the nut mixture over the preserves and spread it evenly.
15. Return the pan to the oven. Bake for approximately 23-28 minutes, or until the topping is bubbling and the edges are golden brown.
16. Set the pan on a wire rack and let it cool for approximately 30 minutes.
17. Lift the slab from the pan using the parchment.
18. While still slightly warm, cut it into 12 rectangles. Cut each rectangle diagonally to make 24 triangles.

19. Let the pieces cool completely before handling further.
20. Melt the chocolate in a heat-safe bowl set over gently simmering water. Do not let the bottom of the bowl touch the water.
21. Dip one corner of each triangle into the chocolate, or drizzle chocolate over the pieces.
22. Place on parchment paper and let the chocolate set completely.

German kitchen note
Chop the nuts finely enough to make the topping easy to cut, but do not grind all of them into a paste.

Serving suggestion
Arrange on a platter with coffee or tea. When sharing, include an ingredient label identifying the hazelnuts.

Glazed German spice cookies

Pfeffernüsse

Makes: Approximately 40 cookies
Preparation time: 30 minutes
Chilling time: At least 2 hours
Baking time: 12-15 minutes per batch
Cooling and glazing time: Approximately 1 1/2 hours
Pfeffernüsse are small spice cookies prepared in numerous variations, including versions finished with a sugar glaze. This adaptation combines honey, brown sugar and warm spices. A small amount of pepper adds another layer of flavor rather than pronounced heat.

INGREDIENTS

For the cookies
- 2 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 tsp. baking soda
- 1/2 tsp. baking powder
- 1/2 tsp. fine salt
- 1 tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp. ground ginger
- 1/4 tsp. ground cloves
- 1/4 tsp. ground nutmeg
- 1/4 tsp. finely ground black pepper
- 6 Tbsp. unsalted butter
- 1/2 cup honey
- 1/3 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 Tbsp. whole milk

For the glaze
- 1 1/2 cups powdered sugar
- 2-3 Tbsp. hot water
- 1/4 tsp. vanilla extract

DIRECTIONS

1. Whisk together the flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, nutmeg and pepper.
2. Combine the butter, honey and brown sugar in a small saucepan.
3. Warm over low heat, stirring, until the butter melts and the mixture is smooth. Do not boil.
4. Transfer the mixture to a large heat-safe bowl. Let it cool until lukewarm.
5. Whisk in the egg, vanilla and milk.
6. Add the dry ingredients. Stir until a uniform dough forms.
7. Cover and refrigerate for at least two hours, or until firm enough to shape.
8. Heat the oven to 350 degrees.
9. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.
10. Divide the dough into approximately 40 portions and roll into small balls, about 1 inch across.
11. Arrange the balls approximately 2 inches apart on the baking sheets.
12. Bake one sheet at a time for 12-15 minutes, or until the cookies are lightly browned underneath and set around the edges.
13. Let them stand on the baking sheet for five minutes, then transfer to a wire rack.
14. Allow the cookies to cool completely.
15. Sift the powdered sugar into a bowl.
16. Stir in 2 tablespoons of hot water and the vanilla. Add additional water a little at a time until the glaze is thick but spreadable.
17. Dip the top of each cookie into the glaze or brush the glaze over the surface.
18. Return the cookies to the rack and let the coating dry completely before storing.

German kitchen note
Measure the cloves and pepper carefully. Small amounts give the dough character without overwhelming the honey and cinnamon.

Serving suggestion
Serve with coffee, tea or warm milk. Pack only after the glaze has dried so the cookies do not stick together.

A German winter table in Cullman
A winter meal does not need to include every dish in this collection.

A pot of potato soup and a loaf of bread are enough for a weeknight supper.

For a longer Sunday meal, pair the pork roast with bread dumplings and finish with baked apples.

The mushroom sauce and dumplings can stand on their own as a meatless main course when prepared with vegetable broth.

The sweets belong to another kind of gathering: an afternoon with the oven on, a cooling rack on the counter and someone nearby to help with the chocolate.

A good collection of recipes should make room for all of those occasions.

There should be something for the cook who has an hour and something for the cook who enjoys spending an afternoon in the kitchen.

There should also be room for another serving.

