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Russellville native Borden shares lifetime of success, tragedy in new book

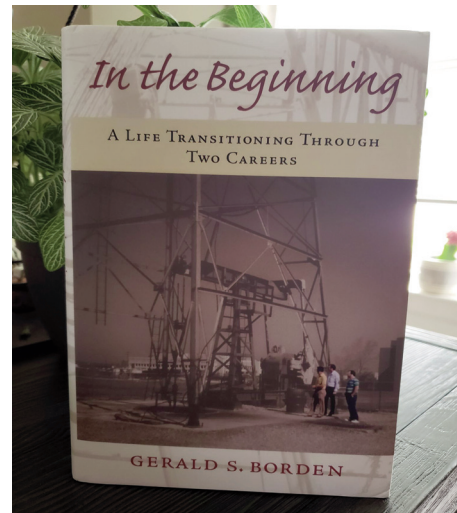
John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Gerald Borden's life reads like a book.

The 79-year-old Russellville native has enjoyed professional success in the propane and natural gas industry, as he rose through the ranks to become CEO of South Alabama Gas. That success, though, has seen more than a fair share of personal tragedy thrown in as well.

Several years ago Borden began writing notes about his experiences, something he called *reflections* of his life. Eventually, he just kept writing and seven months later, he had completed his autobiography, *In the Beginning: A Life Transitioning Through Two Careers*.

See 'BORDEN,' page 8



COURTESY PHOTO

Borden's autobiography, *In the Beginning: A Life Transitioning Through Two Careers*, details the peaks and valleys throughout his life.

Russellville Gas Board 'investing' in customers with appliance rebates, financing

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

If you're considering the purchase of a new natural gas appliance, the Russellville Gas Board has a program that will make that process easier and cheaper.

The Russellville Gas Board is offering rebates and financing on a variety of gas appliances. Gas Board Manager Blaine Collier describes it as an 'investment' in their customers.

"This is a mutually beneficial program. We are trying to invest in our

customers by helping them with the up-front costs to replace an appliance," Collier said. "It's not easy to come up with those dollars, especially when it's an unexpected purchase. And on the retail side, we want to sell gas. The more gas we sell, the lower our rates can be.

"The rebates help our customers and then we see a continued return on it not just for that customer but for all our customers," he added.

Rebates in the amount of \$300 per heater are available for space

See 'REBATES,' page 9

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James Allen Baker, 82, of Russellville, passed away on Thursday, February 25th. Interment at Franklin Memory Gardens.

Martha "Jean" Badgett Breece, 83, of Russellville, passed away on February 27th. A private burial service will be held.

Gloria Ann McKinney, 83, of Russellville, passed away on Wednesday, February 24th. Interment at Franklin Memory Gardens.

Bertha Joy Murner Pinkard, 77, of Littleville, passed away on Sunday, February 27th. Interment at Winston Memorial Cemetery.

Roy Lee Price, 74, of Russellville, passed away on Thursday, February 25th. Interment at Knights of Pythias Cemetery.

Mary Ruth Ergle Weeks Williams, 89, of Phil Campbell, passed away on Sunday, February 27th. Interment at Blue Springs Cemetery.

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Council approves garbage can purchase in preparation for collection take over

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Council approved the purchase of 210 new garbage cans as city officials prepare to take over garbage collection in early April.

The council unanimously approved the \$11,815.60 purchase from Schaefer Solutions. The city will also purchase approximately 30 new cans from the Franklin County Solid Waste Department, according to Russellville Mayor David Grissom.

The council voted last year to extend its contract with the Solid Waste Department for six months as city officials prepared for the transition to collecting garbage for city residents. That service will likely begin on Monday, April 5.

The City of Russellville will purchase all garbage cans already in use inside city limits for \$25 each, Grissom said.

After researching the issue last year, Grissom and the council decided the city could resume garbage collection in a cost-efficient manner. Two

one-armed garbage trucks have been purchased, and the council approved the hiring of Juarez Fitzgerald and Ricky Johnston as Drivers/Operators for solid waste in the Russellville Street Department.

Street Department Manager Shannon Wilson will act as solid waste supervisor and the council approved a pay increase for Wilson to Grade Nine, Step Nine, in return for his additional responsibilities.

The original plan was to hire a solid waste foreman and one driver/operator, but the council decided to hire two drivers/operators and allow Wilson to handle the day-to-day supervision of solid waste collection.

Residents will see no changes in their garbage collection schedule once the city takes over.

In other agenda items, the council:

—declared as surplus property air packs and air bottles in the Russellville Fire Department.

—accepted a letter of resignation from School Resource Officer Sammie Washington and approved a contract with Scotty Lowery to serve as School Resource Officer.

