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Fighting back: A story of hope and inspiration for Freeman and Russellville Hospital

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When Larry Freeman left home January 2, 2021, the 58-year-old Russellville resident knew he was seriously ill.

Freeman's temperature had been up and down like a yo-yo. He was fatigued and he was shaking. Freeman's brother, William, died one week earlier due to complications from COVID-19, so Larry knew it was time to take action.

Freeman got in his car and set out for Florence's North Alabama Medical Center. But Freeman never made it to NAMC.

"When I left my house I felt very weak. As I drove thru Russellville, I

See 'FREEMAN,' page 7



COURTESY PHOTO

Larry Freeman visiting with his daughter Victoria last week at Russellville Hospital.

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Massey again asks commission to consider Community Corrections for Madden

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Former Franklin County Commissioner Rayburn Massey addressed the county commission for a second time last week as Massey took issue with a motion filed by Franklin County Attorney Roger Bedford, Jr.

At the commission's February 8th work session, Massey presented commissioners with a copy of a motion filed by Bedford on April 7, 2020, that asks the Court to deny a

motion filed by former Franklin County Administrator Crista Madden asking to be placed in the Community Corrections program.

While Madden and Bedford continue to disagree about certain language contained in a motion filed by Bedford, Commissioner Jason Miller made his position clear as he read a prepared statement stating his personal objection to any parole or Community Corrections consideration for Madden.

The language at issue in Bedford's

See 'MADDEN,' page 4

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Barbara Norton Ghrigsby, 78, of Russellville, passed away on Sunday, February 7th. Interment at Friendship Missionary Baptist Church Cemetery.

Jackie Dewayne Jackson, 72, of Russellville, passed away on Wednesday, February 10th. Interment at Glendale Cemetery.

June Johnson Moore Lindsey, 90, of Russellville, passed away on Saturday, February 6th. Interment at Franklin Memory Gardens.

Nannie Deloris McCulloch, 83, of Russellville, passed away on Friday, February 12th. Interment at Franklin Memory Gardens.

Darrell Wayne "Cowboy" Moore, 56, of Russellville, passed away on Monday, February 8th. Interment at Mars Hill Cemetery.

Reba Mitchell Patrick, 96, of Russellville, passed away on Monday, February 8th. Interment at Bethlehem Cemetery.

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Registration now open for 4-H Chick Chain program

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Franklin County residents between the ages of nine and 18 are invited to take part in a program designed to teach 4-H members recommended management practices for growing and raising chickens.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System is sponsoring the 2021 Northwest Alabama 4-H Chick Chain. Registration for this year's event is now open through March 5, 2021.

Entrants pay a \$35 fee and will receive 10 female chicks that are one to two days old. The chicks will come from Valley Farms Hatchery and will be vaccinated. Students will care for these pullets for 21 weeks. After that time, the student will bring his or her two best pullets to the 2021 Northwest Alabama 4-H Chick Chain Show at the North Alabama Fairgrounds on October 4, 2021.

Each participant's two chicks will be auctioned after the show and the student will keep the auction money minus the auction fee. The remaining eight pullets will be kept by each student for egg production and future entries in the 4-H Golden Egg Contest.

2021 breed selections include Black Australorp, White Rocks and Speckled Sussex.

Registration is taking place at the Franklin County 4-H Office in the basement of the Franklin County Courthouse. The \$35 check should be payable to the Alabama 4-H Foundation.

There will be a Zoom meeting for virtual project training on April 12, 2021, from 5:30-7 p.m. Chick pickup will be May 7 from 3:30-5:30 p.m., at the Fairgrounds in Muscle Shoals.

Students will attend virtual 4-H workshops and trainings, and invite a 4-H agent to see their chicks at home, either virtually or in-person.

For more information, contact Vanessa Roberts, 4-H Foundation Regional Extension Agent for Franklin County, at 256-332-8880 or 256-309-9576.



COURTESY PHOTO

Participants in the Chick Chain program will receive 10 female chicks that will be raised for 21 weeks before two of the chicks will be auctioned off at the Northwest Alabama Fairgrounds.

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'MADDEN,' from page 1

motion, which asked the Court to reject Madden's request, states *the Franklin County Commission requests that the Motion filed by the Defendant be DENIED.*

Madden pled guilty in 2018 to two felony charges related to her embezzlement of more than \$750,000 of county funds. Madden is more than 31 months into her 20-year prison sentence she received from retired Circuit Judge Pride Tompkins.

Last month, Massey told commissioners his daughter had a job waiting for her in Dale County if she is released into Community Corrections. The Alabama Department of Corrections began the Community Corrections program as a way for non-violent offenders to work and live at home, while remaining under close supervision of Community Corrections officers and continuing to receive prison credit toward their sentences.

A letter in Madden's court file from Freida Kuykendall of the Karen Group, LLC, states that Kuykendall has a job available for Madden in Dale County once she is released.

Madden was ordered to reimburse the Franklin County Solid Waste Fund \$553,889.21, \$82,275.32 to the Franklin County General Fund and \$2,000 to the Franklin County Highway Department.

Madden must also reimburse an additional \$200,000 to State Farm Fire and Casualty and Berkley SE Insurance Company once the county restitution is paid. The \$200,000 represents payments made to Franklin County pursuant to claims filed on the county's insurance policies related to Madden's embezzlement.

Massey and Miller, who were both on the county commission when Madden's case began, both said they never voted or recommended any action regarding her request for Community Corrections.

At the February 8th meeting, Commissioners Chris Wallace and David Hester both said they were not aware of the issue ever coming up at a commission meeting.

Massey contends that Bedford should not have represented to the Court that the commission objected to Madden's request for Community Corrections since that issue was never on an agenda and no vote was taken.

Massey asked commissioners to place the item on an upcoming agenda for

a vote.

"I'm asking that we should comply with the document that has been filed. From the statement each commissioner made and I made, the evidence is that we as a county commission never complied with this document ever being filed," Massey said.

Bedford maintains that when the commission turned over the evidence to the Alabama Attorney General's Office, the commission supported that action.

"To change your position, you have to vote that it's no longer your position. Until (the commission) takes a vote to say they no longer want to take that position anymore, that is their position. They do not have the authority to change her sentence anyway," Bedford said.

