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Davis' passion for real estate as strong as ever

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

Willodean Davis has been a mainstay of northwest Alabama's real estate market for almost half a century, but don't think for one second she's ready to wind down the career she loves, even at age, well...80-something.'

Davis continues to operate her real estate business out of her long-time 115 North Jackson Avenue office building. The names and faces of Davis' staff have changed through the years, but she loves coming into work every day, something that's not likely to ever change.

Davis' current team includes office manager Miranda Fite and Zulay



From left: Miranda Fite, Willodean Davis and Zulay Brooks of Davis Real Estate (Courtesy photo)

Brooks, a realtor who is fluent in English and Spanish.

In the real estate industry, today's technology could be obsolete tomor-

See 'DAVIS,' Page 5

New Rural Hospital Investment Program reaches \$20 million cap after one month

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

To say that year one of the new Alabama Rural Hospital Investment Program (ARHIP) was a success would be an understatement—actually a \$20 million understatement. Last week the Alabama Hospital Association announced the \$20 million tax credit cap for 2026 has been fully met, barely one month since the program opened.

Russellville Hospital, one of 50 rural hospitals eligible to receive ARHIP funds, received \$400,000 in funding commitments out of the \$20 million.

The Alabama Legislature created the program last year as a way to strengthen the financial stability of

rural hospitals by encouraging private donations from individuals and businesses, with the added benefit of a state tax credit.

The Rural Hospital Investment Program allows a rural hospital to receive funds directly through donations made by either individuals or business, up to a capped amount each year.

The benefit for donors is a dollar-for-dollar credit off their state income tax obligation. Donors make contributions through the official Alabama Rural Hospital Investment Program website. Donation applications are completed through this website and sent to the Alabama Department of Revenue. Donors can choose their local rural hospital from the list of eli-

See 'INVESTMENT' Page 4



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Tilmon Hamm, 94, passed away February 16th at North Mississippi Medical Center. Funeral services will be Saturday, February 21, at 1 p.m., at Deaton Funeral Home in Red Bay, with Bro. Roger Wood and Bro. Terry Bloom officiating. Visitation will be February 21 from 11-1 at Deaton Funeral Home.

Felicia Ann Graham, 81, passed away February 14, 2026. A private family celebration of her life will be held on Sunday, February 22nd. Spry Memorial Chapel is assisting the family.

Rickey Gene Franks Sr., 70, of Muscle Shoals, passed away February 14th at North Alabama Medical Center. Visitation will be 12-2 Wednesday, February 18 at Spry Memorial Chapel in Russellville. Service will follow at 2 in the chapel with Bro. Chip Martin officiating. Burial will be at Tharptown Cemetery.

Norman Merrill Hawkins, 66, of Phil Campbell, passed away February 13th at his residence. A memorial service will be announced as soon as times are definite. Spry Memorial Chapel is assisting the family.

Tammy Lynn Ward, 56, of Spruce pine, passed away February 12th at Terrace Manor Nursing and Rehabilitation after a long and courageous battle with cancer. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family with arrangements.

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*The Franklin Free Press is published weekly by Pilati Investments, Inc.
Our publication is available at newsstands and online at no charge.*

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Correction Policy

The Franklin Free Press strives for excellence and accuracy, and we will be pleased to correct any error in our newspaper. To request a correction or clarification, call or e-mail our office.

Letters to the editor

The Franklin Free Press is published by

hometown people, for hometown people. We urge contributions of all kinds, including guest columns, picture submissions, cartoons or letters to the editor. Send any letters to our office via U.S. Postal Service or e-mail, and we will gladly publish them. Letters must be signed and contain the hometown and phone number of the author. The Franklin Free Press reserves the right to edit letters for style, length and content.

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Back to the Bible

by Larsen Plyler:

Matthew 12:9-21

Would Jesus heal a man on the Sabbath and again challenge the Jewish traditions? It would be difficult to miss the hardness of heart evidenced here. They knew Jesus could heal this man, they simply wanted to see whether or not He would. They could not be touched by Jesus' teaching or his works.

When the man came forward, Jesus said that He knew they'd save a sheep on the Sabbath. The man was more valuable than a sheep. So, it would be lawful to heal Him.

When it came to actually healing the man Jesus doesn't reach out, touch Him, or physically do anything. He told the man to reach out His hand and it became whole. They wanted a reason to accuse Him, but He healed the man in a way that they couldn't point to anything He had actually physically done.

They made plans to do harm and to kill on the Sabbath and were critical of Jesus for doing good on the Sabbath. Such exposes the extent of their hypocrisy.

Jesus, aware of their hatred, withdrew. Many came for healing, but Jesus urged them not to make it known (perhaps to reduce tension).

This fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. The Coming One would not cause a scene by loud shouting, but by instruction. He would not push down on the weak or fading. He would be victorious through His compassion.

Even Gentiles would come to trust in Him.

Lessons to Learn:

—Do you see their hard heartedness? How untouchable they must have been to know that Jesus would be able to perform the miracle but wanting to use it as an opportunity to condemn Him!

—Sometimes we might say that if we could have seen the miracles that our faith would be stronger. Of course, it would have been amazing to see any of the miracles that Jesus performed. But, keep in mind that even people who saw Him and His miracles firsthand did not necessarily come to faith. Some people would ignore the power on display in front of them because they were so devoted to their own will and their way.

