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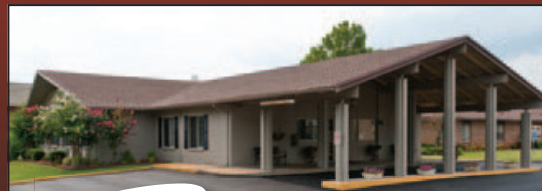
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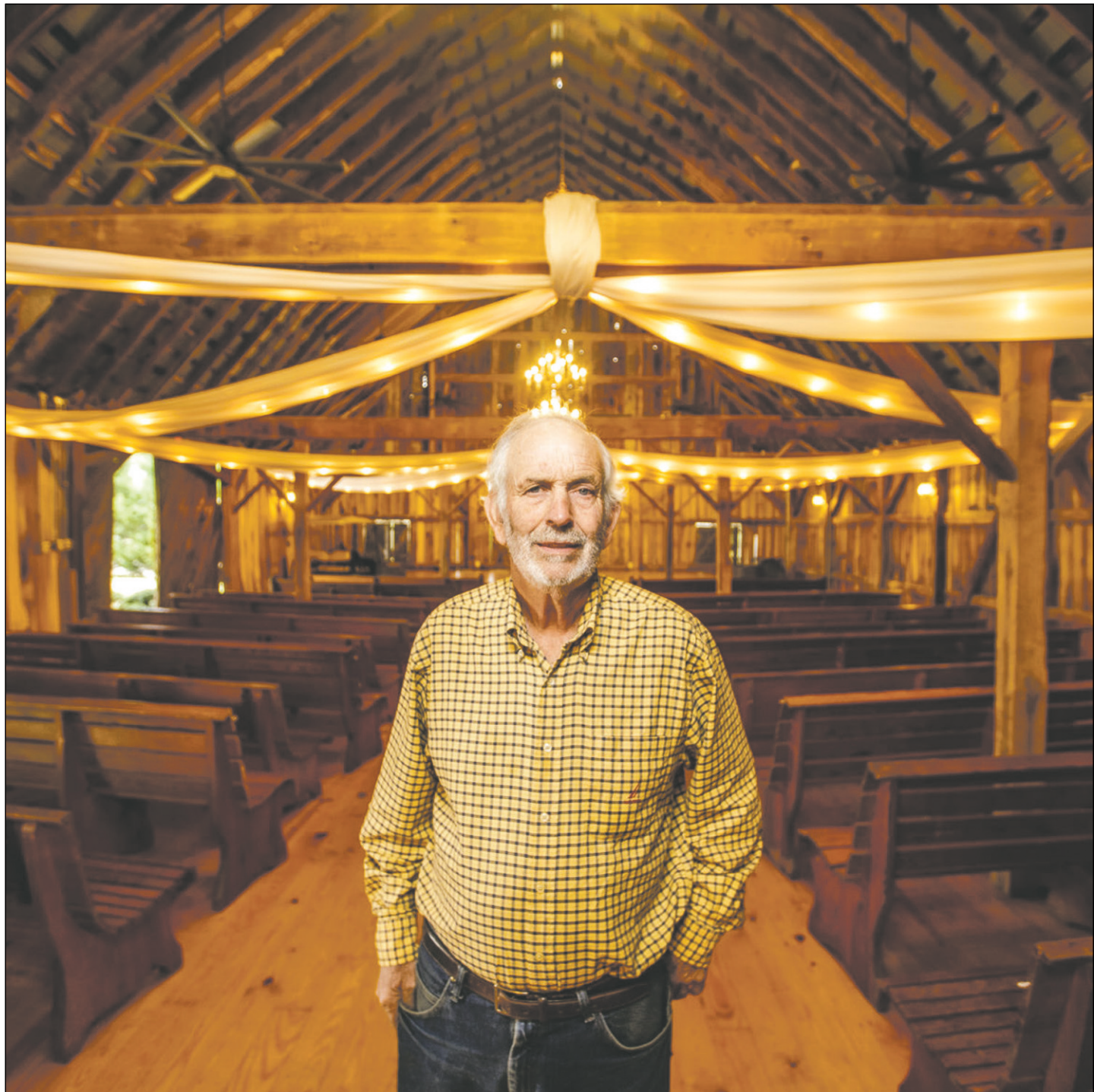
**Inside**

- Ava's Place ..... F1
- For The Win ..... F4
- John Tombyll..... F5
- Vinyl Junkies..... F7
- Mike's Meat Market ..... F9
- Sparky's Drive-In ..... F11
- Village Drugs ..... F13
- Tatum's Service Station.. F16
- AIDB..... F18
- Melvin's Car Wash..... F20
- Alabama Metal Art ..... F21
- North Ala. Animal HospitalF23
- Coats Clothing..... F25
- Counts Brothers ..... F31

**On the cover**



**Tori Earl, left, stands by as Veterinarian Adam Thompson uses a stethoscope to check the heartbeat of Hoshiko, a husky puppy, Jan. 21, at North Alabama Animal Hospital in Sheffield. Story on page F23.**  
[DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]



**Kenneth Dawson stands for a portrait inside Ava's Place, a barn venue, in Florence, Jan. 19.** [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

# Clients become family at Ava's

**By Bernie Delinski** | Staff Writer

ST. FLORIAN — No matter how many times Kenneth Dawson hosts a wedding, he can't help but get emotionally attached to his clients.

"I treat them all just like family," said Dawson, owner of Ava's Place Barn Venue. "I tell them once they book,

they normally come back three or four times before their wedding. I tell them by the time the day comes around, we're family."

He estimates he has hosted 250 to 300 weddings at the 5131 Lauderdale County Road 61 venue.

"I tell them I've got to make money, but it's not all about the money,"

Dawson said. "I've teared up a bunch, to be honest with you."

He started the business eight years ago.

"I bought the place about nine years ago and the barn was there and it just really wasn't set up for horses so I came

**SEE AVA, F2**

# AVA

From Page F1

up with the idea of a wedding barn and thought it would work great," Dawson said. "I started planning it out then. I have a lot of great people come by and give me ideas on what would make it look better."

Today, it includes the main floor complete with an altar, in addition to a dining hall and a bride's dressing room.

