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## A Christmas Wonderland: Oden's annual display a holiday must see

John Pilati  
 Franklin Free Press

Kathleen Oden remembers when she purchased the first pieces of her outdoor Christmas display her daughter was in the 10th grade. That daughter, Wenona, will turn 49 next year.  
 Wade and Kathleen Oden have lived in the house they built since 1976. Located on a gravel road just off County Highway 81, the Oden home becomes a holiday wonderland each year thanks to Kathleen's passion to continue something she

began more than three decades ago. To simply describe the Oden's large front yard as a 'Christmas display' is an understatement. There are hundreds of beautiful Christmas characters, from a nativity scene to Snoopy to the Coca-Cola polar bears. The multi-colored lights are a spectacle to see.  
 And it's all on display for other families to enjoy. No admission. No donation box. Just a way for one family to help make the holiday season special for many others. And it's a labor of love for Oden.

"I started when (my daughter) was  
 See 'ODEN,' Page 8

## 'Meet & Treat' includes treats, characters, story of Christmas

John Pilati  
 Franklin Free Press

One Phil Campbell family is hosting a special Christmas 'Meet & Treat' and you're invited!  
 Adam and Lesley McCollum, along with a host of family members, will hold this drive-thru event at their home on Saturday, December 17, from 6-8 p.m., at 5075 Gravel Hill Road, approximately 15 minutes south of Russellville.  
 There will be seven of your favorite Christmas characters on site to meet vehicles for pictures, including the Grinch, Cindy Lou Who, Santa and Mrs. Claus, Rudolph, Hermie and Shimmer, the real-life Elf on a Shelf!  
 The characters will greet guests

and pass out treats along with a short message that shares the story of Christmas.  
 It's a free event. It will be drive-thru though, so characters will come up to cars and visitors are asked to stay in their vehicles, both to keep the line moving and for safety reasons.  
 Adam said his parents always decorated their home with a large Christmas lights display, so he and Lesley continued that tradition, with a bit of a twist, after they married in 2018.  
 "It was a small event in 2019, where my wife and I stood outside and greeted people. In 2020, we had hundreds of cars show up," Adam said. "During that COVID year, everything had shut down and peo-

See 'MCCOLLUM,' Page 5

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Jimmy Rae Berry, 67, of Russellville, passed away on Friday,  
December 9, 2022. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the  
family.

James Walker Stanley, 92, of Russellville, passed away  
December 11, 2022. Arrangements will be announced by  
Pinkard Funeral Home of Russellville.

Anthony Keith Harris, 62, Phil Campbell, AL. passed away  
Saturday December 10, 2022. Pinkard Funeral Home assisted  
the family.

Paulette McDougale Markham, 66, of Spruce Pine, passed  
away December 11, 2022. Pinkard Funeral Home assisted the  
family.

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## My take on this: Hoping each of you meet your special person

Gail Motes  
Franklin Free Press

Hi my precious followers! I hope your day is going good or you have had a good day. It depends when you are reading this. Just choose the one that works for you.

I have a sweet story to share with you today. I've heard of 'love at first sight,' and it happened to me a few days ago.

I am over renting the Spruce Pine Community Center. By the way, there is no need to ask for a Saturday or Sunday in December, because it's not available.

As soon as I walked into the building, I was looking at the big blue eyes and a sweet smile of the cutest little boy. The building had been rented for his two-year-old birthday party.

We started a conversation with giggles and smiles for each other. I had stopped by to make sure there was toilet tissue and paper towels in the bathrooms. This cute little boy followed me and made every step I did and just like that we became head over heels in love for each other.

With my small task completed, I talked a few minutes to his mother and found out his name was Brayden. As I turned to leave, Brayden grabbed my hand and started leading me.

Without hesitation, I held on to that precious little hand and asked where we were going. He wasn't telling me. One thing I've learned is asking that question never gets the location. The number one response is 'You'll see!'

Within seconds, I found out his plan and his motive. He guided me into the ladies restroom. He let go of my hand and turned and walked out of the door, closing it behind him. I had been captured by a two-year-old and it was the sweetest honor to be standing behind a closed bathroom door.



G a i l M o t e s

When he opened the door to my captivity, those big blue eyes were sparking. I heard the most precious giggle and saw a smile that melted my heart. Just like that, we both knew it was 'love at first sight.'

As I headed to leave, I stopped and we hugged and said our goodbyes. Later, at home while watching television, I couldn't get my mind off Brayden. He was the sweetest young man.

It was important to me that I gave him something to remember me by and I knew what I wanted to do.

I went outside and got a toy dump truck that my boys had played with many years ago. It was a heavy duty yellow dump truck by Mighty Wheels. It had a metal bed. I cleaned and bleached it and could hardly wait to go back to close the center after his birthday party!

His reaction was priceless! Once again, those big blue eyes got even bigger. That big smile and his excitement warmed my heart.

I had written on the bottom of the truck using a permanent marker my name and the date. I requested that his mother take a picture of us and the dump truck.

I sat down on that center floor and sat him in my lap, just as I had my boys at that age. I was gritting my teeth and hugging him tight and telling him over and over that I loved him.

His mother expressed her gratitude by telling me she would send videos of him playing with it.

Later that night, I received a picture of a freshly bathed Brayden sitting backwards on his truck wearing only a diaper and a smile.

