

# Good News

exchange

Rick Vella

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+ ADVOCACY THROUGH  
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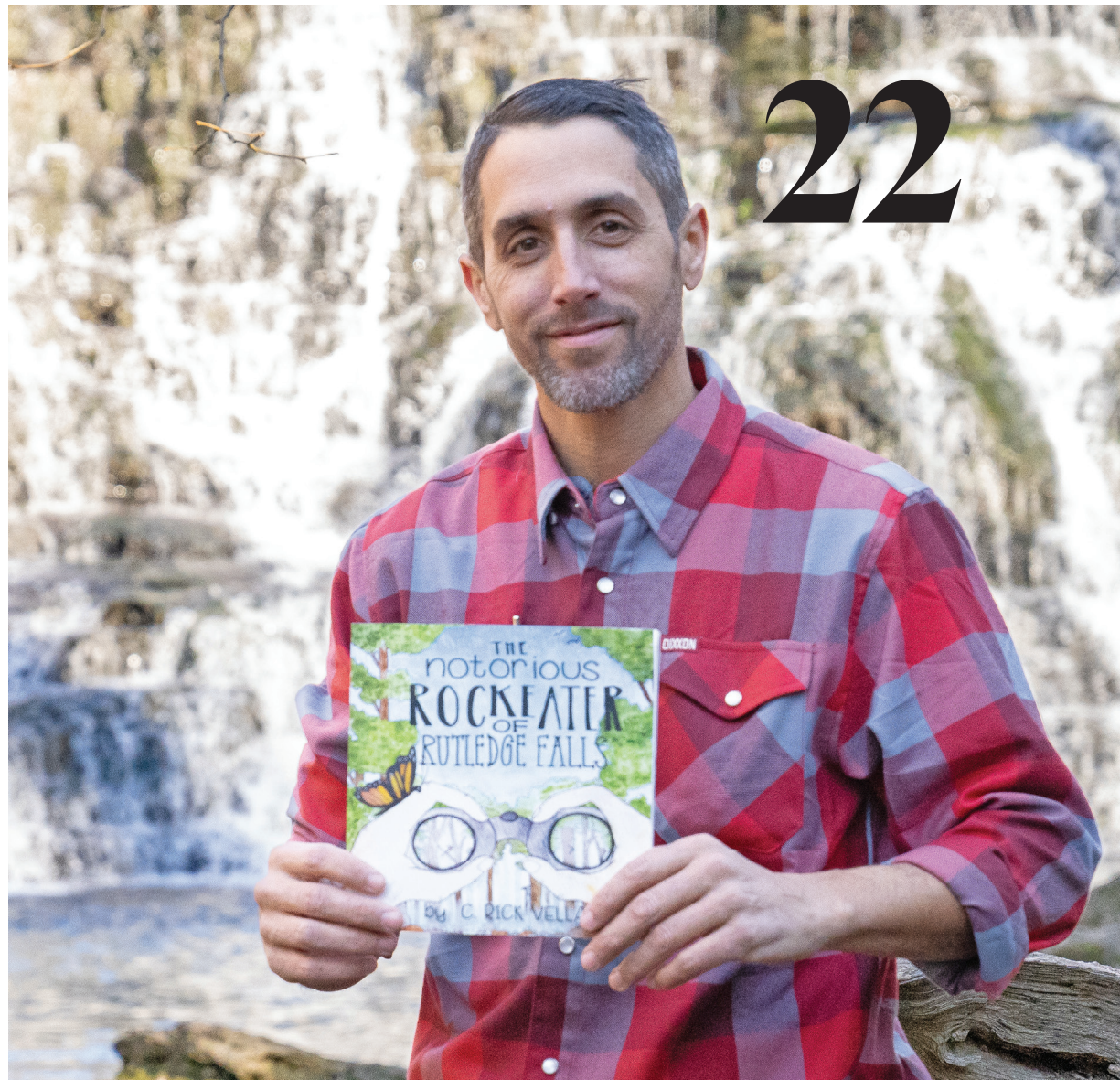
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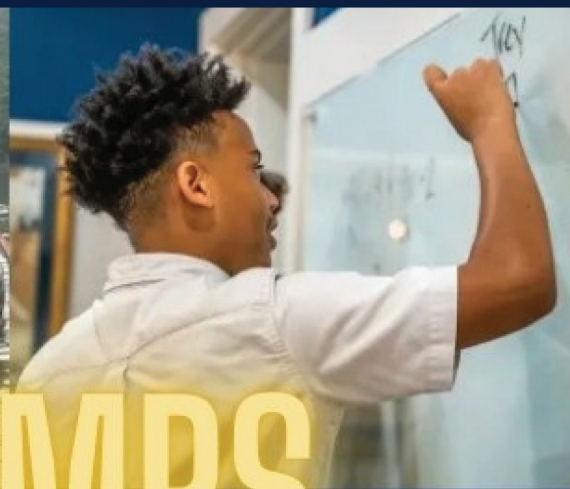
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

# Empathy in Motion

A walk in different shoes

THE SOUNDS of the self-checkout registers beep through the entire store. The short lines of people with baskets and carts move across the reflective tile like a conveyor belt and out the door. Uh, oh. A man at the checkout stood frozen. The total amount due on the screen was higher than he knew was on his card. He had to decide what to put back: something he needed or something for his grandkid. His hand hovered over the items, trying to decide quickly so the people behind didn't notice. Luckily, the woman behind him did notice. Before he could speak, the woman behind him quietly passed him a few dollars. No hesitation, no grand speech — just a simple nod and a kind smile that said, "I've been there too."

