

The Front Porch

Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long

November/December 2024

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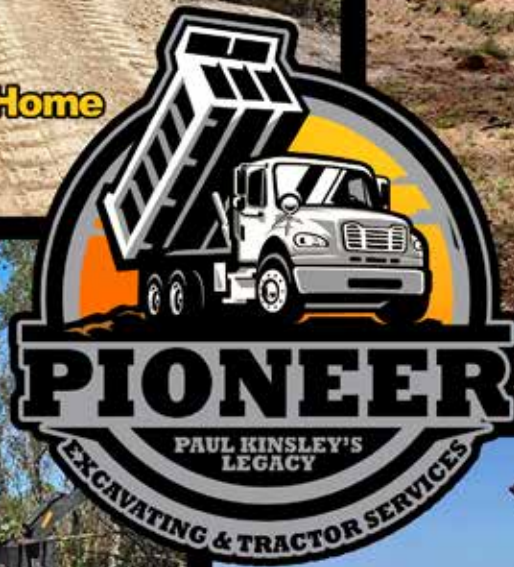
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The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long

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The Front Porch

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Sittin' on the Porch with...

John Willoughby

Story by Hailey Heseltine

Photograph Courtesy of John Willoughby

There are some places you just can't help but call home. No matter what you may have once thought of it, it starts to grow on you, as the people and the places contained within it become familiar and welcoming. Who can resist building a bond with their community after years of getting to know it? That was the experience of John Willoughby, a Perry native.

Willoughby, who was born to a Greenville, Fla., native father and a Greenville, S.C., native mother, grew up calling Taylor County home. He graduated from Taylor County High School in 2014, later moving to Southeastern University, a private Christian university in Lakeland, Fla., to continue his education. When he was a senior in high school, his parents gifted him a bass guitar, allowing him to expand his musical abilities. Though Willoughby knew little beyond playing percussion instruments, he still found himself drawn to learning more.

He soon discovered an affinity for music, motivating him to pursue music business during his education. Though Willoughby decided to stop attending college after a few semesters, he considered it an overall positive experience, especially because he discovered while there that music was his calling.

In late 2016, Willoughby decided to move to Nashville to pursue music further. By then, he had become a proficient bass player, yet he feels in hindsight that he lacked the boldness to succeed there. Not only did he feel as if Nashville just wasn't working out, he felt that "Florida and the Lord was calling [him] home," so he returned to Perry. Some good things came out of his time in Nashville, however, such as the start of his blog, *Breaking Stereotypes*. It started with him simply writing about his life and helping others, but it soon turned into writing about music. He posted reviews, interviews with many artists and even concert photography.

After Willoughby decided to leave Nashville in 2017, he began working with the *Greene Publishing, Inc.* newspapers in Madison. Though he had no prior professional experience in the field, his blogging pushed him in the right direction, as he already had conducted interviews, taken photographs and presented his findings to others. During his career in journalism at *Greene Publishing, Inc.* and later with the *Wakulla News*, he covered community events, crime, fundraisers, emergencies and more, winning multiple awards for his work. As an especially social person, his favorite part of being a reporter was getting to know local residents, offering a smile and interacting with others, building bonds in the communities where he worked.

When Willoughby decided to step away from journalism in early 2021 he began working for FedEx. He enjoyed the fast pace of his job as a delivery driver, as well as how it allowed him to preserve some of the social aspects of his previous job. After an employment offer came from UPS, he noted the benefits and decided to accept. Willoughby continues to work as a UPS driver today, and he is delighted to report that his route goes through Madison, where he gets to interact with many people he became familiar with during his time at *Greene Publishing, Inc.*

Musically, Willoughby uses his talents at his church, Westside Baptist Church, particularly by playing at monthly youth group nights. He feels that since his music ministry has gone much smoother than his previous musical pursuits, it must be what he was meant to do. Though he plays gospel music often, he also appreciates music from many genres, such as rock, country, jazz and blues. He plays acoustic guitar, which he picked up about five months ago, the most. Willoughby loves that music allows him to express his beliefs and has the power to positively motivate anyone who listens, even when the listener is himself. For him, music is more than just the way he expresses himself;

it is also how he connects with his entire community.

Willoughby is proud to be married to his wife, Mandy, who is a local banker. Originally from Maine, she came to Florida about twelve years ago. They met online and quickly hit it off, getting engaged a year later. The two were married in January 2023, and Willoughby describes himself as "still crazy about her." The couple is expecting their first child, a boy, in March 2025; they plan to name him Sawyer after his grandfather, who passed away in September 2023.

Though Willoughby wanted to explore new opportunities outside of Perry in his younger days he now plans to stick around and raise his family there. Every road he took in life seemed to lead him back to his hometown, and now he has developed an appreciation for it. He loves the abundant nature, especially how it allows him the opportunity to disconnect from technology and enjoy some time hunting or fishing in the natural world. He also appreciates the strength of his community, which was recently tested after Taylor County took direct hits from three hurricanes in only about thirteen months. Seeing how the residents were able to persevere and come together was encouraging, and it solidified Willoughby's resolve to continue supporting his community in any way he can.

One of the main things Willoughby hopes to express to others, both through his music ministry and through his daily interactions with others, is the importance of following your dreams. Even though it may be difficult, he believes it truly is the way to find real happiness and success. Regardless of how how or when someone decides to take that step, he says it is never too late, and that it will bring more fulfillment than they ever imagined it could.

For now, Willoughby is happy to enjoy pursuing his dreams here in tight-knit North Florida. What the future holds from him and his family is yet to be known for certain, but for now Taylor County will continue to be the place he continues to call home – the place where he pursues dreams of his own. ■



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TOUCHSTONE HEATING & AIR

No stranger to hard work

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Story by Mickey Starling

Touchstone Heating and Air owner Mark Touchstone is no stranger to hard work. The Lake Butler, Fla., native began working in the maintenance department for the school board while he was attending Union County High School. Afterwards, Touchstone worked for Enviro-Temp, a heating and air conditioning company in Gainesville, Fla. After working on a ranch in Wyoming for two years, Touchstone returned to Lake Butler and the air conditioning business, working for Robinson Heating and Air.

In the late 90s, Touchstone was encouraged by several contractors to begin his own business, which he did, initially operating out of a storage building. Things got ugly when the financial markets crashed in 2008. Touchstone faced mounting debts and had to lay off most of his employees. Raising his daughter, Sydney, turned out to be the inspiration he needed to press on through the difficulties he faced.

One day, Touchstone heard financial advisor Dave Ramsey on the radio, giving

advice that was music to his ears. When he began following Ramsey's advice, he soon saw improvements.

"I had my health, and I was willing to work hard at anything," said Touchstone, whose breakthrough came with an offer from Camp Blanding to do air conditioning work in their barracks. This sizable contract helped Touchstone regain his financial footing and decrease his debt.

By 2010, inspiration and blessings were flowing in Touchstone's direction when he met his future wife, Amy.

"She is very instrumental to our success," said Touchstone. "She gives great advice, and she is patient."

He later happened upon a book, *The Upside of Fear* by Weldon Long, who is now a motivational speaker.

"That book helped me to create goals," remembers Touchstone. "I'm still passing the book on to others."

Later, a web design company, iMarket Solutions, contacted Mark with an ad offer he was sure he couldn't afford. The agency eventually sold him the ad with a no-risk offer that paid big dividends. He once attended an iMarket seminar and

met another favorite business author, Ruth King. She was carrying a large number of books, and Touchstone offered to carry them for her.

In the midst of their conversation, King said, "I can help you grow your company."

"She did, and she still does," said Touchstone.

Today, Touchstone Heating and Air has offices in Lake Butler, Lake City and Madison. The Madison branch came about after a resident called for service.

"I immediately knew this is a town I wanted to do business in," remarked Touchstone. "These are really nice people."

It wasn't long before Touchstone joined the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, and he has enjoyed the many opportunities to help people.

"We care about service," said Touchstone. "We offer 10-year warranties on parts and labor and a money-back guarantee."

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come when we say we will,” said Touchstone, who has made God a major part of his business. “We pray at every staff meeting,” he added. “I gave what I had when I had very little. God always supplied for every need, and there were always jobs. I had an employee who was an atheist who is now a regular church attender.”

Touchstone only sells quality products such as Goodman, Amana, York and others, all with the same warranties. Besides air conditioning and heating, Touchstone also offers generator installation and duct cleaning.

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Mark and Amy Touchstone



Mark and Amy Touchstone are pictured with their children. Pictured, left to right, are: Jordan, Zach, Amy, Mark, Cydney and Sam.



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GOING PRO

Megan Schofill

Story by Lazaro Aleman

Photographs Courtesy of Megan Schofill

For Auburn University (AU) golf standout and local star Megan Schofill – who not long ago had a Jefferson County road named for her – the coming year will be a learning curve, as well as a defining moment in her golf-playing career.

Schofill recently competed in the U.S. Women's Open (USWO), which was held in Lancaster, Pa., at the end of May and beginning of June. One of 22 amateurs in a field of 156 players to participate in the prestigious event, Schofill won low amateur honors with a 72-hole score of 292 (+12) to finish tied with two other players for the recognition and tied for 44th place on the leaderboard, according to AU.

"It's a big deal," Schofill told *The Front Porch*. "It's obviously a professional event, and there were, I think, 20 of us amateurs playing in the event, and four of us made the 36-hole cut and three of us tied for the lowest amateurs in the field."

This makes Schofill the 10th AU golfer to participate in the USWO since 2012 and the second to win low amateur honors since 2009.

In interviews right after the tournament's conclusion, Schofill rated the course one of the most difficult that she had ever played, adding that it had tested every aspect of her game: chipping, putting, driving, irons and mindset.

"This was my first U.S. Open and it lived up to the expectations of the USGA making it a hard track," she was quoted saying. "It was a great experience and a good learning experience for me to learn what I need to work on in my game and what's good in my game."

Her posting on Instagram was more exuberant: "Wow, what a great week at my first U.S. Women's Open! Lancaster was such a treat! Thank you to everyone who made this week so special."

More recently, at the start of August, Schofill defended her 2023 U.S. Women's Amateur Championship title at the Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Okla.

"I made it to match play but lost in the first round," Schofill said. "Still, I was selected to go and play in the Curtis Cup at the end of this month."

She will be one of eight players to represent the United States at the 2024 Curtis Cup, a biannual event that was set to take place at the Sunningdale Golf Club in Berkshire, England, from Aug. 30 to Sept. 1.

"It's Great Britain and Ireland versus the United States," Schofill said. "Eight girls on those teams, and so it's a match-play format. It's a pretty big deal."

Said in understatement, of course.

"I was an alternate back in 2021, so this



will be my first time actually getting to play on the team," Schofill added. "So yes, I'm really excited and looking forward to it. This will be my last amateur event."

Making the event especially sweet is that playing at the Curtis Cup was one of Schofill's long-term goals.

"It really is a tough and competitive game," she said. "And to be picked for it, I was really, really excited and just super honored, because it was one of my goals going into college."

Does she see her overall amateur golfing career as having been particularly stellar?