That little two-year-old holds my heart and my love. The sweetest part of that memory was that he loved me too!

In closing, I wish for each of you to meet a special person and feel the joy that I will always remember.

Please, take care and as always,  
Until later.....

### Franklin Free Press

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**Publisher**  
John Pilati

**Executive Editor**  
Michael Rice

E-mail: franklinfreepress@yahoo.com

**Sales Representatives**  
Michael Rice, John Pilati

**Content Contributors**  
Gail Motes, Christian Medina

**Graphic Design**  
Jason Hill

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The Franklin Free Press strives for excellence and accuracy, and we will be pleased to correct any error in our newspaper. To request a correction or clarification, call or e-mail our office.

#### Letters to the editor

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# Racz wins state theatre festival

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

You won't hear many high school students describe going to medical school as a 'fallback plan.'

For Russellville High School junior Elijah Racz, though, that's exactly how he described a career in medicine—a 'fallback' in case professional theater doesn't work out.

Based on Racz' recent success at a statewide theater festival, he just might have to put medical school on the shelf, at least for a while.

Racz placed first from more than 30 students across Alabama in the category of solo comedic musical at the Walter Trumbauer High School Theatre Festival, held earlier this month on the campus of Troy University.

Racz performed The Ballad of Farquaad from Shrek: The Musical, in the division of solo comedic musical 1975-2014. The range of years represents the era each performer's piece came from, in Racz' case, 1975-2014.

He earned his way to the state championship festival after advancing out of the Trumbauer High School Divisional competition, held in November at Hartselle High School.

Racz also competed in the monologue category, where he earned a superior rating, just short of qualifying him for state in that category as well.

He discovered the song after watching Shrek: The Musical on Netflix. The song resonated with Racz, and he purchased the album and listened to it whenever he was driving his car.

Performed by Lord Farquaad in Shrek, the song gives the audience some insight about Farquaad's volatile relationship with his father.

“When I sing it, I try to be really expressive,” Racz said. “It's a song about his dad and what he wants to do when he becomes king and gets a queen of his own. I try to be kind of overanimated.”

Racz did not use different character voices in his three-and-a-half minute performance. Instead, he sang in his voice and relied on its quality, along with some theatrics and animation during his performance.

Racz' first place finish is all the more special, considering he almost didn't compete at the district level due to the flu bug. And, although he recognized the level of talent he was surrounded by in other competitors, Racz wasn't nervous at all as he prepared for the Trumbauer state finals.

“I went to district feeling sick the whole time, so I was proud of myself for actually making it to state. I really didn't think I was good enough to qualify for state, but when I got there, there were people speaking and doing monologues all over the (Troy University) campus, and they were amazing,” Racz said.

The Trumbauer Theatre Festival began in 1940. It consists of 30 individual events, a one act play festival, a studio theatre one act play festival, all for high school students in Alabama. There are also scholarship auditions for students as well as college screening for high school seniors.

Racz, the son of Esther Racz, is a veteran of local theater. He performed in the 2021 Roxy Theatre's Christmas Spectacular, The Roxy's Salute to Broadway in 2022, and he was cast into two shows at the Shoals Community Theatre, The Wizard of Oz and 9 to 5, last summer.

Racz said he's thankful for the support and dedication of RHS drama teacher Patrice Smith and vocal teacher Aaron Freeman. He's in Smith's Advanced Placement (AP) Language and Composition class and will be in Smith's musical theater course this spring.

Russellville businesswoman Anna Carol Porter got to know Racz through their mutual interest in theater. She's performed in some of the same shows Racz has, and his personality and talent stood out.

“He is an outstanding young man who is super-talented and seems to be able to jump into character and start acting with ease,” Porter said. “He is so respectful and mature, in addition to being very talented.”

When he's not winning state championships in theater, attending Russellville High School and taking part in community theater, Racz also has a part-time job at Sonic Restaurant.

Racz would love to do professional theater, tour with a theater company and one day perform on Broadway.

He plans to attend a four-year university and pursue a dual major in Fine Arts and.....Chemistry, just in case the theater thing doesn't work out.



RHS junior Elijah Racz

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# 'McCOLLUM,' from Page 1

ple had nothing to do and this was a drive-thru event. It fit with the time and the last couple years have been a blessing to use and we hope to the community as well."

While the characters are fun to interact with, and the treats are delicious, the real reason for the event is to share the message about our Savior.

"Christmas with the McCollums is a way for our family to spread the light of Jesus and the message of Christmas with as many people as we can," Adam said. "We want to use our home to honor the birth of Christ our King and the Savior of all first and foremost.

"Come celebrate the Nativity with your family this Christmas and while you're here, we hope you enjoy some of your favorite Christmas scenes, including Toy Story, Charlie Brown, the Smurfs and more," he added.

McCollum said the 'Meet and Treat' event is an opportunity to share the love and light of Jesus.

"It's a way we were able to find as a good ministry opportunity," Adam said. "This may be the one shot a year that someone gets to experience Jesus and if this is it, we want to go all out and give them that chance."

You can find more information about the December 17 event by visiting the 'Christmas with The McCollums' Facebook page. For those who

share and like the post, the McCollums will select one person to receive a special Christmas gift pack.

There may be a line of cars, so you'll have to be patient. But as you wait to enter the 'Meet and Treat,' you can enjoy a beautiful Christmas lights display at the home of the Bell family, which is on the way to the McCollum's home.

