

Good News

exchange

1st Lt. Norris Carden

WINGS OF SERVICE

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INDEPENDENCE

ISSUE 6 2024

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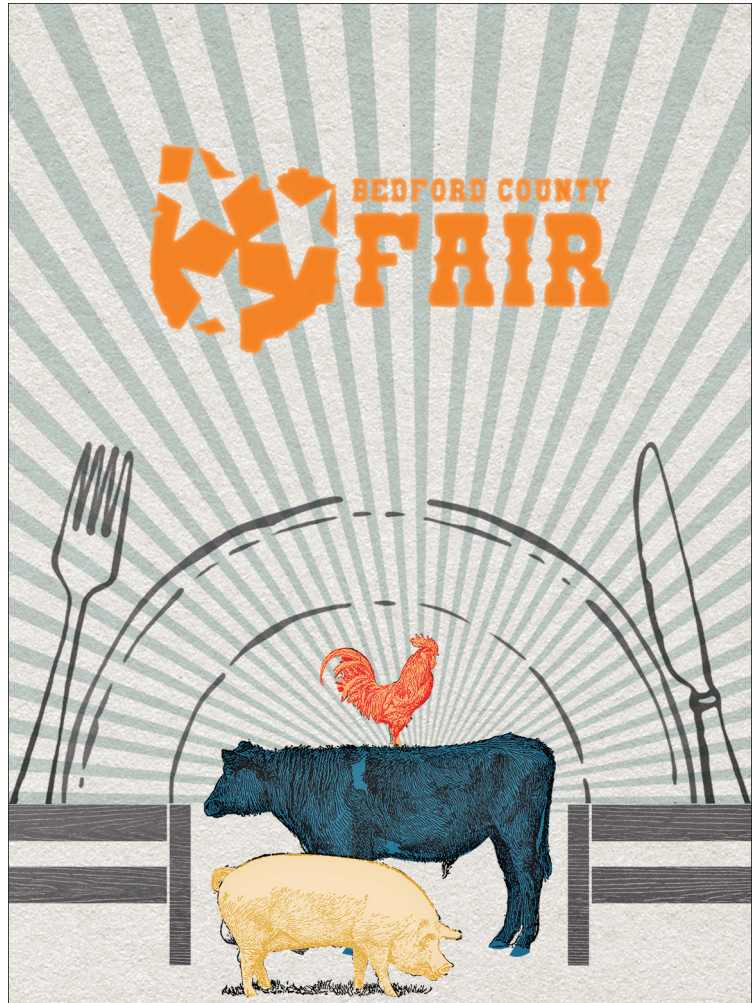
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ISSUE 6 2024

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: 10
Independence

Good Living

TURNING PAGES AND CHANGING LIVES 12
Dot Watson's return to Tullahoma sparks literary change

HOPE TAKES ROOT 18
A deeper look into Serenity House and how it transforms numerous lives in the community

WHERE DREAMS TAKE FLIGHT 24
A cheerleading and gymnastics powerhouse empowers young athletes

HISTORIC CHARM AND EXQUISITE CUISINE 28
Experience Emil's Bistro and Lounge





Good Stories

32 WINGS OF SERVICE

Inside the Tullahoma Civil Air Patrol's lifesaving mission

36 IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HEROES

Aidan Ralston enlists as a National Guard medic, inspired by war heroes and family members

40 FULL CIRCLE SERVICE

A young veteran honors his parents and achieves a childhood dream

Good Times

44 CHARITY LISTINGS

46 ADVERTISER INDEX

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The colors between the oceans

Healing is building for a more perfect union.

IF YOU took a snapshot of any moment in our country's history, there is a hurt we were trying to heal. The same is true today. It's our independence that lets us correct our wrongs, to heal, and to build our country up for a more perfect union. We can all be made by the same Creator and still land somewhere red, white, or blue. We can be different. That is the beauty of independence. This land is your land; this land is my land.

We can be better because of the people in our communities. Those who allow us to be independent provide an open field. We can run for miles into the unknown, and while it's scary, we know we are capable of whatever waits on the other side. We can run with the wind to our backs, hitting the ground to the beat of drums and trumpets that empower us. The same trumpets that rang as we fought a Civil War to keep a

country together with human rights for those of every skin color. The same drums that banged as we flew to Europe to end the Second World War. The same trumpets that helped us stand tall in September 2001. We're a country with the strength to hold each other up in 2020, even if it was through latex gloves.

