



New Hinds Health Sciences Complex making progress in Rankin County

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Braves announce departure from Pearl after 20 years

By James Osborne

The MS Braves have announced that this, their twentieth year in Pearl at Trustmark Park, will be their last season in Mississippi, and that the Atlanta Braves will be moving the team to Columbus, Georgia.

The announcement was made early this year in a post on social media to the MS Braves fans.

“To our incredible fans- 2024 will be the M-Braves’ final season in Pearl, Mississippi. The Double-A affiliate of the Atlanta Braves will be relocating to Columbus, Georgia, as of the start of the 2025 season. We want to thank Pearl, the surrounding Jackson community and the state of Mississippi for the incredible support for the franchise over the past nineteen years. We have loved creating memories with you at Trustmark Park, and we look forward to bringing you an amazing 2024 season. The M-Braves will be commemorating the 20th season at Trustmark Park throughout the sixty-nine-game home schedule in 2024, beginning with Opening Day on Tuesday, April 9, vs. Biloxi. We are hopeful that this is not the end of professional baseball in Pearl, and our organization will support any efforts to bring a team to Trustmark Park in the future.”

The City of Pearl has said that collaborative efforts were made this past year by the City government, County, and state officials to keep the team in Pearl. Legislation was passed to help create a favorable environment for the Brave’s ownership, Diamond Baseball Holdings. Officials said that the collaboration sought to enhance the local community, foster economic growth and solidify the team’s presence in Mississippi.

“We worked diligently with Spectrum Capital, State and County leaders, as well as Diamond Baseball Holdings, to come to an agreement,” expressed Pearl Mayor Jake Windham. “It is truly unfortunate that, despite our best efforts, the Braves have chosen to take this route.”

“The City of Pearl and its dedicated leaders express their disappointment at the decision made by Diamond Baseball Holdings to relocate the Mississippi Braves. The departure will undoubtedly leave a void in the hearts of local fans, who have supported the team throughout its tenure in Pearl.”

Kathy Deer, executive director of the Pearl Chamber of commerce, said, “We are very sad to see the Mississippi Braves leave Pearl. Over the last twenty years, they have been a huge attraction, drawing 3.4 million fans from all over the state to Pearl, Mississippi. Most of us in this area were Atlanta Braves fans long before the Mississippi Braves were here, so it was a natural fit for us. The baseball games have always been exciting and gave us a chance to watch first class baseball and watch as a total of 166 minor league players go on to the big league through the years. We will miss the economic impact that the Braves made here locally, packing our hotels, restaurants and retail businesses on game days, but we will also miss their dedication to community involvement in our city, chamber and schools. They have been like family members and for that we are very grateful.”

Before the start of the season, the College Baseball Series from Spectrum events returned to Trustmark Park. The college games will started on March 5 and featured Mississippi State University (MSU) versus the University of Southern Mississippi (USM), followed a few weeks later by USM vs. Ole Miss. Set for May 1 will be the Governor’s Cup, Ole Miss vs. MSU. Tickets for the Governor’s Cup game are on sale now, as are the regular Braves season tickets.

Windham and City officials say they are hopeful for the future. “The City of Pearl extends its gratitude to the fans, local businesses and the entire community for their unwavering support of the Mississippi Braves over the years. Despite the team’s departure, the City remains optimistic about the future and is dedicated to fostering a vibrant and thriving community for all its residents.”



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Bill payment assistance available for Atmos customers

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Natural gas bills usually fall when the temperature rises. As residents head towards warmer weather, customers of Atmos are encouraged to manage any past due natural gas balances and get ready for the return of cold air later this fall.

Atmos Energy recently held an energy assistance “blitz” for customers in central Mississippi, where the company donated \$100,000 to assist Mississippians who needed help paying their gas bill.

“The average natural gas bill during the winter is roughly \$100 per month,” said Bobby Morgan, Atmos Energy vice president of public affairs. “So, this money will help a lot of customers.”

The donation is one of hundreds made by Atmos Energy as part of an enterprise-wide Fueling Safe and Thriving Communities drive to invest in educational, literacy, energy assistance, and food security resources across the 1,400 communities the company serves.

“Through our partnership with Atmos Energy, we are united in our commitment to serving and uplifting our community, ensuring that no one is left behind,” said Major Timothy Delaney.

Central District PSC Commissioner De’Keither Stamps was also on hand for the Blitz. His office has been instrumental in promoting bill payment assistance for residents in central Mississippi.



“I appreciate the efforts and commitment of Atmos Energy and the Salvation Army to assist and support customers who are facing challenges in paying their natural gas bills,” Central District Public Service Commissioner Stamps said. “We realize it takes significant resources to support the elderly, people with disabilities, veterans and families experiencing financial hardship with the funds they need to enjoy reliable and affordable natural gas throughout the year.”

In the past six months, Atmos Energy has contributed a total of \$310,000 in energy assistance dollars to help Mississippians stay warm.

“Helping customers who face financial difficulty is one of the most important things we do as a company,” said Mathew Davidson, Atmos Energy Mississippi Division president. “We believe that families should not have to choose between staying warm and paying for necessities. Partnering with The Salvation Army helps reach the people who most need help. This partnership makes a real difference in our communities.”

Customers may locate an energy assistance agency by visiting atmosenergy.com/assistance or by calling 211.

Atmos Energy encourages customers needing solutions to help with their monthly natural gas expenses to contact Atmos Energy’s customer service team at 888-286-6700 or visit the Account Center at atmosenergy.com/accountcenter.

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Mississippi Main Street hosts Main Street Day at the Capitol

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Main Street Association (MMSA) hosted Main Street Day at the Mississippi State Capitol to celebrate forty years of community and economic development success throughout the state.

