

A meeting was held to clear up issues surrounding the Spruce Pine storm shelter. See story Page 3.

Ghana West Africa Missions is holding a fundraiser to help provide clean water for those in need. See story Page 11.



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04.11.18

Sears fired from Parks and Rec

Council names interim superintendent, begins search for new director

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

After a three-hour executive session last Monday night, the Russellville City Council voted to terminate Parks and Recreation superintendent Chad Sears effective immediately.

Leeman Mosely was named interim superintendent and will fill that role while the search for a new director is pending.

Councilman Gary Cummings made the motion to terminate Sears. The motion was seconded by councilman Jamie Harris. The vote in favor of termination was 5-1, with Cummings, Harris, councilmen William Nale and David Palmer and mayor David Grissom voting yes, and councilman Arthur Elliott voting no.

"Sadly, I make this motion to terminate Chad Sears immediately for cause concerning his abilities to perform his duties," Cummings said. "I move we make the position available and ask that Leeman Mosely be temporarily appointed Parks and Rec superintendent until the position is filled."

Sears attended Monday's council meeting and spent a good part of the three hours meeting with the council in executive session. A Russellville High School graduate, Sears attended the University of North Alabama, where he played football through 2000. He signed with the NFL's Buffalo Bills and was assigned to NFL Europe's Amsterdam Admirals in 2002.

Through a source familiar with the Sears' investigation, the *Free Press* has learned that allegations were made that Sears, who is an hourly employee, turned in hours beyond what he actually worked. Although there were other concerns raised, the payroll issue was the primary one considered by the council, the source said.

He worked for the parks and recreation departments in Florence and Muscle Shoals before accepting the job as Russellville Parks and Recreation superintendent in 2006.

Through a source familiar with the Sears' investigation, the *Free Press* has learned that allegations were made that Sears, who is an hourly employee, turned in hours

See 'SEARS,' Page 3

K-9 unit for Phil Campbell a hot topic

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

As he opened the town council meeting last Tuesday night, Phil Campbell mayor Steve Bell and the council sat in front of an overflow crowd at Phil Campbell City Hall.

"I wish it were like this every time we meet," Bell said. "To have this many people concerned enough to come to a council meeting is encouraging."

What was on the minds of most in attendance was the issue of a K-9 unit for the Phil Campbell Police Department. A local fundraising drive designed to raise money to help purchase a police dog came to a halt last week when Bell asked the organizers to end it.

As the topic of a K-9 unit gained momentum through Phil Campbell, some residents heard that the mayor and council didn't want a police dog and had told Phil Campbell Police chief Joe Fike to drop the idea.

Bell told the crowd he and the council didn't kill the idea. In fact, they didn't even know there were discus-

sions about a police dog until councilman Danny Brown saw a flyer describing a fundraiser detergent sale to help offset the costs of a K-9.

"We're not against the idea of a K-9 unit in Phil Campbell," Bell said. "The issue is we weren't aware the fundraiser was being done."

"There's been a lot of speculation that led to misinformation that we didn't want a drug dog," Bell said. "We just want to know what's going on on the town's behalf, because it's a big liability we would be taking on."

Bell explained the cost and liability involved with a police department adding a K-9 unit. He said the council would have to approve a plan before anyone moved forward with the idea.

"There's been a lot of speculation that led to misinformation that we didn't want a drug dog," Bell said. "We just want to know what's going on on the town's behalf,