*Directions from Russellville to 5075 Gravel Hill Road: Take 43 south to top of Spruce Pine Mountain. At caution light, turn right onto Hwy. 43 toward Hackleburg. Go 3.7 miles and turn right onto Gravel Hill Road by Backwoods Fish Camp. Go 1.9 miles and the home is on the right. While on Gravel Hill Road, stay right at the sharp curve where the road forks and travel .75 miles to the driveway on the right.*



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 **T**he Senior Center at Phil Campbell is under new management. The Town of Phil Campbell would like to invite and encourage everyone in our area that is 60 years and older to come be a part of the group. This is for men and women. They meet at the Phil Campbell Community Center Monday thru Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00. A delicious lunch is served around 11:00 a.m. Come on out and join in on the games or just sit and have a cup of coffee and socialize!! So if you, your parents, grandparents or your neighbor is 60 or older, pass the word and come out and enjoy a morning of f

 **R**ussellville Masonic Lodge #371 is selling hams for Christmas. Pickup is Friday, December 23, between 8-10 a.m., at the Lodge on Coffee Avenue. Hams are \$35 each and may be preordered by calling 256-810-1970.

 **Y**ou are invited to a special time of musical worship with New Ground, on Sunday, January 8, 2023, at 4 p.m., at North Russellville Baptist Church. The church is located on Waterloo Road before you get to Russellville High School. Pastor Jason Swinney and congregation invite everyone to attend. A love offering will be taken.

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

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# Dare 2 Dance? Florence studio offers a fun way to “move it, move it”

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

There's more to making exercise fun than just smiling while working out on the treadmill.

Studies show the keys to sticking with exercise is to make it interesting and enjoyable.

Russellville physician Dr. Miranda Decker tells her patients every day about the importance of activity in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. And that was a primary motivation for Decker to return to ballroom dance after more than two decades.

So Decker joined Dare 2 Dance, a professional ballroom dance studio in Florence. Ballroom dancing is more than just good exercise, she explained. It's about having fun, along with a social element as well.

When Decker relocated to Russellville many years ago, it was due, in part, to the presence of a ballroom dance studio owned and operated by Dr. Yves Morissette. The studio closed after Morissette's passing, and Decker never found another dance outlet, until she visited Dare 2 Dance last year.

“Being a doctor, I'm always telling my patients to be active,” Decker said. “Just like the movie Madagascar says, 'you've got to move it, move it' to enjoy a healthy quality of life. That's really true regardless of age—young, old or anywhere in between. So my intention was to get moving. Only a month or two later, I had trimmed an inch off my waistline. As you keep moving, your quality of life will improve.

“Dare 2 Dance is a good place with a fun, wholesome, safe environment to get exercise and meet people,” she added.

Dare 2 Dance has locations in Columbia, Tn., and Florence. Both locations



COURTESY PHOTO

Dare 2 Dance students enjoying a recent class

will host a Christmas Show on Saturday, December 17, at 7 p.m., at Venue North in Lawrenceburg, Tn. Doors will open at 6 p.m., and advance tickets may be purchased by calling 256-349-5335.

The Christmas Showcase will feature a variety of dance types performed to Christmas songs.

“It's a great way to get people exposed to dance. You can only do what you know about and this is a way to learn about ballroom dance,” Decker said.

The Florence studio is located at 803 N. Patterson Street. There are classes from beginner to advanced, along with themed parties each Friday evening. Dare 2 Dance offers a free introductory package, with one 40-minute lesson, one group class and one party. The introductory package may be booked online at [www.dare2danceflorence.com](http://www.dare2danceflorence.com).

Dancing is much easier than it looks, and Dare 2 Dance instructors will tell you the hardest step to take is the first one through the front door.

Whether looking for a fun way to exercise, a unique date night or a safe way to meet new people, all you have to do is sign up for the free introductory package, and try it for yourself.

Just follow King Julian's lead in Madagascar, and 'move it, move it'!

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# ‘ODEN,’ from Page 1

in high school and have been adding to it every year,” Oden said. “Some years it’s just a few new pieces and other years I add a lot.

“I usually try to get it up the day after Thanksgiving. But this year we had some family come up from Florida and they wanted to see it, so I had it ready for them on Thanksgiving night,” she added.

Preparation for the massive display begins before Halloween, as Kathleen uses a week of vacation from her employer, Pilgrim’s Hatchery, to prune the small trees and bushes, mow the grass and start setting up the many extension cords to power up the lights.

Wade built a 18’ x 24’ building behind the Oden’s house for Kathleen to use for storing the hundreds of figures and decorations. Through the years, that building filled up as the holiday display continued to grow, so there’s a second building now in front of the house to provide additional storage.

As far as setting up the display, Kathleen has handled that by herself for the most part, but this year, she received a big helping hand from her granddaughter Alexis.

“If she hadn’t helped me this year, I probably wouldn’t have got it put up. She came over and worked until dark with me,” Oden said.

The lighted Christmas display is something Oden started years ago because she had a friend who was really crazy about Christmas and loved coming to see her Christmas lights.

“I started with lights, then went to wood items. I’d draw them out and my husband cut them to shape. I had those out for years. Then I started doing lighted figures and it just grew. I had no idea it would ever get this big,” Oden said.