While perfection will always be impossible to attain, it's our duty to fight for it every day — to get closer to the threshold of freedom and equality for everyone. Independence is a blessing that paints a beautiful picture of blues and reds that, when you pull away, make a purple you can only find between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

This issue of Good News highlights those in our community who make us better. It's their independence — and the fight to obtain it — that makes us who we are. **GN**

Wesley Bryant,
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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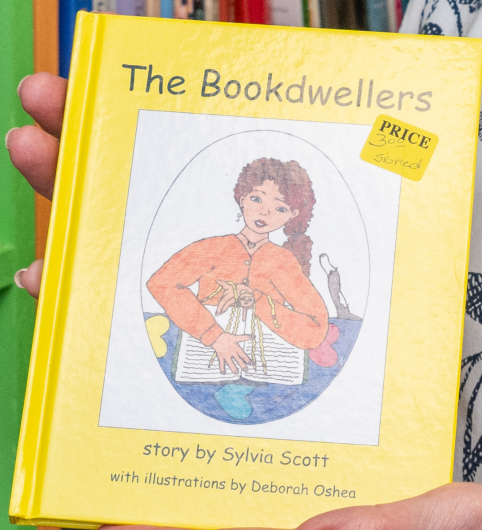
*Turning pages
- and -
changing lives*



Dot Watson's return to Tullahoma
sparks literary change.

By Jeriah Brumfield // Photography by Ashleigh Newnes





Dot
Watson



DOT WATSON'S life began at 308 N. Atlantic St. in Tullahoma, a place that would shape the foundation of her values and convictions. Growing up in a household that cherished giving back, her parents instilled a deep sense of responsibility toward her hometown and its residents. This principle would guide her through a lifetime of remarkable endeavors.

The World War II era inspired Watson's aspirations of becoming a nurse. Surrounded by the wives, mothers, and girlfriends bidding farewell to their loved ones at Camp Forrest, she found inspiration in their life stories. Societal norms initially steered her toward a career in teaching, but Watson's yearning to heal her community intensified.

Watson's formal education led her from East Lincoln Elementary School through junior high and ultimately to Tullahoma High School. During her studies, she enjoyed various activities like Girl Scouts, church youth groups, and the school newspaper, paving the way for many experiences.

The Class of 1957, the last to graduate from the old Tullahoma High School, marked the end of an era. She attended college at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, and earned a degree in biology with a teaching certification. The real highlight, however, was meeting her future husband, Tom Watson, during those formative years.



At the age of 37, she seized the opportunity to pursue her lifelong passion, earning her nursing degree in Newport, Rhode Island — a decision that would set the stage for her impactful career in health care.

As a naval officer's wife, Dot embraced a nomadic lifestyle, accompanying Tom across the globe for 30 years. Their journey together led to two daughters, Mary Beth and Anabel, both Vanderbilt nursing graduates, blessing them with five grandchildren and two great-grandsons.

However, amidst the constant transitions of military life, her heart remained anchored to her hometown. After Tom retired, he let Dot determine their new home.

"When he retired, he said, 'You have followed me to the ends of the earth, and I will go where you want to go now.'"

Without hesitation, she responded, "I want to go home to Tullahoma."

Tom gave her a thumbs up, and back to Tullahoma they went.

"It has been a dream come true," she said.

After retirement, Dot reignited her volunteer flame. She devoted seven years to establishing Partners for Healing — a primary care clinic offering free services to the uninsured in Coffee County. This initiative underscored her unyielding commitment to community well-being and continues to ripple through the lives of those she has touched.

In 2003, Dot's involvement with the The Literacy Council opened a new chapter in her philanthropic journey.

"I love being a volunteer and have done it all my life. Soon after returning to Tullahoma, I met Ann Cline. When she learned that I had been a teacher and taught English as a second



▲ The president of The Literacy Council Donna Rhontou with Dot Watson

language while living in Japan, she asked me to join The Literacy Council. I have been a member ever since."

The Literacy Council is a nonprofit organization that aims to assist adults who didn't finish high school in obtaining an equivalency diploma, making it easier for them to find a job. It is an outstanding program that is still active and thriving.

Initially, her involvement with the The Literacy Council began as a member, where she served on committees. She is now the vice president of the organization. The council's evolution — from elaborate galas to the humble setting of a used bookstore — reflects its commitment to its mission amidst changing times.

The Book Shelf emerged as a natural progression of The Literacy Council's passion for spreading knowledge. Inside the Northgate Mall, its shelves overflow with treasures, inviting the community to explore the magic of reading. When the mall's closure required relocation, the city of Tullahoma stepped in, offering a downtown space, representing the community's support for literacy and education. The library is located at 114 SW Atlantic St., Tullahoma.

The bookstore provides an inclusive and empowering environment for all ages in the community. Collaborating with local organizations, providing books for Little Free Libraries, and supporting adult education classes symbolizes the transformative power of learning.

The council's impact resonates deeply within the community, from providing educational opportunities in the Coffee County Jail to supporting adult learners in pursuing further studies. Through partnerships, outreach, and tireless advocacy, Dot and her colleagues continue to champion the cause of literacy, enriching lives and creating a brighter future for Tullahoma and beyond.