—approved the purchase of a 2014 Ford F150 from ALDOT surplus equipment in the amount of \$12,946 for the Russellville Street Department.

—declared a vacancy for a laborer in the Russellville Street Department and authorized advertisement to solicit job applications.

Grissom expressed his appreciation to city employees and department heads for their work during the recent severe weather period.

"We are thankful for all our department heads and employees for their efforts during the ice and snow event," Grissom said. "Shannon and the Street Department were out day and night, along with our police, fire department all working together with the Electric, Gas and Water and Sewer Departments.

"With the hand we were dealt, they all did an excellent job," he added.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Council is set for Monday, March 1, 2021, with work session at 6 p.m., and meeting to follow.



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Registration now open for Alabama 4-H Summer Camp

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Registration is now open for the Alabama 4-H Summer Camp. The camp is set for June 9-11, 2021, at the Alabama 4-H Center in Columbiana. The camp is for 4-Hers ages 9-14 as of January 1, 2021. The \$150 cost includes two nights/three days at the 4-H Center, meals and snacks during camp and a camp t-shirt. Camp activities include canoeing, paddle boarding, rock climbing wall, team activities, games, swimming and more. Spaces are limited, so register soon. Registration ends March 10, 2021. For more information, contact Vanessa Roberts, 4-H Foundation Regional Extension Agent in Franklin County at 256-309-9576 or by email at vnr0001@aces.edu.

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, be sure and visit us online at www.franklinfreepress.net!

Alabama 4-H Summer Camp



- **When?** June 9th-11th
- **Where?** Camp is at the Alabama 4-H Center in Columbiana, AL
- **Who?** Camp is for 4-Hers ages 9-14 as of January 1, 2021
- **Cost?** \$150 which includes 2 nights/3 days at the 4-H Center, meals and snacks during camp, and a camp t-shirt. (payment plans are available)
- **What?** Camp activities include canoeing, paddle boarding, rock climbing wall, team activities, games, swimming pool, and more!

Spaces are limited, so contact our office now!

Registration Ends March 10, 2021.

Vanessa Roberts, 4-H Foundation Regional Extension Agent

256-309-9576

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The *Franklin Free Press* is published by hometown people, for hometown people. We urge contributions of all kinds, including guest columns, picture submissions, cartoons or letters to the editor. Send any letters to our office via U.S. Postal Service or e-mail, and we will gladly publish them. Letters must be signed and contain the hometown and phone number of the author. The *Franklin Free Press* reserves the right to edit letters for style, length and content.

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WiFi hotspots throughout downtown Russellville now operational

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Hotspots offering free Internet usage are now operational in downtown Russellville, as a result of the Russellville City Council approving the project late last year.

The council contracted with Complete Wireless System, owned and operated by John Stancil, to install hotspots in several areas along Jackson Avenue. The city's cost for the project was reimbursed through the State of Alabama Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES).

Along with invaluable assistance from the Russellville Electric Board, Stancil's company installed the access point for the Internet on a large pole located in the alley between Franklin Street West and Lawrence Street. A chain system is being used, whereby five light poles along Jackson Avenue receive the signal from the launch point.

Internet usage is free, but the council asked Stancil to restrict the use of streaming services, which drag down the speed, and to block access to illicit web sites.

City Councilman Darren Woodruff, who researched the feasibility of the free downtown Wi-Fi idea, said the goal was to provide another resource to students and families who do not have reliable broadband Internet options at home.

"This project was a way to provide city residents a service without incurring a startup cost. For students who have no Internet at home, they have no way to complete virtual learning," Woodruff said.

To access the free Internet, search for Wi-Fi networks that begin with the word 'Russellville.' Additionally, a SECTN hotspot can also be selected.

Stancil said users will get download speed from 265-300 Mbps and up to 25-30 Mbps on upload from the primary launch point. The strongest sig-

See 'WIFI,' Page 5

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, visit us on the web at www.franklinfreepress.net!

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'WIFI,' from page 4

nal can be accessed on Franklin Street by the First Baptist Church parking lot, Stancil said.

There are two systems, 5g and 2.4Ghz. The 5g only works on newer devices that are built for 5g usage. The free Wi-Fi systems have no password, Stancil said. The first time they log on, users will be directed to a page where they are asked to accept terms of usage. If they click 'accept,' they are then taken to the Russellville web portal and able to search the web from there.

Stancil said his company is monitoring usage through Media Access Control (MAC) addresses and users who access sites that are inappropriate will be blocked from further accessing those sites and they eventually can be blocked from using the system at all.

Stancil said he is pleased with the result of the technology used in the project, but he's constantly looking for ways to improve it.