See 'UNIT,' Page 8

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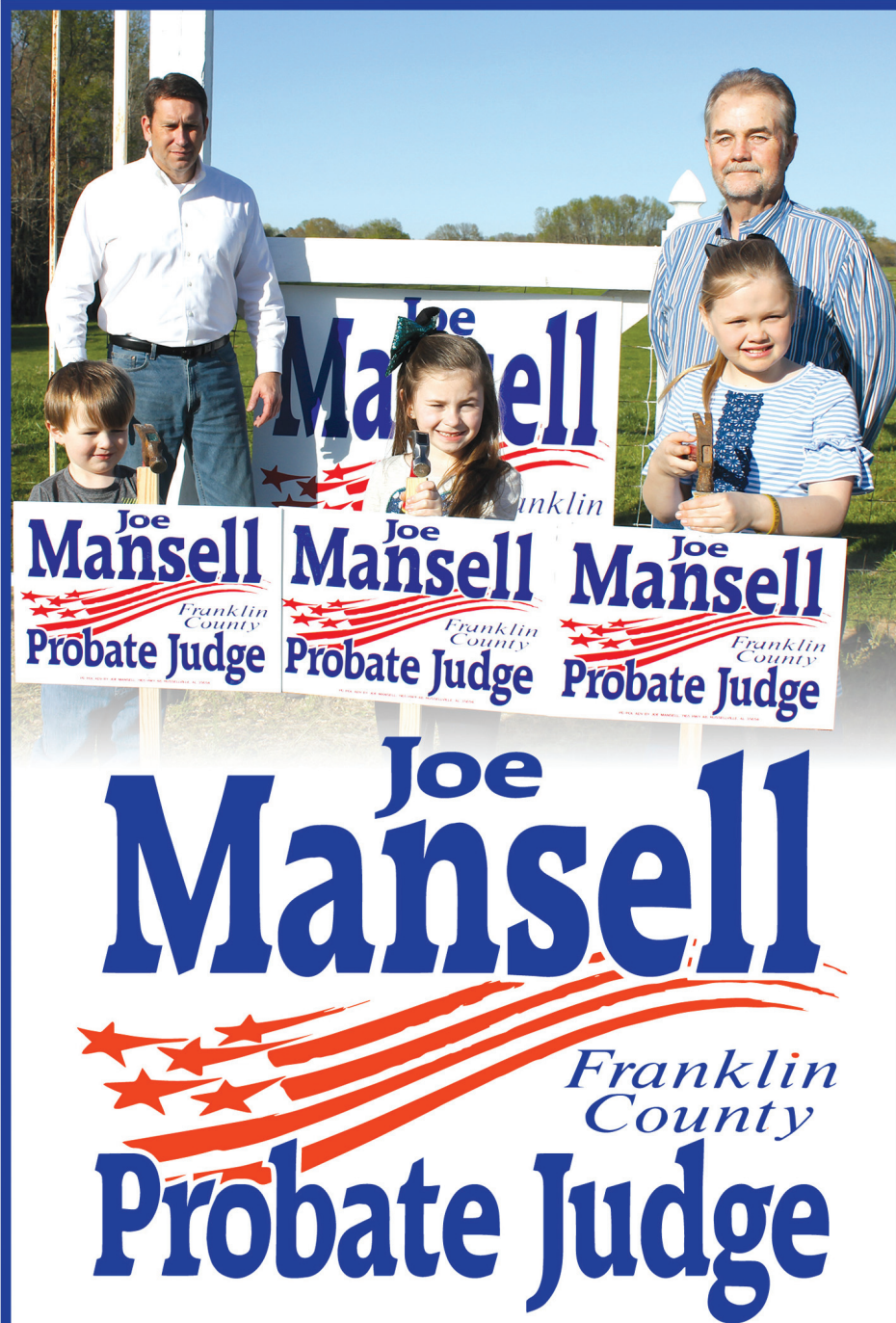
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"My name is Mike Madden. As a Franklin County native, a business owner, cattle farmer, husband, father and grandfather, the future of Franklin County is very important to me.

As a rule, I don't get involved in local politics. But when it comes to this year's election for Franklin County Probate Judge, my family and I are supporting Joe Mansell.

Joe is a man of character whose professional career has seen him serving and protecting the people of Franklin County. Joe is a Christian, a family man and someone who has a solid reputation across the county.

He's the kind of person we need leading Franklin County and paving the way for future generations. Please join me in voting Joe Mansell for Franklin County Probate Judge in the June 5, 2018, Republican Primary.

~ Mike Madden, Spruce Pine, AL

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Mildred Lucille Daily Holliman, Russellville, age 90
Died Friday, April 6, 2018. Graveside service held at Franklin Memory Gardens.
Pinkard Funeral Home assisted the family.

Yvonne M. Thompson, Phil Campbell, age 81
Died Sunday, April 8, 2018. Funeral held at Mt. View Baptist Church in Phil Campbell. Interment in the adjoining church cemetery. Pinkard Funeral Home of Russellville assisted the family.