The event drew a large crowd of state and local Main Street supporters and legislators. Speakers included Senator Lydia Chassanoff and Representative Jody Steverson, who made remarks as the organization shared its economic impact on the state economy and highlighted ongoing downtown revitalization efforts.

“Main Street is a significant part of the upward economic trajectory in Mississippi, through placemaking and revitalization, turning empty buildings and blighted properties into thriving places of business in our beautiful downtowns,” said Marlo Dorsey, MMSA Board President.

In 2023, Mississippi Main Street’s fifty local Main Street programs helped generate 372 new businesses, 868 new jobs, 71 business expansions, and catalyzed \$78 million in private investment, and \$250 million in public investment, just in the state’s Main Street districts.

2023 MISSISSIPPI MAIN STREET IMPACT

50 local Main Street programs helped with:

372 new businesses generated

868 new jobs created

71 business expansions

\$78 million in private investment catalyzed

\$250 million in public investment

170 rehabilitation projects in downtown districts

139 public improvement projects in downtown districts

704 new downtown residential units

70 new downtown district construction projects

In addition, there were significant projects completed in the downtown districts in 2023, including 170 rehabilitation projects, 139 public improvement projects, 704 new downtown residential units, and 70 new construction projects.

Main Street is a nationwide preservation-based economic development program, with more than 1,200 local Main Street organizations across the United States. Mississippi’s Main Street program began in 1984 and helps create hundreds of new jobs and new businesses each year in downtown districts throughout Mississippi.

MMSA organized the event, which included directors from Main Street organizations all over the state, state and local board members, state and federal legislators, and other statewide partners, who celebrated Main Street and its positive impact on Mississippi communities and small businesses.

“Main Street builds strong local economies through its revitalization work and sends the message that Mississippi is truly ‘open for business,’” said Jim Miller, MMSA Executive Director. “We are thankful for the ongoing support of the Mississippi Legislature.”

Bynum creates artwork for display at Jaquith Nursing Home

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

In 2004, after an automobile accident left him in a wheelchair and with an amputated left arm and limited use of his right arm, Virgil Bynum struggled with depression.

However, he says art has been a positive creative outlet to help him work through his depression and create something beautiful in the process. It allows him to express himself and gives him something to focus on besides his physical body. Art is therapeutic for him physically, mentally, and emotionally.

June McCafferty serves as Bynum’s Social Services representative and observed, “Mr. Bynum uses his ability to paint and express himself through his art as a way to handle the stressors that come with being in his situation. It is very therapeutic for him.”

Originally from Magee, Bynum has been a resident of Jaquith Nursing Home in Rankin County for the past eleven years. The facility is part of the Mississippi State Hospital (MSH), a publicly-funded behavioral health program operated under the direction of the Mississippi Department of Mental Health. The hospital and its associated facilities is located on a 350-acre campus in Whitfield, Mississippi, fifteen miles southeast of Jackson. According to its website at press time, Mississippi State Hospital operates 504 licensed psychiatric beds and is accredited by the Joint Commission. The program also includes 423 licensed nursing home beds and provides a variety of community service programs.

MSH was founded in 1855 and helps the individuals it serves achieve mental wellness by encouraging hope, promoting safety and supporting recovery. The hospital is accredited by the Joint Commission.

Bynum says he enjoys participating in many recreational activities at MSH, but art is his favorite. His love of art goes back to high school, with Bob Ross being his icon for as long as he can remember. He likes to mimic Ross’ painting style and techniques to create multidimensional paintings. Bynum says he used oil-based paints for many years, but, since his accident, he prefers acrylic paint, because it dries faster, which is more conducive of painting while utilizing the hand brace that his paintbrush clicks into.

Bynum says he does not sketch out his paintings beforehand. He begins with a vision in his mind and works quickly to get it down on canvas. He has a knack for blending colors to create the exact hue he is visualizing. He also has good depth perception, which helps him create paintings that have texture and dimension. Bynum uses a variety of brushes and techniques in his painting process. Despite his skills and years of experience, Bynum considers himself a novice artist.

He enjoys creating multiple pieces of artwork each year for the annual Ser-

endipity Art Show and Silent Auction at MSH. But, most recently, he created a large piece of artwork for display on Jaquith Nursing Home, Building 78. Bynum said the painting took him about five hours to complete, and it was a scene that he visualized in his mind and brought to life on canvas.

Ceci Whitehurst, art services supervisor, noted that, “Virgil is very dedicated to attending art classes; he also enjoys painting in his room on his own time, too. He is always open to trying new things with his art; even if it is something he’s not familiar with, he will try it. Despite his physical challenges, he doesn’t let it hold him back. He is very talented, and his artwork is unique. We are very proud of Virgil and his beautiful artwork and love that he enjoys sharing his talent with others.”

Ricky Shelby, art instructor, added, “Virgil’s landscapes have a unique style that he has developed over time with colors, lines and content. He uses his limitations to his advantage, which makes his paintings loose and open.”

Bynum utilizes different styles with different mediums. As a result, his landscape paintings are very different than his portraits. When painting with acrylic, he typically paints peaceful, outdoorsy, nature scenes that include sunsets, cabins, lakes, trees, waterfalls, fences and deer. When using watercolors, he paints a variety of subjects, including portraits and an array of animals.

Former MSH Art Instructor Ron Lindsey reflected, “I taught art on Building 78 for fourteen years. Virgil was the anchor of the group. He almost never missed a class. His talent and imagination was very evident. In between classes, during the week, he would produce impressive amounts of work. He was always well represented at Serendipity. Virgil is a true artist and a gentleman. I very much enjoyed working with him.”

