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Melecio tabbed as RPD Officer of the Year

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When it comes to the 22 officers in the Russellville Police Department, it's the ones Chief Chris Hargett hears about the least who often do the best jobs.

And one of those officers, Sergeant Antonio Melecio, was honored as the 2022 Russellville Police Department Officer of the Year at the department's Christmas dinner held December 15 at Hilltop Diner.

Hargett and Lt. Jake Tompkins chose Melecio based on a variety of

factors, including his work ethic, willingness to work extra shifts without complaint when needed and the absence of any complaints about his demeanor while on duty.

"He's just an all-around good employee and Lt. Tompkins and I felt he was very deserving of this honor," Hargett said.

RPD Dispatcher Lariza Delgado was named the 2022 Dispatcher of the Year. Delgado was nominated by her supervisor based on her professionalism and calm under fire handling of calls for service, Hargett said.

See 'AWARD,' Page 4

Former teacher pleads guilty to sex act with student

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A former Phil Campbell High School teacher pled guilty Wednesday to engaging in a sex act with a student.

Jordan Benford, 30, stood before Circuit Judge Glenn E. Thompson and admitted he was guilty of engaging in sexual intercourse with a 17-year-old PCHS student.

Benford was arrested in March 2021 after an investigation by the Franklin County Sheriff's Office into allegations that Benford was engaged in a sexual relationship with a student and was also sending her nude videos/photos of himself.

At the time, Benford was employed

as a high school science teacher and assistant football coach at Phil Campbell.

Benford was charged in May 2021 with a four-count felony indictment including distributing obscene material to a student, soliciting a sex act with a student, transmitting obscene material to a child and engaging in a sex act with a student.

The investigation began on a Sunday night in March 2021 when the student's parents contacted the sheriff's office around 9 p.m. Benford was arrested later that night and admitted an "incident of sexual activity" with a student. He was placed on paid administrative leave effective March 15, 2021.

He was later terminated by the

See 'BENFORD' Page 5

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**Hazel Audrey O'Kelley, 84, of Phil Campbell, passed away
Wednesday, December 21, 2022. Spry Memorial Chapel
assisted the family.**

**Stella Mae Horton Kimbrough, 92, Phil Campbell, passed
away on December 21, 2022. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted
the
family.**

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No prison time for man involved in fatal crash

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A Russellville man who pled guilty to manslaughter will not serve time in prison a judge ruled at a hearing Wednesday afternoon.

Antonio Sears, 38, was charged in October 2020 on an eight-count indictment after a vehicle he was operating crashed, and the female passenger was killed. The incident occurred in August 2020 near Woodland Hills subdivision in Russellville.

Police reports indicate Sears was traveling approximately 70 miles per hour (in a 25 mph zone) without his headlights on.

Circuit Judge Glenn Thompson, who was appointed to preside over the case due to a conflict of interest that prohibited Franklin County Circuit Judge Brian Hamilton from being involved, sentenced Sears to a 15-year sentence, split to serve 36 months in Franklin County Community Corrections.

While on community corrections, Sears will have to regularly report to his case manager but will not have to serve time in prison unless he violates the terms of his community corrections order or if he is charged with a new offense.

Thompson ordered Sears to be placed on two years' supervised probation once he completes the community corrections program.

Sears entered a plea of guilty on the manslaughter charge, a Class B felony carrying a prison sentence of 2-20 years. The remaining charges, which included DUI, Possession of Drug Paraphernalia and Unlawful Possession of Cocaine, Aderall, Oxycodone, Hydrocodone and Marijuana, were dismissed as part of Sears' agreement with the State.

Franklin County District Attorney Joey Rushing said Sears entered an 'open plea,' meaning there was no sentencing agree-

ment or recommendation from the State of Alabama.

Rushing said five witnesses from the victim's family testified at the December 21st hearing, and each asked the Court to deny Sears' application for probation.

"They all asked for a maximum sentence and I asked the Court for a 'severe' sentence with prison time," Rushing said. "The defendant's attorney asked for probation.

"I'm very disappointed he was not ordered to serve time as a consequence of Mr. Sears killing another person," Rushing added.

Sears first entered a guilty plea to manslaughter on October 12, 2022, in Hamilton's court, but the judge withdrew from the case and set aside Sears' plea when he learned his former law partner, Danny McDowell, represented the family of the 27-year-old woman who died in the accident.

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Franklin Free Press

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‘AWARD,’ from Page 1

With 22 officers, including two contract labor School Resource Officers, the RPD is four officers short of full capacity, Hargett said. He hopes to have those remaining spots filled early in 2023. The city has also has four dispatchers and Chaplain Bobby Brown as part of the RPD team.