We love to hear from you! Send your guest columns, recipes, cartoons, letters to the editor and other creative submissions to franklinfreepress@yahoo.com.

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, don't forget to check us out online at franklinfreepress.net!

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Meeting held to get clarity on Spruce Pine shelter

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Social media has its benefits. It also has its drawbacks, as was evidenced recently in a debate created surrounding the Spruce Pine Community Center storm shelter.

A recent social media post by an employee with the Franklin County 911 Operations Center listed the various storm shelters available across the county. The storm shelter located at the Spruce Pine Community Center wasn't on the list.

When some citizens brought this to the attention of 911 officials, they were told the Spruce Pine shelter was privately owned and therefore didn't appear on the county's public list.

Immediately, questions began about whether a private storm shelter could be used by all citizens. Sue Bowen, president of the Spruce Pine Historical Society/Community Center, said she began receiving calls from citizens concerned about the 'private' status of the shelter.

"People were asking why our shelter wasn't on the list and, since it was privately owned, who could use it," Bowen said. "That's why I called this meeting tonight."

Bowen held a meeting at the Spruce Pine Community Center last Thursday evening to address concerns and get some clarification about the storm shelter.

Russellville fire chief Joe Mansell, Franklin County EMA director Jody Hitt and Russellville fire marshal Justin Green attended the meeting.

The Spruce Pine shelter, Hitt explained, was one of four obtained through grant funding that provided 75 percent of the shelter's cost. The Spruce Pine Historical Society came up with the matching

funds, and the shelter was installed during the tenure of Franklin County commissioner Howard Hutcheson.

The shelter is on land owned by the Spruce Pine Historical Society, and operation, maintenance and supervision of the shelter falls on that organization. Franklin County probate judge Barry Moore explained the difference between that shelter and others that are publicly owned by Franklin County.

A recent social media post by an employee with the Franklin County 911 Operations Center listed the various storm shelters available across the county. The storm shelter located at the Spruce Pine Community Center wasn't on the list.

"People were asking why our shelter wasn't on the list and, since it was privately owned, who could use it," Bowen said. "That's why I called this meeting."

"The grant ran through Franklin County, but in the name of the Spruce Pine Historical Society," Moore said. "They came up with the matching funds and did the groundwork and electric work."

Most of the storm shelters located in Franklin County were placed at volunteer fire departments. The shelters are in the name of the Franklin County Commission, but they are opened/closed and maintained by volunteer fire departments, Moore said.

Hitt told members of the Spruce Pine Historical Society that if they wanted their shelter to be added to the public list, they needed to vote on that and send him a written request to add it.

Regardless of whether the shelter is on the public list or not, since it was obtained through grant funding it is available for use by all citizens just like other shelters, Hitt said.

"If you want it public, write a letter to my office and we'll advertise it with the other shelters," Hitt said. "It wasn't on the list because we didn't know how y'all wanted to handle it. If you want it public, we'll get it on the list, GPS it and put a sign up directing people to the storm shelter."

Green said the Spruce Pine shelter is subject to inspection like all storm shelters by the state fire marshal. He explained what the inspector would look for and suggested a regular maintenance schedule.

"You should clean the hoses quarterly that are attached to the dehumidifier," Green said. "The fan should be on at all times, and the doors need to be shut. It needs to be inspected monthly and must have a five-pound ABC fire extinguisher, labels on the breakers, a first aid kit, a sign-in form, flashlight and weather radio."

Mansell explained how and when the seven storm shelters in Russellville are opened.

"City policy is that we put a city employee in every storm shelter," Mansell said. "We want everyone to be safe, so we have a representative at each one just to make sure everyone can get in and be safe."

Mansell said the storm shelters are unlocked whenever the city is placed under a severe weather watch.

Bowen said she would be contacting officials with Mar-Jac to discuss funding for a second storm shelter.

"We definitely have a need for it. This one is at capacity whenever it is used," Bowen said.

City of Russellville receives clean audit for 2016-17

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When it comes to annual audit reports, local governments want to hear one word. 'Clean.'

