

The Mississippi Monitor

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MSDH announces milestone: 20,000 free lifesaving naloxone kits distributed

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi State Department of Health’s (MSDH) Opioid and Substance Use Program has reached a milestone: As of August 20, it has distributed more than 20,000 free individual naloxone kits throughout the state.

Naloxone is a lifesaving medication that can reverse an overdose from opioids including heroin, fentanyl and prescription opioid medications.

“Our program is saving lives every day by making naloxone readily available to the people of Mississippi,” said Jon Hubanks, director of the Opioid and Substance Use Program. “By increasing access to this lifesaving medication, we are breaking down barriers that often lead to tragic outcomes. Each kit we distribute not only protects someone from an opioid overdose, but also reflects our commitment to the health, well-being and safety of everyone in Mississippi.”

Mississippi drug overdose deaths reached an all-time high of 787 deaths in 2021 and are beginning to decline due to prevention and linkage to care efforts. They were 2.5 times higher in 2023 than in 2018.

In December of 2022, MSDH began offering the free naloxone kits to address the opioid epidemic by making the medication easily available through an online request form. The

kits are valued at about \$50 each and made available through federal cooperative agreements.

MSDH recommends that those who are at an increased risk for opioid overdose or who know someone who is should carry naloxone and keep it at home. Naloxone has no negative side effects and will not harm someone if they are overdosing on drugs other than opioids.

Requesting a free kit is easy. Those who wish to have a kit sent to them only need to watch a short training video and complete a survey at this <https://msdh.ms.gov/naloxone>.

For more information about the kits, email naloxone@msdh.ms.gov. For more information about Mississippi’s opioid epidemic, visit ODFree.org.



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Charles Asa Reynolds, M.D., FACS

New TeachMS.org teacher recruitment website launched



Teach Mississippi
One student, one classroom,
one school at a time



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) has redesigned its teacher recruitment website, TeachMS.org, that markets the teaching profession in Mississippi while breaking down the teacher preparation and licensure process into easy-to-understand steps.

Anyone interested in becoming a teacher is advised to explore the website to learn about how to get started. The website includes a quiz to help potential teachers find the licensure pathway that fits their background, an interactive salary schedule and links to job listings in the new Mississippi Educator Career Continuum Archive (MECCA) Talent Portal. It also includes highlights about the benefits of teaching in Mississippi, including incentives for teachers and the state's No. 2 national ranking for affordability.

MDE's Office of Teaching and Leading (OTL) works to attract and retain quality teachers in Mississippi and originally launched the website in 2019. The OTL's Educator Talent Acquisition Division has annually surveyed teachers and school districts since the 2021-22 school year to assess teacher retention and educator shortages. OTL also focuses on removing barriers to educator licensure, including expanding access to alternate-route educator preparation programs and innovative programs such as Performance-Based Licensure and the Mississippi Teacher Residency. The updated TeachMS.org website is one tool to aid those efforts.

School districts and educational stakeholders are urged to share the TeachMS.org website as a resource on their respective websites and other platforms to reach individuals who may be interested in the teaching profession in Mississippi.



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New Miss Mississippi Volunteer and Miss Mississippi Teen Volunteer crowned



Mattie Grace Morris, a recent graduate of the University of Mississippi, was recently crowned Miss Mississippi Volunteer. She will go on to compete for a \$50,000 scholarship at the national Miss Volunteer America Pageant in June of 2026.

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The fifth-annual Miss Mississippi Volunteer pageant, held this past summer at the Tupelo Performing Arts Center, selected twenty-two-year-old Mattie Grace Morris of Oxford as its new representative.

Morris won a \$10,000 scholarship, a prize package featuring thousands in sponsored products and services, a year of appearances as the Mississippi Highway Patrol's D.R.I.V.E. Campaign Spokesperson, and service opportunities as an ambassador for the Salvation Army and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. She also receives the opportunity to compete for a \$50,000 scholarship at the national Miss Volunteer America Pageant in June of 2026.

Morris is a recent graduate of the University of Mississippi with a degree in broadcast journalism and minor in marketing, and she is now pursuing a career in journalism and broadcasting. She is a lifelong ballerina, passionate communicator and dedicated advocate for confidence and wellness.

Morris competed in the categories of private interview with a panel of judges, fitness and wellness, evening gown, and talent—garnering top judges' marks as the Overall Fitness, Talent, and Evening Gown winner. Her talent performance was a classical ballet to "La Esmeralda."

Morris' SERVE Initiative - the service project of her choosing - is "Mind Over Mirror," a movement inspired by her experiences as a classically-trained ballerina, focused on helping women discover their true value beyond what any mirror can reflect.

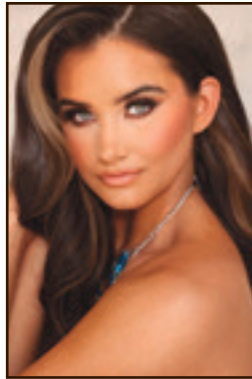
Throughout the upcoming year, she will travel Mississippi promoting safe driving awareness and teaching better driving practices to teen drivers in partnership with the Mississippi Highway Patrol, becoming the fifth state titleholder from the organization to inherit the impactful partnership.

Also crowned in Tupelo was the new Miss Mississippi Teen Volunteer, nineteen-year-old Josie Todd. Todd originally hails from Memphis, Tennessee, and attends The University of Mississippi, where she majors in business marketing. Todd won a \$3,000 scholarship and will work alongside Morris serving the state's partners throughout this year. She will go on to compete for the title of Miss Teen Volunteer America in March of 2026.

Todd's SERVE Initiative is "Best Buddies," her passion for which is inspired by her older brother with developmental disabilities and the social isolation he experienced. She has raised over \$50,000 for the organization and says she is proud to advocate for inclusion and acceptance of those with disabilities.

Todd's talent performance was a vocal rendition of "Let Me Be Your Star," and her resume includes both theatre and vocal performance experience.

The Miss Mississippi Volunteer Scholarship Pageant is a non-profit, service-based organization based in Amory and an official state licens-



Miss Mississippi Volunteer 2025 Mattie Grace Morris



Josie Todd, a student at the University of Mississippi, was recently crowned Miss Mississippi Teen Volunteer. She will go on to compete for the title of Miss Teen Volunteer America in March of 2026.



All photos Special to The Mississippi Monitor

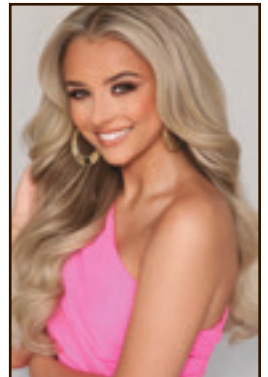
ee of the national Miss Volunteer America Pageant, which was founded by Allison DeMarcus, reality television star and wife of Rascal Flatts band member Jay DeMarcus. The organizations focus on providing women ages 13–26 with educational scholarships and extraordinary opportunities.

The Miss Mississippi Volunteer Scholarship Pageant has also made available more than \$400,000 in scholarship assistance in the first five years of its existence.