Each of us holds the potential to make a difference. This community has the potential to be united in its pursuit of knowledge, boundless in its generosity, and steadfast in its commitment to building a brighter tomorrow — for Tullahoma and all who call it home.

"Every individual can do something to make their hometown a better place. It can be a kind word spoken to someone, offering a hand to help someone, being positive about life, and being thankful for every day of their life here on earth." GN

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JIM DEVLIN & RICK WHITFIELD

HOPE TAKES ROOT

A deeper look into Serenity House and how it transforms numerous lives in the community.

By Jeriah Brumfield
Photography by Ashleigh Newnes

FIFTY-EIGHT YEARS. It has been 58 years since the last time a drink threatened to swallow him whole. At Serenity House, surrounded by encouraging conversations and love, it felt less like a battle won and more like a life rebuilt, brick by brick. Here, life wasn't just rebuilt. It was reborn — each story shared and each understanding glance was a brick laid to form the foundation of his new reality. For 36 years, it has served as a sanctuary, symbolizing the power of community, second chances, and serenity.

Jim Devlin, a God-fearing visionary with 58 years of sobriety, is a living embodiment of Serenity House's mission. His story, intertwined with the center's history, reveals its profound impact on all who step foot in the building, located at 313 N. Collins St.



Years ago, Devlin's life was a whirlwind of alcohol addiction. The ambition was there, but it was overshadowed by a dependence that threatened to consume him. Finding Alcoholics Anonymous became a turning point. The program offered not just a path to sobriety but the sense of belonging he craved. Through those experiences, a glimmer of hope ignited.

“Hope is found in the meetings, and newcomers see the serenity in the eyes of others.”

—RICK WHITFIELD

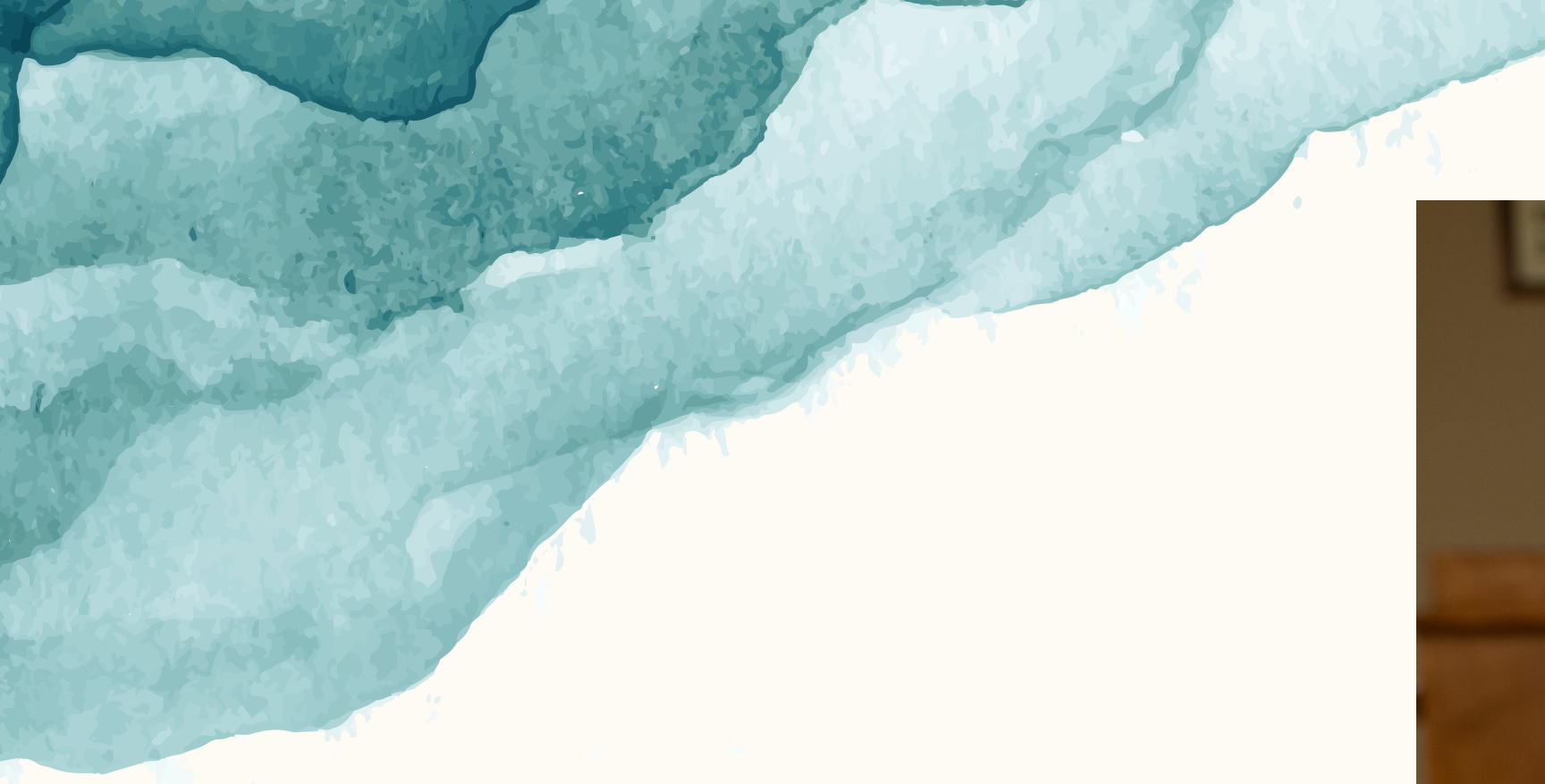
John Nicholson, an esteemed member of the Tullahoma business community, witnessed the transformative power of Alcoholics Anonymous firsthand. He saw the struggle many faced: the