The Oden’s circular driveway allows visitors to drive through the display at a leisurely pace, and to stop and take photos.

The lights are on timers, and turn on after 5 p.m., each evening, and are set to go off after 9 p.m., Oden said. She usually keeps the Christmas display up until a few days after Christmas, so there’s still plenty of time to enjoy it.

Oden’s daughter said her mother always smiles when she hears about another family enjoying the display.

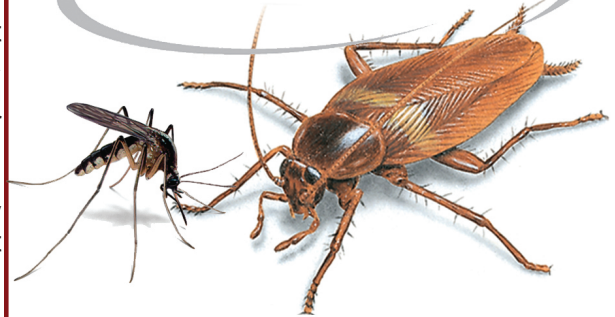
“My mother truly loves doing this for the community. It makes her day when I tell her someone mentioned to me how much their kids loved seeing the lights,” Wenona said.

Occasionally, when someone tells her husband how much they love ‘his Christmas display, Kathleen has to laugh.

“I’m used to people telling Wade how much they love it and they don’t say a word to me. I do all the work and he gets all the credit,” Oden said laughingly. But it’s a labor of love. I love doing it, I really do.”

(Directions to the Oden’s Christmas Display: From Russellville, take Hwy. 243 South to Cty. Hwy. 81, turn left (at Willi’s Grocery/Gas). Turn right off 81 on first gravel road, Cherokee Road. That gravel road turns into Cherokee Ridge and the Oden’s address is 414 Cherokee Ridge. You’ll see the lights through the trees to light your way!)

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**Bus driver requests jury trial for DUI, Reckless Endangerment charges**

John Pilati  
 Franklin Free Press

A former bus driver for Franklin County Schools pled guilty last week to driving under the influence and 40 counts of reckless endangerment resulting from her September 16, 2022 arrest while driving a school bus route that morning.

Rhonda Barksdale, 58, entered the plea in Franklin County District Court, but her guilty plea was soon erased as Barksdale's attorney, Tim Case of Florence, filed notice of appeal to Franklin County Circuit Court.

That means Barksdale's cases will now be tried in front of a jury in Circuit Court. When a defendant appeals a conviction (whether a guilty plea or a verdict) from District Court to Circuit Court, the defendant is afforded a trial de novo, meaning the cases will be decided by a jury or judge with no reference to the prior outcome in District Court.

Some media outlets incorrectly reported this week that Barksdale was sentenced and would serve a two-year prison sentence. Her charges are all misdemeanors, so any jail time she might serve would be in the Franklin County Jail. She faces a maximum of one year jail time per charge.

Barksdale was arrested the morning of September 16th after a motorist called 911 to report a school bus being driven erratically. The motorist moved in front of the bus and slowed down enough to get the bus to stop, according to Franklin County Sheriff Shannon Oliver.

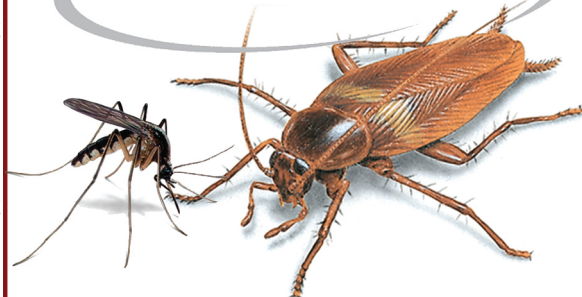
When deputies arrived at the intersection of Highway 48 and County Road 77, they had paramedics examine Barksdale to make sure she was not experiencing a medical issue. They did not observe any indication of a medical emergency, Oliver said.

A blood sample was taken from Barksdale after her arrest and sent to the Alabama Department of Forensic Science to be tested. Franklin County District Attorney Joey Rushing said the toxicology report showed the presence of .09 ethanol (alcohol), well above the limit of .02 for a commercial driver's license holder, along with amphetamines, Clonazepam and Zolpidem (Ambien).

Barksdale, who was hired as a Franklin County bus driver less than a week before her arrest, was fired by the Franklin County Board of Education at Superintendent Greg Hamilton's recommendation later in the month.

The charges against Barksdale will be placed on a trial docket sometime next year, Rushing said.

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# Pharr lands 'dream job' with Franklin County's District Attorney's office

Lucas Shepherd  
Guest Contributor

Franklin County has always held the tradition of law and order to a high standard. That tradition continued on November 15 when District Attorney-Elect Jeff Barksdale appointed Vina native Fallyn Pharr as the new Franklin County Assistant District Attorney.

Barksdale will take office in January 2023, after he ran unopposed in both the Republican Primary and the November 8 general election.

Pharr, a 2014 graduate of Vina High School, attended the University of North Alabama where she earned her undergraduate degree with a double major in Criminal Justice and Political Science. Following her graduation, Pharr was hired by Florence attorney Jamy Poss.

The following year, Pharr enrolled at Cumberland School of Law in Birmingham where she received her Juris Doctorate in just two and a half years by taking summer courses.

