

The Mississippi Monitor

**Canton working to ensure
the Harreld Chevrolet
neon legacy lives on**

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New tax-forfeited inventory map available



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Secretary of State's Office has launched a new map of tax-forfeited inventory on the Tax-Forfeited Lands webpage. Accessible on desktop or mobile devices, the resource provides a streamlined process for the public to explore and evaluate tax-forfeited properties.

The new GIS (Geographic Information System) mapping site offers more details including improved property data accuracy and an enhanced user-friendly experience. Users can search by county, parcel number, PPIN, or user-defined area; view contact information for the land representative of each parcel and view the number of active applications submitted on a parcel before applying.

To view the Tax-Forfeited Inventory, visit TFLGIS.sos.ms.gov.

For questions related to Tax-Forfeited Lands, call 601-359-5156, or email TaxForfeited.CustomerService@sos.ms.gov.



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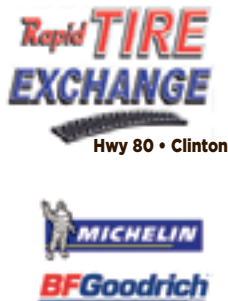
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2024-25 Mississippi Agriculture Youth Council holds final meeting

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The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce's (MDAC) 2024-25 Mississippi Agriculture Youth Council (MAYC) recently closed out their year with a final meeting. Fourteen high school seniors from across the state came together for educational tours and closing ceremonies. The council visited Patina Farms in Canton and Cypress Point in Brandon, where they gained insight into Mississippi agritourism through hands-on experiences, before being presented with certificates of achievement.

"Investing in our youth today shapes the future of agriculture tomorrow," said Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson. "I am proud of this group of students and the initiative they have shown toward the agriculture industry. The Mississippi Agriculture Youth Council cultivates leadership and responsibility in the next generation of our great state's workforce, and I believe our future is bright."

MAYC members met with owners, managers and employees of two major agritourism operations in central Mississippi. Together, the students held open discussions about the challenges and advantages of turning a working farm into a tourist attraction. Following the tours, each student was presented with a certificate of achievement by MDAC Deputy Commissioner Hayes Patrick.

"I want to congratulate the 2024-25 Ag Youth Council. I expect great things for our state, our agriculture industry and even our nation from this remarkable group," continued Gipson.

The MAYC is a workforce development program established by the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce that seeks to expose agriculture-minded high school seniors to a va-

riety of unique experiences within the agriculture industry. Over the course of one year, council members toured farms, agricultural companies and state agencies; visited the State Capitol and learned first-hand about the legislative process and how it affects the agriculture industry; held roundtable discussions with industry professionals, legislators and farmers; and developed communicative and practical skills.

For program guidelines and additional information, visit www.mdac.ms.gov/mayc.



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The 2024-25 Mississippi Agriculture Youth Council toured Patina Farms in Canton as part of their final meeting. Pictured (l to r), front row: Claire Rizzo of Bolivar County, Greyson Foster of Jones County, Layton Varner of Rankin County, Azion Leflore of Rankin County, Micah Osborn of Leflore County, Alana Whitehead of Winston County and Peyton Pierce, Mississippi Agriculture Youth Council Coordinator at MDAC; and back row: Jenna Fullington, Agriculture Internship and Livestock Coordinator at MDAC; Hannah Hill of Tippah County; Grey Cruse of Lee County; John Clayton Kitchens of Lauderdale County; Sloan Walker of Leflore County; Kayleigh Rose Myers of Itawamba County and Emma Creel of Kemper County.



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The 2024-25 Mississippi Agriculture Youth Council toured Cypress Point in Brandon as part of their final meeting. Pictured (l to r) are Hannah Hill of Tippah County, Azion Leflore of Rankin County, Kayleigh Rose Myers of Itawamba County, Layton Varner of Rankin County, Sloan Walker of Leflore County, Claire Rizzo of Bolivar County, Emma Creel of Kemper County, John Clayton Kitchens of Lauderdale County, Grey Cruse of Lee County, Micah Osborn of Leflore County, Alana Whitehead of Winston County and Greyson Foster of Jones County. Not pictured are Emma G. Putnum of Sunflower County and Bryce Bratcher of Oktibbeha County.

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Canton working to ensure the Harreld Chevrolet neon legacy lives on



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For over eight decades, Harreld Chevrolet stood as a beacon of small-town resilience and community pride in Canton, Mississippi. From its humble beginnings on West Peace Street in 1932 to the iconic neon glow of its Highway 51 location, the dealership built by W.E. Harreld, Sr. etched itself into the hearts of generations. Now, almost a decade after the Harreld family sold the business, the spirit of the dealership is set to shine again—literally.

Earlier this spring, the Rose Garden Room at the Canton Welcome Center buzzed with excitement as master neon artisan Rene Pastor of Magic City Signs captivated the crowd with “All About Neon,” a vibrant presentation on the history and artistry of neon signage. The event marked more than just a nostalgic look back—it was the kickoff of a community-led effort to restore the legendary Harreld Chevrolet neon sign that has towered over Highway 51 since 1947.

“It was the largest neon sign in Mississippi at the time,” said Canton historian Jim Lacey, Jr., referencing the glowing landmark that once welcomed travelers from Chicago to New Orleans. “People would compare the big Harreld sign to the one atop the Peabody Hotel in Memphis.”