There were several additional awards presented to officers and dispatchers at the December 15 dinner. These awards recognized years of service with the City of Russellville, safety/accident free years, perfect attendance, physical fitness and distinguished service. They included:

- Chief's Distinguished Award: Capt. Jake Tompkins, Lt. Dustin Lovelady.
- 20 Year Service Award: Dispatcher Patti Landers.
- 15 Year Service Award: Sgt. Brandi Whitely, Lt. Joe Hargett.
- 10 Year Service Award: David Romans, Jake Tompkins.
- 5 Year Service Award: Antonio Melecio, Dustin Lovelady.
- Physical Fitness Award: Alex Prince, Sgt. Derek Henderson, Carlos Lucas and Antonio Melecio.
- Safety & Accident Free Award: Alex Prince, Dakota Riley, Antoine Suggs and David Romans.
- Perfect Attendance Award: Dispatcher Lariza Delgado, Carlos Lucas, Derek Henderson, Antonio Melecio and Antoine Suggs.



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'BENFORD,' from Page 1

board after a lengthy closed-door hearing. Hamilton, citing confidentiality issues, would not comment on his reasons for recommending the termination, nor would he comment on the pending prosecution.

Benford's plea to the school employee engaging in a sex act with a student charge included an agreement by Franklin County District Attorney Joey Rushing to dismiss the remaining three charges.

Benford's plea includes a recommendation from the State of Alabama for a 10-year prison sentence, split with 18 months to serve in custody, followed by six months in Franklin County Community Corrections. If Benford succeeds in completing the FCCC program, he would then be placed on probation.

He will also have to register as a felony sex offender once he is released from custody.

Thompson was specially appointed to the case because of Franklin County Circuit Judge Brian Hamilton having a conflict that prevented him from presiding. Hamilton's former law partner, Danny McDowell, represents the Franklin County Board of Education. Additionally, Hamilton's brother Greg is the Franklin County Superintendent of Education.

Thompson ordered a pre-sentencing investigation and report to be prepared by the Probation Office. A sentencing hearing will be set at a later date according to the judge's order. The Court will have the option to order Benford to serve his time in custody in a state prison or in the Franklin County Jail.

Rushing said judges have broader authority to order where a defendant serves his time in custody in cases that involve 18 month or less sentences.

The plea also included an agreement that Benford would waive any appeals after sentencing.

Benford was returned to the Franklin County Jail after the plea hearing. He has been in jail since a family member came off of his bond and Benford turned himself in. He will remain in custody pending the sentencing hearing. Rushing said Benford will receive credit for the time he's served in the county jail.

The constitutionality of Alabama's law relating to school employee/student sexual activity has been challenge multiple times. Defense attorneys have argued that the equal protection rights of school employees have been violated by the 2010 law because it makes otherwise consensual sex with a 16-year-old or older illegal for school employees yet legal for other adults.

Benford, a PCHS graduate, played baseball for the Bobcats and continued his athletic career as a member of the Alabama A&M University baseball team.

Benford was represented by Florence attorney James Irby.

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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

 **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.

 **T**he Church of God on Mars Hill Road in Phil Campbell will have a New Year's Eve service starting at 8 p.m., December 31, 2022. Everyone is invited. The Believers, Paul Mishue and others will be singing.

 **A** fund-raiser basketball game will be played between the Russellville Police Department and the Franklin County Sheriff's Office on Saturday, January 14, 2023, at 7 p.m., at the Ralph Bishop Center on Ash Avenue in Russellville. Admission is \$1 per person and concessions will be sold. Funds will be used to purchase needed equipment for both departments.

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Councilman helping residents at risk of electricity cutoff

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A Russellville city councilman lent a helping hand to some Russellville Electric Board ratepayers desperate to keep their electricity from being cut off in advance of severe winter weather that hit Northwest Alabama last week.

And ironically, the money he used had its roots with the Russellville Electric Board.

On December 20th, Woodruff was contacted by a representative from Great Western Life Insurance, who was calling to see if he wanted to renew his \$20,000 life insurance policy.

"I didn't know anything about this policy, until she reminded me it was issued through the Russellville Electric Board," Woodruff said.

Woodruff's tenure on the Russellville Electric Board ended in January 2019, when he was not reappointed to another term. Woodruff said he recalled the REB providing board members life insurance, but he assumed the policy was canceled when he was no longer on the board.