And that's exactly what the Russellville City Council heard about the audit performed by the State of Alabama Department of Public Examiners for fiscal year 2016-17.

The council heard a report at its April 2 meeting detailing the audit and a review of the city's financial statements. There were no material weaknesses or significant deficiencies identified as a result of the audit.

"As stewards of the City of Russellville's funds, we strive to be professional and honest in our dealings with monies," mayor David Grissom said. "A clean audit is something we expect, and it's

important the public have confidence in how we manage city government."

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In other action, the council:

- Approved an ordinance to exempt certain items from the municipal sales and use tax during the weekend of July 20-22 as part of the State of Alabama's Sales Tax Holiday.

- Approved a resolution honoring Grace Hamilton for her dedicated service to the Russellville Public Library. Hamilton has been part of the library since the early 1990s, as a patron, volunteer and employee.

- Approved a waiver of the payment in lieu of taxes for the Russellville Housing Authority for the next year.

- Approved a contract with Jeff Frederick to provide softball umpires for the City of Russellville Parks and Recreation Department 2018 season. The contract is for \$1,200 to be paid in four \$300 increments.

- Approved a waiver of rental fees for the A.W. Todd Centre for the Franklin County Extension Office on March 26, 2018, and the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce on April 29, 2018.

- Approved a \$567 claim from Karl Pilati for plumbing repairs and a water pipe replacement after it was damaged accidentally by a member of the Russellville Fire Department.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Council will be Monday, April 16, with work session at 6 p.m. and meeting to follow.

'SEARS,' from page 1

beyond what he actually worked. Although there were other concerns raised, the payroll issue was the primary one considered by the council, the source said.

At one point during the executive session, Russellville Police chief Chris Hargett was asked to accompany Sears to the Russellville Recreation Center to pick up some records requested by the council.

Elliott, who serves as the city council liaison to the Parks and Recreation Department, said he had not received citizen complaints about Sears' performance. Elliott said he had been contacted by two councilmen about concerns they had received about Sears' job performance.

"I do not think termination was warranted," Elliott said. "There were some issues discussed that I thought could have been handled by alternate disci-

plinary measures."

Grissom declined to comment on the termination, citing a policy not to discuss personnel matters.

Cummings said he believed termination was the only appropriate action based on what the investigation showed, although he declined to comment specifically on what the allegations were.

"It's our policy not to talk about employment issues in a public statement," Cummings said. "If I did not feel like the action was justified, I would not have done it. There were so many factors involved that it was time to quit kicking the can down the road."

Efforts by the *Franklin Free Press* to reach Sears for comment last Monday night and Tuesday were unsuccessful.

The Honey Do List: Here comes the sun

It's coming. I can feel it in my bones. Well, not really. What I really feel as I write this is cold and damp, because it's 30 degrees in April.

But, just as sure as there are cows in Texas, warmer temps and dryer days are practically here.

A big part of spring is "spring cleaning," and that means opening the windows and doors and letting the fresh air and sunshine flow through the house. Modern homes are built to be well insulated and free of drafts. This, in turn, means that stuff doesn't get out like it should.

Part of spring is "spring cleaning," and that means opening the windows and doors and letting the fresh air and sunshine flow through the house. Modern homes are built to be well insulated and free of drafts. This, in turn, means that stuff doesn't get out like it should.

Over the winter, things like dust, dirt, mildew, pet dander and pollutants from products we use on a daily basis can really build up inside our homes. Even the "cleanest" of

homes are subject to dust and waste. When you replace your air filter on your central air return, how much dust do you find? And how much do you think stays trapped inside? It kind of chokes you up just thinking about it, doesn't it?

Before you can let the fresh air in, you have to make sure the critters (such as flies, mosquitoes and wasps) can't get in with it. Repairing, or replacing, door and window screens is a great place to start.

To repair the screen, start by first measuring any holes or tears. Holes that are a quarter of an inch or less can be patched with a little dab of nail polish, clear glue or an adhesive such as rubber cement. After the glue is applied and hardens, it forms a seal that keeps out little intruders.