Based on commissioners' statements that they never voted on the issue, Massey alleges Bedford 'falsified documents' by filing an inaccurate document saying the commission requested Madden's motion be denied.

"I have reviewed the minutes and the commission, as a body, did not meet and never requested that a motion by (Madden) be denied. That has not happened," Massey said.

Massey asked Probate Judge Barry Moore whether he ever took part in a vote regarding Madden's request for Community Corrections.

"If you're making accusations, I have no answer for you. I refer all your questions to our attorney," Moore said.

In a January 15, 2021, letter to Massey, Bedford again outlined his position and told Massey the issue "would not be put on the Franklin County Commission" agenda.

After several tense minutes with Bedford and Massey debating their respective positions, Miller spoke up and said he had a statement to make regarding Madden. As he looked at his former fellow commissioner and a father asking for alternative placement for his daughter, Miller's voice cracked and he became emotional as he spoke.

"I want the public to know where I stand on this," Miller said. "I thought a lot about this after our last meeting and I felt like I needed to state my position,

See 'MADDEN,' page 5

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Russellville City Board of Education approves \$250 supplement for employees

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Board of Education approved a one-time supplement of \$250 for most RCS employees at the board's February 9, 2021, meeting.

The board unanimously approved a resolution authorizing a \$250 supplement to all "full-time classified and certified employees, contract principals, the Chief School Finance Officer and individuals providing full-time services through SPUR, except the Superintendent and the Park & Recreation Department, which is managed by the school system."

Employees received their supplemental checks last week after the board approved the move.

RCS Board President Jerry Groce said the supplement was a way to thank employees for the additional time, effort and service that is necessary during the 2021 spring semester to successfully meet the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This is a small token of our appreciation on behalf of the board and superintendent," Groce said. "You continued coming this entire year when a lot of school systems didn't go. You have gone above and beyond your duties.

"We wish it was a lot more but we wanted to say we appreciate what you've done this and every year, but particularly this school year," Groce added.

To be eligible for the supplement, employees must be employed by Russellville City Schools as of December 22, 2020, and the final paycheck of

any employee who fails to remain employed by the board through March 26, 2021, shall include a deduction equal to the one-time supplement, prorated by days worked.

In other agenda items, the board:
—renewed a line of credit with CB&S Bank for \$1.5 million. The line of credit is for emergency expenses only and there is no balance owed on the line of credit. Board member Greg Batchelor abstained from the vote.

—approved job descriptions for new positions of aide and instructional/remediation aide.

—contracted with Scotty Lowery to become School Resource Officer at Russellville Elementary School from February 15, 2021, to October 1, 2021.

—approved a facility use request from the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce for the RHS Auditorium July 16-17, 2021, for the Watermelon Festival Pageant.

—approved a trip request for RMS Show Choir and Drama students to attend a choir workshop at Universal Studios in Orlando, Fla., from February 18-22, 2022.

—approved the following personnel moves:
—Employment in Position: Paula Pounders, math intervention teacher at RES, Tyrone Wilson, teacher at RES, Anna Jeffreys, teacher at WES, DeAndre Coleman, teacher at WES, Michell Lane, teacher at WES, Josh Kennedy, custodian/groundskeeper in the Park and Recreation Department and Sara McDill, instructional/remediation aide.

See 'SUPPLEMENT,' Page 7

'MADDEN,' from page 4

so I drafted a letter to let the public know where I stand."

Miller's statement read as follows:

I realize this is a sensitive issue, but I believe the best way to address this is to be as honest as I can about where I stand when it comes to any change in the sentence Ms. Madden received for stealing more than \$750,000 from the people of Franklin County.

Our job as commissioners is to represent the people of our districts to the best of our ability. We are elected by the people and for the people. When this instance of theft first came to light and in the months thereafter, the people of Franklin County made it very clear how upset they were that this occurred and that such a large sum of taxpayer money was stolen. This was not a few hundred dollars that was stolen or even a few thousand. It was \$753,899. And it was not a one-time offense. Ms. Madden purposefully stole these funds and deceived the people of this county for YEARS.

I have no doubt that she is remorseful. And even though I only worked with her for nine months as a commissioner, I know she was very well thought of, and I know she is still very important to her family and close friends who no doubt want her to be able to play a more active role in their lives. However, as a representative for the victims in this case—the people and employees of Franklin County—I believe we must lay aside our emotions and hold to our position that the punishment for Ms. Madden must fit the crime.

When she was originally sentenced, Judge Moore read a letter from himself and the Commission on behalf of the citizens of Franklin County where he called for a sentence appropriate for the crime so the people of this county and elsewhere could see justice served in this matter and know things like this are taken seriously here. Attorney General Steve Marshall, whose office handled the case, was quoted as saying: "The sentence imposed on Crista Madden of many years in prison properly reflects the importance of deterring public employees from exploiting their offices for personal gain. The people of Alabama deserve honest and trustworthy service from public employees and officials."

With these statements made, how would it look for us to now reverse those opinions in favor of a more lenient sentence now that some time has passed? Do we not want to send the message that theft, especially the

type of theft perpetuated here, will not be tolerated and will not be worth it in the end if someone else were to try the same thing?

I know this is hard and emotional. Things like this are never easy, especially when it involves someone you know. But because of the reasons listed above and the duty I feel I have as a Commissioner and representative of the people, I will not be in support of Ms. Madden entering into Community Corrections or being paroled early or having her sentence shortened, not today and not anytime in the future.

Though it wasn't what he wanted to hear, Massey thanked Miller after he read the statement.

"You do not know how much I appreciate you being honest. I don't have to wonder where you stand. I appreciate you being man enough to come forward and share that," Massey said.



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 The Franklin County Chamber of Commerce and the Franklin County Development Authority are accepting nominations for the 2021 Partnership Banquet, tentatively scheduled for Thursday, March 25th. Nomination forms are available on the Chamber's website (www.franklincountychamber.org) or at the Chamber office (located at 103 Jackson Avenue North, Russellville). Deadline for nominations is February 5th. For more information or details, please contact the Franklin County Chamber at 256.332.1760 or director@franklincountychamber.org.


 You are invited to Revival at the Church of God, 77 Mars Hill Road, in Phil Campbell, starting March 8th. Singers featured each night, including the Mary Bean Family. The Sutton Family will be preaching the Revival. Everyone is welcome. Starts at 6 p.m., nightly. For more information, call 256-324-5288.