Bynum has a unique and identifiable style that makes him a sought-out artist in the annual Serendipity Art Show and Silent Auction. Serendipity is an annual exhibit and auction featuring artwork created by participants in art classes at Mississippi State Hospital. It is an opportunity for patients and residents to see their art framed and on display, and earn some money when their art is sold during the auction. Serendipity is always held the first Thursday in September. In 2024, it will be held on September 5.

In 2023, the Serendipity Art Calendar made a return appearance to the event and was well-received. It featured artwork created by residents of Jaquith Nursing Home (JNH). Many JNH artists have their artwork listed as part of the Serendipity Art Show, but it was a special honor to have a piece selected to be featured in the calendar. Bynum was among those honored artists.

For more information about Serendipity Art Show and Silent Auction, contact MSH Public Relations at 601-351-8018.



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Virgil Bynum

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USM launching Physician Assistant program at Gulf Park campus

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The University of Southern Mississippi's (USM) new Physician Assistant program, announced last summer, is progressing expeditiously, with plans to matriculate the initial cohort in fall 2025.

The program is being offered at USM's Gulf Park campus in Long Beach, Mississippi.

The University says officials in their College of Nursing and Health Professions have worked tirelessly and strategically to gain accreditation for the program, which will positively impact workforce development throughout the region while delivering graduates who are ready for success in the health-care industry.

Physician Assistant Studies Program Coordinator Chris Tuey explains that the Central Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA) will open its 2024-25 cycle at the end of April. USM's new program can start receiving applications as soon as CASPA opens the cycle.

"We will be doing a rolling admissions process, which allows us to review, interview, and accept candidates anytime during the admission cycle," said Tuey.

Though not yet eligible to receive applications, Tuey notes, "We have been fielding numerous contacts and questions from interested students, many of whom are current USM students or recent graduates."



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Physician assistants use their medical expertise to examine, diagnose and treat patients, working closely with other health care professionals as a team to provide care. And the need for physician assistants in the U.S. has never been greater. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects 26.5 percent employment growth for physician assistants between 2022 and 2032. In that period, an estimated 39,300 jobs are expected to open.

"The physician assistant profession has grown rapidly and continues to do so," said Tuey. "The State of Mississippi was the last to allow PA practice, so there is a lot of need for physician assistants here. The fact that salaries have grown along with the profession is a reward for those who are dedicated enough to choose a profession of service and assistance. Our program will help fill the need for more PAs in the state and nationwide, as well as better healthcare access overall."

USM's PA program will require accreditation by the Accreditation Review Commission on Education for the Physician Assistant (ARC-PA). Classes may begin once the program receives provisional accreditation, which is anticipated by June 2025.

The program has already welcomed its first faculty member with the hiring of Jessica Matthews. Another addition was expected by April 1, and the program has received a verbal commitment from a potential third member to join this summer.

USM hopes to enroll 30 students in the initial cohort. The program will require 27 months to complete, which includes seven continuous terms and a total of 108 semester hours (with 15 months of classroom training and 12 months of clinical training).

Dr. Lachel Story, Dean of USM's College of Nursing and Health Professions, says the rapidly expanding workforce markets along the Gulf Coast provided the impetus for launching the program at Gulf Park.

"Additionally, with our strong military presence in the region, this program can help meet a current need for all of our service branches," said Story. "No in-state school is better positioned to meet these workforce needs on the coast than Southern Miss. We have a long legacy of delivering excellent health professions programs, and most of our students are from Mississippi and stay in the state once they graduate."

To learn more about the Physician Assistant program at USM, contact Emma Mitchell at 228-214-3471 or email: physician.assistant@usm.edu

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Stand Your Ground: A universal lesson from the wilds of South Africa

All photos by Toni Miles

By Toni Miles

A guttural roar jarred me out of sleep, reminding me I was thousands of miles away from home. I threw on the cargo jacket I'd bought for this trip and clumsily laced up my new hiking shoes. A Mississippi Gulf Coast girl at heart, I had to leave my low-heeled, jewel-studded flip-flops behind, at least for a few hours, on this day trip out in the South Africa bush.

I grabbed my handy video camera and sticks (tripod) and rushed out of the safari hut, hoping to catch the majesty of the sun rising, lighting up the glorious mane of the male lion who continued to bellow out his bone-jarring roars, letting everyone within a five-mile radius know not only was he awake, but still king of the wild.

Fortunately, I found the perfect place to set up – thankful for the thin wire fence that separated us on this safari and wildlife rescue reserve for unwanted, neglected, abandoned and abused wildlife, including this lion and his pride.

With somewhat steady hands, barely breathing and just feet away from this four-legged



A lioness throws me a deadly stare, sizing me up. Never was the lesson "Stand Your Ground" more crucial than when on this shoot.

beast, I set up my camera and hit "record." So far, so good, but I decided not to try to press my luck, and left the camera to do its work and catch video of the time lapse of this morning's sunrise.

In an incredible stroke of "luck," which I prefer to call Divine Providence, I had landed the opportunity of a lifetime to work as the "B" utility camera operator (and ultimately to work as a producer and writer) for a national TV wildlife series being filmed in South Africa.

All the research in the world could not have adequately prepared me for the splendor – and very real danger – I would encounter during this once-in-a-lifetime trip, where I would experience memories that would last a lifetime, but, perhaps more importantly, equip me with lessons from the wild that I still carry with me to this day.

Once my time-lapse video of the breath-taking sunrise had wrapped, I hopped onto the back of an open truck trailer and rode with the rescue sanctuary crew members who were heading out – behind the lions' fences – to feed the hungry pride.

Perhaps after more than twenty-five years of working in journalism, including decades in TV news where I survived (and covered) Hurricane Katrina on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 2005, outwitted a group of beauty school students whose instructor had sicked them on me while filming the scene of a drive-by shooting at a gas station next door to their cosmetology school in Jackson, Mississippi, and numerous other close calls while working in the industry, I figured the lions shouldn't pose much of a threat.

