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# Russellville City Schools to end semester with remote learning

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

Russellville City Schools officials announced Monday that the system will switch to virtual learning for the final week of the Fall 2020 semester.

The change, which begins Monday, December 14, applies to students at West Elementary School, Russellville Elementary School, Russellville Middle School and Russellville High School. Students will continue classroom instruction through Friday, Dec. 11.

Students' last day of class for the fall semester is Friday, Dec. 18.

RHS Principal Jason Goodwin said the decision was made Monday not in response to a COVID-19 outbreak at any RCS school, but as a protection in advance of the Christmas holidays.

Russellville City Schools students are scheduled to return for the spring semester on Wednesday, January 6, 2021. That date has not changed, Goodwin said.

"The decision to go to remote learning next week is not in response to a spike in COVID numbers," Goodwin said. "We've got maybe five positives in the entire system. That's a low

See 'REMOTE,' page 9



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# Christmas decorating a 'labor of love' for Sparks

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

When you own Russellville's largest florist and your storefront windows are festively decorated for the Christmas season, there's some pressure for your home to look similarly elegant.

Fortunately for Russellville Florist & Gifts owner Chase Sparks, decorating his home is a labor of love.

Sparks' downtown home, a fixture on the annual Christmas Tour of Homes, is not only something beautiful to see, it's also an ever-changing extension of his Jackson Avenue business.

"This year I didn't get to where I need to be decorating inside the

house," Sparks said. "But I really do enjoy it. That's my time to go home at night, after working here and decorating other people's homes, and do my own thing at my own pace.

"I switch things up and add to what I have each year. With no Tour of Homes this year (due to COVID-19 restrictions), the shop took precedence over what went in my house, but outside it's all decorated like normal," he added.

Sparks purchased Russellville Florist & Gifts, 100 North Jackson Avenue, in April 2018. At that time, the business was in its former location in the Franklin Shopping Center. Sparks made the move downtown this year, and the large storefront

See 'SPARKS,' page 8

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**Nancy Stanley Hamilton**, 76, of Russellville, passed away on Saturday, December 5th. Interment at KP Cemetery.

**Brenda Gail Howard**, 70, of Russellville, passed away on Thursday, December 3rd. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.

**Flossie Kathleen McDonald**, 87, of Red Bay, passed away on Friday, December 4th. Interment at Walker House Baptist Church Cemetery.

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, visit us on the web at [www.franklinfreepress.net](http://www.franklinfreepress.net)! Send your guest columns, recipes, cartoon panels, letters to the editor and other creative submissions to [franklinfreepress@yahoo.com](mailto:franklinfreepress@yahoo.com).

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## Sage awarded God and Church award from Girl Scouts of America

Submitted to the FFP

Sapphire Rayne Sage of Russellville was recently awarded her Girl Scouts of America God and Church Award on September 27, 2020, at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Florence.

Sapphire is a Cadette Scout in Troop 10717 of the North-Central Alabama Council of the Girls Scouts of America, led by Fauna Stevens of Russellville and Angela Kratz of Belgreen.

She was presented the award in her church by Pastor Brandon Scroggins. Sapphire worked with Pastor Scroggins to complete the requirements for the award.

To receive the God and Church Award, Sapphire learned about what it means to meet Jesus, worship God and to minister for Christ. Sapphire is an active participant in serving her church and others.

"It is such a joy to see a young person like Sapphire have so much love for the people of her church," Scroggins said. "It was an honor to work with and to present her with this award."

For more information, or to join a local Girl Scout troop, visit [www.girlscouts.nca.org](http://www.girlscouts.nca.org).

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church meets at 9 a.m., on Sundays at 2101 Cloyd Blvd., in Florence.



COURTESY PHOTO

Sage (pictured on left with Pastor Scroggins), received her award after completing the requirements for the God and Church award.

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# Christmas Tree Lighting rescheduled to Thursday

Submitted to the FFP

The Every Light a Prayer for Peace and Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony will be held Thursday, December 10, at the Franklin County Courthouse.

The event was postponed last Thursday due to rain.

Guest speaker will be Bro. Phillip Goad, North Highlands Church of Christ. The Russellville High School Chorus, pianist Tommy Guinn and others will provide entertainment.

Santa Claus, and possibly Mrs. Claus, will attend.

Honored guests will be veterans, front line workers, first responders and volunteers.

Cecil Batchelor and family, who made this event possible by giving the Cultura Garden Club permission to plant the Christmas tree on their property at the Byars Building, will be part of the countdown for the tree lighting.

The Franklin County Chamber of Commerce Junior Leaders will give out candy canes and hot chocolate will be sold.

The Every Light a Prayer for Peace started in December, 1951, and was adopted by the Federated Garden Clubs of Alabama and has been observed in towns across the state and on the steps of the Alabama Capitol in December for many years.

The Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony will be added to the Every Light a Prayer for Peace, which has become a traditional gathering of family, friends and visitors to the Russellville community. The public is invited for this festive event!