"Everything is good and functional like I said it would be. I'm satisfied but it's a test situation for me and my company. We're not done with it," Stancil said. "We're continuously looking for ways to improve it."

Most of the Wi-Fi systems installed by Complete Wireless System are done in rural areas, so the challenges of navigating through all the different surroundings in a downtown area was something new.

Stancil expressed his appreciation to the Russellville Electric Board for their assistance in working on the downtown project.

"Charlie Canida and his employees were wonderful. They are the most outstanding, helpful folks I've ever worked with. They deserve a lot of the credit for this project," Stancil said.

Send your guest columns, letters to the editor and other creative submissions to franklinfreepress@yahoo.com.

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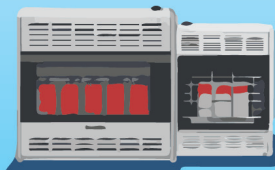
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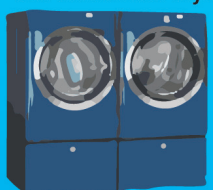


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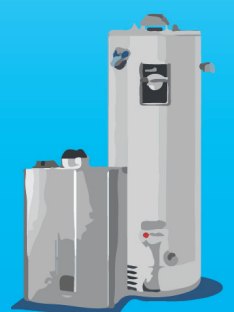
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EVENTS OF INTEREST • FAMILY REUNIONS • PLAYS • CHURCH GATHERINGS • EDUCATIONAL • CLUB MEETINGS


 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.


 Southeast Professional Wrestling presents the 2nd annual Matthew Wallace Tribute Show, Saturday, March 6, at the Russellville Recreation Center at 201 Ash Avenue. Doors open at 6:30 p.m., and bell time is 7:30 p.m. Main Event features Lil' Sicko vs. Jay Blade. Women's Title match Megyn Moxley vs. Killer Kaylin. All tickets \$10. Kids 5 and under free. For more information, call 205-544-5315.

 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. Burlson 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.

Email your event information to us at franklinfreepress@yahoo.com.

39th annual Miss RHS pageant set for March 5th

Submitted to the FFP

The RHS Annual Staff will sponsor the 39th annual Miss RHS pageant on Friday, March 5 at 7:00 p.m. in the RHS auditorium. The pageant offers an array of talent and beauty. We are very thankful that the Russellville Community has been very generous this year.

Miss RHS 2021 will be awarded over \$1800 in cash and prizes. This year's award sponsors are Artistic Jewelry, Dr. Wayne and Mrs. Lela Ray, Kameo Salon, Joseph Roman's Photography, Campbell Vision Center, Holly Nails, Maggie J's Boutique, Lee Nails, 43 Grill, Ms. Nails, Salon St. Clair, Audrey's Gifts and Décor, Russellville Nutrition, The Grind, Wal-Mart, High Level Nutrition, American Health and Fitness, El Patron, The Ville Nutrition, Hello Gorgeous, Hangout Nutrition, Suzy's Clothing, Calm Therapy Massage & Wellness, Frosty Inn, Cash and Kate Design, Joyous Adventures – Cassie Goodwin, Russellville Curves, The Mustard Seed Bakery, and Andersyn Jack.

Additionally, the contestant awarded Viewer's Choice will be given Sheila Fajl earrings from Russellville Florist and Gifts. This year's program sponsors are AFTT Studio, Morgan Chiropractic, CB&S Bank, Brian's Auto Sales, Dr. Wayne and Miss Lela Ray, Ms. Susie Hovater Malone, Family Pharmacy, Cherry Tree Lane Bridal and Formal Boutique, Community Spirit Bank, EyeCare Professionals, Dr. and Mrs. Alan Sherrill, Wood Thompson Insurance, Valley State Bank, Russellville Water and Sewer Board, First Metro Bank, Russellville Electric, Alabama Central Credit Union, Russellville Nutrition, Place of Grace, K&S Outdoors, American Realty, Motor Sports SuperStore, Mayor David Grissom, Hester Printing, and Mrs. Marla Kerby. Special thanks to AFTT Studio for sponsoring the Contestant, Little Sister, and Rising Star Doughnut Party.

Miss Ellie Kerby, Miss RHS 2018, will be emceeing this year's pageant. Miss Sydney Medley, Miss RHS 2020 and student at UNA, will also be assisting and performing. The contestants will be competing in judges' interview, evening gown, and talent. Escorts are Will Calhoun, Dawson Green, Jax Greenhill, Kage Malone, Christian Medina, Ian Miller, Tino Soto, and Caden Watts.

Dr. AnnaKay Holland is the coordinator of the pageant and Annual Staff sponsor, and Ms. Cindy Coan is the pageant director. Tickets have been presold due to Covid attendance regulations. Programs will be available for \$5. This event is one of the highlights of the year. There will be lots of entertainment that you will not want to miss.