As we trekked deeper into the lions' territory and I got a clearer, up-close-and-personal look at these salivating beasts, I started to rethink my calculated decision to venture out on this feeding frenzy.

Trying to multitask – shouldering my trusty video camera in the proper frame and lighting – while silently making yet another plea bargain and promises to God in exchange for saving my life once again – I miraculously managed to get solid video as the crew threw carcasses of cattle that had died of natural causes at a nearby ranch – to the blood-thirsty group.

Witnessing first-hand how the animal kingdom operates by the "Rules of the Wild," the alpha and top-ranking lions fed first, followed later by the lower-ranking ones. Knowing where I stood as a human on the feeding chain, I was just glad I wasn't on the menu, and that they hadn't taken much notice of me.

I breathed a sigh of relief, or maybe I just actually breathed, for the first time since this outdoor adventure began, as we finally rolled away from the wild feast of the beast – but it wasn't over yet.

There were more lions to feed. This time around, we'd have the "safety" of a wire fence as the workers fed the group of lions on the other side.

With a little more confidence, I cautiously approached the fence and tried to gently maneuver the lens of my camera inside the small, square holes formed by the wire fence, so I could get a "clean shot" of the feeding free-for-all.



A simple wire fence like the one seen here is all that separated me from the alpha male lion during a shoot in South Africa.



Taking a much-needed break for play time with one of the rescued lion cubs.

BIG MISTAKE. Thank God, my face was shielded behind my camera and my eyes focused on the viewfinder as I started to roll (record), because, had there not been that barrier, I darn sure might have fallen out of a heart attack, when the alpha male of the pride decided I had dared to trespass on his territory.

I was at a loss for words to adequately describe how utterly terrifying it is, and how your blood literally runs cold, when faced with life-threatening terror, as I was when Alpha Leo decided to give me a good run for my money, or at the very least tried to scare me to death, considering my vulnerable position and the very thin wire fence that separated us from each other.

Yes, I fell backward, but I did not let go of the camera (twenty-plus years of training is hard to break)! So much for the shot. Despite my apparent despair and a need to change my cargo pants, the feeding crew burst out in laughter. Fortunately, at least one person there had a heart. Maddy, who our crew dubbed "The Lion Whisperer," calmly approached me, extended her hand and shared some very valuable advice, at least after the fact.

"You can't show fear," she told me. "Stand your ground."

I dusted myself off, made more bargains with God, pride bruised but determined to get "the shot." I approached the fence and set up the shot once again and rolled. At least I would get my death on video. Maybe it wasn't all in vain. If it bleeds, it leads, right?

Once again, the King of the South African Bush charged me, more agitated this time, grunting and showing his long, sharp incisors, salivating, so close I could smell his rancid breath and definitely feel his extreme displeasure. When I refused to move and stood my ground, he decided to turn and walk around, only to charge me again. Still, I stood. After one more charge, he finally decided he was wasting his time and needed to eat – the chickens, and not me.

And I got my shot.

Little did I know less than twenty-four hours later, I'd face a similar situation while shooting on location in the mountainous and hilly terrain of the African bush, this time around as the show's talent, experienced military veterans, "stalked" some warthogs. As the lone cameraman, I trailed behind them and our guide to get some nice low-angle shots. That's when I heard the snorting.

Slowly, I turned my head to discover a filthy, battle-scarred two-hundred-pound warthog zoned in on me, ready to attack. I quickly did the math and figured I was on my own this time; there was no way the guys dozens of yards ahead of me could help.

Remembering the valuable lesson from my lion encounter just hours earlier, and, once again, making yet more bargains and pleas silently with my Maker, I looked the hairy, angry beast right in the eye and sent a mental message, "You may get me, but you will know you've been in a fight."

It was time to stand my ground, and I did, successfully. Just a few minutes after that stand-off, I caught up with the crew – only for all of us to be vastly outnumbered by a massive group of warthogs that surrounded us at that point. Once again, I prayed – and stood my ground, as did the rest of the crew.

Disaster averted, once again.

Upon return to the States, I offered up thanks for my good fortune and life intact, able to venture in the new territory of writing a season of TV episodes for a wildlife show, which turned out to be a success, but, even more importantly, a very valuable lesson in life.

"Stand Your Ground," turned out to be the title I used for one of the seven episodes. It's something I'd learned about first-hand, and something that's parlayed over into my daily life since.

If we live long enough, all of us will, at some point, find ourselves facing times in our lives where we must decide whether we will stand our ground.

We'll all face predators of all forms – corrupt people, organizations, leaders and other decision-makers who abuse their positions of authority to rob, crush or slander those they are tasked to care for or govern; bullies who threaten our children in the school yard or, worse yet, inside our schools and classrooms; people hellbent on the moral decay of our society, beliefs, families and rights.

Yes, taking a stand can be costly; but, deciding not to do so can be disastrous, deadly and adversely affect not only our lives and generation, but the future of generations to come.

In the wise words of eighteenth-century Irish philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

I hope you decide to take the road less traveled and "stand your ground." I know I am.



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New Hinds Health Sciences Complex making progress in Rankin County



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Dean of Health Sciences Kathy Elliott (left) and Dean of Nursing Wendy Lingle (right) are pictured with the rendering of the new Health Sciences Complex to be built on Hinds' Rankin Campus.

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The new Hinds Community College Health Complex is now under construction just north of the Muse Center. The new facility will be the home of the new nursing school for the college, as well as other curriculum programs.

"We are proud to have this fifty-million-dollar investment in Pearl," said Pearl Mayor Jake Windham.