Making something worth sharing
A small package of homemade baking can be as thoughtful as an elaborate gift.

Choose a recipe, prepare it carefully and let the finished pieces cool completely before packing them.

Include the recipe name and a list of ingredients. Add a handwritten note explaining why you chose it.

Perhaps the recipient enjoys hazelnuts. Perhaps the smell of cinnamon reminds you of a shared holiday. Perhaps a neighbor simply deserves something pleasant at the end of a long week.

The food gives you a reason to knock on the door.

The visit may be what is remembered.

Let the next cook stand beside you
Some parts of cooking are difficult to explain with measurements alone.

A dough can be soft without being wet. An onion can be ready before it begins to brown. A cabbage leaf can be tender enough to fold but still strong enough to hold its filling.

Those are useful things to learn beside another cook.

Invite someone to help shape the dumplings, fill the apples or dip the nut triangles in chocolate.

Let them ask questions. Let them see what happens when the pan is too crowded or the dough needs another spoonful of milk.

Write down the adjustments that worked.

A recipe becomes more useful with those observations, and a family cookbook becomes more personal with each addition.

May these dishes bring warmth to winter evenings, something generous to the table and a few new recipes worth making again.

Guten Appetit!

Food-safety note
Refrigerate perishable leftovers within two hours, or within one hour when the surrounding temperature is above 90 degrees. Divide large quantities into shallow containers rather than leaving a deep pot to cool on the counter.

Keep the refrigerator at 40 degrees or below. Use most cooked leftovers within three to four days or freeze them. Reheat leftovers to 165 degrees.

Editor's source note
The winter recipes in "From Cullman's German Kitchens" are modern German-style adaptations.

Lina Meier's "The Art of German Cooking and Baking," published in 1922, provided historical reference for preparations including potato soup, pork roast, meat-filled cabbage leaves, mushrooms with cream and yeast breads.

The work is available through Project Gutenberg and is in the public domain in the United States. Its historical food-handling and preservation instructions are not presented here as current guidance.



LOCAL SPOTLIGHT / OUTDOOR LEARNING

Critter Crew

The Critter Crew is seen during their "Back-to-School Nature Quest."

PHOTO: CHASADY WOODS / THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

BY CHASADY WOODS / chasady@cullmantribune.com

The Critter Crew has worked its way from a growing love of natural science to an important stepping stone for community involvement. Cassidy Wright and Brianna Horton officially launched the organization in 2026 and have since held several educational programs and events.

"Critter Crew exists to spark curiosity about the natural world, building bridges between wildlife and our community," they explained.

Through their programs they offer a chance for kids to be kids, exploring and experiencing a playful childhood beyond screens and algorithmic content.

The goal of the Crew is to inspire young minds to understand the significance within ecosystems, wildlife and the uniqueness of life on Earth every day. These are the young people who will grow up to not only appreciate the world, but also protect it.

There is nothing too big or too small to be observed. In their August 2026 "Back-to-School Nature Quest" the Crew ventured out around Sportsman Lake Park seeking items on their Nature Bingo Card. Some of the items included yellow flowers, cicada shells, a line of marching ants, feathers and more. Those who achieved bingo received a prize at the end, but in the end everyone who participated was a winner.

Wright noted that whether they are overbooked or just have one person show up, if they can inspire one person, then it is a job well done.

Critter Crew's priority through these programs is the impact of hands-on interaction and the everlasting curiosity that is encouraged.

FIELD NOTES

"Critter Crew exists to spark curiosity about the natural world, building bridges between wildlife and our community."

— CRITTER CREW



CULLMAN TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Critter Crew program participants take part in a frog and toad race.

During week two of their Tales & Tails Reading Program in July 2026, the Critter Crew brought frog- and toad-themed elements such as books, activities and several amphibious ambassadors.

Though what stood out was the checklist the attendees were sent home with. They were encouraged to seek out the natural aspects featured in the reading program at their own homes. They were sent home with a challenge to explore and the tools to be a kid.

One of the challenges tasked the children with telling a friend frog and toad facts they learned that day, which encouraged socialization. They were also assigned to listen for frog or toad calls and count how many jumps it took them to cross their yards.

