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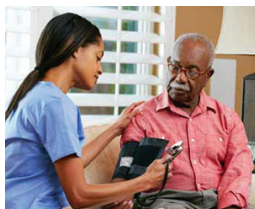
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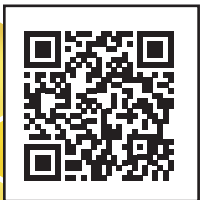
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ISSUE 6 2024

**LETTER FROM THE EDITOR:** 10

Where Champions Are Made

*Good Living*

**UNITING THE COMMUNITY** 14

**THROUGH BASKETBALL**

Churches across Lebanon come together to play ball

**MEETING A NEED** 18

Tennessee Heat brings strong values and competitive sports to homeschoolers

**SHERRY'S RUN** 22

Join us for the 21st Annual Sherry's Run 5K Run/Walk

**CHRISTY MOCK OPENS THE PROM DOORS** 24

Turning thrift store finds into prom night dreams

**VINTAGE VIBES & DELICIOUS EATS AT TOWN SQUARE SOCIAL** 26





## Good Stories

- 28 GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN**  
A Lebanon High School student finds increased faith and purpose after a season-ending injury
- 34 DRIVEN TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**  
Zion Logue's journey from Lebanon to the Atlanta Falcons
- 40 CELEBRATE THE SPIRIT OF THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS**  
Mary Burkett encourages local athletes to uncover hidden potential in Special Olympic

## Good Times

- 44 COMMUNITY EVENTS**
- 46 ADVERTISER INDEX**

Give something good ♡♡

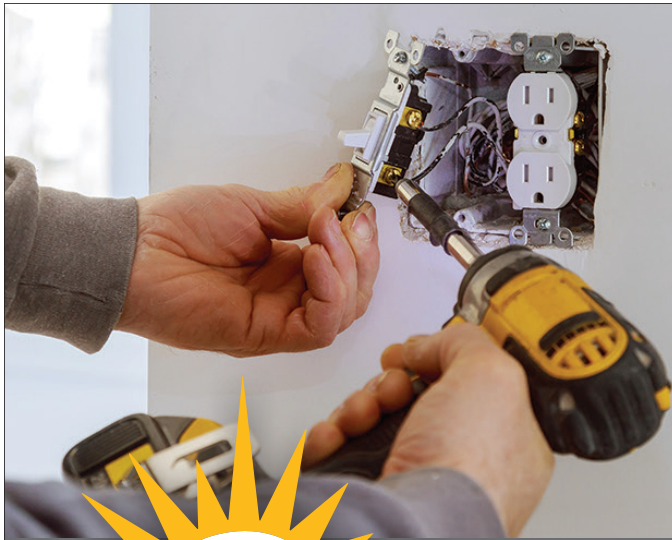


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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

## Where champions are made

Our hometown courts and fields introduce stars to the game.

THE CROWD fills the stands, row after row, of people in our high school's colors. The family in front of you sits down with a fresh hot dog from the concession stand. It's still steaming with a drizzle of ketchup laced across the top from end to end. It smells so good you think you "just might have to go to the concession stand and get your own." On the way there, you run into your old favorite teacher. You run into your old high school crush, wave, and maybe catch up. In the background, the scoreboard keeps ticking up, and the crowd's roar gets louder. The moths and other critters dance around the floodlights tens of feet in the air.

We've all experienced what it feels like to be at a high school football game under the Friday night lights. We know what it feels like to get the jitters as the first play begins — the excitement when our team scores the first touchdown. For towns across the country, sports like high school football bring us together. It gives cheerleaders the experience of a lifetime, pushing them to perform impressive stunts, flips, and lifts. The band students learn to perform in front of hundreds of people and how to work together to

make art. Hometown games are a perfect mixture of fun, family, nostalgia, and teamwork.

Healthy competition teaches things you can't learn alone at a desk. It shows the band, the players, and the cheerleaders how to have discipline. It shows them how to treat others. It pushes them to be humble and show sportsmanship. Because while we win today, next week may hand us a rough defeat. These qualities help make our town a better place. And the good news is — our town isn't the only place building up the next generation of young leaders. Schools across the nation, from California to Maine, are showing students what it means to be a team player.

As we grow older, we run out of time to do the things we love. We forget what it feels like to sit in the crowded stands with a warm hotdog in our hand and balance Dr. Pepper in our lap after sitting down. There's a hidden treasure in our county, and we shouldn't take it for granted. Hometown sports have shaped who we are, and they'll shape the next generation — and the one after that. Our hometown courts and fields introduce stars to the game.

This is where champions are made. **GN**

Wesley Bryant,  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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Mark  
Sandoval

# UNITING THE COMMUNITY THROUGH BASKETBALL

CHURCHES ACROSS LEBANON  
COME TOGETHER TO PLAY BALL

By Sara Hook  
Photography by Robin Holcomb

**E**VERY SATURDAY in the spring, the gym of First Baptist Lebanon is filled with the sound of sneakers squeaking on glossy floors, balls swishing through hoops, and rousing cheers as members of Lebanon's many churches gather to play basketball. It's an afternoon of friendly rivalry and togetherness that has become a tradition for many congregations — the Lebanon Church Basketball League has been running for nearly 30 years. Some of the players even grew up hearing about it and attending games.