Moments like this don't make headlines, but they are what makes a strong community. Empathy isn't just about understanding someone's struggle — it's about moving toward them. It's choosing to help, even in small ways. It's listening when it would be easier to roll your eyes, huff, and walk away.

Empathy in motion is the teacher who stays after school to help a struggling student. The small business owner who donates meals after a storm. The neighbor who checks in just to say, "How are you doing?" These aren't grand gestures, but they are the moments that build something lasting — connection, trust, and the kind of community where people show up for each other.

That's what this issue is about: people who don't just talk about kindness but live it. Their stories remind us that empathy is not passive — it's an action, a decision, and a way of life.

And in a world that often feels divided, empathy is what keeps us together. It reminds us that our stories are connected, that we belong to each other, and that none of us are truly alone.

As you turn these pages, may you be inspired to move — to listen, to step forward, to choose compassion. Because when we walk in each other's shoes, we walk forward together. And that is what makes a community. **GN**

  
**Wesley Bryant,**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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publishing  
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**EMILY RATHS**

# A KNOCKOUT

**AGAINST PARKINSON'S**





▲ Jim Hawkins, Kathy Duvenage, Emily Rath, Daniel Padgett, Mark Brewer, Jim Devlin, Julie Heltsley, Deby Barnett, Mike Rutherford, and Randy Edwards

## Parkinson's fighters in Tullahoma are reclaiming their strength through boxing.

By Jeriah Brumfield // Photography by Brooke Snyder

**G** LOVES HIT punching bags, and their thuds infuse a large gym at FIT Beyond Therapy. The beat of tenacity bounces off the walls. Intensity and focus flow through the room, where Parkinson's warriors — many in their 40s to 90s — push their limits with every punch. To an outsider, it might look like any other fitness class. But inside this gym, every move carries a deeper purpose. Each jab works against stiffness, each pivot eases tremors, and each punch is a step toward reclaiming control.

Emily Rath moves among her students, adjusting stances and offering encouraging words. Across the room, one woman who once doubted she could ever enjoy exercise lands a perfect hook and lets out a triumphant laugh. The energy is electric, and the atmosphere is a celebration of progress, tenacity, and unity.

Rath, who's spent years immersed in the world of exercise science, earning a degree and multiple certifications along the way, never thought she'd be here — but a conversation with a local business owner changed everything.

The instructor asked if she would be interested in teaching boxing classes at a previous location. Rath agreed, and together, they developed the initial programs.

After joining FIT Beyond Therapy in Tullahoma in 2021, Rath asked owner Philip Hill for permission to expand their boxing classes.

"It didn't take long to realize there was a growing group of people with Parkinson's in our community who would benefit from this class," Rath said.

With Hill's approval, her journey in boxing continued.

With her fitness experience and love for boxing, Rath became the ideal candidate to take on the challenge. Boxing had already been a major part of her fitness training for clients. While attending Angelo State University, she completed a unique six-month, one-on-one boxing instruction course with a semi-pro boxer. Through that course, she saw how boxing could help people with Parkinson's.

"Clients often walk away from a boxing session feeling that they have released some bottled-up negative emo-

tions. It is also a great full-body workout," she explained.

Launching the first Parkinson's boxing class was an exciting experience for everyone, but like many things, it was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the shutdown, Rath had the unique opportunity to work closely with Karen Nelson, one of the class participants.

"Karen didn't really enjoy exercise, but she loved poetry and art," Rath recalled. "We started going on walks together. She'd recite her poetry, which helped take her mind off the exercise."

Through working with Nelson, Rath began to understand the daily challenges of living with Parkinson's.

"There were days when Karen had trouble speaking, but you'd ask her to recite a poem, and she'd do it much more clearly than her regular speech. She was a firecracker. Always smiling, always happy. Seeing her fight this disease with such a positive attitude taught me that attitude really makes the biggest difference when facing something difficult."

Though Nelson's battle with Parkinson's was tough, her determination, faith,



▲ Kathy Duvenage, Emily Rath, and Daniel Padgett assist participants in their boxing journey.

and strong support system helped her best manage her symptoms.

“She had the best group of people around her,” Rath said. “Starting with her husband, Bob. Having a support system for the person with Parkinson’s, as well as their main caregiver, is crucial.”

Since those early days, Rath has recognized how important exercise — particularly boxing — is in managing Parkinson’s symptoms. Although there is no cure for the disease, research shows that exercise, especially boxing, can help slow its progression.

“Many of our class participants found us because their neurologist recommended boxing,” Rath said.

Class members show up day after day, towels and water in hand, ready to give it their all.

“They show up regardless of which symptoms are affecting them that day, with an ‘I’m going to do whatever I can’ attitude,” Rath said. “It’s incredibly inspiring to work with this group. It makes me think twice before skipping a workout or backing off just because something is hard.”

Participants experience both physical and cognitive benefits. Boxing involves weight-shifting, changing directions, and using alternate arm movements, all challenging balance, coordination, and

**“It makes me think twice before skipping a workout or backing off just because something is hard!”**

- Emily Rath

even memory. It’s a holistic exercise that improves strength, flexibility, balance, and cognition as participants count punches or name colors during training.

According to Rath and many of her participants, a supportive class environment is key. Rath works alongside Kathy Duvenage, a colleague with a

background in physiotherapy, and has received support from local therapists Karen Todaro and Lori Henley to provide the best care possible.