How often have you stood outside to listen for the sound of frogs or watch for lightning bugs? The Critter Crew gives value to the things that we used to hold dear and inspires these things to be valued once more.

"Whether we're exploring habitats, discussing conservation or introducing you to one of our wildlife ambassadors, our goal is to make science meaningful, interactive and unforgettable," they stated in an interview with The Tribune.

Wright holds a Master of Science in Biology, with academic and professional experience spanning zoology, botany, mycology, cellular biology, microscopy and ecology.

Horton channels her interests in sustainability and environmental stewardship - such as recycling - into creative, hands-on learning experiences. Her innovative approach helps transform scientific concepts into engaging and memorable activities.

The Critter Crew wrote the following messages about where curiosity meets critters:

Cassidy Wright

Although Critter Crew has only been official for a short time, the support we have received from our community has meant more to us than we could ever express. When we first began, we would have been happy to share our love of natural science and STEAM with even one person willing to stop, listen and learn. We never imagined how quickly that small hope would grow.

Today, we find ourselves scheduling more events, meeting more families and reaching more students who are eager to discover the world around them. What started as a simple desire to educate has grown into an opportunity to create meaningful experiences, spark curiosity, and help educate our local community.

We are incredibly grateful to everyone who has supported us, attended our events, encouraged our vision and helped make this journey possible. Critter Crew is still growing, but every person we reach reminds us why we started. We are so excited for all that is still ahead!

Here at Critter Crew, we have several wildlife ambassadors, each with their own unique story that led them to us. Out of all of these critters, the one dearest to me is the one that started it all, Happy, which is a piebald ball python. He is named Happy because he has a smiley face design hidden in his pattern.

Happy was the first critter I welcomed into my life all thanks to one of the most important people to me, Max, whose memory I carry every day. Happy holds a special place in my heart because Max is no longer with us, but I have Happy to remind me of where my journey began.

Happy has become much more than my favorite animal as he is the favorite among many of our supporters, including mine and Max's family who regularly support Critter Crew at events and help us reach more people in our community! Happy is a symbol of a very special connection between so many people who have been part of the journey.

My love for all things natural science and STEAM started when I was younger by just being outside and noticing the beauty in biology. Most people live such a fast paced life, but when we slow down and take the time to look closely, we discover so many wonderful aspects of life that open the door to something much bigger and more beautiful. There are moments in studying natural science that truly take your breath away. For instance, looking at the night sky and noticing the glow of aurora borealis, watching cells divide beneath a microscope, seeing the colorful scales of a butterfly, or noticing the way red hair catches in the sunlight. I've come to realize that those small moments can lead to some of the most incredible memories. There is so much happening around us that we miss simply because we aren't looking for it.

Above all, we are grateful to God for every opportunity He has placed »

before us and every person and critter He has brought into our journey. We pray that Critter Crew continues to remind everyone of the wonder found in God's creation.

Brianna Horton

Critter Crew has grown so much more than we ever thought possible in just 10 months. What started as an idea to combine my love of animals, science and teaching has grown into something that has become such a meaningful part of our lives.

We are incredibly blessed to have friends, family and our community supporting us from the very beginning. We truly wouldn't be where we are today without them!

One of the most rewarding parts has been seeing how excited kids get when they are given the opportunity to learn through hands-on experiences. Watching a child who may have been nervous about a critter becoming curious and start asking questions is exactly why we do what we do. We have some big goals for the Critter Crew, and we can't wait to see where this journey takes us!

Out of all of our critters, Nagini would have to be my favorite. She originally belonged to my grandfather and was surrendered to us when he could no longer care for her, so she has a very special place in my heart.

She also has such a great personality. She is incredibly curious, loves being out and about and always seems interested in what is going on around her. She has definitely become one of our little ambassadors and has a "big" way of getting people's attention (along with Happy) and making them curious about snakes.

I also love that all of our ambassadors have their own stories. They were rescued or surrendered, and now they have a safe home while helping us teach others about science, conservation and compassion.

I have always enjoyed science, from chemistry to biology and everything in between. I've always been fascinated by the natural world and the little things people often overlook, whether it's an animal's unique adaptations or how different parts of an ecosystem work together. I have also always wanted to be a teacher, so Critter Crew has given me a way to bring both of those passions together!