League coordinator Mark Sandoval was one such member. Sandoval grew up playing basketball in Lebanon, and once he graduated from college, he began looking to play in the church league. That was the year the previous coordinators decided to retire, so Sandoval decided to take over.

“Just as I was about to get into it is when they decided to fold it after about 25 years or so,” Sandoval said. “Just kind of last minute. I had a lot of good connections here from growing up and playing, and I just decided to try to restart the league.”

When Sandoval took over, six churches were involved. Now, there are 12 from all over Wilson County and one in Smith County, fielding some 120 players. The churches are Church of Christ, Catholic, United Methodist, Baptist, and nondenominational — anyone is welcome.

“It kind of runs the gamut,” Sandoval said. “Some churches are as small as my church — like 80 to 90 people. The largest church would probably be Providence United Methodist with over 2,000.”

The league provides a place for different churches to connect and give back to the Lebanon community. Each season ends with the winning team choosing a local charity to donate to, and part of the funds raised by the teams go to that charity. Those recipients have included Compassionate Hands, Brooks House, Sherry's Hope, and the Pregnancy Care Center.

“That's just something we do to get more churches and all the players to know about these great organizations that are right here in our backyard,” Sandoval said.

It's a difficult job, but Sandoval jumped in without hesitation. Josiah Smith, the captain of St. Frances Cabrini's team, said that he was offered the responsibility at one point, but it was too much for him to accept.

“Everyone shows their gratitude toward him for keeping this league going and allowing the community to come together all around Wilson County and the area — to bring their churches together to play this awesome game, have fellowship, and get to know one another,” Smith said. “If it wasn't for him doing this and stepping up, we might not have that Wilson County church league [that] we have.”



It's good that he did because the league has been a blessing to many people as a way to exercise, enjoy a sport people love, and simply be out in the community.

“We're not in this to make a career out of it, so to see that people take time out of their Saturday to come and be committed to play this game and be a part of their community means a lot,” Smith said. “It's much more than just coming out here and getting your exercise and going home.”

Many other league members are integral to the organization's success, like referees Keandre Bates, Macieo Gaines, and Nic Doak; bookkeepers John Presley and Alex Britt; and scorekeeper Julian Crutchfield. Crutchfield began as a scorekeeper simply to help out Sandoval, but his motivation soon grew into something more significant as the league continued to connect so many people in the community. Children, wives, grandmothers, cousins, and friends come out to see people play and, over time, form friendships with people from other churches that extend outside the league.

“We all at the core of our beliefs believe in unity and love, and I think that sometimes we struggle in ways to express that,” Crutchfield said. “We don't come up with a lot of opportunities that I'm aware of to share that with people outside of who we go to church with on Sunday. I think that the church league does an amazing job of giving everybody in the community a chance to show that common belief of unity and love in the form of basketball.”

Sports has always been a great unifier. As long as groups like the Lebanon Church Basketball League continue to unify Wilson County, the community will continue to do great things. **GN**

*Find the league on Facebook at Lebanon Church Basketball League for updates or questions.*

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Kristi Scott coaching young women

# MEETING A NEED

Tennessee Heat brings strong values and competitive sports to homeschoolers.

By Sara Hook  
Photography by Robin Holcomb

**S**PORTS ARE vitally important to any community, especially those geared toward youth, teaching responsibility, teamwork, commitment, personal drive, and any number of other values. Sports provide a wonderful place for friendships and

*“We’re always looking to potentially meet needs of families that are homeschooling, looking for their kid to have that recreation activity.”*

**- RYAN SCOTT**

community to form. It isn’t easy for one person to get a team together — school systems organize so many sports. Wilson County is blessed to have those same opportunities available for homeschools through Tennessee Heat.

Created as a faith-based sports program nearly 17 years ago, Tennessee

Heat has grown from a single middle school boys basketball team to offering nine different sports for elementary, middle, or high school homeschool students. The goal, coach and board member Ryan Scott said, is to give those homeschool kids that opportunity of

competitive team sports in a way that shares the gospel with those young people and their families.

“We are a faith-based orga-

nization first and a competitive sports platform second, but we do compete against local, area, middle school and high school — public and private — and other homeschool programs around the region,” Scott said.

Hundreds of kids from around Middle Tennessee participate in

Tennessee Heat every year, Scott said — some in multiple sports and some in only one. The program offers football, volleyball, cheer, cross-country, basketball, baseball, track, archery, and tennis. This next spring, Tennessee Heat will be adding a boys soccer program to the mix. The possibilities are endless, limited only by the number of coaches.



“We are exploring the possibilities of a girls softball team and possibly adding a golf program back, and just praying about the right person being able to help us with that,” Scott said. “We’re always looking to potentially meet needs of families that are homeschooling, looking for their kid to have that recreation activity.”

Every organizer and coach is a volunteer, although there is an option for coaches to get a small reimbursement for some of their expenses. It isn’t an option often taken.

“Most of our coaches put money into the program more than they would take anything out,” Scott said.