"Yeah, I would say so," Schofill said. "I mean, I feel like I've had a super successful amateur career and I'm really excited and happy to finish my amateur career at the Curtis Cup, which again was one of my goals when I started college."

To underscore Schofill's successful amateur golf career, one need only review a few of her many accomplishments in a relatively brief period, beginning with Aucilla Christian Academy (ACA), where she began playing the game and won the All-Big Bend Championship and was named 2016 All Big Bend Golfer of the Year, among other honors.

Since then, Schofill, among her many successes at Auburn, completed

her collegiate career with a Women's Golf Coaches Association (WGCA) All-American honorable mention and a second team All-SEC selection in 2023-24. She also led the AU Tigers with a 71.65 scoring average in her last season and held the lowest career scoring average in program history at 72.01 (minimum 60 rounds), according to the school.

A four-time All-SEC selection, she also reportedly recorded four top-10 individual finishes in her last season with the Tigers, including a tie for third at the Lady Puerto Rico Classic and shooting eight-under (208) at the Mason Rudolph Championship to finish in the top-5. Plus she holds a World Amateur Golf Ranking of 16th.

Additionally, she was three-time Arnold Palmer Cup Team USA Selection for 2023, 2021 and 2020; five-time Augusta National Woman's Amateur Invitee for 2024, 2023, 2023, 2021 and 2020; and two-time Golfweek All-American for 2022 and 2020. And the honors and awards just keep rolling on.

It tells you, if nothing else – even if you know next to nothing about the game of golf – that this young woman and Monticello native is extremely talented, dedicated and determined to excel in the sport.

So, you may ask, what happens now that her amateur career was effectively set to end



with the Curtis Cup?

What happens next, Schofill will tell you, is that she plans to pursue a professional career in golf.

“I’ll turn professional next,” Schofill said. “Hopefully a week or two after the Curtis Cup happens.”

Here is where the learning curve and career-defining phase kicks in. A key determinant in the process is participation in the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) Qualifying School, more commonly called the Q-School, which Schofill planned to attend near the end of August. The aim of the Q-School, which entails a series of qualifying stages to prove one’s golf-playing ability, is to earn an invitation to join LPGA and participate in its many tournaments. The alternative is simply to compete in certain LPGA tournaments and hope to earn the LPGA card in that way.

“It all honestly depends on how these next few weeks go,” Schofill said, in terms of how her professional golf career will develop.

“The Q-School will kind of decide if I will have the opportunity to play on the LPGA tour,” she said. “So if I dance on the second stage, then I’ll have guaranteed status on the feeder tour to the LPGA.”

Feeder tours are considered an essential part of the professional game – allowing young players to learn the trade and, for the lucky few, provide a route to the likes of the more prestigious tours.

“But even if I don’t make it, there are

many tours and that kind of stuff out there,” Schofill added. “So basically, I’ll just sign up for a tournament. I’ll just declare as a professional golfer and I can play for money.”

Going professional, of course, carries its challenges. According to the literature, it’s not unusual for professional golfers to spend upwards of \$5,000 just to play in a tournament, “making each event a must-earn atmosphere for everyone entering the fray.”

Moreover, a Professional Golf Association (PGA) pro with a full schedule of events on their calendar could easily spend upwards of \$100,000 simply “to work at their day job,” the industry literature states.

Granted that the sizes of the purses can be significantly lucrative in some competitions, and notwithstanding the overall appearances of glamour and ease of the life, the experts point out that going professional requires discipline and strict adherence to budgeting practices, as earnings must be weighed against expenditures for travel, gear, accommodations and the like. The higher prizes also, they note, tend to go to the higher-ranked professionals.

Lastly, the size of purses in the women’s golf tournaments, although reportedly going up, are still far below that of their male counterparts. According to the literature, the largest purse in men’s golf is \$25 million, whereas the biggest purse in women’s golf is \$12 million.

This aside, the experts say that at the end of the day, earnings can still be

significant for golf players “firmly in the middle class,” provided that they put the hard mental and physical work that is required to succeed.

Schofill is well aware of the challenges of going professional and is prepared to tackle them.

“It’s kind of crazy how professional golf works compared to other sports,” she said. “Because golf’s all based on performance and not necessarily on what kind of a player you were in college. We just kind of have to figure out what’s happening as it’s happening.”

Successful as her college golf career was, she understands and appreciates that she is entering a new arena that will test and challenge her anew.

“I feel that even though I’ve been a super successful amateur player, I don’t necessarily know if that will translate into professional golf,” Schofill said. “It’s a way different ball game. You travel by yourself. And you don’t have your coaches and teammates around you for support, which is what I’d loved about college golf.”

She is not, however, shying away from the challenges. Rather, she is anticipating them.

“It’ll be interesting to see how I like traveling alone and figuring things out,” she said. “I mean, this next year will be a learning time. Learning what I will need to do better to be a successful professional golfer.”

Fortunately, she said, she won’t be totally alone in her endeavor, as she has a

great support system, naming her parents, Billy and Paulette Schofill, and her fiancée, C.J. Easley, who is also a golfer. Easley has stepped forward to be her caddie in her professional career, offering advice and moral support when and wherever necessary.

"My coaches are also still with me and will help me as I figure all this out," Schofill said. "But I recognize that it's not going to be the same. There will be different kinds of pressure. That's why I will probably travel with maybe one or two other girls that are in the same boat as me. And again, my fiancée is going to caddie for me and we'll go out there together. But still, for this next part, yeah, it will be a lot of time on my own. It's just a lot different."

Going professional will also entail much travel and the logistics and costs that go with it.

"You go to specific events three or four days or whatever, then you come back home again and then go to another one at another time," Schofill said. "Usually, from what you hear from a lot of people, it's like, three weeks on the road and then maybe a week off at home. It all depends on how your calendar shakes as well. Like, if the events are in a really good flow, maybe you can come home. Or if it's all the way on the west coast, you can just stay out there for however long. One great thing about professional golf is that you can kind of make your schedule. If you're

playing really well and have a lot of status and are pretty high up on the money list, then you can kind of pick and choose what events you want to play. But if you're kind of struggling and down at the bottom, then you just play as many as you can and just hope you keep moving up the ranks."

Whichever way it goes, however, Schofill's all in and looking forward to learning the ropes, determined to see how far she can pursue her dream, given the pressures that will accompany it.

"There is definitely pressure," she said, acknowledging potential limitations. "Yes, I want to play professional golf, and I want to be successful, but I don't think I'll still be doing it at 50. I would like to do it for seven, eight or nine years and then move on to the next thing, because I think it's really hard. It's also a lot different for the women than it is for the men. The longevity of the game for the men is a lot different. I mean, I love golf and I know I'll play golf forever, but I don't know that I always want to play at the highest level."

Her reason?

"I think it's just a little bit different," Schofill said. "The men's travel, compared to the women's travel, just the whole thing; I think it's honestly how the men and the women's brain are wired. Some of these girls that I've met playing in these professional events who are in their late 30s and early

40s and still playing... I'm just so impressed by them and how they keep doing it and have their kids come on the road with them or bring them to certain events. It is super impressive, but I don't know if I can do it."

If not always a professional golfer career, what does she eventually see herself doing?

"Honestly, I don't know," Schofill said. "Right now, golf is kind of all I can see in front of me. But I don't know. I've always kind of thought about coaching, so maybe that will be something I would decide to do. But honestly, I really don't know. Right now, I know I want to be a professional golfer, and that's kind of the next step in my career, and I feel like I'll figure out my next chapter later."

Plenty of time yet to cross the bridge when it comes, given that she is 22. Meanwhile, she's readying for the challenges and rewards of a professional career that lies ahead.

Her final words are addressed to the local community.

"I just like to say thank you to everyone in Jefferson County who has supported me along the way," Schofill said. "Like my parents, my coaches, and Jefferson County and Monticello for being so proud of me and who I am. It's the community and the people who really helped to shape me and make me who I am today." ■



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One wall in Katrina Richardson's home displays a world map with push pins showing all the places she's traveled to. Photograph by Laura Young, October 8, 2024.

WHAT'S ON YOUR *Bucket List?*

Sponsored Content Story by Laura Young

When people dream of what they'd like to do before they "kick the bucket," exciting travel destinations often top the list.

Have photos of a stunning vista made you long to be inspired there in person? Do the people, cuisine, music, lifestyle and architecture of a unique culture intrigue you, enticing you to experience it all first hand? What vibrant cities or natural wonders would you immerse yourself in, if you had the chance?

Joining others on such a quest can add the element of fellowship, which enriches the experience with shared joys and accomplishments, beyond whatever personal goals you may want to satisfy. For Monticello resident Katrina Richardson, retirement from her public relations career has given her the opportunity to translate a lifelong love of travel into a part-time business bringing people together to make their travel dreams a reality. Her new venture – Travels with

Katrina – lets her work on her own bucket list and go on adventures with others as a trip leader for the tour company Collette, all the while earning a bit of income along the way.

What's the next destination? New York City! In just a few weeks, Katrina takes a group to the Big Apple. This five-day getaway on Dec. 11-15, 2024, has an itinerary packed with sightseeing, entertainment, shopping and unforgettable holiday cheer. Highlights of the trip include Greenwich Village, Wall Street, Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall, Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, 9/11 Memorial, 9/11 Museum and a Broadway show.

When you book a trip with Katrina, you can leave the details to her and Collette. The NYC package includes five meals, accommodations in Times Square, all admission tickets and full travel costs, from the steps of the Monticello Chamber of Commerce to the destination and back again. A similar trip to NYC next February will include two Broadway shows, one of them the acclaimed *Hamilton*. To sign up for either



New York City

Photograph Courtesy of Collette.

New York trip, visit www.travelswithkatrina.com. You'll find detailed color brochures online there, or you can call Katrina at (850) 567-6451 or email her at katrina@travelswithkatrina.com to find out more.

Also in February of 2025, Katrina invites you to join her on a journey to see Iceland's Magical Northern Lights. The seven-day trip begins with a tour of the capital city, Reykjavik, and a northern lights cruise. An outing to the Golden Circle takes you to

the explosive Geysir thermal area and the double-cascade Gullfoss waterfall. In other Icelandic venues you see volcanic beaches, visit the Sólheimajökull Glacier, stop by the Lava Exhibition Center, swim in a mineral-rich geothermal pool, explore Thingvellir National Park, marvel at glacial lagoons and take in fascinating museums about Iceland's culture. By day you'll observe seabirds, seals, icebergs and breathtaking vistas; every night you'll enjoy delicious dinners followed by sky-gazing for those ethereal northern lights. Iceland is one of the best places in the world to see them, and winter is the best time of year to experience their magic. Check your calendar for Feb. 11-17, 2025, and get ready to check this off your bucket list!



Iceland

Photograph Courtesy of Collette.

"Travel expands your horizons," says Katrina about the value of such journeys, noting that recent trips she led to Greece and the Canadian Rockies rank among the destinations that most awed her.

"Don't worry about the money; just make it work," she adds, recalling how she was inspired to adopt this outlook by cross-country cyclist Tracy Draper's book *Just Do It*. "The reason I say 'just make it work' is this: If you want to go somewhere, plan it now, even if it's two years down the road. Save your money and do it, because you'll be so happy that you did."