Dawson said he places an emphasis on making the planning process and the big day fun, because each wedding is a special event that deserves to be treated as such.

That has produced wonderful memories for his clients, as well as himself. He said many have kept in touch with him throughout the years.

"I don't know, there's just a special bond with some of them," Dawson said. "Just the personalities and things."

He said it is both rewarding and heartwarming when clients tell him that he held a special place in their wedding and continues to hold one in their hearts.

"I've got letters back from people saying how special it is and how I treated them and we would be friends for life," Dawson said.

[bernie.delinski@timesdaily.com](mailto:bernie.delinski@timesdaily.com) or 256-740-5739. Twitter @TD\_BDelinski



Inside Ava's Place, a barn venue, in Florence, Jan. 19. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]



A waterfall feature outside of Ava's Place, a barn venue, in Florence, Jan. 19.



Ava's Place, a barn venue, in Florence, Jan. 19.

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Dylan and Lindsey Harris own For The Win in Florence. [BERNIE DELINSKI/TIMESDAILY]

# It's a gamer's paradise at For The Win

By **Bernie Delinski** | Staff Writer

FLORENCE — Dylan Harris understands how passionate gamers are.

After all, his wife, Lindsey explains, he is one of them.

“Dylan had played Magic: The Gathering competitively,” she said. “They traveled around and played in some of the larger games. He just really enjoyed the hobby. This was what he did in high school and this was what he did on Friday nights.”

Today, Lindsey also has become a fan of gaming, which is a good thing because the Harris’ spend a lot of time around it.

They own For The Win game store,

and on any given night, it is teeming with activity as gamers gather to play Magic, Warhammer and other games.

The store has been around for 10 years, but the couple purchased it in 2019.

“We’ve really expanded our product line and focused on helping customers with what they want,” Dylan said.

In fact, that product expansion, which included Warhammer, forced a store expansion, so they moved from a downtown location to 248 Seville St., where they have an entire room dedicated to playing Warhammer.

“Our Saturdays are real busy,” Dylan said. “We host multiple tournaments on Saturdays.”

He said their employee, Mark Gaudney, has years of experience in gaming, particularly Magic: The Gathering, and is excellent at helping customers.

“When we picked him up, a lot of customers really liked him and he’s very helpful about recommending things,” Dylan said. “They ask for Mark all the time. He’s also a judge for the game.”

Lindsey said they focus on individual customers to get an idea of what best fits them. For example, red cards are best for people who like to focus on the offensive side of the games, while blue is more for the defensive aspect of it.

“We do really like being able to pair people up with cards,” she said. “If

someone says they want to build a deck, we can ask what color they want.”

The store also sells the always popular Pokemon and Yu-Gi-Oh! cards and merchandise, as well as models for games.

Lindsey said customers assemble and paint their models, which helps personalize them.

She said nights at the store are entertaining.

“We have people come here two, three, four, five nights a week,” she said. “They really love the people here and we really have the best customers.”

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# Teaching lets drummer Tombyll pass on his knowledge

By Russ Corey | Staff Writer

FLORENCE — There were musicians who helped John Tombyll when he was starting out and now that he's an established drummer, he's ready to pass on his knowledge and help younger players and even some older ones who just want to be able to play a few songs.

Tombyll is employed as a commercial pest control account executive, but he also plays drums for the popular Shoals band, the Fiddleworms.

He also offers drumming lessons to children and adults on weekends at a local music store, and will also give private lessons in people's homes.

"I just got two new students," Tombyll said. "It's an ebb and flow with students. In the summer it diminishes greatly because people are on vacation. Right now, I have to start a waiting list after these two, which is a good problem to have."

After some trial and error with very



Bryson Green, left, listens as he is instructed by John Tombyll during a lesson, Jan. 22, at Counts Brothers Music in Muscle Shoals. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

SEE TOMBYLL, F6



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Drew Dulaney, left, practices double-stroke rolls with his instructor, John Tombyll, during a lesson, Jan. 22, at Counts Brothers Music in Muscle Shoals. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

## TOMBYLL

From Page F5

young students, Tombyll said the majority of his students are between the ages of 8-16. He has had students as old as 67, a man who just wanted to learn a few songs, and a 31-year-old middle school teacher.

"I have one guys who goes to UNA and is in music production," he said. "He likes the drums. I teach him privately at his house. It's a lot of fun."

When he was younger and getting into music, his uncle, Tim Jones, who is more like a big brother, taught him about music and theory

"My uncle's a jazz guitar player and as a musician he was a big influence on me, as were the Decoys, Rob (Malone) and the guys in the 'worms.'"

He said there are a couple of reasons why he wants to take the time to teach drums 30 minutes at a time.

"I like to give something I have to other people," Tombyll said. "Music is something. In my opinion, if you're a musician, music is not meant to be kept, it's meant to give away. Why would I not want to share it?"

Sure there's some nice part-time income, but it's also about doing for others what others did for him.

"At some point, someone taught me," he said. "They were mentors, not only in music, but in life."

He tries to have a positive impact on

his younger students for the 30 minutes they're together.

"I don't feel like I have to, I feel like I want to," Tombyll said.

Tombyll is a native of New Jersey, but lived in Virginia and Georgia before moving to the Shoals full-time. While living in Georgia, he met guitarist Rob Malone, who is a member of the Fiddleworms and Rob Aldridge and The Proponents.

"It's been a really great journey," Tombyll said. "I love the Shoals. My job I have now, we're a global company. I could go anywhere in the world I want, but I love the Shoals, the vibe, the music scene, the 'Worms, the musicians I've met over the years. You don't see me going anywhere."

Tombyll said he's had some very inspiring students, including a 10-year-old autistic child "who is unbelievable."

"This kid learns better than most kids," Tombyll said. "He doesn't make a mistake. With some of these kids, I get more out of it than they ever will."

Tombyll admits there is a selfish side to teaching.

"It keeps you as a musician sharp," he said. "Because when you teach, you have to make sure you're teaching the right things. You have to constantly draw on that well of knowledge you were given."

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Drew Dulaney practices double-stroke rolls during a lesson, Jan. 22, at Counts Brothers Music in Muscle Shoals.