"We are thrilled about not only our new state representatives, but also to have another successful year of providing opportunities to young women in the books," said Steve Stockton, executive Director of the organization. "We could not do this without the support of the many volunteers and sponsors who believe in our mission."

Morris and Todd immediately began their travels across the state, delivering D.R.I.V.E. presentations with the Mississippi Highway Patrol, advocating for their personal platforms and the organization's philanthropic partners, and embodying the brand's service-minded mission through speaking engagements, events and volunteer opportunities.

For more information about Miss Mississippi Volunteer and booking requests for the new titleholders, contact Director of Media and Public Relations Rachel Bragg at 662-419-2056, or visit www.MissMississippiVolunteer.com.



Miss Mississippi Teen Volunteer 2025 Josie Todd



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Mississippi hosts National Association of State Fire Marshals conference



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The National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM) held its 35th Annual Fire Prevention and Safety Symposium in Biloxi late this summer. The Mississippi State Fire Marshals' Office hosted the gathering of 400 fire service leaders, public safety advocates, and industry professionals from more than 30 states.

The theme for the conference was "All Hours, All Hazards: Disaster Never Sleeps."

Mississippi is no stranger to disaster - from hurricanes on the Gulf Coast to tornadoes in the Delta...from historic floods that swallow neighborhoods to wildfires that spark without warning. The theme was chosen because it captures not just the nature of the hazards Fire Marshals face, but the nature of the response they must bring. It means planning for everything, at all times. It means adapting, coordinating and acting — not just when it's convenient, but when it matters most.

"The symposium is an opportunity to learn from one another, strengthen partnerships and elevate our shared commitment to excellence across every jurisdiction we serve. At the Mississippi State Fire Marshals Office, we are dedicated to ensuring safety through the enforcement of fire codes, regulatory oversight and collaborative response efforts across our state. As Chief Deputy, I have the privilege of leading a remarkable team of professionals who carry out that mission daily with integrity and purpose," said Connie Dolan, Mississippi Chief Deputy State Fire Marshal.

"Fire marshals serve on the front lines of prevention - conducting inspections, enforcing safety codes, investigating incidents and educating the public. This forms the backbone of our fire safety system. The NASFM Fire Prevention and Safety Symposium is a tremendous opportunity to further training, share ideas and strengthen the professional network that keeps our communities safer, smarter and more resilient," said Mike Chaney, State Fire Marshal and Mississippi Insurance Commissioner.

Enrollment for MPACT 2025-26 is open now through May 31

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

State Treasurer David McRae recently announced the Mississippi Prepaid Affordable College Tuition (MPACT) program is open now through May 31, 2026. This program allows for families to lock in current tuition prices to pre-pay for their child's education.

"With college costs climbing every year, MPACT gives Mississippi families the chance to plan ahead, lock in today's tuition rates, and shield themselves from decades of rising prices," said McRae. "This is about financial responsibility, helping parents invest wisely now so their children can pursue higher education without being buried in debt. With Mississippi's economy growing and more jobs requiring education beyond high school, MPACT's 2025-26 enrollment season gives families a smart, fiscally conservative way to prepare for the future."

MPACT plans are available for four-year degree programs, as well as community college programs. Rates vary depending on a child's age and a family's down payment.

For more information about the program. Visit Treasury.MS.gov/impact.

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NASA Stennis provides ideal location for range of site tenants



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Teams at NASA's Stennis Space Center conduct a hot fire test of an Aerojet AJ26 rocket engine on the E-1 Test Stand in November 2013. NASA's Stennis Space Center near Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, operates as the nation's largest rocket propulsion test site, as well as a sprawling federal city.

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

If location, location, location is the overarching mantra in real estate, it is small wonder that NASA's Stennis Space Center is considered a national asset and prime aerospace and technology operations site.

It has long stood as a premier – and the nation's largest – rocket propulsion test site. With unparalleled test infrastructure and expertise, NASA Stennis has helped power the nation's human space exploration for almost sixty years. It continues to do so, testing systems and engines for NASA's Artemis program to send astronauts to the Moon to prepare for future human exploration of Mars.

In addition, NASA Stennis is the choice location for a range of agencies, organizations, offices, and companies, all of whom readily attest to the values of the setting. Ask resident tenants to note the value of their NASA Stennis location, and one hears terms like “strategic advantages,” “ideal location,” “local expertise and experience,” “collaborative opportunities,” “hub of innovation” and “valuable security buffer.”

For the NASA Shared Services Center (NSSC), its location at the south Mississippi test site provides “substantial strategic advantages” that helps the NSSC maximize its work and provide streamlined business operations for the agency.

Likewise, NASA Stennis provides an ideal location for the North Gulf Institute operated by Mississippi State University, as it conducts frontline work in hurricane forecasting, modeling and assessment, as well as fishery and ecosystem management. The location is strengthened further by the proximity to collaborative partners like the Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command and the National Data Buoy Center.

The same holds true for the National Centers for Environmental Information operated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. A spokesperson said the centers' mission success is “firmly rooted in its strategic co-location with other federal partners,” including the Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command, the National Data Buoy Center, and the Northern Gulf Institute.

For Relativity Space, the largest NASA Stennis test complex tenant, the “unparalleled infrastructure” at NASA Stennis has been key to enabling the company's rocket engine testing.

“NASA's Stennis Space Center plays a vital role in getting Terrain R to space,” said Clay Walker, vice president of test and launch for Relativity Space. “The infrastructure here allows us to test high-performance engines in ways no other place can.”

Other companies express similar sentiments, citing the unique opportunities NASA Stennis provides, as well as the value of the local

workforce. For instance, L3Harris Technologies has operated at NASA Stennis under various names since the 1960s, providing support to the Apollo, Space Shuttle and, now, Artemis programs. In 2008, Lockheed Martin opened a start-to-finish facility for production of propulsion systems, making use of the various NASA Stennis propulsion test services and resources.

Evolution Space is capitalizing on decades of aerospace experience at NASA Stennis, as well as “world-class” site infrastructure to establish production and test capabilities for solid rocket motors onsite.

Both Mississippi and Louisiana have established technology offices onsite. As a Mississippi Enterprise for Technology statement noted, “The NASA Stennis environment enhances our ability to support emerging technologies, strengthen Mississippi's technology ecosystem, and contribute to the economic vitality of the region,” said Davis Pace, chief executive officer for the Mississippi Enterprise for Technology.

Meanwhile, the site's most prominent tenant – the U.S. Navy – operates various offices at NASA Stennis. The Navy's move to the site began in the 1970s to take advantage of the security provided by the surrounding NASA Stennis acoustical buffer zone. Various Navy functions eventually located continuing operations onsite, including the Naval Meteorology and Oceanography Command, the Naval Oceanographic Office, the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School, the Navy Office of Civilian Human Resources, and the Naval Research Laboratory.

In similar fashion, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security credits the “high-quality, secure, and resilient” NASA Stennis site for its decision to location information technology and applications operations onsite.

As the very first NASA Stennis federal city tenant, arriving onsite in September 1970, the National Data Buoy Center has borne witness to it all.