For updates on news and sports, visit us online at [www.franklinfreepress.net](http://www.franklinfreepress.net)!



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## My take on this... there are blessings amidst the pain!

Well hello again my friends! Isn't our world filled with a variety of blessings? I know there are those of you who might be calling me crazy right this minute but I'd have to disagree if you thought it. You can only see half a picture without the full view.

A lot of bad things have been going on most of this year but there have been many blessings among us.

Whether you have realized it, we have had tragedies and health crises throughout the years.

We've had our fair share of controversy, turmoil, deadly diseases, poverty and unknowns. Yes we have had something different each year. But we have also received many blessings each year that are often overlooked and that is not a good thing.

If you can't see any good about this year, then I pity you. You are a "surface thinker". Since I just made this word up,

I'd like to tell you what it means. That type of person gives "surface answers" to questions. A "surface thinker" lets an answer just flow right off the tongue.

It requires no thought process.

To even know you have been blessed requires feeling with your heart, believing in your mind and having faith obtain it.

That is why a "surface thinker" doesn't feel or see the blessings God gives during life's trying times. No one is left without a choice. Each individual chooses his or her own answer. Choose



Gail Motes

well, my friend!

We have experienced many years where the poor have struggled, the rich have clutched their money tighter, and the giver keeps on giving. Is this not what life has always consisted of?

I've had friends and family members to die this year.

It's happened each year since I was born. Death is a part of life. We start dying the minute we are born.

Don't expect 2021 to be filled with only happiness, wishes coming true and nothing but good tidings. Expect both good and bad, but pray faithfully and trust in God always.

As for this year, I've had many friends and some family who have lost their lives to COVID-19. It is real!

Please know for each of you who have lost your loved ones to COVID-19, it has broken my heart and I will continue praying for you, your family and that your loved one will become one more survivor.

Regardless of how we lose a loved one, the pain is still deeply felt, but God has given us another blessing.

It could be another family member who needs you more than ever or the understanding to comfort others, but there will always be chances to give and receive blessings.

That leaves me one more thing to add: To each person who is reading this, I want you to know that you are such a blessing and encouragement to me.

Until later...

# Vina officials break ground on new convenience store and gas station

Jason Collum

Rodney Brown told a group gathered in Vina Thursday morning that it was a blessing the town's only gas station was destroyed by fire in January 2019. "It may not seem like it now but the best thing, in my opinion, that's ever happened to this community was this store burning down, or we wouldn't have gotten a brand-new store," Brown said. "So, we're getting a brand-new store now and it will be run right. I promise you."

Brown, Special Projects Coordinator for Mountain Express Oil Company, was on hand to break ground with Vina town officials on an approximately 3,200-square-foot convenience store and gas station on Hwy. 19 at Cherry Street. More than 50 people gathered outside on the grounds where the town's only store had previously stood, to hear the details and celebrate the event.

Mayor Michael Moomaw conveyed his and the town's thanks for Mountain Express committing to building again in the community.

"Let me extend a thank you to Rodney and Mountain Express for having faith in bringing the store back to Vina," Moomaw said. "We appreciate it and we're grateful to them for that and we just can't wait for this start."

Brown said construction is expected to begin in January with a mid-spring completion date, and what will be built on the block will be far better than what was there previously. With the previous gas island sitting on state right-of-way on Hwy. 19, Brown said Mountain Express was required to move the store building back on the property, and that also required them to purchase additional land. That led to the acquisition of the rest of the lot, all the way back to Pecan Street, and a grander idea of what the project could encompass overall.

There are a couple of plans still in play for the development, with one calling for a covered pavilion on one end of the building with tables and a stage to allow for gatherings, community singings and such. If that plan doesn't work a larger building will be built farther back on the property to allow for a covered space for concerts and community events.

"This is my brother-in-law's idea," Brown said of Lamar Frady, co-owner of the half-billion-dollar company based in Acworth, Ga. "He wants this to be the focal point of the community and if we just did that and did it well, it probably would be. But we're looking at a place

where you could park a hundred cars and have a real music park because I don't think there's one within a hundred miles."

The main building will have a country store themed façade and will carry name-brand gasoline. Brown said plans also call for food options all day, from biscuits and other breakfast items in the morning to a "meat-and-three," pizza and chicken fingers on the menu the rest of the day at what will be a "top-of-the-line store."

Brown said it is not yet known whether the store will be company-operated or leased to a qualified operator, but he said it will be run better than the previous store.

The turnout for Thursday's event was an encouraging sign to Brown and town officials.

"I don't know if the mayor called each one of you, but thank you for coming," Brown said. "It's a privilege for us to be a part of this town. We're an invited guest at this at this point, but we want to be a part of the community and that's what we're working toward."

