

The Front Porch

Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long

September/October 2024

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Sittin' on the Porch with...

Anna Smyrnios

Story by Heather Ainsley

Photographs Courtesy of Anna Smyrnios

For 52 year old Anna Smyrnios, Taylor County has always felt like home. Born and raised in Steinhatchee, Fla., Smyrnios always knew that the rural fishing community was where she wanted to live. Even so, when she was 18, she moved away from her beloved hometown in order to attend college at Florida State University but was eager to move back as soon as she could. Around 22 years ago, she returned to Steinhatchee and never looked back, pursuing a career as a teacher of health, P.E., social studies and science.

While she enjoys teaching, Smyrnios always knew she wanted to put down roots in Steinhatchee – she wanted to own something within her community. It wasn't long before the perfect property became available, a building located just across from the local public boating ramp, and Smyrnios knew exactly what she wanted to do with it.

Thus Bubsie's Bait and Tackle shop was born, providing residents and visitors with all of their fishing, boating and scalloping needs before they launched their boats at the nearby ramp. As someone who had grown up fishing and enjoying being outdoors, Smyrnios knew that the bait shop and location simply couldn't be more ideal.

While being so close to the water has its undeniable perks for a bait shop, it certainly comes with risks, too, and shortly after opening on Aug. 5, of 2023, Bubsie's encountered a major setback: Hurricane Idalia, a Category 3 hurricane that made landfall in Steinhatchee on Aug. 30, just three weeks after the shop's opening. It was a devastating hit, and Bubsie's was completely flooded, resulting in significant water damage and a complete loss of inventory.

"It was terrible," Smyrnios recalled. "I had to gut the whole

shop. There was 10 feet of water in our shed and bathroom, and five feet of water in the shop itself. I lost everything inside."

The devastated store owner was determined to get her shop back up and running, and through no small amount of hard work and perseverance, she was able to make the necessary repairs to her buildings and replace all of her ruined inventory. Bubsie's was back in business by February, once again providing local fishing enthusiasts with everything they needed for a day out on the water.

Almost exactly a year from the disastrous Idalia, and only six months after finally reopening, came news of another tropical disturbance: Hurricane Debby, who was fated to make landfall in – you guessed it – Steinhatchee, Fla., as a direct hit.

"Being a part of Florida has its ups and downs," reads a message on the Bubsie's Bait and Tackle Shop social media page on Aug. 3, as the majority of Florida waited to see what would become of the incoming storm system.

"I knew that if we got hit again the way we did with Idalia, I wouldn't be able to reopen," reflects Smyrnios. "So this time, I thought, 'better safe than sorry!' and rented a U-Haul to move as much of my merchandise from the store as possible, so that even if the building got damaged, it wouldn't be a total loss like it was with Idalia."

Smyrnios says that she was deeply touched by the amount of outreach and assistance she received from many of her family and friends, who heard about the upcoming storm and rallied together to help her pack up her inventory before the storm hit. With their help, she was able to preserve most of her shop's contents. All that was left was to wait and see what the storm would have in store.

Miraculously, the shop suffered only minor flooding, the shed and the bathroom taking in water but the store itself remaining



Inventory damage from Hurricane Idalia.



Flooding from Hurricane Debby.

dry. Smyrnios says the flooding waters came right up to the store's doorstep but did not breach the interior, and with her inventory preserved, Bubsie's Bait and Tackle was soon reopened for business.

The shop, located at 7 1st Ave. SE in Steinhatchee, is open Mondays from 6 a.m. until 12 noon, and Thursdays-Sundays from 6 a.m. until 4 p.m. They sell live bait (including shrimp and worms), frozen bait, plastic and hard bait, lures, bulk ice, bobbers, weights, crab and fish traps, souvenirs, clothes and paintings created by Smyrnios' brother, Manuel. While Hurricane Debby posed a significant risk, it was no match for the sheer love, support and dedication of Smyrnios' friends and family, who came through in her time of need in a way that she will never forget.

In her daily life, Smyrnios mostly works, enjoying her position in the shop as business owner with her bait-shop dog, a large lab named Samson. Smyrnios also enjoys a side job working as a teacher. When she does have free time, she loves to fish, scallop and exercise. Her son and daughter-in-law, Clint and Summerlyn Morgan, will be welcoming their first child in September, and Smyrnios looks forward to meeting her first grandchild.

"There's good and bad things about living in a small town," says Smyrnios. "For one thing, everybody knows everything about you, good or bad. But out here, people really care about each other, they look out for one another. In a small town, people really do come together. When it comes down to the nitty gritty, your people will be there." ■



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HAVOC AND HELPING HANDS THROUGH HURRICANE DEBBY

Story by Heather Ainsley

Less than a year after Hurricane Idalia ravaged the Big Bend, the swirling eye of Debby moved through the Gulf of Mexico. Making landfall in Steinhatchee, Fla., on Monday, Aug. 5, as a Category 1 hurricane, Debby's path was just 20 miles from where Idalia previously slammed the state. Debby held sustained winds of 75-80 mph and produced more than 12 inches of rain in some areas, resulting in widespread treefall, significant flooding and structural calamities across the Big Bend. In the wake of this storm, multiple counties experienced complete power loss, and residents, businesses and government officials rallied together in the aftermath to further recovery efforts within Taylor, Suwannee, Madison, Hamilton, Lafayette and Jefferson counties as well as in the communities beyond. Special thanks go to the linemen, emergency response teams and rescue organizations for their hard work and dedication to providing critical resources and care to those impacted by Hurricane Debby. As the storm season continues to unfold, these individuals represent an excellent example of leadership, responsibility and compassion for our fellow man.

Photograph Courtesy of Aaron Portwood, Perry Newspapers.





Taylor County Middle School - Photograph Courtesy of Dawn Perez, Taylor County Chamber of Commerce.

TAYLOR COUNTY



Flooded neighborhoods along the Steinhatchee River - Photograph Courtesy of Valena Driggers, Air & Opportunity Aerial Photography



Photograph Courtesy of Amy Sadler, Perry Newspapers.



Sea Hag Marina flooded - Photograph Courtesy of Valena Driggers, Air & Opportunity Aerial Photography



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Photograph Courtesy of Monica Marquardt.

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Photograph Courtesy of Riverbend News.