"This is a big deal for us," said Hinds President Dr. Stephen Vacik. "When I got to Hinds, one of the first things I saw was that we had to do something about our nursing and allied health programs. Now, we can move forward and we can help change lives."

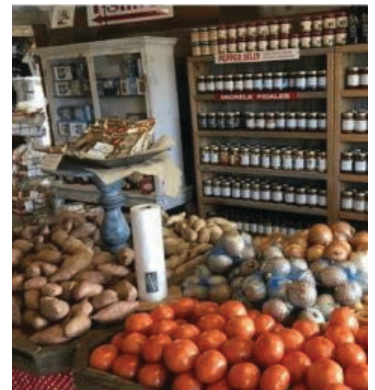
The Health Sciences Complex will be 160,000 square feet and four floors, with three to be immediately occupied when it is built and the fourth to house future growth. It will consolidate programs now housed at the Career Technical Education Building on Greenfield Road in Pearl and the Nursing/Allied Health Center in Jackson, which opened in 1982. The Vicksburg-Warren Campus programs will continue.

"We've been very fortunate to be in a facility we're in right now, but it's no longer adequate to fit the needs," Vacik said. "With our health corridor continuing to move further and further to this area, this is the place to be."

Last year, legislators appropriated \$24 million over two sessions, and Rankin County Supervisors also committed to assisting with the funding.

The new facility will share a parking lot with the Muse Center.

Shady Acres Village is a roadside destination



All photos by Special to The Mississippi Monitor

By Guest Columnist Susan Marquez

If you've driven on Highway 49 in the past forty years, chances are you have noticed Shady Acres Village. Once a small produce stand, the business has grown into much more than a roadside stop. It's a place where travelers can get a scoop of ice cream or an entire meal, as well as gifts, bedding plants, and yes, fresh produce.

Back when times were simpler, a car trip would often include a stop at a roadside fruit stand. With the car loaded up with juicy peaches and strawberries for homemade ice cream, or a watermelon waiting to be iced down once you reached your destination, the fruit stand was a much-anticipated stop while traveling.

When Martha and Tommy Mixon started their small produce stand on Highway 49 in Seminary, they could never have imagined that Shady Acres would become the sprawling roadside attraction it is today.

"They started selling watermelons under a big shade tree," says Katrina Shotts, who serves as general manager of Shady Acres Village. "They had a little honor box where customers would leave their money before taking a melon."

Today, Shady Acres Village has become a destination as much as it is a stop while on the road. The sprawling business features a general store, bakery, café and garden center.

"The Mixons just kept adding small buildings as they were able to," explains Katrina.

The couple eventually sold Shady Acres, and, a few years later, it burned. The Mixons were able to get the land back, and they rebuilt Shady Acres before selling it to Matthew and Julia Pierce, who are the current owners. Katrina has been at Shady Acres since it reopened in 2013.



Shady Acres Village has grown into much more than a roadside stop. It now features a general store, bakery, café and garden center.

The general store features a wide array of made-in-Mississippi products, including rows of Shady Acres branded jams, jellies, pickles and preserves. In the summer, the interior is also filled with mountains of local produce. Depending on the season, there will be tables filled with corn on the cob, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, onions, potatoes, bell peppers, peanuts and pumpkins.

"We sell a lot of fresh vegetables, including bags of shelled peas and beans," says Katrina. "We work with local farmers as much as we can. There is also a muscadine vineyard in the back where people can pick their own muscadine grapes, or they can purchase some inside."

In the bakery, customers can purchase one of Shady Acres' famous cakes, including the decadent Italian cream cake or the Hershey bar cake.

Other goodies from the bakery include pies, cookies, cannolis and candied apples. Local candy makers supply pralines, fudge and other delicacies to satisfy any sweet tooth.

A freezer section offers crawfish and crab pies, corn and crab bisque and other seafood items from the Gulf coast, as well as fresh Gulf shrimp. In season, Shady Acres offers boiled crawfish, as well as King Cakes from Paul's Pastry Shop in Picayune.

The café features farm-fresh vegetables cooked to perfection.

"We have also become known for our smoked ribs," Katrina says.

Other offerings include hamburgers with hand-formed patties, topped with lettuce and locally grown tomatoes, and a dessert from the bakery. There are plenty of tables inside and even more on the large screened-in front porch.

Shady Acres now offers a full-service catering service for everything from business lunches to weddings. Shady Acres Village is located at 624 Highway 49, near Seminary.

Mississippi's state parks are some of the best in the U.S.



Beautiful Cooper Falls at Pickwick Lake in J. P. Coleman State Park is one of the most scenic spots in Mississippi.

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

By Guest Columnist Kara Kimbrough

It's officially spring, which means our electric bills will soon skyrocket, as air conditioners began operating at full capacity.

Scratch that...on a more positive note, it's spring – time to get out and explore beautiful spring foliage found throughout Mississippi. Regrettably, many city-dwellers lack easy access to a place to wander along wooded paths filled with blooming dogwood trees, vibrant azaleas and more of spring's beautiful flowering plants and shrubs.

Don't worry, though; Mississippi's state parks, spread from one end of the state to the other, offer the best of spring foliage and so much more.

And here's the best part: seven of Mississippi's parks were named to Reserve America's Top 100 Campgrounds in the U.S. Several landed on other "best of" national lists, including one in northeast Mississippi that was named among the nation's Top 25 or Top 50 birdwatching, fishing, kid-friendly and "amazing views" spots, among other accolades.

I'm referring to J. P. Coleman State Park in Iuka. In case you haven't guessed, it was named for our 52nd governor.