While the program is limited to registered homeschool students,

there is no geographical limit to who can be a part of Tennessee Heat. Members come from all over Wilson County, as well as from Cookeville and Clarksville. Non-athletes are welcome to join in that community as well. Scott and his wife, Kristi, the cheer coach, put on a homecoming dance every year after the homecoming football game. Such a community is something that public or private schoolers find easily. Those in homeschool, by contrast, must search for those opportunities.

“We’re not trying to replace public or private schools. We’re really just trying to meet the need of a movement of people that have decided that they feel that homeschooling their kids is



Rocky, Roxy, Kristi, and Ryan Scott



Ryan Scott coaching young men

what they want to do,” Scott said. “Not everybody is going to homeschool their kids — not everybody should — but for those that feel called to do so, we intend to serve and help them.”

That service has extended to the whole community, as volunteers from Tennessee Heat have refurbished an abandoned football field in Mount Juliet and regularly help the local middle school maintain its field. Many of the coaches were impacted positively by their own coaches and mentors when they were young, and Tennessee Heat’s work is a way to carry that positive impact forward.

“[It’s] our way of trying to make a difference in the community and helping other youth programs outside of our own, as well as trying to be a good citizen,” Scott explained.

Tennessee Heat has greatly impacted the many children who have gone through the program and the many communities they have competed with and volunteered for. For Wilson County, it means that every child has the opportunity to learn and grow through sports, and the community will feel the positive effects of those opportunities for many years to come. **GN**



# Join Us for the 21st Annual Sherry's Run 5K Run/Walk

FOR NEARLY 20 years now, in August and September, green bows have been found all around Wilson County, Tennessee. Some people pass by the vibrant bows not knowing what they represent, while others have a deep understanding of their significance. Sherry's Hope provides financial assistance to families in Wilson County and surrounding communities who are seeking treatment or are in hospice care due to a current cancer diagnosis. Green bows are little sparks of hope leading up to the organization's largest fundraiser of the year: Sherry's Run 5K Run/Walk. The bows signify not only the 5K fundraiser, but the lasting hope spread all around Wilson County because of those who participate, sponsor, volunteer, and donate!

Bows aren't the only thing that reminds locals of the big day approaching! Many churches, businesses, families, and friends join forces and form teams for Sherry's Run! You are not required to form a team to be able to participate in the 5K, but teams do introduce a little friendly competition. With awards like Biggest Team, Most Team Spirit, Best Team T-Shirt, and Most Money Raised at stake—teams start prepping for race day well in advance! On the morning of Sherry's Run, some teams are seen waving signs to

encourage loved ones they run/walk in honor of, others stand out by wearing bright tutus and shaking pompoms, and many are heard cheering as they complete the course!

Even if you are not part of a team, your participation in Sherry's Run makes a huge difference in the community! You can register three different ways for Sherry's Run. If you are competitive and want to keep track of your time or be eligible to place in your age category, you can register as a chip-timed runner for \$45\*. This fee includes an event t-shirt and medal while supplies last! If you would rather stroll through the course without keeping your time, you can register as a not-timed runner for \$35\*, which includes an event T-shirt and medal while supplies last! If you are not going to be able to make it to the event, or if getting up early just isn't your thing — you can register to sleep-in for Sherry's Run for \$40\* and have an event T-shirt mailed to you after the race day!

Even if you do not participate in Sherry's Run, you can still be a champion! You can be part of Sherry's Hope all year round by becoming a Champion of Hope. Champions of Hope are monthly donors

to the organization. No amount is too small to make a difference in the lives of families in our community! Whether you make a \$10 donation for a green bow to hang on your mailbox, form a team with your closest friends, register to run, walk, or sleep in for Sherry's Run, or become a monthly donor, there truly is an option for everyone to give HOPE! GN

**The 21st annual Sherry's Run 5K Run/Walk will take place on Sept. 14, 2024 at 8 a.m. at 623 W. Main St. in Lebanon!**

*If you would like to register, visit [www.sherryshope.org](http://www.sherryshope.org). If you would like a green bow, they are available for a donation of \$10 or more and can be picked up at the Sherry's Hope office during regular operating hours or at any Lebanon Wilson Bank & Trust location! If you would like to become a Champion of Hope, visit [www.sherryshope.org](http://www.sherryshope.org) and click on the "Ways to Give" tab.*

**\*Price increases after Sept. 13, at 11:59 p.m. CDT\***





# Christy Mock opens the **PROM DOORS**

## TURNING THRIFT STORE FINDS INTO PROM NIGHT DREAMS

By Richard J. Klin  
Photography by Larry McCormack

**T**HE PROM is an American rite of passage that has, through cultural ups and downs, become an enshrined part of adolescence for almost a century. Yet the costs associated with the prom — costs that have progressively increased over the years — can make participation prohibitively expensive for many students.

The ever-spiraling cost of going to the prom has actually been explored in *Fortune* magazine, *Newsday*, *USA Today*, and other publications. In this digital age, proms have gotten progressively more elaborate, including the often hefty price for a limo rental. Going to the prom can cost hundreds of dollars — sometimes, the total price tag for this one night is a whopping \$2,000.

Christy Mock is the owner of Sunshine Flowers & Gifts and has made an effort to eliminate some of the extra expenses involved in going to prom and attending middle school dances. She and her husband, Matt Mock, created the “Something Borrowed” program, which allows girls to choose from donated dresses, wear them for the big event, and then return them — akin to a library.