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MADISON COUNTY



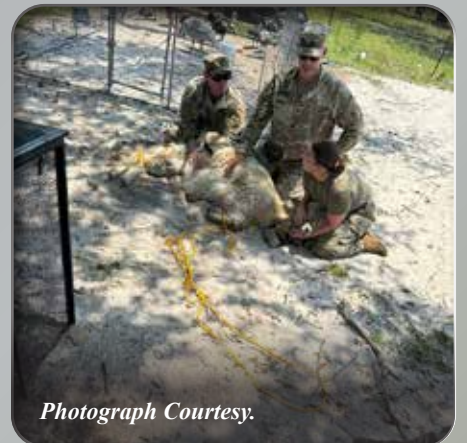
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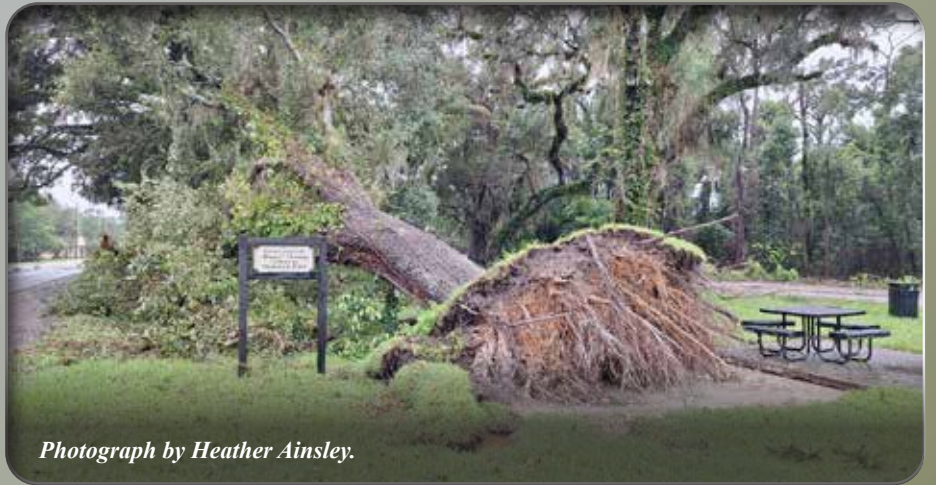


Photograph by Lazaro Aleman.

JEFFERSON COUNTY



Photograph Courtesy of Gloria Cox.



Photograph by Heather Ainsley.



Photograph Courtesy of Diane and Al Frith.



Photograph by Tammy Brookins.



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POP'S SANITATION SERVICES



Upholding family virtues

Story by Heather Ainsley

Photographs Courtesy of POP'S Sanitation

Even the most environmentally-conscious members of our society make trash of some sort. It's nice to think that most of us are mindful of the things we throw into the garbage, but that mindfulness often passes once the bags leave the house and make their way to the curb for pickup. Most people never think about their trash after that moment, but it is exactly that moment when our trash generally becomes someone else's concern.

For those who live in a city, trash pick-up is generally a concern for the city's waste management department, and it is their duty to remove the collected trash and bring it to designated dump sites in a timely schedule. For those who live in the county, the responsibility remains with the resident to bring their trash to dump stations in each

county for disposal. While some may see this as a hassle or inconvenience, a small city simply does not have the ability to cover city and county disposal needs. That's where a man named Tommy Hardee comes in.

Hardee is a life-long resident of Madison, Fla., and comes from a long line of Madison County residents – eight generations, in fact. He has spent his life loving the benefits of living in rural Florida, and served for 11 years as the Supervisor of Elections in Madison. During this time, the elections office was named second in the nation for its ISO rating, which indicated that the county had all the proper procedures and policies in place. While he enjoyed and took great pride in his work with the elections office, a conversation with a close family member got him brainstorming a completely different line of work.

"2021 was the beginning of everything," recalls Hardee. "I had an uncle who was my favorite person; he was a fun guy. He lived in Bay County and had a trash company there. After leaving my position as Supervisor of Elections, he invited me to come and see his business, and see how it was run. After meeting with him, I saw a huge need in this area for a service like that, and I decided that I wanted to start a trash company over here."

Hardee says he woke up one day, prayed about it, and doors just seemed to open up for him. From there, POP'S Sanitation was born and quickly began to take off. Hardee says he got the idea for the business name from his own grandfather, whom everyone fondly referred to as "Pops."

"Pops was the last one to go to bed at night and the first one to get up," said Hardee proudly. "He took care of everyone,



and instilled in us the same values that the company upholds today."

As a resident of Madison County, the need for a reliable trash pick-up service was something Hardee first noticed about residents in Madison, but there was also a huge need in the surrounding counties – Jefferson, Hamilton, Suwannee, Lafayette, Taylor and Dixie counties. As the business continued to expand, POP'S Sanitation began providing services to all six counties. Over the last few years, what started as a five-truck operation has now grown into a nine-truck operation with more than 20 employees.

"Business is good," says Hardee, "and it's growing every day. We went where the need was and now we also do roll-off services in Wakulla and Leon County as well."

While the obvious need was for residents living in more rural areas of their county, POP'S offers more than just residential trash pick-up. Businesses are able to sign up for personal dumpsters for their businesses, and POP'S also has roll-off services for construction and moving jobs. For those who require a one-time pick up for large or heavy items, POP'S also has a bulk pick-up service. No matter what the need is, Hardee and his team strive to be as helpful as possible to all of the communities they serve.

"If I'm gonna be your neighbor, I'm gonna take care of you," says Hardee, adding that when the city has called asking for assistance when their own garbage trucks break down, his company has been more than happy to help the city out with pick-up service to make sure trash doesn't

pile up for residents.

Starting a new company in the midst of a global pandemic is no walk in the park, and even as operation costs have continued to climb, Hardee and his team find ways of retaining staff and keeping the services running as smoothly as possible.

"I have a great group of employees," says Hardee, although he admits it can be a challenge at times to find new employees to hire to keep up with the company's growth. Even with the uncertainties that followed the recent pandemic, he has found that employees will stay where they feel appreciated.

"We aren't like a corporate job," he states firmly, "and we don't treat our employees the way some of these corporations do. We take care of them, treat them like family. That has really



helped with retention. People will work hard for you if you treat them right. If you're good to people, they'll be good to you."

Along with the challenges associated with growth, POP'S Sanitation has also felt the pressure that many companies have felt, with rising costs of supplies and equipment. For example, what was once a \$220k truck now costs around \$300k, making it extra important to take care of the company's equipment and ensure that regular maintenance and upkeep are sustained throughout each of the counties they serve.

While managing such an important service in so many different counties requires Hardee to be highly structured and organized with the business, in his free time, he is happy to simply "go with the flow," and enjoys spending time with his family and friends on whatever activities they choose. He and his wife, Kaila, have been together for 20 years this October, and together have a son who currently attends Aucilla Christian Academy in the ninth grade. The family also owns hunting dogs.

When he isn't working or spending time with his family, Hardee enjoys working with Combat Marine Outdoors, Inc., a charity organization that focuses on providing former military personnel and families with support, positive interactions and outdoor adventures in the hopes of reducing post-military depression and suicide rates. They provide hunting, fishing or outdoor recreation trips to individuals and a family member, complete with sight-seeing, meals and a banquet that takes place at the end of the program. For Hardee, these encounters are not only richly rewarding, but are life-long, and even his son still has contact with kids who have participated in the program.