 The NACOLG SenioRx Medication Assistance Program supplies free and low-cost medications for anyone in Alabama with a disability or a chronic illness, regardless of age, that requires daily medication. Medicare recipients may also be eligible. For more information, contact NACOLG SenioRx today. There is no charge for this service. Call 1-800-AGELINE (1-800-243-5463) or 256-389-0529 and ask for Paula Pardue. This program is in partnership with the state of Alabama and Alabama Department of Senior Services.

 Everyone 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.

 New 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.

 TOPS 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.

 The 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. Burleson 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.

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

Don't forget to visit us online at www.franklinfreepress.net!

'FREEMAN,' from page 1

asked myself whether I could make it all the way to (NAMC)," Freeman said. "The Lord spoke and I knew I'd never make it, so I went to Russellville Hospital. I walked into the emergency room shaking, sweating and with a temperature of 102.5. I told them I needed some help."

Over the next 40 days, Freeman received much more than just 'help' from the staff at Russellville Hospital. As his Coronavirus turned into pneumonia, Freeman received round-the-clock care from the nurses, dedicated daily visits from his admitting physician, Dr. Miranda Decker, and with the help of the entire hospital team, from the Intensive Care Unit staff to the physical therapists, Freeman never gave up.

A devout Christian, Freeman has spent a lifetime inspiring other people, whether through his words, his music or his faith. As he was wheeled out Thursday afternoon headed to J.W. Sommer Rehabilitation Center in Muscle Shoals, Freeman faced a whirlwind of emotion as he said goodbye to a hospital staff that served as his surrogate family the last six weeks.

As tearful goodbye after goodbye was said, it was evident how much Freeman inspired and lifted the spirits of a hospital staff who had saved his life.

This was no one-way street though. The men and women of Russellville Hospital wouldn't allow Freeman to give up. In return, his smile, his resiliency and his optimism shined a much-needed light of inspiration and hope upon the staff.

The staff of Russellville Hospital saved Larry Freeman's life, but Freeman, in his own way, saved them as well.

After nearly a year of front-line service in the COVID-19 pandemic, faced with so much death, despair and stress, the staff of Russellville Hospital needed a Larry Freeman as much as he needed them.

On the morning of February 4th, Dr. Jeffrey Manord replaced Freeman's tracheostomy tube with one that had a speaking valve. A couple hours into his post-operative stay, Freeman opened his eyes, looked around the room and spoke for the first time in almost a month.

"Hey you guys!" Three words. Three beautiful words that brought nurses and staff around him to tears. After a six-week journey where Freeman's life hung in the balance, those three words weren't just a major step for him.

They told his new hospital family this story would have a happy ending.

Standing under the dark cloud of COVID-19 since March 2020, these health care professionals received some much-needed sunshine courtesy of Freeman.

"23 years, 5 months, 2 days." That's the answer when you ask Freeman how long he served in the National Guard. That included a deployment to Iraq in 2004. One year after his unit returned home, Freeman's wife Gina died. In the face of that tragedy, Freeman stayed positive.

His daughter Victoria will soon celebrate her 14th birthday. When she came to the hospital last Tuesday, it was their first time together since Christmas. Emotional? You better believe it.

"After I saw her (Tuesday), the next morning I thought about how I'm leaving here for rehab Thursday," Freeman said. "And I told God *thank you*. God knows all. And through the last 40 days, those two words, *thank you*, I said to God many times. Lord, you've got this, and thank you for my blessings."

When he's not serving his country, Freeman has worked at Clark-Pulley for 31 years. He's also a veteran basketball official working out of the Tennessee Valley Basketball Officials Association. Freeman is a member of First Missionary Baptist Church in Russellville.

Whether it's at work, on the golf course or on the court, Freeman is a people person. Just ask his pastor, the Rev. B.J. Bonner.

See 'FREEMAN,' page 9

SUPPLEMENT,' from page 4

Superintendent Heath Grimes told the board the school system has been given additional funds through the CARES Act and through the federal government's stimulus plan.

Grimes said the funds will be used to hire additional teachers and aides to reduce class size.

"Our focus will be on grades K-3 to make an impact there, where our ELL students are concentrated," Grimes said. "Use of the funds are very restric-



COURTESY PHOTO

Russellville Hospital staff had a parade sendoff for Larry Freeman Thursday afternoon.

tive and may only be used for academic recovery.

"You can't use them for building, for example. We plan to hire additional bilingual aides and there will be a focus on retired teachers and some additional certified teachers," he added.

Grimes told board members the system, as of February 9, had three positive COVID-19 cases among staff and seven in the student population. One faculty member was under quarantine along with 50 students.

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, don't forget to check us out on the web at www.franklinfreepress.net!

Senior cheerleading class a special one for Mayfield

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

As Russellville High School varsity cheerleader coach since 2012, Stephanie Mayfield says each squad has its unique strengths.

But Mayfield admits there's something special about this year's group, particularly the nine senior girls who have been with her since middle school.

Captains Destiny Hatton and Leah Grimes, along with Co-Captain Lauren Mae Sturdivant, Shelby Carson, Ashlyn DeArman, Callie Palmer, Abby Peters, Lily Pounders and Karly Tidwell, lead a squad whose talent their coach describes as 'off the chain.'

"Most of these girls have cheered since 7th grade. They really have been the backbone of this program since they were in 9th grade as junior varsity cheerleaders," Mayfield said. "You can't imagine the talent level we'll be losing."

"A couple of them plan on cheering at the collegiate level. The University of North Alabama will have its tryouts very soon. They will go on to be successful at the next level regardless of what they choose to do," she added.

Eight of the nine seniors received the prestigious Legacy Award, given to girls who cheer from 7th through the 12th grade. They will also receive scholarships from Mayfield and her husband Mike.

While no one would choose to go through their senior year of high school in the midst of a health pandemic, Mayfield's nine seniors never got down or felt shortchanged about their final year on the squad.

"They've been troopers through it all," Mayfield said. "They didn't get to go to a college campus for cheer camp, so we had a home camp for the first time. These seniors never complained and they are an inspiration for the younger ones."

"During the season, they've helped me and we've tried to have little treats for them during the year, like the ice cream party we had this week," Mayfield added.