The fundraiser, hosted by Canton Tourism and spearheaded by the Canton-Madison County Historical Society, seeks to return the sign to its former brilliance. If successful, Pastor and his team from Birmingham, Alabama, will begin the restoration. Known for their work on HGTV’s Home Town, Magic City Signs brings the experience and artistic vision needed to honor the sign’s legacy.

The Harreld Chevrolet story is a cornerstone of Canton’s history. Founded during the Great Depression, the business weathered national crises, including labor strikes, gas shortages and even the 1979 Easter Flood. In 1947, moving to a swampy plot just south of the town square seemed risky. But, with a philosophy grounded in putting the customer first, the dealership flourished under three generations of Harreld leadership—W.E. Harreld, Sr., his son Bill, Jr., and later, his grandson Jim.

Even as car dealerships grew larger and more corporate, Harreld Chevrolet retained its small-town charm. Loyal customers from Canton and the surrounding counties remained steadfast, drawn to the family’s unwavering commitment to service and community.

Though the dealership was sold to Mac Haik in 2016, the legacy remains—in stories, in memories, and in the silent silhouette of its once-vibrant sign. Now, nearly ninety years after W.E. Harreld first opened his doors, Canton is rallying once again to preserve a piece of its identity.

“Neon is more than just light—it’s history, it’s emotion,” said Pastor during his presentation. Four grandchildren of the original sign’s creator, Billy Will Harreld, were in attendance, their presence a living bridge between past and future.

As Canton eyes its 2036 Bicentennial, restoring the Harreld Chevrolet sign is more than a beautification project—it’s a symbol of the city’s enduring spirit. In the words of one attendee: “It’s about lighting up our past to illuminate our future.”



For more information or to donate to the fundraiser to restore the sign visit bit.ly/3TsXLuT or “Canton-Madison County Historical Society” on Facebook.



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Starkville student's art on display at U.S. Capitol

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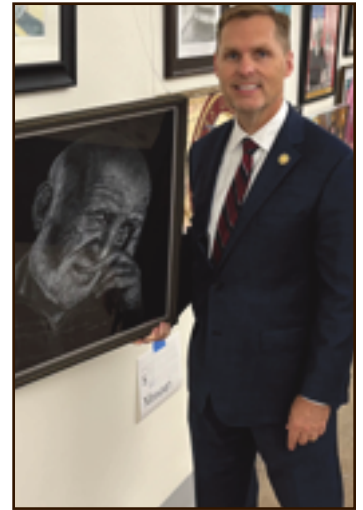
Sachiko Clay was recently announced as the winner of the 2025 Third Congressional District Art Competition. Clay attends Starkville High School and has been recognized for her art in previous competitions. In October of 2024, she was recognized as Rotary Student of the Month for her artistic abilities. She was also named one of only eleven finalists world-wide for the 2023 International Travelers Photography competition and has received two Silver Medals in the Mississippi Scholastic Art Competition.

Clay described her art as, "[A] white charcoal portrait drawing of my grandfather. I began this piece by taking a photograph of my grandfather with a 50 mm Canon camera and practicing each facial feature on a separate piece of paper until I felt confident enough to start the final draft. Using a sharpened general's white charcoal pencil allowed me to build upon my values on textured canson paper."

Clay worked under the instruction of art teacher Andrew Lark at Starkville High School. Lark is an award-winning art instructor who has earned statewide and national honors. He is the recipient of the Rotary International Dr. Merrill Hawkins Excellence in Education Award and is a member of the Starkville Area Education Hall of Fame.

Congressman Michael Guest, who sponsors the competition, noted, "Each year, one high school student from each congressional district is selected to have their artwork displayed in the United States Capitol. I am honored to have the 2025 winner of the Third Congressional District Art Competition displayed in the Capitol. Congratulations to Sachiko Clay for her achievement."

Clay's art will be on display at the United States Capitol for one year.



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Mississippi Congressman Michael Guest stands with Starkville High School student Sachiko Clay's artwork inside the U.S. Capitol.

County Health Departments hold special immunization walk-in clinics

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Several County Health Departments (CHD) are holding special walk-in immunization clinics for school registration this summer.

The walk-in clinics are for incoming kindergarten and seventh-grade students, both of whom have required vaccinations before starting school in the fall. Parents must provide their child's school with a Certificate of Immunization Compliance (Form 121) prior to school entry. College students can also receive vaccinations during the clinics.

Clinic hours are 8 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. on designated days. For a complete list of CHDs holding walk-in clinics and the dates, visit msdh.ms.gov/ready4school.

There is a \$10 administration fee per shot if a child does not have insurance; the cost is \$20 for college students.

Additional nursing staff will be available during the clinics so that parents can complete the process quickly and efficiently. Parents should bring a copy of their child's immunization record. Form 121 can be obtained from a child's immunization provider, but the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) now offers a convenient way to check a child's immunizations record online.

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Mississippi AI Talent Accelerator Program launched with \$9.1M in grants

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves recently announced the launch of the Mississippi AI Talent Accelerator Program (MAI-TAP), a new initiative that fosters the development of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and related technical capacities across the state's institutions of higher learning to support the expansion of Amazon Web Services in Mississippi. Additionally, the initiative creates training infrastructure that benefits the broader technology and information infrastructure sectors. The initiative is a partnership between AccelerateMS, the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) and Amazon Web Services (AWS).