“From its inception, Sen. John Stennis (and other leaders) envisioned a place where America would push the boundaries of the unknown – from the depths of the oceans to the far reaches of space,” said Dr. William Burnett, director of the National Data Buoy Center onsite. “That vision lives on at NASA Stennis, now home to one of the world's largest concentrations of oceanographers. At the National Data Buoy Center, we proudly carry out our mission to safeguard maritime safety by harnessing the full strength of this unique scientific and technical community.

“We are deeply rooted in the community and grateful to thrive within the collaborative spirit that defines Stennis. It's an honor to be part of its legacy – and its future.”

Book Review: *Memorial Days* by Geraldine Brooks

By Guest Columnist Lauren von Foregger

Grief is the great equalizer, the near universal experience. Indiscriminately, grief can, for example, unexpectedly and temporarily render legs useless, make breathing impossible or produce great animal sounds from a mere human body. It can happen anywhere, to any one of us.

Grief lurks; it bides its time and often strikes at the most inopportune moment. It doesn't follow social constructs of appropriateness; it does not wear a watch. It puts us all on an even playing field.

Geraldine Brooks' memoir *Memorial Days* offers readers a poignant, unflinching look at her jagged journey toward peace following the sudden and unexpected death of her husband. On Memorial Day, 2019, Brooks receives the shattering news that Tony, her sixty-year-old, healthy, fun and vibrant husband, has collapsed and died on a sidewalk in Washington, D.C.

What follows is a whirlwind of tasks and, for years, Brooks suppresses the crushing weight of her grief. Three years later, she sets out to find some semblance of reconciliation within herself, seeking solace in the one place that feels most natural to her: Tasmania. It is there, on the rugged island off the coast of Australia, that Brooks faces the raw, repressed grief she has been running from.

This is not Geraldine Brooks' first venture into the world of writing. Among her long list of works is her 2020 novel *Horse*, which topped the fiction charts for weeks, becoming a beloved fixture in the hearts of readers, mine included. At the time I read it, I had no idea that Brooks had written the second half of that novel after her husband's death, during the early, uncertain days of the pandemic.

But *Memorial Days* is something much more visceral than a novel. In *Memorial Days*, Brooks' narrative shifts between the days and weeks following

Tony's death and her time spent in Tasmania. Both timelines are imbued with humor and pain, as they wrestle with the vulnerability of being human, the process of grief, and the cost of moving forward.

"I have vaulted right over denial, anger, bargaining and depression and landed in the soft sands of acceptance," Brooks writes. "I now know that, even as I wrote those words, I was in denial. I didn't believe he was dead. I expected him to come bursting through the door, throwing clothes out of his bag, loudly regaling me with funny tales from the road. The vault I had attempted was impossible. Those sands were quicksand."

Alone on Tasmania, Brooks treks through rugged terrain, reads through her late husband's journals, gathers sea asparagus, and sleeps by the fire of a woodstove. She wears the same clothes for days on end, throws herself into the cold sea, watches sunsets. But mostly, she waits. She gives her sorrow the space it demands, allowing it the time it needs to release itself.

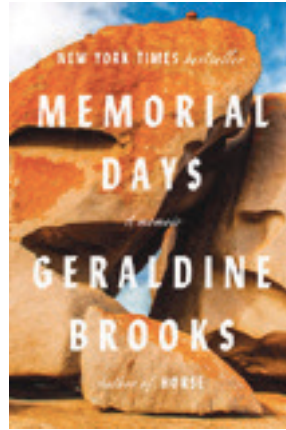
Brooks writes about society's tendency to rush grief, to push those mourning to feel better, to move on.

"I wish we could resist those things," she writes, lamenting how people often expect grief to be neatly packed away in a reasonable time. Grief, however, is ever-present, lingering on the edges, patiently shaking its head. It understands it is here

for the long haul, and so, too, must we remain for the unrelenting sadness of those we love, even after we feel it should have been properly stowed away.

"When I started to write fiction," Brooks writes, "I came across a piece of advice on the craft of novel writing. Your task, as a novelist, is to keep pushing your protagonist's head under water throughout the narrative. But when you get to the end, you must decide: Will you sink them, or let them swim? I put my face in the clear, briny water. I stretch out my body. I swim."

Memorial Days is for anyone who has wrestled with what it truly means to move forward after loss. It's a story for all of us.



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Pioneer of gifted education

Dr. Frances Karnes leaves lasting impact

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Dr. Frances Karnes' decades of advocacy, innovation and mentorship transformed gifted education, shaping how educators, policymakers and communities support students with exceptional abilities. Her influence extends from Mississippi to classrooms and policy initiatives across the nation and around the world.

Karnes, distinguished university professor emeritus at The University of Southern Mississippi and founding director of its Frances A. Karnes Center for Gifted Studies, passed away peacefully on August 22, 2025, surrounded by her family. She was 87.

Programs and Policy Influence

For more than forty years, the Frances A. Karnes Center for Gifted Studies at Southern Miss has been an internationally recognized leader in gifted education research, outreach, advocacy and curriculum and policy development. Thousands of students with exceptional abilities have participated in the center's Leadership, Saturday Gifted Studies, Summer Gifted Studies and Summer Academically Talented Youth programs, which provide enrichment and accelerated courses taught by expert instructors from diverse professional backgrounds.

Founded by Dr. Karnes in 1979 and named for her in 1999, the center also supports teachers of the gifted and their families. Under Karnes' leadership, the center influenced public policy in Mississippi and nationally, leading to improvements in curriculum and funding for gifted education. Her former students—many of whom collaborated with her on publications—now carry her vision forward in classrooms and educational initiatives across the country and globe.

Mentorship and Legacy

Her extraordinary dedication not only shaped the Karnes Center but also left a lasting imprint on the university and the broader educational community.

"Dr. Karnes was a true pioneer whose vision transformed gifted education in Mississippi and beyond," said Southern Miss President Dr. Joe Paul. "She was a force for good, a tireless leader, and her unwavering commitment to students, educators and families reflects the very best of our institution. We are honored to carry forward her legacy of excellence, innovation and inspiration."

Dr. Heather Houston, one of Karnes' former students and



now director of the Karnes Center, described her mentor as having "the special gift of being able to identify unique talents and abilities in other people."

"Her legacy reaches far beyond the world of gifted education and lives on in the entrepreneurial, artistic, legislative and intellectual achievements of those she gathered to herself over the years," Houston said. "She had a way of revealing the wonderful things in you that you were not aware of yourself. Even more, she made it a point to encourage and cajole until you had stepped out in faith upon the platform she helped you to envision."

"I learned so much at her side and have been so honored to have her trust and friendship as I have taken on the directorship of her center," Houston continued. "She has made such a difference in my life and in the lives of so many others. I would venture to say that Hattiesburg, and the world, would be a very different place without her influence."

Awards and Service

Karnes served on the Southern Miss faculty from 1973 until 2014. Her honors include the Mississippi Association for Gifted Children's Award for Excellence (2003), Distinguished University Professor (2010), TeachTechTopia's Top 10 Most Influential Special Education Professors (2010), the National Association for Professional Women's Legacy Registry (2011–12) and the National Association for Gifted Children's Legacy Award (2015).

