

# *Shoals* WOMAN

August 2025

## Shoals Woman *of the* Year

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Carolyn  
O'Byrne

Encouraging *the* next  
generation of readers

Leighton native  
believes *in*  
DREAMING BIG

Personal interest *in*  
genealogy drives *their*  
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The lesser-known story behind  
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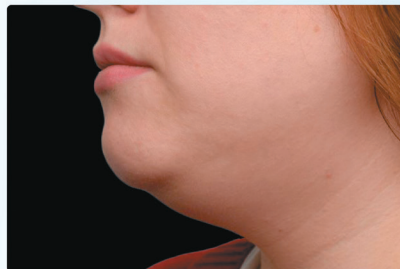
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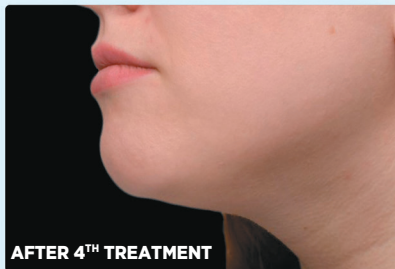
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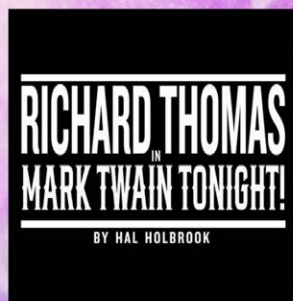
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# Shoals WOMAN

August 2025

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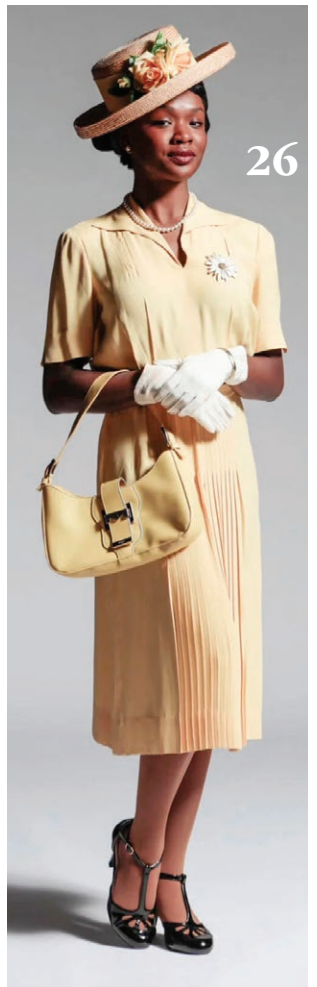
## 49 Nominees

2025 Shoals Woman of the Year

## 49 Past Winners

Shoals Woman of the Year, 2005-2024

26



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## ON the COVER



Photograph by Dan Busey

It took spending several scary nights alone in a borrowed van in the parking lot of a Nashville hospital praying for her daughter to fight off an infection to find her purpose.

"There are caregivers who are suffering silently," Carolyn O'Byrne said. "They are so under recognized and under supported. I want them to know that there's someone out there that cares. And I will make myself available to anybody. I don't care where they are, what time it is, I'll be there for them ... I want them to know that there are resources. And that they do have somebody on their side when it doesn't feel like it and they're feeling like they're all alone."

She has done that by purchasing and repurposing a home right across the street from North Alabama Medical Center to help those from out of town who need a bed to sleep in or just to wash their clothes while their loved ones are in the hospital.

Daisy's Place has become a safe haven for approximately 30 guests from 11 different states since 2023.

So many people before her have gone through what she did in 2003. Carolyn got her direction and has been an advocate for several caregivers who either have stayed in Daisy's Place or have purchased her four-book series "The Thriving Caregiver."

Her motto is caregivers helping caregivers.

That giving heart is one reason why she is the 2025 Shoals Woman of the Year.

Each year, the selection process gets more difficult when Shoals Woman of the Year nominations are whittled down to the final five. It becomes obvious how many wonderful, strong women we have living right here in the Shoals. They excel above and beyond the responsibilities implied in their career title or business name.

We are proud and humbled to again share with you the profiles of five of the finest, not just the finalists, who embody a giving and generous character which makes the Shoals the best place to live.

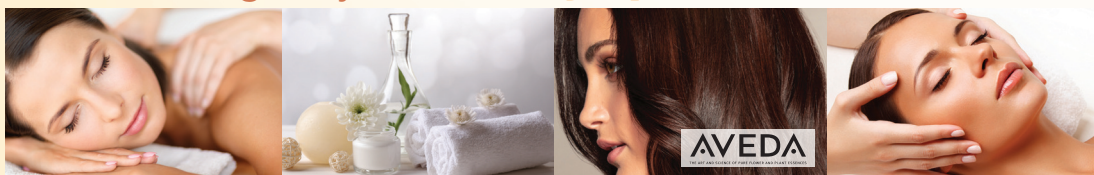
All of these women have had to endure challenges of one type or another, but they all persevered and have made their mark.

We are so happy to be able to shine a spotlight on these incredible women of the Shoals.

They all have worked so hard to lift others up.

Now, it's our turn to lift them up.

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**Hillary delaRosa, MD**







## CAROLYN O'BYRNE

# doesn't want to see a caregiver suffer silently

by KEVIN TAYLOR

Photos by DAN BUSEY

Parents will do anything for their children.

It's just what they do, especially if that child is hurt or sick. That includes living in a van in the parking lot of a hospital.

Carolyn O'Byrne lived out of a borrowed van in a Nashville hospital parking lot for weeks while her 17-month-old daughter was being treated for a MRSA infection after already having been in the hospital for days while doctors were trying to figure out what was wrong with Daisy.

At that time in 2003, Carolyn was a one-income parent of four children. So, when the doctors and nursing staff told her that she could not stay in the room with Daisy while she recovered from the infection, Carolyn moved into a 1980s conversion van in the parking lot of the hospital that was donated to her by a friend.

"So, I was able to put all my stuff in the van and that was my home," she said. "... Each night about 1 or 2 in the morning, I would cry my way out to the old van. Terrified to be alone, I was sleeping in the Nashville [hospital]

parking lot. And if you call it sleep, I did it for a few hours just long enough to make it through the next day, because I [thought] I may not see my baby again."

Daisy continued to improve to the point that mother and daughter were reunited in a hospital room again.

Several more weeks passed and after a blood transfusion, Daisy remained in the hospital until her heart and her immune system were back up to par.

Daisy is now in her 20s and her heart is doing better.

Carolyn and Daisy went through "hell," as Carolyn put it.

"Tens of thousands of other people have gone through what I've gone through. Are going through what I went through. And are going to go through what I went through," she said. "And I thought. Please, dear Lord, direct me. What can I do?"

Twenty years later, Carolyn founded Daisy's Place which is a home located across the street from North Alabama Medical Center where people who live outside of Lauderdale or Colbert counties can rest, make a bite



**2025 SHOALS  
WOMAN OF  
THE YEAR**

Carolyn O'Byrne









to eat and wash their clothes while their loved one is in a Hospital for more than five consecutive days.

Since the day she opened Daisy's Place, Carolyn has served approximately 30 guests from 11 different states and continues to do so because she doesn't want to see what happened to her happen to another person who has a loved one in the hospital for an extended period of time without offering some type of support.

In the process of running Daisy's Place, Carolyn also has become a published author of a four-book series, "The Thriving Caregiver."

"The main book is a caregiver's guide that walks you through the process of the importance of taking care of yourself, first," she said. "It takes you through the processes of how to deal with your loved one and how to deal with the medical system at the hospital, how to deal with medical help at home, and the many forms of paperwork that you need to be aware of ... insurance legalities, power of attorney, end of life, hospice, etc."

At the end of each chapter in the books, there are prayers on that particular subject within the chapter. The last chapter has more than 1,800 small prayers targeting the emotions of a caregiver, she said.

"And what's so wonderful about these books? My motto is caregivers helping caregivers," Carolyn added.

And 100% of the proceeds from the sales of the books benefit Daisy's Place.

The support that Carolyn and the volunteers of Daisy's Place offers is done without any thought of benefit or reward. It's just part of their makeup as people.

The challenges Carolyn has gone through in hospitals with her daughter and in getting Daisy's Place up and

running is a testament to her will as a person.