Reeves also announced \$9.1 million in grants through MAI-TAP to institutions of higher learning. The grants are a strategic investment in Mississippi's future workforce and economic competitiveness.

"This is another bold step forward for Mississippi," said Reeves. "We're not just preparing for the future – we're building it. This investment will help to ensure that Mississippians are equipped with the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving digital economy."

MAI-TAP will stimulate the development of workforce programs that address the skill development demands of the artificial intelligence sector. Each institution will seek private funding and resources to leverage along with state support.

Grant recipients include:

- **Alcorn State University:** \$1.15 million to train individuals in southwest Mississippi on digital literacy and artificial intelligence fundamentals. This funding will also allow for the deployment of telehealth resources through ASU's School of Nursing to improve healthcare access to underserved, rural communities.
- **Belhaven University:** \$390K to hire a dedicated AI program chair and integrate AI content into its online MBA curriculum to ensure working professionals have practical, industry-aligned AI skills.
- **Jackson State University:** \$1.3 million to launch an Executive On Roster (XOR) program to engage AI experts and provide real-time industry insights, ensuring that workforce participants have relevant and appropriate skills. JSU student consulting teams will partner with Millsaps College to deliver AI-powered small business support to cultivate tech-driven startups and enhance Mississippi's small business ecosystem.
- **Millsaps College:** \$1 million to build upon an existing private investment. Millsaps will establish an endowed chair in AI and Emerging Technology. Through the ELSEWORKS student consulting program and in partnership with JSU, Millsaps will assist small businesses with AI integration.
- **Mississippi College:** \$723K to leverage existing, private funding. Mississippi College's funding will create a 12-hour certificate and a 6-hour microcredential in their School of Law to ensure Mississippi's future and current lawyers have knowledge needed to thrive in the AI/machine learning enabled world.
- **Mississippi State University:** \$2.2 million to establish an endowment and seek private match for AI/machine learning workforce and research initiatives. This includes two new faculty lines and the development of a graduate certificate in Data Center Construction Management – one of the first of its kind nationally.
- **University of Southern Mississippi:** \$1.24 million to establish a Maritime AI Innovation Lab to accelerate AI adoption in Mississippi's Blue Economy. The Lab will focus on port efficiency, vessel safety, and supply chain optimization. Additionally, USM will launch a master's degree in Robotics and Intelligent Systems. Funding includes support for faculty, graduate researchers, and critical GPU infrastructure. USM will establish an endowment and seek private match to support AI/machine learning research and application of innovations.
- **Tougaloo College:** \$1.08 million to hire new AI/machine learning faculty and establish an endowment to ensure students in all programs have access to appropriate AI/machine learning related concepts.

Mississippi's strategy for AI and ML workforce development is organized around five core pillars:

1. AI/machine learning infrastructure by investing in human capital infrastructure: Building a skilled workforce for foundational infrastructure roles.
2. AI/machine learning literacy for Mississippians: Promoting basic understanding and competencies across the state's population.
3. Education and industry-specific use cases: Aligning AI education with industry-driven applications.
4. Upskilling for product innovation: Enhancing skills for those creating new tools and technologies.
5. Research infrastructure: Supporting the capacity for AI/machine learning innovation and technology advancement.

The newly established AI Workforce Readiness Council – through the State Workforce Investment Board and AccelerateMS – will facilitate this collaboration. The Council will be chaired by Dr. Kollin Napier of the Mississippi Artificial Intelligence Network, and each awardee will appoint a designated representative to actively participate on the council.

Reeves also highlighted several institutions of higher learning that did not receive funding but are still playing a major role in MAI-TAP, through existing funding and collaborative efforts. This includes Co-Lin Community College, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Hinds Community College and the University of Mississippi.

"This is about more than just jobs—it's about opportunity," said Reeves. "With this initiative, we're ensuring that Mississippi leads the way in AI and machine learning innovation, as well as workforce readiness. It's another big day for Mississippi."

Economics and Personal Finance state champs named

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Council on Economic Education recently hosted the State Championship Economics Challenge, as well as the State Championship Personal Finance Challenge. Both events were held at Mississippi

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First Place Personal Finance Challenge State Championship winner in the Middle School Division was Wayne Academy, including Anniston Crane, Kaylee Dumas, Andie Hall and Bristol Holland, with teacher Virginia Kittrell.



First place Personal Finance Challenge State Championship winner in the High School Division was Germantown High School, which included Peyton Brewer, Tate Bragg, Clark Estess and Nick McKee, with teacher Christy Walker.



First place Economics State Championship winner in the Adam Smith Division was Germantown High School, which included Peyton Brewer, Tate Bragg, Clark Estess and Nick McKee, with teacher Christy Walker.



First place Economics State Championship winner in the David Ricardo Division was Northwest Rankin High School, which included Gabriela Jeter, Nala Salter, Nigel Armistad and Samatha Young, with teacher Rush Sweeney.

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First place Economics State Championship winner in the David Ricardo Division II was Okolona High School, which included Joshua Brown, Kristian Boyd, Camden Lathan and Markayla Stone, with teacher Jaqueline Brown.



First Place Personal Finance Challenge State Championship winner in the High School II Division was Canton High School, which included Jalyrn Dunigan, Alexandria Luckett, Henser Vicente and Nelly Rosales, with teacher Teena Ruth.