“It’s inspiring to see them encourage one another and share what they’ve learned,” Rath said. “There’s a real camaraderie that comes from facing this disease together.”

For participants like Randy Williams and his wife, Phyllis, the community aspect is just as important as the exercise.

“The exercise program is very helpful, and the social contact is his incentive to get out of bed on Monday and Friday,” said Phyllis. “As the caregiver, I will add that the group is also a great support for me.”

The class continues to grow, and the team adapts the program to meet participants’ needs. Instructors use gait belts for those with mobility issues or at higher risk of falling, ensuring participants can work at their own pace while being supported.

Sometimes, participants do exercises seated when standing becomes too much. Other times, they start standing and switch to a chair when they tire.

As the class expands, Rath anticipates needing more helpers to maintain a high level of care and inclusivity.

She encourages the community to make fitness a priority and invest in their health, even when it’s difficult.

“We all have days when we don’t feel like doing what’s good for us,” Rath said. “But working with this group, I often find myself pushing through that resistance. When you see people fighting a disease like Parkinson’s, it’s incredibly inspiring.”

She added, “If you or someone you know has Parkinson’s, you don’t have to face it alone. There’s a community right here in Tullahoma that’s supportive and encouraging. They share daily struggles and best practices for combating symptoms.” **GN**

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# Caleb McCall: A New Chapter

of

# FAITH

The Legacy Church found its new home here in Tullahoma.

By Jeriah Brumfield  
Photography by Brooke Snyder  
and submitted by Legacy Church

**O**N A warm summer afternoon, a group of volunteers from The Legacy Church gathered in the parking lot of an apartment complex just a stone's throw from their new building. Church members unloaded boxes of food and set up tables with colorful flyers for upcoming events. A line of families, many walking or riding bikes, began to form, greeted with smiles and warm welcomes.

Caleb McCall, the church's pastor, watched as his team engaged with the residents, handing out Thanksgiving meals, offering prayers, and sharing the joy of the season.

"This is what it's about," he thought to himself as he saw kids laughing and adults conversing.

Located just across from Lowe's and a local movie theater in Tullahoma, The Legacy Church continues to expand its outreach ministries to individuals all over Middle Tennessee. Once based in Shelbyville, the church has found a new home in Tullahoma, bringing with it a story of conviction, persistence, and continuous efforts to make this corner of Tennessee a better place.



▲ Many followers fill the room at The Legacy Church to praise and worship at one of the two services available.

## A VISION BORN IN SHELBYVILLE

McCall and the congregation's path to Tullahoma was a faith-driven adventure that required diligence and divine timing. The church began its ministry in Shelbyville, where McCall and his team sought to meet the spiritual, mental, and physical needs of the local community.

The church grew rapidly, drawing people in from surrounding areas with its heart-stirring preaching and persistent outreach efforts. However, as 2023 drew to a close, it became evident that their rented space was no longer sustainable. In December 2023, the pastor of the church whose building they were using gave them a six-month deadline to find a new location.

"So, I began this search. I had been searching for property in Shelbyville for about three years because I knew that we needed our own space. So I had been

looking this whole time, and I could not find anything. I had made several calls, met with several people, went and looked at different locations, and tried to rent a middle school, but we were denied."

Then, a fellow pastor and friend, Chad Conn, with Break Free Worship Center, reached out, offering to sell his church building in Tullahoma. McCall was initially unsure. He and his team had toured the building before, back in early 2023, but according to McCall, it didn't feel like the right decision at the time. After hearing the news in December, he believes he felt God nudging him to reconsider.

He and his team revisited the property and, after praying together, felt peace about moving forward.

"This is where God wants us to be. We were about to buy land in Shelbyville to try to build a building, but with the interest rates and the cost of construction,



it wouldn't have been the right move for us. It was like God was shutting door after door after door, and he left this one open.”

### TULLAHOMA: A PERFECT FIT

The decision wasn't easy for McCall and the team to make. Moving to Tullahoma meant stepping away from Shelbyville, where The Legacy had first started. But as the team prayed and reflected, they realized the move was providential.

While Shelbyville had been a wonderful chapter, Tullahoma offered something unique: accessibility. This central location has made a significant difference, not only for the church's original members but also for new attendees. Many of The Legacy Church's members already drove in from surrounding areas like Manchester, Lynchburg, and Bell Buckle. Tullahoma became a convenient meeting point for everyone.

The Legacy Church closed on the property in May 2024, and renovations began in July that year. Church members tackled

the remodeling themselves, turning the space into a modern, welcoming sanctuary. By July 7, 2024, the church held its first service in the new building, and the turnout exceeded expectations — 360 people attended, even though the sanctuary could only seat 300. The energy in the room was electric, and it marked a new chapter for the church that they will never forget.

Since then, attendance has steadily increased, and the church now averages between 250 and 300 people each Sunday. To accommodate the growing congregation, two services have been added at 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. The move to Tullahoma has opened up new opportunities for ministry, and The Legacy Church is reaching people from across the region.

### SERVING DOSSET APARTMENTS

The Legacy Church has made serving the residents of Dosset Apartments a top priority. Located near the church's new

building, Dosset Apartments houses many families who rely on walking or biking for transportation. Moving to this location has allowed the church to better connect with these neighbors directly, making it easier for residents to attend services and events.

The Legacy Church has hosted food drives, back-to-school events, and other outreach initiatives to support the Dosset community. In addition to providing tangible help, the church has built genuine relationships with residents, encouraged them, and given them a sense of belonging.