John Tombyll shows a rudiment to his client, Bryson Green, not pictured, during a lesson, Jan. 22, at Counts Brothers Music in Muscle Shoals.



Customer Lacy Cottingham, left, is checked out by Mark Sandlin, owner, at The Vinyl Junkies Record Lounge, Jan. 12, in Florence. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

# Vinyl Junkies Record Lounge is record collectors clubhouse

By Russ Corey | Staff Writer

FLORENCE — Mark Sandlin always wanted to open a record store, but the Vinyl Junkies Record Lounge is no ordinary record store, thanks to his wife, Donna.

From the outside, the shop at 1815 N. Wood Avenue, resembles a colorful home.

Often, the sound of music playing inside can be heard before you open the front or side doors.

“I used to hang out at the Turning Point,” Sandlin said, referring to a record store that was located in

downtown Florence in the 1970s. “It’s something I always wanted to do.”

An avid record collector for years, Sandlin said he wanted the store to be different than other record stores he’s visited.

“My wife goes to record stores with me and she never had a place to sit down,” Sandlin said. “She said, we need a lounge where people can sit.”

So tucked away near the check out counter is a space with a couch, table and two comfortable chairs where people can wait while their friends or spouse can relax if they’re not interested in browsing through the racks of

used and new records.

Or they can sit with Sandlin during a break and talk about music or records.

“There have been so many class reunions here,” Sandlin said. “People bring in pizza. I have regulars that come in and hang out. It’s a clubhouse, is what it is.”

There is a coffee pot with several mugs handy, a rest room and a small kitchen with a refrigerator stocked with a variety of beverages. There is, of course, a stereo receiver and turntable so Sandlin can share music with customers and friends.

Like most record stores, the walls are

covered with posters depicting various artists, bands, album covers, but also photos of local musicians. Brochures on the counter help promote the Alabama Music Hall of Fame, FAME Recording Studios and Muscle Shoals Sound Recording Studios. There’s a small box containing Outlaw Apostles compact discs.

On the opposite side of the building lies The Nook, a place where Donna Sandlin offers clothing, jewelry and other unique items.

On the wall at the check out counter

SEE JUNKIES, FR

# JUNKIES

From Page F7

is a bulletin board where customers can post the names of records they're seeking.

Sandlin said it's common for fans to come in and ask for a particular album or albums by a particular artist. If Sandlin doesn't have it, he has a network of other collectors and suppliers who can help him. Sometimes it takes months to find a particular record.

"Some young kinds come in learning to play guitar will ask what's a good place to start and I get them a handful of Chuck Berry records," he said. "I've turned a lot of kids on to Robin Trower."

His customers cover a wide age range, but he frequently sees a lot of customers in their teens and 20s buying vinyl and often looking for records from "the power five," which includes The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Kiss and The Rolling Stones.

While Willie Nelson Records sit in the racks, Sandlin said he can't keep Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash Records.

"I can't keep Alabama records," he said.

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Inside The Vinyl Junkies Record Lounge, Jan. 12, in Florence. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]



Vinyls from local artists sit on display for sale at The Vinyl Junkies Record Lounge, Jan. 12, in Florence.



The Vinyl Junkies Record Lounge, Jan. 12, in Florence.



# Personalized services key to Mike's Meat Market's success

By Russ Corey | Staff Writer

MUSCLE SHOALS — Through his career as a butcher, Mike Askew has found that making sure customers are satisfied is good for business.

That's been especially true for Mike's Meat Market on Avalon Avenue, which celebrated its fourth anniversary on Nov. 7.

"It's a country meat market," Askew said. "We sell a lot of country ham and country sausage. That's we're about down here. We do a lot of steaks and we're big on variety packs."

A variety pack will typically have some combination of steaks, pork ribs or pork chops, chicken tenders, ground beef, a beef roast, bacon and/or sausage.

They also offer a monthly special package that has been a hit with customers.

"We have customers who started with us when we opened," Askew said. "They consistently buy one every month."



Linda Bishop, left, and Mike Askew work to prepare orders for their customers, Jan. 22, at Mike's Meat Market in Muscle Shoals. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

SEE MIKE, F10



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Workers prepare orders for their customers, Jan. 22, at Mike's Meat Market in Muscle Shoals.

[PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

## MIKE

From Page F9

Askew said he thinks customers like that one-on-one interaction, being able to order steaks cut a certain size.

"We'll cut them any size, pork chops, steaks, fresh chicken as well," he said. "We sell a lot of fresh cut steaks, filet mignon and ribeyes are our best selling steaks. We'll marinate them in Dale's. We'll do bacon wrapped filets.

"I think we offer you offer that personal service, because we treat one customer at a time when they come in," Askew said. "We'll have someone at the counter to greet them and take their order."

Another personalized service Mike's Meat Market offers is free delivery within a 20 mile radius of the store. This was especially popular during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Askew said they developed a mobile app during the pandemic to allow customers to order online and pick up their order with limited interaction.

"I think the customers have really been happy to be able to do that," Askew said. "I have a lady who helps me with the deliveries."

Askew was manager of the meat department at Foodland in Tusculmbia

when he noticed that the O'Guirees butcher shop had closed. Askew said he'd worked at the shop on Saturdays in 2003-04 to help owner Don O'Guiree.

After O'Guiree retired, the store was empty for almost 1 ½ years before Askew decided to buy it and reopen it as Mike's Meat Market.

"He had several offers on the place, but none that stuck," Askew said. "I wanted to operate a butcher shop. Don wanted it to stay a butcher shop."

Askew said O'Guiree came out of retirement to help him cut meat during the pandemic, but he's stayed on and works five days a week at the shop.

He also offers the classic O'Guiree's country sausage, which has also proven to be popular with customers.

"We still bring it in from a farm like they used to," he said.

Askew said while making a special delivery in the Madison area that there are no meat markets along U.S. 72 between the Shoals and Athens.

It's given him the idea to possibly expand his operations, but a location has yet to be selected.

"You don't see a lot of meat markets left," Askew said. "Expansion for us would be a pretty amazing thing."

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Mike Askew dials in settings before weighing an order for a customer, Jan. 22, at Mike's Meat Market in Muscle Shoals.



Mike's Meat Market, Jan. 22, in Muscle Shoals.