*Special thanks to Jason Collum and The Red Bay News.*



**PHOTO BY JASON COLLUM**

Officials took part in a groundbreaking ceremony for the town's new store/gas station Thursday afternoon. The store will be located on Hwy. 19 at Cherry Street.

**Send your guest columns, recipes, cartoon panels, letters to the editor and other creative submissions to [franklinfreepress@yahoo.com](mailto:franklinfreepress@yahoo.com).**

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# What's Happening

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**L**ifeSouth Community Blood Center will host a blood drive at Russellville Hospital on Thursday, December 17, 2020 from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm. LifeSouth is the primary supplier of blood products to Russellville Hospital. Please contact Deborah Lindsey to schedule an appointment at 256-332-8676 or by email at [deborah.lindsey@russellvillehospital.org](mailto:deborah.lindsey@russellvillehospital.org). Please be sure to bring your photo ID when you donate. Everyone who signs up to donate will receive a free T-shirt, an appetizer card from Texas Roadhouse, a free cookie dough card from Papa Murphy's and a free meal ticket from Russellville Hospital. We will also be giving away DOOR PRIZES! All donors with a successful donation will receive COVID-19 antibody screening. Results can be accessed via the LifeSouth donor portal within seven days of your donation. Go to [www.lifesouth.org](http://www.lifesouth.org) to log in to the donor portal.

**T**here will be a New Year's Eve service starting at 6 p.m., and continuing into the new year, at the Church of God, Phil Campbell, 77 Mars Hill Road. Hwy. Turn of Hwy. 13 just south of Phil Campbell. Everyone is invited and welcome to attend. For more information, call 256-324-5288.

**E**veryone is welcome to worship services at Duncan Creek Baptist Church, 3925 Duncan Creek Road, Russellville. Service times are Sunday School at 10 a.m., Worship Service at 11 a.m. and Bible Study at 5 p.m. Pastor is Bro. Joe Thorn.

**N**ew Life Ministries invites you to join them for Sunday School at 10 a.m. on Sunday mornings and for worship services on Sundays at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. and Wednesday nights at 7 p.m. On the first Sunday of each month, there will be a fellowship lunch after morning services. You and your family are invited to come worship and fellowship with the Lord of Hosts and his children. New Life Ministries is located on Hwy. 24 west toward Red Bay, behind Tompkins Feed.

**Y**ou are cordially invited to new service time at Pleasant Ridge Missionary Baptist Church on Highway 48 in Russellville, at 11 a.m., Sunday mornings. Social distancing practiced, mask optional. Pastor Roger Bond.

**T**OPs 0155 Russellville is now meeting at the Russellville Hospital Education Room at 4:30 p.m. every Monday. Everyone is welcome to drop in for a free meeting visit. Call 256-446-5962 or 256-412-2855 for more info.

**T**he Newburg Masonic Lodge #388 meets the first Thursday of every month. The Russellville Masonic Lodge #371 meets the first and third Tuesday of every month. The Franklin County Shrine Club meets the second Tuesday of each month. The Order of the Eastern Star Chapter 256 meets every second and fourth Tuesday of each month at the Russellville Masonic Lodge. Spruce Pine Masonic Lodge #608 meets the second and fourth Thursday of each month. Phil Campbell Masonic Lodge #880 meets the first and third Thursday of each month. Burselon Lodge #143 meets the second and fourth Monday of each month. Belgreen Lodge #428 meets the first and third Monday of each month. All meetings start at 7 p.m.

**R**ussellville Al-Anon is meeting at Russellville First Baptist Church at 6 p.m., each Thursday. We are wearing masks and social distancing.

**T**he Franklin County Women's Leadership Committee, a division of Alabama Farmers Federation is seeking donations for our annual "Cottons for Christmas". Donations requested are for new socks that will be distributed to residents in one of the county's nursing homes. Each year our committee picks a different nursing home in the county and we strive to provide all residents in that particular nursing home a gift of socks & lotion. Unfortunately, this may be the only gift some of our local residents receive and we want to let them know we care about them! Traditionally we have a donation/collection box at the annu-

al Farm-City Banquet, however, due to COVID the banquet will not be held this year and donation boxes will be placed at 4 local businesses in Franklin County: Franklin County Extension Office (please leave your donations with one of the Courthouse security guards) ALFA Insurance Office-Russellville, ALFA Insurance Office-Red Bay & Kiel Equipment, Hwy. 43, Russellville Cottons for Christmas is one of the many community efforts the Franklin County Women's Leadership Committee works on each year to "give back" to the community. Please take your sock donations to one of the above locations by Friday, December 11, 2020. If you have any questions please call Carol Glass @ 256-810-5446 or Shannon Murray @ 256-668-3893.

**J**oin us for pancakes at North Russellville Baptist Church on Saturday, December 19th from 8 a.m. until 10:30 a.m. in the fellowship hall. Pancakes and pictures for only \$7 per person. Proceeds go to the NRBC youth department. Come join us!