“For Thanksgiving and Christmas, we go in there, hand out meals, and pray with folks. We've had several youths from the Dosset Apartments start coming to the church. We've had some parents and apartment managers come to the church before, as well.”

McCall also organized an outreach event where gospel rap musicians performed, believing it offered residents the opportunity to experience the gospel through the powerful medium of music ministry.

### MOVING FORWARD

McCall and his team are already dreaming big for the future. Outreach initiatives like Be The Bush Ministries and Miriam House are expanding, and plans to break ground on a new building in Normandy are in the works.

As the congregation continues to grow and expand, it's apparent that faith has been rewarded.

For McCall and the The Legacy Church family, this isn't just the start of a new chapter. It's a whole new book. McCall believes the congregation's heart for worship, community, and service is stronger than ever, and their doors are wide open to anyone searching for hope, belonging, and a deeper connection with God. GN

*For more information, follow The Legacy Church on Facebook. Address: 120 Flower-town Road in Normandy.*

◀ *Caleb in the sanctuary of The Legacy Church — the sanctuary has served as a safe place for many of all ages in the Tullahoma area.*



# A Vision in Motion

Tulahoma's own Hope Nunley helps guide the town toward greater unity and success.

By Jeriah Brumfield // Photography by Brooke Snyder

**I**N TULLAHOMA, painted murals brighten alleyways, sharing its history while offering a hopeful glimpse into the future. Welcoming storefronts invite neighbors and visitors to linger just a little longer. Children's glee brightens the already colorful playgrounds. Even the sidewalks seem to come alive and encourage unity and friendship.

Hope Nunley, the executive director of the Tullahoma Area Chamber of Commerce, is one of many leaders actively driving her vision forward. With each passing day, her vision for a stronger, more connected town grows clearer, and you can see it coming to fruition in the people and projects around her.

Nunley joined the Tullahoma Area Chamber of Commerce in 2008 when she took her first steps as an ambassador. Little did she know that this modest beginning would set her on a path of transformation, not just for her career but for the future of Tullahoma itself.

"I started as an ambassador, served on the board of directors, and then in January 2017, I officially began as the executive director," Nunley recounted. "At that time, we had 372 chamber members. Now, almost eight years later, we're nearing 500 members, and we've added signature events that have become a part of the fabric of this town."

Despite the growth in numbers, the chamber's small team of three pours their hearts into everything they do.

"Our days are tighter and busier, but they fly by because of the role we get to play in Tullahoma. We get to welcome new people, celebrate

A portrait of Hope Nunley, a woman with long brown hair, smiling. She is wearing a black and white striped cardigan with gold buttons and a black skirt. She is standing next to a granite countertop.

Hope Nunley

our neighbors for their accomplishments, and be a part of the exciting growth that's happening," Nunley continued.

She is fully committed to keeping Tullahoma's energy positive and welcoming. This is a town she truly cares about. She explained that one of the most compelling aspects of Tullahoma is the unity that holds the community together.

"The first thing I always start with is the people. We have an incredible community of amazing friends and neighbors. That's what we constantly hear from others, too — it's the people that make Tullahoma special," she said.

As Tullahoma grows, Nunley takes pride in how the town has maintained its small-town feel while offering the amenities of a larger city.

"We have big-city amenities but with a small-town feel. It's the perfect combination for an incredible community."

One can see Tullahoma's growth in its expanding chamber membership and the emerging opportunities that line the horizon. Nunley is especially excited about the future of the local education system and how it will equip the next generation of leaders.

"When I look out my window into downtown, I see so many opportunities for growth. We have incredible assets downtown, and there's room for more. With [Motlow State Community College] and the University of Tennessee Space Institute, we're educating the next generation who will bring fresh ideas to the table," she said.

Nunley believes this influx of new energy will create innovative opportunities that Tullahoma has yet to imagine. She also admires Tullahoma's public school system and the inspiring students who are already charting their own paths.

"It blows my mind to hear these teenagers talk about what they want to do and how they've already carved out a path to make it happen," she said.



▲ The DAISY Award was presented to Jenny Shelton, who was nominated by Hope and her husband, Cory, for her compassionate care during the most difficult time of their lives.

Reflecting on her own high school years, Nunley admitted, "At that age, I had no idea I'd be here today. The students here are truly incredible."

However, one of Tullahoma's biggest strengths is its innate ability to come together and pool its resources to support those in need.

"We have a large number of them [service organizations], and anyone can find something they're passionate about and volunteer just one to three hours a month. It's amazing how much you can give back by simply showing up."

She is especially proud of organizations like the Kiwanis Club and initiatives like "5 Loaves 4 Kids," which packs weekend meals for children who might otherwise go hungry. These efforts, she believes, reveal Tullahoma's true identity — people not only seeing the need but stepping up to fill it.

Empathy and unity drive this community. Nunley sees it every day in the school food trucks that serve families during the summer and the many organizations

working behind the scenes to make life a little brighter for those in dark places.

One of the most touching moments in her life and career came during her and her husband's most vulnerable moments.

"We were expecting our first child, a daughter named Amelia, when we received the devastating news of her diagnosis with a 99% fatality rate," Nunley shared. "During my labor at Vanderbilt Tullahoma-Harton Hospital, we were blessed to have Nurse Jenny Shelton by our side. She treated me not just as a patient but as if I were her own daughter."