# Quality, prices have kept Sparky's Drive-In thriving

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman | Staff Writer



Sparky's Drive-In. [TIMESDAILY FILES]



Todd Smith waits to take orders at Sparky's Drive-In.

TUSCUMBIA — Todd Smith can't imagine life without Sparky's.

No one else can either.

Sparky's Drive-In restaurant has been a staple in Tuscumbia and the Shoals area since 1956 when the Blanton Sparks family opened it.

Located in the heart of Tuscumbia's Valdosta community, the Sparks family would operate the business until 1994 when the Smith family would purchase it.

A college-aged Todd Smith was waiting in the wings to take over the family business in 1997.

Twenty-five years later and he's never looked back.

"I'm doing exactly what I love," he said, of running the restaurant handling not only the business end of it, but the cooking as well. "I feel like I'm cooking for a few hundred of my best friends every day."

Smith doesn't hesitate when asked the most popular menu item. It's the footlong Sparky's dog -- a unique

combination of chili and slaw on a hotdog.

It's followed closely in popularity by another specialty, the barbecue pork fries, the Sparky's version of a loaded baked potato.

"We have a really extensive menu, but I still cook considerably more of those items than anything else," he said, adding that on an average day he'll sell about 250 footlongs.

And a trip to Sparky's isn't just about the food, Smith insists, but the fellowship with neighbors.

"When someone new stops by we joke that it won't take long for them

SEE SPARKY, F12



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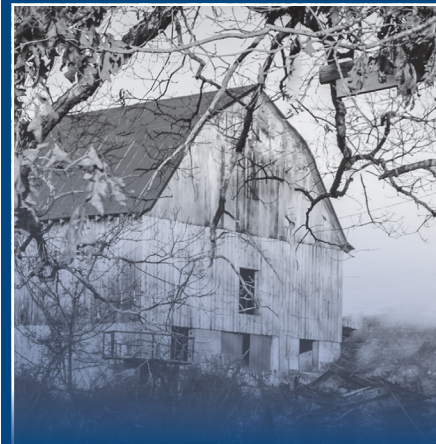
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# SPARKY

From Page F11

not to be new anymore," he said.

When COVID-19 hit nearly two years ago, Smith said he wasn't unlike other restaurant owners wondering its effect.

What he saw was a major increase in business.

"We were already a drive-in, take-out only place, so I guess people figured we had that business model down pat and they trusted us as it was pretty much our wheelhouse," Smith said. "Most years a business can expect a 4% to 6% percent growth, but mine grew over 30 percent last year."

There have been some bumps in the road however, with supply chain issues and staffing problems.

"Every week it's a struggle to find certain items," he said, adding that it's mostly paper and container products that are so hard to get now.

"I haven't been able to serve a banana split in a boat in a year and a half because we can't get the containers any more," he said.

As for staffing, he said the restaurant has ceased opening on Saturday and is now Monday through Friday 10 a.m. until 6 p.m.

"I hated to do it, but we didn't have much choice," he said. "I've just really worked at making sure the customers don't see any other differences like food quality or prices."

"I think our quality and (reasonable) prices go a long ways towards our popularity," he said. "I'm not going to price anybody out of eating here. I hate the thought of a kid not being able to come in here and get an ice cream cone after school."

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Todd Smith hands out an order at Sparky's Drive-In. [TIMESDAILY FILE]



Toddy Smith puts an order in the window at Sparky's Drive-In. The restaurant has been a Tuscumbia staple since 1956. [KEVIN TAYLOR/TIMESDAILY]

# Village Drugs: Forward thinking with a hometown feel

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman | Staff Writer

MUSCLE SHOALS — When Kevin Arnold bought Village Drugs in 2000, he compares the feeling to that of a new coach taking over a successful sports program.

The strategy was to continue on with what was working, keep up with the times and even get ahead if possible, and earn the people's trust.

"We were taking over an already successful business, so there wasn't any revamping to be done. It was already established. We just had to make sure its success continued," Arnold said, of his taking over the store from previous owners Hayward and Peggy Gunnin, who opened the pharmacy in 1980.

It's the hometown feel of the store than draws customers, then keeps them, he said.

SEE DRUGS, F14





TJ Sellars fills a prescription at Village Discount Drugs in Muscle Shoals, Dec. 21, 2021. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]



Workers fill prescriptions and tend to customers at Village Discount Drugs in Muscle Shoals, Dec. 21, 2021.

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# DRUGS

From Page F13

“There was already a really friendly atmosphere established here and we didn’t want to get in the way of that because we realized immediately that the personal touch it offered was responsible for its success.”

Originally from Cullman, Arnold and his wife Leah committed more than 20 years ago to making the Shoals their home, and their business a standout option for personalized care.

Arnold is one of four pharmacists at the Muscle Shoals location. He said having a staff that’s on the same page every day is an advantage in operating a business that, by its very makeup is moving more towards a clinical nature.

With two pharmacies in Cullman and in the building phase in Florence, across from North Alabama Medical Center, the operation is expanding. The Florence store has an anticipated opening date of July.

Arnold said the key to a successful, thriving business is creating a good product and, “putting the best product out there and treating people right goes a really long ways.”

The pharmacy’s “clinical nature” as he refers to it, includes the company’s willingness to embrace the services that mean convenience for customers like offering travel vaccinations and COVID vaccines and testing.

“We’re a mom and pop operation in terms of being service oriented but we’re also very forward thinking,” he said. “The clinical offerings are big for



**Jarrod Tidewell tends to a customer on the phone as he is surrounded by family photographs at Village Discount Drugs in Muscle Shoals, Dec. 21, 2021.**

[PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

us. So is the simple fact that if you call the Muscle Shoals store, you speak to someone in Muscle Shoals. We keep everything, all our services right here at the local level and people appreciate that.”

Village Drugs is coming off its

biggest year ever in filling prescriptions. Arnold doesn’t believe that’s coincidence.

“We simply retain our customers and that’s a direct reflection on the how we conduct business,” he said. “The people we do business with are

good people. We know them. We know their families and that makes the difference.”