The idea came to them quite suddenly after Christy’s arbitrary purchase of a formal dress at a thrift store. She then “put it out there” to people she knew, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Members of the community stepped forward with their donations, along with a consignment shop and boutique that also added to the supply. Eventually, the stock totaled 150 dresses. Girls can come and try these dresses on (not at Sunshine Flowers & Gifts) and then return the items post-prom.



There was a pop-up changing tent, along with a mirror, which helped to streamline the process. Unlike a library, there are no late fees — or fees of any sort at all. Something Borrowed saves the participants from having to spend hundreds of dollars on a dress. This can enable them to attend the festivities when they previously couldn’t or simply save their money for other costs associated with proms and dances.

The community “has come together,” according to Mock, and word of mouth and social media have been an effective way to communicate the existence of Something Borrowed. She has also “reached out to schools, to counselors, and made a flyer, and mailed it out so they could pass them out to the kids there. We sent it out to our chamber of commerce as well.”





**... we're helping the special needs prom in the fall ... we're going to donate all the dresses we have now."**

CHRISTY MOCK

Something Borrowed also was mentioned on NewsChannel 5 (WTVF). It's obviously getting the attention it deserves. Most of the girls who use this service are from the area, but there is no real geographic requirement.

"If there's a need for it," Mock stated, "there's a need for it."

Something Borrowed has also facilitated an older crowd as well. Some Cumberland University students used the service for a banquet, and adult women have also used Something Borrowed.

"And then we're helping the special needs prom in the fall. It's going to be at the fairgrounds in Lebanon. We're going to donate all the dresses we have now."

Mock was a special needs teacher and said she knew "how hard it is for them to find dresses or be included in stuff." There will be one day when students with disabilities will come in and pick out a dress, along with getting their hair and makeup done.

Christy Mock has "been blown out of the water" by the success of this program and is "amazed by the need for it." She has fielded requests to include boys in the process by lending out suits, but there simply isn't room.

"If we had a bigger space, we'd definitely do that too."

Middle and high school students, especially in the age of social media, face a barrage of pressure. The fear of looking conspicuous — of standing out for the wrong reasons — is a constant in every generation. Nobody should have to feel stigmatized or left out because of financial constraints. Christy Mock and Something Borrowed are making things a little easier all around. GN



**CHRISTY MOCK**

# VINTAGE VIBES & DELICIOUS EATS AT TOWN SQUARE SOCIAL

**O**N A nice day, it's always a treat to walk around Lebanon's square and check out the stores and restaurants. If you are looking for a great place to eat, Town Square Social is a must.

My husband and I were taking a stroll around the square when we decided to stop in for lunch. As soon as we walked in, the smell of delicious food made us even hungrier. The restaurant's exposed brick walls and decor gave it a unique vintage vibe, and the crowd of diners gave it a lively atmosphere. The staff and the guests all seemed to be having a great time.

Jackson greeted us with a warm smile and was attentive and charming. Our order arrived very quickly, despite how busy it was. We tried the Reuben sandwich with onion rings and the pimento cheese patty melt with tater tots. The Reuben came loaded with corned beef, sauerkraut, and Swiss cheese on grilled rye bread. The onion rings

were crispy and delicious. The pimento cheese patty melt was a hit, too, with a juicy beef patty, creamy pimento cheese, and caramelized onions between toasted bread. The tater tots were crispy on the outside and fluffy inside, adding a perfect nostalgic touch. We washed it all down with some sweet tea, which was just right — not too sweet.

Overall, Town Square Social is a gem. The combination of great food, a warm and lively atmosphere, and excellent service from Jackson made for a fantastic dining experience. If you're in Lebanon, definitely check it out!

It is conveniently located at 145 Public Square and is open for breakfast on Saturday and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., reopening at 11 a.m. for lunch and dinner. Full hours for lunch and dinner are Monday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. **GN**