We are so excited to again have Rising Stars and Little Sisters at our pageant again this year. Each contestant in the pageant was asked to select two girls who are students in Russellville City Schools to assist in their performance. The Rising Stars are girls in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. You will see these little ladies during the evening gown revue. The

Little Sisters for the pageant are girls in grades sixth through eighth. They will be introducing themselves and the talent for their Big Sister during the talent portion of the pageant. It is hoped that these young ladies will use this opportunity to be in front of this audience and one day want to be contestants in the Miss RHS pageant. We are continuing to build traditions. Something we are very good at doing at Russellville City Schools.

Miss RHS Rising Stars are: Brantley Benford, Kinsley Benford, Ava Bianco, Annalesa Bonds, Maci Reagan Boyd, Baylor Bradford, Layla Grace Cleveland, Tinley Cleveland, Bella Rae Entrekin, Brilynn Green, Ruby Gist Harbin, Lyza Shaw Herring, Hadley Kate Horton, Kennadie Keeton, Karlei Mitchell, Emme Odom, Mackie Drew Parker, Raylee Peden, Darby Pinkard, Kingzlee Poss, Lillain Grace Ritter, Alexa Nichole Trapp, Rita Maria Valesquez, Ivy Elizabeth Willis, and Kaylee Wilson.

Miss RHS Little Sisters are: Josie Burcham, Morgan Calderon, Camden Elizabeth Carson, Ella Colagraoss, Dixie Dover, Cara Elliot, Harlee Shyanne Fisher, Emmy Green, Keyli Hargett, Addison Holcomb, Anna Kate Hood, Maci Cate Jackson, Chloe James, Anna-Kate Kennedy, Jemma Moore, Audrey Oliver, Lily Cate Pace, Halyee Elizabeth Patrick, Gracie Kate Pinkard, Avery McReynolds, Hailey Rogers, Raney Stone, Ansley Kathryn Willis, Ellie Willis, and Sarah Kate Wilson.

The proceeds from this event will benefit the students by defraying their cost of the yearbook. We hope your schedule will permit you to come and support our RHS students.



COURTESY PHOTO

Front Row: Shelby Carson, Brooke Putman, MaKayla Gann, Jodie Morrow, Lauren Mae Sturdivant, Abigail Dodson, Rosa Ena Maravilla, and Celia Echeverria.

Second Row: Kaitlin Hope Speck, Chloe She)eld, Peyton Parrish, Madyn Alexis Harris, Silvie Miller, Bailey Bishop, Ashlee Moon, Caylin Pinkard, and Camille Lynn.

Third Row: Keslie Brook Allen, Annie Willis, Melanie Trejo, Sophie Hill, Madeline Cooper, Tori Tiffin, and Stella Hill.

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'BORDEN,' from page 1

Through Two Careers.
Borden chronicles his business experience as well as his advancement through the state hierarchy of the Freemasons all the way to being elected the youngest-ever Grand Master of Alabama in 1978. Borden, a member of Russellville Lodge 371 and Sheffield Lodge 503, would later be suspended, reinstated, and suspended again before he ultimately withdrew his membership from the Russellville Lodge, converting the Sheffield Lodge to his primary membership.

In the Beginning is available for purchase by visiting www.coldwaterpublishers.com. The cost is \$29.95.

The book includes a foreword by Borden's lifelong friend and Russellville attorney Danny McDowell, who describes Borden as "the product of a blue-collar neighborhood and upbringing, who was, as Southerners say, raised right."

McDowell describes Borden's unflinching belief in and reliance on the "power, authority and grace of the supreme architect of the universe and the peace and comfort received as a result of that faith."

Borden would rely on that faith through the tragic loss of a young wife and later the loss of a daughter as well as all his siblings.

His early years saw Borden and his three siblings (James, Sis and Ken) raised in a home on North Gaines Avenue, followed by a move to the Newtown mining village on what is now East Lawrence Street in Russellville.

Dad was working for Sloss Mining Company, which later became U.S. Pipe and Foundry...All of the plant operations were within walking distance of our house. When we heard the whistle marking the end of a work shift, we knew Dad would be home in a few minutes.

When Borden was eight, the family moved back to downtown Russellville in a house on East Franklin Street. He recalls childhood experiences ranging from watching the Franklin County Courthouse burn to sitting on stools at the soda fountain at Bradford's Drug Store to enjoy a cherry Coke.

Borden graduated from Russellville High School in 1959, then moved to Chicago to join his sister and her family, where he worked at Motorola for several months.