In Mississippi, there is no shortage of places bearing the name of a former governor, historical figure or, as is the case of many of our counties, Native American tribes or derivatives. Coleman, also a state legislator and U.S. judge, is perhaps most remembered for his 1960 invitation to presidential candidate John F. Kennedy to sleep in the Theodore Bilbo bed at the Governor's Mansion.

Ironically, the beautiful park, opened in the mid-1960s and named in Coleman's honor, overlooks the Tennessee River, not the one bearing the name of the state he led from 1956 to 1960.

But enough about history. J.P. Coleman State Park has been recognized for its beautiful scenery, camping amenities and ample fishing and water recreation opportunities in Pickwick Lake,

a breathtaking 47,500-acre freshwater lake. The sparkling waters of the lake are filled with bream, catfish and most species of bass, resulting in a prime fishing spot for outdoorsmen.

However, ask anyone who's visited the park, and they'll tell you its most amazing feature is a 50-foot waterfall, Cooper Falls. In simple terms, it is an amazing sight to behold. A continuous stream of water rushes over a massive stone wall etched into the scenic landscape and flows into the lake below. The falls alone are deserving of a visit, but, if time allows, plan to stay a little longer and enjoy the spacious park filled with natural beauty and plenty of activities for the entire family.

For those desiring to stay overnight, the park offers primitive camping sites, as well as more comfortable accommodations, including parking pads for RVs, 23 cabins and a 19-unit motel. Many campsites are near the water's edge, while others are located high above the water on one of the rocky bluffs overlooking the lake.

Other activities to enjoy include miniature golf, picnicking and swimming in the lake or the park's pool. Or, take a leisurely stroll through the abundant wooded areas filled with, this time of year, colorful native trees, beautiful flowering plants and several species of birds.

Once you visit, it's easy to understand why, collectively, Cooper Falls, Pickwick Lake and J.P. Coleman State Park draw thousands of annual visitors from not just Mississippi, but around the nation.

If You Go:

J.P. Coleman State Park

Where: 613 CR 321, Iuka, MS

Admission: Free (separate charges for overnight accommodations)

Contact: 662-423-6515 for more information

MDE announces 2024 Parent of the Year



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Jessica Banahan McNeel, a mother of three with two students in the Pascagoula-Gautier School District (PGSD) has been named the 2024 Mississippi Parent of the Year by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE).

McNeel was nominated by the PGSD and is described as a humble, dedicated advocate of public education in the district and community. She consistently demonstrates a passion for fostering a positive and enriching environment for students and families.

Because of McNeel's collaborative spirit, she has impacted each school her children have attended and even invests in schools they are not currently attending.

As a partner in the law firm Byran, Nelson, Schroeder, Castigiola, & Banahan, PLLC, she allocates time to invest in schools, community and children to make an attractive area for the next generation.

McNeel believes one of the most impactful ways to benefit her children, as well as other children in the community, is to be present, involved and continue to give back to the district. She wants her children to always understand that their parents support them and value community and the diverse people and opportunities within it.

McNeel's goal is to raise children who are kind, open-minded, intelligent and have a desire to work hard in

accomplishing their endeavors.

She has witnessed countless individuals who have made significant contributions to the schools. Appreciating these contributions helped foster her unwavering belief in the Pascagoula-Gautier School District, the community and Mississippi.

Drawing inspiration from her parents, who advocate for public education and volunteerism, McNeel mirrored what she learned as a child. She has invested countless hours in various service-oriented activities and organizations serving as Parent Teacher Student Organization President for three years and representative for the Parent Advisory Board.

McNeel chaired fundraisers, organized annual campus cleanups, chaperoned field trips and actively engaged in various school events such as Teacher Appreciation Week and Accelerated Reading parties.

Additionally, McNeel has annually served as a community interviewer in the legal sector for the "You're Hired!" mock interview program sponsored by the Jackson County Chamber, and she served as a member of the PGSD's most recent Strategic Planning Committee. She is a founding member of Pascagoula Gautier Foundation for Educational Excellence (PGFEE), a non-profit dedicated to fostering connections between individuals, businesses and industries to the PGSD with the goal of supporting and promoting education within the community. For the past twelve years, she has chaired the Rotary Club of Pascagoula's annual scholarship program, which awards approximately \$40,000 to seniors from local high schools.

Research has repeatedly shown that parental involvement is a critical factor in determining the academic success of students. As part of the annual Parent of the Year program, MDE asks each district to select an outstanding parent who has made a significant impact on school improvement efforts in the school district.

The committee reviewed numerous applications submitted by school districts and selected a Parent of the Year finalist from each of the four congressional districts. From those four district winners, the 2024 Parent of the Year is determined.

Other Parent of the Year finalists for 2024 included:

- Congressional District 1 finalist **Leigh Ann Whitehead**, who was nominated by the Tupelo School District for being an unconditionally supportive parent with a heart of gold who gives her time and resources. She currently has two children in the district.
- Congressional District 2 finalist **Paula Morris**, who was nominated by Natchez-Adams School District for her exceptional dedication and unwavering support in creating a nurturing and enriching environment for students, parents and faculty. She has two children, with one in the district.
- Congressional District 3 finalist **Lakeitha Atkinson**, who was nominated by the McComb School District for her outstanding contributions and being an amazing role model parent, who supports the school's mission and vision, and advocates for students, teachers and parents. She currently has one child in the district.

Colonel Nick Saucier takes oath as State Military Judge



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Left to right, Mississippi Court of Appeals Presiding Judge Virginia Carlton, Col. Nick Saucier and Maj. Gen. Janson Boyles, Adjutant General of the Mississippi National Guard, stand for a photo after Col. Saucier's Promotion and Investiture Ceremony on March 1 in Jackson.