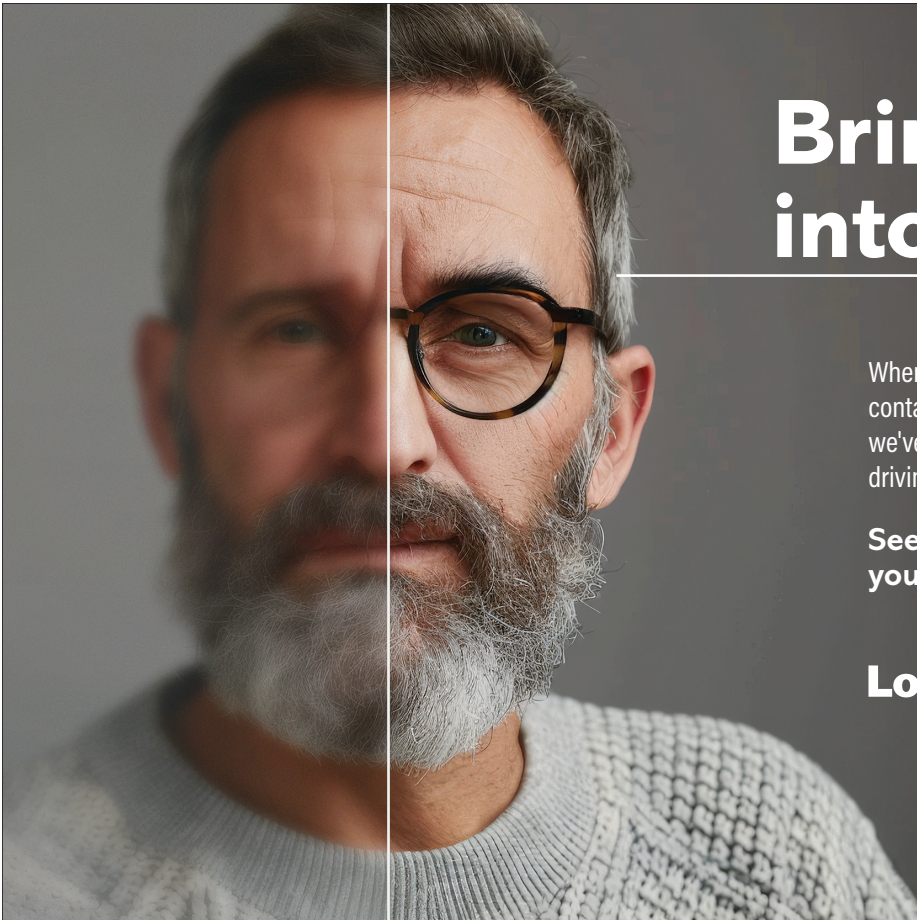
## GOOD NEWS IS COMING TO DINNER!

We will feature a local food critic's thoughts as they dine in Lebanon. This month Krys Midgett visited Town Square Social.

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BRICE NJEZIC

**GOING  
AGAINST  
THE GRAIN**



## A Lebanon High School student finds increased faith and purpose after a season-ending injury.

By Gabriel Grant Huff // Photography by Larry McCormack

**T**HE SECOND oldest of six children, Brice Njezic grew up in Lebanon. Following in his parents' footsteps, he loved sports. Baseball swooshed into his life at 5 years old. Basketball and football came into the picture soon after. After participating in all three sports in elementary school, the activities continued into Lebanon High School, where he began to shine.

The young athlete played safety and receiver in football. He went through every position in basketball. In baseball — his true love — he handled shortstop.

"When you put in that work, you don't do it alone," Njezic, 18, said. "So every

single day, when you're struggling, you're working hard, you're in pain — there's somebody next to you who is also struggling, working hard, in pain. There's a bond right there you won't feel anywhere else."

Having an average build and being 5 feet, 11 inches tall, Njezic would tell people that he does not exceed in height or speed. Just ask coach Will Wakefield, who described Njezic as respectful and always willing to move against the crowd, not caring about the latest trend but only doing what's best for his game.

The year 2024 marked Wakefield's sixth year serving as the high school's head baseball coach. With a coach's eye,

Wakefield saw past what Njezic lacked in physical appearance.

"He makes up for it because he is extremely intelligent and extremely hardworking," Wakefield said.

One day, however, Njezic's whole world fell apart in a split second. Running down the basketball court during his junior year in high school, Njezic had been attempting to steal the ball away from the opposition.

"And I lunged for it, and I guess my foot stuck in the ground and hyperextended, and it tore my ACL," he recalled.

Njezic had no control over his leg and did not know what had happened, so he



▲ Brice Njezic talks with his baseball coach Will Wakefield



**Keep your head down and keep working. It may not get noticed right away, but eventually, it will pay off.**

**BRICE NJEZIC**

hopped to the bench to straighten the leg out. Unfortunately, he never returned to action. With nothing else to do, he spent the entire baseball season on the bench, watching his younger brother play sports — depressed with the itch of doing what he loved but unable to scratch it. Wakefield knew about the pain plaguing his young athlete.

“You can tell it bothered him, but I could tell he handled it about as good as any high school kid could,” Wakefield said.

Njezic had lost his life’s cornerstone — something he turned toward whenever joyful or troubled. But through the season of pain, he found a new cornerstone. He had been attending church forever, checking all the boxes by going to service, reading the Bible, and saying his prayers. Earlier, at 15 years old, he had begun to realize there was something more, and his older brother, deciding to become a preacher in Knoxville, served as the driving force behind his epiphany.



“I see him go through that, realizing it wasn’t just like a ‘check-the-boxes’ kind of thing,” Njezic said. “It’s a daily way to live your life — made me realize that it’s more serious than I was making it.”

This understanding later strengthened and aided him in his recovery as he grew closer to God. He remained active in assisting the baseball team, with Wakefield even describing him as an “extra coach.” Njezic credited his athletic trainer, Jacob Woodward, as someone who helped him through the hard months.

“Romans 5:3-5 reminds me that when we go through troubles and rough situations, it just trains us to be better, and it makes us stronger or smarter in the long run,” Njezic said.

After seven months, Njezic fully recovered and returned to play all three sports his senior year — an endeavor people noticed.

“His name should be remembered at Lebanon High School for a long time for that reason,” Wakefield said, adding that Njezic became the baseball team’s best player that senior year, leading the team in almost every offensive category.

The coach would also remember Njezic going off alone before every game to sit in the corner and pray, staying true to his values. Wakefield said the memory will stay with him for a long time.