She also devoted her time to numerous community and professional organizations, including the Boys and Girls Club of Hattiesburg Advisory Council, the Hattiesburg Public School Foundation Board, the Forrest General Hospital Spirit of Women Advisory Council, Forrest General Foundation Board, the National Association for Gifted Children, the Mississippi Association for Gifted Children, and the Council for Exceptional Children, among many others.

"I had a wonderful career at Southern Miss," Karnes said upon her retirement. "The people here have been very kind and supportive of our efforts to establish and expand gifted education in Mississippi."

To view Karnes' obituary, visit <https://www.moorefuneralservices.com/obituaries/Dr-Frances-A-Karnes?obId=44528459#/obituaryInfo>.

For more information about the Karnes Center for Gifted Studies at Southern Miss, visit www.usm.edu/education-human-sciences/gifted-studies/index.php.

Let's Eat, Mississippi: The Handpie Guy

By Laura Lee Leathers

Recently, I contacted Ryan Tate, founder and owner of The Handpie Guy, regarding coming to Tupelo for an interview. We set the date. The logistics were arranged, and on an early Thursday morning, my friend, Charlotte, and I drove the over two-hour trip north.

Picking up my cell phone, I hit the Google Maps app for directions to the Handpie Guy. The address I had entered took me to a shopping center. I pulled in front of the Change skate shop on Cliff Gookin Boulevard and looked for the Handpie Guy sign, but saw nothing.

Picking up the phone again, I called the number I had in my contacts.

"Hi Ryan, I'm sitting in my vehicle in front of the business, Change. Are you inside?" I asked.

With a slight chuckle, Ryan told me that I had the wrong address. He said he had moved from that location several months ago. I needed to come to 1133 West Main Street, his business is across from the Talbot House Bakery and Cafe.

I plugged in the new address. Once again, I relied upon Google Maps. Pulling out of the shopping center, I went east on Main Street. When I approached the area, the voice from Google was telling me to turn right. I obeyed. No signs of the Handpie Guy; instead, I was at a tire service center. Ugh!

I redialed the number, "Hi Ryan, I'm at the address you gave me, but I'm not finding your business."

How embarrassing, I thought, and now I'm late for the interview. Ryan told me that he was directly across the street. I drove out of the parking lot, stopped at a stoplight, and then turned left, followed by a quick right into the parking lot of a shopping area. And there was the sign I was looking for, over a building that is a free-standing Farmer's Market.

Ryan warmly greeted me, and I took a seat at a corner table. Our appointment was for 10 a.m.; now it is almost 10:30, and people were steadily driving up. I watched the patrons getting out of their vehicles to view the day's menu and place their order at the front window, while others went to the drive-thru. The place was hopping with business.

Ryan asked if I would like to sample a hand pie or two. Who could refuse? I chose the sausage and gravy for the savory option and a peach for the sweet one. Piping hot, it would be a few minutes before I could indulge.

The Skateboard Connection

Ryan Tate is originally from Southern California, where he engaged in skateboarding from his childhood and continues to this day. After high school, he joined the army and then returned to Venice Beach, where he was involved in several businesses.

His wife, Carla, is from Stone County, Mississippi, but they met in California. She is also a skateboarder. They decided to move to Ocean Springs, but they returned to California.

Eventually, they decided to move back to Mississippi, this time to Petal, where they opened an award-winning restaurant, which also featured a food truck, called South Miss Hot Dogs and Hand Pies for a more southern flair. Later, they made the decision to sell the business.

Last fall, Ryan commented to his wife that he was bored and wondered where they could find a place to skateboard. They found Change in Tupelo and met with the owner, Matt Robinson. He is the founder of a skateboarding and art festival held annually called ChangeFest.

The connection between the two men went from skateboarding to opening a business using the small kitchen at the back of Change. Also joining in the conversation was Michael Parker, who goes by Parker. He was hired and began working for The Handpie Guy when it opened for business on October 2, 2024.

It wasn't long before the Tates realized they needed a slightly bigger kitchen and a more centralized location. Ryan met with the owner of a farm stand and asked about renting the space. He remodeled, creating a kitchen and an area for customers to sit. But a portion of the building was kept for the owner to operate the seasonal farm stand.

Handpies Available in 120 Varieties

The inspiration for South Miss Hot Dogs and Hand Pies and The Handpie Guy may have come from a Ryan's California friend, an Argentinian, whose mother had an empanada shop.

With a love for cooking, Ryan spent several weeks developing a rich, buttery pie crust that would work well for both the savory and sweets. The dough is mixed the day before and placed in the refrigerator to harden. The next step is to run the dough through a sheeter. Then, by hand, Ryan and

Parker use a disk to cut out the 500 to 700 pie crusts for the day. The following steps are the fillings and then the crimper.

For the fillings, the Tates started with tried-and-true recipes from Carla's family. But the recipes have grown with new creations and requests from customers. There are the favorites, such as Mississippi Pot Roast, sausage gravy, and cheeseburger, along with the new candied jalapeno and pimento cheese.

Open on Wednesday through Friday, the monthly menu features one breakfast pie, one vegetarian option, three savory pies, and three sweet pies. However, the menu is subject to change, should a pie become a hot-selling item. Weekly, the menu is posted on the Facebook page. The following is a daily example: sausage gravy, cheeseburger, chicken cordon bleu, gauchito corn, jalapeno popper with bacon, peach, apple, blueberry with vanilla cream, and bananas foster.

Ryan stated that he usually arrives at work around 4:30 a.m. to prepare for serving customers from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. However, if they sell out, which they typically do, they will close around 1 or 2 p.m. A unique feature of this business is that there are no leftovers. If there are any handpies left at the end of the day, they are taken to the nearby fire station.

For the 4th of July, The Handpie Guy set up a stand at a local park. They made 1,000 fried pies, instead of the usual oven-baked, and sold lemonade. It was a success. The sweets and savorys are requested for events such as baby or bridal showers. The pies are frozen, and delivery includes instructions on how to bake at home. For pre-orders, customers simply call or use the Facebook page.

Ryan also serves seasonal items, like a sweet potato handpie, or at Mardi Gras, he has handpies that are decorated like the King Cake. When you order a dozen, a plastic baby is hidden in one of the handpies.

Challenges and Contests

Do you like hot peppers? Does a contest called "The Fire in My Piehole Challenge" pique your interest? About a month ago, Ryan shared the details of the contest on social media. The hand pie was made a tad larger than the regular pies. Inside each pie was a mixture of ground beef and a sauce consisting of Ghost, Carolina Reapers, Scorpion, Habanero and Jalapeno peppers. One thing is sure, it was hot and spicy.

Those who took the challenge had to wear gloves to pick up the pie. The contestant had 90 seconds to eat the pie. Then they had to wait five minutes before they could drink a glass of milk. A good number of men and women participated.

From a social media post, Ryan wrote, "After a month of running it, I've learned one thing: people will do anything for a free t-shirt. I thought this would just be a fun little stunt—watch folk's mouths catch fire, eyes water, hear a few 'it's worse coming out than going in' jokes, and boom, laughs all around."

Sorry, the contest has ended. Ryan officially pulled the plug on the contest on August 29. Those who participated are in what Ryan calls "an exclusive club of 15 legends who survived it in the summer of 2025, right here in Tupelo. Their faces are forever immortalized on the Wall of Flame (and social media photos don't lie)." The Wall of Flame is located inside The Handpie Guy.