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**A customer is helped at the drive-thru window of Village Discount Drugs in Muscle Shoals, Dec. 21, 2021.**



**Village Discount Drugs in Muscle Shoals, Dec. 21, 2021.**

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John Dylan pumps gasoline for a customer, Feb. 4, at Tatum's Q-Gas off Cloverdale Road in Florence. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

# Full service with a smile at Tatum's

By **Bernie Delinski** | Staff Writer

FLORENCE — In the span of only a few minutes, quick conversations spanned subjects varying from football, catching up on a driver's family and the latest update on another's health.

That personal touch is common when a motorist pulls into Tatum's Q-Gas, at 3688 Cloverdale Road.

But the services station also provides an additional personal touch that is a rarity these days: full-service gas pumps.

Manager Chad Pruitt said reactions

usually amount to those of pleasant surprise from new customers, and plenty of return business from regulars.

"It's just convenient because you don't even have to get out of your car," Pruitt said, while moving from one pump to another as vehicles pulled into

the station.

He said the business, which is owned by Glen Tatum, particularly is convenient when someone has children in their vehicle and doesn't want to get out of it, or when it's cold outside.

SEE TATUM, F17





John Dylan pumps gasoline for a customer, Feb. 4, at Tatum's Q-Gas off Cloverdale Road in Florence. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

## TATUM

From Page F16

For Pruitt, who also is a fifth-grade teacher at Underwood Elementary School, coming to Tatum's to work after school is a great way to stay in touch with the community.

"We've got so many regulars who come by," he said.

The business offers fuel options of regular, road diesel and farm diesel gasoline and kerosene. The full-service offering includes checking oil at the driver's request.

Pruitt said he is pleased to offer the service, and it is good for business.

"A lot of people who just moved into

the area say, 'I've never seen one of these since I was a kid' and you talk with them and they come back," he said. "Some, when it's pouring down raining, will stop by and you hope they come back."

He said customers are not required to use the full-service pumps.

"If people want to fill up on their own there's a self-service island for that," Pruitt said.

He said he enjoys seeing the customers, and they seem to enjoy it, as well.

"I guess you could say this is a good little business that provides service with a smile," Pruitt said.

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Chad Pruitt, manager, pumps gasoline for a customer, Feb. 4, at Tatum's Q-Gas off Cloverdale Road in Florence.

# AIDB-Shoals: The area's hidden gem



**Dr. Lillian Smith, right, uses sign-language to converse with Bethany DeVries through a video call, Feb. 1, at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind in Tuscumbia. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]**

**By Lisa Singleton-Rickman** | Staff Writer

TUSCUMBIA — There's one characteristic Stephanie Pizza picked up on immediately upon taking over as regional director for the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind, Shoals Regional Center: Its value to the community.

"It's truly a hidden gem, providing free services for 20 years now to consumers, their families and the community," Pizza said.

Pizza has been director since 2020,

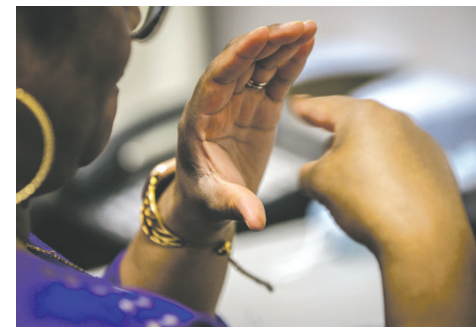
having a distinguished background in working with the visually and hearing impaired.

With clients from birth to senior citizens, Pizza said the case management services include everything from helping clients understand what support they need with daily care like labeling their medications, to housing, to making referrals to other entities in helping individuals gain employment. The staff also provides training and technology in individuals' homes or in-house at the

center.

"We have a technology lab on site with various computers for individuals to use, a braille embosser, and multiple closed-circuit television and video phones that allows those who are deaf to make a phone call through an interpreter."

The uniqueness of the center allows education for families with newborns beginning from the time they fail a screening.



**Dr. Lillian Smith uses sign-language to converse with Bethany DeVries through a video call, Feb. 1, at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind in Tuscumbia.**

**SEE AIDB, F19**

**AIDB**

From Page F18

“That family can come and receive services from that very young age and it allows parents to meet others who are dealing with the same disabilities,” she said.

Interpretive services are also available through AIDB, with a simple electronic request.

“Our region is getting support for interpretive services through the Huntsville Regional Center but we’re in the process of bringing in an interpreter here to raise the level of those support services.”

The center, located at 512 N. Main Street, is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.

Located just two blocks from Ivy Green, the birthplace of Helen Keller, Pizza said the center with its educational component not just for the clients and their families, but the community at large, is of vital importance.

“One of my biggest goals is to spread awareness that we’re here and we’re able to meet the needs of those with disabilities in a way that doesn’t place strain on families,” she said. “That’s a huge benefit for the whole area.”

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**Dr. Lillian Smith demonstrates a desktop electronic magnifier she uses for clients with low vision, Feb. 1, at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind in Tuscumbia. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]**



**Dr. Lillian Smith demonstrates a desktop electronic magnifier she uses for clients with low vision, Feb. 1, at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind in Tuscumbia.**



**Dr. Lillian Smith, left, uses sign-language to converse with Bethany DeVries through a video call, Feb. 1, at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind in Tuscumbia.**

# Whitlock makes vehicles, people shine

By Bernie Delinski | Staff Writer

FLORENCE — It has become one of the best-known slogans in the Shoals: “If it don’t shine, it ain’t mine.”

And Melvin Whitlock, owner of Melvin’s On The Spot Car Wash, makes sure to live up to that every day.

“It’s their car but my name is on it when they leave,” Whitlock said, while standing outside his 2221 Huntsville Road business. “My logo is on it. ‘Where did you get that car washed? I got it cleaned at Melvin’s.’ That means something.”

Whitlock started the business more than 30 years ago.

“It’s inspirational,” the perpetually upbeat Whitlock said. “It’s nothing I went to school for or anything like that. Things just happened and they all fell in place.”

“I was financially needing help and had to come up with a way to earn money, and it’s something I enjoy doing — washing cars and cleaning up cars — and it just took a snowball effect.”

He said he has many repeat customers, and it means a lot to him to know they have that confidence in his business.

“The one thing we put in it is we care,” Whitlock said. “We want to make sure people know we’re concerned about the quality we put out, and that’s the reason we were able to hang around for 30 years, is because we care.”