Two years later, when Nunley welcomed her perfectly healthy son, she was reunited

with Jenny, and the tears they shared that day were tears of joy.

"We got to honor Jenny in 2023 when she won the DAISY Award, and it was such a special moment for us to celebrate her," Nunley said.

Jenny's empathy helped her through her darkest moments and reminded her how special her community was and is today.

Nunley also supports community outreach efforts outside of her professional career. She participates in numerous organizations, including Rotary and the Arnold Community Council.

"I always tell young professionals to find two things to focus on and do them really well. Don't stretch yourself too thin, but find what you're passionate about and give it your best," she advised.

In Nunley's eyes, the people, the community, and the mission to make Tullahoma a better place drive her daily.

"You see good and want to do good," she said. "I just hope the work we're doing here is infectious and that others are inspired to step up and serve." GN

# Sweet Bee Coffee:

## A DRIVE-THRU DELIGHT



Your daily **buzz** — served with a smile!

**S**WEET BEE Coffee has quickly become a favorite spot for both locals and visitors seeking quality beverages and a welcoming smile. It caters to early risers and those looking for a light lunch.

The cafe offers a diverse menu that includes espresso-based coffee drinks, creamy frappuccinos, a variety of teas, and even Italian sodas! Among the favorites are the caramel frappe and classic drip coffee, both praised for rich flavors. Sweet Bee Coffee also offers a number of additional flavor add-ins that are perfect in the Italian sodas or the popular “Buzzy” caffeine option made with Red Bull.

For those seeking a bite to eat, the cafe offers bakery items like cookies, muffins, and cinnamon rolls all day. The breakfast menu includes biscuits, bagels, and breakfast burritos until 11 a.m. Starting at 11 a.m., it offers a rotating lunch menu offering soups, sandwiches,

and more — so be sure to follow Sweet Bee’s social channels to stay up to date!

I stopped by one morning to give it a try, needing that caffeine boost. I chose the chorizo burrito and it was savory and flavorful with just a hint of spice. I paired it with the popular caramel frappe which was creamy and sweet with that hint of salty that comes from a good caramel flavor. It was an indulgent treat to accompany the hearty burrito, making it a perfect way to start the day. There can be a bit of a wait as drinks are made to order, so be patient.

Sweet Bee Coffee is primarily a drive-thru service but it does offer a walk-up window and outdoor seating area for patrons who prefer to enjoy their drinks in the open air, though it’s worth noting that parking can be somewhat limited. If you’re in need of a morning caffeine boost, a light lunch, or a fun place to catch up with friends, this cafe is a great addition to Tullahoma. **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 Sweet Bee Coffee.

### Sweet Bee Coffee

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C. Rick Vella

# ROCKY TRAILS AND STORYBOOK TALES

DISCOVER HOW THE BEAUTY OF RUTLEDGE FALLS BECAME THE PERFECT SCENE FOR RICK VELLA'S CHILDREN'S BOOK.

BY JERIAH BRUMFIELD // PHOTOGRAPHY BY BROOKE SNYDER  
AND SUBMITTED BY C. RICK VELLA

**D**ISCOVER HOW the beauty of Rutledge Falls became the perfect scene for Rick Vella's children's book. From a young age, Vella's mind was always in motion. It often traveled far from the classroom, creating his own stories, characters, and worlds. Whether inspired by a school lecture or a solemn moment in the corner of a room, Vella would find himself daydreaming, creating something new. His natural inclination to think beyond the present, to dream up the unimaginable, an inherited family trait, has carried him through a lifetime of creative expression. This untamed and vivid imagination was a natural part of him, which he now expresses through the written word.

To Vella, writing is like an endless frontier, much like the wilderness he's always loved.

"Alaska is called 'the last frontier,' but to me, writing is like that. If you think about it, you can write it," he said.

"Whether it's good or not, that's for the readers to decide."

"I'd be sitting there, just thinking about something else," Vella recalled. "I'd come up with a character, or a creature, or a whole new world."

His writing style, unburdened by convention or expectation, has led him to create stories that connect with readers and brighten imaginations, much like the music that surrounded him as a child.

Before becoming an author, Vella and his wife's family were on the road, traveling as part of a bluegrass band. The cadence of the music and the creative energy of writing songs for their albums became a launching pad for his early development as a storyteller.

"I'd always write goofy songs — silly things about putting bread in a toaster or some little thing like that," he laughed.

"Sometimes I'd hear a song, and I'd change the lyrics to something funny. It's kind of annoying to some people, but it's just how my brain works."

Early on, some of Vella's teachers quickly picked up on his ability to make others laugh, even with his quirky lyrics. One of his grade school literature teachers assured him he was the most creative student she'd ever had.

However, Vella struggled academically as a child, and his teachers later noticed signs of dyslexia and difficulties in spelling and grammar. But they never stopped him from exploring his creativity.

"I never fully understood why words sometimes mixed up in my head," he said. "But I just kept writing anyway."

As an adult, Vella found solace in writing during a particularly challenging time in his life. In 2019, he was diagnosed with two rare health conditions — a liver disease and a blood disorder — causing his life to come to a standstill.

During these hospital stays, writing became a refuge. He wrote his first book, "The Silly Situation That Made Samuel Smile," beautifully illustrated by Sara Andrews while in the hospital, which he believes helped him overcome those challenging moments.

Vella's condition began to improve through the support of a nutritionist who guided him toward a healthier lifestyle. However, the journey through his health challenges remains an integral part of his story.