What I love most is that we can make science hands-on and exciting through experiments, STEAM activities, nature exploration and our animal ambassadors. I want kids to leave our programs looking at the world around them a little differently and realizing that science isn't just something they learn in a classroom, it's happening all around them. Ultimately, I hope Critter Crew sparks curiosity and encourages people to keep asking, "Why?"

EXPLORE CRITTER CREW

Learn more about the Critter Crew at www.crittercrewedu.org.

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COMMUNITY MATTERS STUDENT FEATURE

Khloie Heald

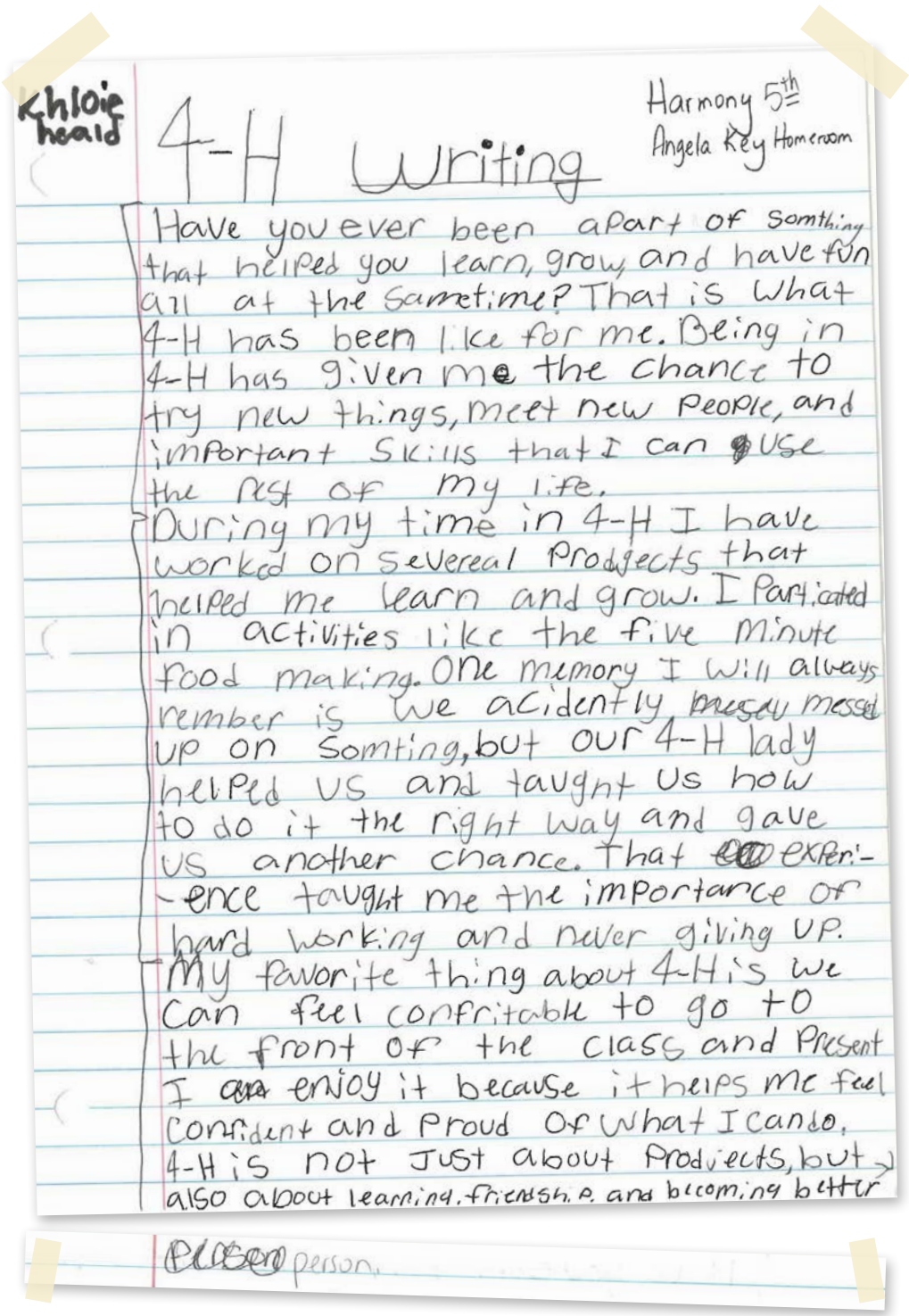
A Harmony School fifth-grader on what 4-H has taught her