Borden returned home and with the assistance of his brother James, was able to purchase a Shell service station and small grocery store across from Hester Heights subdivision on Highway 43. He soon opened a small engine repair shop at the same location. At age 19, Borden found himself owner/operator of a thriving business in his hometown.

He later married the former Margaret Kelley, sold his business and went to

work for the Russellville Gas Board in March 1964, after the birth of his daughter Melissa. Borden would later become manager at the Russellville Gas Board.

Margaret's health took a rapid decline after she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. Complications from a hysterectomy operation, where a blood clot moved to her heart and caused a massive heart attack, cost Margaret her life in 1971.

He met his second wife, Jo Ann, when Borden was in Florence meeting with a representative from Blue Cross. The couple married on October 20, 1973, at Waco Baptist Church with Bro. John Holcomb presiding.

Jo Ann delivered twin girls on February 6, 1976, giving Borden four daughters.

My only advice to husbands/fathers with four daughters is to just get used to losing all the arguments/discussion. You can't win against five-to-one odds. I later learned that the older girls told the twins to just bat those big eyes at Daddy and he will give in every time.

Through his adult years, Borden knew God was calling him into the ministry. It wasn't until 2004, though, when he would finally answer that call becoming pastor of Oak Grove Baptist Church in Repton, AL.

Within a month of becoming pastor, Borden's brother Ken died from lung cancer. Two weeks later, Borden's faith would be tested again, as he received a call telling him that Ginger, one of his twins, had been involved in a serious accident with her 19-month-old son in the car.

While the boy would recover, Ginger suffered severe brain injuries and would never recover. She died on November 22, 2012, while lying in her mother's arms surrounded by her family.

The book's later chapters detail Borden's ascension, suspension and reinstatement to the Freemasons. Borden said he included the chapter to "provide a complete record of my illegal suspension, later trials and the appeals."

Borden concludes *In the Beginning* by explaining why he published a book.

This book was written about my life's experiences and lessons learned from those experiences. It is my hope that others may learn from my experience.

And through Borden's tenure as a small business owner, corporate CEO, state-level leader in the Freemasons, pastor and a man who endured his share of personal tragedy, there's a lot for the reader to learn.

While he's learned much from his life experiences, Borden's not one to dwell on his failures. There's just not enough time, as he explains.

It is neither the monetary value of a watch or a man that's important. What is important is what the man does with the time God allows him.

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Belgreen kindergarten registration now open

Submitted to the FFP

Belgreen kindergarten registration for the 2021-22 school year is now open. Students must be five years old on or before September 1, 2021.

Please use the following link to register your child: <http://bit.ly/3szreiP>. Registration information and the link are also available on the school's website and Facebook page.

There will be a document drop off day on Friday, March 26, 2021, during school hours at the school. Please bring a copy of your child's birth certificate, Social Security card, immunization record, and up to date proof of residency.

If your child is currently attending pre-K at Belgreen, you do not have to supply a copy of the child's birth certificate or Social Security card.

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'REBATES,' from page 1

heaters, up to a \$600 maximum. Gas dryers and ranges offer a \$100 rebate, and if a customer replaces his or her primary home heating unit, a rebate up to \$800 is available. Water heaters include up to \$500 rebate.

There are also rebate incentives on fireplace hearths or self-contained gas log units, Collier said.

Loans are available that can finance up to 100 percent of installation costs, subject to credit approval. The monthly loan payments are added to the customer's utility bill. A quick approval process will let applicants know if they're approved.

The loans include fixed-rate terms up to six years, with no prepayment penalties.

Collier said the customer must use a licensed gas fitter to be eligible, and the loan program is available to residential owner-occupied single-family and duplex homes.

Additionally, the Russellville Gas Board carries a supply of some appliances, including tank-style water heaters. Tankless water heaters can be ordered. The gas board has a limited supply of space heaters in stock as well.

"We just want to give the customer another option. A furnace is certainly a large expense and we wanted to offer some solution to soften that blow," Collier said. "The loans can be set up where you can spread the expense out over six years."

To receive the rebates, customers must apply and schedule a safety inspection by a gas board employee. And the customer must present a receipt to confirm the purchase of the appliance. The rebate applies only to new appliances. Once the inspection is approved, the rebate is issued to the customer.

To apply for financing or a rebate, call the Russellville Gas Board at 256-332-2020.

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Bobcats keep rolling with Saturday sweep

Staff reports

Phil Campbell improved to 6-0 on the season and stretched its overall win streak to 16 games with a doubleheader sweep on Saturday, edging New Hope 3-2 and routing rival Winfield 22-5.