The Adam Smith Student of the Year was Clark Estess of Germantown High. Estess' teacher was Christy Walker.



Personal Finance Middle School Student of the Year was Andie Hall of Wayne Academy. Hall's teacher was Virginia Kittrell.



Personal Finance High School Student of the Year was Elijah Edwards of Bogue Chitto Attendance Center. Edwards' teacher was Rose Porter.



The David Ricardo Student of the Year was Canon Caldwell of Magnolia Heights. Caldwell's teacher was Barry Coleman.

Anna Jones named MDE Parent of the Year

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) has named Anna Clarissa Jones as the 2025 Mississippi Parent of the Year. Jones is a mother of two with one student in the Clarksdale Municipal School District.

Jones was nominated by the school district and is described as a supportive, dedicated, and compassionate person who loves a challenge. She goes above and beyond the call of duty, using her talents and monetary resources, if necessary. She is a role model for other parents within the school community and radiates positivity offering words of encouragement to students and staff.

Jones says she values being actively involved in her children's educational life. She says she is a firm believer that education begins at home long before children reach school age. Jones regularly visits the school and is considered dependable and readily available to serve. Faculty and staff are no strangers to her. Therefore, she is always aware of behaviors, grades and current events. She is not only involved in her children's lives but has become a mother figure to other children, giving support to their educational journey and activities.

Jones' participation in various service-oriented activities and organizations has impacted the schools and created a positive and better



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Anna Jones, nominated by the Clarksdale Municipal School District, has been named the MDE Parent of the Year for 2025.

environment for everyone. She's an active member in the PTO, where she spearheads fundraising efforts so students can participate in extracurricular activities. She's an active participant in Open House, Class Night, Choir Booster Club and often chaperones for events. She worked tirelessly for the band booster club ensuring that band members had the necessary nourishment for games and other activities. In support of her business, RelVitalize Therapy Infusions and Health Services, she is a member of the Clarksdale High School Health and Wellness Council where she provided the opportunity for faculty and staff to receive B12 shots.

Additionally, Jones served as co-president of the youth department in her church, supporting the spiritual growth of students to be well-rounded leaders. For the past four years Jones and family members have prepared Thanksgiving plates that were delivered to over 1,000 people in the community.

She says is looking forward to making a greater contribution to the school and community through her nonprofit, The Overcomers' Place. The mission is to empower young people within the Mississippi Delta to overcome life's obstacles by equipping them with the tools to become confident and successful contributors within their homes, community and the world-at-large.

Research has 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 2025 Parent of the Year is determined.

Other Parent of the Year finalists for 2025 include Congressional District 1 finalist India Hale, who was nominated by the Senatobia School District for her selflessness, resilience, and unwavering commitment to teachers, staff, and students. She has four children, with three in the district. Betsy Guerry was the Congressional District 3 finalist, nominated by the Brookhaven School District as a tremendous advocate for building relationships between the school and parents and making sure all students feel loved and respected. She has three children currently in the district. Also included was Congressional District 4 finalist Justin Powell, who was nominated by the Hattiesburg Public School District for serving faithfully for the academic success of all children, supporting staff and faculty whenever his services are needed. He has one child currently in the district.



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Administrator, Teacher of the Year named for 2025

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Dr. Marsha Peoples, principal at East Flora Elementary School in the Madison County School District, has been named the 2025 Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) Mississippi Administrator of the Year, and Ashley Barefoot, teacher at Longleaf Elementary School in the Lamar County School District has been named the 2025 Mississippi Teacher of the Year.

The winners were announced at a program led by MDE's Office of Teaching and Learning that celebrated all school districts' top 2025 administrators of the year and teachers of the year.

The annual Mississippi Administrator of the Year program honors an administrator who demonstrates superior ability to inspire teachers, to employ exemplary leadership practices and to participate as an active member of the community. The recipient receives a \$5,000 stipend and shares expertise through various presentations and activities for the improvement of education in the state.

The annual Mississippi Teacher of the Year program recognizes an exemplary teacher in the state who inspires students, demonstrates leadership both inside and outside the classroom and serves as an active member of the community. The award recipient also receives a \$5,000 stipend

and will share expertise through various presentations and activities. Barefoot will represent Mississippi in the National Teacher of the Year competition.

When describing her personal philosophy, Dr. Peoples said she believes "that all children should be given the opportunity to receive the very best education possible. When students are taught well and learn well, they can become anything that they put their minds to. As an educational leader, my goal is to make this a reality for all students."

In describing her personal philosophy, Barefoot said she believes it's important "to develop and empower students to reach their full potential. My philosophy of education is to nurture students' curiosity by facilitating discovery opportunities and teaching them the skills they need to become lifelong learners and changemakers."

Should either the 2025 Mississippi Administrator of the Year or 2025 Mississippi Teacher of the Year be unable

to fulfill their duties, alternate candidates for each role have been selected. The alternate 2025 Mississippi Administrator of the Year is Zane Thomas, principal at Houston High School in the Chickasaw County School District; and the alternate 2025 Mississippi Teacher of the Year is Tobie Lambert, teacher at Mississippi School of the Arts.