**R**ussellville Masonic Lodge #371 is selling Christmas hams. RHams are \$30 each and may be pre-ordered by dialing (256)-810-1970. Pickup is curbside only on Wednesday, December 23rd between 8-10 a.m. at the lodge on Coffee Avenue.

**S**EPW presents 'Christmas Carnage,' a Southeastern Pro Wrestling event in Russellville, on Dec. 12, 2020, with bell time at 7:30 p.m. Doors open at the Russellville Rec Center, 201 Ash Avenue, at 5:30 p.m. Main event features a Strap Match between 'Cowboy' Dusty MacWilliams and 'Suicidal Beast' Bryant Woods. All tickets are \$10. Kids 5 and under are free. For more information, call 205-544-5315.

**V**illage Square Apartments in Russellville host George's Country Boys each Monday from 6-8 p.m. for some Gospel and Country singing!

We love to hear from you! Please send your guest columns, cartoon panels, letters to the editor, recipes and other creative submissions to [franklinfreepress@yahoo.com](mailto:franklinfreepress@yahoo.com).



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# Russellville students get an important lesson about Civil Rights

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

Richard Maggerise's ninth grade history class is in the middle of the study of America's Civil Rights movement.

So, with the help of Russellville City Schools Superintendent of Education Heath Grimes, Maggerise's students got a first-hand look at the history of segregation and the Civil Rights movement right here in their hometown.

Accompanied by RCS Board of Education member Jerry Groce and Mr. Joe Graham, the students toured Reedtown School as the two men shared their experiences of attending a segregated school.

The irony was palpable as Groce, President of the RCS Board of Education, told students about his days at the all-Black school that was open through 1968. Groce described being a young Black man growing up in an era where resistance to the Civil Rights movement was strong.

"During that time it was not uncommon, as a Black person, for it to be very dangerous to go out and do things," Groce said. "We tried not to go out somewhere unfamiliar at night. There were no Blacks in the legislature, the governor's office, the city council or in any position of power.

"It was understood you, as a Black person, went to the back of the bus and if a white person came in and said give me your seat, you just got up," he added.

Grimes said Maggerise reached out to him with an interest in his class touring Reedtown School and Grimes arranged for Groce to set it up.

"It was important for the students to hear from someone who went through the transition and Jerry did," Grimes said. "We knew he was going to give an honest, unbiased account. It wasn't political. He and Mr. Graham were just sharing some of their life experiences with the students."

The history class, as with many Russellville High School classrooms, was comprised of a majority of Hispanic students. Grimes said the men stressed that regardless of the color of their skin, it's important to be fair to all students.

"White students are not the majority in Russellville City Schools any longer. If we treated people differently based on who was in the majority, what would that look like today?

"It's not about white or black. It's about history, and making sure we don't

repeat it. Also, we can tie the lessons into our Hispanic relations and immigrants and how we treat each other," Grimes added.

Graham told the students about how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the guiding light when it came to Civil Rights reform.

"When we started seeing things like the (1965) Selma march happening, it put some hope in your heart," Graham said. "Martin Luther King, Jr., really started the movement and did it in a non-violent way."



COURTESY PHOTO

Jerry Groce, left, Joe Graham and Heath Grimes accompanied Richard Maggerise's history class on a tour through the old Reedtown School Thursday.



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# 'SPARKS,' from page 1

windows were near the top of the list of what drew him to the new location. He covers the windows as he prepares the storefront for each season, creating interest and buzz around town.

"I love to see historic buildings and places brought back to life. In so many towns, the downtown area is the hub of everything," Sparks said. "The building really caught my eye and especially the display windows.

"That's something that I love to do—create interest from the storefront and that draws people in. I wanted to do my part in the redevelopment of downtown Russellville and try to create something downtown that brings it some life," he added.

Sparks, who is in his third year on the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, has three part-time and two full-time employees at Russellville Florist & Gifts. He describes the business as a true 'team effort.'

With a store filled with beautiful Christmas décor, the care and personal touch used by the Russellville Florist & Gifts staff is evident when you walk in. Even though the store is adorned with a Christmas theme for two months, Sparks said in the floral business, Christmas is a year-round job.

"Christmas is a 12-months out of the year ordeal in this business," Sparks said. "We'll go to market, COVID-19 rules applying, in January, and buy Christmas for next year. I'll see the new styles and trends. It's a 12-month preparation for the themes and looks we're going for and what we put together to accomplish those looks."

Russellville Florist & Gifts is more than just beautiful floral arrangements and decorations though. Sparks offers a wide variety of gift ideas, including a new line of men's gifts.

"We carry a full line of candles, warmers and melts, jewelry, and I added men's gifts including shirts, socks and wallets," Sparks said. "We've got puzzles for children and adults, different kinds of foods and dips. We offer local lines like 1818 Farms (bath and beauty) from Mooresville, Alabama, and a full line of shea lotions, men's shave oils, coffee and more.