Pharr, whose maiden name is Shotts, is married to Taylor Pharr. They have one seven-month old daughter.

Pharr laughingly recalled that her first encounter with the idea of a career in law came in the fourth grade when a teacher mentioned how well she could argue.

"I had a teacher in the fourth grade that told me that I would make a great attorney one day, because I had a real knack for arguing. That was my first real connection to the thought of a career in law, honestly, so I started actually thinking about it, and it just stuck with me," Pharr said.

The motivation for many young lawyers is the desire to help people who otherwise would not have a voice in the legal system, and that also rings true with Pharr.

"I love the idea of being an attorney, because it grants me the opportunity to help people in some way or another. I have the ability to help victims receive justice, or to defend someone who is being wrongfully accused," Pharr said.

"It is meaningful and allows me to serve a purpose for people who, otherwise, may not have honest representation," she added.

Goal orientation is a pivotal part of any success story. Pharr was very forthcoming with exactly what it was that she wanted to achieve in her new position as Assistant District Attorney.

"Obviously, I want to help victims seek out proper justice, but beyond that, I just want to do a good job for the people and the community that I serve on a daily basis. I want to be a true and honest voice for the people. Not only that, but I want to work side by side with our local law enforcement to make sure they know that the job they do is greatly appreciated. Overall, I want the community to feel that they are as safe as possible," Pharr said.

As an Assistant District Attorney in Franklin County, Pharr has realized her major career goal and she's appreciative, and excited, about the opportunity.

"My goal was to always be a District Attorney, or at least an Assistant District Attorney and I have achieved that. My focus is solely on doing the job I've been assigned and doing it well. I'm not looking, at this point, to 'climb the ladder'. I'm happy right where I am," Pharr said.

Pursuing a degree in something as intricate as law is bound to come with some form of stress or another, but for Pharr, it was not nearly as difficult as some would imagine.

"I had struggles, but not like you would really think. There was a lot of pressure academically, but not so much from other sources. I had a great community behind me that supported my journey to success. I have a great husband who encouraged me through the entirety of my educational completion. That definitely made it easier on me. I have been very blessed all the way through the process of answering a calling," Pharr said.

The community plays a major role not only in the position of Assistant District Attorney, but to Pharr personally. She took time to express how vital it was for the community as a whole to know how much this privilege to serve means to her.

"I just want them to know that I am here for them in any way that they might need me to be. I want to help them any way that I can," Pharr said.

"A degree like mine would have allowed me to go anywhere and do anything that I wanted to, but I purposefully chose to stay here, so that I could invest in my own district, because it means that much to me," she



Fallyn Pharr

added.

Pharr took ample time to express her gratitude to those who made this opportunity possible and as easy as it could be for her.

"Firstly, I just want to thank my parents. They've helped so much along the way it has meant so much to me. I want to thank my husband for being so supportive and always believing in me. Obviously, a big thank you to Jeff (Barksdale), Mandy (Barksdale), and Joey (Rushing) for welcoming me, so kindly, into the Franklin County District Attorney's Office. They have made this transition process so easy for me," she added.

Pharr officially started her new position with the Franklin County District Attorney's Office on November 15, 2022.

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Russellville City School Board of Education. Front Row, from left: Kim Clonts, Greg Trapp, Superintendent Heath Grimes. Back Row, from left: Radford Hester, Jerry Groce and Greg Batchelor.

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**Belgreen bests Waterloo 51-23**

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

Coach Marty Cooper's Belgreen Bulldogs boys varsity basketball team evened their record at 6-6 with a 51-23 win over Waterloo Friday night.

Braycen Johnson led the way for Belgreen with 23 points, including 16 in the second half. Austin James scored 13 and Will King added nine for the Bulldogs. Belgreen led 14-2 after one quarter, and 24-6 at halftime, as all 11 players logged playing time for the Bulldogs. In addition to the Waterloo win, Belgreen defeated Tharptown on December 6 by a score of 56-52. James' 22 points and Johnson's 20 led the way for Belgreen. The Bulldogs led 26-24 at halftime, and the game remained close after three quarters, with Belgreen holding a 41-38 lead. Tharptown's balanced scoring was led by Edwin Vela's 13 points. Dylan Valdez had 12, Jackson Clement 10 and Malachi Minor 9.

The Bulldogs lost on December 5 to Phil Campbell, 50-34. Three Bobcats had double digits to lead Phil Campbell's balanced attack. Kyle Pace had 13, and Sage Raper and Bryant Hyde 10 apiece. On December 8, Belgreen lost to Addison, 67-42. James had four three-point field goals against Addison as part of his team-leading 18 points. Belgreen will travel to Cherokee Thursday, Dec. 15 and will host Hackleburg the next night, with boys and girls varsity games both evenings.

Coach Chad Green's Belgreen girls varsity team went 1-2 in its three games last week. The Bulldogs defeated Tharptown 50-21, led by Dacota Green's 21. Noelle Willingham added nine and Bryn Scott seven in the win.

On Monday, Phil Campbell defeated Belgreen 53-50. Hannah Welborn led Phil Campbell with 15, and Green poured in 21 for the Bulldogs in a losing effort. On Friday, Belgreen started slow, scoring only eight points in each of the first two quarters, en route to a 59-52 loss to Waterloo.

The Bulldogs rallied in the second half, outscoring the Cougars 36-23.