constant search for meetings scattered across churches and recreational halls. The inconvenience, he believed, was a barrier to recovery. Nicholson dreamt of a central location — a sacred space dedicated solely to recovery.

Devlin, forever grateful for the program that transformed him, readily embraced Nicholson's vision. They embarked on a fundraising journey inspired by the belief that a dedicated space could make a world of difference. The road wasn't easy, but the Tullahoma community rallied behind them. With donations trickling in and volunteers, many of whom had experienced recovery themselves, Serenity House became a reality.

Serenity House offers a safe haven for those seeking recovery through its 12-step program. The facility hosts various sanctioned groups, including Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and Overeaters Anonymous. Each group warmly welcomes newcomers who identify with specific struggles.





Rick Whitfield, a board member with Serenity House, said, “Hope is found in the meetings, and newcomers see the serenity in the eyes of others.”

It’s no wonder that local court systems refer many individuals in need of support to Serenity House. The recovery program provides a safe space for individuals seeking to rebuild their lives. The physical space offers a sense of permanence and legitimacy, but the mutual experiences within the walls are where true power lies.

Newcomers yearning for a different life find hope in past stories of struggle and triumph. Experienced members offer encouragement, support, and guidance. It’s a place where vulnerability is not a weakness but a cornerstone of healing.

Serenity House provides a nurturing environment that reignites hope and creates growth. The program empowers individuals to reclaim their lives and rebuild what addiction took away. Individuals mend broken relationships and find success in their chosen career paths. They help to shatter the cycle of despair and replace it with a joyful, fulfilling life.

You might not see the physical transformation within these walls, but the emotional metamor-

phosis is profound. The shame that once clung to individuals like a shroud is replaced by dignity.

Devlin’s story isn’t unique; it’s a testament to the countless lives Serenity House has touched. His journey from the barriers of addiction to becoming a pillar of recovery and a co-founder of a sanctuary of hope proves that recovery in Tullahoma is within reach for those who need it.

With the addition of Devlin’s grandson, Mitch, to the board, the organization embraces an even brighter future.

Whitfield said, “Mitch joining the board adds a great asset, and he identifies well with the younger adults.”

This new generation ensures that the center remains relevant by staying in touch with the needs of a younger population seeking recovery.

At Serenity House, hope takes root and mends broken lives. It is a community that thrives on second chances. Here in Tullahoma, remarkable transformations take place, one life at a time. **GN**

Anonymity is a core value of the traditions, a constant reminder to prioritize principles over personalities. For more information, call (931) 454-9132. Address: 313 N. Collins St. in Tullahoma.





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STACEY HENLEY CRAVENS
AND LEE ROGERS



WHERE DREAMS TAKE FLIGHT

A CHEERLEADING AND GYMNASTICS POWERHOUSE EMPOWERS YOUNG ATHLETES.

By Jeriah Brumfield // Photography by Ashleigh Newnes

WALKING THROUGH the double doors, a medley of grunts, thuds, and sneakers squeaking against polished floors fills the air. Bodies blur across the spring floor, twisting, leaping, and defying gravity. A young girl, eyes narrowed in focus, launches herself skyward in a breathtaking high jump. Nearby, another girl prepares for her next set of movements. Her muscles ripple with exertion as she executes a series of flawless round-offs. Brows collect beads of sweat, and determination shines in every eye. Stretching mats in the middle of the gym hold a tableau of contortion. Backs bend like willow branches as coaches and childhood friends Stacey Cravens and Lee Rogers give instructions and encouragement in equal measure.

Tennessee Gymnastics & Cheerleading provides a sanctuary for athleticism and mentorship in Tullahoma. Cravens and Rogers founded the business over two decades ago, inspiring local youth to pursue their dreams — both academically and physically.

Cravens, a proud native of Coffee County, attended the University of Tennessee (UT) from 1989 to 1993 on a cheerleading scholarship.

“I always knew I wanted to be a part of the UT squad,” she reminisced. “It was my dream, and I pursued it with everything I had.”