While life has been busy since the start

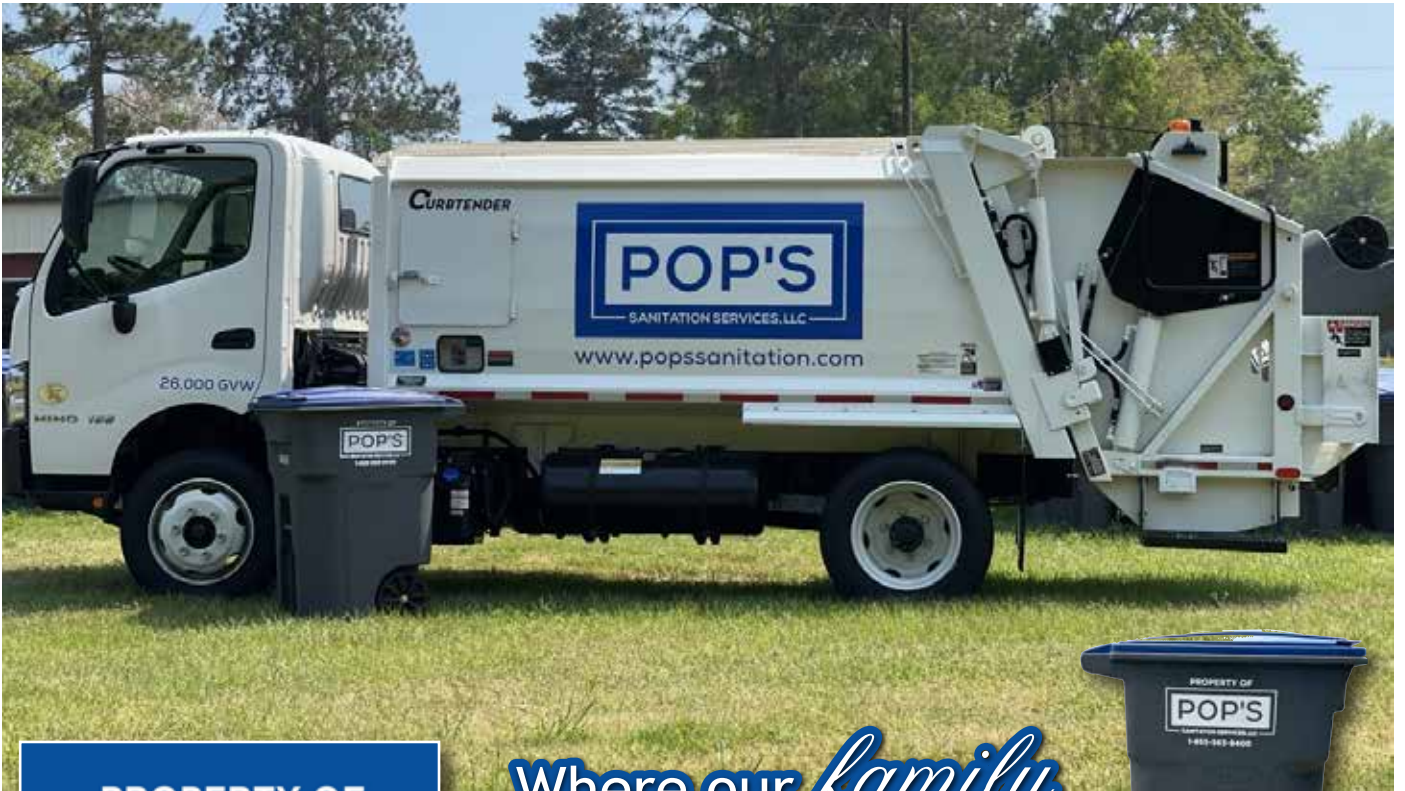
of POP'S Sanitation, Hardee maintains that he is "the happiest he has ever been," and looks forward to everything that is to come in the company.

"As a family-owned business, we aren't just a corporation," he says proudly. "We think outside the box, and there isn't a problem we can't find a way to handle."

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POP'S Sanitation owner Tommy Hardee, with his wife Kaila and their son Tuff.



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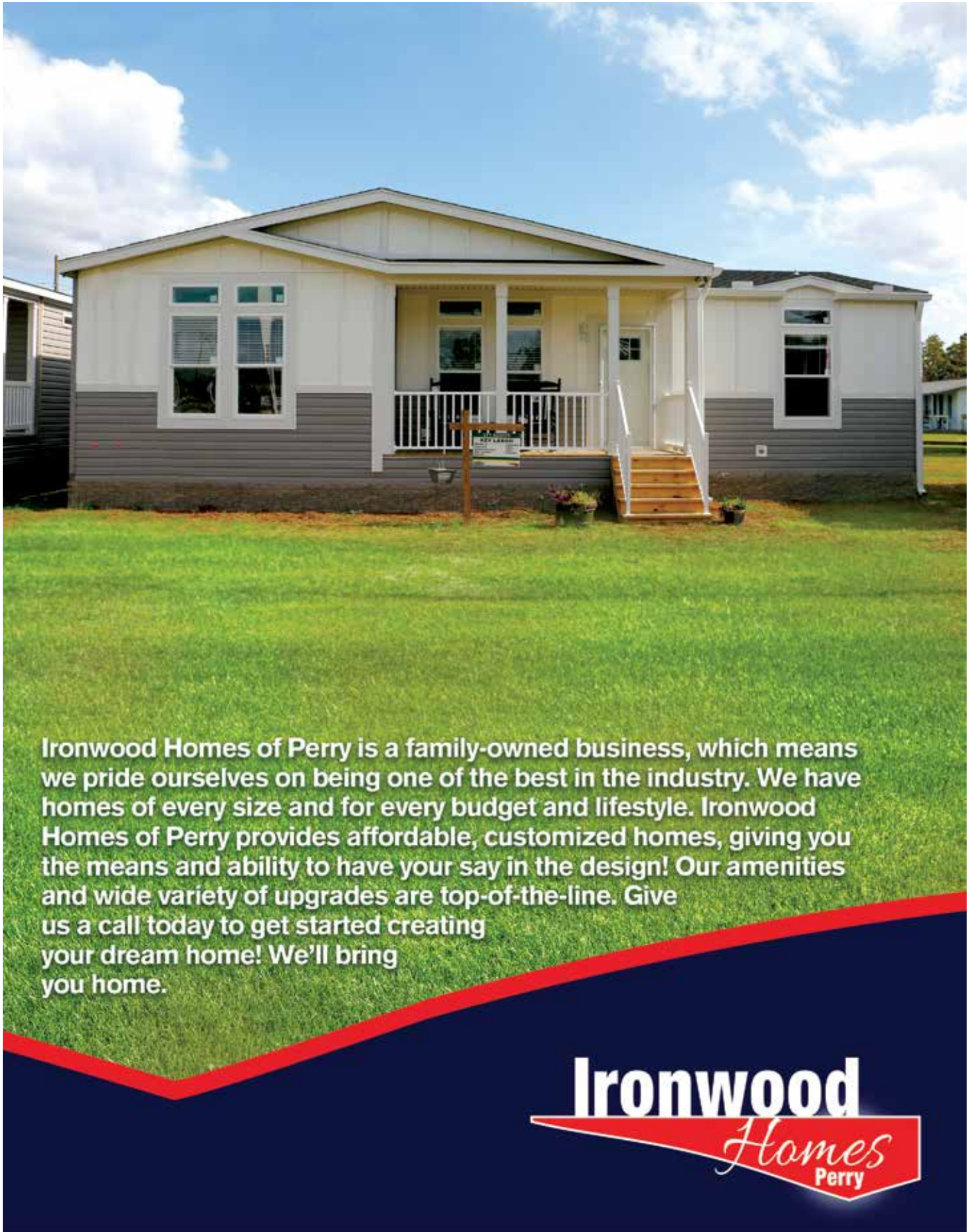
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GREENVILLE'S GEM:
RAY CHARLES'
CHILDHOOD HOME



Photo Courtesy of Todd Moffses.