Green's team will travel to Cherokee Thursday, followed by a home game with Hackleburg Friday night. Belgreen will play in the Winston County Tournament starting Monday, Dec. 19.

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**200 and counting: Hester records milestone win**



**Hester with the 2022-2023 Vina girls varsity basketball team**

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

As the Vina girls varsity basketball team walked off the court last Monday night, most of the fans left knowing the Red Devils had defeated Phillips 67-52.

But the feeling for the team was that of excitement, not for themselves, but for their coach, as the defeat of the She Bears was Hester's 200th career win as a varsity basketball coach.

There was no ceremony after the game. Only the coach and his players knew of the milestone, and that was fine with Hester.

See, 'HESTER,' page 14

**18 Golden Tigers named All-Region 8-5A**

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

When a football team plows through its region schedule undefeated, it would seem likely that team would be well-represented in the All-Region team.

And that's exactly the case for the Russellville Golden Tigers, who had 12 first team All-Region 8-5A players and six Honorable Mention All-Region 8-5A players when the results were announced last week.

Coach John Ritter's team finished 7-5 overall and 6-0 in Region 8 play. Incredibly, the Golden Tiger defense gave up only 28 points in its six region games. That's an average of less than five points, a number that will win you a lot of football games.

"That is a testament to how we played in giving up only 28 points in Region 8 games," Ritter said. "Strength of our Region aside, that's a pretty difficult thing for a defense to do."

Golden Tiger defensive players who earned a spot on the All-Region First Team included Banks Langston (DB), River Richardson (DL), Devin Green (LB) JT Hill (DL), Matthew James (DL) and Martin Tomas (LB).

Russellville also had four Honorable Mention All-Region honorees, including Malachi Duncan (LB), Nicklaus Pounders (LB), Richard Scott (DB/P) and Jah Williams (S).

"For the year, we gave up an average of 15.5 points per game," Ritter said. "That's a total of 186 points with a very tough schedule that included Deshler, Mars Hill, Athens and 7A Grissom. I'm very proud of our defensive effort this year."

Quarterback Harrison Burch (in 11 games) completed 115 of 198 passes for 2,349 yards, 25 touchdowns and only four interceptions. That's a 20.4 yard average per completion and a QB rating of 131.1. You might know much about QB ratings, but trust us, a 131.1 is outstanding.

Senior Conner Warhurst ran the ball 161 times for 1,426 yards (an 8.9 yard average per attempt)

See, 'REGION,' page 15



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# 'HESTER,' from Page 13

Hester is on his second stint as Vina girls' varsity coach and his 16th year of coaching. Hester led the Vina program from 1997-2002, and took over again in 2015. He also coached varsity girls basketball at Belgreen from 2011-2014. The Phillips win put Hester's career record at 200-194, an impressive mark for a coach at one of the state's smallest schools.

"I appreciate the girls' effort on this team. They are the ones who did this," Hester said. "We are having a good season and are 6-4 on a kind of rebuilding year, so the girls are really doing a good job."

Franklin County Superintendent of Education Greg Hamilton, a former Vina coach, congratulated Hester on 200 wins.

"I'm proud of Coach Hester's accomplishment. To win consistently at a small school is no easy task," Hamilton said. "He works hard to make the girls' basketball program at Vina successful."

In the Phillips game, senior Kaitlyn Athley led Vina with 23 points. Khylee Brooks had 12 and Sara Harper 11 points with 10 rebounds.

After a 56-41 loss Tuesday to Hackleburg, Vina improved to 6-4 with a 67-39 win at Tremont, Miss., Saturday night.

Harper led Vina with 20 points and seven assists. Athley canned five three-pointers as part of her 19 points and Kaley Attaway had eight points and 12 rebounds.

The Red Devils' schedule this week includes a road game at Brilliant and a home game against St. Bernard on December 15.

Vina's Junior High Girls Team is enjoying an outstanding season, with 11 wins and a top eighth grade seed entering this weekend's Franklin County Junior Tournament. Vina will play the winner of the Red Bay-Belgreen for the county title.

Coach Abby Ward's team defeated Phillips 37-2, paced by Harleigh Ridge's 14 points and Brooklyn McEuen's 10. Their 11th win was a 32-22 defeat of Hackleburg.

In a 26-20 defeat of Hubbertville, Vina was led by Braxtyn Quinn's 12 points and Layla Hester's 11.

In a 32-26 victory over Belgreen, McEuen led the Red Devils with 14. Quinn had eight and Hester six points.

In a 40-23 win over Covenant Christian, Vina was led by Makenzie Elrod with 12 points, Miranda King's 11 and Kari Harper's eight.

Ward's junior varsity Vina girls will face Phil Campbell in the county championship game.



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# 'REGION,' from Page 13

and 21 touchdowns.

Senior wideout Randall Johnson amassed 1,130 all-purpose yards for an average of 102.7 per game. He hauled in 39 receptions for 1,073 yards and 13 touchdowns.

Warhurst, Burch and Johnson joined teammates Grayson Murray (OL), Tilmon Baker (FB) and Bralynn Vincent (WR) on the All-Region 8-5A First Team.

Warhurst also received the Region 8-5A Offensive Skill Position Most Valuable Player and Murray the Offensive Line Most Valuable Player.