BY GAUGE DAY
gauge@cullmantribune.com

With another edition of Community Matters comes another opportunity to highlight the work of an outstanding student in the Cullman community. This edition, The Cullman Tribune is proud to feature a report by Khloie Heald, a fifth-grade student at Harmony School, selected by Cullman County 4-H Extension Agent Kerri Roberts.

Through this ongoing feature, Community Matters aims to recognize local 4-H students by sharing their writing and experiences. The goal is to give young authors a platform to share their voices while highlighting the lessons, personal growth and opportunities that come through their involvement in 4-H.

"Khloie's report highlighted the impact a caring adult leader can have on youth," shared 4-H Extension Agent Kerri Roberts. "Agent Assistant Daphne Gilmore has a true heart for others and it is evident that Khloie felt that welcoming and helpful quality. I also love that Khloie noted, '4-H is not just about projects but is also about learning, friendship and being a better person.' 4-H is committed to making our youth Beyond Ready for their future."



Khloie heald

4-H Writing

Harmony 5th
Angela Key Homeroom

Have you ever been apart of somthing that helped you learn, grow and have fun all at the same time? That is what 4-H has been like for me. Being in 4-H has given me the chance to try new things, meet new people, and important skills that I can use the rest of my life.

During my time in 4-H I have worked on severeal Projects that helped me learn and grow. I Participated in activities like the five minute food making. One memory I will always remember is we acidently messed up on somting, but our 4-H lady helped us and taught us how to do it the right way and gave us another chance. That exper-ence taught me the importance of hard working and never giving UP.

My favorite thing about 4-H is we can feel confritable to go to the front of the class and Present I enjoy it because it helps me feel confident and proud of what I can do.

4-H is not just about Projects, but also about learning, friendship and being a better person.

KERRI ROBERTS

The original copy of Khloie Heald's student report

By Khloie Heald

Fifth grade, Angela Key's homeroom, Harmony School · 4-H: Mrs. Roberts

In Khloie's words

Have you ever been a part of something that helped you learn, grow and have fun all at the same time? That is what 4-H has been like for me. Being in 4-H has given me the chance to try new things, meet new people, and important skills that I can use the rest of my life.

During my time in 4-H I have worked on several projects that helped me learn and grow. I participated in activities like the five minute food making. One memory I will always remember is we accidentally messed up on something, but our 4-H lady helped us and taught us how to do it the right way and gave us another chance. That experience taught me the importance of hard working and never giving up.

My favorite thing about 4-H is we can feel comfortable to go to the front of the class and present. I enjoy it because it helps me feel confident and proud of what I can do. 4-H is not just about projects, but also about learning, friendship and becoming a better person.

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COMMUNITY / A PERSONAL STORY

'I never knew so many people cared'



BRAD STEELE

Karlie Day, on the day of her surprise

BY GAUGE DAY / gauge@cullmantribune.com

On Aug. 23, my wife got the surprise of a lifetime. After 35 radiation treatments, five surgeries and more pain than I care to remember, Karlie would finally get some of the rest and rejuvenation she desperately needed. But let me set the stage first.

Late last year, my wife's ability to breathe through one side of her nose slowly began to decline. She isn't someone who typically has sinus issues, so we knew something probably wasn't right. After a checkup, we were told a polyp was blocking the airway in one nostril. Surgery would follow in two months.

Two months passed. It got worse. We showed up for surgery.

Afterward, the doctor told us he wasn't able to remove everything and that what he found wasn't normal. It needed to be biopsied.

Off to Birmingham we went. It was there that our lives changed.

Cancer.

The air felt like it was sucked out of the room. No one prepares you for the moment you hear that word. She is a young, healthy 33-year-old. My mind couldn't wrap itself around what I had just heard. It was the last thing we expected. But there was hope yet.