"Apparently, the REB continued to pay the premium for more than three years after I left the board, at a cost of \$1,300 annually," Woodruff said. "The representative asked me if I wanted to renew the policy, and I said I did not. Then she asked me to hold on while she figured the cash value of the policy."

"Apparently, this was a policy that built a cash value. She told me the policy has a \$2,058 cash value and if I was canceling it, then Great Western Life would issue me a check for \$2,058," he added.

Woodruff decided he would donate the \$2,058 to ratepayers whose electricity was about to be disconnected with temperatures later in the week forecast as low as three degrees.

He made a post Tuesday afternoon inviting any Russellville Electric Board customer whose service is scheduled for disconnect this week to contact him by Facebook Messenger. While he wasn't be able to help every ratepayer in this difficult situation, Woodruff said the assistance was on a case-by-case basis as long as funds remained.

Within one hour, the Facebook post had been shared 55 times. Woodruff said there were already three ratepayers he would be assisting. The only criteria was that the person or family must be a REB ratepayer.

"Friday night the temperature will be three degrees. I have had people contact me worried about their power being turned off this week," Woodruff said. "They have asked for a two-day extension but were denied by the Russellville Electric Board."

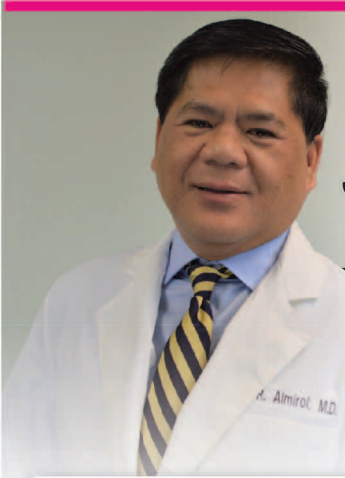
Woodruff questioned why REB Manager Charles Canida would continue to pay insurance premiums for a policy on a former REB member. Additionally, he wonders how many other former board members' policies are being paid well after their tenure on the board.

"It's yet another example of gross mismanagement of money, but in this case, at least the ratepayers are going to get these funds back," Woodruff said.

At the December 19th Russellville City Council meeting, Woodruff asked the city attorney to research whether the city could pass an ordinance preventing any utility from turning off the power, gas or water to any citizen in Russellville during extreme weather conditions.

"If this can be done legally, it would give the ratepayer a short extension and hopefully enough time to get their bill paid," Woodruff said.

City Attorney Danny McDowell said he would research the issue and contact Woodruff with an answer.



John Almirol, M.D.
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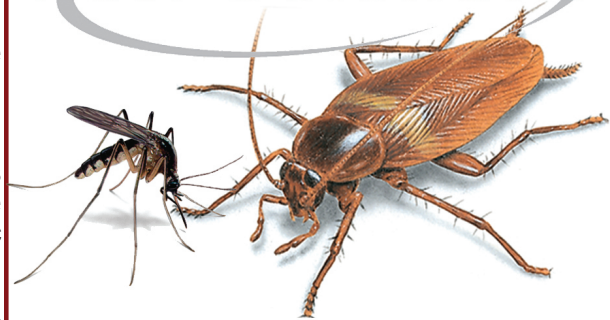
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Northwest-Shoals receives \$950,000 grant to provide increased support and resources for students

Submitted

MUSCLE SHOALS & PHIL CAMPBELL, ALA. -- Yesterday (12/20), Congressman Robert Aderholt announced a three-year, \$950,000 grant from the United States Department of Education (USDOE) for Northwest-Shoals Community College (NW-SCC) to fund an Advocacy and Resource Center for underserved student populations.

"I am pleased to announce that Northwest-Shoals Community College will be receiving a grant in the amount of \$950,000 for the Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC) project aimed at assisting underserved students in North Alabama. As a member of Congress and a member of the House Committee on Appropriations, I strongly believe and encourage these types of investments into our education system that will serve the area for decades to come," said Congressman Aderholt.

The ARC project will support at least 300 students on the Phil Campbell and Shoals campuses with basic resources. Services students will benefit from include: a food pantry, mentoring and life coaching, professional counseling and referrals, assistance with housing and utility services, transportation assistance, aid with childcare services, and access to technology and help with course software.

"The importance of this Basic Needs Grant awarded to Northwest-Shoals Community College by the USDOE for the individuals that it will serve cannot be overstated. It will not only impact those directly served by the grant but their families and communities as well by removing barriers associated the issues of poverty and mental health and providing opportunities to enter the workforce with the skills essential to succeed," added Jeff Goodwin, President of Northwest-Shoals Community College.