Little did she know that fate would bring her lifelong friend, Rogers, into her path during those years. Their journey began at the gym, where they met while trying out for the cheerleading squad.

“We were fortunate enough to become really good friends and cheered together,” Cravens recalled.



▲ Kenzleigh Nolan and Stacey Henley Cravens

After college, Cravens competed in Fitness America competitions in 1998, eventually earning the title “ESPN Ms. Fitness America” in 2001. During this time, she also ventured through entrepreneurship, eventually returning to her roots in Coffee County to open one cheerleading and gymnastics business in Tullahoma and another in Manchester.

Rogers began her career after college at a geological engineering company in Oak Ridge while coaching the Lady Vols cheerleading team. Realizing her passion lay in cheerleading and gymnastics, she reunited with Cravens and relocated to Coffee County to help her manage her businesses.

“We had more than enough students and decided to join forces to make it an extremely successful business,” Cravens explained.

As experienced coaches, they help their students build confidence and focus through cheer and tumbling.

“We’re positive, encouraging role models,” Rogers said. “We want them to know they can achieve anything. We are going to protect their skills and help them to be the best they can be.”

Giving back to the community is at the center of everything the coaches do. Their passion for helping young athletes is evident in every aspect of their work. As a vital part of the community, they work closely with local cheerleading squads and offer clinics to prepare athletes for trials.

The duo has helped talented young women all over Middle Tennessee secure scholarships nationwide. Students have gone on to cheer at Freed-Hardeman University, UT Knoxville, Middle Tennessee State University, University of the South, and the University of Alabama Tuscaloosa — among many others. One of their talented students even cheered at Vanderbilt University.

Another student’s remarkable talent and dedication to cheerleading were recognizable



▲ Thursday's class at Manchester Recreation Center



▲ Roe Bradley



▲ Stacey Henley Cravens, Daisy Matlock, Lee R



“

We want them to know they can achieve anything. We are going to protect their skills and help them to be the best they can be.

- Lee Rogers

at a young age. Despite financial constraints, her mother ensured her participation in extracurricular activities. The coaches provided additional training sessions free of charge, allowing her to develop her skills further. This support led her to cheer at Tennessee Tech University, and now she is in her third year studying chemical engineering.

These testimonials drive the coaches to continue their mission of guiding young athletes toward their goals, even during challenging moments.

“When I come home from teaching for hours, sometimes I’m very exhausted. There can be a lot of challenges. But when I come home at the end of the day, if I have impacted a child in a positive way, it makes it all worthwhile,” Rogers explained.

Cravens and Rogers are dedicated to helping their students become stronger, more flexible, and more coordinated. They enthusiastically support young cheerleaders and gymnasts as they step up to more competitive levels. They are equally passionate about assisting athletes in other sports like soccer, volleyball, softball, or basketball.

The expert coaches cherish the special moments when their students continue to cheer in college, walk across the stage at graduation, and share their wedding invitations. The connection remains strong as they keep in touch with their students, supporting them through all stages of life.

Cravens and Rogers are determined to continue empowering young athletes around Tennessee with no signs of slowing down.

“We’re not planning on retiring anytime soon,” Cravens playfully explains. “We’re just getting started.”

In the end, all that matters is that the youth they interact with reach their full potential.

“The most important thing is that they grow up to be the best version of themselves that they can possibly be and to have the confidence to do so.” GN



Rogers, and Emma Still

▲ Stacey Henley Cravens and Elle Wolfe

— — — — —

HISTORIC CHARM AND EXQUISITE CUISINE

— — — — —

EXPERIENCE EMIL'S BISTRO AND LOUNGE

IN THE heart of Tullahoma, Emil's Bistro and Lounge is sophisticated yet warm. Housed in a charming, historic building just off the downtown square, Emil's welcomes guests into a world of elevated dining experiences.

Upon stepping through the door, patrons are welcomed into an intimate setting within an old house. The ambiance lends itself perfectly to romantic dinners, celebratory gatherings, and casual catch-ups.

Emil's culinary offerings are nothing short of exceptional, showcasing a menu crafted with care and precision. The dishes at Emil's are as artfully presented as they are delicious, drawing inspiration from both classic and contemporary culinary traditions. From tender cuts of steak cooked to perfection to delicate seafood creations and vibrant vegetarian options, there is something to delight every palate.





The roasted tomato cream soup is a family favorite to start the meal, though the side salad with peppery ranch dressing is a close second. Southern classics like fried green tomatoes, fried okra, or pimento cheese with assorted crackers are also sharable appetizers destined to wow any diner. Entrees such as fish and chips, Chicken Daniel, and lump crab cakes offer rich and decadent experiences sure to delight your taste buds.

Emil's also offers weekly specials, so be sure to check in often to find something new to try. The restaurant's Tasty Tuesday offers a three-course meal at an affordable price. You can also make reservations for its New Year's Eve or Valentine's Day celebrations to wow your special someone.