"We also do custom gift baskets of all kinds tailored to whatever the customer wants us to put in it," he added.

Sparks has been delighted with the response to his downtown move, and

he's building a regular customer base from the Shoals as well.

"It's been phenomenal, as far as the foot traffic. We're seeing more people from the Shoals as they hear about our new location. People eating downtown see the store and come back to shop. It's been good both here at the store and out at everyone else's homes," Sparks said.

In recent weeks, Sparks has been out of the store as much as he's been there, as he custom decorates homes around Russellville for the holiday season.

"This past week I've had a job pretty much every day if not two. Our home decorating and installations have picked up tremendously this year. It's starting to become a really big part of the business," Sparks said. "You can tell this business is growing."

Sparks' interest in the floral business is nothing new. He said it began with his love for Christmas and branched out from there when he was in high school.

"I opened a home-based business during high school. Then I started doing weddings, events and decorating houses for Christmas," Sparks said. "I just took an interest in it and it stuck with me."

Sparks' 15,000-square foot building used to house Russellville's first modern hotel on the second floor. He has long-term plans to use the second floor but hasn't decided when or how he'll do that.

"I'm in the process of getting the windows put back in upstairs as I'm able to do it. The front eight are already put in and there are 19 left to go," Sparks said. "I've not made a complete decision about what to do upstairs. There's an interest in doing a boutique hotel or I've thought about a full event space ballroom setup as there is not a lot of historic event space available.

"It will be determine by the cost and other factors. But I'm real anxious to get up there an start on it. I just don't know when that will be," he added.

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# Grimes feted by UAB College of Education for work with ELL students

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

Russellville City Schools' Superintendent of Education Heath Grimes is passionate about English Language Learners (ELL) having the same educational opportunities as all other students.

Grimes' efforts working with, and on behalf of, ELL students was the reason behind the University of Alabama Birmingham honoring Grimes with its Outstanding Service Award last week.

With more than 40 percent of Russellville City Schools' students entering the system classified as ELL, it's an issue that's central to Grimes' system.

English Language Learners are classified as students whose primary language at home is something other than English, and who are unable to communicate or learn effectively in English.

Russellville has the state's largest ELL student percentage. With 53 percent of all Russellville City Schools students classified as Hispanic, RCS administrators and teachers face unique challenges to provide a quality education to a large group of students who need additional, focused instruction and training.



Heath Grimes

That led Grimes to help establish Alabama Leaders Advocating for English Learners (ALA-EL), an affiliate of the Council for Leaders of Alabama Schools, or CLAS.

Through his ALA-EL efforts, Grimes advocated and was successful in obtaining additional funding from the Alabama Legislature in order to increase the ability to work with ELL students.

"We've still got a lot of work to do, but we went from less than \$100 per student (in state funding for ELL) to around \$400 per student," Grimes said. "It's progress, but it's still underfunded and there's work to be done."

Dr. Susan Spezzini, Program Director for Secondary Education and ESL at UAB, said Grimes was selected based on his track record of advocating for better ELL instruction and funding statewide.

"It was definitely an unexpected honor," Grimes said. "And it means a lot to receive it from the University of Alabama Birmingham's College of Education."

"This will continue to be an important issue both to me personally and for our educational system statewide. When 48 percent of your students at West Elementary School do not speak English when they first arrive at school, we're probably unlike any other school district in the state of Alabama," he added.

Alabama literacy laws require any student who can't read at a certain level by the end of third grade to be retained. Additionally, the state requires 45 minutes for every student below grade level in individualized instruction. Grimes said that's difficult, if not impossible, when new mandates are imposed without the corresponding funding to carry them out.

"Based on our numbers, in order for us to comply with state law, we are minus six teachers to make that possible," Grimes said. "I'm going to address that with the state superintendent. We can't be in violation of the state law, but we also can't hire six new teachers. They pass a blanket law and don't consider anomalies like Russellville City Schools and that creates an issue."

## 'REMOTE,' from page 1

number, but we do have a growing number of students quarantined due to family members having COVID.

"We wanted our students and their families to be protected in advance of the Christmas holidays. We don't want students to get infected and bring that home where they infect their entire family," he added.

It's not the first time RCS teachers and students will be learning in a virtual format. From

October 28-November 8, RHS students took part in remote instruction after a number of students, including several on the varsity football team, showed symptoms of COVID-19. RHS students returned to regular classroom instruction November 9. Goodwin said the system is well-equipped for remote learning, with most students having access to Internet.

"We may have a few (students) with spotty or limited service, but we've deployed devices and our teacher are well-prepared to handle this,"

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Goodwin said. "We are comfortable deploying to this format. Is it the same as in-person learning? No, absolutely not, but the kids are still learning."

With the Russellville City Council announcing that Wi-Fi would soon be available in the immediate downtown area, that will be another outlet for students to access the Internet for school assignments.

"That will definitely be a help to those who have limited or no access, assuming they have transportation to an area where they can use that," Goodwin said.