"I worked with a biochemist, and through dietary changes, specifically frequently consuming soluble fiber, which helps most with cleaning up the liver and blood cells, I'm in remission now," Vella said. "It was a miracle to get connected with her."

With a healthier outlook on life, Vella finished his published work, "The Notorious Rock Eater," also illustrated by Andrews, and wrote two more books now available on Amazon.

With the publication of "The Notorious Rock Eater of Rutledge Falls," Vella brought his creative work into the world and also shared a special connection to the very land that inspired it.

In 2005, Vella moved to Tennessee and stumbled upon Rutledge Falls while looking for hiking places to take his dogs. It would soon become a place that

*Illustration in this book was based on actual structures on the property leading up to Rutledge Falls.*

held special meaning for him.

"The terrain is just so rocky — the way the land slopes down to the waterfall," Vella described.

"I put it aside at first to work on another story, but I knew 'The Notorious Rock Eater' was something special," he said.

With its stunning natural features, Rutledge Falls became the perfect scene for Vella's storytelling. His book blends the area's natural beauty with a bit of whimsical fantasy.

The magic of Rutledge Falls, its rocks and waterfalls, is alive in the pages of Vella's book, inviting readers to experience its beauty in a new way.

He read "The Notorious Rock Eater" for the first time to a group of children at the falls, which he said was a neat experience for both him and the listeners.

For Vella, the beauty of places like Rutledge Falls isn't just in the sights or sounds; it's in the stories they inspire.

"I hope that when families go to places like Rutledge Falls, they find something magical there," he reflected. "Maybe they'll get a copy of my book and see the scenery in a new light. I hope it sparks some creativity in them or maybe just gives them a moment to pause and take in nature."

Vella also believes in the importance of encouraging creativity, especially in children.

"We need the arts, especially now," he said. "there's a lot of lessons that can be learned outside of the classroom. Writing, drawing, music — these things are so important."

And for Vella, the act of storytelling is just as important as the stories themselves. He believes storytelling is a powerful tool



that connects humanity. He sees it as something deeply human, a way we've always shared our history, passed down knowledge, and connected with one another.

Whether through a lighthearted tale, a grand adventure, or a meaningful story, he believes the act of telling connects generations and inspires something greater within us all.

"The characters in 'The Notorious Rockeater of Rutledge Falls' come from completely different worlds, yet they find themselves in a situation that, despite those noticeable differences, they come together for a greater cause," he said.

"In a day and age where people have polarizing different views on politics, religion, ethnicity, or class and wealth divide, I hope there is a unifying message that we are all fearfully and wonderfully created for a purpose. So let's find out what that is and do it."

Through his stories, Vella hopes to inspire others to embrace their creativity, explore the world around them, and remember that no matter the challenges life throws at them, stories can be a place to escape, heal, and grow.

"God made me to be creative in everything I do, whether it's music, writing, building, being a help to others, or simply making people laugh, and in many ways, using that creativity has given me purpose." GN



Cheryl Rhoads

# EVERY DOG DESERVES A HERO.

CHERYL RHOADS IS ON AN UPHILL BATTLE TO HOUSE, HEAL, AND REHOME TULLAHOMA'S ANIMALS.

BY JERIAH BRUMFIELD // PHOTOGRAPHY BY BROOKE SNYDER

SOMETIMES, THE seeds of a life's calling are planted long before we recognize them. For Cheryl Rhoads, a life invested in animal welfare was written in the stars — or perhaps in the butter bowls she used to carry frogs and critters to school as a child. She enjoyed caring for animals early in life and spent numerous adventures outdoors, catching bugs, frogs, and even snakes and building elaborate habitats for them.

“I was solely responsible for my teacher canceling ‘show and tell,’” she joked. “She said she was afraid of what I was going to bring her in a butter bowl to show the class and talk about.”

Over the years, that childhood wonder became a fulfilling adventure in Rhoads' adult life. Throughout her life, Rhoads has consistently integrated animals into her life — whether as cherished pets, through rescue work, or while running a grooming and boarding kennel. Every season of her life and each experience has increased her love for animals and their well-being.

So, when the opportunity to become an Animal Control Officer (ACO) came along in 2021, it felt like a natural next step for Rhoads. It was a chance to make a real difference in her community. As an ACO, she now advocates for the voiceless, ensuring that every animal receives the care and respect they deserve. With each day on the job, Rhoads embraces the opportunity to connect with animals and their owners personally. In her heart, she knows that every interaction is a chance to spread compassion and understanding in her community.

## OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AT THE SHELTER

Managing an animal shelter isn't easy, and Rhoads faces challenges that many in her position know all too well. Space is tight, and staffing is often stretched thin.



The shelter currently houses 66 dogs. But according to Rhoads, they could fill a space twice this size in the blink of an eye.

However, Rhoads and her team aren't the ones to throw in the towel. Instead, they roll up their sleeves and get creative. To combat some of these most pressing issues, the team leans on innovation and persistence, and Rhoads and her team strive to make every square inch count.

"Dogs that can share a kennel safely are placed together. We utilize our offices, bathroom, kitchen, and any space that we can find that can safely and humanely house a dog."

What is the secret weapon to their success? A network of big-hearted foster families who open their homes to shelter dogs, especially when the mercury drops.

When it comes to staffing, Rhoads shared that emotional and physical tolls are involved in this field of work. She said that a job in animal control often requires hands-on learning and consistency. She asserted that potential caregivers must decide whether they can bear it and if they can excel at it. She also encouraged them to remember that the dogs and the team were counting on them.