Complementing the exquisite cuisine is an extensive selection of fine wines, craft cocktails, and artisanal beverages. Whether seeking the perfect pairing for your meal or simply indulging in a pre-dinner drink at the lounge, Emil's offers a drink menu that will impress even the most discerning connoisseurs.

Beyond the exceptional food and drink, Emil's prides itself on providing impeccable service, with a team of attentive staff dedicated to ensuring every guest's experience is nothing short of extraordinary. From the moment you arrive until the final farewell, you'll be treated to hospitality that is second to none. **GN**

GOOD NEWS IS COMING TO DINNER!

We will feature a local food critic's thoughts as they dine in Tullahoma. This month Tabitha Buckner visited Emil's Bistro and Lounge.

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A close-up, artistic photograph of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes in a draped, wavy pattern. The colors are vibrant, with a deep blue field for the stars and bright red and white stripes. The lighting creates soft shadows and highlights the texture of the fabric.

INDEEPE



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¹ *National Endowment for the Humanities (neh.gov)*

INDEPENDENDEN



By Jeriah Brumfield
Photography by Ashleigh Newnes
and submitted by Norris Carden

1ST LT. NORRIS CARDEN



WINGS OF SERVICE

Inside the Tullahoma Civil Air
Patrol's lifesaving mission

ESTABLISHED JUST days before the infamous attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) symbolized a ray of hope during one of the darkest periods in American history. Initially conceived as a civilian defense force, CAP swiftly evolved into a vital component of the nation's emergency response infrastructure. With a fleet of over 500 single-engine aircraft spread across the country, CAP stands ready to leap into action at a moment's notice — whether it be in the aftermath of a natural disaster or during times of national crisis.

Norris Carden, a dedicated composite squadron commander and airborne photographer with CAP in Tullahoma, spends his time shedding light on the organization's multifaceted role, explaining how CAP's aerial reconnaissance missions are pivotal in disaster response efforts. He recounts the harrowing events of 9/11 when CAP's Cessnas were among the few aircraft permitted to soar over New York City's skyline, capturing crucial imagery of ground zero and aiding in the assessment of the devastation wrought by the terrorist attacks.

“Civil Air Patrol is better equipped. The planes fly lower, slower. They're better

equipped to do aerial photography than anything else the Air Force has. We are not part of the military arm of the Air Force, but we are the Air Force Auxiliary.”

Since then, its mission has expanded to encompass a wide range of services, from aerial photography to search and rescue operations.

But CAP’s contributions extend far beyond the skies. Within CAP lie three core competencies: aerospace education, youth programs, and emergency services. It’s evident that CAP is not just about flying planes; it’s about empowering the next generation of leaders and innovators. Through its aerospace education program, CAP provides free resources to educators, inspiring students in public and homeschools to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and math. From model rocketry to robotics, CAP cultivates a passion for science and exploration in young minds.

“We sometimes go out and talk to kids in classrooms,” Carden said. “We visited the Coffee County Homeschool Association and had a day at the Tullahoma airport, between looking at the Vanderbilt helicopter and looking at the Beechcraft Museum and watching the aircraft operations. We met up with them and taught them some more about aerospace — about planes and flying and stuff.”

The youth programs CAP offers are equally transformative. With a cadet program designed for ages 12 to 18, CAP instills valuable leadership skills, character development, and a deep appreciation for service.

Cadets like Carden’s daughter, who joined CAP in 2017, have the opportunity to explore a wide range of activities, from flight training to cybersecurity camps. An emphasis on hands-on learning and real-world experiences sets it apart, giving cadets the tools they need to succeed in both aviation and life.

Carden recounts the countless exercises and operations he’s trained for, from locating emergency radio beacons to standing ready to assist with wildfire response efforts. CAP’s partnership with



▲ C/SSgt. Brayton Joshua Arant, C/SMSgt. Connor Dyllin Keel, C/SMSgt. Anna Jayne McGregor, 1st Lt. Norris Carden, and 1st Lt. Erin R. Sanders

agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Guard ensures a seamless coordination of resources and personnel in the face of adversity.

“Just last year at the Tullahoma airport, we had to help find the radio beacon [emergency locator transmitter] that was going off.”

The most remarkable aspect of CAP is its ability to transform lives. Cadets who join embark on journeys of self-discovery and growth. From earning their private pilot’s license at age 17 to pursuing careers in aerospace engineering, CAP cadets are poised to soar to new heights.

“We have former cadets who are nurses,” he began. “We’ve got former cadets working in cyberspace security. We have one cadet right now who is 18. He has already joined the Tennessee Air National Guard (TN ARNG) and has been preparing to go to basic training. But because of his Civil Air Patrol experience, they’re giving him the rank of E-3 — private first class. He jumped two promotions.”