Tune in to 100.7 WGOL Sunday at 8:30am for our Back to the Bible Radio Program.

Reach out with your questions, comments, or requests for personal Bible study at backtothebiblepodcast.com or at info@backtothebiblepodcast.com



'INVESTMENT,' from Page 1

gible hospitals.

The law caps annual tax credits under ARHIP to \$20 million, with a \$750,000 maximum for any rural hospital to receive in 2026. In 2027, the per hospital cap increases to \$1,000,000, with the cap maxing out in 2028 at \$1,250,000 per hospital.

Caps for individual donors are \$15,000 per year. A married couple filing jointly has a \$30,000 donation limit. Corporate caps are \$500,000 and for pass through entities, \$450,000 each year.

There is a catch, though, for a rural hospital to be eligible for the program. The statute states that a rural hospital shall only be eligible for assistance through the Rural Hospital Investment Program in a year where at least 10% of the assistance provided to the hospital comes from the local governing body.

Without this local match, a rural hospital is ineligible to benefit from the program. That's why Russellville Hospital CEO Chris Ware addressed local governmental bodies in December to encourage their participation in the program.

"The Alabama Hospital Association worked tirelessly to get funds," Ware told the council. "This program is designed to strengthen the stability of rural hospitals and these funds will help Russellville Hospital continue its vital role in the Russellville community." In order for Russellville Hospital to receive the maximum \$750,000 assistance, the local governing body must allocate \$75,000 in 2026, 10% of that cap.

"The Alabama Hospital Association worked tirelessly to get these funds," Ware told the council. "This program is designed to strengthen the stability of rural hospitals and these funds will help Russellville Hospital continue its vital role in the Russellville community." In order for Russellville Hospital to receive the maximum \$750,000 assistance, the local governing body must allocate \$75,000 in 2026, 10% of that cap.

"We are asking you to match that 10% amount each year," Ware told the council. "Without it, we can't participate in the program and receive vital assistance that's otherwise available."

Modeled after Georgia's HEART Program, the initiative enables donors to invest directly in the health care delivery systems serving their community.

AlaHA President and CEO Danne Howard praised strong leadership and broad support from legislators who supported the bill.

"The speed at which the cap was met shows just how eager Alabamians were to support their rural hospitals," Howard said. "The overwhelming response to this program demonstrates both the need and the opportunity to continue strengthening rural health care across Alabama."

To learn more about the Alabama Rural Hospital Investment Program, visit www.alpha.org/invest-in-rural-hospitals/.

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NOTICE TO CONTRACTORS INVITATION FOR BIDS

Sealed Bids will be received by the Russellville Water and Sewer Board until March 11, 2026 at 10:00 A.M., local time, for furnishing all equipment and doing the work according to Specifications and Contract Documents on file in the office of the Owner, the improvements hereinafter described. No bids will be received after the time set forth hereinabove; and the Bids will be publicly opened and read. The Bid Documents will be opened at the Russellville Water and Sewer Board on March 11, 2026 at 10:00 A.M., 721 Jackson Ave S., Russellville, Alabama 35653. If your Bid Documents are mailed, they should be received prior to March 11, 2026 at 10:00 A.M. at the Russellville Water and Sewer Board, 721 Jackson Ave S., Russellville, Alabama 35653.

The work of providing equipment for the Russellville Water System Infrastructure Improvements Project Contract No. 2 Highway 243 Water Booster Pump Station Upgrades Project DWSRF No. FS010075-05.

The principal items of work are detailed herein below. Principal Work:

- 1. Remove Existing Vertical Turbine Pumps and Install new Vertical Turbine Can Pumps and Control Panel w/ VFD's**
- 2. Install New Flow Meter and Vault (Additive Alternate)**
- 3. Electrical Connections**

Plans, Specifications and Contract Documents are open to public inspection at the office of Owner, Russellville Water and Sewer Board, 721 Jackson Ave S., Russellville, Alabama 35653, or may be obtained from the office of the Engineers, Utility Engineering Consultants, LLC, 135 Gemini Circle., Suite 211, Homewood, AL 35209 upon deposit of \$75.00 per set, the actual cost of printing, reproducing, handling and distribution for each set of documents. No refunds will be made except to Prime Contractor Bidders, which shall be refunded for one bid set.

The successful bidder must furnish a Performance Bond for one hundred (100%) of the bid amount and a Payment Bond for one hundred (100%) percent of the bid amount, and must secure his bond from a bonding company's representative or agent in the State of Alabama.

The Contract will be awarded to the lowest responsible and responsive bidder. No bid may be withdrawn after the time for opening bids has passed. The Owner reserves the right to hold the bids for a period of sixty (60) days after the date of receiving Bids.

The Contractor is hereby advised that TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE on this project and that the contract time of 230 consecutive calendar days total and noted restrictions shall be strictly observed. LIQUIDATED DAMAGES WILL BE ASSESSED IF THE CONTRACT TIME IS EXCEEDED. The Contractor may apply for an extension of time in accordance with the provisions of the contract; however, such an extension must be approved prior to the contract completion date to avoid the imposition of liquidated damages.