She doesn't want to see another person go through what she did more than two decades ago here in the Shoals.

This is what she felt was right to do – for others. That's why she is the 2025 Shoals Woman of the Year.

So, what does it mean to be named Shoals Woman of the Year?

"It means so much to me because of the awareness of Daisy's Place," she explained. "I really don't - and please don't hear this wrong - I really don't care about it for myself. I want others to know about [Daisy's Place] so that they can tell others about the opportunity to stay with us.

"There are caregivers who are suffering silently. They are so under recognized and under supported. I want them to know that there's someone out there that cares. And I will make myself available to anybody. I don't care where they are, what time it is, I'll be there for them ... I want them to know that there are resources. And that they do have somebody on their side when it doesn't feel like it and they're feeling like they're all alone."

Carolyn can identify, and she doesn't want to see anyone else sleep in a vehicle in a hospital parking lot.







## HOLLEY HAMM

# wants to make every child feel special

by KEVIN TAYLOR  
Photos by DAN BUSEY

It all started with a simple ask in 2021 from a friend who was teaching kindergarten at Harlan Elementary.

Holley Hamm was asked to sponsor a class and later learned the story of one particular boy who was in the class. He was one of 14 brothers and sisters in a family and his birthday was coming up soon.

She took it upon herself to make a special cover for his chair to celebrate his birthday and make him some cupcakes.

Holley soon became the Birthday Fairy, and every student in the class received a backpack.

The teacher thanked Holley for her impressive work and then asked if the Birthday Fairy would visit all of the kindergarten classes at the elementary school, which was at least 100 students.

"I just remember getting in my car that day and thinking my husband's going to kill me because he paid for that whole class," she said. "He told me if I was going to do this that I would have to make this a nonprofit and ask for donations."

While Holley may seem like the life of the party as the Birthday Fairy, she admits that she is more of an introvert. So, the idea of asking people for money for her venture seemed out of the question.

Holley said she was about to tell her friend that she couldn't do

it, but then she started showing pictures of what she had done for the children in the class to her friends.

"They were like, Holley, God is calling you," she said. "So, they got behind me and in six weeks we raised so much money that we were able to take care of all those kids at Harlan Elementary and the special needs kids, too."

It continued to snowball from there. Holley and her group added more Title I schools by branching over into Sheffield.

Holley and her girlfriends had developed a pattern for the kindergarten chairs that worked universally, so they got right to work.

As more work was needed, fate stepped in again.

One of Holley's girlfriends had a son whose girlfriend was in a sorority at the University of North Alabama. In no time, Holley had a group of sorority sisters on her front doorstep ready to go to work.

More sororities found out about the Birthday Fairy and so, too, did the athletes at UNA.

Holley now has an army of volunteers.

With more volunteers in hand, there also were more asks from schools across the Shoals for the Birthday Fairy.

In 2022, Holley celebrated 203 birthdays at Harlan Elementary and at Threadgill Elementary in Sheffield.

The next year, Holley celebrated 305 children and three schools.

At the conclusion of the 2024 school year, Hamm and her Birthday Fairy army celebrated 457 students at seven schools.

"The easy thing would have been to just drop bulk gifts off for each of the children in these classrooms, but I wanted the kids at UNA to understand the impact their work has on each kid in these classrooms," she said. "We are doing this to make each and every child in that classroom feel special and important and that they are so worth being celebrated."









## REBECCA HOVATER

# looks for ways to serve her community

by KEVIN TAYLOR  
Photos by DAN BUSEY

There are few times the word no comes from Rebecca Hovater.

She prides herself in being a small-business owner, but what most people notice about her is her enthusiasm in being part of the community she serves.

There are few clubs or organizations around the Shoals that she has not had a hand in.

Not long after opening her insurance office in Sheffield, Rebecca began volunteering with the Sheffield Kiwanis Club in 2009.

It wasn't long after attending Kiwanis meetings and networking with those who were in the club that she was asked to take part in other organizations like the Tennessee Valley Arts Association and the Junior League.

"I guess I'm a glutton for punishment," she said with a laugh. "I would say yes to one thing and then another opportunity would be presented to me. And I would say yes to it. ... I like to stay busy and look for ways to serve my community."

In addition to owning a small business and being active with so many organizations, she also is active within her church while also being a part of a family with three children.

"Rebecca Hovater is a friend that I can call for anything," said one of the people who nominated her. "Need help with the church Bible school decorations? Home hit by a tornado? Need to come up with

a school fundraiser? Rebecca is always there ready to help."

So how did she develop such a big servant's heart?

"I would say that my mom definitely is somebody that you always see volunteering, getting things done or organizing a situation," Rebecca said. "So, as a child, I grew up and watched her do a lot of that and I've tried to emulate that as an adult."

She said that what she does as a volunteer or serving on numerous boards, she wants her actions to set an example for her children.

"I want to teach the next generation it is better and more meaningful to give back instead of looking at 'what can this give me in return?' she said. "My background is in elementary education, so I want to see the Shoals be a great place for my three children to live and the other kids, too. ... I'm a people person. I like to talk, and I enjoy going and being a part of an organization and serving in the organization. And I hope my actions motivate others to get involved."

Rebecca has noticed a growing trend among civic organizations. Fewer young people are involved in civic organizations.

A 2024 survey showed that 44% of Americans say they attend a social event in their community such as a high school football or basketball game a few times a year. Less than 30% of Americans says

they volunteer, 33% said they have attended a community meeting at least a few times a year.

"I'm the youngest person in the Colbert County DAR club," she said. "I'm also the youngest member of the Kiwanis Club. I would hope my actions as a volunteer and a member of civic organizations would inspire other [young people] and hope they say to themselves, 'I can give an hour here or there.'"









## LACINDA OYEN

# lifts kids up during special moments of their lives

by KEVIN TAYLOR  
Photos by DAN BUSEY

LaCinda Oyen lives for success stories.

One of her favorite stories is that of a child who was diagnosed with spina bifida, and the family was told he was never going to walk unless with braces and a walker.

Admittedly, Oyen said she is a stubborn person.

When she began working with the child and the family, she was up front and told them that she was stubborn.

"I told them it will serve them well when they decide to do one thing rather than not doing anything at all," she recalled.

That little boy has grown to have independent mobility.

"I can just see him now in my head running down the driveway," she said with a wide smile.

That is just one of many success stories she's had over a career that will span 30 years in September, working with the United Cerebral Palsy Center.

"When I was a physical therapist assistant and in school, I wanted to do pediatrics," she said. "I think I was the only one in my graduating class that wanted to do pediatrics. A lady that I worked with at another place said when you finish school and you still want to do [pediatrics], come talk to me. The

rest, as they say, is history."

Her love for children flows beyond just her everyday work.

Oyen has also been a mainstay volunteer for special events in the Shoals like Night to Shine, Special Olympics and UCP's annual 5K and half marathon Life Without Limits.

"LaCinda's favorite job at Special Olympics and Life Without Limits is presenting the awards to those with special needs," said one of the people who nominated her for Shoals Woman of the Year. "... LaCinda lifts them up in those special moments in their lives."

And she keeps doing it without any need for accolades for herself.

She said it is the families and the children she gets to work with which keeps her motivated to do her job.

"I have some of the most amazing families that I get to work with, and those sweet children, that is what keeps me going," she added.

Oyen said she will work with a minimum of 20 families a month. She said not one single family has the same story. Each one has a different situation.

Even when she has finished helping a family, she really hasn't lost touch or forgotten them.

She admits that, thanks to social

media, she is able to keep tabs on some of the children and families she has worked with.

"I celebrate the wins with these families," she said. "They'll send me a video and that baby may have just took some independent steps. I don't care if we're out to eat. I'm gonna do my happy dance. That way everybody around me knows my baby did something wow!"









## SUE PILKILTON strives to keep Helen Keller's legacy alive

by KEVIN TAYLOR  
Photos by DAN BUSEY

Sue Pilkilton remembers it like it was just yesterday when she was 14 years old at Deshler High School and in her English teacher's class.

One day, the teacher told the class that each student would earn 100 extra points if they brought her a ticket stub from Ivy Green, which is the birthplace of Helen Keller.