Entrepreneurship

When I asked Ryan about future plans, he told me he was working on several ways to expand his hand pie business. Offering franchises is at the top of his list. If you are interested and would like to invest, contact him.

This fall, he will be flying to California to consult with a friend who wants The Handpie Guy in a food truck located at his movie studio in Burbank. There are other things he is considering.

The Tates are in the process of selling their home in Tupelo and will return to Petal. Parker will be the operations manager for the Tupelo business. The Tates will be traveling back and forth as needed.

Several times, Ryan left our interview to help Parker with customers. I witnessed firsthand how much he enjoyed meeting the public.

When asked what the best thing about the business was, Ryan responded, "I would have to say it is the interaction with people. Getting to know them and where they are from. I pretty much talk to everyone who comes through." He is building relationships and offers a high-quality pie that keeps his customers coming back.

I thanked Ryan for his time, said goodbye to Parker, hopped in my car, and went back to pick up Charlotte. Before I left Tupelo, I took her to The Handpie Guy for an afternoon dessert. I purchased a baker's dozen to take home and share with family and friends. I'm hooked!

Follow The Handpie Guy on Facebook or call 662-422-3381 for the menu, pre-order information, and more.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Fresh baked, sweet or savory... the recipes continue to grow with new creations and requests from customers.



Wesson ranch serves as home base for Mississippi Highway Patrol Mounted Division

By Bob Arnold

A 160-acre Wesson ranch is the base of the relatively new Mississippi Highway Patrol (MHP) Mounted Division.

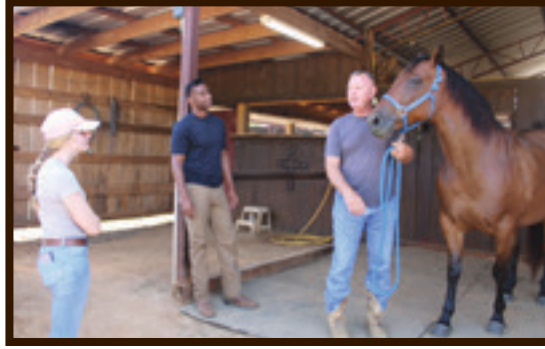
Ellis Lee Morrison, a 28-year Wesson resident, life-long horseman and veteran state Highway Patrol officer is Captain of the Special Operations Group (SOG) based at his ranch off St. John Road.

Along with SWAT, Air Op, Motorcycle, K9 and CRASH teams, the new SOG enhances MHP's law enforcement capacity. The four-year old unit is on call 24/7 to assist in search and rescue of missing persons and accident victims in hard-to-reach areas, tracking down prison escapees and others targets of man hunts, providing an added level of security and crowd control at special events – fairs, parades, sports and entertainment attractions – and presenting a public face for the Highway Patrol.

Horses, Morrison notes, are a good fit in law enforcement because “they have keen senses of sight, smell and hearing; they have a height advantage, are stealthy and can go to places where others can't.”

“It was a vision of Governor Tate Reeves and Commissioner of Public Safety Sean Tindell,” Morrison explains.

They asked Morrison, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Bureau of Investigations at the time, to create the new division and lead it, following a model similar to K9 teams in which the leaders train, feed and maintain dogs on their own properties. Morrison's credentials as a horse trainer with his own ranch in a good central location made him the ideal choice.



Kate Malta, a Mississippi Highway Patrol Mounted Division volunteer (left) learns how to handle horses with children. Division Captain Ellis Lee Morrison (right) is assisted by Trooper Stargell Catchings in teaching Malta.

Morrison took the job, and started by consulting with Texas officials at Capital Security in Austin and the state's Department of Criminal Justice, which has one hundred horses available to track prison escapees. He acquired the initial horses for the new Mississippi unit from Texas.

Four years later, the MHP Mounted Division has twelve equines – two at the Mississippi State Prison at Parchman and ten on Morrison's Wesson ranch – Colt, Nemo, Maggie, Delta, Dake, Missie, Chewy, Bradley, Tank (Morrison's personal horse) and Elvis, a mascot pony. One other permanent police officer works with Morrison – Trooper Stargell Catchings - and the division has twelve special duty members. Volunteers who are good with children also play an

important role in the division's public relations activities.

Training the horses is ongoing at Morrison's ranch, with the major focus on desensitizing them to distractions from their job focus – sights and sounds, people, other animals. Morrison even has a pig on his ranch to annoy the horses, so they aren't spooked on a search and rescue mission when they encounter a Mississippi wild hog.

“The Mounted Division is at work constantly,” Morrison summarizes. “When our horses aren't involved in a law enforcement function, they are interacting with people – particularly children – presenting the Mississippi Highway Patrol positively. As trained, friendly animals that also support public safety, they uniquely demonstrate that law enforcement is not to be feared, but is there to help, not harm.”

Photo and cover photo for this story Special to The Mississippi Monitor



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Mississippi Legends:

Jimmy Boyd - The Mississippi boy who changed Christmas

By Richelle Putnam

Jimmy Boyd, a Mississippi native, was 13 when he recorded the holiday tune "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus." The song became a Billboard chart number one song within three weeks and sold over two million copies in less than ten.

But Boyd's life was far more intricately layered than one hit.

Born From Grit and Strings

James (Jimmy) Devon Boyd was born to Winnie and Leslie Boyd on January 9, 1939, near McComb, Mississippi.

Leslie Boyd, a farmer-turned-carpenter, often had to pick over 600 pounds of cotton daily to support his family of 21 siblings.

In 1941, he sent his wife and two sons by train to California while he rode freight trains, hobbing from Mississippi to Texas and reuniting with his family in Riverside. Leslie's grit significantly shaped and defined his son Jimmy.

The Making of a Star

Jimmy's grandfather, known as the local legend "Fiddler Bill," had a profound influence on Jimmy's musical pursuits. Jimmy started playing guitar at age four and, at age seven, was plucking at cotton barn dances.

Bandleader and performer Jim Lewis featured Jimmy on his radio show. Those \$50-per-show appearances grew into regional fame.

After winning a local talent contest, Boyd appeared on *The Frank Sinatra Show*, which led to a recording deal with Columbia Records.

His first charted recording was the country number "(The Angels Are Lighting) God's Little Candles," which reached almost a million sales. But, at the urging of Columbia executive Mitch Miller, Jimmy recorded "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus," and, from there, he became a household name.

Still, the song faced controversy. The Catholic Church objected to mixing a sacred holiday with a sensual theme and banned the song in Boston. Boyd, who was 13 then, personally met with the church leaders to explain the innocent humor behind the lyrics, and the ban was lifted.

In a *Time Magazine* interview, Boyd said about the chart-topping song, "I like it personally, but I didn't think anyone would buy it."

It turns out the world did, and it never stopped listening.



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Born near McComb, the young singer who saw "Mommy kissing Santa Claus" had a career that spanned stage and screen.