The Contractor shall note the funds for this project are provided thru DWSRF (Cleaning Water State Revolving Fund). All applicable Federal guidelines must be met.

The Owner reserves the right to reject any or all bids, to waive any informality in any bid, and to accept any bid considered advantageous to the Owner. There will be no Pre-Bid Conference.

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'DAVIS,' from Page 1

row. And the State of Alabama's ever-changing real estate laws and regulations make staying on top of their trade more challenging than ever for those in the real estate business.

Davis' experience as a realtor is a catalyst in building trust in the professional relationships she forms with her clients. Fite stays on top of the latest real estate rules and regulations and Brooks, who moved from her native Venezuela in 2015, continues to build a good base of clients, both inside and outside the Latino community.

"With my wonderful staff, I can give more individual attention to people and with the experience God has blessed me with I can use that to better serve our clients. When choosing a realtor, experience matters more than anything else," Davis said.

Davis Real Estate is set up to represent homebuyers or sellers from other parts of the country, with the ability to handle everything through electronic media. And they do that a lot, often finding properties with clients signing contracts within a day or two.

But there's something about old school customer service that Davis will always appreciate.

"I like sitting down with a person and writing out a contract while I explain everything," Davis said. "There's an impersonal nature to everyone being there electronically but in our world today, things move faster than ever. And because of artificial intelligence and technology improvements, my business isn't just in Russellville anymore."

Davis said it's especially important for out-of-state homebuyers to perform their due diligence on a property they've never physically seen. That's where an experienced realtor can protect her clients by making a contract contingent on a home inspection, survey, pest inspection and title insurance.

"When you get all that done for a property, you know we are in good shape and the homebuyer is protected," Davis said.

Fike regularly records videos of properties being considered by clients, giving them a thorough virtual walkthrough tour.

"You have that technology at your fingertips at Davis Real Estate and it makes it so much easier to find what you're looking for in a property," Fike said. "We've seen homes bought an hour after we recorded the video."

Davis has adapted to provide every technological advancement for her clients. But when it comes to her own personal technology, she finds the new iPhone models difficult to navigate. And she always has her business phone in her left pocket, and her personal phone in the right pocket.

"Mrs. Davis will sell houses until the Good Lord calls her home, and then we'll bury her with her two phones," Fite said.

To contact Davis Real Estate, call the office at 256-332-9920 or you can reach Davis directly on her 'old school' phone at 256-762-5671.

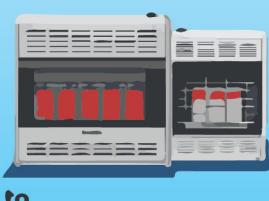


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Utility reform legislation gets endorsement from Tuberville

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Legislation that would eliminate elections for the Alabama Public Service Commission and protect Alabamians from rising utility costs has gained an endorsement from Sen. Tommy Tuberville, the front runner to serve as Alabama's next governor.

The 2026 Utility Reform Package also includes protections ensuring large-load data centers like Bitcoin mining companies are financially responsible for all infrastructure and grid updates they require.

The legislation would require annual public meetings on utility rates and costs, and reforms preventing the use of ratepayer funds for lobbying or political activity.

Alabama Republican Party Acting-Chair Joan Reynolds praised the efforts of several Republican legislators for leading bipartisan work to rein in rising utility costs. The utility reform package is being advanced through the legislature by State Sen. Lance Bel, State Sen. Andrew Jones and State Representatives Chip Brian and Leigh Hulsey.

Supporters of the utility reform package point out that Alabama is one of only 10 states that still elect Public Service Commission seats.

In a pool media call last week, Tuberville said any Public Service Commission members who fail to keep utility rates down 'need to go immediately.'

The PSC isn't aligned with the state leadership to keep utility rates down, which they need to be, and stop ridiculous regulations from being implemented. If they don't do that, then they need to go immediately, not at the end of a six-year term," Tuberville said.

The need to rein in utility rates is seen as a major allied in recruitment and expansion of industry in Alabama.

The Utility Reform Package contains three bills, with one restructuring the Public Service Commission and two addressing data centers, often the largest electricity consumers in the service area.



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All Franklin County establishments inspected in January receive 'satisfactory compliance' ratings

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Each of the 47 Franklin County establishments that received health ratings during the period of January 1, 2026 through February 1, 2026, had scores that fell into the "satisfactory compliance" range.

Health ratings are required to be prominently posted in all food/lodging establishments. Scores are graded by the Alabama Department of Public Health inspectors on a 100-point scale.

Establishments with scores of 85 to 100 are considered to be in "satisfactory compliance" and are routinely inspected. Establishments scoring between 70 and 84 will be inspected again in 60 days, and those scoring between 60 and 69 will have another follow-up within 48 hours. Any establishment scoring below 60 will be immediately closed.

Areas of inspection by ADPH include management and personnel; food storage, preparation and service; equipment; utensils; linen cleanliness; plumbing and waste; poisonous or toxic material storage and an inspection of the physical facility or property.

47 of 47 Franklin County establishments listed in the most recent food and lodging establishment ratings scored 85 or above, within the satisfactory compliance range.

The high score was 99, received by multiple establishments.