In May of 2025, Travels with Katrina presents Collette's Alaska Discover Land & Cruise. After a one-day tour in Fairbanks, you'll spend two days in Denali National Park then drive to Anchorage, visiting the Alaska Wildlife Conservation Center along the way. At the port of Whittier, you'll board the Holland America Nieuw Amsterdam and enjoy cruising for the remaining seven days of the trip. As you take in the beauty of glaciers, coastal islands, mountain vistas and the rich world of marine life, this floating resort also provides dazzling entertainment, myriad dining options and fabulous port stops in

Skagway, Juneau and Ketchikan (the "City of Totems") until you disembark in the Canadian city of Vancouver. This trip is filling up fast, so contact Katrina without delay to get in on this experience.



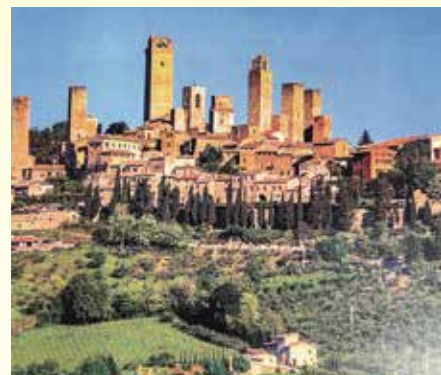
Alaska

Photograph Courtesy of Collette.

All trips through Travels with Katrina allow for savings when booked early. For example, those who sign up for the Alaska trip by Nov. 21, 2024, can save \$450. When booking, insurance can be purchased to cover a refund in case your plans change before or during the journey. While the trips offered by Katrina appeal to many who live locally, they are of course open to anyone living anywhere. This allows for friends and family who may live far apart to enjoy trips together.

After taking a break through the heat of summer, Travels with Katrina picks up again in September of 2025 with a trip out West to some of America's most awe-inspiring national parks. The Grand Canyon, Zion and Bryce – oh my! Grand Teton, Yellowstone, Mount Rushmore and more! Special sites on the itinerary in and around the parks include Scottsdale, Lake Powell, Salt Lake City, Jackson Hole, Old Faithful, Sheridan, the Bighorn Mountains and Crazy Horse Memorial. Rivers, rocky rims, summits and stunning formations await you, along with cultural experiences to deepen your appreciation for the diverse people whose history is bound to these lands. In all you'll traverse Arizona, Utah, Wyoming and South Dakota, building memories of a lifetime along the way.

Earlier this year, Travels with Katrina arranged a wonderful trip to Italy, and another opportunity to visit "the boot" is being offered Nov. 4-12, 2025. The Explore Tuscany adventure, sponsored locally by the Madison County Chamber of Commerce, lasts nine days, with all outings based out of the Hotel Ercolini and Savi, Montecatini Terme. Unpack once and enjoy the spa resort nestled in Tuscany's rolling hills, the world-renowned



Tuscany

Photograph Courtesy of Collette.

cuisine of the Tuscany region, historic sites spanning medieval times to the Renaissance to WWII, the colorful Palio horse race, rugged coastlines, terraced vineyards and, of course, the leaning Tower of Pisa.

Travels with Katrina plans to round out 2025 with a special Christmas on the Danube river cruise through Germany and Austria. Highlights of this nine-day trip include stops in Würzburg, Rothemburg, Nuremberg, Passau, Wachau Valley, Glühwein Party and Vienna. Along the way, enjoy the Christmas markets, medieval settings, fairy-tale houses, cathedrals, castles and an ancient abbey. Even though this trip is already sold out, there's a waiting list for any slots that might open up from other travelers' cancellations.

For 2026, Katrina is already offering trips to Costa Rica, Britain and Australia/New Zealand!

Although Katrina handles the bookings for these trips, the details are organized by Collette (yes, that's who gives away trips on *Wheel of Fortune!*). Before each trip, the company also sends a manager to conduct a pre-trip talk to prepare the travelers to make the most of their upcoming adventure. Further, Collette ensures a smooth and worthwhile experience by engaging knowledgeable guides in each destination



Danube

Photograph Courtesy of Collette.



Katrina Richardson's immediate family includes, left to right, Jay, Olivia, Joe and Katrina Walton; Katrina; and Brad, Jill, Robin, Kelley, Hannah and Spencer Richardson. Photograph by Stacy Prato.

to accompany the group. In addition to the trips Katrina is leading, Collette offers a full catalog of more than 170 tours every year to destinations across Africa, the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand, the Americas and Europe.

Wherever in the world you dream of going, Katrina would love to work with you on your bucket list trips!

She began developing her travel club concept during her last years as the executive

director for the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce and Tourist Development Council. She's also building similar business relationships with the chambers of commerce in Madison, Wakulla and Gadsden counties that help her reach out to people in the communities they serve. She emphasizes, however, that anyone can sign up for any trip. No membership in any group is expected.

Katrina's desire to experience exciting

travel through work goes back at least as far as her high school years, when she planned to become a flight attendant. As it turned out, she married Rich, a Navy man, and they traveled the world together through his military postings.

Today, one wall in Katrina's home displays a large world map. It's covered with push pins showing all the places she's been, and miniature bronze buckets mark the next three places on her personal wish list: Finland, Morocco and Vietnam. Vietnam will be an especially poignant trip for her, because Rich passed away from the effects of Agent Orange, years after encountering the carcinogen during his three military tours there.

One way or another, she means to stand in that place.

When Katrina isn't traveling, she makes time for her and Rich's grown children, (little) Katrina and Brad, their spouses and the six grandchildren. Sometimes, though, family time is spent traveling!

When her oldest grandkids were both sophomores in high school, Katrina foresaw that rather than marking their upcoming graduations with traditional gifts or money, she wanted to give them a travel experience.

"Where do you want to go?" she remembers asking them.

They chose the Grand Canyon, and she immediately began saving money every month for the two years leading up to their graduation date. The next two grandchildren chose Hawaii, and the last two took an Alaska cruise. Katrina lives the advice she gives about dreaming, planning, saving and just doing it.

In the end, a bucket list trip can certainly be to a place you want to see for yourself, but it also can be a travel experience you want to share with the ones you love – past, present and future. ■



Canadian Rockies

Glacier National Park - Lake Louise. Photograph Courtesy of Katrina Richardson.



Greece

Swimming in the cold water of the Aegean Sea. Photograph Courtesy of Katrina Richardson.



Italy

On an optional three-night Pre-Tour Extension in Sicily, this group enjoyed Taormina's charms in the company of an expert local guide, who took them to Corso Umberto, the imposing Corvaja Paqlace and the city's well preserved Greek theatre with an unparalleled viewpoint of the adjacent ocean. Photograph Courtesy of Katrina Richardson.

Jason Shoaf

District 7
State Representative



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As part of the Youth Ranches' Work, Study, Play and Pray philosophy, the All Faiths Chapel at the Boys Ranch serves as a meeting place for our youth and staff. Countless worship services, Bible study, and even weddings have taken place at this chapel over the last 67 years.

FLORIDA SHERIFFS YOUTH RANCHES TURNS CHALLENGING CHILDHOODS INTO *Hopeful Futures*

Story by Sarah Jackson

Photographs Courtesy of Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches

The Florida Sheriffs Boys Ranch sits on the banks of the Suwannee River, nestled among the pines and oaks of North Florida. This picturesque location provides a warm and caring home to young men and women struggling through adolescence. Whether they have a broken family dynamic, a challenging community or have simply lost their way – these youth find a different way of life within the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches.

With Sheriffs in the name, this organization is often thought to be a juvenile detention facility. But pass through the archway along twin rows of majestic oaks, and you'll find a 3,000-acre working ranch centered around a quaint, Mayberry-esque community. The Boys Ranch campus includes a chapel, cafeteria/auditorium and beautiful homes built to house up to twelve children each. Every cottage, road and building bears the name of a generous donor, or donors, who saw a need and wanted to be part of our mission.

In 1955, Marion County Sheriff Don

McLeod and Hillsborough County Sheriff R. Ed Blackburn Jr. drove to Amarillo, Texas, to pick up a couple of teenagers from county lock-up. A young man had attempted to knock over a grocery store in Ocala, and the robbery went badly. He fled to Texas with a gunshot wound and his accomplice – his pregnant girlfriend.

In the 1950s, Florida sheriffs saw an epidemic of juvenile delinquency in their counties. The Florida Sheriffs Association had been in operation for almost 60 years, revolutionizing how sheriffs approached crime-fighting in the state. But seeing a young man in handcuffs over a crime of

desperation, coming from an environment devoid of support and love – that was never the goal. Children were meant to be protected, not prosecuted. It was obvious that something was missing in their communities.

While waiting for the paperwork to process, a local deputy offered to be a tour guide to the two Florida sheriffs. In between scenic views of the Pala Duro Canyon, they learned about a successful home for boys started by wrestler Cal Farley. It was a place for boys who would otherwise be on the streets or in a jail cell. Sheriff Blackburn and Sheriff McLeod drove back to Florida with two scared teenagers in their backseat and ideas about how it could have gone differently.

Years of petitioning, planning and support from the Florida Sheriffs Association and generous citizens made the sheriffs' dream a reality. The Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches was born to prevent delinquency and develop lawful, resilient and productive citizens, and sixty-seven years later our mission remains the same.

For decades, the Youth Ranches has challenged the assumption that our programs are juvenile detention centers, a place for "bad kids." Even Live Oak locals, growing up within miles of the flagship Boys Ranch campus, recycled the same threat through generations to keep kids in line: "You better straighten up, or you'll end up at the Boys Ranch."

At the Youth Ranches, we believe there's no such thing as a bad kid. Generations of young men and women have grown up at the ranches, learning that their past doesn't define them and that they have value. We've seen victims of abuse, neglect, extreme poverty and negative influences learn what it means to be safe, loved and given opportunities to succeed.

While the Youth Ranches was beginning to spread its wings, decisions about what set us apart had to be made. Aside from our connection with law enforcement, what could we offer the wayward youth of Florida? Passionate staff members like Jim Strayer, a titan in residential care programming, were asking these and other important questions. What if the Ranch wasn't just a place that provided three meals and a bed? What if it offered fundamental life skills, natural family dynamics and real opportunities for the kids who grew up there?

These questions evolved into our four-pillar philosophy: Work, Study, Play and Pray. This philosophy is the cornerstone of our approach to youth development. It teaches our youth how to put in an honest day's work, the importance of education, how to play in a healthy way, and that



While at the Boys Ranch, Antonio served as the captain of the Suwannee High School Bulldogs varsity football team. He rode with his team through Live Oak during the homecoming parade, shortly before graduating high school and attending West Point.

there is a God who loves them. Each of these pillars is carefully integrated into daily life at the Boys Ranch, providing a holistic approach to youth development.

WORK

On average, a rancher stays for a year and a half. The Youth Ranches is a volunteer program; a child has to want to be here. When youth enter the program, they set firm goals related to their education, behavior, interpersonal skills and family relationships. When students reach their goals, they can leave our program or stay until they graduate high school.