Stage to Screen

Between 1953 and 1954, Jimmy Boyd appeared five times on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, performing with legends like Rosemary Clooney, Frankie Laine, and Betty White. He also landed recurring roles in sitcoms like *Date with the Angels*, *Bachelor Father*, and *Broadside*.

That led to appearances in movies such as *Inherit the Wind* (1960), starring Spencer Tracy and Mickey Rooney.

He was the youngest performer to headline in Las Vegas' famed Sands Hotel, sharing the stage with Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack at only age 13.

Complicated Celebrity

Boyd often felt limited by Mitch Miller's (Columbia Records) partiality for novelty songs, wanting to explore the country and rock that Miller disliked. Regrettably, Boyd turned down the chance to record "Jambalaya," which became a Hank Williams hit. However, Boyd recorded his version of the song in 1960.

Also that year, Boyd was drafted into the U.S. Army and performed in USO shows across Vietnam, including a 1967 tour with Nancy Sinatra. His talents offered laughter and music in war-torn landscapes, uplifting those serving abroad.

Boyd became an avid tennis player and sailor and, in his later years, lived on his sailboat, *Unplugged*, in Marina del Rey. He was married twice, once to actress Yvonne Craig, TV's Batgirl. He remained single after his second divorce. Boyd said the most exciting moment in his life was the birth of his son, Devon James Boyd.

Jimmy Boyd passed away from cancer on March 7, 2009, at the age of 70. His longtime friend, Eleanor Pillsbury, was by his side in his final days.

Still A Star

Boyd's star is on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 7021 Hollywood Boulevard.

Although his name will forever be linked to that mistletoe moment, Boyd's life was nurtured by the same grit and determination we often find in Mississippi legends.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.

Partnership with Canopy Children's Solutions will deploy first-of-its-kind youth mental wellness platform

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves recently announced a \$16 million partnership between the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) and Canopy Children's Solutions to deploy Canopy Anywhere, a breakthrough solution for youth mental wellness. With this rollout, Mississippi will provide a first-of-its-kind mental wellness approach designed for students in grades 6-12 that identifies children's needs in real time.

Canopy Anywhere can be accessed via devices already provided to students in schools, creating an effective, lower cost method for improving student mental health.

Canopy Anywhere provides:

- Evidence-based hope curriculum that strengthens emotional wellness and goal-setting.
- Self-guided digital tools and weekly wellness lessons.
- Tech-enabled care navigation that connects students and caregivers to real-time support.
- Resource navigation for families.
- Clinical screening and assessments when deeper support is needed.

"Mississippi has momentum in the classroom, and this new partnership will help keep it that way," said Reeves. "Our kids deserve the very best education we can give them. Emotional and mental health play a major role in students' academic success, and that's why this initiative is so important. This transformative project aligns with the state's mission to address lingering effects of the pandemic, and it offers an innovative, cost-effective pathway to recovery while building a sustainable model for broader adoption in Mississippi."

"We are deeply grateful to Governor Reeves and the Mississippi Development Authority for fueling Canopy Anywhere and prioritizing the mental wellness of Mississippi's children. This bold investment honors our 113-year legacy and empowers a more hopeful generation for Mississippi's future," said Canopy Children's Solutions CEO Dr. John D. Damon.

"As the executive director of the state's top economic development agency, I know the importance of a healthy workforce and quality education," said MDA Executive Director Bill Cork. "Meeting the academic and emotional needs of our students not only improves quality of life, but it builds on Mississippi's record of investing in our people to grow the economy."

Canopy Anywhere was developed to meet urgent and rising needs in children's mental health. Nationwide, the percentage of adolescents reporting at least one major depressive episode in the past year increased nearly 90%, with three million having serious thoughts of suicide. About one in three high school students report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Canopy Anywhere was initially piloted in select schools of the Madison County School District. In 2024, 143 of the 628 students who participated in the pilot were identified with immediate mental health needs and connected

CANOPY anywhere

THE HOPE SCALE

DIRECTIONS: Read each sentence carefully. For each sentence, please think about how you are in most situations. Using the scale shown below, please select the number that best describes you and put that number in the blank provided. There are no right or wrong answers.

None of the time A little of the time Some of the time A lot of the time Most of the time All of the time

1 2 3 4 5 6

— 1. I think I am doing pretty well.

— 2. I can think of many ways to get through the things in life that are most important to me.

— 3. I am doing just as well as other kids my age.

— 4. When I have a problem, I can come up with lots of ways to solve it.

— 5. I think the things that I have done in the past will help me in the future.

— 6. Even when others want to quit, I know that I can find ways to solve the problem.

to in-person support.

Canopy Anywhere offers a weekly wellness curriculum in which students receive weekly lessons that are centered on building healthy skills for goal setting, identifying pathways to reach their goals and maintaining the willpower to keep working on their goals. Each week's 10-minute lesson can be accessed via a secure Canopy Anywhere platform that will email each lesson to students on their school device. Students will also have access to the curriculum in a workbook form, to ensure every student can access the curriculum.

Parents have the option to opt-out of the program for their students at any time. Parents/guardians will receive a weekly email with a link to access the content of each lesson. Parental consent is required for all mental health assessments and services.

The program also offers a "HOPE Scale screener," a validated tool that measures a student's confidence in reaching goals and finding ways forward.

Students periodically complete the HOPE Scale Screener during the Canopy Anywhere curriculum. This screener consists of the same six questions every time it is taken. If a student scores low on the Hope Scale screener, the school counselor will be notified to check in with the student.

If the school counselor checks in with the student and determines further support is needed, the school counselor will contact the parent/guardian to notify and obtain parental consent to refer the student to the in-school mental health therapist for assessment and services. Parental consent is required. Mental health assessments and services provided by the in-school therapist are funded by the grant.

For more information about Canopy Anywhere, visit MyCanopy.org/solutions/canopy-anywhere/.

HOPE IS THE BELIEF THAT YOUR FUTURE CAN BE BRIGHTER THAN YOUR PAST AND THAT **YOU** HAVE THE POWER TO MAKE IT HAPPEN!

The project supports 29 public school districts in low-and-moderate income districts, with funding provided by the CDBG-CV Program administered by the State of Mississippi and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The school districts are:


- Biloxi Public School District
- Claiborne County School District
- Clarksdale Municipal School District
- Coahoma County School District
- Corinth School District
- East Tallahatchie Consolidated School District
- Greenville Public School District
- Greenwood-Leflore Consolidated School District
- Gulfport School District
- Hattiesburg Public School District
- Holmes Consolidated School District
- Humphreys County School District
- Jackson Public School District
- McComb School District
- Meridian Public School District
- Natchez-Adams School District
- North Bolivar Consolidated School District
- North Panola School District
- North Tippah School District
- Quitman County School District
- South Delta School District
- Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District
- Sunflower County Consolidated School District
- Tunica County School District
- West Bolivar Consolidated School District
- West Tallahatchie School District
- Wilkinson County School District
- Winona-Montgomery Consolidated District
- Yazoo City Municipal School District

Curriculum topics include:

- **Your Hope Engine (aka Your Brain!)**
- **Identifying Goals**
- **Establishing Pathways to Meet Goals**
- **Maintain Willpower**
- **Sleep**
- **Self-Esteem**
- **Can-do Mindset**
- **Nutrition**
- **Movement**
- **Gratitude**
- **Substance Use**
- **Resilience**
- **Healthy Conflict**
- **Bullying**

GRANT PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Funding for this program is provided through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grant-CARES Act Program, administered by the Mississippi Development Authority.