Pitchers Mason Swinney and Luke Barnwell were the story in the opener, combining to throw a one-hitter. Swinney got the start and went five innings, allowing two runs (both unearned) on one hit while striking out five and walking two. A junior now in his third season at the varsity level, Swinney has given up just four earned runs in 39 career innings (good for a 0.72 ERA) while racking up 66 strikeouts and issuing only 13 walks.

Barnwell (1-0), a senior, picked up the win against New Hope with two perfect innings of relief, striking out two and throwing 20 of his 26 pitches for strikes. He is now 6-1 in his varsity career with a sparkling 1.47 ERA.

The Bobcats, who had totaled 56 runs on 59 hits in their first four games of the season, managed only four hits in Saturday's opener. One of those was a first-inning double by Swinney, who moved up on a passed ball and scored on an error to spot Phil Campbell an early 1-0 lead.

Swinney singled in the bottom of the third and eventually scored on another error to make it 2-0. New Hope took advantage of a leadoff walk and three Bobcat errors in the top of the fourth to score twice and tie the game.

The score remained even until the bottom of the

See 'BOBCATS,' page 13

BIRMINGHAM BOUND

Thanks to sharpshooting, disciplined play, and a team-first approach, the Belgreen Bulldogs are starting down their first final four appearance in two decades after winning the northwest regional finals.



PHOTO BY KYLE GLASGOW

The Bulldogs, led by Scout Bragwell's 24 points, shot over 60% from the floor in their 73-58 victory over Pickens County.

Brady Petree
 Franklin Free Press

When head coach Marty Cooper took over the Belgreen boys' basketball program two seasons ago, things needed a little... revamping, to say the least. And to hear junior guard Will Bonner put it, Cooper came in and essentially had to rebuild the program from the ground up.

"When coach Cooper first came in, he was building the program from scratch. We came into practice and there were some of us that didn't know how to do a jump stop, didn't know how to make a power layup and he had to build everything," Bonner said. "He's built this program into what it is in just two years now. He's the best coach I've ever had, by far."

And Cooper has certainly rebuilt the program. After falling to Decatur Heritage in the

regional semifinals last season, the Bulldogs one-upped their performance from a year ago by not only advancing to the regional finals, but bringing home the regional title with their 73-58 win over Pickens County on Thursday night.

Cooper has only been at the helm of the Bulldog program for two seasons but it didn't take him very long to realize the impact that the game of basketball has on the Belgreen community night-in and night-out. So for his squad to reach heights that haven't been reached since the 1999-2000 season, he realizes the significance not only for his guys, but the fans in the stands as well.

"I'm just excited for our community. 1994 was the last time they went to the title game and they ended up losing. Other than that and the 1999-2000 season, that's it. The boys program doesn't have a state championship to its record," Cooper

See 'BIRMINGHAM,' page 12

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'BIRMINGHAM,' from page 11

said. "We know it's going to be hard. When you get down to four teams, you know you're facing top-notch guys. We would love to be the first boys' team to bring home a state championship to Belgreen High School and the community."

With their season on the line and the program's first final four berth in two decades hanging in the balance, Belgreen boys head coach Marty Cooper's confidence in his guys never wavered. The second-year head coach for the Bulldogs has always had an overwhelming sense of confidence in his players and that confidence was on full display in their regional final victory.

"The experience last year against Decatur Heritage was important for us. We felt like coming into this game that it wasn't going to be a nail biter. We felt like we were either going to panic and they were just going to overwhelm us and blow us out or we were going to dictate tempo and control the game," Cooper said. "And that's exactly what happened, we were able to control the game and play at our pace. They live and die by getting steals off of the press and we were able to control the ball really well for the whole game."

Controlling the pace of play and limiting their turnovers was indeed key for the Bulldogs in the win. While Belgreen accounted for more turnovers than their opponent (13-11), they were still able to get off good shots while breaking that aforementioned full court press.

While the Bulldogs were able to jump out to an early 16-10 lead after the first quarter, Pickens County wasn't able to close the gap on Belgreen, but were able to keep the damage to a minimum after the Bulldogs outscored the Tornadoes 18-17, leading to a 34-27 halftime lead for Belgreen.

The third quarter is where the Bulldogs made their mark. Going on a 25-15 run throughout the third quarter, the Bulldogs were able to pick up a massive 19-point lead ending the third quarter and they would never look back en route to the 73-58 final.

"This is the best group of guys that anyone can play with and we've got the best coach in the state right now and it's just amazing. Coach Cooper had us so prepared for tonight and it showed," Will Bonner said. "He knows that there's always something that we can get better at and he constantly pushes us to better ourselves and tonight is a result of that."