The Class of 2021 cheerleaders have also excelled beyond their accomplishments with the squad.

"I've invested so much time with these girls they're like my own children. I'm so proud of them. They're leaders in our school, with some of the highest ACT scores in the entire school and they take hard classes. I can't say enough about them," Mayfield said.

That respect and admiration flows the other way, as well.

"She's been our coach all four years," Grimes said of Mayfield.

"When we came in, she took us in like her own. She's always hard-working and wants us to do what's best. We used to complain she was too hard on us but seeing other squads and seeing what she does for us, we realize we have one of the best coaches any school could have."

Grimes, a cheerleader since the 8th grade, was selected by team members as this year's captain, along with Hatton. Mayfield expects a lot from her captains in their leadership roles, and she encourages the girls to hold them accountable.

"The girls know their peers better than I ever know them. They watch their social media sites, check them out and see if their walk matches their talk. They want someone who will absolutely go the distance the whole season and not quit on them," Mayfield said.

While Grimes said it's an honor to serve as captain, it can be difficult to be in a leadership role to her friends and teammates.

"It is definitely a challenge to make decisions for my peers and friends, but overall when we make those decisions it's always what's best for the team," Grimes said. "We've always been super close and this year has seen us grow even closer. I hope the upcoming (2021-22) squad stays close. We've had sleepovers and that helped

draw us closer. I hope that's something they continue."

Hatton, a competitive dancer who works at AFTT Studio in Russellville, choreographed the dances for her varsity and JV squad, along with three of the band dances this year.

The respect her teammates have for her speaks for itself. They have voted Hatton a captain each year since they were in 7th grade.

Hatton will attend UNA next year as part of the school's criminal justice program. She also plans to try out for the UNA Dance Team. But don't think she's closing the door on cheering.

"After two or three years I plan to transfer to Texas A&M or the University of Alabama, complete my degree in criminal justice and try out to be a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader," Hatton said.

Sturdivant, who serves as co-captain, plans to return to the classroom one day as an educator. She will attend Northwest-Shoals Community College next fall to get her basics, then transfer to UNA and major in elementary education.

When asked what type of teacher she hopes to be, Sturdivant looks no farther than Mayfield.

"Ms. Mayfield has really inspired me as a leader and as an educator. She always goes above and beyond for her students," Sturdivant said. "It's never been just like an athlete and coach relationship. She's more like a friend we can always to to with anything."

"We trust her and know she'll always take care of us and be in our corner. I want my future students to realize I'll be there for them and always be cheering them on," she added.

As for their unusual senior year, Sturdivant and her teammates describe it as 'different, but complete,' and have never dwelt on what they might have missed.

"Whenever I think about this year, one word comes to mind—blessing. This year has been a blessing," Sturdivant said. "Through the quarantine I got to spend a lot of time with my family and words cannot express how much I enjoyed that."

"We've done so many things no other senior class has done or experienced, so I definitely feel like it was a complete experience. We've seen support from our community, as people realize we've not had a chance to have a senior year like other classes. I'm thankful we even got to be in school and do the things we did," she added.

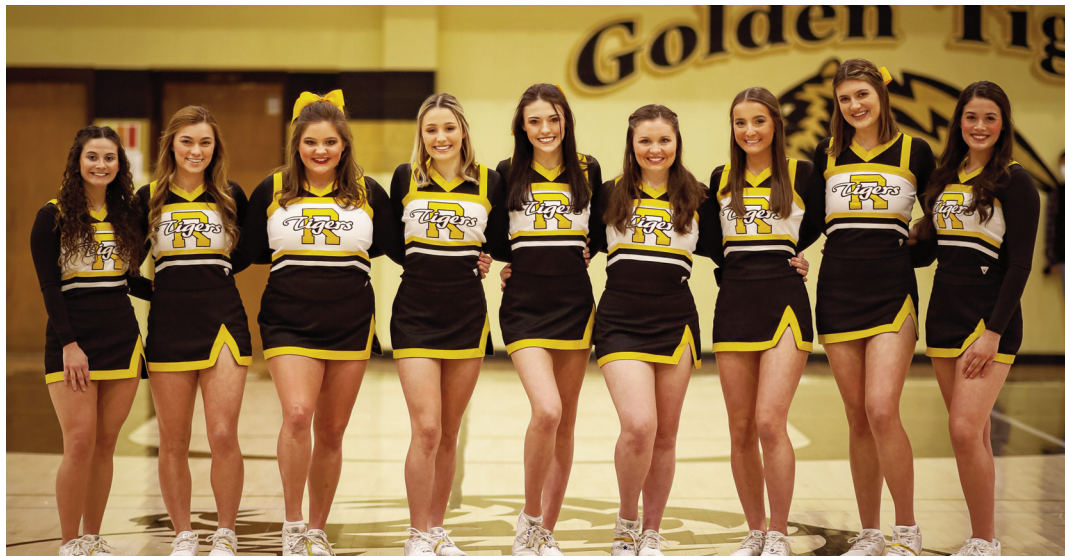


PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

The 2020-21 RHS varsity cheerleading squad, with nine seniors, is one Coach Stephanie Mayfield will always remember as being special.

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'FREEMAN,' from page 7

"Larry is one of a kind," Bonner said. "He's a happy-go-lucky guy with a sense of realness in his wit. As he engages himself in things, he takes his responsibilities in a strong way, but while he's working he's always happy and willing to go forth in a positive manner. He's just a great guy."

Freeman's return to work, to the basketball court, to the golf course where he's enjoyed hundreds of rounds of golf with friends—all that remains unknown. Freeman has no timetable. Regaining his strength through therapy and rest are what he'll focus on once he returns home.

"I won't be in a big hurry to do anything. I love golf, but I'll take time to rest and get through this before I get out there again," Freeman said. "I won't be in any rush. I'll take my time and when I feel I'm ready to get back to work or get back on the course, I will. But I have to regain my strength first."

Freeman was admitted January 2nd to Russellville Hospital's COVID-19 Unit, an eight-bed unit housed in the former labor and delivery ward on the first floor. He didn't stay there long, though.

"Soon after he was admitted, we could tell he needed the extra care that our ICU nurses provide, so he was transferred on January 5th to the Intensive Care Unit," said Danielle Coan, Freeman's case manager at Russellville Hospital.