WHAT IS CANOPY

anywhere

Canopy Anywhere is a first-of-its-kind in-school option for youth mental wellness. Developed around the evidence-based Science of Hope, Canopy Anywhere is an approach designed for students in grades 6–12.

- **Parental Controls:** Parents have the option to opt-out of this program for their students at any time. Parents/Guardians will receive a weekly email with a link to access the content of each lesson. **Parental consent is required for all mental health assessments and services.**
- **Weekly Wellness Curriculum:** Students receive weekly lessons that are centered on building healthy skills for goal setting, identifying pathways to reach their goals and maintaining the willpower to keep working on their goals.
- **Accessing Canopy Anywhere:** Each week's 10-minute lesson can be accessed via a secure Canopy Anywhere platform that will email each lesson to students on their school device. Students will also have access to the curriculum in a workbook form to ensure every student can access the curriculum.
- **HOPE Scale Screener:** A validated tool that measures a student's confidence in reaching goals and finding ways forward. Students periodically complete the HOPE Scale Screener during the Canopy Anywhere curriculum. This screener consists of the same six questions every time it is taken. [Click here to view the HOPE Scale Questions.](#)
- **Low HOPE Check In:** If a student scores low on the Hope Scale screener, the school counselor will be notified to check in with the student.
- **In-Person Mental Health Assessments & Support (PARENTAL CONSENT REQUIRED):** Once the school counselor checks in with the student and determines further support is needed, the school counselor will contact the parent/guardian to notify and obtain parental consent to refer the student to the in-school mental health therapist for assessment and services. **Parental consent is required.** (Mental health assessments and services provided by the in-school therapist are funded by the grant.)
- **Commitment to Safety & Privacy:** Canopy strictly follows HIPAA requirements, ensuring the highest level of confidentiality and security for every child and family served. The Canopy Anywhere platform is fully FERPA & HIPAA compliant and protected.



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Amtrak's Mardi Gras Service connects Gulf Coast cities

By Susan Marquez

While it was only 6:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning, the train station in New Orleans was alive with activity. As we walked into the station, we heard the sounds of a New Orleans brass band and smelled the chicory coffee served with a hot breakfast.

The excitement was thick as journalists, dignitaries and politicians mingled. Soon it was time for speeches. Members of the Mississippi Rail Commission, including president Knox Ross (former mayor of Pelahatchie), along with Roger Harris, the president of Amtrak, and Mississippi U.S. Senator Roger Wicker, were among those who spoke to the crowd before everyone was led out to the train platform on a red carpet with confetti floating through the air.

It was all for the inaugural run of the Amtrak Mardi Gras Service, the new passenger line that runs from New Orleans to Mobile and back.

This is the first time there has been rail service from New Orleans to Mobile since Hurricane Katrina destroyed the tracks twenty years ago, and, according to Wicker, it was ten years in the making.

"This was a truly bipartisan project. Democrats and Republicans came together in a big way to make this happen, with negotiations and planning across three states and on the Federal level," Wicker said.

Now, passengers can board the train in New Orleans and ride along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The train stops in Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, Biloxi and Pascagoula to drop off or pick up passengers before the train reaches its final destination in Mobile.

Mark Magliari is the senior public relations manager in Amtrak's Chicago office. He explains that at one time, the route went from New Orleans to Pensacola.

"The plan is to extend this line from Mobile to Pensacola in the coming years."

According to Magliari, there are also plans to extend the route from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. Currently, there is bus service from Baton Rouge to New Orleans for those who want to ride the train to the Gulf Coast.

There were easily a dozen or so cars for the inaugural run, but regular runs will have three passenger cars. More cars will be added as the demand increases. That may be sooner rather than later, as tickets for the first run for the public on August 18 were sold out both ways within the first few hours they went on sale.

The first stop on our trip was in Bay Saint Louis. A couple of miles before we got to town, we noticed cars pulled over on the side of the road. Families with cell phones were standing next to the cars, making videos of the train as it passed. Many people waved, and some held up "Welcome Amtrak" signs.

The excitement began to build as we rolled into town. A high school marching band was playing, and cheerleaders were shaking pom poms. Hundreds of residents in Mardi Gras attire were gathered to greet the train as it rolled into the station.

A group of women led by Tish Haas Williams boarded the train, all dressed in sparkles and feathers, in true Mardi Gras fashion. They were with

the Hancock County Chamber of Commerce, where Tish serves as the executive director.

"We are really excited about this train," she said. "It is going to make Bay Saint Louis accessible to so many people!"

After the politicians and dignitaries made their speeches, the train began its eastward journey.



All photos by Susan Marquez



The next few stops were no more than a half hour apart. Gulfport had the largest crowd of all at the train station, and folks on Highway 49 didn't seem too bothered by the fact that the train blocked the highway for about 15 minutes. Then it was on to Biloxi and Pascagoula before heading into Mobile.

The views of the water along the Mississippi Gulf Coast were beautiful. There were shrimp boats, pleasure boats and jet skis, some riding along the shoreline and waving at the train. There was plenty of wildlife as well, from fish jumping to egrets, seagulls and pelicans.

Arriving in Mobile, we passed a shipyard and rolled into downtown. There were people waiting to greet the train next to the platform. A brass band played while young ladies in hooped skirts and floppy hats smiled at the crowd.

The band led us into the convention center, where the City of Mobile provided champagne upon arrival, along with a buffet lunch. More speeches were given. Roger Wicker joked it was his sixth speech of the day. There was mild ribbing that Mobile was the site of the first Mardi Gras.

The return trip back to New Orleans was pleasant.

I spoke with Eric Cova, director of communications for Smart Growth America, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit which, according to the organization's website, "helps create healthy, prosperous, and resilient places to live for all people through research, advocacy, and direct community support." Their work spans housing and land use, transportation, and economic development to find solutions to communities' most pressing needs. Eric shared a timeline with me on the rail service from New Orleans to Mobile.

David Peter Alan, a New York-based attorney who has written for *Railway Age* for over twenty years, filled me in on the politics of the line.

"This is a good thing for the area," he said, although he isn't convinced it will last.

I'm not so sure about that. With the excitement and enthusiasm I saw from Amtrak employees, dignitaries, politicians and the crowds that gathered at the train stations along the route, I believe the Amtrak Mardi Gras Service will transport passengers along the Gulf Coast for a long time to come.

Our train rolled into the New Orleans train station at 6:30 p.m., right on time. A jazz band greeted us, as we were gifted with Hubig pies and water. It was a fun day, and I believe the possibilities for the future are endless.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.

2025-26 SOS Student Ambassador Fall Summit held



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

Mississippi Secretary of State Michael Watson hosted the 2025-2026 Secretary of State (SOS) Student Ambassadors for their Fall Summit. The event, hosted at the Two Mississippi Museums in Jackson, marked the first of the in-person summits the Student Ambassadors will attend throughout the school year.