Preparing to continue his athletic career at Pellissippi State in Tennessee, Njezic left behind one piece of advice for other players.

“Keep your head down and keep working. It may not get noticed right away, but eventually, it will pay off.” GN



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ZION LOGUE

**DRIVEN TO  
MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE**

# Zion Logue's journey from Lebanon to the Atlanta Falcons

By Haley Potter // Photography by Robin Holcomb

**S**ITTING ON a cozy couch in a living room in Lebanon, excitement and nerves filled the room for a local athletic hero and his family. Zion Logue, a young man with an infectious smile and a humble demeanor, anxiously awaited the biggest moment of his life: the NFL draft. As he sat surrounded by family and friends, Logue opened up about his journey from a small town to the national stage.

"I've been playing football as long as I could walk. I have played for as long as I can remember," Logue explained, his eyes lighting up with nostalgia. "My earliest memories were playing flag football at 4 years old. And, man, it just took off from there. I played all three sports — football, baseball, basketball — for as long as I can remember, but I knew I was destined for greatness one of these days, and football just happened to be that."

Logue's love for football was clear from a young age, and his hometown played a crucial role in nurturing his talent. Lebanon High School became the first significant milestone in his journey. Despite his growing fame, Logue has never forgotten his

roots. His commitment to giving back to his community does not go unnoticed.

"I have a football camp," he shared. "My first annual football camp was last May and another this June. I also do a Christmas gift-back. So, I'm very rooted in my community. Bringing my community up is something that I really pride myself on."

Logue's football camp is more than just a training ground — it's a bright spot for many children in Lebanon.





# I really want to give back and just let people know to chase their dreams. Because it can happen — just chase your dream, and everything you want will happen for you.

ZION LOGUE

“The football camp was sponsored,” he said with pride. “No parents had to pay anything. It was completely free to kids because I know this area. A lot of parents don’t have the money to send their kids to these football camps and things like that — the things that their kids want to do. I wanted to make sure they could come out, have a good time, interact with me in person, and just have fun.”

Logue’s journey took a significant leap when he joined the University of Georgia.

Reflecting on his college experience, he shared, “Georgia’s everything that I needed for my life. Just going down there and even making connections with some of my teammates, who are going to be some of my best friends later down the line — some in my wedding — it was everything that I needed as a young man, for sure.”

The bonds he created at Georgia not only shaped his career but also his character. The sense of community and the competitive spirit laid a strong foundation for his future endeavors.

As we sat on the final day of the NFL draft, the anticipation was clear. Logue’s voice carried a mix of excitement and nervousness.

“I’m just anxious. I’m just ready for my name to be called. I’ve been dreaming of this since I was a child. When I finally see this phone ring, it’s going to be so emotional. I’m not going to be able to hold back tears. I know this whole house is going to be crying. I’m just ready to hear my name.”

Logue’s dream quickly became a reality, but his commitment to his hometown remains the same.

“I just want to live every day as best as I can,” he said. “Every room I walk in, I

want to make a difference from the time I enter to the time I leave. That’s even in my community. I really want to give back and just let people know to chase their dreams. Because it can happen — just chase your dream, and everything you want will happen for you.”

Logue drew inspiration from both his family and the legends of the game.

“I looked up to a lot of my family, but I’ve also been a student of the game,” he said. “I’ve watched every hall of fame speech you can think of — every draft that I can remember. I’ve just chased my dream for so long, and now I’m grateful for it to happen.”

Lebanon holds a special place in Logue’s heart.

“Don’t sleep on Lebanon because there’s a lot of talent here that doesn’t get seen,” Logue said. “I hope that people really start turning to this area because there are some gems out here. They just gotta come find it.”

As the clock ticked, the anticipation grew stronger. Finally, the phone rang, and Logue’s face lit up with joy. The Atlanta Falcons had drafted him, and the room erupted in cheers and tears. His dream had come true, and his journey from Lebanon to the NFL was complete.

At that moment, it was clear that Zion Logue embodied “Where Champions are Made.” His story demonstrates hard work, dedication, and unconditional support of a community that believed in him. As he starts this new chapter with the Atlanta Falcons, Logue’s heart remains firmly rooted in the place that made him who he is today. **GN**



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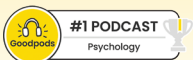
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MARY LEE BURKETT

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OLYMPICS**



# Mary Burkett encourages local athletes to uncover hidden potential in Special Olympics

By Kali Bradford // Photography by Robin Holcomb



**T**HE FIRST Special Olympics took place in Chicago's Soldier Field in July 1968 and hosted 1,000 athletes from across the U.S. and Canada. In its second year, the event grew internationally and welcomed France into the fun. By the fourth year, 10 additional countries sent athletes to compete. The next 55 years would see the event grow exponentially, welcoming even more athletes from across the globe. Today, athletes from over 170 countries gather to compete in the Special Olympics.

What started as a small summer camp in the backyard of the late Special Olympics co-founder, Eunice Kennedy-Shriver, now encompasses nearly 5 million Special

Olympics athletes worldwide. In Tennessee alone, the Special Olympics reaches more than 18,000 athletes across the Volunteer State, according to the Special Olympics Tennessee website.