This devotion to both the animals and the team is tested daily, especially when difficult decisions must be made. These moments stay with caregivers like Rhoads long after the workday ends.

## A STORY THAT STAYS WITH HER

Some stories at the shelter don't have happy endings, but they mean a lot to caregivers like Rhoads. She shared one story that has stayed with her about a dog that arrived aggressive, mistrustful, and unadoptable.

"He had not been properly socialized. He had been trained to attack as a guard dog, and he was on guard. Chris and I each worked with this dog. Within a month, we had made real progress. I remember that I was able to go into his kennel, and we would play with his stuffed toy. He was so excited to see me, and I looked forward to working with him. I loved him."

But his aggression remained. He lunged at volunteers, Rhoads' co-workers, and even her family when she considered taking him home. With no safe options left, Rhoads made the painful decision for behavioral euthanasia, which she said was a moment she will never forget.

"I will never regret giving him a piece of myself. Yes, he ended up losing his life, but he went to sleep loved. He went to sleep with me, telling him that I loved him, stroking his ears, and petting his head. He went to sleep being held. He did not die alone, scared, and unloved. He was euthanized with so much love and care."

## WHAT KEEPS RHOADS GOING

Amid the challenges of shelter life, Rhoads finds her persistence and optimism restored with every neglected, timid dog that learns to wag its tail again, every fragile life that grows strong, and every once-broken spirit that rediscovers joy.

"We watch dogs come in neglected, scared, timid, and closed off, and then we get to work with them and see them turn around into dogs that enjoy spending time with humans, gain weight, get healthy, and learn to love life again," she said.

"I absolutely love getting updates on dogs that have been in the shelter and have been adopted to loving homes. My co-workers also keep me going. We have a great working relationship at the shelter, but also throughout the city."

Rhoads said she enjoys receiving updates from adopters and watching relationships form among the shelter team's staff and the larger Tullahoma community.

"We work with the police, codes, finance, public works, and many other departments within the city. Everyone is always very supportive and helpful in assisting us when we need something."

When the days get particularly heavy, the shelter itself offers comfort.

"Our shelter is clean, the dogs have larger rooms than most dogs in other shelters, we have a wonderful play yard to take them out into daily, and we aren't

struggling just to feed and medicate our dogs. At the end of the day, if all of that isn't enough to keep me going, there's always a dog on hand that is more than willing to provide a good cuddle to cheer me up."

## IMPROVING THE DOGS' LIVES

Under Rhoads' leadership, the Tullahoma Animal Shelter prioritizes health and safety and depends on the community's support. The shelter vaccinates, alters, and microchips the dogs before adoption. Puppies undergo quarantine to prevent parvovirus. Partnerships with Hills Science Diet, Tractor Supply, local veterinarians, and others provide access to high-quality food and medicine at the best prices.

Rhoads said the staff treat every dollar of the shelter budget like it's their own. This year, they implemented Interceptor Plus to keep dogs parasite-free and are looking into Simparica Trio to include flea prevention as well. The shelter also maintains a food pantry stocked with community donations for struggling families.

She said, "This is made possible through donations from the community and local businesses. We offer food to any community member that needs it, free of charge. We understand that people fall on hard times, and worrying about whether you are going to feed yourself or feed your pet should not be an issue."

## LEADING AT THE STATE LEVEL

Rhoads' consistent efforts in animal advocacy have earned her the position of central region director for Animal Care & Control Association of Tennessee. Her goal is to expand support for animal control officers in the field.

"I would love to search out and provide hands-on training for officers that would help them understand dog body language as well as safe practices in the field that would help them capture and transport animals humanely." GN



Jordan Ennis

# ADVOCACY THROUGH CONNECTION

JORDAN ENNIS AND HIS FAMILY ARE COMMITTED TO FINDING A CURE AND SUPPORTING THOSE AFFECTED BY ALS.

BY JERIAH BRUMFIELD // PHOTOGRAPHY BY BROOKE SNYDER  
AND SUBMITTED BY JORDAN ENNIS

**I**N JULY 2005, Jordan Ennis and his family's lives changed with an unexpected diagnosis. His father, Steve Ennis, whom everyone knew for his fortitude and encouraging words, had been struggling with a series of troubling symptoms. But when doctors finally gave him the devastating diagnosis of ALS, they were left to face the harsh reality of a disease that, at the time, had little awareness or hope.

"He started showing signs earlier that year — his speech was slurred, and his legs didn't work like they used to. He would trip, fall, and his ankles would just give out," Jordan recalled.

"They finally diagnosed him with ALS at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. We had no idea what it was. But after doing some research, we found out that the average lifespan for those with ALS is three to five years and that it was 100% fatal with no known cure."

Jordan had just married a year earlier and was thriving in the family business. Life was good, and the future was bright. But this news turned everything upside down, leaving them devastated.

ALS, which affects the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord, progressively robs people of their ability to move, speak, and eventually breathe. At the time of his father's diagnosis, there was little public awareness about the disease and even fewer support systems for families facing it. But Jordan's father was determined that his battle wouldn't go unnoticed.

"He said, 'I want to fight this,'" Jordan shared.

This inspired his daughter, Holly Ennis Proctor, to take action. While accompanying her father to the Emory MDA/ALS clinic, Holly found herself looking for ways to make a difference.