Russellville City Schools students are not taking mid-term exams this year. That's a decision that was made prior to the fall semester, when RCS administrators delayed the start of the school year. School officials believed two additional weeks of classroom instruction would be more beneficial to students than taking summative exams at the end of the fall semester.

Goodwin said students semester grades will be based half on the first nine weeks, and half on the second nine weeks. The usual 10 percent weight for exams is not in effect this year.

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## Odom hoping that tough schedule elevates Golden Tigers to new heights

Kicking off their season with a win over 7A Florence, Russellville is hopeful that a tougher schedule will pay dividends once area play rolls around.

Brady Petree  
 Franklin Free Press

RUSSELLVILLE - Talk about a way to open up your basketball season.

After a 16-point lead evaporated for Russellville, the game came down to the one aspect in which the Golden Tigers had not been great through almost four full quarters against 7A Florence: free throws.

Shooting just 16-34 from the free throw line throughout the game, the Golden Tigers turned to senior forward Chandler Dyas with a 78-78 tie on the line with just over 30 seconds left, to drain one of two free throws to give the Golden Tigers the lead and ultimately the win.

See 'HEIGHTS,' page 14



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

Dyas (pictured) put up 33 points against Florence including five shots from behind the three-point line.

# An A+ in chemistry

For a Belgreen squad that puts up eye-popping numbers and flashy plays, the root cause of their success comes down to one thing: playing as a team.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

Bonner, who led the Bulldogs with 39 points against Sheffield before dropping 16 against Phillips, is the primary facilitator for a Belgreen squad that thrives on getting others involved throughout the game.

Brady Petree  
 Franklin Free Press

BELGREEN - If you haven't heard by now, let us be the first to tell you: the Belgreen boys basketball team is really good this season.

Like, *really* good.

And if you want to know what makes the Bulldogs click, all it takes is a deep dive and you will find that it really boils down to a few key things: fundamentals, technique, and an amount of chemistry that would make Marie Curie proud. Well, maybe a different kind of chemistry but you get the idea.

Those are just a few of the reasons that the

Bulldogs are off to a 5-0 start on the season and are poised to usher in a new decade full of excellence for a Belgreen program that has seen its fair share of success.

During the undefeated stretch that the Bulldogs have gotten off to, head coach Marty Cooper hasn't had to sweat very often and the seat at the front of the Bulldog bench stays pretty warm throughout the entire game because well, there's a certain level of confidence that the second-year coach has in his guys. And while the Bulldogs are off to the ideal beginning to their season, Cooper still wants to see how his guys perform in a more competitive setting across all four periods of a game.

See 'CHEMISTRY,' page 13

# Groce hoping players take next step in development while finding 'identity'

Brady Petree  
Franklin Free Press

RUSSELLVILLE - The ultimate goal of any team is simple. Win as many games as possible and shoot for a championship. But before a team can reach for the stars, they have to find out who they are, in a sense, before they can continue to progress.

And for Russellville girls head basketball coach Jermaine Groce and his staff, making sure his team figures out what works for them and what they do best is the first task at hand.

"It's early on and we've got a young team so we're really searching for an identity and also searching for someone to step up and be a leader for us. But at the same time we're scrappy and have a lot of energy, we just haven't been able to translate that into success so far," Groce said. "Our girls' resiliency stands out to me and just their fight to stay in games regardless of the score so it speaks volumes about their character and determination."

Two of the leaders of last year's squad for Groce, Madison Murray and Lexi Glass, graduated leaving the Golden Tigers to search for that aforementioned new leader.

Now, Groce will look to develop a new leader and will have a variety of

young, intriguing players to choose from.

Jenna Whitfield (11 points against Florence) and Jacey Moore (ten points against Florence) came out of the gate strong this season against Florence as both players scored in double digits while players like A.B. Oliver and senior Fallin Cox are also solid players for the Lady Golden Tigers as well.

But while the search for an identity and a leader for this years girls squad continues, that hasn't stopped Groce from looking to make other improvements on the court in the meantime.

"We've got to do a better job rebounding both on the defensive and offensive boards and box out. We struggled some early with turning the ball over at a high rate so ball control is something that we will have to continue to be mindful of as we get closer to January," Groce said. "The area we're at our best at is when we're in transition. Our girls are so scrappy defensively so when they get out in transition they do a great job of converting. So we've got to accelerate that aspect and maybe run some more halfcourt traps and things like that to get our offense in transition and put some points on the board."

While the Lady Golden Tigers lack a plethora of experienced depth at the top of their rotation, a youthful bench gaining experience via critical minutes could pay off for years to come for Groce and the program. Part of the

See 'DEVELOPMENT,' page 15

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# 'CHEMISTRY,' from page 11

"You hope you don't have to worry about execution but they're kids so you never know how some things might go. But I think we need to play against good teams across a good four periods," Cooper said. "I don't think we've done that yet against the better teams we've already played but it's really early."