GAUGE DAY/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

The hands behind the remodel

From what they could preliminarily see, it was "in situ," or Stage 0. We still had an MRI ahead of us, but we had hope. We scheduled another surgery to remove the rest of what we now knew was a tumor, along with the surrounding tissue.

We had the MRI, hit the road for the beach the week before surgery and never heard anything different. Then we came home.

We showed up for surgery. Karlie was being prepped when the doctor came in and began explaining that surgery would be different for Stage 4 cancer.

Stage 4?

"Sir, Stage 4? We thought this was Stage 0?"

Turns out, even in the medical world, people are human and make mistakes. Somewhere along the way, no one had told us that the MRI showed Karlie's tumor was skull-based and had invaded nearby nerves.

We went from Stage 0 to Stage 4 in about five minutes, right before my wife was supposed to be wheeled away for surgery.

I wanted to be angry. Every part of me did. But my wife needed me to love her and comfort her first.

And here we were again, our world being rocked. Sharing the news with her mother, who was waiting in the lobby, was devastating. I questioned God in that moment more than I probably ever have.

"Why?" It was the best I could come up with.

The surgery was successful, and at our follow-up, we were told there was no evidence of remaining cancer. Then came the next part of the fight.

Radiation. No chemotherapy, but extensive dental work to prepare for radiation because of where the cancer was located. Of everything she endured, the dental surgeries and recovery may have been the most painful.

Then radiation began. She lost her sense of taste and some of her smell. There was hair loss, fatigue, headaches, jaw pain and more.

But she didn't skip a beat. She made every ballgame, every church service, every school function she could. Cancer may have interrupted her life, but she refused to let it take it from her.

And eventually, we arrived at treatment number 35. Her last one.

Karlie rang that bell. I don't know if I've ever seen her smile more beautifully.

And to be honest, that would have been enough for me in that moment. But through clever planning, something I am usually terrible at, greater surprises awaited her.

What she didn't know was that while she had been fighting her battle, myself, alongside her mom, and »

The community that surrounded her

our pastor's wife, Sherry, along with an army of people who love her, were hard at work planning behind the scenes to give her a much-needed surprise. And on Aug. 23, she was about to see just how big that army really was.

For weeks, her mom, Sherry and I had collaborated on how to transform our living room and kitchen without Karlie knowing. Little did she know, throughout the process we were listening, making mental notes of all the "wishes" she had. Wishes that seemed far off before and felt even further away when you're diagnosed with something like cancer.

To know my wife is to know that her taste is anything but "simple."

Fresh coat of paint? Sure. Easy enough for most. But for Karlie and her grand plans? Try "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," where nothing that was there is there anymore. That was the boulder we were going to roll up the mountain. But we had a plan. We had the people. And we got to work.

That Friday morning, I pretended to leave for work like I usually do while Karlie took the kids to school. By the time she got back, I was home waiting with the first surprise: a weekend getaway to Mentone, a place where we've spent many anniversaries together.

Just us. No kids. No guilt. No worries. A chance to rest, eat good food and rejuvenate in God's creation.

She hurriedly packed, frantic about all the things she just knew I had probably forgotten to plan for, as I usually do. She's not wrong. That's how I know the Lord armed me with some supernatural wisdom to make sure I didn't miss anything for once.

We got on our way and made it to Mentone. What a beautiful weekend it was.

Peace was easy to find in the beauty of the nature surrounding us, but even sweeter was seeing some of that peace return to my wife's face.

And I was reminded of something I hadn't even realized we'd lost.

We laughed. A lot.

I hadn't realized how void of laughter our lives had been all those months. How healing laughter can be, especially between the souls of two people who have already seen so much of life together. It was the healing we both needed.

Then Sunday came.

Our remodel surprise happened to coincide with her family reunion, so we had to make that our first stop. I'll be honest, I don't remember much of the reunion because of the anticipation of getting home. Internally, I was throwing a party, and I couldn't wait much longer.

We feasted as one does at a family reunion, socialized, played some songs and finally, we headed home.

Her mom booked it to the house ahead of us. I made sure we stopped at a gas station or two along the way to give everyone enough time to get into place.