Interestingly, Vincent, who had only eight receptions for 97 yards this season, was nominated by three other Region 8 coaches because of his outstanding blocking. When a wide receiver stands out to three coaches because of his blocking, that's an unselfish player doing his job every play, whether his number is called or not.

Baker, whose H-back position primarily involves blocking, was another Golden Tiger whose 'team first' mentality earned him a spot on the All-Region Team.

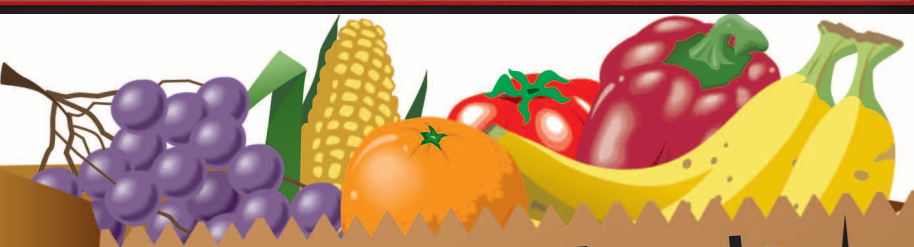
Sophomore Neyland Baker (OL) was also named Honorable Mention Region 8-5A, to round out the 18 Golden Tiger honorees. Of those 18, seven were seniors: Warhurst, Murray, T. Baker, Johnson, Langston, Richardson and Cartee.

It's a senior class that includes the team's leading rusher and receiver. And it's a group Ritter will always admire for their workmanlike leadership.

"It's the way they approached every game—they got down 0-2 and never panicked. Their mental approach to each game remained the same and the never got complacent," Ritter said. "They did a good job in practice, in playing and in their role of being team leaders.

"We put a really good product on the field that was fun to watch. Their effort was fun to watch in practice, and fun for our fans to see on Friday nights," he added.

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, don't forget to check us out on the web at [www.franklinfreepress.net](http://www.franklinfreepress.net)!



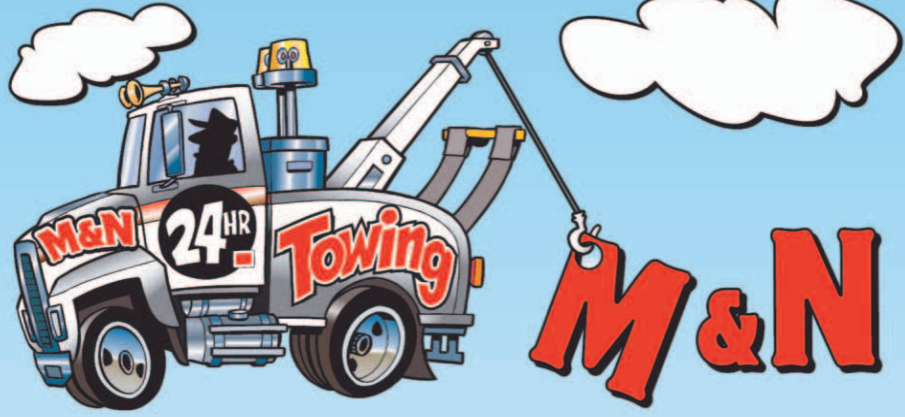
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## Community Spirit Bank VP named to Barret School of Banking Board of Regents

Submitted

The Paul W. Barret Jr. School of Banking announced that Tammy Montgomery, executive vice president, COO, and human resource manager of Community Spirit Bank in Red Bay, Ala., was elected to serve on Barret School of Banking's 2022-2023 Board of Regents.

Barret, established in 1972, provides banking education for graduates and participates in more than 38 states. And is dedicated to helping banking students excel in receiving an excellent community bank educational experience to benefit both the student and their sponsoring community bank employer. Their mission is to provide a world-class learning experience for the career-oriented individual in commercial banking or related financial services industry business.

Montgomery's position on the Board of Regents is amongst some of the leading bank professionals from around the country who volunteer their time and diverse perspectives from within the industry to ensure the community banking industry benefits from Barret's programming.

They are involved in strategic planning, curriculum review, budget oversight, new programming development, scheduling the annual lecture series, and promoting Barret within their banks and state organizations.

"Tammy is an exceptional community bank leader who has dedicated time and resources to advance Barret's mission to help train up the next generation of community bank leaders," said Community Spirit Bank president and CEO Brad M. Bolton.

"We are honored that the Barret Banking board has appointed her and that she has accepted this appointment to represent the needs of community bank-focused learning. We thank her for volunteering to serve in ensuring a bright future for bank education and the communities and customers they serve," he added.



Tammy Montgomery

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# Hines, Pace named RFD firefighter, volunteer of the year

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

Shawn Hines is one of those firemen that Russellville Fire Department Chief Joe Mansell loves to have on his team.

Hines, a Firefighter/EMT who came to the RFD in 2020 after starting his firefighting career with the City of Sheffield, sees something that needs to be done, and he does it. It's a simple philosophy, but one that Mansell appreciates.

And it's that type of work ethic that recently earned Hines the 2022 Russellville Firefighter of the Year Award. The award is presented annually to one fireman who stands out among his peers. The award is voted on by his fellow firefighters, so Hines' extra efforts did not go unnoticed by his coworkers.

Carson Pace was named the 2022 Russellville Fire Department Volunteer of the Year, Mansell said.

The awards were presented at the department's Christmas dinner last week.