With opportunities like the CyberPatriot competition and specialized summer activities, CAP equips cadets with the skills and confidence they need to succeed in an ever-changing world.

As Carden reflects on his own journey within CAP — from photographer to squadron commander — his pride and gratitude are palpable. Over the years, he has proudly witnessed the camaraderie among members, the sense of purpose that comes from serving others, and the profound impact CAP has had on his community. It's clear that for Carden and his fellow volunteers, CAP is a calling, a mission, and a legacy of service that spans generations. GN

The CAP, with support from the Air Force, the city of Tullahoma, and Coffee County, offers financial assistance to cadets in need. This assistance can help cover costs associated with uniforms, attending encampments, and participating in special cadet activities. Meetings are every Monday evening from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. at the TN ARNG Readiness Center, and those interested are welcome to visit. Visit www.gocivilairpatrol.com for more information.

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NORRIS CARDEN



By Jeriah Brumfield
Photography by James Jordan

AIDAN RALSTON



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HEROES

Aidan Ralston enlists as a National Guard medic,
inspired by war heroes and family members.

AS AIDAN Ralston looked at the inscription on his treasured copy of “The Gallant Man,” he couldn’t help but feel inspired by the words of Desmond Doss. Doss was a World War II (WWII) hero who saved lives without firing a shot, and his story spoke to Aidan in ways words couldn’t express. For months, Aidan read military history books and manuals, and his fascination with the U.S. armed forces grew stronger with each page. It became bigger than mere admiration, eventually becoming a yearning to be part of something bigger than himself.

“I wanted to be a medic because I wanted to help people. Doss inspired me to serve my country and help people in times of war and crisis,” he expressed.

Aidan’s mother, Shelly Ralston, was one of his biggest supporters throughout the process. She witnessed Aidan’s interest in serving his country years prior to him officially signing the forms.

“Aidan has always been interested in history — in particular, WWII. He was about 8 or 9 when his interest went even deeper, and he started being curious about how it shaped the world as we know it today,” Shelly said. “The medical interest

DEPENDENCE



came later when he realized how much of an impact the war had on people who returned home, as well as their families.”

As college approached, the weight of financial responsibility felt daunting, but Aidan remained determined. Thankfully, the National Guard presented an opportunity to not only find purpose but financial stability as well. The decision wasn't easy, but Aidan's strong moral compass and Christian background guided him. He confidently embraced this new path. It's a decision he's proud of and one that's brought him countless opportunities for personal and professional growth.

When asked about her initial feelings regarding his enlistment, Shelly admits to feeling nervous at first. But she can't help but feel overwhelming pride for her son, who is well on his way to becoming a true hero.

“For me, having a child who chooses to serve is an incredible feeling. I have faith that if he's called up, then he's going to be exactly where he's supposed to be,” Shelly said.

Aidan eagerly and bravely enlisted in the Tennessee National Guard. His family, ever supportive, understood his desire to chart his own course. He fully engulfed himself in boot camp at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. The relentless training — physical and mental — pushed him to his limits. But through the exhaustion and drill sergeant's orders, he formed an unexpected bond with his fellow recruits.

“I made friends that I will never forget, and I am still in contact with some of them. Military life is a hard but rewarding lifestyle,” he explained.

Mutual challenges between him and his team brought forth a closeness that surprised him. Encouraging pats on the back during long runs and sharing inside jokes were just some of the moments Aidan will never forget.



At boot camp, weeks turned into months. Aidan's initial angst melted away, replaced by a sense of confidence and pride. He tackled obstacle courses with newfound agility, and his shooting accuracy steadily improved. Boot camp transformed him physically but also instilled in him an ironclad discipline and resolve to defend the ideals he held dear.

Along his journey, Aidan grappled with the ethical complexities of his chosen path. The steadfast faith that guided his life — the principles enshrined in the Ten Commandments — sometimes clashed with the realities of war. Would he be forced to compromise his beliefs?

Despite these uncertainties, Aidan rests in his faith. His Bible serves as a source of strength. He also draws inspiration from his number one support system: his family.

“My family supporting me is my motivation to keep going during hard times,” Aidan declared.

He was the only one from his close circle who had taken this path, which is a responsibility he carries with honor. Choosing to serve is also a way to honor his late grandfather, David Maynard, who was a Vietnam War veteran, and his father, Patrick Maynard, who served 11 years in the Navy.



“I wanted to do something with my life that was bigger than myself. God bless America.”

AIDAN RALSTON

“He was always riveted to them when they’d share tales of their time during service and constantly asking questions,” Shelly said. “Seeing the positive impact that the military had on their lives, Aidan seeks the same aspects, such as the stability, routine, values, and principles that the military instills in soldiers.”

Shelly believes that his decision to become a medic in the National Guard was challenging but fit his humble yet determined personality.

“He’s often the kind of person who gives without the expectation of notoriety,” she explained.