Pilkilton admitted that she didn't need the extra points but just wanted to please her teacher.

One Sunday in April she went to Ivy Green was given the tour of the grounds.

"As I walked around the grounds, I thought this is just magical," she said. "It's so peaceful, and I just loved it."

Later that summer a friend of her father's asked if she would be interested in working in the gift shop at Ivy Green. He told her that she would make \$1 an hour.

"I worked every weekend and in the summer I worked every day," Sue said.

Later she became hostess of Ivy Green and since 1981 she has served as executive director.

"I've had several other opportunities to work other places, but I would not change a thing because that was in God's plan that I work there," she said.

Sue became enamored with Helen Keller's story from the first day she took the tour of Ivy Green. The more she learned about Keller, the more she knew that she wanted to continue to share her story with the thousands of people who have walked the grounds each year.

"I look forward to keeping Helen Keller's legacy alive because she touched so many lives and there were so many barriers that she had to cross," she said. "I draw inspiration from people who come here. They may have found out their child is going deaf or blind and then they hear Helen Keller's story, and they have newfound hope for their child."

Ivy Green and Helen Keller aren't her only loves. Sue said her favorite hobby outside of work is watching her three grandchildren take part in their favorite sports or events.

"I have one grandson who is a three-sport guy. He plays football, basketball and baseball. In fact, he was named player of the year in baseball when they won their first baseball title in Deshler's history," she said. "Then I have an 8-year-old grandson who is just getting into sports and then the caboose, my little granddaughter, loves to dance and takes part in dance

competitions. So, they really are my hobby. I love watching them do well, and they definitely keep me going."

Given her love and enthusiasm for sharing Helen Keller's story, Sue said it never seems like a job 44 years into serving as the executive director. But the thoughts of retirement have crept into her mind.

"To be honest with you, I pray all the time for God to send someone that will love [Helen Keller's] story and her legacy to keep it alive," she said. "I've always said when the time comes and I feel like that I can no longer contribute to her legacy in the home, that's when I'll step away."









# Who will be the 2026 Shoals Woman of the Year?

**This is your chance to nominate the next Shoals Woman of the Year.**

**All nominations must be submitted by 5:00 p.m. April 24, 2026.**

The purpose of the Shoals Woman of the Year award is to recognize an individual woman who distinguishes herself in her community as a leader. The recipient of the Shoals Woman of the Year award demonstrates excellence in leadership and has a visible impact on others. She represents the best of who we are as women and as leaders.

**Please explain in detail, with examples, how the nominee makes an impact in the following areas:**

**Leadership:** How has the nominee demonstrated strong leadership abilities, whether in their workplace, community, or volunteer activities.

**Impact:** How have they made a visible difference in the lives of others through their actions or initiatives.

**Presence:** In what ways do they possess a strong presence, demonstrate integrity, and inspire others.

**Service:** How does your nominee go above and beyond in their immediate job responsibility to benefit others.

## **Nomination Guidelines:**

- In a 200-300 word summary tell us your nominee's story and specifically how it relates to your nominee being selected for Shoals Woman of the YEAR along with how she has given back to the community including her involvement in the Organization representing courage, determination, heritage, heroism, initiative and vision. **(Please detail on a separate sheet)**
- Nominee Name/Address/Phone/Email
- Nominated by Name/Contact Phone
- Name/Describe your nominee's Organization (list Professional positions held within the last 2-5 years and general responsibilities)
- List all civic/community activities, clubs, groups and or boards they have served on within the last 2-5 years. Any awards received.

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For more information on Shoals Woman of the Year nominations or the event, please contact Mara Beth Cravens at 256-740-5811 (marabeth.cravens@timesdaily.com) or Renita Jimmar at 256-740-5815 (renita.jimmar@timesdaily.com).



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# Leighton native believes *in* DREAMING BIG

by CHELSEA RETHERFORD

When Catara Brae graduated from Colbert County High School in 2019, the Leighton native said she knew two things were certain. “I did not want to go to college, and I wanted to be a singer,” she said.

What Brae didn’t know was that in pursuing her dreams of singing, she’d end up chasing bigger dreams of performing in live theater and eventually to film and television.

Soon after her high school graduation, Brae found herself singing and dancing on different cruise lines. While she enjoyed the work and the travel opportunities that singing at sea afforded her, Brae admits that she yearned to be back on land.

Seeking a change in career, she found the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe. She was cast as the lead role in “Ruby the Musical,” which premiered in January 2024 in the Troupe founder’s hometown of

Sarasota, Florida.

“I didn’t really know what I was getting myself into,” Brae said, adding that when she began preparing for auditions, she initially thought the story was about Ruby Bridges, the American civil rights activist who is known for being the first Black child to integrate an all-white elementary school in New Orleans in 1960.

“I initially thought that’s what this story was going to be about. A lot of us did. We thought the same thing,” Brae said. “When I found out what was going on, I was intimidated. I wasn’t interested in a lead role at all. I simply wanted to do land theater. I wanted to get into acting, but I was not interested in a lead, especially not one of this magnitude.”

Despite her reservations, Brae was cast as the title character Ruby McCollum, another historical figure whose story garnered national attention in

Catara Brae’s first professional role in live theater came when she was cast as the lead in “Ruby the Musical.”



1952 thanks to the reporting of author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. That year, McCollum stood trial for the murder of a white doctor and Florida State Senator-elect C. Leroy Adams, who she claimed had been raping her for years.

The role opened other doors for Brae, who found herself acting behind cameras in New York City after the show closed in April 2024. Though she was initially reluctant to accept her casting as Ruby, Brae said “yes” when asked to reprise the part for a run in Detroit, Michigan, in February 2025.

Brae said she and the Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe hope to see the musical take wing in a national tour and perhaps even be accepted for a run on Broadway.

“It’s not a guarantee, and there’s no guarantee I myself will be a part of the show any longer,” Brae said. “You never know, but I believe in dreaming big.”

**What was the experience of playing Ruby McCollum like for you?**

That is a difficult question. Well, it’s not difficult to answer. The show itself — the subject matter — is very difficult to grapple with. It’s quite difficult to be submerged in such a character because of the heavy, emotional content. It is complex emotional content.

To tell that story effectively, and to tell it the way I believe it should be told, I had to dive into those difficult dark places. So, it’s very difficult to feel that, you know? That’s the difficult side of it.

**What drew you to the part a second time?**

It’s an honor and a privilege, but I also feel it is a responsibility. I do believe we have to talk about things like that in order to prevent them from continuing to happen. Stories like Ruby McCollum’s true story is not at all uncommon. It’s just not given the proper attention that it deserves.

There are millions of women who have been through this, and even men. There are millions of people who have suffered that sort of abuse, and then we see it swept under the rug. It gets snuffed out. I have an opportunity with “Ruby” to amplify those silent voices.

It was an emotional weight, but I stuck with it because I believe that these stories are necessary. If I hadn’t had somebody speaking up for people like me before I was ever even born, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I want to be a part of the voices that make the world a better place.

**Because this is a true story, what approach did you take in tackling character development for the musical? Do you feel there is anything personal you brought to the character?**

Indeed. So, first of all, I have quite an interest in history. There’s a documentary on YouTube that I watched, and I read books and excerpts from Zora Neale Hurston. So, I went and did some research. I did some homework like you would in school.

I feel like in order to speak for someone, you need to have enough

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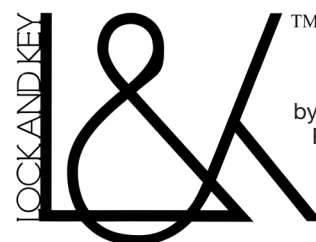
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by Tony Perrin



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Catara Brae  
in "Ruby the  
Musical."

[COURTESY PHOTOS]

empathy — and possibly enough in common with the person — to relate to them in order to tell the story. I do believe that I would not have been so weighted down by the role if I didn't relate.

**What first drew you to the theater?**

Oh, my goodness! I grew up somewhere between Tyler Perry and The Disney Channel. I grew up having a dream of performing. I've always had it in my mind that this is what I wanted to do.