Mansell was impressed from the first day Hines went to work for his



department. Hines is a family man who acts and speaks to others with respect. Hines and his wife Savannah have two children, Chance and Lakely.

"He is very polite and respectful," Mansell said of Hines. "It's 'yes sir, no sir' and you just don't see much of that these days. We're blessed to have him as part of our department and he's well-deserving of this honor."

Mansell said it's important for the department's future to have a mix of younger firefighters with older, experienced employees.

"We're hitting the age where several of the guys are near retirement, so Shawn will definitely be moving up the ranks in the near future. He's got a bright career with the Russellville Fire Department," Mansell said.



Tune in to WGOL 100.7 FM to hear "Real Estate Tips with Willodean" weekdays at 8 a.m. and 12 p.m. Davis is the owner/broker of Davis Realty & Associates in Russellville.



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**Intersection of AL 24**

# Public input invited on proposed 243 bridge replacement project

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

The State of Alabama is asking for public input on a proposed bridge replacement project on Alabama 243 south of Russellville.

Signs were posted south and north of the bridge earlier this month inviting public input, which can be made online at [www.aldotinvolved.com](http://www.aldotinvolved.com).

That web site, maintained by the Alabama Department of Transportation, lists pending projects and allows for comments to be made through the site.

The 1.3 mile project calls for the bridge that travels over Cedar Creek to be replaced. A detour will be utilized while the project is pending.

The reason for the project is stated as constructing 'a more modern facility capable of handling existing and future traffic demands in a more efficient manner,' according to the website.

Public input will be received through January 6, 2023, according to Jud Young, Transportation Engineer with ALDOT.

Young said the bridge, approximately five miles southeast of Russellville, was constructed in 1965, and is requiring an increasing amount of maintenance work.

The original plan was to have an onsite detour around the project, but that would have involved too much right-of-way and structure relocation, so there will be an offsite detour using adjacent county roads.

"The signage for that detour will be very detailed," Young said. "Large trucks over the weight limit will use Alabama 13 and 195 to reconnect with 243. Local residents will be able to take county roads so they won't have too long of a detour."

If the final project plans are approved, it would likely be late 2023 before the project is let and onsite works begins, Young said.

"We do not have to do an onsite detour and right-of-way taking houses, so that helps speed up the process," Young said. "There is some right-of-way involved because the elevation of the roadway has to be raised and the new bridge height raised."

The new bridge will have wider lanes than the existing bridge, and an eight to ten foot shoulder. The existing bridge was built with post and rail barriers, making a tighter roadway.



We love to hear from you! Send your guest columns, recipes, cartoons, letters to the editor and other creative submissions to [franklinfreepress@yahoo.com](mailto:franklinfreepress@yahoo.com). For updates on news and sports throughout the week, don't forget to check us out online at [franklinfreepress.net](http://franklinfreepress.net)!

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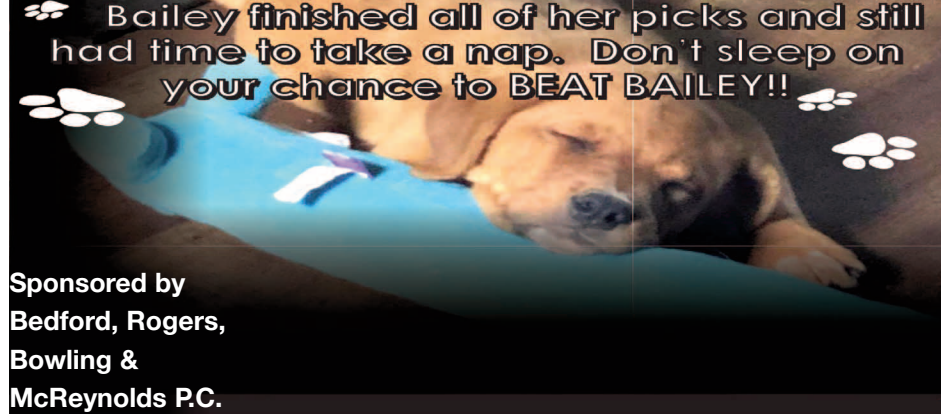
  
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The following slate of bowl games is open ONLY to our weekly winners. If you were a weekly winner this year, please submit your predictions by December 21. The top scorer will win our grand prize of \$100.

Submit your picks to us each week in one of two ways: Fill out the entry form on this page and mail it to us at 113 Washington Ave. NW, Russellville, AL 35653, or email your picks to us along with your name and number at franklinfreepress@yahoo.com. Picks sent in by mail for Week 13 must be postmarked by Wednesday, December 21 and picks submitted by email for Week 13 must be received by Wednesday, December 21, at 10 a.m. Each week, the contestant who correctly picks the most games will win a free T-shirt and the chance to pick in the grand-prize final-week contest. If multiple contestants correctly pick the same number of games in a given week, the tiebreaker score will be used to determine a winner. Contestants are only eligible to win the weekly contest once. No multiple winners allowed. ONE entry per telephone number.

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Wisconsin vs. Oklahoma St.	Oklahoma St.	
Kansas vs. Arkansas	Arkansas	
Oregon vs. North Carolina	Oregon	
Texas Tech vs. Ole Miss	Ole Miss	
Tennessee vs. Clemson	Clemson	
Alabama vs. Kansas St.	Kansas St.	
Iowa vs. Kentucky	Kentucky	
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