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My view of the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

By Guest Columnist Andrew Whitehurst



Children need a way to fall in love with nature, and they need places for this to happen. Current writing on child development explains and reinforces this need. The book *Last Child in the Woods* (2008) by Richard Louv is a good place to start. When children reach adulthood with a solid tie to the natural world – plants, forests, mammals, birds, beaches, rivers – and, yes, dinosaurs and fossils

– it will remain with them and provide happiness, a built-in prescription for stress, and a way to unclutter a mind that is constantly stimulated by computer screens, tablets and cell phones.

When any one of us drifts back in memory, our affinity and need for a dose of nature is often tied to “place.”

The Mississippi Museum of Natural Science (MMNS) in Jackson is such a place, situated on a 305-acre state park along the Pearl River, one of our state’s two major coastal plain rivers. For hundreds of thousands of school children and thousands of families with small children, the museum has provided a starting place and support for sparking that love for the natural world.

Inside the museum, there are beautiful and informative permanent exhibits, a whole hallway of aquariums, and the hall behind the fossil wall that holds traveling exhibits on a wide array of science subject matter.

I see the aquariums as the face of the MMNS, because they are beautiful, always in motion and full of life: plants, frogs, fish, snakes turtles. When my son and daughter were young, I would wake them up on a Saturday and say, “Let’s go see the fish,” and they knew exactly where we were going.

Nothing draws children and their families like the various dinosaur exhibits, but many other types of exhibits have passed through the temporary exhibit hall. One of my favorites in the early 2000s featured the art of Walter Inglis Anderson, the Mississippi Gulf Coast’s premier painter of barrier islands and their wildlife. Next to several of Anderson’s watercolors, the exhibit curators place a living specimen. There were living pitcher plants next to painted pitcher plants and tanks of turtles next to Anderson’s turtle renderings. The hallway was a celebration of art and nature that I’ve never forgotten.

Outside on the trails, if you’re quiet and patient, the daily or seasonal encounters you can have with wildlife and plants are abundant and often intimate. Seeing the first trilliums pop their green mottled leaves above the forest floor leaf litter in February, or the first gray rat snake of the spring sunning on a log; seeing a barred owl fishing for frogs or crayfish in one of the drying sloughs in late summer, or watching wading birds or wood ducks fly in at dusk to roost in trees in the Mayes Lake section of LeFleur’s Bluff State Park are some of the incredible “one on one” nature shows that the quiet trail walker can enjoy.

The coolest thing I ever witnessed from one of the museum’s

swamp-viewing platforms was a male bowfin swimming along, guarding a school of his newly hatched fry, as they traveled and fed around the edge of the upper slough. Bowfin, *Amia calva*, are a primitive species of fish closely related to gar, and like gar can utilize oxygen for respiration without using their gills. Gar species and bowfin have swim bladders into which they can gulp air from the water’s surface when water temperatures are high and dissolved oxygen concentration is low, and bowfin exhibit more parental care than most fish species. They aren’t true lungfish like in Africa, but they are perfectly adapted to life on the floodplain and can persist in summer heat in drying, muddy pools in the Pearl River’s backwater sloughs until fall cold front rains replenish them. I got to have a secret peek into their life cycle when I observed a large male herding and protecting his school of tiny bowfin fry. The museum offers these amazing moments to all its visitors – but you have to keep all your senses ready.

A museum like ours, with beautiful and educational indoor exhibits and a floodplain forest swamp for a campus has secrets to share with the visitor, and all the visitor needs to do is show up ready. Our Mississippi Museum of Natural Science is ready to share these secrets with visiting school groups and families with small children – with anyone who walks in the door either paying admission or with an annual Museum Foundation membership.

One of the amazing things about our museum is that it is funded and maintained by the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks – a state agency. Most states’ natural history museums are sponsored solely by universities or private foundations. The state legislature cared enough about the future of wildlife in Mississippi at the end of the 1930s to fund a game agency to regulate hunting and fishing and a museum to encourage education about Mississippi’s animals, plants, and habitats.

The museum has a great heritage. It offers so much to children and families and has improved its offerings recently with a large modern playground in the front of LeFleur’s Bluff State Park, with a new trail and food concessions that make it easier for families to stay longer and enjoy more of what is there. Find a time to go see what’s going on – there is always something new and different to take in, whether inside or outside on the trails.

Find a connection to the place – mine is that I planted my grandmother Hazel’s maidenhair ferns in the snapping turtle tank when I worked at the museum, and, in the thirteen years since then, the staff divided and trans-



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planted them into many of the other terrarium exhibits. I check on Hazel’s ferns every time I visit.

You can connect, too, and help support the museum’s mission: a Museum of Natural Science Foundation membership for a family is a great way to start. Then, pick a nice morning and say to the people waking up in your home, “Let’s go see the fish, the dinosaurs, the trails.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: Whitehurst serves as a board member for the Mississippi Museum of Natural History.

238th ASOS leaves legacy of warrior ethos, bravery and comradery



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In November of 2019, Airmen with the 238th Air Support Operations Squadron received Bronze Stars during a ceremony at Key Field Air National Guard Base in Meridian.

By Maj. Sabrina Dalton, 186th Air Refueling Wing, Chief of Public Affairs

Humble, brave, valiant, selfless, and highly decorated are just a few words to describe members of the 238th Air Support Operations Squadron (ASOS), Key Field Air National Guard (ANG) Base in Meridian, Mississippi. Comprised of Special Warfare Airmen known as TACPs or Tactical Air Control Party, Air Liaison Officers (ALO), operations support, and Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC), the ASOS was recently redesignated as the 238th Contingency Response Squadron (CRS) on April 1, 2025.