Story by Mickey Starling

Photography by Emerald Greene

Though there are sources identifying Albany, Ga., as the childhood residence of Ray Charles, the soul-singing icon was only a resident of Albany for about a month after his birth in 1930. Much of his early years were spent in Greenville, Fla., before enrolling in the Florida School for the Deaf & the Blind, in St. Augustine, Fla. Charles spent decades spinning out chart-topping hits until his death in 2004.

Elesa Pritchett, a childhood friend of Charles and a current resident of Greenville, was instrumental in setting the record straight as to where Charles resided, and she spearheaded efforts to restore his childhood home. The dilapidated structure was fully restored in 2008 and is available for touring by appointment.

"I want kids in Greenville to know that if a blind young man can grow up in Greenville and be successful, they can, too," said Pritchett, who had a 400-pound bronze statue in Charles' likeness placed in the town park in 2006.

Charles resided in the tiny four-room home until age five, when the family moved to another location, near the Red Wing Cafe, where the owner, Wylie Pittman, gave Charles his first piano lessons. Those first years found Charles growing up with only the basics. His home had no electricity or running water. An outdoor pump provided water. One of the four rooms featured a fireplace for warming the family in the winter. Open doors and windows caught an occasional breeze for cooling the hot summer days. Even the handful of people living in the house made for tight quarters and difficult living conditions.

The restored home features an old piano placed by the Keys family and a 1936 bedroom suite donated by members of Pritchett's family. Recently, the house suffered roof damage that has since been repaired, thanks to Pritchett, who picked up the \$6,000 tab for the repairs. Touring is on hold until the handicap-access ramp can also be repaired, and anyone wishing to eventually visit the childhood home of Ray Charles should call (850) 948-7501.

Charles' small town heritage and blindness did not hamper the legacy he left in the music industry. During the highlight of his career in the 1950s, he was dubbed the "Father of Soul Music" by his peers. Charles had a unique ability to combine genres like





Anthony Evans painted this "Celebration of Ray Charles," which is on display at the historic home.

Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind, Charles learned to play every instrument offered, including piano, trumpet, saxophone and clarinet. Music became his world, and his talents took him to the top of it.

Quincy Jones, a well-known producer and friend of Charles, once said, "Charles is one of the best singers, composers and artists this world has ever seen."

Even in the midst of that success, Charles' career almost derailed when he was 35 years old. He was arrested for possession of heroin and other drugs. Fortunately, Charles quickly entered a rehabilitation program and recovered

The acoustic duo Hot Tamale holds a musical celebration for Ray Charles' birthday every year at his bronze statue in Haffye Hays Park in Greenville, Fla. Photograph Courtesy.

jazz, blues and gospel in his various hits, including "I've Got A Woman," which is where the term "soul music" was first used to describe his unique style. "Unchain My Heart" and "What I'd Say" are just a few of Charles' other numerous chart toppers. By career's end, Charles had six Grammy

Award recognitions to his credit.

No doubt, his difficult childhood contributed to the depth of emotion found in his lyrics. By the age of seven, Charles went totally blind, possibly from glaucoma, and by age 15, all of Charles' siblings and parents had died. While attending the



within a few months. Marriage was less addictive for him, briefly marrying twice. Charles went on to have 12 children by 10 different women. His eldest son, Ray Charles Jr., was instrumental in saving his father's life. At six years old, he went to his father's bedroom for a goodnight kiss and discovered him slumped over, bleeding to death from an accidental drug overdose. His screams for help eventually served to save Charles' life. He overcame his addiction and continued his storied career, while remaining forever grateful for his son's contributions in saving his life.

At 73, Charles was diagnosed with terminal liver disease and died several months later. His rich contributions to the world of music continue to live on for present and future generations to enjoy. His iconic swaying back and forth at the piano, while belting out soulful lyrics, is an image that time will be slow to erase.

One of the many ways that the memory of Ray Charles is being kept alive is by an acoustics duo known as Hot Tamale, made up of Craig Reeder and Adrian Fogelin. The pair appears each year at Haffye Hays Park in Greenville, where Charles' statue is located. They perform on or near the legendary singer's birthday, which is September 23. This year's celebration is planned for Sunday, Sept. 22, from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. Locals often gather and sing along to some of Charles' many hits. Along with the years of effort put forth by Pritchett, the life and legacy of Ray Charles will not be soon forgotten. ■

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WHAT'S HAPPENING

**September 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15,
20, 21, 22**

Killing Mr. Withers – Murder Mystery Dinner Theater at MOH

The audience is cast as part of a bus tour that has broken down in the desert, as the Monticello Opera House stages another interactive, fun-filled whodunit with scenes performed between courses of the dinner. The best detectives attending the show win prizes! For more information and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

September 7 & 8

Wildlife Center 4th Year Bash

The North Florida Wildlife Center (1386 Cook Rd. in Lamont) holds a 4th Year Bash from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with discounted entry. Enjoy animal encounters, free goat feeding, free face painting, local food and drink and more! For tickets visit www.northfloridawildlife.org. For more information, call (850) 347-0921 or email info@northfloridawildlife.org.

September 7 – October 5

Synergy 4.5 Exhibit at JAG

This show features the work of the Artists' League of the big Bend of Florida, Inc., including a wide variety of fine art and fine craft style. See paintings, collages, drawings, ceramics, needlework, photography, weaving, sculpture and more. Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla., is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.

September 13–15

Equine Trail Sports Fall Fun Challenge 2024

Equine Trail Sports will be hosting its Fall Fun Challenge at McCulley Farms (2913 NW McCulley Farm Rd., Jasper) for an exciting weekend of family fun. Bring your friends and your horses for 6.5 miles of trail riding with six obstacles along the way. There will also be music, a family movie night, raffles, awards, food trucks and camp fires. For more information and ticket pricing, visit www.equinetrailsports.com.

September 14

Madison's Local Market

The Madison County Chamber of Commerce hosts this event from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Four Freedoms Park (112 Range St.) in downtown Madison. Call (850) 973-2788 for more information.

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts & crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 5 to 8 p.m.

Hope and Justice Dinner

Suwannee Valley Unsolved, Inc., is hosting its inaugural Hope and Justice Dinner at 4 p.m. at the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranch (1318 Cecil Webb Pl., Live Oak). There will be a silent auction, raffle and speakers, including featured speaker Aphrodite Jones of Discovery ID's True Crime with Aphrodite Jones. Proceeds from the event will benefit Suwannee Valley Unsolved's Cold Case Victim's Advocate Program. For ticket information, contact Heidi Snipes at (386) 688-3555 or visit suwanneevalleyunsolved.betterworld.org.