The grant is funded through the U.S. Department of Education's Basic Needs Program aimed at supporting student success. This grant will be

in the amount of \$950,000.00 for the first budget period (12/31/2022 through 12/31/2025). It is anticipated that the grant will be for a total of 3 years.

The College will close for the holiday break December 22 - January 3. Spring semester classes begin January 12. For more information about the registration, please visit nwsc.edu.

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



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RV Council approves purchase of digital radios

*John Pilati
Franklin Free Press*

The Russellville City Council approved a \$10,000 one-time allotment to the Cramer Children's Center at the council's December 19th meeting.

Kim Bevis, with the Cramer Children's Center, requested the additional funding from the city on top of the \$2,500 yearly allotment already provided by the city.

The CCC's mission is to 'lessen the trauma of children who have been abused at the hands of someone else.' Andrea's Arbor, located at 508 North Jackson Avenue in downtown Russellville, is part of the Cramer Children's Center.

Bevis told the council the center has served 454 children this year through its three centers, including 113 children in Franklin County, representing 26 percent of the total amount from the five county area served by CCC.

The council voted to allot an additional \$3,333 in 2023, 2024 and 2025, in addition to the existing allotment.

Bevis said the center's funding has declined in recent years so she is making an appeal to each of the cities served by CCC.

In other agenda items, the council:

--approved a resolution commending the Cotton Flats Cruisers for the club's \$500 donation to the Russellville Fire Department's Helping Santa program.

--declared an air compressor tank surplus property in the Russellville Fire Department.

--approved an additional match of \$204.06 for the purchase of extrication tools through the Assistance to Firefighters Grant.

--approved the purchase of 74 radios for the Russellville Police Department, Russellville Fire Department and Russellville Street Department, and a maintenance contract with 911 iNet for the digital portable radios. RPD Chief Chris Hargett said the current radios leave some dead spot areas where they can't be used. These digital radios can use any cell tower in their range and they are 100 percent encrypted. The monthly maintenance cost will be \$20 per radio.

--approved pay scale adjustments for RPD officers Kerry Hallman (Grade 6, Step 2) and Joseph Franks (Grade 6, Step 4).

--heard a report from Councilman Darren Woodruff praising the work of the Russellville Fire Department in extinguishing the recent fire at Northside Grocery.

"I want to publicly say these guys are good. They saved the building while several firefighters were on a second call at the same time," Woodruff said.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Council will be January 3, 2023, with work session at 6 p.m., and meeting to follow.

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Flanagan hired as Sheffield baseball coach

Michael Rice
Franklin Free Press

Former Head Russellville Middle School coach Corey Flanagan has accepted the head baseball coaching position at Sheffield High School.

After spending the last eight years as a coach for the Golden Tiger football and baseball programs, Flanagan will now transition to his new position with the Bulldogs.

"Although we do not have an official resignation yet, I am aware of Coach Flanagan's intent to accept another job," Russellville Superintendent Heath Grimes said. "(The Russellville City Board of Education) will approve it when it is received at the January meeting and likely will be effective January 3rd."

Grimes continued to wish Flanagan success on his new endeavors while noting the impact he left with Russellville.

"I'm happy for him. Coach Flanagan is a great person, teacher, and coach. He will be very successful no doubt. He definitely will be missed in Russellville City Schools. However, he wants to grow and expand his experience. I applaud him for that and wish him nothing but success," Grimes added.

Sheffield announced the hiring of Flanagan on Facebook last Friday, Dec. 16 and a meeting was held the next day for Bulldog student-athletes to meet their new skipper.

Flanagan visited Sheffield's facilities and met with the principal and players last week and after some thoughts and praying on the mat-

See, 'FLANAGAN,' page 12

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Bobcats making the most of Christmas break to improve against unfamiliar foes

Michael Rice
Franklin Free Press

The Phil Campbell Bobcats are taking their talents on the road this Christmas break to face some opponents they might not be quite as familiar with.

Last week, the Bobcats faced the Coosa Christian Conquerors in Gadsden, Alabama, taking down the Conquerors in a rout by a final of 68-33. They then continued their road trip by traveling to Collinsville, falling 51-50 to the Panthers.

"I like going and playing teams outside of town during the Holidays," Head coach Shane Clay said.

"Especially teams you've never heard of or will ever play again." Clay's squad kicked things off on a slow pace and were down 10-8 at the end of the first quarter.



Canaan Clay, above, is second in scoring for the Bobcats with 11.6 points per game as Phil Campbell hopes to push towards an area title.