If the hole is bigger, you can make a patch. If you have an old window

See 'SUN,' Page 5



Doug Green

Our House

by Ree Shannon



My take Freedom of speech & on this... the right to bear arms

There is so much negative talk about guns these days. This brings to mind something I read recently. If you don't give up your car because others drive drunk with theirs, then why do you have to give up your gun because others commit crimes with theirs?

As with all things, there are two sides to the issue of gun control, so I'm using my freedom of speech—along with my right to bear arms—to state my opinion on the matter.

I will use my gun WHEN NECESSARY to protect my family from harm. I could not or would not stand by and see them badly injured or killed because I had not means of protection.

This brings to mind something I read recently. If you don't give up your car because others drive drunk, then why do you have to give up your gun because others commit crimes with theirs?

There may be some of you who have taken karate or lifted weights and don't need a gun for protection, but I'm neither fast enough nor strong enough to cause harm to another person.

A knife could be a deadly weapon and has been used many times to take a life. I know of nothing being said about that. Should we not have the right to allow butcher knives in our kitchens? What about hunting knives that are used to aid in killing meat for families to have food? I don't want these rights to be taken from us. Guns are not the enemy here. A person has to load the gun and pull the trigger before a crime is committed. Even the person's mindset

has a lot to do with such a terrible act.

There will be some who say I don't know what I'm talking about. Unless it happened to my family, I wouldn't know what it felt like. I do know what it feels like to have someone try to kill a loved one. I had one shot in the leg, and the bullet then went through the other leg. It resulted in such tremendous blood loss that he almost died.

Even that has not changed the way I feel about guns. I have never held the gun responsible, but I will always remember the one who tried to take the life of someone I loved.

I was told she would not be held responsible unless the person she shot pressed charges against her. He wouldn't, so she's free. Never tried for attempted murder. Not even charged with child endangerment, and there were three children inside the house. If he'd been killed, things might have gone differently. I'm just glad I don't know about that.

Not only that, but the many who fought and died for us to have such a right used guns to make that happen. I do not want such a sacrifice to be forgotten because someone chooses to abuse and misuse our right to have guns for protection.

Regardless of the weapon used to bring harm or death to another person, the weapon itself is not responsible. As I said earlier, there are two sides to everything. This is the side I'm on!



Gail Motes

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Getting rid of the car

Dear Dave,
How do you sell a vehicle with a lien amount that's higher than the actual value of the car?

Michael

Dear Michael,
First, you need to find a way to cover the difference between the amount of the lien and what you can get for the car. Let's say the car is worth \$12,000, and you owe \$15,000. That would leave you \$3,000 short.

The bank holds the title, so unless you give them the payoff amount of \$15,000 you're not getting the title. The easiest and simplest way would be if someone buys the car for \$12,000, and you had \$3,000 on hand to make up the difference. If you don't have the money to make up the difference, you could go to a local bank or credit union and borrow the remaining \$3,000.

I really hate debt, but being \$3,000 in the hole is a lot better than being \$15,000 in the hole. Then, you could turn around and quickly pay back the \$3,000 you borrowed.

You'd give the total amount owed to the bank, they would give you the title, and you would sign it over to the new owner. Hope this helps!

Dave

'SUN,' from page 4

or door screen sitting around somewhere, you can cut out a patch from it. If not, your local True Value® hardware store will have replacement screening and screen patches available for purchase.

Cut a square patch that is one to two inches larger than the hole, using a utility knife or shears. For aluminum screens, unravel about six strands on all four edges of the patch, leaving single strands sticking out along each edge. Overlay the patch on the damaged area and weave the loose strands through the screen; then bend the strands on the other side to secure the patch to

Stop spending completely?

Dear Dave,
My mom and dad are following your advice, and they are working hard to get out of debt. I was wondering, is it okay to buy things while you're paying off the debt you already have?

Leslie

Dear Leslie,
I'm glad you're paying attention to the finances around your house. Of course, there are some things you must have. We call these "necessities." Most things are not necessities, though. If your air conditioning breaks down or you have car repairs, those are things you must spend money on to fix. Things like new furniture, vacations and eating at restaurants are not necessities. They're things you might *want*, but they're not necessary—especially when you're trying to pay off debt.