His outreach goes well beyond cars. Whitlock and his church, Westside Church of Christ in Leighton, lead an annual event that provides a Christmas shopping spree for underprivileged children.

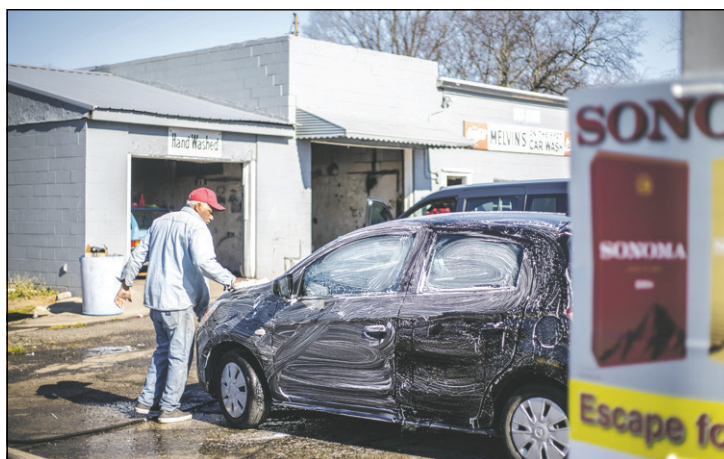
“We’re connected with the church and do that,” he said. “I’ve had people who will come and bring clothes and shoes and things to the car wash and I’ll take it up to the church and distribute them to children. All through the year, we’re looking for ways to help and give back to the community, especially ways to help people who may have fallen down on their luck and need a second chance.”

That includes hiring people in need.

“We provide honest employment for them to help them get stabilized and back in society,” Whitlock said. “Just guys looking to get back on their feet and who need a helping hand. I take them to church with me if they want and try to



Melvin Whitlock, owner, inspects a vehicle after it was washed by his employees, Feb. 1, at Melvin’s On The Spot Car Wash in Florence. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]



Dennis Adams cleans a customer’s car, Feb. 1, at Melvin’s On The Spot Car Wash in Florence.

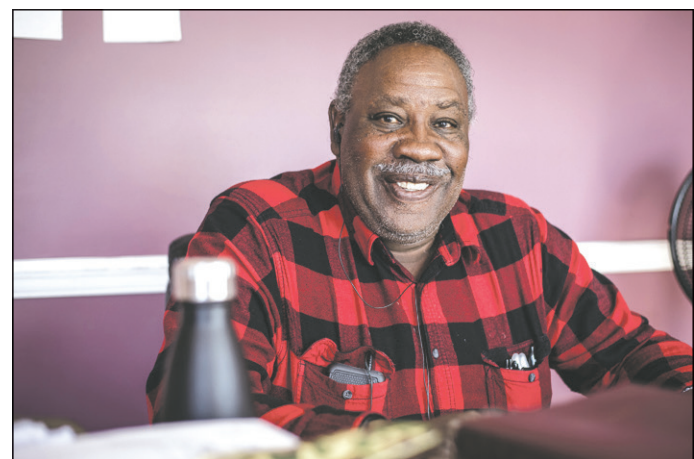
rehabilitate them, me being an employer and also a minister.”

He said they also try to mentor children, and have even helped teens get their driver’s permit and license.

“A lot of them feel like they’re trapped and there’s no way out, and we want to be that mentor and tell them we can help you,” Whitlock said. “One day they’ll look back in the rearview mirror of their

life and they’ll see that we were there for them and helped them.”

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Melvin Whitlock sits for a portrait inside his office, Feb. 1, at Melvin’s On The Spot Car Wash in Florence.

# Alabama Metal Art creates a unique niche in signage

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman | Staff Writer

FLORENCE — A drive around the University of North Alabama campus, or pretty much anywhere in the Shoals, will reveal the unique signage of Alabama Metal Art.

What transformed out of a business first established in 1991, Tri-State Metals, Alabama Metal Art has taken on its own life since 2010.

Owners Chris Roberson and David Smith have created a niche market that today brings customers from around the country.

“We’ve done hundreds of signs, both indoor and outdoor, for people across the country and I guess we’ve been successful because we treat people like we want to be treated,” Roberson said.

Smith and Roberson started the Tri-State Metals business in 1991 and moved to Florence Industrial Park in 1996.

“We had some of the equipment to do this work that we’d used on the commercial end of the business and when some companies started asking for metal art we figured we might could make a go of it,” Roberson said.

Then, during what Roberson calls the economic meltdown of 2008, the two realized a need to diversify their business, thus creating Alabama Metal Art.