Freeman's oxygen saturation level remained low, so his doctor ordered a BiPap to help him breathe.

As of January 7th, Freeman continued to lack energy to the point where his treatment had to become more aggressive. "He was exhausted. The COVID caused pneumonia and when he started to decline that's when we tried to transfer him to a facility with a pulmonologist on staff," Coan said. "That's a level of care we don't have as a rural hospital."

By mid-afternoon that day, two things were apparent. First, there wasn't a bed available anywhere in the Southeast. Second, he needed to be on a ventilator."

Freeman agreed to be intubated, but before the procedure began, ICU nurse Stephanie Hester made a promise to her patient. She told Freeman his team of doctors and nurses were not going to give up on him, and she insisted he not give up on them. They both agreed to fight, even with COVID-19 and pneumonia standing as a formidable opponent.

"I knew this was an emotional time," Hester said. "My dad passed away from COVID and Larry's brother had just died. I knew personally how scared he might be and he needed to know we were going to do everything we could."

"Every time I came into his room, whether he knew it or not, I told him to keep fighting. It's been hard to see all the sadness day-to-day. Seeing him smile and get better every day was something we all needed," she added.

Before he regained his strength, though, there were some rough days for Freeman. His condition was serious enough on January 13th that hospital staff called the family to his bedside. *Not a good day.*

Two days later, better news, as Freeman transitioned from the ventilator to a tracheostomy tube, which allowed his sedation to be reduced. Still very weak, though, Freeman continued to receive supplemental oxygen.

On January 20th, nurses made a video call to Freeman's niece, Whitney Tisdale, and his girlfriend, Teresa Bennett. He couldn't speak, but he could communicate by nodding his head and smiling. *Another step forward.*

The next several days saw Freeman begin physical therapy with one-pound weights. He began mouthing words to nurses and on January 27th, he had enough strength to sit up in bed for the first time. Two days later, he took five steps and sat up in a chair.

After a few days of clear liquids, followed by full liquids, Freeman enjoyed a small serving of mashed potatoes on February 1st. On February 3rd, he took 15 steps forward and 15 back to his bed.

Dr. Decker had seen enough improvement to order his tracheostomy tube changed to one with a speaking valve on February 4th.

That tube was removed February 8th. The next morning, now able to speak softly, Freeman had a request for the ICU staff: *Frosted Flakes and Strawberry Pop-Tarts, no frosting!*

Still weak, but growing stronger every day, Freeman progressed sufficiently for Decker to release him to a rehab facility last Thursday. Freeman never gave up, and *Freeman's Fighters*, the ICU staff's self-imposed new nickname, never gave up either.

"After experiencing so much loss from COVID, I am so proud to say that I have gained an amazing new friend and I look forward to hearing updates on (Freeman's) continued recovery," Hester said.

Inspiring others through words of support and encouragement is nothing new for Freeman. Without his voice, and his life in limbo, he still found a way to serve and uplift others from his bed in a hospital he never planned to go to.

"I don't think there's a place in the world I'd rather have gone. I'm grateful to Dr. Decker and the staff who took me in," Freeman said. "Dr. Decker told me 'I'm not losing you. You are here for a reason. All I ask is you not give up on yourself because I'm not giving up on you.'"

There was some sadness for Freeman in the days leading up to his discharge. As he grew stronger, the reality that his brother was gone hit him hard one evening.

"As I was watching TV last night, it was the first time I thought about my brother William and I started crying," Freeman said. "We never fussed or had a cross word. I started thinking about him being gone and I just lost it."

But the staff here would not let me stay down. Each time they came in, they asked 'what can we do?' And they didn't leave my room until I was satisfied as to why I called them. They are incredible."

15 people who, 41 days earlier, were strangers to Freeman, are now part of his family. *Stephanie Hester, Alicia Henson, Katie Allen, Kelsey McDaniel, Brooke Boyles, Julianna Wallace, Charlotte Seay, Tristan Trussell, Cody Bass, Samantha Pope, Laura Kroeger, Rachel McCreless and Sara Hodge. Russellville Hospital's ICU staff of heroes. Nena Brown and Brandy Perkins. Russellville Hospital's Respiratory Therapy staff of heroes.*

Freeman said he'll never forget the countless people who prayed for him during this ordeal. A firm believer in the power of prayer, he knows those prayers were answered. So many people Freeman had impacted in his life now answered the call for him with prayer.

Bryant Bonds, Freeman's godson, dropped by the hospital last week to give Freeman a haircut and shave, something Freeman said would make him feel better. Again, no questions asked, the staff arranged it. *Make it happen!*

As paramedics ushered Freeman's stretcher from the ICU to an awaiting ambulance Thursday afternoon, the hospital halls were lined with staff, along with Freeman's friends and family, for a makeshift parade, complete with signs, shakers, balloons, ribbons and a steady flow of tears.

"I told Mr. Freeman that he was a blessing to these nurses," said Russellville Hospital Director of Nursing Alis Welborn. "He was the bright spot they needed. They've been at this for a year. His positive attitude will stay with us and always remain a part of us."

"The whole hospital needed him. We really did," Welborn added.

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Bulldogs capture 1A area 14 title

Brady Petree
 Franklin Free Press

To say that the Belgreen Bulldogs cruised to their second straight area title would be a massive understatement. With their 72-29 victory over Phillips on Friday night, the Bulldogs clinched a spot in the subregion round of the 1A playoffs where they'll take on Covenant Christian this week. And they ran through the 1A Area 14 tournament in style.

Through their two matchups against Vina and Phillips, the Bulldogs averaged a gaudy 77 points for the tournament while allowing a measly 27 points.

What makes those statistics more impressive, is the fact that the Bulldogs only played their starting five for a fraction of each area game.

Having an overwhelming amount of depth is only part of the reason that the Bulldogs are one of the heavy favorites to come out of the north region. And for one of the core members of the starting five, Collin Bonner, that depth will come in handy once the quality of competition picks up beginning this week during subregion play.

"Knowing that every guy on the team knows their role and can execute it flawlessly feels amazing. The fact that when the starting five comes out of the game we don't have to worry about turnovers or anything like that and that we can rely on our guys to keep us in the game at all times," Collin Bonner said.