I always recommend people take a hard look at their priorities and remember there's a difference between wanting something and needing something to survive. It can be hard, and it may mean everyone has to go without a few things they want for a while. But if your parents are serious about getting out of debt, they'll do it. And it really won't take all that long. Great question!

Dave

**Dave Ramsey is CEO of Ramsey Solutions. He has authored seven best-selling books, including The Total Money Makeover. The Dave Ramsey Show is heard by more than 13 million listeners each week on 585 radio stations and multiple digital platforms. Follow Dave on the web at daveramsey.com and on Twitter at @DaveRamsey.*

the screen. Use needle-nose pliers to maneuver and bend the wires.

For fiberglass screens, you can use a self-adhesive patch. Once the patch is on, you can then add a touch of nail polish or clear adhesive for even more stability.

If the hole is bigger than the bottom of a coffee mug or something equivalent in size, you're better off replacing the whole screen. We'll talk about that next week. Maybe, by then, spring will be here. That is, unless all the cows walked out of Texas yesterday.

Remember, help is just around the corner at your local hardware store.

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 The Bay Tree Council for the Performing Arts in Red Bay will sponsor two scholarships to two area high school seniors. The scholarships will be \$500.00 each, and applications can be obtained from Micah Jackson at Red Bay High School, or they can be emailed to you by contacting BTCPA through their Facebook page or contacting Scotty Kennedy at 256-356-8758 or scottydk@att.net.


 AARP Tax-Aide will be offering free income tax preparation at DHR on Thursdays from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. through April 12. You do not have to be an AARP member, be retired or be a certain age to use this service. Call Ben at 256-332-0252 for an appointment.


 Russellville Masonic Lodge 371 will be selling Boston butts for Memorial Day weekend. Butts are \$30 and may be pre-ordered by calling 256-810-1970. Pick-up will be Saturday, May 26 from 8-10 a.m. at the Masonic Lodge on Coffee Street.


 American Legion Post 64 meets the second Thursday of each month at the Chamber of Commerce office on Jackson Avenue. Meal served around 6 p.m., meeting at 7 p.m. Next meeting will be April 12.


 The Reedtowntown Roundup Scholarship Committee will be selling fish and/or chicken plates this Friday, April 13 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Back To Basics Center (Old Reedtowntown School). Plates ordered prior to day of sale cost \$10. Plates purchased day of sale cost \$11. Eat in or carry out. Plates ordered prior to day of sale must be picked up between 11 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. on Friday. Proceeds will benefit the Reedtowntown Scholarship Fund.


 The Belgreen Alumni Banquet will be held this Saturday, April 14 at the Belgreen High School cafeteria with social hour from 4-5 p.m., dinner from 5-6 p.m. and annual alumni meeting from 6-7 p.m. This year we will honor the Class of 1968 on their 50th anniversary. Also, we will give special recognition to the classes of 1951-53, 1961-63, 1971-73, 1981-83, 1991-93, 2001-03 and 2011-13. Everyone is invited. \$12 for meal tickets. Please RSVP for meals to 256-332-1376. For more information, call Judy West at 256-277-1211.


 The Kerry Gilbert Band will perform a benefit concert with special guest Cari Ann Cornelius at the Roxy Theatre in downtown Russellville this Saturday, April 14 at 7 p.m. General admission seating. Doors open at 6 p.m. Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$5 for children ages 6-12, and free for children under 6. Call 256-335-4356.

 The Helen Keller Volunteer Auxiliary will host their \$5 jewelry sale April 16-18 in the Aerobics Room at the Keller Wellcare Center, located on the campus of Helen Keller Hospital. Masquerade Jewelry will be on site with earrings, necklaces, pins, bags, rings and more! All items are only \$5 each! Proceeds benefit the projects of the Helen Keller Hospital Volunteer Auxiliary, including the Louise Isbell Ashe Scholarship Program. These scholarships are given out each spring to graduating high school seniors who are pursuing careers in healthcare. For more information, call 256-386-4476.

 Celebrity Waiter Dinner sponsored by Will's Willing Walkers will be Tuesday night, April 17 at 43 Grill starting at 5:30 p.m. All tips go to the American Cancer Society for our local Relay For Life. Please come and support this worthy cause.