Each rancher has a job on campus. It may be in an office filing papers and doing janitorial work, or outside learning carpentry or lawn maintenance. The Ed Van Ness Farm at the Boys Ranch is a fully functioning ranch with horses, cows and hay fields, providing youth with many opportunities to learn real-life skills. The kids have to apply for their jobs and be interviewed. They can be hired, fired, demoted, promoted and given raises. They learn the value of a job well done as well as how to save money and spend wisely.

Rancher Savannah works at Ed Van Ness Farm at the Boys Ranch. As a new rancher, she was still learning the program and dealing with turmoil from her life back home. For a while, all she did was push everyone away; then she found the Farm Program.

"I went to the farm one day to help [Farm Director] Jeff Parker vaccinate cows," Savannah said. "He said I did a good job and asked if I wanted a job. I was really happy for the first time in a really long time because it was giving me an opportunity to become something."

Savannah's work ethic and leadership



Savannah was the first female to win the Carleton F. Tweed Horsemanship Trophy. At the annual Boys Ranch Open House and Horse Show, she was presented with the coveted belt buckle and trophy in 2023 at the Grand Entry Ceremony. The award is given to a rancher who shows responsibility, dedication and integrity in every aspect of their lives.

skills helped her excel at the farm. She was the first female in Boys Ranch history to be awarded the Carleton F. Tweed Horsemanship Award, a coveted honor among ranchers.

"No one at the ranch ever gave up on me," Savannah said. "They continued fighting for me and being there for me, and it has really helped me."

STUDY

The Youth Ranches believes a good education is the foundation for a child's future. Many children come to the Youth Ranches behind in school. We offer extensive tutoring and attention to academics, ensuring that each child has



The theme at Youth Ranches summer camp is “Law Officers Are Your Friends!” School resource deputies spend the week with campers from their communities, building healthy relationships that follow them back home during the school year.



Part of summer camp is trying new things, like archery. Cali was a first-time camper, and her counselor Ms. Maceda stepped in to teach her how to properly shoot a bow. This is just one of the many “firsts” at camp, showing boys and girls that they are capable of anything!

the opportunity to catch up and excel in their studies. Students who do well in school and have good character may apply for scholarships through the Youth Ranches for college or technical school. These scholarships cover tuition, books and other necessary expenses, providing our students a pathway to higher education. Currently, twelve students are benefiting from these scholarships.

Antonio came to the Boys Ranch in need of a safe place to sleep. A teenager from a broken home, he was sleeping on couches while maintaining a 4.0 GPA

and serving as captain of his high school varsity football team. The ranch was there to give him a roof over his head and a path towards college.

“There was a ton of people that helped me out on this journey. I guess God has just blessed me with a tremendous amount of perseverance.”

Before Antonio graduated, he was already getting calls from Ivy League colleges. Ranch staff helped him apply to West Point, where he attended for three years before transferring to Columbia University to study Applied Mathematics

on a Youth Ranches scholarship.

At the Youth Ranches, we believe that a child’s past circumstances shouldn’t determine their future. When passionate people rally around a youth with love and support, anything is possible.

PLAY

Many kids at the Youth Ranches haven’t had time to be a kid. Maybe they have grown up too fast or been latchkey kids, responsible for looking after younger siblings while parents work multiple jobs. Learning how to “play” is important. Many interpersonal skills are built by playing as a child. Recreational activities on campus range from ping-pong tournaments to trail rides on horseback. A balanced, healthy lifestyle is essential, and playing (canoeing, fishing and participating in a pick-up game of basketball) is part of life. These activities are not just for fun but also serve as a means to build the social skills, teamwork and physical fitness that contribute to the overall development of our youth.

Maddy and Jeremiah are siblings at Youth Ranch Safety Harbor. This campus was created to keep sibling groups from being separated in the foster care system. Maddy and Jeremiah arrived at the Youth Ranch traumatized and scared, victims of extreme poverty. Their cottage parents opened their hearts to the siblings, patiently guiding them through the daily routines of ranch life until Maddy and Jeremiah understood that they were safe here.

Today, these siblings are typical teenagers. They are excellent athletes, obsessed with music and movies, and happy to share their feelings and thoughts on any subject imaginable. Maddy, who just turned fourteen, has come a long way in her journey at the ranch.

“When I came here, I didn’t know how athletic I was,” Maddy said. “[The ranch] signed me up for softball, and I ended up liking it and trying out for other sports. I’ve gotten a lot of compliments, but I just have fun when I’m playing sports. It’s something I enjoy.”

Being at the ranch allowed Maddy and her brother to salvage their childhoods. They don’t have to worry about where their next meal will come from or if they will be separated from each other. Maddy and Jeremiah can just be kids.

PRAY

The Youth Ranches wants children to know that there is a God who loves them. The youth attend chapel once a week, and other activities are available if they want to become more involved on campus or in



Keenan was at the Boys Ranch for several years, overcoming many obstacles with the help of his beloved cottage parents. They continued to mentor him after graduation, helping him navigate through college life and develop a healthy work/school balance. Now a psychology major, Keenan hopes to become a Christian counselor to help other people like him who just need a little guidance.

the community. Character development is also part of each young person's growth. The Youth Ranches teaches "character first" through the schools and homes as a way to instill important values like integrity, empathy and resourcefulness.

Keenan was sure of his path when he graduated high school at the ranch. He felt a calling on his life to go into ministry, and he saw himself visiting far-off mission sites to deliver much needed supplies while sharing the gospel.

"I ended up changing my major to psychology because in my time at college, I found myself sitting down talking with people one-on-one a lot, and doing counseling like it's second nature," Keenan said.

His advice isn't just reserved for his peers. For the past several months, Keenan has worked with the Boys and Girls Club of America in their summer camp program. He also worked as a children's pastor and youth leader at several local churches.

"I'm planning on being a Christian counselor," Keenan explained. "I want to counsel people and bring them closer to Jesus so they can understand who He is."

SUMMER CAMP

The need for our specific type of programming for at-risk youth inspired an experiment in the early 1980s: two



Maddy and Jeremiah are siblings at Youth Ranch Safety Harbor. They no longer have to worry about being safe, or fed, or housed. Instead, they can enjoy being teenagers, listening to music, playing basketball outside their cottage, or making friends at school.

weeks of summer camp on the back acres of the Boys Ranch. With a theme of "Law Officers Are Your Friends!" and a cast of troublesome boys paired with local deputies acting as camp counselors, our legacy of summer camp began.

That first summer was such a success, the Youth Ranches quickly assigned more resources to camping services, which expanded rapidly to meet the need for free, traditional summer camp experiences for at-risk or poverty-stricken children across the state. We saw campers emerge as leaders, gain self-confidence and learn important social skills. The Youth Ranches now has three overnight summer camps and a statewide mobile day camp program known as Harmony in the Streets.

Camp activities center around the four Cs of teamwork: Communication, Cooperation, Concentration and Commitment. These concepts are the keys to unlocking success at camp. Whether working as a team to solve the challenge course, staying safe on the archery range or learning to canoe for the first time – the 4 Cs help campers solve problems together.

The kids we serve at camp can be a rambunctious bunch. To address behavior and inspire respect in our campers, we developed the four Rs of Respect:

Respect yourself, Respect others, Respect authority and Respect the environment. Everything from learning to speak with kindness to picking up discarded trash around the camp comes back to respect. As a result, campers build strong, healthy relationships with each other, the camp staff and the volunteer law enforcement officers who spend time at camp. These deputies show our campers that "Law Officers Are Your Friends!" and they can be trusted to help when campers need it most.

From residential services to summer camp, the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches continues to be a beacon of hope in the lives of children and families. For more than 67 years, it has provided hope and a brighter future for more than 181,000 kids and their families. There are so many stories like those of Savannah, Antonio, Keenan, Maddy and Jeremiah. Stories of challenging childhoods turned into hopeful and successful futures because of the love and support of the ranches, our sheriffs and our donor family.

If you would like to learn more about the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranches or join us in our mission, visit our website at www.youthranches.org or call (386) 842-5501. ■

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Daniel Monroe III and family pose together on the porch of the 1903 family home in 2018.

The deep roots of **NORTH FLORIDA**

Story by Heather Ainsley

*Photographs Courtesy
of the Monroe Family*

North Florida today is a place rich in history, tradition and agricultural roots. For some, these roots go back generations. For life-long residents Stephen and Stanton Monroe, the roots of their family history date back to the 1800s and are full of old family stories that help paint a picture of what rural life in northern Florida was like back then. It all began with their great-grandmother, Mattie Lou Hagan.

Mattie Lou Hagan, who went by

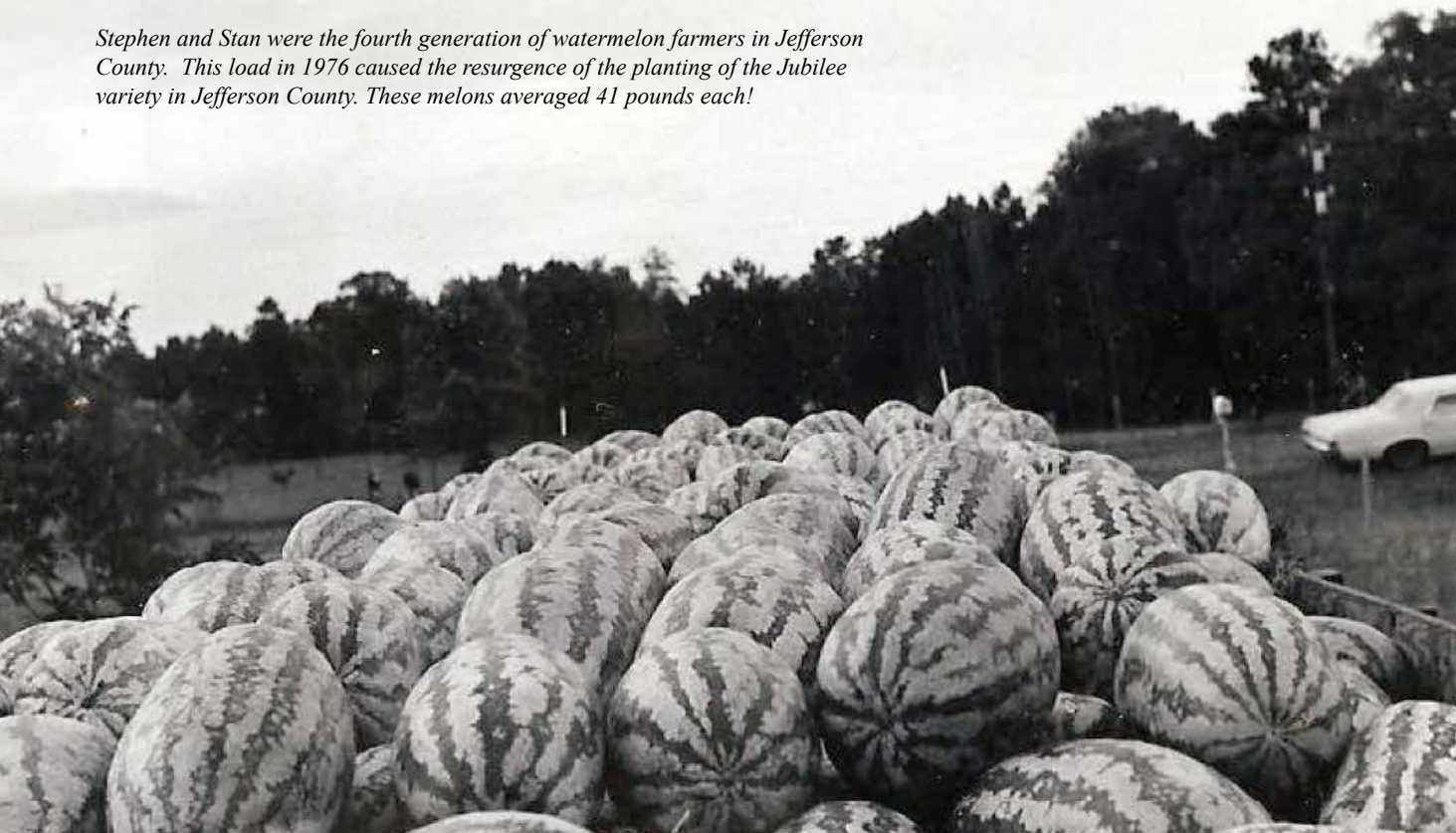
“Matt” to those who knew her, was originally from Taylor County. In the late 1800s, Matt would meet a man by the name of Daniel Monroe, who moved to Taylor County from the Carolina area, and in 1898, the two would be married.