One thing that separates Cooper from other coaches across any level, is his demeanor. Rare are the occasions in which you see Cooper raise his voice, jump out of his seat in anger or disgust or even throw his hands over his head. While that demeanor is on display every night for Cooper, he felt as though the Bulldogs regional final matchup called for a scaling back, even for his standards.

"I thought it was important for us to be calm tonight. Because we knew that they (Pickens County) were going to be under a lot of pressure out there and we knew they wanted to win and repeat," Cooper said. "So I tried to be even more low-key than normal just to try and be that calming presence instead of getting after them like we might do some games."

Most nights, like their regional semifinal matchup against Holy Spirit on Monday, the Bulldogs would turn to Will or Collin Bonner to shoulder most of the workload in key games or when in a tight spot. However, this time around the Bulldogs turned to one of their few veterans to lead the charge.

Senior guard Scout Bragwell was the one to answer the call.

The sharpshooting Bragwell, who was one of the top three-point shooters across Franklin County a year ago, would go on an absolute tear as he torched Pickens County to the tune of 24 points on 8-11 from the floor, including going 6-8 from deep.

"Everything just added up for me. This was just such a huge game in a huge arena and we had such a large crowd here supporting us, it was just unreal," Bragwell said. "It was the biggest game of the year for us no doubt and we stepped up. I just couldn't go out with a loss. We always say that Wallace is our curse and we can never get passed here and to just be the team that finally does it, it feels so good and it's so rewarding."

After their win over Holy Spirit on Monday to send the Bulldogs to the regional finals, Cooper expressed his delight with how even though Bragwell only came away with six points in the win, those six points seemed to come at a crucial point for the Bulldogs in the win.

Bragwell coming in clutch once again for the Bulldogs was no surprise to his head coach.

"What Scout did for us tonight was huge. He shot the ball really well against Covenant Christian but tonight he just broke their (Pickens County) back tonight," Cooper said. "Every time they thought they might have a chance, it seems like he hit one. Just an outstanding performance from Scout and we needed it from him."

While the Bulldogs certainly possessed their fair share of offensive firepower, the real test as to how Thursday night's game shook out would come down to two things: defense, and rebounding. At the core of those two strategic efforts from the Bulldogs? None other than senior Isac Willingham.

While Willingham finished with only six points on the night, a majority of his work was done on the glass and in the paint, as per usual. And while that's where his work has come in handy most nights for the Bulldogs this season, there was no bigger need for his services than on Thursday.

"They were a big, strong, physical team and they're tough. We knew that if we didn't at least go out there and match it, we were going to get beat, and we ended up matching it," Willingham said. "This is what we've worked for since we were five and six years old. We've just put in so much work to get to this point and we're finally here."

The Bulldogs were able to match the Tornadoes in rebounding with 30 boards apiece on the night. Keeping with an athletic team like Pickens County in terms of rebounding while shooting 61.2% from the floor (50% from beyond the arc) will be enough to seal the deal nine times out of ten.

See 'BIRMINGHAM,' page 15

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'BOBCATS,' from page 11

sixth, when senior outfielder Trey Leindecker reached on a single. Levi Crittenden was hit by a pitch, and Leindecker took third on an errant pickoff throw. He scored the go-ahead run on a balk, and then Barnwell finished off the win with a one-two-three seventh.

Swinney led the way at the plate, going 2-for-4 with a double and two runs. Leindecker was 1-for-3 with a run, and Austen Baker went 1-for-2 with a walk.

The Bobcats got their bats going in the nightcap against Winfield, breaking the game open with six runs in the top of the third and then scoring 14 runs over the final three innings, including nine in the seventh.

Bryant Hyde and Swinney, the first two hitters in the order, did the bulk of the damage, combining to go 7-for-12 with three doubles, eight RBIs and seven runs scored. Cam Habada (1-0) got the win on the mound, striking out six and allowing two earned runs in three innings.

Phil Campbell got on the board in the top of the first, scoring twice on a dropped third strike, an error, a hit batter, a wild pitch and a sac fly by Ridge Raper. Habada struck out three batters in the bottom of the first and then racked up three more K's in the second, keeping it a 2-0 game.

The Bobcats broke it open with a six-run third inning highlighted by RBI doubles from Swinney and Barnwell, a sac fly from John Miller Lawson and a two-run double from Hyde that stretched the lead to 8-0.

Winfield didn't roll over, however, scoring a run in the bottom of the third and four more in the fourth to trim the lead to 8-5. Phil Campbell answered with a three-run fifth keyed by Swinney's two-run single.

The Bobcats scored twice in the top of the sixth to make it 13-5 and then sent 15 men to the plate in the top of the seventh, scoring nine times to finish with their highest single-game run total of the season. Crittenden, Hyde and Kendrick Baker each had an RBI single in the seventh, and Swinney added an RBI double.