As a little kid, you don't recognize the value of money and everything, but I knew that people could do it, and I wanted to be a part of it. I was so blessed and fortunate to have gotten an opportunity to work on a cruise ship in August of 2019, directly after high school graduation. It was a dream, it was amazing, and I loved it; however, performing seaside can get a little bit taxing.

I wanted a change in my career, so I worked really hard, I auditioned, and I was submitting everywhere. Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe was the first to hire me off cruise ships. I honestly accepted the job because I wanted to do land theater, and that's the truth.

**How would you compare your work on a cruise ship to what you're doing now?**

It was light-hearted, fun entertainment. All I was doing was singing and dancing and making people smile. It wasn't very thought-provoking, which was fine. You know, I enjoyed what I did.

Even doing it for the fun of it, that's alright.

That's the whole reason I wanted get into theater. It was fun. I expected to get into some more Disney-like things, you know, I expected to get into the light-hearted, fun things.

So, yes, on cruise ships, we call these shows "production shows" or "review musicals," where there's no storyline. It's just singing and dancing for the fun of it.

Everybody loves some form of music. Everybody likes to watch some kind of show, you know, some form of entertainment. The work I did on cruise ships could be very sappy, very artistic. I knew it brought me joy. It was exhilarating, and you can see that and feel it in the audience.

I think it can be a kind of ointment for people who have wounds if you give them a little joy through entertainment. It's the most powerful feeling to see joy on people's faces and to feel the energy coming from the audience.

**What are some of the most memorable roles or acts you've performed? Why?**

Ruby, for all the reasons discussed.

I definitely find significant value in all the things that I've done, but my career is still so young. It's still budding; it's a sapling.

You know, my whole life, no matter what people said, no matter that they scoffed at me, not matter how they dismissed me or told me what I should do, I was right about myself the whole time. I really can be a singer.

I've been telling myself this my entire life. My mother always told

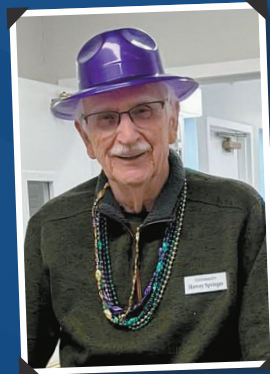


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me that I couldn't be a singer until I graduated high school. Immediately after I graduated, that was the very thing I got to do. I'm so grateful for the way it all happened, from the cruise ships to "Ruby." She grew me. She molded me, and I believe I gained some acting chops from that role.

I did not have any training. No acting training. I did a little bit of community theater with the Ritz in Sheffield, but it was soon confirmed that did not count as training. I am grateful for those experiences, but I have learned a lot over the past year. "Ruby" was that for me.

I was sharpened and challenged on the cruise ship as well. I grew as a person and a performer. I've recently gotten into television and film. For the first time ever, I visited New York City in April of 2024. I shot a murder documentary. I shot for an episode in the show, "Evil Lives Here."

**What do you think is key to finding success in the entertainment industry?**

First, I hate to sound like this, but you do have to have some sort of talent. There are a lot of people out there who are dishonest with themselves. They need to view themselves objectively and ask themselves, "Can you act? Can you sing? Can you dance? Can you host?"

If you want to be in this industry and do the things that I'm doing in live theater, you have to have some sort of skillset, but more importantly than that, you need to have

a certain mindset for success that you can be free enough to do what you want to do.

The world really is your oyster. If you can't do theater and film but you still want to go into the entertainment industry, we are in a new day and age. There is the internet. You can find your niche on the internet and become an influencer. You can entertain people that way.

I believe you have to be resourceful. You cannot be afraid of rejection. You will see 50 no's before you ever see a yes.

I am so grateful for this. It does not phase me at all. Now, some people really have to work for this, but personally, I am not phased when I don't hear back from an audition. When somebody tells me no. When they say they are going in a different direction.

Honestly, I made up my mind when I was a kid, when I knew that I was going to be in this industry, that somebody is hiring. Just like with any other job. If this McDonald's won't hire you, maybe that one will. It doesn't have to be McDonald's. There's Burger King. There's Krystal's, you know what I mean? If there is a will, there is a way.

I just really believe that. You have to have your own personal grit. You have to have your own tenacity. It takes a lot of work, but with a lot of work comes a lot of reward.

Catara Brae got her start as a singer performing on cruise ships in 2019.



[COURTESY PHOTOS]



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# Encouraging *the* next generation of readers

by CHELSEA RETHERFORD

Photos by DAN BUSEY

When Jessica Hill first volunteered at the public library in Florence more than 25 years ago, she had no idea her involvement would lead to a lifelong career in children's services.

"I grew up going to the library. My parents took me every Saturday, pretty much," Hill said. "I can remember eating breakfast and then going to the library. My dad would go straight to the biographies, and my mom liked to look around in fiction, and I would grab a couple of picture books."

It was that deeply rooted love for the

library that drew her to volunteer as a Key Club member at Bradshaw High School around 1996. Hill said she'd enlisted to hold a story time for pre-school aged children at the Florence Library as part of a literacy project the student organization had started that year.

"Once the literacy project was over, I asked the then assistant director if I could continue to help out with the story time," Hill said. "She allowed me to do that, and then that turned into a part-time job."

Over the next few

years, Hill continued working part-time at the library as she worked towards her degree in elementary education at the University of North Alabama.

At that time, she said, the former library hadn't developed the children's department that exists today. Hill spent a majority of her time in the reference section, at the circulation desk, or as a page shelving books.

Still, her passion was in helping with the occasional children's programming the library held, like story times for young visitors.

By the time of her graduation from UNA in December of 2002, library staff was preparing to move to a new location on North Wood Avenue.

"I was already doing the story times and knew that I was going to work part-time once we moved over," Hill said. "Then the then director, Elizabeth South (Gullett), asked me if I would be interested in having a full-time job here. I'll be honest, I thought I would just do it for a little bit. When the next school year started, I thought I'd apply for jobs to teach, but I just



Florence-Lauderdale Public Library's Jessica Hill stands for a portrait inside the library.





fell in love with it.”

As the Florence-Lauderdale children’s librarian, Hill has helped to grow the department to include daily programming each week for the early childhood, middle school and teenage age groups. While she continues to lead the early childhood programs at the library, Hill also visits area schools to hold story times on campus and introduce children to services provided by the library.

“I want to give them a reason to come to the library and, hopefully, they will fall in love the same way I did around that age,” she said. “If they love their library, they’re going to love their community. We always want to have something going on that

gives them a reason to come here.”

Library Executive Director Abby Carpenter said the entire staff see the importance of holding programs for all age groups at the library.

“I think we fill a need for a lot of families,” she said. “You know, there are children who may not have a favorite extracurricular at their school, but they find programs that resonate with them here. We also have a lot of home schoolers, and we have people who say they have met their best friends from coming to programs together here. It’s just a good gathering place for people off all ages who find common interests in the things we have to offer here.”

Just as Hill got her start at the library by



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volunteering, she's also helping to foster the next generation of volunteers. Each year leading up to the library's annual Summer Reading Program, she said she enlists helpers from the library's junior volunteer program.

"We have different jobs for different ages, and we consider their interests and skillsets too," she said. "Some of our volunteers just come in and help sort and shelf books, they help us prep for activities that we're doing later in the week. The kids have to have finished the fourth grade, so they're very young when they start volunteering. Over the years, those junior volunteers have started to work here when they are a little bit older. We have had multiple junior

volunteers who have become librarians."

While Hill has enjoyed seeing children get involved, her main goal is to share her own love of reading and learning with children and parents she sees week to week. It's a goal she said she sees come true through events like Summer Reading and other weekly programs held at the library.

"What's so special for me now is that I see kids who grew up coming to the library are coming back with their children," Hill said. "That's been a joy to witness that sort of come around full circle. I love what I do here, but mostly I love the relationships I've been able to make over the years."



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# Personal interest in genealogy drives their passion as town historians

Angie McMullin, Ann Stumpe and Janet Ragland stand for a portrait inside the Buffler House.

by CHELSEA RETHERFORD  
Photos by DAN BUSEY

Janet Ragland, Angie MacMullin and Ann Stumpe have made names for themselves as St. Florian historians after they took it upon themselves to compile local histories of their friends, family and neighbors for the town's first Oktoberfest heritage festival.