Fifteen minutes out. I hope she loves this.

Ten minutes out. I wonder if everyone will be there?

As we crested the hill by our house, Karlie got her first sign of the surprise, and her first glimpse of the army waiting for her.

Cars lined both sides of the hill. Our U-shaped driveway was packed.

I could already see her eyes getting glossy.

If that had been the entire surprise, I think she would have been content.

We got out and headed toward the door. Through our large living room window, she noticed that a lamp had changed. The jig was up.

"Gauge! What have you guys done?!"

Tears. The sweet kind.

The kind that made five surgeries and 35 radiation treatments feel more like a scar than a wound. A test that was becoming a testimony.

She opened the door to a whole new home.

Gray walls had become a deep green. The accent wall she'd dreamed about was finally a reality. More lights and lamps than I could ever conceive as necessary decorated the room. Her new caramel-colored furniture was in place, accented by the rich colors of the rug underneath.

It looked like the pictures she'd drawn up and the ideas she'd talked about for months.

The wishes that once seemed so distant were here. Tangible. Real. And the joy of seeing them come to life was written all over her face.

But those were the material things. The best part of her surprise was the people. The community that surrounded her.

Her people came out of every nook and cranny to greet her. In all our time living in that house, we'd never had so many people there at once.

Her closest friends who had held her close through it all. Her mother, Patsy, who has been our rock. Her amazing family. The baseball moms who had

The army was always there

poured life into her. Our church family who have prayed and prayed over her. Her extra mother, Sherry, who made so much of this happen. The men who showed up and did their part. And so many others.

Hugs poured in.

And somewhere in the middle of it all, Karlie turned to me and hugged me tight.

"I never knew so many people cared."

Phew. It hit me all at once.

My wife truly didn't realize just how many people loved her. Not because they hadn't shown her. They had.

They had been there from the beginning. They prayed over her and anointed her with oil. They brought care packages. They took our kids to school. They checked in. They encouraged her. They made sure she had what she needed. They stood in her corner through surgery after surgery, treatment after treatment.

And isn't that the nature of the enemy? To use a battle that already feels hopeless in so many ways to isolate you, to make you feel alone and to push you to dwell on the bad instead of seeing the good that's still all around you? To make your burdens yours alone and deceive you into believing no one else can help carry them for you?

I held her and affirmed what seemed so obvious to me.

"Of course this many people care."

It was then that I realized this moment was the real gift.

The trip to Mentone gave us laughter and healing. The remodel brought new life into our home and, in many ways, symbolized the old becoming new.

But the people were never new. The army was always there. They had been all along.

And in this moment, they pulled back the curtain and let her see just how loved she really is. That was the real prize.



GAUGE DAY/THE CULLMAN TRIBUNE

The best sunset in Mentone, Alabama

Cancer takes a lot out of you. It can make your soul feel quiet and because the enemy is a thief of joy, he uses that as a way of clouding our vision until all we can see is that long battle ahead of us. But on that Sunday, Karlie got to see something else.

And maybe that's why I'm sharing our story. To show you what community really is.

It's not always a well-planned weekend in Mentone that ends with cars lining your driveway or a house full of people waiting to see the surprise on your face. In fact, most of the time, it's much quieter than that.

It's the random text you get on your way to radiation that makes you laugh. It's the prayer your best friends' kids say for you when they go to bed at night. It's the care package filled with all your favorite treats, handed to you at a weekend baseball tournament by a bunch of misfit 9-year-olds.

It's a pastor who calls and whispers a prayer over you in the emergency room on a night that was trying to break you. It's a friend sitting quietly beside you when there just isn't much left to say.

It was you, our community, who carried us through some of the hardest months of our lives.

And on that Sunday, you showed up once more. Only this time, you were all standing in the same place.

Cancer had given my wife plenty of reasons to feel beaten down. But when she opened that door, she saw with her own eyes something that had been true from the beginning.

She was never fighting alone.

And all of you gave her a gift that I could never have planned for.

"I never knew so many people cared."

They did, Karlie.

They always did. ■

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CULLMAN
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CITY OF CULLMAN

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Council President Pro-Tem David Moss, Mayor Woody Jacobs,
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