September 14–15

East Coast Youth Rodeo Association Rodeo



Join the East Coast Youth Rodeo Association for an exhilarating weekend of rodeoing. Contestants must be 19 years of age or younger. The event will begin at 10 a.m. on Saturday, Sept. 14, and at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Sept. 15, at the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranch (1318 Cecil Webb Pl., Live Oak). Rodeo events include the Pee Wee Division (ages 4 and under), Mutton Bustin (ages 7 and under), Junior (ages 5 to 9), Senior (ages 10 to 13), High School (ages 14 to 19) and High School Bulls (ages 14 to 19). For more information and event prices, call (904) 845-7353 or visit www.ecyra.com.

September 21

TCEC Annual Meeting

Tri-County Electric Cooperative's Annual Meeting begins with Bingo at 8 a.m. at the Madison County High School gymnasium (2649 US-90 in Madison). The in-person business update takes place at 10 a.m. All registered members will receive a free gift and a chance at one of many door prizes to be given away.

Anthem Edition in Concert



Anthem Edition, a Christian gospel band, is set to perform at Mount Olive Baptist Church (5314 Mt. Olive Rd., Live Oak) beginning at 6 p.m. This concert is free and open to all.

September 26

Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce Annual Dinner

Wrap up a bustling year of commerce with a "Boots Bling & Bowties" dinner catered by The Porch on the Green. The evening begins at 5 p.m. at the Monticello Opera House (185 W. Washington St.). Tickets are \$50 per person with group and sponsorship levels also available; go to www.monticellojeffersonfl.com to make your reservation.

September 27–28

Suwannee River Riding Club Rodeo

Join the Suwannee River Riding Club (9132 254th Ter., O'Brien) for the fifth oldest rodeo in the state. Bull riding, barrel racing, team roping and other events will be highlighted at the 68th Annual Rodeo, beginning at 8 p.m. each night. There will be vendors on the grounds, along with famous rodeo clown, Colt 45. Admission is \$15 for individuals over 9 years of age. Youth 8 and under get in for free.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

September 28

Lee Homecoming Day

The Town of Lee host this free annual event at 286 County Road 255, featuring a biscuit-and-sausage-gravy breakfast, parade, entertainment, vendor and much more. For more information, visit leehomecomingday.com.

October 10-13

Eighth Annual Suwannee Roots Revival



Experience a wonderful lineup of Americana, bluegrass, jam and blues music at the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park (3076 95th Dr., Live Oak). The festival also offers camping, yoga, music workshops, a kids stage and activities, a dance tent, as well as campground pickin' sessions. For more information and tickets, visit www.suwanneerootsrevival.com.

October 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, 20

Alice in Wonderland

Theatre Guild Valdosta presents Alice in Wonderland, based on the classic by Lewis Carroll, adapted by Anne Coulter Martens. Performances take place in the historic 'Dosta Playhouse (122 N. Ashley St., Valdosta). For show times and reservations, visit www.theatreguildvaldosta.com or call the box office at (229) 24-STAGE (247-8243).

October 12

44th Annual Pioneer Day

Head over to Veterans Memorial Park (123 SW CR 300, Mayo) for the Lafayette County Chamber of Commerce's 44th Annual Pioneer Day. Enjoy a variety of vendors between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Don't forget to find a spot for the parade, which will begin at 10 a.m. For more information or to learn how to become a vendor, visit www.lafayetteflchamber.com/pioneer-day.

October 12

2024 Ride for the Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch

Presented by the American Legion Riders, this Poker Run will benefit Florida's children. The run will start at the Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch (12936 Musgrove Pl., Live Oak, Fla.) and will end at American Legion Post 107 (10726 142nd St., McAlpin, Fla.). The cost is \$10 per hand, \$20 for three hands, and \$30 for five hands plus breakfast. Registration starts at 9 a.m., followed by a blessing of the bikes at 9:55 a.m. The first bike will take off at 10 a.m. The best hand will win a custom trophy. All vehicles are welcome. Additional entertainment will include a 50/50 drawing. For more information, contact Chaplain Dennis Young at (863) 512-9101.

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts & crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 5 to 8 p.m.

Residing Hope's 10th Anniversary Celebration

Tour Residing Hope's campus at the Madison Youth Ranch (1647 N.E. Captain Buie Rd., in Pinetta), enjoy a catered lunch and hear a special program. This event begins at noon. To register, fill out the form at residinghope.org/madison-youth-ranch-anniversary-celebration/.

October 12, 13

Pickle"Fall" Tournament



The Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce hosts Men's & Women's Doubles on Saturday, Oct. 13,

and Mixed Doubles on Sunday, Oct. 13, at the Jefferson County Recreation Park (1380 Mamie Scott Dr.). Play one division for a \$50 entry fee or both divisions for \$60. For more information, call the Chamber at (850) 997-5552 or Tournament Director Starbuck Rissman at (850) 510-4479. Register at PickleballBrackets.com.

Fall Farm Tour 2024

Visit over farms, ranches and orchards across the region during this amazing educational and family event. For more information, call (850) 294-3918 or follow FL-Ga Farm Tour on Facebook.

October 15-20

Suwannee River Wilderness Trail



Celebrate Florida's version of autumn on its most famous river with Paddle Florida's signature event, the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail. This 65-mile paddle on the historic Suwannee River spans six days, making stops at dozens of natural springs along the way, including Royal Springs and Little River. Participants will camp at the Suwannee River State Park locations among others, ending at Ivey Memorial Park in Branford. For more information and to view the itinerary, visit www.paddleflorida.org/suwannee-river-wilderness-trail. The deadline to register is Saturday, Sept. 28.

October 17

Best of Madison 2024 Awards

The Madison County Chamber of Commerce presents this year's celebration at 701 BC Venue and Brewery (701 S.W. Range Ave., Madison). Beginning at 6 p.m., enjoy food, drinks, entertainment and more. For more information, visit www.madisonfl.org or call (850) 973-2788.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

October 18

Nakatani Gong Orchestra in Concert at MOH

The Nakatani Gong Orchestra is a large ensemble touring contemporary



sound art project. Local musicians are trained in Nakatani's techniques for playing his adapted bowed gong, and he conducts them in a performance of his original composition. For more information and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit

www.monticellooperahouse.org.

October 18-19

Suwannee River Roundup Pro Rodeo

It's rodeo time in Live Oak! Suwannee Parks and Recreation is hosting the Fourth Annual Suwannee River Roundup Pro Rodeo, beginning at 7:30 p.m. each night. The event will feature bull riding, bronco riding, barrel racing, steer wrestling, breakaway roping, calf roping and team roping. Tickets are available at the gate, which will open at 6 p.m. Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$5 for youth ages 12 and under, and free for children under the age of 5. This event takes place in the Bob Holmes Arena at the Suwannee County Fairgrounds (1302 11th St. SW, Live Oak, Fla.).

October 19

33rd Annual Hickory Grove Founder's Day Celebration

Starting at 8 a.m. enjoy food for every taste and entertaining events celebrating the rich history of the northern Madison County community and Hickory Grove Methodist Church. The event takes place at 1218 N.E. Hickory Grove Rd., in Pinetta.