Aidan steps forward with purpose, inspired by a desire to serve and a commitment to his beliefs. He is a soldier but also a man of faith, and he carries both identities with dignity.

“I wanted to do something with my life that was bigger than myself. God bless America.” **GN**

INDEPENDENTEN



By Jeriah Brumfield
Photography by Ashleigh Newnes

MATHIAS MONTOYA



FULL CIRCLE SERVICE

A young veteran honors his parents
and achieves a childhood dream.

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD Mathias Montoya watched, wide-eyed, as his parents tucked their crisp uniforms into their starched pants. The morning light glinted off their polished boots, symbolizing the years they'd dedicated to serving their country in the Navy's Medical Corps. A sense of awe filled the room, and a tiny seed of inspiration took root within Montoya. The desire to follow in their footsteps — to be part of something bigger than himself — was undeniable. Though he didn't realize it then, life would soon become a training

ground for his future endeavors. Every path he took in life led him to the same destination: servanthood.

As a teenager, he worked as a lifeguard, which instilled in him a mindset of serving others. Later, when he became an EMT and firefighter, the sound of sirens was no longer just background noise. It was a call to action that he fully embraced. Each role gave him a raw understanding of human vulnerability.

Montoya was a well-known figure in his town before he joined the military. He was recognized for his excellent teaching skills at Tullahoma's Highland Rim

Homeschool Cooperative, outstanding basketball refereeing skills, and acting talents at the Manchester Arts Center and South Jackson Performing Arts Center.

“I have served the community any way I could. It brings me such joy to see the lives you can affect with some of your time and good works,” he explained.

However, Montoya’s most defining experience was with the Tennessee State Guard, where he volunteered for three years from 2020-2023 and solidified his desire to serve his country. He rose through the ranks and became the personnel noncommissioned Officer for over 60 personnel.

He eventually became one of the primary instructors for the 61st Medical Squadron, teaching 1,000 airmen a combat casualty care course in February 2023. Remarkably, it was during this drill that Montoya met his recruiter.

Montoya’s dream finally came true when, at just 23 years old, in April 2023,

he enlisted in the Air Force National Guard. Joining the Guard felt like a natural progression for this natural-born leader.

Basic Military Training (BMT) presented challenges, surrounded by men of different backgrounds, cultures, and beliefs. Despite the differences among the group, Montoya thrived, seeing every challenge as a learning opportunity.

“Sometimes, you’re in the right place at the right time. It took about one week for the dorm to become brothers,” he remarked.

He and his team emerged as the “best of the best flight” during training. They also scored the highest on the end-of-course test, averaging 94, winning academic excellence. These impressive accomplishments were undoubtedly the result of the strong bond they forged and their determination to be the best they could be during their training.

During his time away, letters from home were his lifelines. Each one was a familiar voice encouraging him along across the miles. Though he missed his wife dearly, her steadfast love and support and their strong family network kept him going. Their support system was even more helpful when a tree fell on their home shortly after he left for BMT.

“You never can feel more powerless as a man when your wife and home need your help, and you’re not there,” he began. “Thankfully, mine and my

wife’s family got everything taken care of, and I’m eternally grateful for that.”

Montoya discovered a new aspect of his identity during technical training after BMT. He assisted fellow guard members and reservists by translating the complicated regulations of the Air Force in a friendly manner. Rather than simply giving orders, he embraced the philosophy of being a servant leader, which is now a fundamental part of his character.

Graduating at the top of his electrician class solidified his dedication to excellence. Every day was a race to understand electrical work at its finest alongside a group of intelligent classmates he now considers friends.

He draws strength from his loving wife and supportive family as he continues his service. They understand the sacrifices inherent to military life, and their ongoing support strengthens their bond with each deployment and training session.

“My wife has dealt with my being gone with patience and grace. The key to overcoming the distance is communication through phone, letters, and smoke signals, and taking every opportunity to see her in person.”

May Montoya’s story honor all those who serve, sacrifice, and protect this great nation.

“I’m proud to be a part of history and part of something bigger than myself for the state I love,” he said. “I want my family, friends, and my future children to know what it’s like to live in a nation where independence is king. I intend to serve as long as I can and make a difference, even if no one ever knows what I have done.” GN

“I have served the community any way I could. It brings me such joy to see the lives you can affect with some of your time and good works.”

MATHIAS MONTOYA



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Finding hope in the battle with addiction

What is it?

As the first phase in the recovery process, the StepOne ServiceSM is a hospital-based, three-to-five day acute withdrawal management service. Provided at Southern Tennessee Regional Health System, it is for adults who are in the impending or early stage of withdrawal from alcohol and/or opioids.

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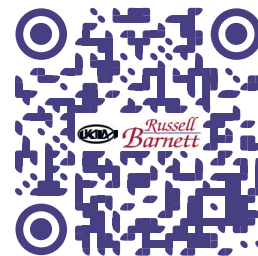
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