The lowest score among the 45 establishments was an 86, received by Waffle House #2186, 14005 Hwy. 43, Russellville, although this score was within the 'satisfactory compliance' range.

Other inspection scores of Franklin County businesses, in descending score received, included:

- The Thrift Store, 201 Lawrence St. W, Russellville, 99.
- Blue Boys, 4141 Hwy. 24, Red Bay, 99.
- Russellville Nutrition, 14130 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 99.
- Phil Campbell Nutrition, 3415 Broad St., Phil Campbell, 99.
- The Ville Nutrition, 112 S. Jackson Ave., Russellville, 99.
- Walmart Bakery, 13675 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 99.
- Russellville Senior Center, 201 Washington Ave. SW, Russellville, 99.
- Best Western Breakfast, 13770 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 99.
- East Franklin Junior High School, 1815 Hwy. 89, Phil Campbell, 99
- Russellville Skateland, 801 Cross Ave., Russellville, 99.
- Red Bay Senior Center, 115 5th Ave. SE, Red Bay, 99.
- Phil Campbell Senior Center, 135 Sherry Brice Dr., Phil Campbell, 99.
- Burger King, 15455 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 99.
- Big Star #345, 406 4th St. NW, Red Bay, 99.
- Kelly's Kitchen, 912 4th St. NW, Red Bay, 98.
- Tacos y Salsas LLC Mobile Unit, 202 E. Cotaco St., Russellville, 98.
- Ideal Mart, 503 Waterloo Road, Russellville, 98.
- Red Bay Nutrition, 102 4th Ave. SW, Red Bay, 98.
- Pizza Hut, 13450 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 98.
- Dollar General #20938, 9260 Hwy. 243, Phil Campbell, 98.
- Stockyard Cafe, 14330 Hwy. 243, Russellville, 98.
- CJ's Grocery, 14545 Hwy. 187, Russellville, 98.
- 43 Grill, 15110 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 98.
- Best Western, 13770 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 98.
- Subway, 504 4th St. SW, Red Bay, 98.
- Econo Lodge, 13600 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 97.
- Smoke N Batter, 13670 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 96.
- Panaderia Adonai, 311 S. Jackson Ave., Russellville, 96.
- Big Star #345 Deli, 406 4th St. SW, Red Bay, 96.
- Pollo LoQuillo, 115 Franklin St., Russellville, 96.
- Piggly Wiggly #93 Market, 518 4th Ave. SW, Red Bay, 96.
- Sweet Glow Nutrition, 109 Franklin St., Russellville, 95.
- Hilltop Diner, 808 Ronnie McDowell Ave., 95.
- Subway #37464, Walmart, 13675 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 95.
- The Grind, 13760 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 95.
- Mama Cortez dba Rancho Viejo, 11797 Hwy. 43 South, Russellville, 95.
- Bojangles, 13810 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 95.
- Walmart #403 Deli, 13675 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 95.
- Red Bay Hospital, 211 Hospital Road, Red Bay, 95.
- Coco Michoacana 2, 318 S. Jackson Ave., Russellville, 94.
- Red Bay Tiger Mart, 211 4th Ave. SW, Red Bay, 94.
- Jack's Family Restaurant, 13640 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 93.
- Past Times—Overton Farm, 2300 Overton Farm Road, Hodges, 91.
- McDonald's #6564, 15254 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 90.
- Piggly Wiggly #93 Deli, 518 4th Ave. SW, Red Bay, 90.
- Cedar Creek Chevron, 11477 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 87.
- Waffle House, 14005 Hwy. 43, Russellville, 86.

Health ratings are available at www.foodscores.state.al.us and may be viewed by city or county.

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Franklin Board of Education approves personnel moves, out-of-state trip requests

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

At a short meeting on February 12th, the Franklin County Board of Education approved several personnel moves and out-of-state trip requests.

The board approved the following personnel moves:

- Transfer: Elisha Mansell, from special education aide at East Franklin Junior High to bookkeeper/secretary at East Franklin.
- Paid Parental Leave: Taylor Godsey, teacher at Phil Campbell, March 2-May 1, 2026, Keylee Allison, teacher, Franklin County Career Tech Center, March 2-May 1, 2026, Trevor Allison, teacher, Phil Campbell High School, March 2-May 1, 2026, Kristen Oliver, teacher, Phil Campbell Elementary School, March 4-May 5, 2026.
- Personal Leave: Beatrice Hardin, custodian, Red Bay Elementary School, Feb. 20-June 1, 2026.
- New Teacher Substitutes: Elizabeth Fabian, Chandler Dyas, Debra Millwood.
- COHORT 17 21st Century Community Learning Centers After School Program: Garrett Dean, Site Coordinator Sub., Vina, and Carol Childers, aide, Vina.

In other agenda items, the board:

- approved compensation of \$500 to Lori Huffaker, Yearbook Sponsor at Tharptown High School, for the 2025-26 school year. THS will reimburse the Franklin County Board of Education the \$500 plus applicable benefits.
- approved out-of-state trips including East Franklin 8th and 9th grades to Six Flags Over Georgia, April 23, Phil Campbell High School Softball Team to Tremont Attendance Center, Tremont, Ms., April 13, Red Bay Varsity/JV Softball Teams to Tremont High School February 19th, Red Bay Junior High Softball Team to Tishomingo Middle School March 9 and Red Bay Varsity/JV Softball Teams to Belmont High School, March 20.