Now that business has been taken care of in their area, the Bulldogs now turn their focus towards the aforementioned subregion play where they'll take on Covenant Christian (who the Bulldogs defeated just a few weeks ago) on

See 'BULLDOGS,' page 14

Defense wins titles

For years now, the Phil Campbell Lady Bobcats have been known for their tenacious defense. And this year, as they prepare for a hopeful trip to Birmingham, the defense has proven that it's still top-tier.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

Scott, above, and the Lady Bobcats forced a whopping 10 turnovers in the first quarter in their area tournament title win over Danville last Thursday night.

Brady Petree
 Franklin Free Press

Relentless. Dominating. Exhilarating. That's just a few of the ways one might describe the Phil Campbell Lady Bobcats defense. Unless of course you're the team on offense against the Lady Bobcats, in which case you might define the defensive efforts from the Lady Bobcats as 'exhausting'.

That defense is a key reason that Phil Campbell repeated as area champions once again as the Lady Bobcats cruised to a 61-37 win over Danville last Thursday night.

Producing ten turnovers in the first quarter, the Lady Bobcats are hopeful that their defensive prowess can lead to a replication (or potentially better) of their playoff performance from a year ago.

"We go into every game with an energetic mindset. You're here, you're there and you've just got to play everywhere and be everywhere and that's the way we try to play every single night," senior forward Katie Thomas said. "We've always been taught, since we were tenth graders, that we had to step up on the defensive end because defense wins ball games. You might miss layups but if you

See 'DEFENSE,' page 13

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Top-seeded Golden Tigers punch ticket to subregion round

Staff Reports

After not winning an area game until their first round matchup in last year's area tournament against top-seeded Hamilton, Russellville made a 180 degree turn in just one season.

Going undefeated in area play over the course of the season earned the Golden Tigers the top seed in the 5A area 15 tournament and also secured a first round bye while West Point and Lawrence County duked it out for the right to square off against Russellville in the area title game.

West Point would earn that right after squeaking out a win over the Red Devils, but the Golden Tigers ultimately came out on top as area champs with a win over the Warriors on Friday night.

Russellville 68 West Point 64

The Golden Tigers jumped out to a commanding 23-12 lead over the Warriors in the first quarter thanks to nine points from Jep Bishop. Eli Gipson and Chandler Dyas each knocked down a three-pointer en route to five points each for the Golden Tiger seniors in the quarter.

The Warriors weren't able to cut into the Golden Tiger lead but they were able to keep things at bay through the second quarter with a 16-16 scoring pace.

Russellville carried a 39-28 lead into halftime after getting six points each from Dyas (who knocked down a pair of three-pointers) and Bishop. Boots McCulloch chipped in with four points in the second quarter for the Golden Tigers as well.

West Point was able to cut into the Golden Tiger lead by one point after outscoring Russellville 20-19 in the third quarter.

Connor Warhurst led the Golden Tigers in scoring for the third quarter with six points after knocking down two three-pointers. Bishop added five points to his total while McCulloch and Gipson each scored three points in the quarter. Russellville carried a 58-48 lead into the fourth quarter.

Despite being outscored 16-10 in the fourth quarter, Russellville was still able to hold off West Point and take home the area championship by a 68-64 final.

Bishop added six points in the final quarter to finish his night with 26 points, leading the Golden Tigers in scoring. Dyas would knock down another three-pointer in the quarter, bringing his scoring total to 16 in the game. McCulloch and Gipson both finished with nine points while Warhurst finished with eight points for the Golden Tigers.

Russellville will take on 5A Area 14 winner runner-up Mae Jemison at home on Wednesday night, weather permitting.

Lady Bulldogs take home area title with win over county-rival Vina

Staff Reports

Belgreen head girls basketball coach Chad Green has won his fair share of area titles during his coaching tenure. However, as the Lady Bulldogs rolled over the Vina Lady Red Devils in last Friday night's 1A area 14 tournament championship game, this year's title will undoubtedly take on a different meaning for Green and the Lady Bulldogs.

"It always feels great to win the area title. But the thing about it is, this year you not only had to be good and play well, but you also had to stay healthy as well over the course of the season," Green said. "It's been four years since we had won an area championship and these girls have been there four years in a row and finished as the runner-up. So it's really special for these girls to come out and win and get them a title."

Emma Dempsey is the senior leader of the Lady Bulldogs and has had quite the career during her time at Belgreen. Whether it be on the softball field or elsewhere, she's always found a way to succeed. But a basketball area title was the one thing eluding the senior post player.

Now, she gets to check that box off as she will finish her career on top of the area standings as a Lady Bulldog.

"It means a lot to be able to win an area title on our home court. We've never even hosted and then to get to host *and* win means a lot," Dempsey said. "Coach Green had a really solid defensive game plan for us and we worked for a few days this week on a few things we needed to work on and it was worth it."

Belgreen 61 Vina 34

The Lady Bulldogs wasted absolutely no time in taking control of the area championship game as they were able to jump out to a 16-8 lead after Dempsey put up seven points to lead Belgreen in scoring in the quarter. Dakota Green and Kaley Chandler each chipped in with two points while Bryn Scott knocked down a three for the Lady Bulldogs.

Vina would get contributions from four different players to keep the Lady Red Devils in the game for the first quarter as Sara Scott, Abbi Mitchell, Abbie Petree and Sara Harper each scored two points in the quarter.

In the second quarter, the Lady Bulldogs were able to essentially put things away as Belgreen paced the Lady Red Devils to a 20-2 scoring margin for the quarter. Noelle Willingham scored ten points in the second quarter as Dempsey and Green both scored four points in the quarter as well for Belgreen.

After halftime, Vina was able to mount somewhat of a comeback, outscoring Belgreen 19-16 in the third quarter. Harper led the scoring in the quarter for Vina with eight points Hailey Cantrell and Sara Scott both scored four points for the Lady Red Devils in the quarter as well.

Dempsey was able to keep the comeback damage to a minimum, scoring 13 out of Belgreen's 16 points in the third quarter. The Lady Bulldogs would enter the fourth quarter with a commanding 52-29 lead.