But late in the second half, the Bobcats found another gear. Over the final quarter-and-a-half, the Bobcats scored 60 points.

"The Panthers are a top 12 team in Alabama. We had a chance to win, but our shot rimmed out," Clay said.

The Bobcats are 9-4

overall this season and are only allowing on average 45 points a game.

The Bobcats have four players averaging over 11 points a game, with Bryant Hyde leading the charge with 13.2 points per game. Senior guard Canaan Clay is behind Hyde in the scoring totals, averaging 11.6 points per game.

Clay says efforts on both sides of the court have paid dividends for the Bobcats and singled out one player's defensive efforts in particular.

"Sage Raper is doing a great job on defense for us," Clay said.

The Bobcats are 1-2 in their area. They have defeated Colbert Heights and their two losses are to Danville and Colbert County.

"Everything that could go bad went bad in our loss to Colbert County. We didn't do the things we normally do," Clay said.

Tverberg: NW-SCC adjunct position a career 'goal'

Michael Rice
Franklin Free Press

After four years as the Belgreen varsity softball team's head coach, Susie Tverberg has accepted a teaching position at Northwest-Shoals Community College.

Tverberg, a Tharptown native, transferred to Russellville High School and graduated in 1988 and attended NW-SCC where she played softball for two years.

"I tried out at Northwest and Coach Bill Moss offered me a scholarship. I pitched for two years," Tverberg said.

Tverberg received her Bachelors Degree from Athens State University in Early Childhood Development.

Tverberg pursued and obtained her Masters Degree five years ago from the University of West Alabama. It was the Masters Degree that made her eligible to teach the class at

Northwest-Shoals.

"I've coached softball as long as I can remember. A lot of the people I teach with, coached their T-ball team," Tverberg said.



For the last four years, Tverberg has taught child development classes to Belgreen students. The students receive college credit for these classes.

Tverberg's goal has always been to return to

NW-SCC to become an adjunct instructor, but her passion has been on the field coaching.

She will continue to help coach at Belgreen in her spare time. Her husband Sander was recently named varsity softball coach for the Bulldogs.



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'FLANAGAN,' from Page 11

ter, he knew which direction he was meant to take his career.
"After meeting everybody, I prayed about the decision and told God to check all the boxes for me and he did that," Flanagan said.
The move represents an opportunity to grow as a coach for Flanagan who says the key for success starts with creating a foundation for the student-athletes he will be coaching.
"To be successful this year, I will start with building relationships with the kids. From there, we're going to hit the ground running and take it day by day throughout the season." Flanagan said.
The hire comes two months before the season opener when the Bulldogs open up the 2023 season with Meek High School on February 18.
As the head coach of the RMS football team, Flanagan led the Golden Tigers to two North Alabama Middle School Football titles.



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Commission approves personnel moves in short meeting

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Commission approved several personnel moves in the Sheriff's Office at its December 19 business meeting.

Commissioners approved the employment of Hailey Brown as a temporary Corrections Officer/Dispatcher and the resignation of Deputy Brent Wells.

The commission also approved advertising for a permanent Corrections Officer/Dispatcher and a permanent Deputy position.

In other agenda items, the commission:

--approved 2023 annual material bid awards for the Franklin County Highway Department.

--declared a 2004 John Deere Tractor and Alamo brush cutter and a 2007 Chevrolet Truck as surplus property in the Highway Department and authorized the sale of the same on GovDeals.com.

--approved an additional expense of \$200 of American Rescue Plan Act funds for repairs on the roof of the Department of Human Resources building.

--approved the county's continued participation in the Alabama County Commission Association Liability Self-Insurance Fund.

--authorized Franklin County Emergency Management Agency Director Mary Hallman-Glass to bid out supplies for room enhancements in the Emergency Operations Center.

--authorized an expense of \$49,000 (lower than minimum to apply state bid law) for purchase of maintenance replacement parts for the elevator in the Franklin County Courthouse.

--heard an update from Franklin County Revenue Commissioner Strat Byars that all property tax payments postmarked by January 3, 2023, or received by his office on or before that same date, shall be considered on-time payments. This is due to the courthouse being closed Monday, January 2, 2023.

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Applications will be accepted in the Franklin County Commission office until 5:00 PM on Friday, January 6, 2023.

Heavy Equipment Operator for Franklin County Solid Waste

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Applications will be accepted in the Franklin County Commission office until the position has been filled.

An application and job description may be picked up, faxed or emailed upon request from the Franklin County Commission Office, located at 405 N Jackson Avenue, Monday – Friday, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM or applications are available at www.franklincountyal.org under the Careers tab.

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