“It took a couple years to find out



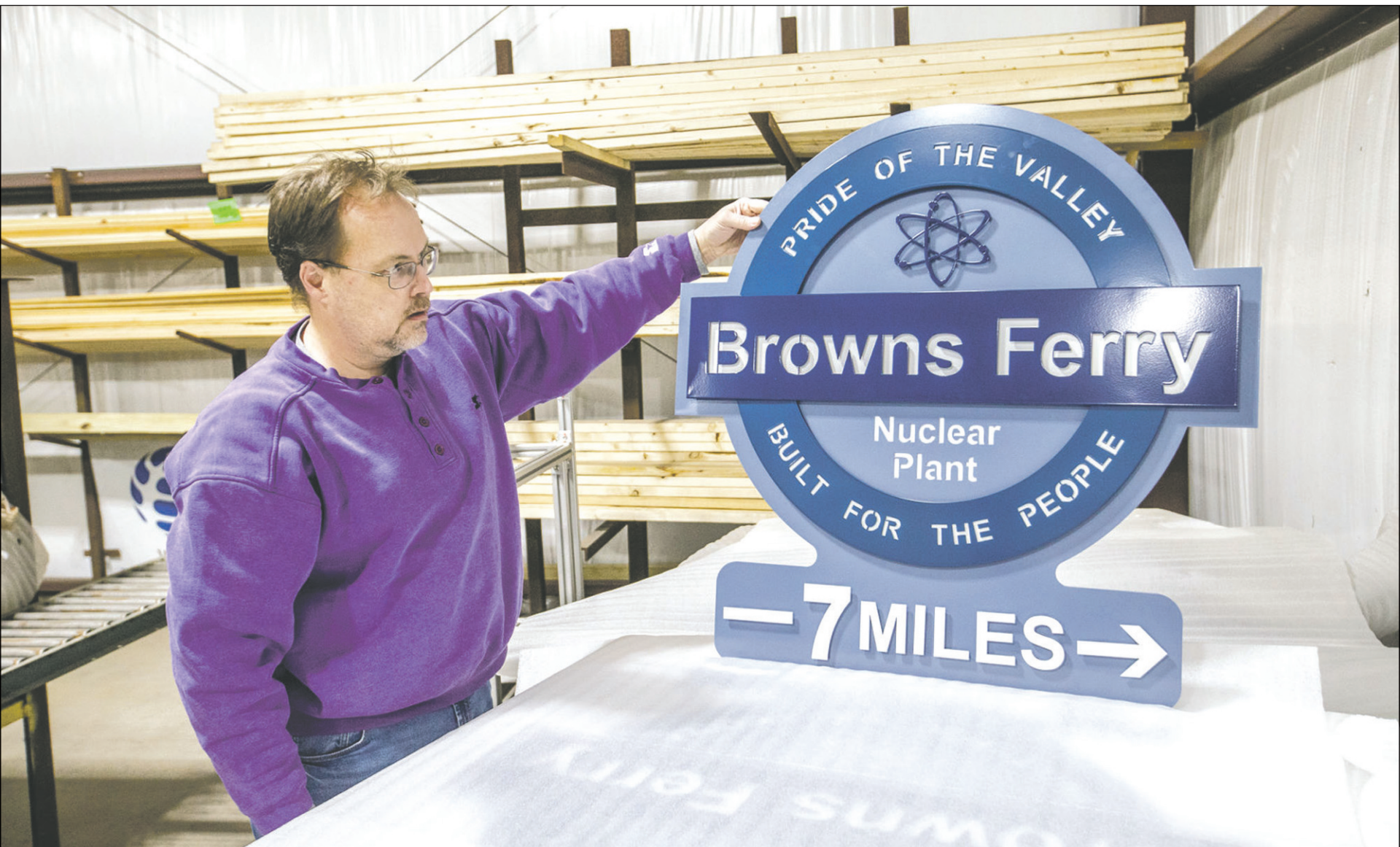
SEE ART, F22 Two crew members work to powder coat a project inside Tri-State Metals/Alabama Metal Arts in Florence. [COURTESY PHOTOS]



A sign made for Colbert County football by Alabama Metal Arts.



Inside Tri-State Metals/Alabama Metal Arts in Florence.



Robert Miles, lead designer, shows a sign for Browns Ferry Nuclear Plant, Jan. 21, at Tri-State Metals/Alabama Metal Arts in Florence. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

## ART

From Page F21

where our niche was but we settled on metal business signs and it really took off because we aren't afraid to try most anything," he said.

"We do layered signs, backlit signs and multi-dimensional signs. We've done some pretty unique pieces. We collaborate on each one and the customer always has tremendous input."

Some of the designs presented, he admits, have been headaches in that they included odd color choices or lacked some significant detail.

"That's when we step in and offer to rethink elements of the design with the customer and they generally appreciate it," he said.

Customers often come in and participate in the sketching process of

design.

"We like to settle everything with the customer on the front end -- the variables that make it unique and the details that, in many cases, come to be iconic," he said. "It's so much easier to get it right when we have a solid plan from the beginning. It's all made to order and has to be right."

As a steel yard, with most of their inventory warehoused, Roberson said the delays on materials throughout the pandemic haven't really affected his business.

"We've been blessed that most of our materials and supplies we use on a daily basis have been right here in our warehouse," he said. "We've been able to serve our customers like always."

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A worker welds a sculpture for a project at Tri-State Metals/Alabama Metal Arts in Florence. [COURTESY PHOTO]



Veterinarian Adam Thompson uses a ophthalmoscope to check the retinas of Hoshiko, a husky puppy, Jan. 21, at North Alabama Animal Hospital in Sheffield. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

# Veterinarian says education is key to successful pet ownership

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman | Staff Writer

SHEFFIELD — Veterinarian Adam Thompson has seen a growing trend the past seven years he's worked at North Alabama Animal Hospital: Pet owners seeking education.

"The pet craze has certainly grown the past 5-10 years, but so has pet owners wanting information on how to

do what's best for their pets," Thompson said.

"I'm big on education because the more information people have, the better they can head off problems. They know better what to look for."

Thompson said what lured him to veterinary medicine was the idea of helping people strengthen their bond with animals.

"We have many clients who just want to know they're a part of their pet's care," he said. "With the pandemic and more people at home, they've bonded more closely with their pets and that allowed them to see problems that may have otherwise gone unnoticed."

There's a team of 25 at North Alabama Animal Hospital with five veterinarians on staff.

"Our whole staff is very sincere about educating our clients and making sure people have a plan and are proactive in their pet care," he said. "With each veterinarian we've added, we've seen growth in clientele."

Thompson said the staff is also well aware of their need to practice high



**Tori Earl, left, stands by as Veterinarian Adam Thompson uses a stethoscope to check the heartbeat of Hoshiko, a husky puppy, Jan. 21, at North Alabama Animal Hospital in Sheffield. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]**

## VETERINARIAN

From Page F23

quality medicine as the facility is two or more hours away from most referral facilities such as Memphis, Nashville or Birmingham.

“We do internal medicine workups right here so people very rarely have to travel,” he said. “We strive to stay on the leading edge of diagnostics and treatment. People expect strong diagnostics and that makes us even more determined to deliver.”

The pandemic has also driven up pet adoptions the last two years, Thompson said, as many people were seeking companionship.

“That’s great that adoption is



**Veterinarian Adam Thompson stands for a portrait, Jan. 21, at North Alabama Animal Hospital in Sheffield.**

up, but because of that we have to do an even better job of educating them on caring for these pets, knowing when the pet needs veterinary care and how to treat simpler issues at home.

The bottom line is our pets are family.”