The next regular meeting of the Franklin County Board of Education will be March 24th, with work session at 3:45 pm and meeting to follow.

Professional experience, calling to serve drive Fleming's bid for Franklin County Commission District One seat

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

With more than three decades' experience as a transportation manager for the Alabama Department of Transportation, Jeff Fleming is well familiar with the workings of county government.

That experience, along with a desire to serve his community, motivated Fleming to run for the Franklin County Commission District One seat in the May 19, 2026, Republican primary.

The winner of the primary will complete the balance of the four-year term, which will end in 2028 when the office comes up for election again.

Fleming is one of five candidates for the seat, joining incumbent Grayson Murray, Curtis Baker, Micah Gaston and Joey Norton. Fleming also applied for the vacant seat after former District One Commissioner Michael Murray passed away last year.

"My experience includes more than 32 years in roadway and bridge construction and inspection, and I have hands-on knowledge of infrastructure, planning and practical problem solving for county government," Fleming said.

Fleming and his wife Talitha are active members of the Franklin County community. Talitha serves as a Library Media Specialist at West Elementary School in the Russellville City Schools system. Fleming is a 1986 graduate of Russellville High School.

They have three grown sons, Isaac and Micah, who are both civil engineers with the Alabama Department of Transportation, and Jacob, an accountant with the Alabama Department of Revenue.

Fleming said his campaign is based on strong family values and a commitment to serve the community with integrity, accountability and sound judgment.

"My professional experience and our family values will serve to guide my focus on responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars, improving Franklin County roads and bridges and strengthening public services for the benefit of Franklin County residents," Fleming said.

If none of the five candidates receive a majority of votes at the May 19th primary, there will be a runoff set for June 16, 2026, that will decide the winner.

Polls will be open 7am-7pm on Tuesday, May 19th.



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Russellville boys' soccer team off to 2-1 start to new campaign

Kadin Pounds
 Franklin Free Press

The Golden Tigers have officially taken the pitch for the start of the 2026 spring soccer season.

The Russellville High School varsity boys' soccer team, under first-year head coach Larsen Plyler, made its opening appearance of the season at Mars Hill Bible School's Bart Andrus Memorial Soccer Tournament on Saturday, February 7. The Golden Tigers, ranked No. 8 in Class 5A in the preseason coaches' poll, finished second in the three-team tourney and walked away 1-1 after facing Class 7A Hoover and Class 4A Mars Hill.

Russellville played back-to-back games after the first match between Hoover and Mars Hill kicked the memorial tournament off, the Bucs coming away 2-1 winners over the Panthers. That set RHS up with Hoover, a team ranked preseason No. 4 in Class 7A.

The Golden Tigers were able to grab one goal on a penalty kick converted by sophomore Jose Tristan but it wasn't enough to get past top-10 Hoover which found two goals in the match to win.

Directly after their loss to the Bucs, the Golden Tigers were presented with another challenging match against Mars Hill, preseason ranked No. 4 in Class 4A. This time one goal was enough, however; Tristan bagged his second goal of the day, and the Golden

See, 'SOCCER,' Page 14

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SPORTS

Belgreen, Russellville varsity girls' basketball teams advance to Sweet 16

Kadin Pounds
 Franklin Free Press

The Belgreen High School and Russellville High School varsity girls' basketball teams advanced to the AHSAA Northwest Regional tournament over the weekend, winning their respective sub-region games to punch their tickets. It will be the Lady Bulldogs' seventh trip to the regional since 2016; meanwhile, the Lady Golden Tigers' victory marked the first time RHS has clinched a regional berth since 2010.

In Belgreen's sub-region contest against Lexington, the hosts didn't play around. BHS outscored the Lady Bears 21-5 in the opening period of play and bumped that advantage to 20 points by halftime. Coming out of the break, Belgreen outpaced Lexington 23-5 in the third quarter to put LHS in a 38-point hole. With a running clock in the fourth quarter, the Lady Bulldogs cruised to a 34-point, 69-35 victory.

"At the beginning of the year I thought we did a good job of finishing strong, but we had trouble starting well. The last two games—the area championship against Covenant Christian and the sub-regional against Lexington—we've started well and that's been a good thing for us," Belgreen head coach Chad Green said.

Three Lady Bulldogs hit double figures in scoring. Sophomore Randi Terry led Belgreen with 19 points in the win. Senior MaKenna Fisher dropped 11 points and junior Lilliana Willingham added 10 points.

Belgreen, reaching the Northwest Regional for the third straight year, is set to face the

See, 'SWEET 16,' Page 12

Red Bay looks to make deeper playoff run after punching ticket to Northwest Regional tournament

Kadin Pounds
 Franklin Free Press

The Red Bay High School varsity boys' basketball team was the lone local boys' team from Franklin County to advance to the AHSAA Northwest Regional tournament after walking over Falkville High School Saturday night. The Tigers, ranked No. 3 in Class 2A by the Alabama Sports Writers Association, defeated the Blue Devils 71-39 and will play in the regional for the ninth year in-a-row.