"The SOS Student Ambassador program is one of my favorite initiatives at the Secretary of State's Office," said Watson. "Investing in and mentoring our future generations remains one of our most important public services. We are honored to have the opportunity to host some of Mississippi's best and brightest in Jackson, while teaching them the importance of civic engagement, voting and leadership."

The Student Ambassadors had the opportunity to participate in a "reverse Q&A" with Watson to discuss some of the biggest challenges facing Mississippi's youth and ways state officials may address some of their concerns. Another highlight from the day included a panel featuring Assistant Secretaries of State from three divisions of the Secretary of State's Office and Chief of Staff Carla Thornhill.

Ambassadors also toured the Mississippi Governor's Mansion and participated in a Lunch and Learn Q&A with Drake Cushing, senior vice president and general manager of C Spire Business. Through a special partnership with the C Spire Foundation, award-winning chef Nick Wallace and his team at the Nissan Cafe provided lunch for the students.

"The C Spire Foundation is proud to support the Mississippi Secretary of State Student Ambassadors program, which aligns perfectly with our mission to advance STEAM education for Mississippi students," said Beth Pickering, C Spire Foundation president and executive director. "By investing in young leaders and encouraging civic engagement, our goal is to help build a future where innovation, technology and public service go hand in hand."

The SOS Student Ambassador program equips high school seniors with the knowledge and resources to engage as leaders within their schools and communities. The three main components of the program are teaching students about elections and voting (including how to host a voter registration drive in their school), state government, and mentorship. This is the fourth year of the program, and the 2025-26 class consists of 73 students from 54 schools in 28 counties across all four congressional districts.

The program was recently awarded the 2025 IDEAS (Innovation, Dedication, Excellence and Achievement in Service) Award at the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) Summer Conference in Biloxi.

MID launches AI bot "Janie" to help consumers

Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The Mississippi Insurance Department (MID) Consumer Services Division is launching an Artificial Intelligence (AI) service to help consumers complete the insurance company complaint form. Using the bot, affectionately called Janie, is as easy as picking up the phone and calling 601-843-6925.

Once a consumer calls the number, they can describe what happened and why they are making a complaint. Next, Janie will ask for information, including the consumer's name, phone number, address, insurance company, and policy information. Once that information has been provided, Janie completes the complaint form for the consumer and submits it to the MID.

The bot, offered by Entratus.ai, will collect most information, but if a consumer has additional documentation, like bills, they will need to submit that via email within two days. After submission of a complaint, consumers can expect a written response from the company within twenty working days.

"This option will not replace the traditional means of speaking to a live representative," said Insurance Commissioner Mike Chaney. "We aren't replacing people here at the MID. You'll still be able to talk to a real-life person. You'll also still be able to fill out the form using traditional channels, such as email, fax, or traditional mail."

A video illustrating how Janie works can be found at <https://youtu.be/Rce1BHnFsIQ>.

For assistance with an insurance question or claim, call 601-359-3569, email consumer@mid.ms.gov or visit www.mid.ms.gov.

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Northrop Grumman opens high-tech aerospace lab at Northeast Mississippi Community College



Special to The Mississippi Monitor

The defense contractor's investment in the Corinth campus creates a pipeline for high-tech careers as the company reports strong quarterly growth.

By Lynne Jeter

Defense technology giant Northrop Grumman has officially opened its new aerospace laboratory at Northeast Mississippi Community College's (NEMCC) Corinth campus, marking a significant milestone in Mississippi's workforce development initiatives.

Under clear skies on a slightly cooler summer day, the ribbon-cutting ceremony August 26 featured Governor Tate Reeves, Northrop Grumman executives, state officials and NEMCC leadership rejoicing what represents both a strategic investment in regional education and a pipeline for the state's growing aerospace and defense industry.

The high-tech facility, funded through a Northrop Grumman Foundation grant, will provide firsthand training in composite material fabrication, repair and inspection, and also in advanced manufacturing techniques. Students will gain experience in simulated real-world environments that mirror what they'll encounter in the aerospace workforce, with the lab expected to fully open for training programs in early 2026.

"The Northrop Grumman Aerospace Lab at Northeast Mississippi Community College is a win-win for our company and for the state," said Tom Jones, corporate vice president and president of Northrop Grumman Aeronautics Systems. "This cutting-edge facility will provide a highly trained pipeline to the technical workforce that will help enhance prosperity in Mississippi."

The lab signifies more than just educational infrastructure; it embodies NEMCC's commitment to addressing the skills gap in high-demand technical fields. The facility will enhance the college's ability to serve more students with cutting-edge equipment and career-ready programs that align directly with industry needs, from manufacturing to advanced aerospace technologies.

"The realization of true workforce training efforts is a testament to the power of collaboration and partnerships," NEMCC President Dr. Ricky G. Ford said during the ceremony. "As we witness the unveiling of this cutting-edge training facility, we celebrate the potential it holds for our students to receive hands-on experience and begin prosperous careers in aerospace and advanced manufacturing."

The project's roots trace back to 2022, when Reeves announced a significant \$2.2 million investment in workforce development at NEMCC during a press conference at the school's Booneville campus. That investment, funded through Accelerate Mississippi, was designed to enhance training programs and boost the local workforce in trucking, advanced manufacturing and fiber optics programs.

"When I ran for governor three years ago, I spent a lot of time talking about the importance of workforce development and workforce training," Reeves said in 2022. "I've spent a lot of time bragging on our community colleges because we know that we have an asset here in Mississippi that's exceptionally impressive."

The timing of the lab's opening aligns with Northrop Grumman's broader expansion and strong financial performance. The company posted solid second quarter 2025 results, with revenue reaching \$10.4 billion, up 1 percent year-on-year, and net earnings rising to \$1.17 billion from \$940 million. The Mission Systems division, which could potentially oversee workforce development initiatives like the NEMCC lab, was the top performer with sales rising 14 percent to \$3.16 billion, thanks to restricted program awards and growing demand for radar systems and advanced technologies.

The aerospace lab opening also coincides with significant contract wins for Northrop Grumman that underscore the company's growth trajectory and need for skilled workers. For example, in February, the company secured two noteworthy contracts totaling \$1.4 billion to advance air and missile defense capabilities for the U.S. Army and Poland. These awards include expanding software development for the Integrated Battle Command System (IBCS) and delivering advanced defense systems to international partners.

This success has contributed to Northrop Grumman's strong pipeline of work, with the company ending the quarter with a backlog of \$89.7 billion, underlining sustained demand across its portfolio. International momentum remains a major growth driver, with overseas sales up 18 percent in the quarter and 14 percent year-to-date.

Northrop Grumman's investment in Mississippi runs deep, with the company maintaining more than 800 employees in some 730,000 square feet of manufacturing space across four sites in the state, along with nearly 100 suppliers. The new aerospace lab at NEMCC denotes a strategic investment in developing the next generation of workers to support these operations.

Greg James, NEMCC's director of workforce training, has been influential in bringing this partnership to fruition.

"When I got the email from Northrop Grumman, I knew all the hours and conversations had finally come full circle," said James. "This isn't just a check. It's a spark for transformation, especially in our rural communities."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Article courtesy The Magnolia Tribune.



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