October 24-27

Suwannee Hulaween 2024

Every Halloween weekend, visitors can delight in electronic music, art and camping at the Spirit of the Suwannee (3076 95th Dr., Live Oak). The festival boasts a blend of mesmerizing lights, art exhibits and live performances. For tickets or more information, visit www.suwanneehulaween.com.



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Dr. Scoles (center) cares for a patient in Brazil. The medical mission group usually works from around 5:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., tending to the needs of around 400 people in one or two villages per day.

Caring for “th

Story by Hailey Heseltine

*Photographs Courtesy of
Dr. Wesley D. Scoles*

Many people in North Florida, especially Jefferson County residents, will recognize Dr. Wesley D. Scoles, MD, as a familiar face. Dr. Scoles has been working for Tallahassee Memorial Hospital (TMH) since 1997, and specifically at the family practice in Monticello. His career as a doctor here is fulfillment of a lifelong dream.

“I was told by my parents that I told them at age five I wanted to be a doctor,” says Dr. Scoles. “Pretty much all my friends and family knew that was what I wanted to

be when I grew up.”

Dr. Scoles does not know for certain why he chose that goal for himself. He cites some possible explanations, such as that his father was a minister and spent much time in hospitals, or simply that he had observed the respect and mystique surrounding doctors. Regardless, he held firmly to that childhood dream, and he decided to make it a reality. He attended the University of Missouri in Columbia, graduating in 1994 with the aim of practicing family medicine. Afterward, he completed his residency at the University of Missouri Hospital.

After finishing his education, he and his wife Lisa considered moving states.

They both enjoyed the atmosphere of college towns, and they wanted to move farther south. They discovered that the Tallahassee area would suit both those needs, so they decided to make the move, and Dr. Scoles soon began working for TMH in Monticello, where he has been ever since.

Going on medical missions was not something Dr. Scoles had anticipated for his future. However, in 2003, he was invited to go on one in Guatemala. Though it was unplanned, he accepted the offer. In Guatemala, he helped provide free medical care for coffee growers in the mountains. These people rarely had access to medical



Dr. Paul Harman, an optometrist, is one of the many hardworking individuals who goes on medical missions with Dr. Scoles.

“the river people”

care, and being able to render them the care they needed for free was a unique and fulfilling experience for him. After his return from Guatemala, he decided that he would continue going on annual medical missions to the country for the foreseeable future.

It was during his medical mission in 2005 when something changed. It was an evening in early October, not long after the strike of Hurricane Stan. Because the area he and his group had been dealing with was now a disaster zone, it was a particularly tough mission. He was journaling in a quiet, secure room with just one other person. As he recorded his experiences of the day, he thought he heard

something, a voice mentioning something about “the river people.” He asked the man in the room to repeat it, but the man said he hadn't said anything. Dr. Scoles later mentioned the experience to his wife, but afterward, he went months without thinking of it again.

The following year, a former patient came into his office and asked to speak with him. She explained that, while she was driving on I-10, she suddenly had the thought that she should come and tell Dr. Scoles something important. She promptly went to the office, asked to see Dr. Scoles and was permitted. When she saw him, she told him that she felt she

should tell him to go “to the river people.” Dr. Scoles asked her what she meant, and she explained that there were medical missions in Brazil that went alongside the Amazon River. Dr. Scoles was touched by her words, remembering his experience in Guatemala. He decided that going to Brazil was something he was meant to do, so he resolved to begin doing his medical missions there. He has been going to Brazil on an annual basis ever since.

Everyday life for a mission group in Brazil is very different from everyday life in Florida.

Going on a medical mission and traversing miles of river naturally requires



Dr. Scoles' family includes (left to right) Zane Scoles, JD, Lisa Scoles, JD, Wesley Scoles, MD, and Blaire Coté, MD.

the group to be mobile, so, throughout the course of the mission, the group lives on a double-decker boat called Seara. On the top deck, the group sets up hammocks to sleep, and the bottom deck has general living space, including a kitchen and dining area. The group eats local foods, which often consists of beans, rice, beef and locally-caught fish, such as the tambaqui, along with some sort of dessert, such as fresh fruit. Many locals are understandably wary of travelers, but the Seara is painted with easily-recognizable colors so it can be identified as the boat with people who provide free medical aid.

The group usually is out and about by 5:30 a.m., and since the location is so close to the equator, the day lasts almost exactly twelve hours, meaning they routinely finish their work around 5:30 p.m., when it gets dark. They typically tend to one or two villages per day, treating patients and providing medicine. One or two villages may not sound like much at first, but it can mean that the group tends to the needs of up to 400 people per day. Furthermore, the work is not always confined to the daylight hours. Dr. Scoles describes himself as “on-call 24/7” in Brazil. Many times they will spot a group of people trying to flag the boat down from the shore. In

those situations, there is usually a medical emergency, and the group is always ready to help. After all, prioritizing the needs of the people is exactly what they came to do.

Among those he works closely with is Dr. Paul Harman, OD, an optometrist. Dr. Scoles humorously remarks that the patients like Dr. Harman better than him because they get to see immediate, positive results from his care. Dr. Scoles' medicines, however, taste unpleasant and may give the patients an upset stomach at first; many only see the good results after he's long gone.

Of course, the medical missions come with challenges. Aside from the personal sacrifice involved, there is also the issue of transportation. It takes about two days just to get to Brazil, and all travel once there is done entirely by boat. There are also some cultural differences, especially in the language. Dr. Scoles does not speak much Portuguese, the primary language of the people he treats on the missions, so he works with a translator, Greg Parker, to communicate with his patients.

Despite the challenges, he finds the experience of helping “the river people” to be very rewarding.

“It's just knowing that you're helping people who can't help themselves,” he

explains. “It's what I think I'm supposed to do, and as long as I feel like we're reaching people that were unreachable before, I feel like I'm doing good.”

Over the years, the people have become familiar with him. He recalls a specific experience that stuck with him – the first time he realized they had a nickname for him. “Big Head” counts as a term of endearment in this regard. It helped him realize that the people of Brazil had become just as fond of him as he had of them.

The positive effect of the medical missions is seen in many ways. One of the things Dr. Scoles especially noted is that, prior to the group's frequent returns, many of the parents in the villages would not name their infant children. This was because the mortality rate of infants who do not have access to medical care is very high, and some parents would postpone naming their children to make potential loss less painful. However, in more recent years, Dr. Scoles has noticed more parents naming their infant children; they do not fear infant mortality as much when access to quality medical care is available.

Furthermore, he sees that the group's work is truly appreciated. Dr. Scoles recounts a story of Dr. Harman, who



During medical missions, the team eats primarily local foods, including tambaqui, a fish that is often part of a traditional Brazilian Easter meal, held here by Rick Parker, a missionary.