Before her marriage to Monroe, Hagan found work as one of the first female mail carriers in the state. Back in the late 1800s, not many of the roadways were paved, and the motor vehicles that were used to carry the mail to the homes of residents would often get stuck in the sandy roads, unable to make it all the way to their destination. Hagan

found that she could quite easily close the distance between the mail vehicles and the homes of the mail recipients via horseback, and in this way often delivered letters and the occasional book to those in Taylor County who otherwise would not have received their mail.

For the first few years of their marriage, Hagan and Monroe lived in the area of what is now Hagens Cove State Park. In 1903, they moved, along with with Hagan's brother, to Jefferson County, and built a house that rested on around 900 acres of untamed land in Waukeenah. They got right to work

Stephen and Stan were the fourth generation of watermelon farmers in Jefferson County. This load in 1976 caused the resurgence of the planting of the Jubilee variety in Jefferson County. These melons averaged 41 pounds each!



Homegrown Ultrablack bull

clearing the land to harvest the trees and make the ground suitable for farming. As this was the early 1900s, they did most of this labor with the use of mules because tractors were still relatively new and less common. In fact, according to Monroe family history, Daniel Monroe, Sr. preferred to work and tend the land by working with the mules even into his late 80s, scarcely using a tractor for his farming, despite the ease and accessibility that the machines offered. It was well-established that he did not like the trails that tractors made in the fields, so even though many of the fields were dozens of acres per crop, he enjoyed tending them in the traditional way.

Life was good on the Monroe farm, and the family had plentiful crops of corn, watermelon and peanuts, grew

and processed sugar cane and raised hogs. While many farmers in those days raised what was referred to as "wood hogs," which were plentiful in the North Florida woodlands, Daniel preferred to raise commercial hogs, which were less common than wood hogs but grew larger and were more profitable to sell for meat. While the family also occasionally raised cattle, family history recalls that Daniel, Sr., preferred and expected pork to be present at every meal, even if the meal also included beef.

It wasn't long before Matt and Daniel had children of their own, a son whom they named Daniel, Jr., and a daughter, whom they named Mattie Lou. Young Daniel grew up working on the farm, helping his father grow and harvest crops that they would then bring over to the railroad depot in Drifton or Lloyd. Back then, watermelons were sold for around half a cent per pound, and the fruit had to be brought to the railroad station by wagon to be shipped. Back on the homestead, renovations were being made to the Monroe home with the inclusion of electricity for lights and a full indoor bathroom, as requested by Matt.

Daniel Jr., grew up and married a woman named Elva Raffield, who was the daughter of William Cullen Raffield and Amelia Christina Wears. Together, they had a son, whom they named, according to family tradition, Daniel Monroe, III,

who would later go by "Danny."

Danny was a hard worker on the family homestead. While his father and grandfather preferred raising pigs, he took a liking to working with cattle in the late 1950s. Much of Florida in the '50s was untamed land with thick brush, formidable flatlands and treacherous swamps, mentions Stephen Monroe, as he and his twin, Stanton, recall their family's history.

"Back then," Stephen says, "just about every family had a few head of cattle, and all of the cows were allowed to just roam the land. You'd round them up when it was time to go to market, and everyone would come and get their cows then, but in general they were all mixed up, and many of them would find their way down into the wild flatwoods."

He mentions that it wasn't uncommon for some families to have large numbers of cattle and hogs 'running' in the rural woods.

The most common breed of cows at the time had originally been brought in by early Spanish settlers. As more and more of Florida was being developed, several timber companies purchased large tracts, intending to cultivate the land and grow pine for timber. However, generations of loose cattle on the land posed a perceived threat to the timber companies, as many of the cows were feral and unruly. Afraid that their young

pine trees would be consumed by the wild cattle, the companies hired local men who were brave enough to go out into the wilderness and gather the feral cows. It was a dangerous job, but it paid honest wages. Danny Monroe was one of many men hired to be "cow hunters."

"Our daddy made \$42.50 a week as a cowboy," says Stephen, who then sharply corrected himself. "Actually, they were called 'cow-hunters,' not cowboys. The term 'cowboy' originated in the west, where cattle barons in town would hire young men to work on the cattle drives. In Florida, cattlemen and cow-hunters were often the owner of the cattle as well as the working hand."

The reason for this distinction, the twins revealed, was that in the days of early America there were "cow men" who raised large herds of cattle out in the western states of the Great Plains. This was dangerous work, as there were many perils in the "wild west." Conflicts with Native Americans, threats from traveling bandits, wild animals and exposure meant that cowmen had a tough job. It wasn't uncommon for cowmen to ride into a nearby town and hire a young boy to assist them, commonly an orphan or son of a poor family. These youth were called "cowboys."

A cowboy's job, however, was often so perilous that when you were hired as a cowboy, it was not expected that you would return home. Many cowboys drowned while moving the herds across rivers and creeks, or they fell victim to Native Americans, bandits or wild predators.

The job of a cowboy was similar to that of a shepherd boy; they were charged with minding the cattle and looking after the herd. A cowboy's job, however, was often so perilous that when you were hired as a cowboy, it was not expected that you would return home. Many cowboys drowned while moving the herds across rivers and creeks, or they fell victim to Native Americans, bandits or wild predators.

While certainly not a universal insult, in some circles back then, to call a cowman a cowboy was to either accuse him of having no intentions of coming home, thus deserting his home responsibilities to live out in the west, or it was a way of saying that he was not strong



Stanton (left) and Stephen (right)

enough to survive the tasks associated with the journey they were attempting. Additionally, the habit of hiring homeless boys, orphans or boys from poor families to work as cowboys was also a factor in the insulting nature of the term, as to call a man a cowboy was to challenge his upbringing and societal status. Stephen and Stan state very adamantly that their father was no cowboy, but a cow-hunter, a distinction that their father had been keen to teach them, lest they offend unintentionally.

It was while out working in said cow-hunter position that Danny received some of the best news imaginable; his pregnant wife had gone into labor!

Danny and his wife, Betty Spratt Monroe, had been married in 1955, and had already become the proud parents of their first son, Daniel Lloyd Monroe, IV, who went by Lloyd and was a little over a year old. On Good Friday, April 4, 1958, Danny was miles deep in the wild woods of Taylor County, while his wife was in labor in Jefferson County, in the capable hands of Dr. Ward, who held a practice in what is now the location of The Social restaurant in Monticello.

Stephen was the first to emerge into this world, and was given his name immediately by his mother, who was completely unaware that she was actually pregnant with twins. Indeed, Mrs. Monroe had suspected something was unusual about the pregnancy, for she was a slight woman and during her pregnancy, her midline seemed to grow beyond what was expected for a singular child. In response to her inquiries about whether she were carrying twins, however, the doctor had assured her that he could hear only one heartbeat, but that it was a strong and healthy one.

Imagine her surprise when, after having her healthy baby boy, the doctor suddenly exclaimed to his nurse, "my God, Martha, there's another baby here!" Newborn Stephen was attended by the nurse for a few minutes until baby boy number two made his surprise debut into Jefferson County.

Danny III, had no idea his wife was having the baby that day, let alone that she was giving birth to twins. As there were no cell phones, and only a few rural homes had telephones in the 1950s, the family sent word from the doctor's office to a



Possum huntin'

store in rural Taylor County that served as a central hub in the wilderness, in an effort to reach Danny. The store's owner, Mr. Martin Towles, happened to know where Danny and his crew were planning to be that day, and he set off into the wilderness to search for them.

Cattlemen would gather the cattle into pens that were strategically located throughout the flatwoods, and Towles knew which pen Danny and his crew would be driving cattle to that day. He reached the cow pen around the same time Danny and the other cow-hunters were approaching with a group of wild cattle they had spent all morning gathering. Towles climbed up onto the side of the cow pen, hollering and waving his hands excitedly to get their attention. This frantic action reportedly startled all of the cattle the cow crew was trying to capture, and back into the scrub they ran!

While delivering the news of this double-blessing, Towles reminded Danny that he and Betty already had a 13-month-old boy, so this would be

three boys to feed on a cow-hunter's wages. It was a long ride in the old Jeep from the flatwoods to Waukeenah, and Towles persisted that Danny ought to just give him one of the twins. Danny never agreed, although Towles "claimed" the second child as his own from then on. It would be joked about good-naturedly between the two families for generations to come, solidifying a lifelong familial friendship between them.

That day, an excited Danny leapt into the back of Towles' Jeep pickup and made his way toward home to meet his sons. Meanwhile, Danny's younger sister, Gloria, was elected to ride home in the ambulance and hold one of the twins on their first trip to the family home in Waukeenah. They arrived safely long before their father got home.

It would be another two weeks before Stephen's twin brother would be given a name. According to the twins' retelling of the tale, their mother lamented naming her first son without knowing he was a twin, saying that she would have

picked a more "twin-friendly" name than "Stephen." At last, she decided to name her youngest son Stanton, and he would eventually go by Stan for short. The two soon became big brothers to two younger sisters, Laura and Suzanne, and the five worked and lived on the family farm.

"Back then, everyone grew up working all the time," recalls Stan. "There wasn't anything else to do, so it was just what we did. When we got up, we went out to work. When we got tired, we rested. When we were hungry, we ate. We never really thought about it as 'work.' It was just our agricultural lifestyle."