Many St. Florian residents can trace their family history back to the first German Catholic farmers who settled the area more than 150 years ago.

More than 20 years have gone by since Ragland, MacMullin and Stumpe started digging through old archives to construct their first

display for the festival.

"It just kind of fell into our lap," Stumpe said. "I was working at the (St. Michael's Catholic Church) office, so I had access to a lot of the records and things."

Unlike Ragland and MacMullin, who each grew up in the small German-Catholic town outside of Florence, Stumpe moved to the Shoals from Asheville, North Carolina, and became a part of the community through her husband, Lawrence Stumpe.

Still, she said she has a personal stake in local history, not only through her husband, but also through some family

roots she can trace back to Town Creek in Lawrence County.

"I love genealogy and stuff like that," Stumpe said. "You never know what you're going to find out. I have family here, and if you're a LeMay, I'm related to you."

Uncovering those old family connections gives Stumpe a thrill. More than once, she's found an interesting personal connection in an unexpected place as she's conducted research for the Oktoberfest display — like the time she discovered a relation to her former choir director.

"I used to think, 'Man, Mary Fran looks just

like my Aunt Beulah,'" Stumpe said. "At some point, her brother did some family history. I was going through that history and found out her family was from Troupe County, Georgia, which is right next to Randolph County, Alabama, where my Owen (relatives) came from, and darn it if my Owen people weren't in his family history!"

Ragland and MacMullin said they too had some deep family connections that keep them interested in compiling town history and genealogies. Ragland has family branches leading back to the Stumpes as well, and



MacMullin is from a long line of Lockers that trace their lineage back to the early 1870s.

"I just don't want all this to be lost," Ragland said, showing off several posterboards of photos and information she and her two colleagues have constructed over the years for the Oktoberfest display.

"Some of these focus on old houses, and as simple as that is, it's preserving those old photos for everybody," she said. "If it was just owned by one family, well, they might have all these old pictures. It wouldn't be lost to them, but nobody else would know about them."

In referencing the stories of some of St. Florian's oldest houses, Ragland, MacMullin and Stumpe add that the



The Buffler House in Saint Florian.

Buffler house, which has become something of an icon for their town, also plays a great role in their efforts to showcase town history every year.

Sometime after Oktoberfest had kicked off as an annual event for St. Florian, Mary Buffler — the home's last inhabitant, sold her family home to the city

for public use. After a few years of restoration, Ragland said she, MacMullin and Stumpe were granted workspace and storage in the upstairs portion of the home.

Downstairs, the home also became a more permanent home for their display every October.

"If it weren't for this space, we wouldn't know from year to year where we would be," Ragland said.

Before the home was opened up to them, Stumpe said the ladies started out in the St. Michael's gymnasium of the old school located on Church Road. Those first few years, as Oktoberfest was just beginning to grow, she said they started with a large roll of craft paper and a collection of pictures before they moved to the posterboard infographics now shown at the Buffler house each year.

"We'd stick that paper on the wall, and we just stuck our pictures onto the paper," Stumpe said. "Then we'd have to take it all down and put the photos away in a binder. The next year,



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we'd go back and do the same thing. I don't know how many years we did that until we realized we should get the posterboard."

After St. Florian Senior Center was built on St. Florian Road, MacMullin said they moved their display over to that building for a while. That was short-lived, however, as the center soon became a hub for Oktoberfest and other events.

"We were there probably four years or so, but we still needed dedicated space to keep our things," MacMullin said. "Sometimes, we'd keep it all at our house, or at the church, depending on what was going on at the time. Then the town was generous enough to give us a room upstairs.



Angie Locker McMullin holds a portrait of Joseph Buffler at the Buffler House in St. Florian.

"People should come out, not just to see the display, but also to see the house."

When the ladies first began compiling the town histories, Ragland said they relied heavily on research already completed by Maryanne Bernauer, a late local historian and educator from St. Florian, as well as a book of genealogies, "A History of St. Florian Area Families," by Carl Stumpe.

"Maryanne did the history of St. Florian for her master's thesis back in 1963 or something like that," Ragland said. "You can find it in the (Florence-Lauderdale Public Library), and everybody refers to it. When you go through her research, you can start looking back at things in the convent at



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Cullman or St. Bernard (Preparatory School)."

Soon after starting the project, Ragland said they started conducting their own research, picking up where Bernauer and Carl Stumpe had left off. That research is ongoing and covers numerous events that have occurred within the community from its earliest settlers to weddings and celebrations in St. Florian's more recent history.

"You know, we've got so much that is history to us, but even when our grandparents and parents got married, now that's history to our children's generation," Ragland said. "It's never ending, and it changes every year."

Ragland and MacMullin took on the daunting

task of retracing the St. Michael's Church history two years ago to help pay homage to the church's 150th anniversary. They have

since included some of their findings in the display that will be available to view once again at Oktoberfest this year.

MacMullin said they still have tons of research to conduct before she and Ragland are satisfied that the work is complete.

"It's like untangling a web or putting a puzzle together," she said of her own interest and motivation behind the projects.

"It's like uncovering the lost," she said. "It's exciting when you do that and you run across a name you recognize, even if you didn't know much about them. I've learned so much since we started doing all this. It's slow-going, but we add what we can year after year."



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# The lesser-known story behind HELEN KELLER'S MIRACLE

by CHELSEA RETHERFORD

Photos by IVY ROSE BALL



Anna Bond Kelley,  
playing Annie Sullivan,  
and Mary John Alexander,  
playing Helen Keller,  
practice the water scene  
during rehearsal for the  
Miracle Worker



In its 64th year, the annual stage production of William Gibson's "The Miracle Worker" came to life this year on the very soil where the true story unfolded in Tuscumbia more than 130 years ago. While the play centers around the towering figures of Helen Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan, two actors add depth to that story by leaning into the lesser-told narratives of Helen's parents, Capt. Arthur and Kate Keller.

Jonathan Moore and Stephanie Crothers aren't new to the stage, but their partnership in portraying the Kellers is blooming.

Moore, who has embodied the role of Capt. Keller for the past decade, grew up in Tuscumbia and remembers watching

"The Miracle Worker" several times over the span of his childhood. Crothers, a Los Angeles native, came into her role much more recently, but she said the story of Helen Keller is one she also was introduced to early in life.

"I guess it's kind of my civic responsibility," Moore said with a laugh. "I've always had a love for my hometown of Tuscumbia, and you know, the history behind this story. It's something I've always wanted to be a part of."

When he first auditioned for a part, Moore was cast as a doctor, and in his second year with the production, he played Mr. Anagnos, the director of the Perkins Institute for the Blind and teacher to Annie

Sullivan. Following those early experiences, Moore said he moved away for a stint, but when he returned in 2015, he auditioned and became an understudy for the role he's become known for in the Shoals.

As he would soon find out, the role of Capt. Keller is one that resonates deeply with him. As a father to twins who were born prematurely, Moore said he understands the sense of helplessness that plagued the Kellers in Helen's early years.

"I can't imagine what it would be like to have a deaf and blind child, but I can relate to seeing your own kids suffer and to not really know how to handle or deal with that," Moore said. "In the situation with my own girls, you know,

I wasn't in control. I couldn't make anything happen other than to put my trust in the grace of God. That's what we did."

Moore said he's found the script more relatable since he's taken on the role of Capt. Keller.

"Now, on stage, I play more of a grouch than a loving guy," Moore admitted with a laugh. "But he is a pushover. In Helen's autobiography, 'The Story of My Life,' she talks about how her father was a community guy that everyone liked. He liked to tell stories."

Moore said he read the autobiography in preparation of his role years ago. His studies led to a pre-show ritual of snacking on watermelon before taking the stage as Capt. Keller.

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"He was known for growing some of the best watermelons in the state," Moore added. "I've done that before the show for forever, but nobody knows why. It's just another small way to feel connected to the part."

Crothers, who portrayed Kate Keller for

the second consecutive year, brought a different kind of intensity to the role.

Crothers followed her fiancé, Spencer Cantrell back to his hometown in the Shoals a few years ago. Shortly after the move, Crothers said a friend who knew the director encouraged her

to audition.