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Mississippi Court of Appeals Presiding Judge Virginia Carlton recently administered the judicial oath to Col. Saucier at the Supreme Court in Jackson. Col. Saucier's wife Bonny and daughter Livi helped him don his robe in an investiture ceremony marking his entry into the role of military judge. Moments earlier, his wife and daughter attached eagles insignia to his uniform as he was promoted from Lieutenant Colonel to Colonel.

Maj. Gen. Janson Boyles, Adjutant General of the Mississippi National Guard, said, "Nick is joining an elite group." He epitomizes the qualities sought by the National Guard, Gen. Boyles said.

Judge Carlton has known Col. Saucier since he served as a Court of Appeals law clerk for Judge Larry Roberts. She recalled his calm demeanor and humble attitude. He is a person



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Col. Nick Saucier, center, shakes hands with Mississippi Court of Appeals Presiding Judge Virginia Carlton after taking the oath of office as State Military Judge on March 1. At right are his wife Bonny Saucier and daughter Livi.

of strong character who is well respected by his colleagues, she said.

"I have great confidence that Judge Saucier is going to be a great judge," she said.

Col. Saucier said he knew little about the National Guard when he enlisted as a student at Mississippi State University in 1997. He served as an enlisted soldier in the Mississippi Army National Guard for seven years before becoming an officer. He has twenty-seven years of military service, including deployments to Afghanistan in 2008 and Kuwait in 2023.

He looked out over many of his military colleagues gathered for the ceremony, and recalled others with whom he served.

"I've learned something from each and every one of them," he said, and thanked them for pushing him to be a better soldier.

He thanked his wife of twenty-four years for all of her support, and he thanked their daughter, who is seven. She doesn't know all about his job, beyond the fact that he is gone a lot.

"She's told me several times that she is proud of her soldier dad."

In his new role, Col. Saucier will preside as a military judge over courts martial for the National Guard in Mississippi.

"You are going to be the only National Guard judge in the State of Mississippi," Judge Carlton said.

Col. Saucier earned a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Mississippi State University in 1999 and a law degree from the University of Mississippi School of Law in 2006. He served as a law clerk at the Court of Appeals 2006-2010. He was commissioned as a First Lieutenant/Judge Advocate General in March 2007.

The highly decorated soldier served as trial counsel and Chief of Fiscal Law for the 168th Engineer Brigade in Afghanistan in 2008. After completing mobilization, he served as senior defense counsel with the 972nd Trial Defense Team, then as Chief of Military Justice and later Chief of Administrative Law at Joint Forces Headquarters. He was assigned to the 66th Troop Command as Staff Judge Advocate, then as Command Judge Advocate for the 184th Expeditionary Sustainment Command. He returned to the 168th Engineer Brigade as Brigade Judge Advocate during deployment to Kuwait in 2023.

Judge Carlton also has an extensive military background. She retired from the military in 2015 at the rank of Colonel after 24 ½ years of service that included numerous assignments as JAG officer, military trial judge and military appellate judge.

Dr. Tracy Cook named as President of Alcorn State University

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning has named Dr. Tracy M. Cook as 21st president of Alcorn State University. Cook served as interim president of the university since July 8, 2023. He assumed the role as president on April 1, 2024.

“This decision was made in the long-term best interests of Alcorn State University and its students, faculty, staff and alumni,” said Dr. Alfred McNair, president of the Board of Trustees. “There was an obvious desire and call from the Alcorn family for Dr. Cook to be named to this role, and we are putting our full faith and confidence behind this decision. He is the right person to lead Alcorn State University.”

A native of Fayette, Mississippi, Cook earned undergraduate and graduate degrees at Alcorn, and then earned his doctorate at William Carey University. His time as an athlete at Alcorn has been recognized with his induction in the Alcorn Sports Hall of Fame, his selection as one of the university’s Top 50 Greatest Football Athletes, and the 2023 presentation of the Southwestern Athletic Conference Alumni Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award.

He has more than twenty-five years of administrative experience in education, having served in the Jefferson and Claiborne County School Districts as a teacher, athletic director, principal and superintendent. He returned to his alma mater as chief of staff in 2015, and then stepped into the role of vice president for student affairs and enrollment management.

“I am honored to have the trust and support of the Board of Trustees, and excited to officially lead a university that has meant so much to me personally and professionally,”



Special to The Mississippi Monitor
Dr. Tracy Cook

Cook said. “We have a bright future ahead of us and I am committed to leading us all toward new levels of success.”

The decision to remove the interim label from Cook’s title was applauded by Dr. Al Rankins Jr., commissioner of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning.

“At this juncture in Alcorn’s history, Dr. Cook is the right choice to lead the university to greater prominence,” said Rankins. “I understand and appreciate the work that lies ahead for him. Alcorn State University is fortunate to have him at the helm.”

The choice to name Cook as president was welcomed by members of the Alcorn family.

“In my dealings with Dr. Cook, I found him to be a sincere, caring, and dedicated individual whose word is his bond,” said Col. James C. Stubbs (U.S. Army Retired), past president of the Alcorn State National Alumni Association. “I believe Dr. Cook possesses the necessary skill sets, professionalism and character to serve as president of Alcorn State. He is a welcome addition to the list of great presidents who have served Alcorn and worked to ensure it continues as an institution dedicated to the development of

young minds throughout the United States and the world.”

Carla Cleveland Kirkland is a 1986 graduate of Alcorn State and serves as vice-chair of the Alcorn State University Foundation Board.

“As a member of the Alcorn Foundation Board and a fellow educator, I am elated to hear that Dr. Cook has been named president of Alcorn,” Kirkland said. “He has a wealth of experience that has prepared him for this role. I believe he will work to bring innovation to the university so our students will encounter the excellence needed for them to be successful in their future endeavors.”