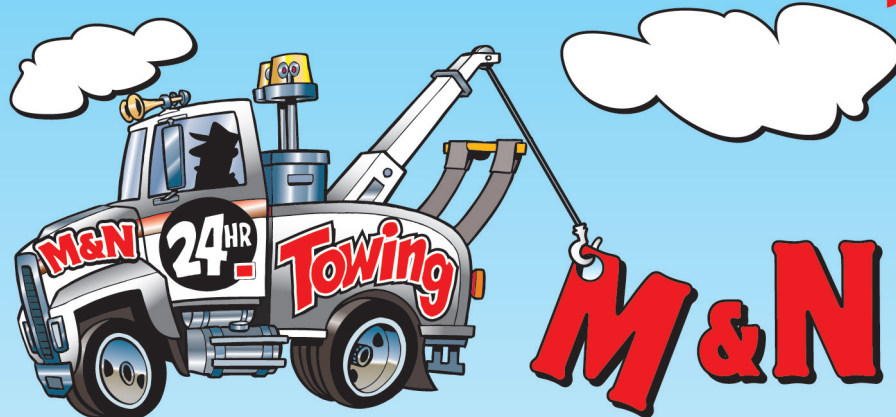
Belgreen held Vina to just five points in the fourth quarter as the Lady Bulldogs cruised in the final frame en route to their first area title in four years.

Dempsey led all scorers with 26 points while Willingham added 13 points for the Lady Bulldogs as well. Dakota Green finished her night with seven points and Chandler added six points for Belgreen. Bryn Scott chipped in with five points while Hannah Borden and Morgan Vandiver both had two points for Belgreen.

Sara Harper led Vina in scoring with ten points and Abbi Mitchell scored nine points on the night. Sara Scott went 3-5 from the free throw line en route to her eight points for the Lady Red Devils while Hailey Cantrell added four points.

Belgreen will take on Shoals Christian in the first round of subregion play this week, weather permitting.

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'DEFENSE,' from page 11

hold a really good scoring team to 50 or 60 points in the playoffs, we've got a good chance to win those games."

Thomas is a part of a key core of seniors that have led the Lady Bobcats to another extremely successful season. Alongside fellow seniors Olivia Taylor and Caitlynn Mills, this group of senior Lady Bobcats has the potential to go down as one of the more prolific groups that Phil Campbell has watched come through the program.

This senior class has done its fair share of winning during their time within the program and for head coach Craig Thomas, watching this group continue to have success over the years has filled him with a sense of overwhelming pride.

"This is their fourth area title and those three (Thomas, Taylor and Mills) have started for me since the tenth grade. They're just a very special group and I've had them since the seventh grade and they've come through the system," Thomas said. "They're relentless. That's the one thing I will say about this group. They've accomplished so much and I'm proud to see them accomplish so much during their time here."

Outside of their tenacious defense, the Lady Bobcats also play with a level of intensity from tipoff to the final buzzer that can be matched by few, if any, other teams.

"We're very fortunate to be able to play with that level of intensity the entire game. We have a lot of girls that can play and we can probably go eight or ten players deep. I tell our girls all the time that if you're not going to play hard, you're going to sit with us," Thomas said. "Our intensity is a testament to our bench and the girls we have that are playing for us. No one wants to lose their starting positions and so they have to up their game and we're fortunate because we have people that can take you out so that forces our girls to step up."

As they look to make a return to the final four and perhaps bring a blue map back to Phil Campbell, there's no room for mistakes from here on out. And you don't have to tell that to this team twice.

"We have to have everything perfected from now on. We have to play our best game that we can play and we have to continue to have great chemistry as well. Talking to each other and making sure we're on the same page is key for us," Taylor said.

"We've got to make sure we make our layups and push the ball really well. We have to be able to make our shots and run the floor because that's our game. That's how we play and we've got to be able to do that consistently," Mills said.

While the Lady Bobcats prepare for their first subregion matchup against Winfield, they aren't wasting any time in shoring up some mistakes from recent games to ensure that those mistakes don't come to light later in the playoffs.

"Our concentration has got to sharpen up a little bit. Some of the simple things like taking good shots and making our layups is something we have to make sure we work on if we want to get back where we were last year," Taylor said.

Of course this Lady Bobcats isn't *just* composed of seniors. And with a bench that can easily go 12 players deep and at the very least compete, there are plenty of juniors and sophomores that will be looking to continue the run of dominance after this year's class graduates - even though they aren't quite finished yet.

One of those aforementioned players that will look to take over next season is sharpshooting junior Kenner Scott.

"Playing with Katie, Olivia and Caitlynn, I've learned that counting on each other and having each other's backs is key. Playing together as a team and reading each other and the way everyone plays helps us get wins," Scott said. "Being leaders and a role model for the younger players coming up and wanting them to go all the way and win like we do is something that these seniors do well and I'm going to be looking to do that next year."

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'BULLDOGS,' from page 11

Wednesday at home after the Eagles fell to R.A. Hubbard in their respective area tournament championship.

While they may have had a relatively stress-free path to an area title, that didn't stop the Bulldogs from taking the opportunity to sharpen up some things and tie up some loose ends.

"It's a blessing. Now that we're out of the area and we've won it, we're looking to make a run now. We were fortunate enough to be able to work on some things during the area tournament and make sure we're ready for what comes next," Will Bonner said.

Senior forward Isac Willingham is sort of the unsung hero for the Bulldogs. If there's a tough defensive matchup to be had, Willingham is the go-to guy for Belgreen. Diving after loose balls, crashing the boards and making the plays that oftentimes go unnoticed by the average fan, Willingham takes pride in doing the things that get overlooked, but lead to victories, for the Bulldogs.

"I love doing the small things like that. I know Will, Collin and Scout are going to each get theirs and they'll find me eventually and dish it off to where I can get mine," Willingham said. "Diving on the floor after loose balls and doing things like that gets our guys pumped up and give us a huge energy boost and I take pride in that."

While cruising to yet another area title with their win over Phillips, there was another competition brewing within the area game itself. A competition between Will and Collin Bonner to see who can score the most points by the end of the game.

While Collin came out on top in the area title game with 25 points, don't think for a second that Will is going to sit idly by and let his brother take home too many more scoring crowns before the season comes to a close.

The fact that both Will and Collin Bonner have been fortunate enough to play alongside one another while doing a tremendous amount of winning during their tenure at Belgreen is part of the reason they both have cemented themselves as elite players in Belgreen history already.