Even before she landed the role of Kate, Crother's said she knew the weight of the story she would be helping to tell.

"I was very nervous at first, because I knew it was precious," she said. "Not precious in terms of delicate, but it's such

an important story, and Kate's is an important voice in that story. As are the captain's and James Keller's voices. I didn't know about all those other voices in Helen's story."

Crothers also took a deep dive into "The Story of My Life" to get a better grasp on

Stephanie Crothers, playing Kate Keller, and Jonathan Moore, playing Arthur Keller, practice a scene with Mary John Alexander at Ivy Green.



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her character, but as she'd come to find, there was very little mentioned about Kate Keller in her daughter's autobiography. Lacking true source material to help build her characterization of Kate, Crothers said she turned to what she knew about Helen and who she became.

"She only mentions her mother once," Crothers said. "I was just yearning for more, but then I thought about who Helen is and her persistence. The way Gibson wrote this story, you can see Kate's persistence, and you can see that in the way Helen ultimately lived out her life. That strength Helen had, I believe, came from her mother."

Though new to the

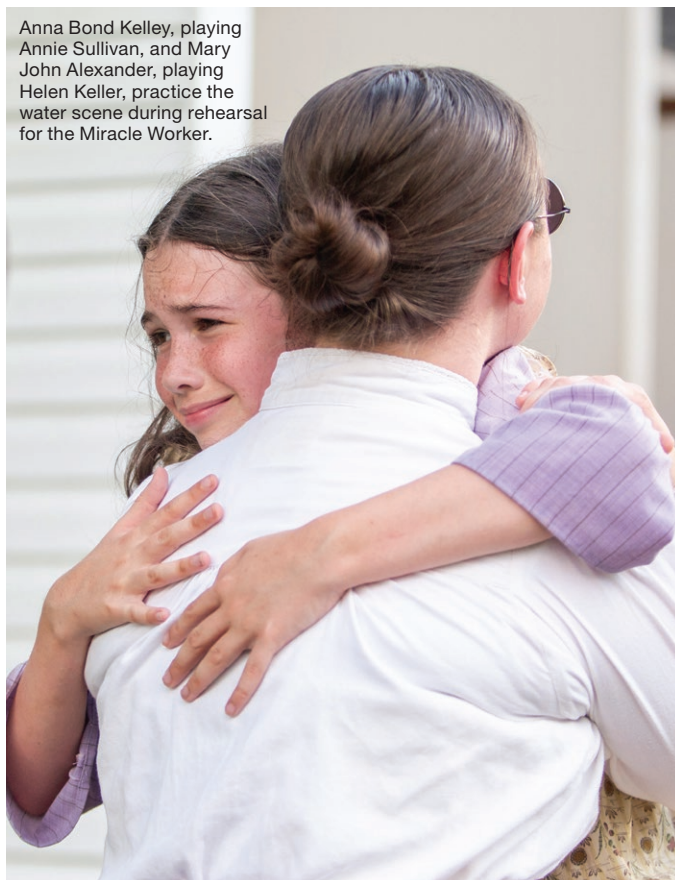
role, Crothers made a strong impression on Moore and the rest of the cast.

"Stephanie is incredible. You know, I think that's the neat thing about all this, we all take pride in this show," Moore said. "It's important to all of us to keep the story alive, and I think it's an honor for us to be able to do that."

The show's director, Self, is no stranger to the stage either. Having grown up in the production—playing Helen, then Annie, and now directing—Self has helped nurture a cast that balances tradition with exploration. Many cast members return year after year, though roles are re-auditioned each season.

That sense of renewal keeps the material fresh,

Anna Bond Kelley, playing Annie Sullivan, and Mary John Alexander, playing Helen Keller, practice the water scene during rehearsal for the *Miracle Worker*.



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Moore said. Even after playing the same role for 10 years, he said he continues to discover new layers of his character in scenes that he's rehearsed dozens of times.

"I think (Self) pushes us, too," he said. "You try to find new ways to say the same line that

resonates differently—whether that's within yourself or someone else in the audience. I've been saying the same lines for a long time, but there's always something new to discover about that person and about their message."

With their performances, they both

hoped to pay homage to the people they portrayed.

"Gibson did a great job with this story," Moore said. "It is the story of Annie, who is the miracle worker, and it's the story of Helen, of course. But every character has their own struggle in

how they deal with Helen's deafness and blindness. There are multiple stories inside the big one, and they all culminate in the breakthrough at the pump. You want to do a good job of honoring each one of those stories because they were real people."



Stephanie Crothers and Jonathan Moore, who will play Helen Keller's parents in this summer's production of the Miracle Worker, pose for a photo on set at Ivy Green in Tuscumbia.

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# Plunket-Brewton *and* Thompson *are* grateful *to the* women who helped *pave the way*

by CHELSEA RETHERFORD  
Photos by KEVIN TAYLOR

Callie Plunket-Brewton was pursuing her doctorate at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey in 2005, with hopes of becoming a professor, when she said she was given the first opportunity to lead in a religious setting.

It was then that she first considered, maybe the career of her father, Rodney Plunket, could also be an option for her.

"I had not contemplated the ministry up to that point," Plunket-Brewton said. "I wanted to be an academic. So, I was working as a college minister while I was finishing up my PhD. Over the course of the next couple of years, I started realizing that

I didn't want to be an academic. I wanted to work in ministry."

Though the change in career trajectory would make her the fourth-generation minister in her family, it wasn't a decision she thought her relatives, or even her community, might fully support.

Plunket-Brewton had grown up in the Church of Christ, a non-denominational church that typically excludes women from any leadership roles within the assembly.

Despite any reserves she might have had in consideration of her family's feelings, Plunket-Brewton said they were "quite supportive" of her decision.

"I think it took them

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a little while to adjust their thinking that 'OK, this is what Callie is going to do,' she said. "I think it was mostly that they had — as I had — seen me as an academic and not working in ministry. So, I think mostly the adjustment was accepting my going from one career track to the other."

By December of 2011, Plunket-Brewton had become an ordained priest within the Diocese of Alabama. In 2013, she stepped into the role of associate rector at Trinity Episcopal in Florence, where she had already been serving as assistant rector before her ordination. In 2020, she became the first female rector at Trinity.



Danielle Thompson, left, and Callie Plunket-Brewton became the first female rectors of their respective Episcopal churches in the Shoals.

Thompson is rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Sheffield, while Plunket-Brewton is rector at Trinity Episcopal Church in downtown Florence.

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Danielle Thompson shares a similar story.

Thompson, too, thought she might become a teacher, or maybe a lawyer or a social worker. As she was weighing those options, she felt drawn to divinity school, in part because her Church of Christ background also instilled in her a strong sense of faith, and she wanted to pursue those goals in a faith-based institution.

So, Thompson enrolled at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee.

"I think I realized at some point, when none of those things seemed to land, I really was trying to work around ministry instead of going right for it," she said.

Thompson also stresses that her newfound belonging within the Episcopal Church came before her intention or desire to become ordained. Still, the new opportunities she had within her new church encouraged her to consider ministry.

Thompson was ordained in 2010. A native of Hartford, Connecticut, she first served in churches in

Chicago, New York, and Birmingham before moving to the Shoals, where she became the first female rector at Grace Episcopal in Sheffield.

Like Plunket-Brewton, Thompson said her family was very supportive of her decision despite her conversion from the Church of Christ and what might have seemed to them an unconventional career path.

"My parents were really supportive of it, and our family has been extremely gracious. My husband's family, too," Thompson said, explaining that her husband, Josh Davis, had also grown up in the Church of Christ.

Though she and Plunket-Brewton were the first female rectors at each of their respective churches in the Shoals, the women joke that their congregations seemed to hardly notice.

"I mean, nobody batted an eye," Thompson said. "I would say, I've served in other churches, and I could think of one person in each church who, you know, still had some

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hangups about women's ordination, but they did not try and get in my way or anything. In fact, we had perfectly good relationships. They just thought I was in the wrong line of work."

"I didn't get any pushback here at Trinity, but there was another parish where I worked, and it was interesting, I had several — women especially — who were uncomfortable with what I was doing," Plunket-Brewton chimed in. "Out of a pretty decent size parish, there were two women who really were polite. They just struggled, and really wouldn't take communion from me."