“Having the most motivated, adaptive and lethal special warfare airmen take on the new mission of Contingency Response, only makes sense,” said Lt. Col. Scott Duckworth, commander of the 238th ASOS. “It is a relatively new mission for the Air Force with personnel who are already combat proven and capable of being the benchmark of what a Contingency Response Squadron should be.”

On the heels of escalating Al Qaeda terrorist activity, the 238th ASOS stood up on Oct. 1, 1999, following the restructuring of the 238th Combat Communications Squadron (CCS), which activated in 1953.

Since activation, ASOS members deployed in support of United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM), including operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom and Inherent Resolve. They conducted combat operations in the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003; the liberation of Fallujah, Sadr City, and Karbala in 2004; counter insurgency in Afghanistan; and the Defeat ISIS campaign in Syria.

Over the years as world geopolitics evolved, the mission of the 238th evolved to meet the needs of the National Security Strategy (NSS).

As the only Air Force Special Warfare squadron within the Mississippi Air National Guard (MSNG), the federal, wartime mission of the ASOS is to provide liaison and expertise to United States (U.S.) Army combat units. However, ASOS members worked with all U.S. military services to include the Marines, Navy and Air Force, calling in close air support (CAS) or air-strikes, artillery fire, and naval gunfire – amplifying the mission as a force multiplier. They also conducted medical evacuations and set up overseas drop zones for equipment resupply.

Their stateside or peacetime capacity consisted of supporting domestic operations as air advisors, providing reconnaissance support such as searching for missing persons; participating in natural disaster and hurricane relief efforts for Katrina and Irma; and supporting counterdrug operations.

The year 2003 hailed the first of many deployments for the 238th, when six TACPs deployed within seven days of notification in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). One of the original members of the unit, Retired Col. Billy Murphy who served from 2000 – 2008 as a Battalion ALO, deployed to Iraq. Then Major-Murphy and five other Airmen to include then-Major Scott Snively, deployed with Fort Campbell’s 19th ASOS.

“We were responsible for providing close air support, and I spun up the Apache pilots on emergency CAS who were my eyes on target. We had combined armed effects on different targets throughout Iraq,” Murphy detailed. “Apaches were on target, Army long range missiles, and



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Guardsmen with the 238th Air Support Operations Squadron stand aboard a C-17 Globemaster III at Key Field Air National Guard Base in Meridian on September 11, 2017. Approximately twenty Airmen, Humvees, and other equipment from the 186 ARW were being transported to Florida to assist with search and recovery efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma.

2,000-pound bombs dropping all at the same time, and everyone made it home.”

On Dec. 3, 2003, when the 238th returned from their deployment, both Murphy and Snively, were awarded the Bronze Star for their actions during OIF.

Murphy said that his time spent with the 238th was instrumental in developing him to be a valued staff member at every command level, setting the stage for the remainder of his career where he later progressed to serving as commander of the 186th Air Operations Group at Key Field ANG.

In 2004 during the Iraq conflict, four, 6-member teams deployed for three-month combat tours, supporting the 39th Brigade Combat Team. During this deployment, the campaign to liberate Fallujah, Iraq, occurred.

Former ASOS member, then-Senior Airman James Munn, deployed alongside the unit’s U.S. Air Force JTACs and members of a U.S. Navy special operations team. The team was tasked to insert into Fallujah, during Operation Phantom Fury to provide direct action and CAS operations. While there, Munn survived being hit in the chest by the spoon of a grenade with the event leading to a two-hour long firefight. In totality, the operation lasted 17 days. Munn was awarded the Bronze Star, with Valor, following his return from the deployment. This is just one of the many acts of bravery exhibited by ASOS members throughout the unit’s activation.

From 2004 – 2020, 238th ASOS TACPs traversed the world 14 times, fighting the war on terrorism. They’ve been accredited for the defeat of ISIS, were instrumental in Baghdad, had more than 2,000 enemy kills, and dropped more than one million pounds of bombs, all in defense of U.S., coalition and host nation forces.

California resident Lt. Col. Frank Monterrosa, who serves as a fireman in his civilian career, began his military career with the 238th in 2007 as an enlisted ROMAD and later commissioned to become a TACP officer. In all, Monterrosa deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan twice each, and to Syria from 2018-2019.

“The reason I stayed with the 238th is the people,” explained Monterrosa. “Living in California, I could have gone to Washington State or Houston. At one point, at least 20 members all lived out of state. That really drives home the point of brotherhood. I’ve always loved the atmosphere and culture.”

Most every year, at least 20% of the unit was deployed at any given time, speaking to the legacy of not only bravery, but also of comradery fostered by shared deployments, experiences and adversities.

For the past 26 years since the inception of the 238th ASOS, one Purple Heart, more than 20 Bronze Stars, one with Valor, numerous Army Combat Badges, at least three Combat Action Medals, and hundreds of other decorations have been awarded to members for support during training exercises, acts of bravery, and for injuries received while in combat with enemy forces. In fact, the 238th garners the record of the most Bronze Stars and Combat Action Ribbons of all Mississippi Air National Guard units.

With the ASOS redesignated, the 238th Air Support Operations Squadron’s legacy persists in perpetuity due to the 26 years of heroic actions and accomplishments embodying the Air Force warrior ethos through deterrence and the defense of our freedoms and national security.