Cooper has been around the coaching block and understands just how important chemistry within a team can be. And thanks to the likes of players like Will and Collin Bonner, Isac Willingham and Scout Bragwell, the chemistry of this Bulldog squad is second to none.

"I think it's a big part of our success and the thing about it is, it's really something you can't coach. I think right now those guys have a good feel for one another and they play off of one another," Cooper said. "What I really like about them is that they don't care who gets the points and all of that. They really enjoy sharing the ball especially for high school kids where things can be individualized sometimes but we don't have that problem because those four guys really enjoy sharing the ball and playing with one another."

That willingness to spread the ball around and get everyone involved showed last Friday night, particularly in Will Bonner's case as the junior guard had a hand, whether it be an assist, steal or bucket, in the first 17 points that the Bulldogs scored against area-rival Phillips as Belgreen cruised to a 94-33 victory.

Bonner, who finished with 16 points on the night including four three-pointers and going 5-5 from the free throw line, is off to a hot start early on in this 2020 season. And while it might be easy to point at one particular facet of his game, such as his finishing touch near the basket, his court vision, or his relentless defense, there's something else about Bonner that stands out to his head coach.

"He's worked hard to improve his game. But right now the main thing to me is that he's so humble about it. He'll come in, without being asked, and clean the floors before a junior high game and just little stuff like that he takes it upon himself to do," Cooper said. "Being a leader in the program, the other kids notice those kinds of things. And when he has a big scoring night, kids aren't jealous because they know he loves giving the ball up and that he will give it up and that ultimately creates a lot of the chemistry that you see on the court during games."

While the chemistry may start with Will Bonner, the effects it ultimately has goes beyond just him. All one has to do to see the effects is to take a look at the scoreboard at the end of the night to see just how involved the entire Belgreen squad gets.

Against Phillips, every single player that dressed out last Friday night registered at least two points on the night with three players (Will and Collin Bonner and Isac Willingham) scoring in double digits.

In a day and age in which more and more high school teams are adopting the NBA-style of play in living and dying by the three-point shot, the Bulldogs are zigging while other teams are zagging. Out of the Bulldogs 94 points against Phillips, only 18 points came from three-point range. Now, one might think that it's just one game, but even in their 74-52 win over a talented Sheffield squad the Bulldogs hit... two three-point shots. While the Bulldogs can certainly knock down the three ball when needed, they prefer to keep things fast and simple.

Regardless of how the Bulldogs come away with a win, it all gets back to fundamentals, technique, and some good old fashioned chemistry.

"We've got really good leadership and it's not just Will, it's Collin, Scout and Isac and those group of seniors. They've been around me for a year now and so they know what to expect and if we can keep in a flow and hopefully not get too many more games cancelled I think we'll be fine but obviously still a long way to go," Cooper said.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

Willingham (pictured above) is a key part of the group of veterans on the Belgreen team that helps facilitate and maintain a high level of chemistry amongst the players.

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## 'HEIGHTS,' from page 11

Encouraged by the performance from his squad (most of which are fresh off a football playoff run to the state quarterfinals) Odom is confident that if the Golden Tigers can replicate the style of play in which they played with Florence, that good things will come their way down the road.

"To start off this season with a win over a team like Florence at home was a big win for us. The things that we had to do to win that night are the things that we've got to hang our hat on," Odom said. "We played really tough, we controlled the pace of the game which is hard to do against Florence teams because they're so athletic. We got a lot of contributions from a lot of other guys and so that's something that we're going to expect every night and when we do those things, we feel like we have a chance to be really successful."

The made free throw was just one of Dyas' 33 points on the night which included three three-pointers in addition to nine rebounds, one assist and two steals as well as a block for his performance.

Russellville entered halftime up 41-34 thanks to a stellar first half performance from the aforementioned Dyas as well as Jeb Bishop who finished

with eight points in the half before finishing his night with 16 points to go along with eight rebounds and a blocked shot on the night.

Up by seven as the first half came to a close, the Golden Tigers would extend their lead to 16 points before the Falcons began a comeback attempt exiting the third quarter with the Golden Tigers lead cut to 12.

As the Falcons were en route to a 28-point fourth quarter, the Golden Tigers got a key steal from Brooks Scott that would eventually set up the Dyas free throw attempts to seal the deal for Russellville as the Golden Tigers would win their season opener.

Getting the kind of contributions from the seniors (three leading scorers) on the Russellville squad is something that Odom and his staff are certainly encouraged by and are hopeful that the development of his veteran leaders continues.

"Those guys have been there and done that before. Sometimes I think when you get in those games, even going back to a year ago when Florence kind of handled us, these guys because of their experience expect to win and that just rubs off on everyone else in the locker room," Odom said.