"I met someone in the clinic where my dad was seeing Dr. Glass," Holly recalled. "I was talking with the staff about finding anything I could do to help with ALS or the clinic, and a few

days later, an MDA member reached out about fundraising. And then the Night of Hope Gala was created.”

In 2006, the family held the first annual Muscular Dystrophy Association Night of Hope Gala. They wanted to raise both awareness and funds to support the research and ensure that people living with ALS knew they weren't alone.

The Night of Hope Gala is an annual tradition that continues to honor his father's memory and raise millions for ALS research. Held at the Intercontinental Buckhead in Atlanta, this event draws over 500 guests for an evening of celebration, auctions, inspiring speeches, and, most importantly — hope.

Every year, Jordan and his family present the Steve Ennis Hope Award to an individual who has dedicated themselves to raising awareness of ALS and money to support its research. The gala has raised over \$12 million in its 18-year history. But Jordan believes the funds raised are just a by-product of communities banding together and supporting others.

The impact of ALS started to make waves in communities across the country, particularly when the Ice Bucket Challenge went viral in 2014. In three short months, it raised over \$230 million for ALS research, shining a spotlight on the disease that had long been overlooked.

For Jordan, the connection to ALS became even more personal when he met former Alabama fullback and NFL player Kevin Turner and former Alabama tailback and NFL player Kerry Goode — two men whose lives were forever changed by ALS and whose friendship heavily influenced Jordan's ALS advocacy.

Turner and Jordan first met in 2011 through a mutual acquaintance, and the two hit it off immediately. They both spent their time raising awareness and funds for ALS, and over the next few years, they attended several fundraisers together, becoming close friends. Turner, who was diagnosed with ALS in 2010, was already an outspoken advocate for the disease, having dedicated himself to helping others facing similar struggles.

Jordan Ennis  
recognizes  
Kevin Turner for  
all of his work  
with ALS in 2013.

“It was that meeting that really, looking back, is what inspired me to help people navigate this journey,” Jordan explained.

Goode, on the other hand, became part of Jordan's circle after publicly announcing his own ALS diagnosis in August 2015. Goode, a former all-star at Alabama and player and strength and conditioning coach in the NFL for about 10 years, was a powerhouse who was well-known for his athleticism. But one day, he noticed something wasn't right. Goode explained in a news release that he couldn't even pick up a box that wasn't heavy, and that made him realize something was wrong. Six months later, he was diagnosed with ALS.

When Jordan learned of Goode's diagnosis, he knew he had to reach out.

“I called him to discuss the ALS journey and, most importantly, to let him know that he was not alone in this fight. I invited him and his wife, Tanja, to attend our Night of Hope event that year which was in a couple of months as our guests and sit at our table. And they haven't missed one since. He is another truly inspirational person.”

While ALS remains a tough challenge with no clear cure in sight, Jordan has seen firsthand the difference that ongoing support, research, and awareness can make.

“One thing we are working hard to do is make the disease more livable and easier for people that are paralyzed in their own body to communicate with their eyes.”

In addition to working with the Night of Hope Gala, he's also a sought-after speaker who shares his story and encourages others to remain hopeful during life's tragedies. Between speaking at corporate events, helping others organize ALS fund-



raisers, or supporting other causes, Jordan's heart for giving back is undeniable. He's an advocate for ALS and for anyone experiencing adversity.

“Always, always look at the positives that can come out of any situation,” Jordan said.

“It may be tough to find sometimes, and it may take quite a while but work hard to try and find it because it can make a profound difference in your life and the lives of others around you.

When Jordan reflects on his father's life and example, it's evident that the lesson his father instilled in him — never give up, always stay positive — is a way of life. Through the Night of Hope Gala and his numerous other efforts, Jordan is living out those lessons every single day. **GN**



Always, always  
look at the  
positives that  
can come out of  
any situation.

– Jordan Ennis

# Tullahoma Area Chamber of Commerce Annual Membership Celebration - Feb. 7



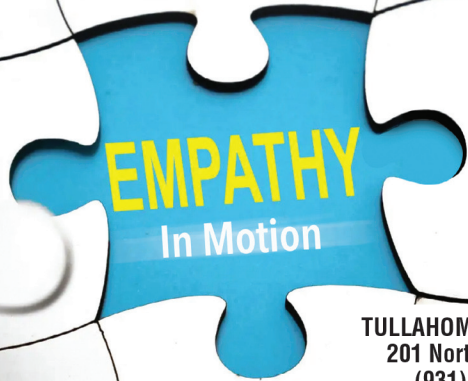
Photography by Ashleigh Newnes  
and submitted by Amy Haring Photography

The 2024 Annual Membership Celebration brought together community members to celebrate passion, dedication, and success on Friday, Feb. 7. With the generous support of FirstBank and Vanderbilt Tullahoma-Harton Hospital, the evening was filled with networking, recognition, and community spirit.



1. Amy Haring and TaShonna Starr 2. Kylee Holt, Kathryn Wiseman, Hope Nunley, and Kathie Grissom 3. Penny and Donald Cooper  
4. James Fuller 5. RJ Hayes and Greg Sandlin 6. Ivy Petty, Kathryn Wiseman, and Kylee Holt

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*Amani*

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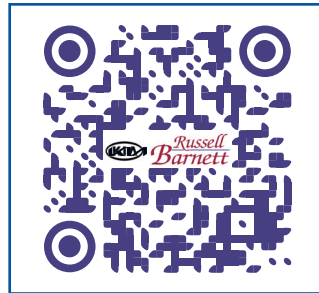


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