Red Bay jumped out to a lead as large as 10 in the first period and led by seven points after the opening eight minutes. In the second quarter, the hosts began to create even more separation despite a tenacious defensive effort by Falkville. The Tigers quickly took an 11-point lead early in the quarter and, after two quick steals and breakaway buckets in the final 30 seconds of the period, had ballooned it to 25 points by halftime. At the break, RBHS held a 43-18 advantage.

After the intermission, Falkville went on a quick run to cut the deficit down to 19 points early in the third, but Red Bay's explosive first half would see the Tigers through. RBHS absorbed the early third quarter pressure and went into the fourth with a comfortable 55-34 advantage. The final eight minutes of play was all Red Bay, which outscored the Blue Devils 16-5 to win by 32.

"We've been pretty good offensively all year so we just kept doing our thing on that side of it," RBHS head coach John Torisky told the Franklin Free Press. "The pace of play was really good. We had a lot of assists; I think we had 20 or 21 assists which is probably the most assists we've had in a game this year. And our defense is playing good, too. We pressured them, forced quick shots and were able to get more possessions."

See, 'TIGERS,' Page 13

'SWEET 16,' from Page 11

champion of Area 10, Sulligent, in the Class 2A regional semifinal. Green said the Lady Bulldogs will have to be at their best to advance to the regional championship game, one goal this veteran group of players is keen to accomplish.

"To win we've definitely got to take care of the ball. (Sulligent) likes to pressure half-court and full-court. We've definitely got to rebound and get back in transition because they have some athletes, some fast players that can push the ball down the court," Green said.

"This is a decorated group of players. A lot of them have been with me for a long time, since they were in the seventh or eighth grade. They've won six straight area championship, three straight county championships, and now they're going to the regional for the third straight year," Green added about his experienced squad, especially the seniors. "But I don't think they're satisfied with that. They're hungry. They want to win and they want to keep advancing deeper."

Tip-off for the game is set for 3 p.m. on Tuesday at Wallace State Community College in Hanceville.

While Belgreen's sub-region win continued a streak, Russellville's win over No. 10-ranked Sardis ended a sub-region losing streak and started a winning one. For the first time in 16 years, the Lady Golden Tigers will make a regional tournament appearance—and it's thanks to an impressive road performance against the Lady Lions last Friday.

Russellville, trailing by nine points after the opening period, tied the game up at halftime and then went on in the second half to win by 10 points, 72-62.

"This group is very resilient," RHS head coach Jermaine Groce said. "At one point in time (in the game) it was 18-3 on the road against a top 10 team. They could've packed it up but the girls continued to battle, kept running and kept pushing the tempo."

"Sardis had a great atmosphere. Their fans were really engaged, so it probably took us the first quarter to calm down and relax, but once the game got to our pace, a more fast-paced game, we felt pretty comfortable the rest of the way," Groce added.

Four Lady Golden Tigers hit double figures in the win. Junior Ella Copeland led the way for RHS with 26 points, sophomores Angeleah Smith and Blevyn Sappington both scored 14 points, and senior Laila Hill dropped 10 points.

Now its on to the Class 5A Northwest Regional in Hanceville, a tournament only one other Lady Golden Tiger squad has reached in the last two decades. When RHS last made the regional in 2010, it advanced to the regional final before falling to Fairfield 46-45.

Groce said this team's hard work and the dedication needed to reach this moment will be remembered for years to come.

"The commitment and the demands placed on them, a lot of it goes unnoticed," Groce said. "They have the discipline and the wherewithal to compete and continue to do what's necessary and have that hope and belief that if you do stuff the right way you'll have a shot at advancing."

"I'm just super proud of these girls for sticking with it, continuing to believe in each other and continuing to fight," he added. "To do something that hasn't been done in over a decade and to step on the court in the Sweet 16, it's a special accomplishment. These girls will be remembered for their contributions to (RHS) girls' basketball forever."

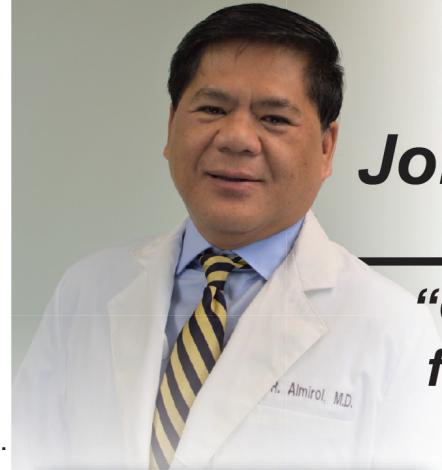
Russellville's first regional test in a long time will be another tough assignment. The Lady Golden Tigers are to meet No. 2 Guntersville (25-4) in the regional semifinal. Russellville has been locked in, Groce said, but this still relatively young team will need to put in an exceptional performance to pull off back-to-back upsets.

"Controlling the boards is an absolute must. We need to be pushing the pace with tempo. I think against Sardis we shot over 30 threes so we need to be able to get shots. And the last three games our assists have skyrocketed—I think we averaged 15 assists in those games—so moving the ball, penetrating and trusting each other is crucial," he said. "So my keys to the game are win the rebounding edge, move the ball, and get our assists up. And if we can reduce turnovers and keep our turnovers under 10, that'd be great."