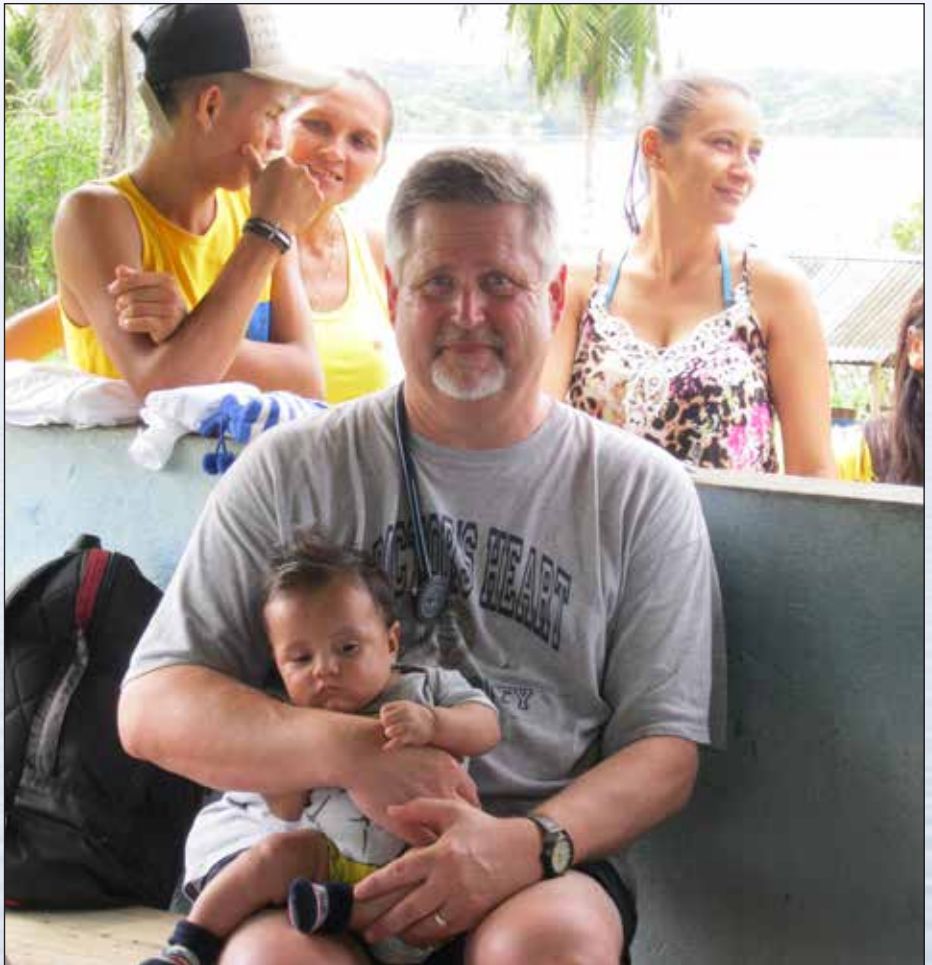
accidentally left a paper with a smiley face on it at one of the villages; the smiley face was meant to be something for people to look at during their eye exams. When they returned a year later, after the smiley face paper had been long forgotten by Dr. Harman, they discovered that it was right where they had left it, taped to the wall. The room they had left it in was important to the village, one where serious occasions such as funerals were held. The village people held Dr. Harman's page in such high esteem that they kept it up in the room, untouched, for a whole year.

Though the medical missions usually last just a few weeks out of the year, the experiences have greatly affected Dr. Scoles' life beyond Brazil. He says that going to Brazil has also made him view his work in Monticello as a mission in its own right.

"Once I realized Monticello was where I was going to be, it became my mission as well," he says. "...It's not about me, it's about everyone else...it's about the people we're helping, and it's very humbling."

Dr. Scoles would like to extend appreciation to many of the people he works with on his missions, particularly Dr. Harman and Greg Parker, as well as the entire Parker family in Brazil, who are resident missionaries he describes as "very hardworking people." He would also like to thank Whit Boyd, PA, with whom he works at the Monticello TMH office, and Heather Boyd, who also generously donates her time to the medical missions.

Though he was unable to go to Brazil this year, Dr. Scoles plans to return next year and many more years to come, to tend to the needs of "the river people" and to further accomplish the things he feels he was always meant to do – both in Brazil and in Monticello. ■



Dr. Scoles, who is known lovingly to the village people as "Big Head," describes himself as "on call 24/7" in Brazil. The years of medical missions have instilled trust in the people of Brazil, and he finds himself welcomed back year after year to render care.



Dr. Scoles and the rest of the team live aboard the double-decker Seara through the duration of their medical mission. Traveling by boat along the Amazon River area allows the group to be mobile and reach many villages with their care.



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ADVOCACY AND ACTION

How **Suwannee Valley Unsolved** is making a difference



Story by Danny Federico

*Photographs Courtesy of
Suwannee Valley Unsolved*

Suwannee Valley Unsolved, Inc. has emerged as a beacon of hope for families seeking justice and closure in cold cases across the Suwannee Valley region. Founded with a mission to assist families and revitalize unsolved cases, the organization has swiftly become a vital advocate for victims and their loved ones.

Suwannee Valley Unsolved, Jason Futch's brainchild during the COVID-19 pandemic, was initially conceived as a platform to narrate unsolved homicide cases through a podcast initiative. Using his experiences as a podcaster in the Pacific Northwest, Futch embarked on a journey to shed light on unresolved cases in Columbia County, particularly focusing on three unsolved homicides involving convenience store employees. However, unforeseen events prompted a shift in focus, leading to the organization's transformation from sensationalism to advocacy. In 2021, Futch stumbled upon a John Doe case from 1983 in Suwannee County, marking a pivotal moment in his endeavors.

"With the help of Sgt. Wayne Kelly, who was instrumental in the case's investigation, we were able to close the case through our research and the efforts made by SCSO (Suwannee County Sheriff's Office) and FDLE (Florida Department of Law Enforcement) in 1983 and 2010," Futch explained. "The victim was identified as Reginald Leonard Ward, and the suspect was identified; however, he died in 1996 in Hamilton County."

This breakthrough spurred the organization to expand its scope. Futch recognized the pressing need for a platform dedicated to advocating for families impacted by unsolved homicides

*Unidentified Male –
Vehicular Homicide, Madison County*



*Valerie Straughter –
Homicide, Madison County*



*Thomas “Thumper” Horton –
Homicide, Lafayette County*



*Marilyn Harris –
Homicide, Madison County*

and missing persons cases. In 2023, after two years of hard work, Suwannee Valley Unsolved transitioned into a non-profit entity, rallying support from local agencies and community partners, including Project Cold Case in Jacksonville.

“The project was a collaborative effort, and some of the individuals who helped us are now part of our Board of Directors, including Sgt. Kelly,” Futch said.

Central to the organization's mission is its commitment to amplify the voices of victims and their families, ensuring



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*Jaworski Williams –
Homicide, Hamilton County*



*Anthony Paul Henry –
Homicide, Hamilton County*



*Kamrie Mitchell –
Endangered/Missing, Suwannee County*

that their stories are heard and their cases receive the attention they deserve. Through public events, educational initiatives and collaborative efforts with law enforcement agencies, Suwannee Valley Unsolved strives to bring closure to families while advocating for justice.

"We work hard to reconnect with the families of the victims and ensure that their cases receive the attention they deserve," Futch emphasized. "We also provide education to families about their rights as victims, as well as resources to help them if their loved one's case goes cold."