But, you know, that's OK."

Both she and Thompson said they are grateful for the women who made the first strides in leadership within the Episcopal Church. Since the first women to become ordained as Episcopal priests happened 50 years ago, Thompson and Plunket-Brewton feel there is less concern shrouding their authorities within their churches.

"There is no way either of us would be sitting here today without that first female senior warden, or without that altar guild and those youth acolytes, who for the most part were

11- and 12-year-old girls," Thompson said. "A lot of them were walking into more uncomfortable situations than I have walked into as a female ordained person. A lot of them were younger, and they hadn't had all of the support and encouragement that I have experienced along the way."

"And training," Plunket-Brewton added. "I mean, we've also had all this training so that if somebody were to push back and say, 'You need to tell me in scripture where this is,' we could both make a very convincing argument."

As other denominations are beginning to raise questions about whether women are qualified, or biblically permitted, to serve as preachers in their churches, Thompson and Plunket-Brewton hope to serve as positive examples and encouragement to other women in their community.

I have a great deal of respect for other denominations. One of the things we say quite often in the Episcopal Church is that we're the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement,"

Plunket-Brewton said.

"What I would say is pray hard, trust God, and be open to the fact that God may be calling you to do something surprising. I guess I would also say, if there is somebody that is struggling with their role as a female in the church, Danielle and I are here if you ever want to talk."

Thompson echoed Plunket-Brewton's message to other women who feel called to do more in their congregations.

"In that spirit, you know, ordained or not ordained, in a formal leadership position or not, we're all sisters in Christ and we're all ministers," Thompson said.

"I don't look at a woman in another religious tradition and think, 'Oh, she's not like me.' Not at all. We just ended up in different groups. We had an opportunity in this denomination to do something that the church felt we were gifted for. I hope that if my life had gone differently and I were in another denomination, that I would still be serving in whatever way that was possible for me."



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Lisa Morris  
Tammy Irons

Lillian Glanton  
Molly Tubbs  
Jackie Baker  
Melissa Wisdom

## past WINNERS



### 2005 | SHERRY FOWLER

Fowler was chosen for her work with the North Alabama Head Injury Foundation. Her daughter, Mary Darlene, sustained a debilitating head injury in 1986 when she was struck by an intoxicated driver. Fowler was advised to place her daughter in a nursing facility. She refused. She received the training necessary to care for her 19-year-old daughter at home. Fowler continued working with the foundation after her daughter's death in 2005.

### 2006 | NATALIE GORDON

Gordon was 24 years old when she battled cancer and underwent a life-saving surgery: the removal of her left arm and shoulder. She was mother to a 7-month-old and a 3-year-old and Gordon said she was not prepared to lose parts of her body. More importantly, however, she said she was not prepared for her children to lose their mother. She said the surgery was traumatic and depressing, but Gordon adjusted and became an inspiration to others. She vowed not to let her loss stop her.





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## 2007 | KAY PARKER

Parker and a friend, Sharon Scogin, developed the idea for The Healing Place after Parker saw a television report about a grief support center in Portland. She believed a similar center was greatly needed in the Shoals. The Healing Place became a haven where adults and children learn to work through their grief after a loved one's death. Parker's goal was to give people a place to be heard and to learn healing thoughts, including learning how to cherish memories and keep them from being debilitating. Parker passed away Sept. 25, 2021.



## 2008 | BETTY BURDINE

Burdine has spent her life helping people, first as a nurse, then as coordinator of the Lifewise Seniors program for Eliza Coffee Memorial Hospital in Florence. She didn't stop there, but volunteered in several community endeavors. She helped raise money for the American Heart Association and was instrumental in procuring the monument for Lillian Diebert in Diebert Park in Florence. Burdine's caring nature extended to Lillian Diebert, who she would look in on before Diebert's death in 2011.







## 2009 | FELICE GREEN

Green retired from the University of North Alabama in 2003 but didn't sit still. She has a special love for children and will don costumes to read to children at various outlets across the Shoals. Green also expressed her love of art and dance and became a member of the Poza Dance Troupe while remaining active in Delta Sigma Theta sorority, which she helped charter at UNA. She is a known organizer of events during the W.C. Handy Music Festival including the ABCs of Blues & Jazz. She is a volunteer with the Salvation Army and St. Vincent De Paul Society at Our Lady of the Shoals Catholic Church in Tuscumbia.



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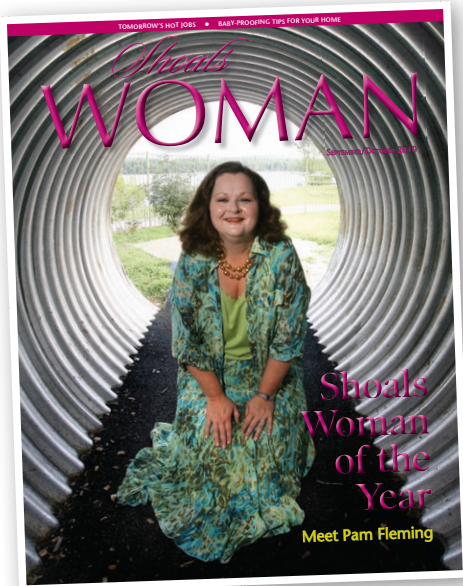


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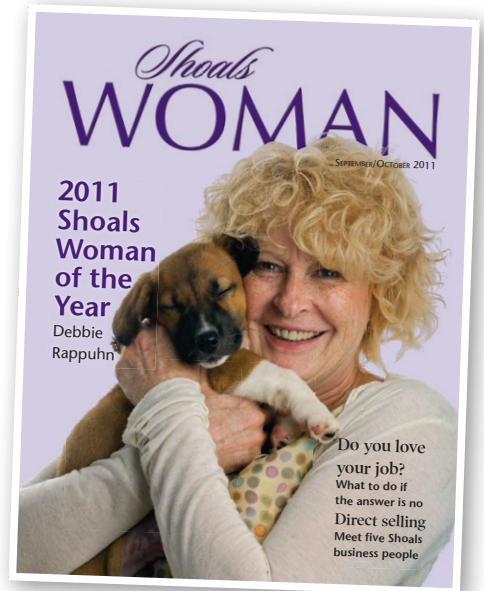


## 2010 | PAM FLEMING

Fleming's outgoing personality helped her carry on a tradition she first learned from her parents: help people in need. She was honored for her work in helping to create the boundless playground at Riverfront Park in Sheffield. The playground is play-friendly to any child, regardless of his or her abilities, with a sandbox that wheelchair-bound children can roll up to and play in. Fleming also was instrumental in getting a new home for the Ealy family when their daughter, Shanteki, was diagnosed with leukemia and was told she could not return to her home because of its condition.

## 2011 | DEBBIE RAPPUHN

Rappuhn took her daughter to the Florence-Lauderdale Animal Shelter for a school project but soon returned to offer her services as a volunteer. She painted and scrubbed and initiated improvements that included a cat habitat room, a puppy room and a laundry room with a sink for bathing animals. She was appalled at the number of animals euthanized and dedicated countless days to finding homes for those unwanted pets – even if it meant sending them to other shelters and homes across the country.



## 2012 | ELBA BARNES

Barnes needed to care for her ailing parents and moved from Birmingham to Florence to be near them. She soon realized there was an important gap in available services in the area: there was no place where adults like her parents could go for social interaction, exercise and art activities. Such a place would also offer respite for caregivers. Barnes brought an idea for an adult day care to Westminster Presbyterian Church. In July 2009, Westminster Interfaith Caring Place opened, initially as a Sunday-only program. By November, it was offering a mid-week break so caregivers could go Christmas shopping. Eventually the nonprofit center would operate Monday through Friday.

## 2013 | SARAH JENNIFER THOMPSON

After Thompson's sister, Sidney, died in January 2006, Thompson honored her sister's memory and founded Sidney's Safe! Foundation. It was a place where other women could learn how to stand strong against domestic abuse and how to seek recovery from addiction. The foundation has branched out to help children, too. It is an outreach that provides hundreds of bags of food a week to local schoolchildren who otherwise would go hungry.