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Staff Sgt. Jared Doyle and Staff Sgt. Ted Soto of 238th Air Support Operation Squadron, Mississippi Air National Guard, plot map coordinates prior to being evaluated during a close air support, live fire exercise June 6, 2017, at the National Training Center.

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Students win MACS art contest, scholarships

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Twelve students and one teacher recently took home \$8,000 worth of scholarships as 2025 Mississippi College and Career Savings Art Contest winners. State Treasurer David McRae presented the winners with their awards during a recent reception at the Mississippi Museum of Art.

The Mississippi College and Career Savings Art Contest is an annual event held by the State Treasurer's Office. This year, more than 2,000 students competed for twelve scholarships, making it the most competitive year in Treasury history. First place winners received a \$1,000 scholarship in the form of a Mississippi Affordable College Savings

(MACS) account. Second place received a \$500 scholarship, and third place received a \$250 scholarship.

"Every year, it amazes me what these students create," said McRae. "From chefs to dentists to elementary art teachers, Mississippi's students have big dreams for their future. I'm hopeful these scholarships from Mississippi College and Career Savings will push students one step closer to achieving their dream jobs. Congratulations to all of this year's winners, and thank you to all who participated."

In addition to student winners, Jessica Johnson from McLaurin Elementary School took home the Art Contest Teacher of the Year award

and was awarded the \$1,000 Educator Scholarship. Johnson had one hundred nineteen students submit art pieces this year. With the Educator Scholarship, she will be able to purchase art supplies for her classroom and cover other educational expenses, so she can continue to inspire young minds through art.

MACS is a Mississippi 529 College and Career Savings plan offered through the Office of the State Treasurer. With MACS, families can open a tax-advantaged savings account for educational expenses. The money in these accounts can be used for college tuition and expenses. The funds can also be applied to secondary and elementary private tuition, apprenticeship programs, student loans and more. For detailed information about the program, visit Treasury.MS.gov/MACS.

All photos Special to The Mississippi Monitor



High School 1st Place, Gaston 'Gus' Simpson from Pass Christian High School



High School 2nd Place, Jordyn Sledge from Saint Andrew's Episcopal School



High School 3rd Place, Kaylin Harris from Ida B. Wells APAC



Teacher of the Year, Jessica Johnson from McLaurin Elementary School



Early Elementary 1st Place, Henry Moore from Vardaman Attendance Center



Early Elementary 2nd Place, Miller McDaniel from Quarles Elementary



Early Elementary 3rd Place, Aurora Domingo from Madison Station Elementary School



Elementary 1st Place, Atharva Mantri from Northeast Lauderdale Middle School



Elementary 2nd Place, Beau Frost from Ida B. Wells APAC



Elementary 3rd Place, Jui Yen Hung from Overstreet Elementary School



Middle School 1st Place, Alexis Gypson from Ida B. Wells APAC



Middle School 2nd Place, Nurin Mock from Ida B. Wells APAC



Middle School 3rd Place, Benjamin Cummins from Ida B. Wells APAC Benjamin Cummins's scholarship was accepted by his art teacher, Ms. Renna Moore.

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MPB awarded grant to preserve Mississippi media history



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The archival materials to be restored from MPB productions over the last fifty-five years include more than 14,000 film, video and audio recordings.

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Mississippi Public Broadcasting (MPB) has received a \$350,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to digitize and preserve over five decades of archival content.

The grant, awarded through NEH's Humanities Collections and Reference Resources program, will support MPB's Preservation and Access Project — a major initiative to safeguard and modernize more



than 14,000 original productions produced locally by MPB, documenting Mississippi's cultural, artistic, political and social history.

This funding builds on a \$750,000 investment from the Mississippi Legislature in 2022, which launched MPB's long-term archival preservation effort. That initial support allowed MPB to begin organizing its collection, building the infrastructure to digitize it, and making it accessible online to educators, students, researchers, and the general public.

"This collection documents a huge portion of Mississippi's cultural impact on the world. Many of the titles in this body of work include interviews with authors, civil rights leaders, artists and state lawmakers," said MPB Chief Operating Officer Anna Neel. "This grant gives us the opportunity to rethink how we share, connect and celebrate the life and legacy of these icons while preserving and showcasing Mississippi's rich history for future generations."

MPB's phased improvements will continue to roll out over the next year, including upgrades to its website, mobile platforms, and on-demand content, benefiting students, educators, families and lifelong learners statewide.

"The archival project is a large undertaking given the vast amount of historic material that has been compiled over the last fifty-five years," continued Neel. "Once completed, the public will have access to a vast collection of media that presents our state's history in a more engaging, user-friendly and forward-looking way."

For more information, visit www.mpbonline.org.

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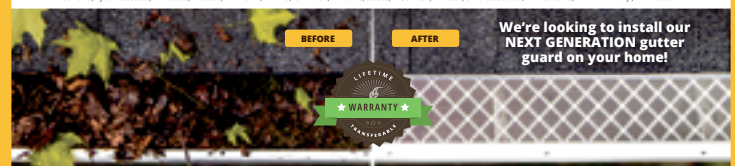


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DSU launches free tuition program for Mississippi students



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Delta State University recently announced a new initiative aimed at expanding college access and reducing financial barriers for Mississippi families. Beginning this fall, the Delta State Free Tuition Scholarship will cover 100% of tuition for Pell Grant-eligible, first-time freshmen.