Life in the Monroe household was full, and there was no shortage of things to do on the farm. Even so, in the 1980s, Betty felt her heart pull in the direction of missionary work in Haiti. She was a talented seamstress, and for years she made much of the family's clothing for Easter, Sunday church service, festive wear, square dances and more. Around that time, there was a business in Monticello called The Apron Factory in the area where Simpson Nurseries now stands. Aprons were commonly used around the house back then, and the factory made plenty of them. There were also plenty of fabric scraps, and Betty was able to get the surplus materials and use them to make dresses for the women of Haiti. As sad as she was to leave her family to perform her missionary work, she felt a true calling. It wasn't long before she was able to raise the money to bring sewing machines to Haiti and teach the women there how to make dresses on their own. In later years, she would also travel to Cuba for missionary work.

This spirit of helping others spread throughout the family, and several of the Monroe children also participated in missionary work. Susan became a missionary in France, North Carolina and Guatemala while Lloyd, who worked previously as a lawyer, became a missionary in Guatemala with his sister. Together they and their partners founded Porch de Salomon.

Danny III later pursued a position in the public's eye, and served as Jefferson County Commissioner for two terms. He also was among the first members of the Planning Commission, where he worked for 28 years as a volunteer, developing the county's comprehensive plan. In addition, he became heavily involved in the Florida Farm Bureau and the Jefferson County Cattlemen's Association.

The Monroe twins, Stephen and Stanton, spent most of their lives seemingly attached at the hip – if you saw one, the other was never far behind. This changed only a handful of times in their



Danny and Betty Monroe – Married December 17, 1955



1935 – Great Granddaddy Monroe, Daniel, Jr (age 5) and Uncle Frank (age 2)

lives. During grade-school, because the boys would focus only on one another and not on their lessons, they had to be in separate classrooms. When they turned 20 years old, they left college for separate internships in the cattle industry of South Florida at Fellsmere and Okeechobee.

“That was the only time we weren't together,” recalled Stephen, adding that although the brothers were 65 miles apart, they still reconnected as frequently as they could, exchanging pay phone conversations and visiting one another on weekends.

After college, the boys moved back to their hometown, where they helped run the family farm. In 1992, Stanton built a home of his own on family land near the lake, using what are called “dead-head” cypress logs.

It was common practice, decades ago, for men to venture into a cypress forest, which was often dense, swampy land, and harvest the cypress trees for use as valuable lumber. To maneuver these large trees out of the swamp, the men would cut them down using axes, then use the water to transport the logs downstream, as cypress logs normally

float when harvested. Occasionally, the wood would not float down the creek, but would sink and become close to impossible to remove from the swamp, so it would be left there.

Stan was able to acquire some of these “dead-head” logs from Liberty County in the late '80s. The wood had sat untouched for nearly 100 years before being pulled out of the swamp and sold. Stan was able to purchase the wood from a man named Raymond Hamlin, Jr., who had a permit to pull the logs out of the Apalachicola River in 1989. Most of the logs were “landed” at Owl Creek, and from there, Stan hauled the logs to a sawmill to have them processed. He used the lumber from these logs to make the exterior siding and trim, as well as the interior paneling, trim and cabinets of his entire home.

“You couldn't do it now,” says Stan, “It has gotten so popular – it's rare lumber, it got so expensive. I don't even think you could get a permit for it anymore. I just got blessed, due to the kindness of Mr. Hamlin and his family. They had them and would sell them to me.”

Over time, the original 900 acres

of family farmland has been divided, but most of this land is still owned by various family members, including the parcel containing the home built in 1903 by Daniel Monroe, Sr. Several of Daniel Sr. and Matt's grandchildren and great-grandchildren have homes on the property too. Today, the Monroe brothers continue to raise a herd of cattle together there, a herd that traces back to 1966, when their mother let their father spend her savings to purchase a set of heifers.

It can be easy to look back at the 1800s as lost moments in time, the people, places and practices long forgotten into anonymity, nameless faces gazing back from old photographs. However, families like the Monroes exist all across North Florida, and their roots of family memory reach deep and strong, through generations of lifetimes. By continuing to tell the amazing stories of perseverance, selflessness, creativity and hard work that has existed since the foundation of our original families, we can continue to not only exercise these attributes, but recognize them in one another. After all, we are, every one of us, just another piece of living history. ■



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COLE RAGANS

A story bigger than baseball

Story by Rick Patrick

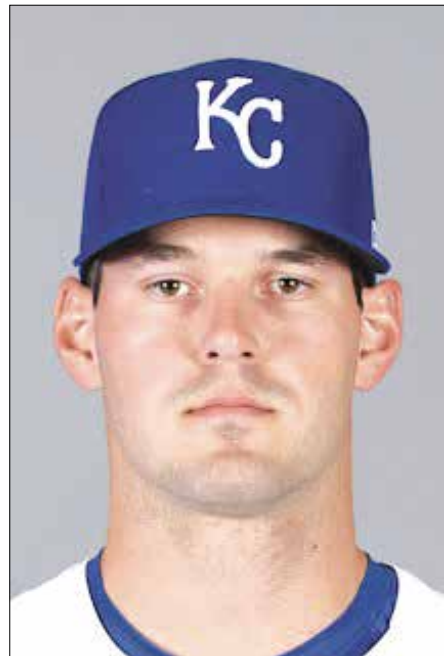
Photographs Courtesy of Tommy Hardee

Most local baseball fans are well familiar with Madison County High School (MCHS) graduate Lorenzo Cain, the former professional baseball player who spent the pinnacle of his career playing for the Kansas City Royals Major League Baseball team. Now another member of the Royals' baseball roster has strong family ties to Madison, Live Oak and Tallahassee.





Cole Ragans' sister Kaila Hardee proudly watches as her brother takes the field for his Major League debut with the Texas Rangers.



Photograph Courtesy of the Kansas City Royals.

Cole Ragans, a left-handed starting pitcher with the Royals is originally from Crawfordville, Fla., and went to high school in Tallahassee at North Florida Christian School (NFCS), where he was considered one of the top left-handed pitchers in the nation. During his senior season at NFCS, Ragans was named an Under-Armor All-American and the All-Big Bend Pitcher of the Year, chalking up a 9-2 record with a 0.90 earned run average and hurling 104 strikeouts. Ragans initially committed to the Florida State University Seminoles before opting for a professional baseball career, being drafted in the first round of the Major League Draft by the Texas Rangers as the 30th overall pick in the 2016 draft, the same year he graduated from NFCS.

Ragans no doubt has many fans who enjoy watching him play. However, none of those fans could quite hold a candle to the one who may be his biggest fan. That would be his sister, Kaila Hardee, wife of Tommy Hardee, of Madison.

Ragans' first experience in professional baseball was a positive one when he lead the Northwest League with 87 strikeouts for the Spokane, Wash. team, matching the third-highest number of strikeouts in the league in a decade. In



2018 and 2019, Ragans underwent two “Tommy John” ligament replacement surgeries, which limited his playing. Then, in 2020, the pandemic forced the cancellation of the Minor League season. In 2021, Ragans returned to the diamond for the first time since 2017 and began to improve his game after being out for more than three years. The North Florida lefty worked his way up through the minors until Aug. 4, 2022, when he made his Major League debut with the Rangers. In 2023, he made the Rangers’ Opening Day roster, earning his first Major League win on Opening Day, helping to lead the Rangers to an 11-7 win over the Philadelphia Phillies. The Royals picked Ragans up in a trade deal on June 30, of 2023.

During this 2024 season with the Royals, he has established himself as a premier pitcher in the starting rotation. He was selected to the American League All-Star team and has been



Cole Ragans (right) shares a lighter moment with his fellow American League All-Star and Kansas City Royal catcher Salvador Perez (left).



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nominated to the All-MLB Team. This season, Ragans recorded a total of 223 strikeouts, which is the second most in the American League. Ragans also picked up his first career post-season win on Tuesday, Oct. 1, when he pitched a shut-out game against the Baltimore Orioles. With a five-pitch mix in his quiver, Ragans put down one hitter after another. Then, with two outs in the scoreless fifth inning and runners on the corners, Ragans faced the top of the Orioles' line-up. Orioles' shortstop Gunnar Henderson stepped up to the plate, and Ragans hurled three 90+ miles per hour fast balls, yielding two strikes on the Orioles' slugger. Then, Ragans tossed something a little different, a slider that began its trajectory high before dipping down below the strike zone like a jet coming in under a radar, causing Henderson to swing helplessly at the elusive baseball. The Royals went on to win the series, earning a spot in the American League Division Series to face the New York Yankees. Ragans was a top contender for the prestigious Cy Young Award, given each year to the top pitcher in the American League and National League, as chosen by the Baseball Writer's Association of America.

Ragans no doubt has many fans who enjoy watching him play. However, none of those fans could quite hold a candle to the one who may be his biggest fan. That would be his sister, Kaila Hardee, wife of Tommy Hardee, of Madison.

"In 2022, [Cole's] sister was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer and had to have surgery," recalls Tommy. "Instead of sitting around the house after [Kaila's] surgery, we decided to surprise Cole at one of his triple-A games. We drove to Louisiana for the night and after we got on the road, Cole contacted Kaila to let her know he had been called up to pitch for the Texas Rangers on Thursday night, so we made a detour and headed to Arlington to surprise him there. The Good Lord gets all the credit, but I know that moments like that help Kaila keep fighting. She loves her family and loves some baseball and to see her younger brother throw his first Major League pitch lit up her world."

The joy of seeing her younger brother succeed has continued to lift Kaila's spirits, just when it has been needed most.

"It's seemed like the few times [Kaila] was a little down, we would get a chance to watch 55 (Cole's jersey number) and it would light her up again."

Right now the future looks bright for both Ragans and Kaila.

Ragans is helping fuel the resurgence of one of the youngest teams in Major League Baseball, and Kaila "continues to believe in the healing she received from the Holy Spirit," as Tommy stated.

"[Kaila] is grateful to have the opportunity to come along side the rest of the tribe of family and friends to watch Cole live out his dream of playing baseball."

That "tribe" is like to grow with every pitch from Ragans' left arm.

Ragans lives in Tallahassee with his wife Tori. ■



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Rick Scott and AFSP advocates.

Suicide Prevention KNOW THE SIGNS

Story by Heather Ainsley

Photographs Courtesy of Anne Marie Curry and Bobbi Sapp

For local Monticello woman, Ann Marie Curry, life overall was very good.

“When I was 16 years old,” begins Curry, “I laid eyes on the most perfect man I had ever met. I was mesmerized, hook, line and sinker. I knew he was the one. We have now been together for almost 24 years, and he is my very best friend. We have two children; a handsome son named Reed, and a beautiful daughter named Keagan. I would have told you I had the perfect life...”

That was until the tragic events of Nov. 19, 2020, when Curry arrived home from work to find the lifeless body of her 15-year-old son, Reed. From that moment on, her life was changed forever.

“Shock consumed us for the first few months,” she recalls. “Then the grief kicked in. That was the ultimate kick in the gut, knowing that your child is gone and is never coming

back. So many ‘what ifs,’ so many ‘whys,’ so many ‘hows.’ We blamed ourselves, and we blamed each other. There were so many emotions.”

Curry admits that, unfortunately, no one in the family had any idea that Reed was struggling with suicidal ideations and says that, to this day, the family still does not fully understand why he chose to take his own life. They can only speculate and come up with possible assumptions as to what their son had been facing.