*lisa.singleton-rickman@TimesDaily.com or 256-740-5735. Twitter@TD\_LSRickman.*



**Tori Earl holds Hoshiko, a husky puppy, as Veterinarian Adam Thompson uses an ophthalmoscope to check her retinas, Jan. 21, at North Alabama Animal Hospital in Sheffield.**





John Posey, owner, stands for a portrait inside Coats Clothing Co., Feb. 4, in downtown Florence. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

# Coats helps people look, feel good

By **Bernie Delinski** | Staff Writer

FLORENCE — Sometimes, a customer walks into Coats Clothing to do something they've never done before: wear a suit.

Often, those customers have no idea what they want. During those instances, John Posey takes them under his wing and helps every step of the way.

"We deal with a lot of blank slates," said Posey, who runs the store his grandfather, Ellis Coats, opened in 2000. "We show them why things look better on them, and fits that look better on them."

The way Posey looks at it, each

customer is a walking display of the quality of his business, and he wants them to look good.

"You want them to just look as sharp as you can," he said. "You never want to send them out in something that looks bad on them. We're going to bend over backward to get that done."

Posey said he wants each customer to feel good about wearing their suit, because that helps the customer feel good about himself. A lot of times, a customer purchases a suit for a special occasion, and his satisfaction with that suit plays a role in his experience at that event.

"If you're apprehensive about it in the shop, you'll never feel comfortable

in it when you get home," Posey said. "It brings confidence if you know you're going to look good at an occasion."

Coats opened his first store in 2000 as Florence Clothing, on Pine Street, before moving to Court Street and becoming Coats Clothing. Posey said although he now runs the store, his grandfather still plays a big role.

"He still is a major impact," Posey said. "He gave a wealth of information for me to get it to where it is now."

He said he has developed close relationships with customers over the years.

"I feel very close to the community with it," Posey said. "It's fun. We have

customers come in and chat, hang out and say hello. We've made a lot of good friends, which in turn becomes some of our best advertising."

That personal touch sometimes is critical because it is common for a customer to come in and purchase a suit for a diseased loved one to be buried in, or for themselves to attend a funeral.

"We deal with people in hard times," Posey said. I want to be there to comfort them at that time of sorrow. I want them to know that and feel that."

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# Counts Brothers Music wants to provide what customers need, want

By Russ Corey | Staff Writer

MUSCLE SHOALS — Being working musicians helped Wayne and James Counts know what customers wanted when they opened Counts Brothers Music 39 years ago.

The music store, which specializes in all manner of instruments, amps, accessories, music and repair service, opened on Montgomery Avenue in Sheffield in 1983, but moved about a year later to an old Singer Sewing Machine store on Woodward Avenue in Muscle Shoals.

“It was just me and my brother Wayne,” James Counts said. “We had been thinking about it for a long time.”

Counts said neither he nor his brother took a salary for the first couple of years. They continued working as musicians and put money back into the business. Wayne Counts plays guitar and bass while James Counts is a drummer for the popular Shoals band The Midnighters.



SEE MUSIC, F32 Rob Richey, guitar technician, plays an SG on Jan. 22, at Counts Brothers Music in Muscle Shoals. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

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462294-1  
454891-1

456664-1

459638-1



**James Counts shows bottled water sold at their shop on Jan. 22, at Counts Brothers Music in Muscle Shoals.** [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

## MUSIC

From Page F31

They stayed at that location until 1990 when they moved the operation to a new building on Waverly Avenue in Muscle Shoals where they remain today. Wayne Counts retired from the business in 2007.

“At that time we tried to provide good pricing, good service and do some things other stores weren’t doing,” James Counts said. “Initially I considered just doing a drum shop because nobody catered to drummers around here.”

Since he had a management information systems degree from the University of North Alabama, Counts said they also began selling Commadore computers at the store.

“That helped in the first year to give us a boost,” he said.

Counts said it helped that he and his brother were working musicians who knew a lot of the other players in the Shoals. It helped them know the needs of their fellow musicians and they tried to carry brands and items locally so they didn’t have to travel out of town to music stores in larger cities.

“We did rentals, which was kind of unique,” he said. “Pretty much everybody does it now. We still do band instrument rentals, but we were renting PAs. if somebody needed a guitar or an amp for a gig, we’d do that. We’d accept trades back in the 1990s.”

Counts said he and his brother would teach in the beginning. They would allow musicians to sell instruments on consignment in the store and offer repair service.

“We’ve always had some good luthiers we’ve used along the way,” he said. “We try to have an electronics guy available.”



**James Counts moves a drum on display on Jan. 22, at Counts Brothers Music in Muscle Shoals.**

In 2019, the store served as a ticket outlet for Jason Isbell’s first Shoals-Fest music festival at Florence’s McFarland Park. Counts said about 1,000 people showed up for tickets and made it difficult for customers to get into the store.

“It was something to provide a service to the community,” he said.

They have also installed equipment in local churches and schools.

They’ve also hosted in-store appearances by artists like guitarists Jack Pearson, Al Pitrelli, Steve Morse and Eric Essix, bassist Victor Wooten and others over the years.

In the music business, Counts said you have to be flexible and respond to customers’ needs.

“It’s kind of hard to specialize in a small town like here,” he said. “We’ve been fortunate to have had some great customers along the way.”

*russ.corey@timesdaily.com*  
or 256-740-5738. Twitter  
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**Inside Counts Brothers Music in Muscle Shoals, Jan. 22.**





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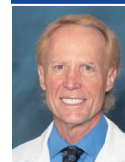
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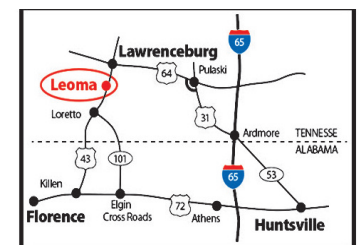
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A photograph of a living room interior featuring wood-look laminate flooring. The room includes a light blue sofa with a green ottoman, a side table with a lamp, and a bar area in the background.

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Danielle Elliott, MSN, CRNP; Liz Davis, MSN, CRNP, NTP

Front row from left: Russell Bien, MSN, CRNP;  
Douglas Woodford, MD

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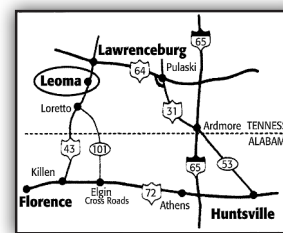


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