The transformative program reflects Delta State's deep commitment to student success, affordability and educational opportunity for all.

"We believe that a student's financial situation should never be a barrier to earning a college degree," said DSU President Dr. Daniel J. Ennis. "This scholarship reinforces our mission to empower students and invest in the future of our communities."

The Free Tuition Scholarship ensures that all tuition costs are fully covered by combining a student's federal Pell Grant with any other earned scholarships. If there is any remaining balance, Delta State covers it, eliminating out-of-pocket tuition costs for qualifying students. The scholarship is renewable for up to four years (eight semesters), as long as the student remains Pell Grant-eligible and maintains academic progress toward a degree.

"With this program, we're sending a clear message: If you want to go to college, let's go," said Ennis. "Delta State is all in on making higher education more accessible and affordable."

Students and families interested in learning more about the Free Tuition Scholarship and how to apply can visit www.deltastate.edu/admissions/free-tuition/ or contact the Office of Admissions at admissions@deltastate.edu.

UMMC opens dedicated burn unit to expand statewide care

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The University of Mississippi Medical Center has officially opened a dedicated burn unit inside Batson Tower, creating a specialized environment designed to meet the complex needs of adult and pediatric burn patients.

This marks a major expansion of the Mississippi Burn Center at UMMC, which was designated as a state burn center by the Mississippi State Department of Health in 2023. The new unit strengthens UMMC's capabilities by consolidating acute treatment and rehabilitation services into a single, specialized space. Spanning 9,000 square feet, the area includes eight patient rooms, a hydrotherapy room for wound debridement and a rehabilitation gym to support physical and occupational therapy.

Staffed by an interdisciplinary team of experts in emergency medicine, trauma surgery, plastic surgery, critical care, laboratory medicine, mental health, occupational therapy and physical therapy, the unit supports a full spectrum of specialized care. This collaborative approach ensures that burn patients benefit from both immediate critical care and long-term rehabilitation services essential for recovery.

The unit includes a specialized hydrotherapy room for wound debridement to support healing, minimizing the need for trips to the operating room. Equipped with a shower table, adjustable temperature controls and a television for entertainment, the space keeps patients at ease during procedures that are necessary for preventing infection. When surgery is needed, patients can access OR suites in the same tower, minimizing transport time and improving continuity of care.

"The rooms are larger, which gives us the space we need for dressing changes and other procedures, right in the patient's room," said Dr. Alan Jones, associate vice chancellor for health affairs. "Cohorting burn patients is the standard we prefer, because they are prone to specific types of infections. When they're comingling with other patients, they're more vulnerable. So, it allows us to keep them more isolated and protected."

Plans are also underway to launch tele-burn consultations, offering additional support to hospitals and emergency providers statewide. The goal is to improve coordination and ensure timely treatment, particularly in rural areas.

"This will mean that our rural hospital partners can request a consultation, I'm able to see the patient, and look at the wound in real time with the provider," said Dr. Juvonda Hodge, who joined UMMC in 2024 as the Center's director. "It gets their care started a lot quicker and that helps prevent complications down the road."

With more than seventeen years of experience in pediatric and adult burn care, Hodge is leading efforts to enhance education, outreach and clinical care. Since arriving, she has implemented hands-on training, in-service sessions and other learning opportunities for our faculty, students, residents, fellows and first responders.

"Being an academic medical center, we not only impact the patients



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Cutting the ribbon for the opening of the new burn unit are (l to r), front row: Kayla Hubbard of Magee; Dr. Juvonda Hodge, director of the Mississippi Burn Center; Dr. LouAnn Woodward, vice chancellor for health affairs; Dr. Alan Jones, associate vice chancellor for health affairs; and Kenneth Clark of Waynesboro; and back row: Dr. Daniel Edney, state health officer; Dr. Peter Arnold, chief of the Division of Plastic Surgery; Dr. Al Rankins, IHL commissioner; Sherry Riser, nursing director; Gee Ogletree, IHL president; and Sen. Walter Michel.

that we take care of, but also future doctors and providers," said Hodge. "We have pharmacy students, nursing students, medical students, surgical residents, emergency medicine residents, anesthesia residents... We also co-manage with pediatric residents."

"When they leave here, they'll know how to recognize and respond to burn injuries. That level of preparedness makes a real difference, especially in communities where burn specialists may not be readily available."

In 2024, the Mississippi Burn Center admitted more than 350 patients. With the new unit now operational, the Medical Center is better equipped to meet the growing need for high-quality burn care across the state.

As Mississippi's only Level I trauma center, UMMC is uniquely positioned to deliver coordinated, high-level care for patients with complex and life-threatening injuries. The opening of this unit is also a rare achievement. UMMC is just the third academic medical center in the country to establish a new burn unit in the last twenty years.

"This is a very big deal, and we are so proud that everything has finally come together," said Hodge. "The biggest reason for that is the collaboration and commitment of our teams at UMMC and strong support from our state leadership. Burn care is incredibly complex. It requires not only specialized training, but also the right environment, equipment and coordination. That's what we've built here."

"Our new unit combines advanced resources with a comprehensive, patient-centered approach," said Jones. "It's not about treating burns. It's about delivering the best care and support for recovery at every stage of the patient journey."



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