Habada allowed two hits and four walks in his three innings before giving way to Austen Baker, who worked two innings in relief. Baker allowed one earned run on three hits with two strikeouts and two walks. Crittenden pitched two scoreless innings to close it out, allowing three hits and striking out three.

Hyde, hitless in game one, bounced back to go 4-for-7 in game two with a double, three RBIs and three runs scored. Swinney went 3-for-5 in the night-

cap with two doubles, five RBIs and four runs scored. Crittenden was 1-for-3 with two RBIs and three runs, and Barnwell had a double, an RBI and two runs.

Austen Baker was 1-for-2 with two runs scored, and Raper went 1-for-4 with an RBI and two runs. Bryant Anthony was 1-for-4 with a run, and Hunter Baker scored twice.

During their 6-0 start, the Bobcats have out-scored their opponents 81-9.



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'BIRMINGHAM,' from page 12

What makes the Bulldogs victory over the reigning 1A state champions even more impressive, is the fact that it wasn't just a win. It was a runaway victory for Belgreen.

Over the course of the entire 32 minutes of gameplay, the score was tied for 3 minutes and 11 seconds while Pickens County maintained a lead for a measly 22 seconds. Leaving Belgreen to carry a lead for a whopping 28 minutes and 14 seconds.

As for Collin Bonner, who finished with 17 points on 8-12 shooting on the night, coming into the game, he knew he would draw the card being the go-to guy to matchup with the extremely athletic Pickens County at the rim. And while nerves might have set in before the game, it didn't take long for those nerves to subside and give way to a much-needed confidence boost from his teammates.

"I'm just happy. I was nervous going into the game because we knew how athletic they were and I knew that they were extremely good defensively. But I knew that if we didn't turn the ball over and we boxed out, I knew we had it in the bag," Collin Bonner said. "We had confidence in one another. We were confident on the ride up here and we were just giving each other pep talks and talking about what we needed to do right and as long as we keep that mentality, we'll keep winning."

Will Bonner finished his night with 20 points on 8-15 shooting to go along with six points and four rebounds. Collin Bonner finished with 17 points in addition to two blocks, two assists and eight rebounds while knocking down his lone three-point shot. Bragwell would add five assists and four rebounds to his credit to go along with 24 points on the night. Willingham pulled down seven rebounds while dishing out three assists to go along with his six points. Austin James would chip in with four points and two rebounds on the night while Canaan Stough added two points and two rebounds for the Bulldogs.

Belgreen will play Notasulga on Tuesday, March 2nd at Bill Harris Arena in the 1A state semifinals.

Belgreen was scheduled to play Tuesday in the 1A state semifinals, after the FFP was sent to press. For information regarding the Bulldogs semifinal game, please visit www.franklinfreepress.net for the latest news and updates.



Scout Bragwell Senior, Guard Belgreen

Bragwell has had one of the purest shooting strokes in Franklin County during his time at Belgreen. And that beautiful shot was on full-display when the Bulldogs needed it most. Bragwell scored 24 points on 8-11 shooting while going 6-8 from beyond the arc to lead the Bulldogs in scoring in their 73-58 1A northwest regional final victory over Pickens County last Thursday.



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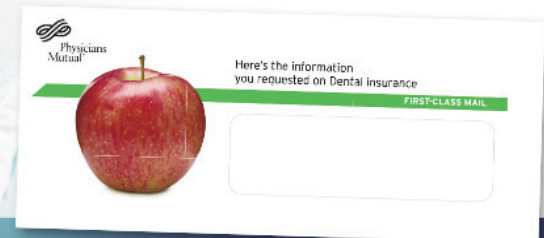
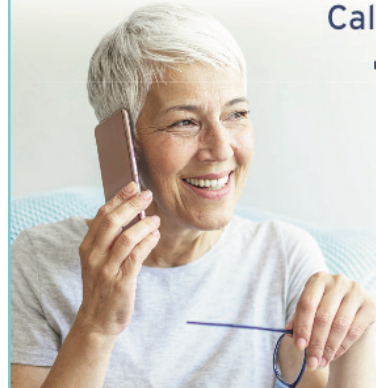
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Includes the Participating (in GA: Designated) Providers and Preventive Benefits Rider. Product not available in all states. Acceptance guaranteed for one insurance policy/certificate of this type. Contact us for complete details about this insurance solicitation. This specific offer is not available in CO, LA, NY; call 1-800-969-4781 or respond for similar offer. Certificate C250A (ID: C250E; PA: C250Q); Insurance Policy P150 (GA: P150GA; NY: P150NY; OK: P150OK; TN: P150TN); Rider kinds B438/B439 (GA: B439B).
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