The website also states that the Special Olympics offers year-round sports training, competition, and health and education opportunities for individuals ages 2 and above with intellectual disabilities. The organization "champions inclusion and community while embracing everyone irrespective of ability or disability. Together, they are working to make the world a better, healthier, and more joyful place through the power of sport."



▲ Mary Lee Burkett and her team

Lebanon resident Mary Lee Burkett knows all too well the endless benefits that come with being a part of the local Special Olympics organization. For the last 16 years, she has been with Area 27 Special Olympics, which includes Trousdale and Wilson counties. She currently wears several hats in her involvement with the organization, including Area 27 co-director, coach, and parent to a daughter with disabilities, Emily. Now in year 16 with the organization, Burkett said she has enjoyed a long relationship with Special Olympics that started as a college student.

“Special Olympics was dear to my heart from when I was in college,” she explained. “I volunteered when they would do events like track and field on campus. I enjoyed the athletes and how excited they would get along with their love for the game.”

As a mother of a child with disabilities, Burkett knew the benefits of being involved with Special Olympics. At age 8, she signed Emily up, and both have been with the organization for the last 16 years.

### **Discovering an athlete’s ability**

As a coach, Burkett teaches sports, including basketball and bocce ball, bowling, ice skating, and corn hole, a new sport to the Special Olympics. Bocce ball is a popular outdoor game that involves rolling big balls toward a smaller target called a pallino. The goal is to land the balls as close as possible to the pallino. Bocce ball can be played in a one-on-one format or can pit teams of up to four players against each other. The game can be played on almost any flat surface.

“Bocce ball is a summer games sport. We participated in the summer games that took place in May,” Burkett explained. “The athletes like training with a partner, and they also like the game. There is time when the athletes can socialize and enjoy each other. Bocce also allows athletes to gain some leadership skills. They can help each other in this sport. It’s great for our nonverbal athletes or an athlete who just needs extra help. I’ll partner an athlete who can communicate well with an athlete who has more needs. It empowers both athletes.”

Burkett added that for each athlete, it’s about finding out what their abilities are and building on those.

“A great example of our athletes making the most of their abilities is one of our