## 2014 | SUSIE MARTIN

Susie Martin was only required to spend four hours a month with the girl who became her "little" at Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Shoals, but she and 13-year-old Sabrina Carles are together every weekend, all weekend. The program allows Sabrina to be Martin's Little until she is 15, but Martin jokes she will keep her until Sabrina gets married.



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## 2015 | ANGIE HAMILTON

Angie Hamilton presented the idea for a one-stop center that could streamline help for victims of domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse and physical abuse, and elder abuse – cases she saw regularly as an assistant district attorney in Lauderdale County. The idea was immediately well received, and One Place of the Shoals was born.

## 2016 | NINON PARKER

Ninon Parker grew up on the front lines of celebrating the history of the Shoals, including as a member of Ivy Green's first cast of "The Miracle Worker" – the stage play that celebrates the awakening of Helen Keller to the world around her. Parker's community involvement is one of historical preservation and business promotion that keeps the Shoals a vital place that recognizes its important past, as well as its exciting future.



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## 2017 | MERCY WINTERS

A member of the Salvation Army Women's auxiliary, Mercy Winters was instrumental in bringing the successful Empty Bowl Luncheon to the Shoals as a fundraiser for the Salvation Army each year. She is hands-on in her volunteer work, not only in helping to plan the luncheon each year, but leading her "clay mates" group to meet at her and her husband's ceramic business to make the bowls that are featured at the luncheon. She has even gotten her neighborhood involved in community charity work by organizing an Iron Bowl event that benefits a different charity each year.



## 2018 | JESSICA DAVENPORT

Jessica Davenport's children, Kruz and Paizlee, were born with Schimke Immuno-Osseous Dysplasia, or SIOD. In simple, dire terms, the children have a rare form of dwarfism that brings with it renal failure and a weakened immune system. It's also fatal, with a life expectancy of 9 to 11 years. Instead of falling apart, Davenport founded Kruzn for a Kure Foundation and has raised the \$1 million needed to get the attention of wealthy philanthropists who can raise the \$6 million needed to kick researchers into finding a cure for the rare disease. In the 12 months since Davenport received the Shoals Woman of the Year award, she and her husband Kyle have moved to California where Kruz has not only received his mother's stem cells, but one of her kidneys as well. Paizlee is being prepped to receive the same from her father. Keep abreast on these remarkable children and their parents through Jessica Davenport's Facebook page or the Kruzn for a Kure Foundation Facebook page.



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## 2019 | GINGER WILLINGHAM

Ginger Willingham has always had a heart for service, and in 2014 learned there were children in the community whose only opportunities to eat were at school. After much prayer and discussion, she was inspired to establish Isaiah's Call, named for Isaiah 58 in the Bible. She and a bevy of volunteers pack food bags with enough food for the children and their families to have during the weekend. They started with seven families at one school and now serve more than 200 families at schools in Colbert and Lauderdale counties, as well as Safeplace, a local shelter for women and men and their children who are fleeing domestic violence.



## 2020 | MARY DAY SMITH

Mary Day Smith was on active duty for the Alabama National Guard on Helton Drive when fellow Korean War veteran Ralph Dula visited her there and became her mentor. He recruited her to join the American Legion. When Smith joined the Legion there were a lot of guys, but slowly she worked her way up and became the first female commander for this area. Smith became heavily involved with programs all over north Alabama. "When there's a crisis in your life, it's easy to dream about a rescue that immediately rushes to your side, determined to clear the crisis and put you and your family back into a good place" and that is what Smith has a hand in doing. She doesn't seek thanks for anything but she claims that she sees the thanks come to her in unexpected places. Smith believes in the Legion slogan "Veterans Still Serving."





## 2021 | PAM CLEPPER STUMPE

When you look up the word selfless in the dictionary, there very likely may be a photo of Pam Clepper Stumpe next to the definition. The consensus opinion of her is that when she gives of herself, all worries can be thrown out the window. When she and her husband relocated to the Shoals, the couple soon became active in the community, including the Colbert County Sheriff's FAME Girls Ranch. Clepper's work with the ranch has varied over the years. She and the "posse" went through house parent training so they could spend the night at the ranch and give those house parents already at the ranch some much-needed time off. She also organized the group to bring meals to the ranch to help the house parents. Some of those within her posse were teachers, so they chipped in and helped to tutor the girls. By the fall, Pam's Posse was 25 members strong, and they helped to kick off the inaugural FAME Ranch Round-Up, which has gone on to become a huge event for the ranch. So why does she go that extra mile? "I just enjoy seeing someone succeed and find within themselves all the good that they are and what they can be," she said. "If I can help just a little bit in helping them get there, then that just brings joy. I love to lift people up and make them see what they can do better. Or what's inside them that they don't even know they have."



## 2022 | AMY GOSS ROBINSON

Amy Goss Robinson, who is a Sheffield native, left the area and obtained her doctorate in physical therapy at the University of South Carolina before returning home in 2011 to provide physical therapy here. Two years later, her world was turned upside down. She was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer which resulted in the removal of her breasts at 36 years old. While she was being treated for cancer, she sought out local support groups pertaining to breast cancer patients and found nothing. So, rather than throw up her hands and accept it, she helped found and develop her own breast cancer support group right here in the Shoals. The Breast cancer Recovery and Awareness Together (BRAT) Pack was formed with the help of Dr. Patrick Daugherty in 2014. After the surgery to remove her breasts, she also began to investigate the possibility of becoming a foster mother. After becoming a foster parent, she had several children stay with her on a short-term basis. Her first possible long-term child came into her home in April 2018. About seven months later his twin sister and older sister were reunited in Amy's home, where they remain. Not long after finishing breast cancer treatment, Amy met Chad Robinson and were eventually engaged. The couple wanted to adopt the children but were hit with the hurdle that they had to be married at least a year. They married and a year later, COVID-19 stepped in the way and slowed the court system to a near halt. It wasn't until March 2022 that the three children became Robinsons. Hurdle after hurdle presented themselves, and Amy Goss Robinson cleared it by a mile.



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## 2023 | DR. KIM JACKSON

You can call it a leap of faith or just answering the call from a higher being, but that's exactly what Dr. Kim Jackson did. One day in October 2015, she got a call. "God called me to this, and I had never worked with the homeless before," she said. "I did office management and worked in human resources, but I heard Him clearly that day." Shortly thereafter Jackson put in her notice and stepped away from her corporate job to establish Crossroads Community Outreach in the Shoals, where she is the founder and director of the nonprofit agency. "That happened in April 2016, and I've never looked back," she said. "This is a faith walk for me." Crossroads was launched by operating out of her home with the help of her twin sons. Since then, Jackson, her family and Crossroads have assisted thousands of people whether they are homeless or just need some assistance during a rough patch in their lives through street outreach, the day center or community events. "The people I serve everyday are who keep me motivated," she said. "When I go in and talk to someone like the mayor, I'm not speaking for myself. I'm speaking for the people that I serve who are suffering. I am the voice of the people who may never get the opportunity to speak with the mayor or be interviewed by the newspaper. I make sure I speak for them and their heart."



## 2024 | BRENDA BAKER

Brenda Baker had been on several mission trips to other countries for a week or two weeks. She built relationships with families and the children she encountered while on those trips. But a week or two weeks just didn't seem like enough for Baker, and a friend of hers saw that. Jan Ingle suggested that Baker become involved with CASA (court appointed special advocates).

"CASA is something that gives you the chance to stay with that child through the whole process," Baker said. "You get to know that child. You get to love on that child and advocate for them." And during the process Baker has developed deep connections with the children she has advocated for since 2015. Baker certainly has made a difference for the children she has advocated for over the years. Those deep bonds with those children may never be broken thanks to her. Baker spends countless hours, days, weeks and even years on a case. One of her cases lasted three years, which allowed her to develop a deep connection with the children. "The adoptive mother still sends me pictures of the [four] children so that I know how they are all doing," Baker said. "...With CASA, you can make a difference."

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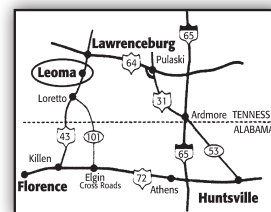


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