"It's been awesome to be able to play with my brother. We've been playing since we were around two years old and we always are in a competition of who can score the most points, who has the better game, and things like that," Collin Bonner said. "We're both just really competitive and to be able to go out and compete on the same team with him has been really special."

"I beat him tonight but it's always fun to compete with him. Every game we come at each other afterwards seeing whoever has the most points and we try to do better than the other next time out," Collin Bonner said.



Jep Bishop Senior, Forward Russellville

The Golden Tigers have gotten key contributions at key moments from multiple different players over the course of the season. Needing a win to take home the area title, Bishop stepped up to the challenge. The senior forward put up 26 points as Russellville came out on top against West Point 68-64.



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A public notice from the Russellville Gas Board

RUSSELLVILLE GAS BOARD
1296 Walnut Gate Road
Russellville, AL 35654

The Russellville Gas Board is required by Federal Law to implement and maintain a Damage Prevention Program and a Public Awareness Program. The following information is provided in compliance with those requirements.

I. Damage Prevention Program

- A. The Russellville Gas Board (RGB) is to notify parties who periodically excavate in areas where RGB's natural gas lines are located and to inform those parties to request that RGB's natural gas lines be located. Requests for line locations may be made by calling Alabama Line Location Center at 1-800-292-8525 or the Russellville Gas Board at 1-256-332-2020. A 48 hour notice is required.

II. Public Awareness Program

- A. Natural gas has no odor, therefore, in order to identify possible leaks, the Russellville Gas Board (RGB) adds a foul smelling substance to natural gas. If you detect a foul smell near appliances, apparatus, equipment or at any other location near natural gas lines call the RGB at 1-256-332-3850 or after hours at 1-256-332-2230. If the odor is strong, proceed as follows.
- 1) Leave the structure.
 - 2) Do not flip light switches.
 - 3) Do not use electrical equipment.
 - 4) Do not create a spark or flame.
 - 5) Notify the RGB.
- B. Repairs or alterations to any natural gas facility should be performed by a licensed and bonded pipefitter.
- C. It is unlawful to attempt to repair or alter natural gas pipelines or facilities owned by RGB.
- D. The RGB's natural gas pipelines are located underground throughout the area of service. In order for the public to identify the approximate location of underground pipelines, the RGB incorporates the following measures:
- 1) Bright yellow markers identify the existence of underground natural gas pipelines.
 - 2) Above ground facilities are painted silver. Fences have signs attached identifying RGB facilities.
 - 3) An on-site location of natural gas pipelines is available by calling Alabama Line Location Center at 1-800-292-8525 or the RGB at 1-256-332-2020.
 - 4) Detail maps are available at the RGB office located at 1296 Walnut Gate Road, Russellville, AL, 35654.
- E. In the event of damage to RGB's natural gas facilities the affected public should leave the area and the party causing the damage should:
- 1) Leave the equipment and premises immediately.
 - 2) Do not create a spark or flame.
 - 3) Notify the RGB immediately.

Natural gas is a safe and reliable form of energy. By implementing the Damage Prevention Program and Public Awareness Program, the Russellville Gas Board is committed to ensuring that it stays that way.

Russellville Gas Board

La Comisión de Gas de Russellville
1296 Walnut Gate Road
Russellville, AL 35654

La Comisión de Gas de Russellville por requerimiento de la ley Federal tiene que implementar y mantener un Programa de Prevención de Daños y un Programa de Conciencia Pública. La siguiente información va de acuerdo a dichos requerimientos.

I. Programa de Prevención de Daños

- A. La Comisión de Gas de Russellville (RGB) deberá notificar a las partes que periódicamente excavan en áreas en que la RGB tiene líneas de gas natural e informar a dichas partes que piden que las líneas de la RGB sean localizadas. Para pedir la localización de las líneas puede hacerlo llamando al Centro de Localización de Líneas de Alabama al número 1800-292-8525 o en la oficina de la Comisión de Gas de Russellville al teléfono 1-256-332-2020. Se requiere notificar con 48 horas de anticipación.

II. Programa de Conciencia Pública

- A. El gas natural no tiene olor, por lo tanto para poder identificar posibles fugas, la Comisión de Gas de Russellville (RGB) le agrega una sustancia de olor fétido al gas natural. Si usted detecta este olor cerca de algún aparato o equipo o en cualquier otro lugar cerca de una línea de gas natural llame a la RGB al teléfono 1 256-332-3850 o después de horas de servicio al 1-256-332-2230. Si el olor es fuerte, haga lo siguiente:
- 1) Aléjese del recinto.
 - 2) No prenda luces o apagadores.
 - 3) No use equipo eléctrico.
 - 4) No cree una chispa o flama.
 - 5) Notifique a la RGB.
- B. Reparaciones o alteraciones a cualquier instalación de gas natural deberá ser hecha por un tubero con licencia y certificado.
- C. Es contra la ley intentar reparar o alterar una línea de gas natural o instalación propiedad de la RGB.
- D. Las líneas de gas natural de la RGB se localizan bajo tierra en el área de servicio. Para que el público pueda identificar la localización aproximada de líneas enterradas, la RGB incorpora las siguientes medidas:
- 1) Marcadores de color amarillo brillante identifican la existencia de líneas subterráneas de gas natural.
 - 2) Servicios sobre el suelo están pintadas de color plateado. Las cercas tienen señales identificando servicios de la RGB.
 - 3) Se encuentra disponible un servicio para localizar líneas de gas natural llamando al Centro de Localización de Líneas de Alabama al teléfono 1-800-292-8525 o a la RGB al 1-256-332-2020.
 - 4) Hay mapas detallados disponibles en la oficina de la RGB localizada en 1229 Walnut Gate Road, Russellville, AL, 35654.
- E. En el caso de daño a los servicios de gas natural de la RGB el público afectado deberá alejarse del área y la parte que cause el daño debe:
- 1) Dejar el equipo y el lugar inmediatamente.
 - 2) No provoque una chispa o flama.
 - 3) Notifique la RGB de inmediato.

El gas natural es una fuente de energía segura y confiable. Implementando el Programa de Prevención de Daños y Conciencia al Público, la Comisión de Gas de Russellville esta comprometida a asegurar que siga de esa manera.

Comisión de Gas de Russellville