**There are so many blessings in being able to work with these athletes.**

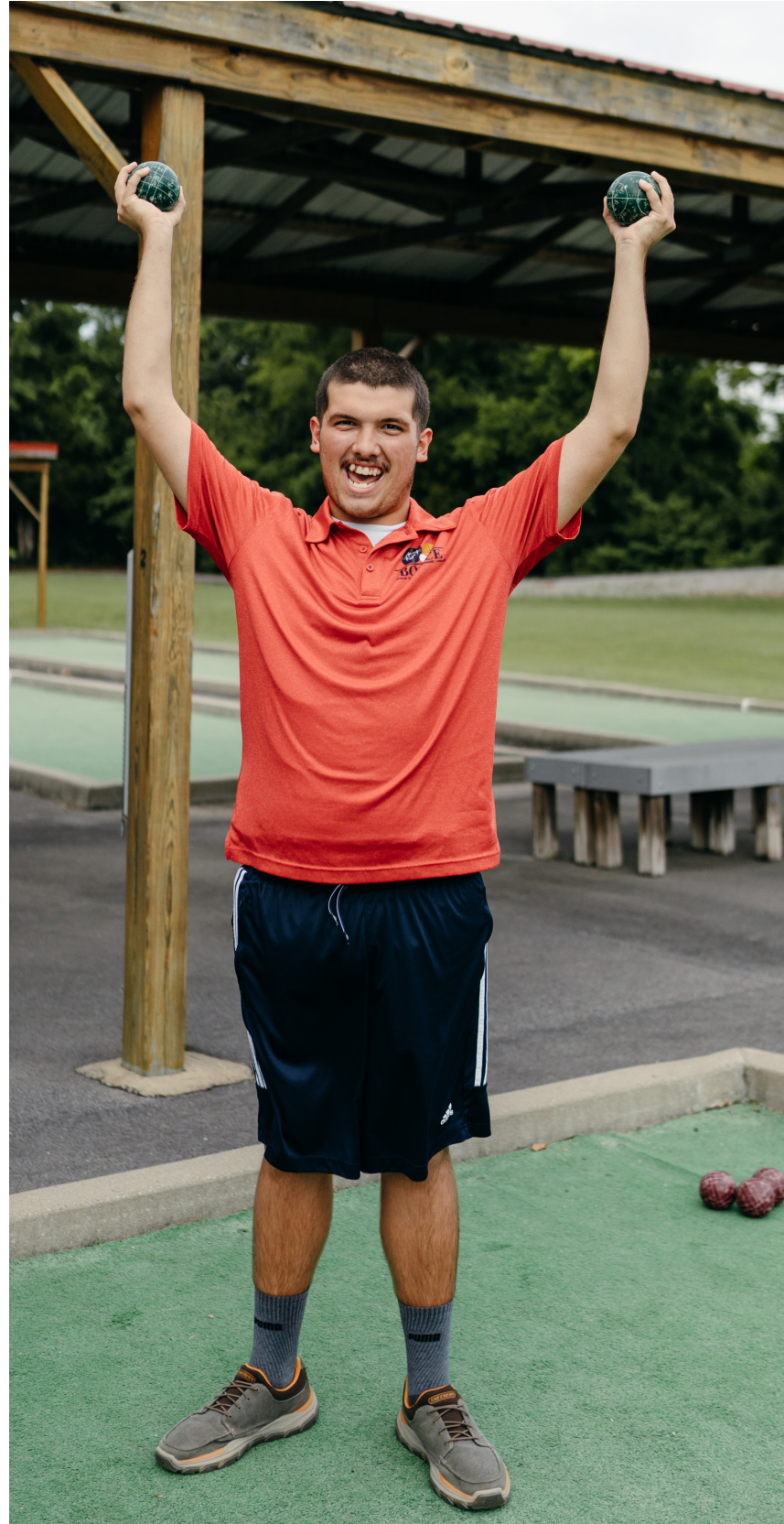
**MARY LEE BURKETT**

nonverbal athletes that had started basketball,” she said. “Upon joining, he came in with his earphones on and was excited, but he couldn’t dribble and didn’t understand the game completely. I pulled him aside while another coach took the rest of the team. I worked with him on just dribbling, and he learned to dribble. We set him in front of the goal, and when another player came down, they would throw the ball to him, and he would dribble once and then shoot. It’s our process to work with each athlete’s abilities and put them in a position where they can be most successful.”

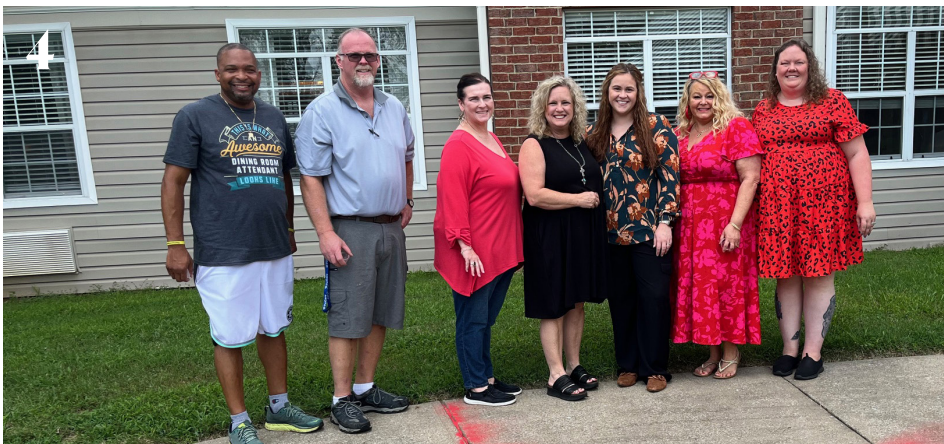
### **The gold medal of blessings**

Burkett said that working with each athlete provides endless blessings.

“There are so many blessings in being able to work with these athletes,” she enthused. “They look forward to the competition, and being able to see them compete and get a medal — whether it be gold, silver, or bronze — to see them have that feeling of accomplishment is heartwarming. Also, the socialization they gain is beneficial. For example, my daughter will talk about a competition weeks before because she’s looking forward to being with her friends and the competition.” **GN**



# Red Sand Awareness - July 16



Photography by Kevin Hines

The Red Sand Project was pioneered by Molly Gochman to initiate public awareness and engagement for human trafficking. Participants in the Red Sand Project use bright red sand to fill the cracks of sidewalks, with the grains of sand symbolizing those individuals who fall through the cracks of society. In a successful effort to keep the momentum of the project in Wilson County, County Mayor Randall Hutto, Lebanon Mayor Rick Bell, Mt. Juliet Mayor James Maness, and Watertown Mayor Mike Jennings came together to proclaim July 28 through Aug. 3 as “Red Sand Project Awareness Week.” This is the third year that Wilson County has participated in this project through partnership with various government departments, local businesses, and local organizations. They’re proud of the effort that our community has put into combatting this heartbreaking reality and hope that their efforts will shine a light on a brighter future.

1. Tyler Ausbrooks and Troy Shelton 2. Ben Williams, Jason Hanneken, Kat Cox, Shayna Vaughn, and Vickie Vaughn  
3. Jason Mull 4. Don Juan Birdsong, Keith Gross, Danita Morgan, Angela Holland, Peyton Suchomel, Deann Parks, and Jessica George

# Habitat for Humanity



Photography by Anthony Merriweather

Formerly Lebanon Outlet Mall, the new ReStore, with 25,000 square feet of floor space, features new and gently used household and office items and building supplies at greatly reduced prices.

“We have been working for months toward this grand opening with lots of donations and community support. We are very excited to welcome the community to our new store! We are always looking for volunteers to help us with inventory and stocking shelves,” said Jennifer Keaton, ReStore director.

Proceeds from the ReStore help sustain Habitat’s mission of providing affordable homeownership opportunities to hardworking Middle Tennesseans. The reuse benefit of the ReStores save more than 1,500 tons of materials from city landfills annually.



1. Ribbon cutting 2. Mayor Rick Bell  
3. Matthew Richie, Andre Francis, Noll Beausoleil, Maxwell Gibson, Lamont Ginyard, Oshanie Huie, and Malique Francis

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