"I'm super happy for this group of girls," he added. "We've still got a lot of youth, but they're getting experience and they've got a lot of energy and dedication. It's special and I appreciate this group so much and hopefully we can get out there and show the type of energy and effort that we need to to advance to the Elite Eight."

The Lady Golden Tigers' scheduled showdown with Guntersville is set for Thursday, February 19, at 9 a.m.

Phil Campbell High School and Red Bay High School, runners-up in their areas, also made the postseason but were defeated in the sub-regional Friday night, ending their campaigns. The Lady Bobcats led No. 7-ranked Lauderdale County at the end of three quarters of low-scoring action but were unable to pull off the road upset in the end, falling 38-31. Red Bay, facing off against Cold Springs, was routed to end its season; the Lady Tigers lost to the Lady Eagles 71-17.



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'TIGERS,' from Page 11

Khalil Luster led the way with 20 points for the Tigers. Senior Jaxon Vinson also hit double figures in the win, scoring 18 points.

Wallace State now awaits the Tigers, as does their opponent Tanner High School. That Class 2A regional semifinal contest is scheduled for 4 p.m. on Tuesday.

While Red Bay has had unparalleled success, at least locally, the last decade in reaching the regional phase of the basketball playoffs, getting to the state quarterfinals has been a challenge. In their previous eight postseason appearances, the Tigers did make the Final Four once, in 2020, but have failed to advance past the Sweet 16 the other seven occasions. Some of those season-ending losses—like a one-point defeat to Vincent in 2019, three-point losses to Sheffield and Tanner in 2022 and '23, and a two-point loss to Tanner last season—have been hard to swallow.

Torisky said it's great to reach the regionals and all, but he's sick and tired of being one-and-done at Wallace. The No. 3-ranked Tigers want to make a deep playoff push—and the head coach believes this squad can be the one to do it. The first team standing in their way is Tanner.

"Tanner's unlike most teams we play. They're very physical. It's hard to play against a team with their level of physicality, so we need to focus on getting back in transition, rebounding, and taking care of the basketball," Torisky said. "I know we'll have a battle—Tanner is as tough as they get—but I know we can score, so if we can take care of those other things then I feel like we have a good chance of winning that game."

"It's always nice to get to Wallace, you know? That's a big deal around here, and we've been there a lot. We've been in a lot of close games down there; unfortunately, we've ended up on the short side of those a lot, too," he added. "Personally, I'm always glad to go to Wallace, but I'm tired of just playing one game. This year we want to play at least two games, and I think this year's team is good enough to make that happen."

Belgreen and Phil Campbell's boys teams also made it to the sub-regional round but were eliminated. The Bulldogs lost to Decatur Heritage in a nailbiter, 53-49; the Bobcats were ousted by Lauderdale County, the No. 7 team in Class 3A, 75-34.

BHS and host Decatur Heritage played it close throughout the game with the Bulldogs trailing for just five or six points for the majority of it. At the end, however, Belgreen had a real chance to pull out a victory but for an unfortunate turnover late.

Senior Braycen Johnson closed out his career with a game-high 20-point performance. Junior Jake Dill also hit double digits with 14 points for the Bulldogs.

In Phil Campbell's game at Lauderdale County, the top 10-ranked Tigers didn't waste a lot of time. The Bobcats trailed by double digits at the end of the first period and LCHS continued to press its advantage until the end, ultimately winning by a 41-point margin.

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'SOCCER,' from Page 11

Tigers were able to see it through with their first clean sheet. The victory secured tournament runner-up status for RHS.

Two days later, on Monday, February 9, Russellville hosted West Point for its first home game. RHS put together a solid performance against the Warriors, winning 7-1.

Russellville's Tristan opened the scoring in the match, giving RHS an early 1-0 lead and him his third goal in as many games. His goal was followed by one from junior German Perez in the 22nd minute. Perez, from a tight angle, beat the WPHS goalkeeper with a shot slotted into the far bottom right corner. The Golden Tigers would take a 2-0 lead into halftime.

Ten minutes into the second half, the Golden Tigers went up 3-0 courtesy of another goal from Perez. A shoddy clearance attempt from West Point fell to Perez just outside the box and the junior took advantage of it, rolling a left-footed shot between two defenders and under the diving West Point goalkeeper.

In the 58th minute the visitors were able to pull one back and kill Russellville's effort at a clean sheet—a foul in the box sent West Point's Nathan Marta to the penalty spot and he converted it coolly. But that goal allowed RHS to dampen the Golden Tigers' attacking spirit. After the West Point PK RHS went on to put four more past the Warriors.

In the 60th minute, freshman Gerson Deleon made it 4-1 with a shot smashed into the bottom right corner from around 20 yards out.

Russellville's fifth goal was scored by junior John DeLeon Juarez in the 62nd minute. A cross into the West Point penalty area was chested down by a Golden Tiger into the path of Juarez, who hit the back of the net with a left-footed volley from about 12 yards away.

In the waning moments, the Golden Tigers left no doubt, adding two more goals in less than three minutes. Junior Angelo Romero, with 3:11 left in the match, scored an easy tap in after a harried WPHS goalkeeper fumbled the ball; then, with 30 seconds left, an unmarked Christopher Mendez Rodriguez got on the end of a well-placed corner kick and thumped in a header from about six yards.