“Dennis and I have always talked to our children about being safe on computers, being bullied, being sexually assaulted, driving safely, etc.,” she continued, “but never about suicide, depression or mental health.” She says that the family was a happy one, and even when she went to her first therapy session after Reed’s passing, her therapist was surprised at the lack of trauma or family issues surrounding the home before Reed’s death.

“Not to say we didn’t have our issues,”



Reed Curry.



Ann Marie Curry (Tallahassee Walk Chair), Wendy Mercer (Jacksonville Walk Chair) and Candi Morris (Gainesville Walk Chair) visit Washington DC to advocate for suicide prevention.

says Curry, “but nothing that we could put our finger on immediately. My mind was out of control; I couldn’t keep my thoughts together, they were all over the place. My emotions were all over the place. I couldn’t breathe. It felt like an elephant on my chest.”

Knowing that she had to do something to keep herself busy and occupy her thoughts, Curry began to do some research, looking for the most valuable and best-rated suicide prevention organization in her area to get

If you are struggling with suicidal thoughts, and are considering self-harm, help is available. Call or text 988 or chat online at 988lifeline.com to reach the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. You are not alone.

involved with. She discovered the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), joined it and immediately got to work helping to raise awareness about suicide and suicide prevention.

The AFSP is an organization that was founded in 1987 by a small group of individuals, each of which had personally lost someone to suicide. These founding families joined forces with scientists to create the AFSP with the hopes of establishing a private source of support for suicide research and education, so that essential suicide prevention efforts could be sustained into the future. Before AFSP, there was no national-scope, not-for-profit organization dedicated to understanding or preventing suicide through

research, education and advocacy. Today, the AFSP is established in all 50 states, and works diligently to educate hundreds of local communities about suicide and how to prevent it.

For Curry, getting involved with the AFSP helped change her life after the loss of her son, and she has remained involved for the last three and a half years. Today she is on the Board of Directors for the Florida Panhandle Chapter of AFSP, is the Tallahassee Walk Chairperson and also works as the Healing Conversations Coordinator. Over the years, her work has opened her eyes to the significance of suicide prevention and understanding mental health.

“I see it everyday,” she mentions, “in my personal life and on social media. Every single one of us is affected by mental health, and it’s so very important. It needs to be a priority for every single one of us.”

Recently, Curry flew out to Washington, D.C., to advocate on behalf of AFSP. A group of 250 advocates met and urged Congress to support and co-sponsor three bills that would support the 988 Lifeline. Among these bills were the Improving Mental Health Access for Students Act, the Local 988 Response Act of 2023 and the CONNECT Act of 2024.

“These pieces of legislation will increase awareness of and access to the 988 Lifeline, as well as expand essential follow-up services,” she says. “We had a full day of appointments on Capitol Hill and met with 274 congressional offices, including 30 members of Congress. It was a very humbling and amazing experience and one that I would never have been lucky enough to experience if it weren’t for AFSP.”

Looking into the future, Curry hopes to

be able to build on her non-profit foundation, Love Like Reed, Inc., which she began in honor of her son but has had some trouble forming on her own. In the meantime, she is spending her time focusing on suicide prevention advocacy in schools, colleges and workplaces.

“We cannot forget about our homeless, veterans, LGBTQ and frontline workers who deal with mental health issues on a daily basis,” she mentions. “This is a huge and important issue that needs to be addressed, especially to our kids so they can learn how to cope.”

“Reed was the sweetest, funniest, most sensitive child I have ever met,” says Curry fondly. “He would cry at the drop of a hat if someone got their feelings hurt or he witnessed someone get hurt. He loved to play baseball, fish and play video games. He was always easy going and laid back, like his daddy, but he loved with his whole, entire heart and soul. I would give anything to bring him back, to change things, but I can’t so I will keep his name alive and keep striving to help other children and families.”

Anyone who would like to learn more or get involved – whether it is about how to advocate, volunteer, become a board member, teach suicide intervention programs, become a sponsor, leave a donation or just get basic information – can contact Ann Marie Curry at (850) 519-5054 or by email at annmariemoh@hotmail.com.

Suicide is among the leading causes of death in America. In 2022, the age-adjusted suicide rate was around 14.21 per 100,000 individuals. In 2022, men died by suicide 3.85 times more than women, and according to



Florida Representative for Florida, Darren Soto, with AFSP advocates.

the World Health Organization, it is estimated that for every suicide that occurs, there are likely to be 20 other people making a suicide attempt or struggling with suicidal ideations.

Suicidal thoughts and actions are often an absolute last resort. Many people struggling with suicidal ideation may not be able to see an end to the emotional or physical turmoil they are experiencing and are seeking relief from their pain or struggle. Many suicidal people may feel afraid or confused by these emotions and may even be overwhelmed or ashamed of their suicidal thoughts. This fear and shame may prevent them from reaching out to people in their lives or from seeking help when they need it the most. Taking the initial step towards seeking professional help can be intimidating. For individuals struggling to seek assistance, there are local resources that can help.

Local Madison woman, Bobbi Sapp, lost her son, Christopher, to suicide in February of 2022. The devastating loss of her son led her to create a local outreach program for people in her area who struggle with suicidal ideations, as well as those impacted by suicide. Through her grief, she hopes to touch the lives of others and help convince people to choose

to stay. One of the ways she hopes to help is through her organization, Christopher's Message. Christopher's Message is a non profit, charitable organization made up of Christopher's family. It is devoted to helping people who are in need of suicide prevention resources to identify and access them. Additionally, it strives to provide outreach for those impacted by the suicide of a loved one.

Sapp has now been involved in suicide prevention advocacy for two years, and it has been a significant learning experience for her.

"This is not a journey that anyone could or would take lightly," she says. "It takes some people years to even cope with the devastating loss of their loved one. Add the word 'suicide' into that and it brings forth so many more emotions, due to the many questions that evolve when the death is self inflicted."

Sapp says that through her work as an advocate she has grown to develop a clearer understanding of the language that surrounds suicide, and how difficult it can be for individuals to communicate with someone who has suffered a loss as a result of suicide or who is struggling with suicidal thoughts. By increasing awareness about how to discuss these sensitive topics, she hopes to assist

individuals who may one day find themselves having a conversation with someone who has suffered a loss or who is struggling with ideations, mental health concerns or depression.

"We also have a project that is similar to Flat Stanley, called 'Cruisin' with Christopher,'" says Sapp, "where we send a packet of stuff to anyone who requests the package. They take him along and document their journey, via pictures and a journal. They spread hope to others by handing out flyers in their city/state. It is a great way to have advocates all over the world."

There is currently a flight attendant who will be participating in "Cruisin' with Christopher" starting in November. Sapp mentions that she is excited by the thought of how many people and places he will visit, and her hope is that his message reaches "all the right people in all the right places."

Today, she focuses on community events, local outreach programs, and sponsoring youth activities within the community, like soccer and fishing teams. She also organizes outreach through Christopher's Message.

"We go out to individuals or families in crisis," she mentions, "or those who are in the



Christopher Sapp



same situation as us. We send out journals to individuals that have holds on them due to suicidal ideologies or attempts, and I host different age groups one night a week for a couple of hours, for those who have attempted or had thoughts, and we paint, color, or journal. We hope to add more to next year's calendar in and outside of Madison. My goal is to be able to 'Cruise with Christopher' and attend schools in every community to advocate to the youth of America about just how precious their lives are and how their mental health is affected by so many factors in society. I'd love to be able to host workshops and trainings as well."

For anyone interested in becoming an advocate, Sapp highly recommends they take a Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) class, which serves as a basic training course that can teach everyday citizens how to respond to someone in a crisis. For those interested in becoming involved, contact Bobbi Sapp at christophersmessage@yahoo.com.

The first goal of Christopher's Message is to educate people on the language of suicide, and help them recognize the signs of someone who is struggling with a personal crisis, depression or suicidal ideations, so they can be connected with appropriate resources swiftly.

Another goal of the organization is to help the survivors of suicide (both the loved ones of someone who successfully committed suicide, or the survivor of a suicidal attempt) restore a sense of faith and hope in their lives, as well as provide them with a community that can help educate and empathize with them about the situation. This can help



connect survivors with resources that exist right in their own community. By fighting to break the stigma, Christopher's Message seeks to spread the message that it is okay to ask for help.

"Our plans are many," says Sapp, "but the Lord guides our steps (Proverbs 16:9). If anyone reading this is ever in a dark place, please know that the dawn of a new and brighter tomorrow is just around the corner... reach out, and just stay, because your life matters!"

What the Curry and Sapp families experienced is common; many loved ones of suicide victims say they had no idea their friend or family member was struggling. This leaves the grieving families and friends to undergo the process of searching desperately for answers after a suicide has already taken place. Not only is this heartbreaking process one that is full of speculation and regret, but even in the event of getting a concrete answer, it can never bring back the life of a suicide victim.

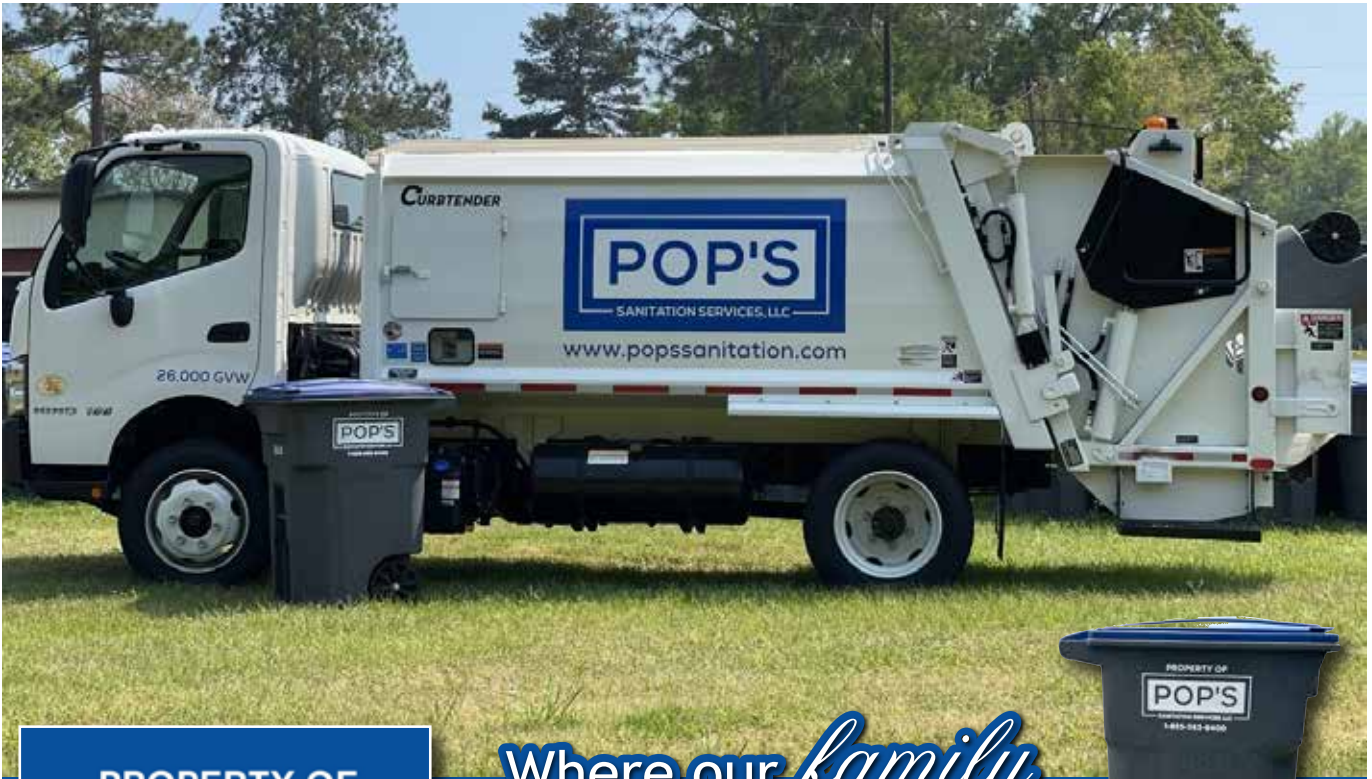
Suicide prevention involves recognizing warning signs in those who are struggling with depression, hopelessness and suicidal ideation. By learning to recognize the warning signs, caring individuals can better know how and when to speak to loved ones who may be struggling, and this early intervention can help save lives.