Kicking off the season against a high-quality opponent in Florence is the continuation of a trending theme in terms of scheduling for the Golden Tigers with playing top-tier opponents in hopes that once area play, sub-region and perhaps the regional tournament arrive, the Golden Tigers will be accustomed to a certain level of play. And even in an unusual season such as this one, Russellville is sticking by that gameplan, even if it means a few games get tossed out here and there due to COVID-19.

"When you play good teams every night, you're ultimately prepared for anything you're going to see in those late January games and into area games. When you look at who we could potentially see in a playoff game, it's high-level basketball and so that's why we play these teams because we need to be able to play at a high-level every single night," Odom said. "It's challenging because in basketball you'll have those nights where you don't shoot as well or the ball doesn't bounce your way and you've got to find ways to push through it and that's one thing we tell our guys is that you're never as good as your last win and you're never as bad as your last loss. It's just about continuing to get better."

Scott finished the night with 12 points, seven rebounds and the crucial steal for Russellville. Boots McCulloch and Eli Gibson both finished with five points on the night with Nathan Brockway chipping in with four points and teammates Ashton Boyd and Conner Warhurst adding two points apiece.



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PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

Bishop (pictured with ball) who had 16 points, eight rebounds and a blocked shot in the win over Florence, is part of a talented group of seniors including Chandler Dyas and Brooks Scott.

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# 'DEVELOPMENT,' from page 12

learning process for the younger players on the team, along with the few veterans, is going to be to learn how to remain competitive across all four quarters.

"Every game we've played this year, we've had a really good half. We played Fairview really good for a half, Florence for a really good half and Brooks for a really good half. Now we've just got to figure out how to close it out," Groce said. "Once we go to the bench, everyone is a freshman or sophomore so it definitely has something to do with the experience that we have. So the main objective right now is to get some of our younger girls some more minutes to where we can work on some things and learn how to close games out."

One thing to keep an eye on will be the quality of opponents that the Lady Golden Tigers will matchup with over the course of this season. From opponents ranging from the aforementioned Florence, to Athens and Fairfield, Russellville has no shortage of talented opposition lining up across from them this season. Groce is hopeful that the tougher schedule will help in the development of his players while also preparing them for area play and potentially a playoff run.

"The hope is that you play a very diverse schedule that allows you to match up with some teams that are very similar to who you'll play in area play. When we played Fairview, that was a close resemblance of West Point who we will probably see in the area tournament," Groce said. "We won't see another team as athletic as Florence but the other teams we will see later on are very good and will hopefully get us ready for that area tournament."

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## Will Bonner Junior, Belgreen Guard

Bonner can do it all. He can get a steal, turn around and dish it to a teammate for an assist or keep it himself and finish flawlessly at the rim. Those talents were on display this past week as the junior guard led the Bulldogs past Sheffield and Phillips as Belgreen improves to 5-0 on the season. Against Sheffield, Bonner had 39 points. Then in their matchup against Phillips, Bonner accumulated 16 points and also had a hand in some capacity in the first 17 points of the game for the Bulldogs.



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### The Largest and Freshest Salad Bar in Franklin County!

Congrats to Week 13 winner PHILLIP KING, who correctly picked 8 out of the 9 games that were played and also won the tiebreaker!

**Bailey finished all of her picks and still had time to take a nap. Don't sleep on your chance to BEAT BAILEY!!**

Sponsored by Bedford, Rogers, Bowling & McReynolds, P.C.

**BEAT BAILEY IS BACK!** Submit your picks to us each week in one of two ways: Fill out the entry form on this page and mail it to us at 113 Washington Ave. NW, Russellville, AL 35653, or email your picks to us along with your name and number at [franklinfreepress@yahoo.com](mailto:franklinfreepress@yahoo.com). **Picks sent in by mail for Week 14 must be postmarked by Friday, December 11th, and picks submitted by email for Week 14 must be received by Saturday, December 12th at 10 a.m.** Each week, the contestant who correctly picks the most games will win a free T-shirt and the chance to pick in the grand-prize final-week contest. If multiple contestants correctly pick the same number of games in a given week, the tiebreaker score will be used to determine a winner. Contestants are only eligible to win the weekly contest once. No multiple winners allowed. ONE entry per telephone number. Thanks for playing, and good luck!

### Franklin Free Press Football Picks Contest

Week 14: December 12th

	Bailey's Pick	Your Pick
Michigan vs. Ohio State	Ohio State	_____
Oklahoma vs. West Virginia	Oklahoma	_____
North Carolina vs. Miami	Miami	_____
Wisconsin vs. Iowa	Wisconsin	_____
Cincinnati vs. Tulsa	Cincinnati	_____
LSU vs. Florida	Florida	_____
Washington vs. Oregon	Oregon	_____
Georgia vs. Missouri	Georgia	_____
Alabama vs. Arkansas	Alabama	_____
Auburn vs. Mississippi State	Auburn	_____
Tiebreaker Score:	Ole Miss _____	Texas A&M _____
Your Name:	_____	
Phone number:	_____	

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