One of the many examples of the

group's efforts to raise public awareness and keep cold cases in the public's mind comes with Kamrie Mitchell's case.

Mitchell, a Suwannee County resident, disappeared in 2012. A week after she was last seen, her vehicle was found submerged in floodwaters from Tropical Storm Debby on 184th Street. In 2023, Suwannee Valley Unsolved and the SCSO erected a sign on 184th Street to memorialize Mitchell's disappearance. The sign, featuring details about her case and the Crime Stoppers hotline phone number for anyone with information, serves as a constant reminder of Mitchell's disappearance.

"We believe it's important to honor victims and help their families seek justice," Futch expressed.

Not only has Suwannee Valley Unsolved engaged with local law enforcement agencies to offer assistance in revitalizing cold cases, but the organization has recently established a Victim's Advocacy Program and teamed up with Moxxy Forensic Investigations, Inc., a non-profit corporation that has solved numerous cold cases using investigative genetic genealogy to identify previously unidentified human remains. In January 2024, the organization announced its expansion into Madison County, having formally partnered with the Madison Police Department.

Furthermore, Suwannee Valley Unsolved endeavors to engage the community through various outreach efforts, including sponsorships, memorial initiatives and partnerships with local businesses and organizations. By fostering dialogue and mobilizing resources, the organization aims to cultivate a culture of vigilance and support for victims' families.

"It is essential that our community never forgets these victims. It is also essential that law enforcement keep exerting their resources to help these families. That is why we are here: to offer hope that something will be done. There is no reason why, in 2024, these cases should still be unsolved," Futch stated. "We have flyers of homicide cases and missing person cases that businesses can put up on a window. But ultimately, if anyone has any information, regardless of how big or small, reach out to law



*Deborah Jean Howard –
Endangered/Missing, Suwannee County*



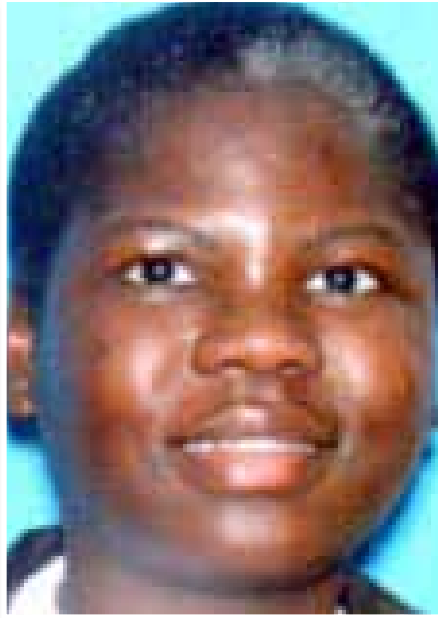
*Daniel "Danny" Burton McCrimon –
Homicide, Suwannee County*



*Carrie Combs –
Missing, Hamilton County*

enforcement. If someone doesn't feel comfortable coming forward because they fear they will be identified, they can report a tip anonymously through Crime Stoppers."

Despite challenges and obstacles, Suwannee Valley Unsolved remains steadfast in its pursuit of justice and closure. With a dedicated team of professionals, passionate advocates and unwavering community support, the organization continues to make strides in resolving cold cases and offering hope to



*Marsha Kaye Lyle –
Missing, Hamilton County*

those impacted by the tragedy.

"We are very pleased by the support we have received in our area," said Futch. "We continue to be encouraged by this support from survivors, law enforcement and community leaders so we can carry out the mission of helping families receive justice. Unfortunately, no level of justice will ever bring a loved one back. Therefore, closure will likely never happen. But knowing that the individual who killed their loved one can kill no more is enough to smile again. That is our

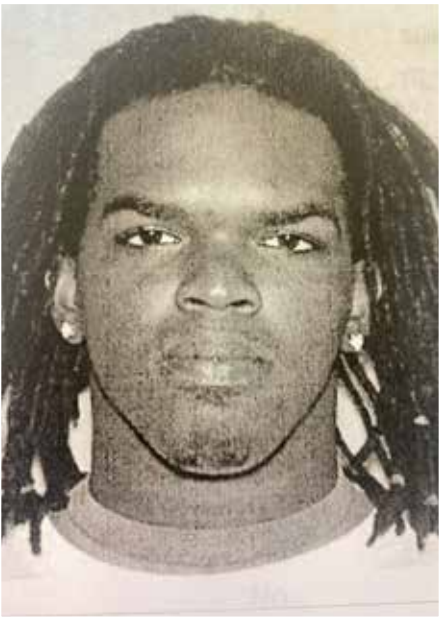


*Annie Paul –
Endangered/Missing, Madison County*

hope as we move forward into the future."

As the organization looks towards the future, its resolve remains unwavering, fueled by the belief that every victim deserves justice and every family deserves closure. Futch's words, "The victim always comes first," echo Suwannee Valley Unsolved's commitment to serving as a beacon of hope for those in need.

In an effort to further spotlight area cold cases, Suwannee Valley Unsolved will be hosting its inaugural Hope and Justice Dinner at the Florida Sheriffs



*Tortarian Alexander –
Homicide, Madison County*



*Johnny Eugene Abraham Parnell –
Homicide, Suwannee County*



*Diana Lynn Snodgrass –
Homicide, Suwannee County*



*Jill Diane Carter –
Homicide, Suwannee County*

Youth Ranch on Saturday, Sept. 14. Hosted by Katie Jefferies of First Coast News' "Unsolved" series, the dinner will offer individuals an elegant evening of socialization, a silent auction and a raffle, all while supporting victims and families of unsolved cases. The evening will feature keynote speaker Aphrodite



*Jeremy Harris –
Homicide, Madison County*

Jones, a true crime journalist and New York Times bestselling author known for her show *True Crime with Aphrodite Jones* on Discovery ID. Additional speakers include Charlene Shunic with the Resource Association for Missing People and Shunick Missing Persons, Lt. George Harrigan and Taylor Levesque

with St. Johns County Sheriff's Office, Moxxy Forensics and Laura Brotherton, the daughter of Mark Brotherton, whose homicide in Lake City in 1971 remains unsolved. Tickets are priced at \$50 per person and include dinner and a raffle ticket. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit suwanneevalleyunsolved.betterworld.org.


To learn more about Suwannee Valley Unsolved and how to get involved, visit the group's Facebook page or reach out to Futch at jason.futch@suwanneevalleyunsolved.org. Additionally, individuals who would like to donate to the organization's ongoing efforts can do so by visiting any TD Bank location, by visiting suwanneevalleyunsolved.betterworld.org, or by mailing checks or money orders to Suwannee Valley Unsolved, Inc., 136 NE Calob Ct., Lake City, Fla. 32025.

Individuals with information pertaining to cold cases within the Suwannee Valley area are encouraged to contact local law enforcement. Anonymous tips can be left through the following Crime Stoppers tip lines: Hamilton County, (386) 792-8477; Madison County, (850) 973-2762; Suwannee County, (386) 208-8477; Big Bend Crime Stoppers, (850) 574-8477; and Crime Stoppers of Northeast Florida, (888) 277-8477. ■



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