It is important to understand that there is no singular cause for suicide. Suicide and suicidal thoughts occur when stressors and health issues (including but not limited to mental health) converge to create an experience of hopelessness and despair.

The following behaviors may signal that a person is at risk: Increased use of alcohol or drugs, looking for a way to end their lives (such as researching online for methods), withdrawing from activities, isolating from

family and friends, sleeping too little or too much, visiting or calling people to say goodbye, giving away prized possessions, aggression or fatigue. Someone who is facing suicidal thoughts or ideations may display the following moods: depression, anxiety, loss of interest, irritability, humiliation, shame, agitation or anger. Often, an individual who has been struggling may also show signs of relief or sudden unexplainable improvement. This is considered a warning sign as well, as it can commonly be an indicator of impending suicidal action. While the signs may be difficult to miss, they also include the way a person speaks, and what they talk about. Warning signs include a person talking about killing themselves, feeling hopeless, having no reason to live, being a burden to others, feeling trapped or being in unbearable pain.

Most people who take their own lives exhibit one or more warning signs, either through what they say, or what they do. If you are concerned about someone, consider having a private, open and honest conversation with them. Be compassionate and direct with them about if they are considering suicide. Avoid getting into debates about the value of life, minimizing their problems or giving advice. Tell them that you care about them, and listen to what they have to say. Encourage them to seek treatment or contact their doctor or therapist. It can be easy to think that someone else is reaching out to them, but the only safe assumption is that you're the only one who will reach out to them. If you are concerned, speak up. If someone says they are considering suicide, take the person seriously. Stay with them and call 988 to be connected with the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. After the crisis has passed, be sure to follow up with them to see how they are doing. ■



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November 2

CarQuest Car Show

Monticello CarQuest's annual Car Show and Customer Appreciation Day takes place from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 1321 S. Jefferson St. Raffles throughout the event culminate with a drawing for a Bayou Classic Fish Cooker. Proceeds support the Jefferson County Lions Club service projects.

November 8, 9

Suwannee River Riding Club Rodeo

Watch bull riding, barrel racing, team roping and other fun events at the fifth oldest rodeo in the State of Florida! Events begin at 8 p.m. each night at the Suwannee River Riding Club arena (9132 254th Ter., Branford). Admission for adults is \$15; kids ages 8 and under get in free.



November 9

5k Walk/Run for Veterans

RIVEROAK Technical College's inaugural 5k Walk/Run for Veterans begins with registration at 8 a.m., followed by the walk/run at 9 a.m. Entry is \$30 for Veterans or active military and \$35 for the general public. The race starts and ends at RIVEROAK Technical College (415 Pinewood Dr. S.W., in Live Oak).



November 9

Sugar Cane Festival

At one of the area's largest events, compete in the Soap Box Derby, see an array of live demonstrations, enjoy food, arts/crafts, see live performances and so much more. The festival, hosted by Suwannee Hardware and Feed, takes place from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Bridge Street in White Springs.

November 9

Third Annual Community Festival and Chili Cookoff

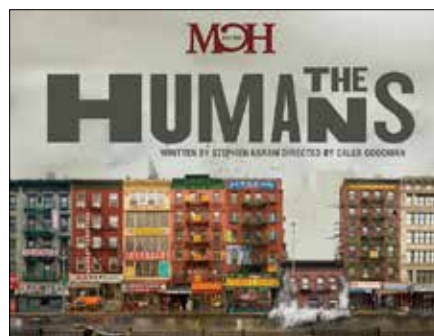
Rotary Club of Branford offers a day of chili and fun at the Suwannee River Greenway (502 S.W. Suwannee Ave., behind Branford Town Hall). Registration is \$20 per participant and will take place from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. Public entry for judging is \$5 cash or \$5.25 for credit card payments. Judging will take place from 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Proceeds support student scholarships and other Rotary Club of Branford initiatives.



November 9

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts/crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 4 to 8 p.m. Check the Monticello FL Second Saturday Facebook page for posts about this month's special theme.



November 14, 15, 16, 17, 21, 22, 23, 24

The Humans at MOH

Monticello Opera House invites you to a Thanksgiving visit with Erik Blake, who breaks with tradition by bringing his

Pennsylvania family to celebrate the holiday at his daughter's apartment in lower Manhattan. Over the course of this awkward and frequently hilarious Thanksgiving meal, tragic and painful truths are met with humor and love, in a performance the *Chicago Tribune* calls "a kind, warm, beautifully observed and deeply moving new play." For more information and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org



November 16

Jefferson Arts Festival

Enjoy the fine art and crafts of 25 local artists as well as live music and the 2024 SketchCrawl from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St., Monticello).



November 16

SVEC Touch-a-Truck

See, touch, honk and explore various trucks, emergency vehicles and heavy machinery for free from 9 a.m. to noon at Suwannee Valley Electric Cooperative's main office (11350 100th St., Live Oak).

Nov. 16 thru Jan. 4

Colors of Christmas at JAG

The annual holiday all-member art show opens on Saturday, Nov. 16, at Jefferson Arts Gallery, with a reception from noon to 4 p.m. 6. See and shop for lots of giftable art and many holiday-themed pieces – all original, handmade designs by local artists. The exhibit will continue through Jan. 4 during regular gallery hours, Wednesdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., or by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

November 19

Best of Madison 2024

The Madison County Chamber of Commerce recognizes outstanding Chamber members, individuals and businesses in the Madison County community with awards and a banquet from 6 to 9 p.m. at 701 BC Venue and Brewery (701 S.W. Range Ave.). Tickets cost \$35 each or \$30 each for parties of six or more. For more information, call (850) 973-2788.



November 24

Community Thanksgiving Service

An interdenominational worship service takes place at 6 p.m. at the Family Ministry Center (325 W. Walnut St., Monticello). The event, organized by the Jefferson County Ministerial Association, includes light refreshments, music, prayer and a Thanksgiving program.



November 29-30

Old Tyme Farm Days 2024

Celebrate rural American life and heritage at the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park (3076 95th Dr., Live Oak). Enjoy many exhibitions, including syrup making and bottling, cane grinding, old tractors and engines, farm animals, a swap meet, arts/crafts, a kid's tent, quilting, demonstrations and much more! Admission for non-campers is \$10 per carload.

Nov. 29 - Dec. 30

Suwannee Lights 2024

The Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park's annual light display dazzles adults and children alike with more than 10 million lights. Drive or walk through and enjoy photo opportunities, live entertainment, campfires, s'more, hot cocoa, holiday candy, caroling and more! The display is open every night from 6 to 10 p.m. at 3076 95th Dr., Live Oak.



November 30

Young Entrepreneurs Day

The Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce celebrates Small Business Saturday by holding Young Entrepreneurs Day all around historic downtown Monticello from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Youth ages 6 to 16 are invited to register as vendors for just \$10 by calling (850) 997-5552.

December 5-7

40th Annual Christmas on the Square

Historic Downtown Live Oak becomes Christmas on the Square, with festivities organized by the Suwannee County Chamber of Commerce. View the Christmas tree lighting on Thursday at 5:30 p.m., and the annual Jingle Bell Fun Run/Walk plus a movie under the stars. On Friday and Saturday, more than 300 arts/crafts vendors line the streets with an assortment of goods. For more information, visit www.suwanneechamber.com/christmas-on-the-square.html.



December 6-23

Folk Culture Festival of Lights

The Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park (11016 Lillian Saunders Dr., White Springs) spreads Christmas cheer with complimentary popcorn, hot cocoa, marshmallows by the bonfire, Santa, food/craft vendors, kid's crafts and more. Lights come on at dusk and the last ticket will be sold each night at 8:30 p.m.

December 7

Monticello Christmas

Beginning at 3 p.m., historic downtown Monticello comes alive with musicians, entertainment, a holiday marketplace and a fun zone for kids. Into the winter night, there will be a light parade, tree lighting and visits with Santa until 8:30 p.m. For more information, visit monticellochristmas.com.



Dec. 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 21

White Christmas

Theatre Guild Valdosta presents this Irving Berlin holiday classic, which centers around veterans Bob Wallace and Phil Davis, who have a successful song-and-dance act

WHAT'S HAPPENING

post-WWII. The entertainers follow a duo of beautiful singing sisters on their way to present their Christmas show at a lodge in Vermont. Featuring one of the most loved Christmas songs of all time, this musical promises to delight audiences of all ages. Performances take place at the historic 'Dosta Playhouse (122 N. Ashley St.) For performance times and tickets, visit www.theatreguildvaldosta.com, or call the box office at (229) 24-STAGE (247-8243).

December 14

Monticello Second Saturday

Enjoy karaoke, arts/crafts vendors, extended shopping hours and other fun in downtown historic Monticello from 4 to 8 p.m. Check the Monticello FL Second Saturday Facebook page for posts about this month's special theme.

December 14

Sweets-N-the-Streets

Hamilton County Chamber of Commerce turns the Jasper City Park (205 Hatley St.) into a winter wonderland, with vendors kicking off festivities at 2 p.m., followed by a holiday parade at 6 p.m.

December 14

Madison Local Market

Shop local vendors and food trucks in Four Freedoms Park in downtown Madison from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., rain or shine.



December 14

The Kricketts and the Currys Christmas Show

Ring in the holiday season at the historic Monticello Opera House with The Kricketts and The Currys Christmas Show. These two acclaimed roots music bands join forces for

their fabulous annual concert featuring their hit songs and holiday favorites. For more information and tickets, call (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.



December 31

New Year Party at MOH

The Monticello Opera House creates a dazzling evening in Paris for New Year's Eve! Enjoy live music, the dance floor, heavy hors d'oeuvres, the bar, festive favors and photo opps with a professional photographer. All this fun doubles as a fundraiser for MOH to support future shows, technical upgrades and historic restoration projects. As the date nears, check www.monticellooperahouse.org for more details. ■

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