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Artemis Generation students inspired during NASA STEM event



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Pascagoula (Mississippi) High School students stand in front of the Thad Cochran Test Stand at NASA's Stennis Space Center on February 22 during a Next Gen STEM Explore Stennis event focused on computer science and how it impacts propulsion test work onsite. NASA/Danny Nowlin

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The questions kept coming, exceeding the allotted time, as students at NASA's Next Gen STEM event in late February explored the importance of computer science for future agency missions.

Students, both in-person and joining in online, interacted with a panel of employees from NASA's Stennis Space Center near Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, during the agency event about opportunities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

"We know from our own experience and research that stories are powerful," Next Gen STEM Project Manager Dr. Carrie Olsen said in welcoming students to the event. "It is a big part of our project to connect students to our NASA people, because then you can hear their stories. Stories do way more than reading something, because you are connecting to another human being, and you may see a bit of yourself in them, and it might spark something."

Students in classrooms today are part of the Artemis Generation that will contribute to future Artemis missions and every area of NASA work for the benefit of all. As the agency establishes the foundation for long-term sci-

entific exploration at the Moon and prepares for journeys to Mars, it will take all types of roles in STEM, and other fields, to meet needs of the future.

During the February event, NASA Stennis employees working in the fields of engineering, autonomous systems, and cybersecurity sparked the curiosity of students joining in person from Louisiana and Mississippi, as well as those online.

"Computer science is very versatile," NASA controls engineer Dewayne Lavigne said. "You can go anywhere with a computer science degree, and you are going to be able to find work and have it take you to places you did not know you could go. I never saw myself working at NASA, and here I am."

Lavigne works with a programmable logic controller in the NASA Stennis test complex. The powerful computer performs its routine functions about 4,000 times a second during propulsion test activities, he said.

During a question-and-answer period following panel presentations, Springfield (Louisiana) High School student Seth Spiers learned from NASA Stennis mechanical engineer Armando Delgado that a typical day can include

in-office work with computer software and hands-on field work in support of propulsion testing, which relies on computerized systems to perform complex tasks.

Pascagoula (Mississippi) High School student Josh Davis received feedback from the panel about technical advancements needed for future space exploration.

“A lot of projects are focused on what technologies we need to mature or develop to get astronauts from the Moon to Mars – systems health management, monitoring the health of the different components of the rocket, the propulsion, where the fire comes out, the habitat, anything in between,” said Travis Martin, technical project manager of the NASA Stennis Autonomous Systems Laboratory. “We definitely need to automate those things, so the astronauts can carry on the business of conducting science.”

Everyone can find their place in space and NASA, Stennis Chief Information Security Officer Bonita Oliver said, noting that it ultimately depends on what a student wants to do and what a student likes to do. For Oliver, math and science interested her, so she pursued computer engineering. She began at NASA as an application developer manager and now oversees cybersecurity at NASA Stennis.

Students asked a range of questions, from the impact of artificial intelligence to the best path to a NASA career to what motivates panelists in their day-to-day work. Panelists urged students to take advantage of opportunities to participate in NASA activities and programs.

In a group discussion following the event, students from Springfield High School, Hancock County (Mississippi) Career Technical Center, and Pascagoula High School agreed “the future is computer science,” calling it a foundational piece to spaceflight moving forward.

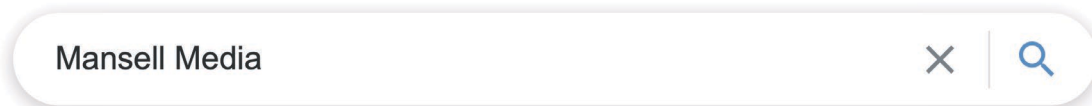
The immersive event, coordinated through NASA Connects in partnership with the Next Gen STEM project through NASA’s Office of STEM Engagement, plays a critical role in helping to build a diverse future workforce by engaging students in authentic learning experiences with NASA’s people, content, and facilities.

EDITOR’S NOTE: This article was compiled by Bo Black at NASA’s Stennis Space Center, with assistance from students at Pascagoula (Mississippi) High School, Hancock County (Mississippi) Career Technical Center, and Springfield (Louisiana) High School.



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Real Estate Tips:

Summer Home Maintenance Tips:

- Ceiling fans should be set counter clockwise.
- Check exterior of the home for moisture damage/wood rot that has occurred from Winter.
- Monitor the property for water erosion/intrusion around the foundation and fill any holes, sloping away from the home.
- Water the foundation system during drought conditions. Concrete expands and constricts with moisture. Allowing for overly dry or wet extremes, is why many homes experience foundation issues. This can be avoided by keeping the moisture content approximately the same throughout the year.

Tips to ready your home for sale:

• **The importance of hiring an experienced real estate professional:** There are so many facets that go into selling a home. Hiring a seasoned agent to help you navigate this process is a worthwhile consideration. Duties include, walking sellers through the whole process from the initial consultation, pricing, listing, showings, contract negotiations, all the way to closing. I will help you through it all. Also, statistics show that hiring a REALTOR to sell your home increases your net by up to thirty three percent.

- **Curb appeal is so important.** It is your first opportunity to impress buyers.
- **Clean and/or pressure wash the exterior.** Including roof and removing debris.
- **Repaint/repair any areas that have paint peeling or is damaged.**
- **Placing fresh mulch/pine straw in flower beds always dresses up the property.**



As the trusted real estate advisor for clients over the last 13 years, Christine understands that buying, selling, and/or investing is one of the most important and complex financial decisions most of us will ever make. She has a seasoned perspective on the process and has built a thorough knowledge of the real estate market. Additionally, Christine maintains the highest standards of responsibility, allowing her to put her expertise to work for her clients by helping them achieve all of their real estate objectives.



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