The victory improved Russellville's record to 2-1. The Golden Tigers are scheduled to play their next match Thursday, February 19 against West Point.



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Russellville's Copeland makes program history with 2,000th career point

Kadin Pounds
Franklin Free Press

In nearly 50 years of Russellville High School varsity girls' basketball, a lot of players have donned the black and gold, but none can claim what Ella Copeland achieved in her team's regular season finale as the junior became the first player in the history of the Lady Golden Tigers' basketball program to score 2,000 career points.

Copeland, now certainly the most prolific scorer in program history, reached the 1,000 career points milestone last season against Phil Campbell before she hit her next momentous milestone against the same Lady Bobcats team on Tuesday night. According to records compiled by the RHS coaching staff, she needed just nine points going into the contest to hit 2,000; she quickly reached that point in the first period of play.

During halftime of the proceeding boys' basketball game, Copeland was recognized mid-court for her achievement and was presented with a banner and golden ball by her head coach, Jermaine Groce.

Groce called Copeland "special" and praised her for her work ethic and ability to overcome adversity.

"She's special and she's always had an ability to put up points in bunches. She's relentless, she's a hard worker, a competitor, and we're super proud of her for what she's done on this journey to accomplish it," Groce said in a postgame radio interview on WGOL 100.7 FM. "You know she missed half the year last year with her ACL injury, and she's just had the resolve to continue to work. We're just super happy for her."

For Copeland, reaching the record-breaking moment came without much premeditation—just a lot of hours in the gym, some help from friends, and faith.

"When I first started playing in seventh grade, I wasn't thinking about records or milestones like that, I was just focused on getting better every day and helping my team however I could," she said. "To reach 2,000 points is honestly pretty surreal, and I'm really grateful for it. It's a reflection of a lot of hard work over the years, but also of my teammates trusting me, my coaches pushing me, my family supporting me, and keeping my faith in Jesus."

"It means a lot to me. I've put in so many hours in the gym and worked through a lot of ups and downs, so to see that hard work pay off is really special. I'm really thankful for the moment and proud of what I've accomplished, but I also see it as motivation to keep getting better," she added.

Copeland, who is averaging 25.2 points per game this campaign, would go on to finish with 26 points against Phil Campbell. Russellville got the win, too, beating the Lady Bobcats 77-61.

The Lady Golden Tigers jumped out to a 20-12 lead after the opening quarter and had doubled up on Phil Campbell 44-22, by halftime. Going into the final period of play, Russellville had a 26-point advantage so Groce chose to play some of his younger reserves which allowed PCHS to cut into its deficit. Still, RHS went on to win by a healthy 16-point margin and improve to 17-11 overall.

In addition to Copeland's game-high tally, senior Laila Hill and sophomore Angeleah Smith contributed 15 points and 10 points, respectively. Sophomore Sadie Odom scored nine points for the Lady Golden Tigers and Elizabeth Davis, an eighth-grader, had eight.



RHS junior Ella Copeland, left, is presented with a banner and golden ball commemorating her scoring her 2,000th career point. She is pictured with RHS head coach Jermaine Groce. (Courtesy photo)

Country artist Bryan White bringing his six Number One hits to Russellville on March 7th

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When country artist Bryan White takes the stage next month at Russellville's Roxy Theatre, those in attendance will enjoy a string of hits that include six number ones.

White, a Grammy award-winning singer, has charted 21 songs since his debut single in 1994. White hit number one for the first time in 1995 with "Someone Else's Star," and scored the rare back-to-back number ones with "Rebecca Lynn."

White will take the stage at 7 p.m., Saturday, March 7th for his first appearance in Russellville. Tickets are available at www.itickets.com or by calling 404-964-9552. Reserved tickets in the first six rows are \$50.74 and general reserved seats are \$40.12.

White's other number one singles include "I'm Not Supposed to Love You Anymore," "From This Moment On" (with Shania Twain), "So Much for Pretending" and "Sittin' on Go" in 1997.

White has sold more than 4.5 million albums in his storied career.

He was named CMA's 1996 Horizon Award, the Academy of Country Music's Top New Male Vocalist, CMT Awards Artist of the Year, and you can throw in his being named among People magazine's '50 Most Beautiful People' in 1998.

White is also an accomplished songwriter who has penned Number One songs for Diamond Rio ("Imagine That"), Sawyer Brown ("I Don't Believe in Goodbye"), and his music has been recorded by Wynonna, LeAnn Rimes, Joe Diffie and others.

After White released "God Gave Me You" in 1999, it reached Top 40 status in the United States. But 15 years later, the song achieved massive international popularity in the Philippines when it became the theme song for a Philippine AIDub love team on a popular television variety show.

He's played the Philippines many times since 2015 and he remains extremely popular in the Philippines.

The 52-year-old White was born in Lawton, Oklahoma and raised in Oklahoma City.

White's first job after moving to Nashville was selling t-shirts for the band Pearl River. In 1994, he met record producer Kyle Lehning, who helped White get signed by Asylum Records that year.

White and his wife Erika have two sons and continue to make their home in Nashville.





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