 West Elementary School will hold Kindergarten registration and verification on April 2-17, 2018. Registration packets may be picked up at the Russellville City Schools Board of Education and returned with the required documents. A Kindergarten screening will be administered to all registered students. Please refer to the following information to determine the appropriate time for you and your child to be present for the screening. All screenings will be conducted at the RCS Board of Education building located at 1945 Waterloo Road, Russellville, AL. Hours are 8:30-11:30 a.m. and 12:30-2 p.m. Wednesday, April 18, 2018 – Students with last name beginning with A-H; Thursday, April 19, 2018 – Students with last name beginning with I-Q; Friday, April 20, 2018 – Students with last name beginning with R-Z. It shall be the policy of the Russellville City School System to provide nondiscriminatory basis educational opportunities for children. No person shall be denied the benefits of any education program or activity on the basis of race, color, disability, creed, national origin, age, or sex. Pursuant to the requirements of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, all homeless children, migrants and English language learners must have equal access to the same free appropriate public education provided other children and youth. All programs offered by schools within the School System shall be open to all students in compliance with statutory and judicial requirements. The enrollment of homeless, immigrant, migrant and limited English proficient children shall not be denied due to any of the following barriers: Lack of birth certificate; lack of school records or transcripts; lack of immunization records; lack of proof of residency; lack of transportation; unaccompanied; no guardian.


 Siloam Missionary Baptist Church will hold revival with evangelist Bro. Randy Taylor Wednesday-Friday, April 18-20, at 7 p.m. Pastor Bro. Jarrod Helms and congregation invite everyone to attend! Nursery provided.


 Kindred Hospice (formerly Gentiva Hospice) offers a grief support group, "Grieving Well Together," that meets the third Thursday of each month at 10 a.m. in the Lenox room at Calvary Baptist Church in Russellville. You are invited to attend.


What's Happening


256.332.0255


EVENTS OF INTEREST • FAMILY REUNIONS • PLAYS • CHURCH GATHERINGS • EDUCATIONAL • CLUB MEETINGS


 The gospel group Purpose will be singing at Gray Rock FCM Church on Saturday, April 21 at 6:30 p.m. Everyone is invited! For more information, call 256-627-6404.


 An unveiling of a historical marker honoring former Alabama congressman Carl Elliott will be held at the Vina Community Center on Sunday, April 22 at 2 p.m. The Red Bay Museum, which includes a display on Elliott, will be open after the ceremony. Among those speaking at the event will be state representative Johnny Mack Morrow, Mary Jolley and Julian Butler, who work as aides to Elliott and Carl Elliott III. For more information, you may call Scotty Kennedy at 256-356-8758, Cassie Medley with the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce at 256-332-1760 or Sue Raper at Vina City Hall at 256-356-4996.


 The Bay Tree Council for the Performing Arts presents its final production for the 2017-2018 season, "Southern Hospitality," by Jessie Jones, Nicholas Hope and Jamie Wooten and directed by Scotty Kennedy. The play will be presented Thursday, April 26 through Saturday, April 28 at 7 p.m. and Sunday, April 29 at 2 p.m. at Community Spirit Bank's Weatherford Centre in Red Bay. Tickets will go on sale at the Weatherford Centre Monday, April 16 from 2-4 p.m. weekdays. You can purchase your tickets there or reserve them by calling 256-356-9829. Tickets are \$8.00 each with open seating. Groups who are interested in coming may call Beth Hammock at 256-356-9286.

 The Sons of Confederate Veterans, Lt. Col. John W. Harris Jr., Camp #1833 will meet Thursday, May 3 at 6 p.m. at the Russellville Rec Center on Ash Avenue. Camp #1833 meets the first Thursday of each month EXCEPT January and July. For more info, call 256-324-2317. Everyone welcome!

 The Russellville High School Class of 1988 presents the ninth annual Chucky Mullins Memorial Golf Tournament Friday, May 4, 2018 at Twin Pines Country Club. Tee-off times at 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. Lunch at 11:30 a.m. Three-man teams. Entry fee is \$225 per team. There will be cash prizes and door prizes. Proceeds go to the Chucky Mullins Memorial Scholarship Fund. For additional information, you may contact Deedra Seale Moore at (256) 412-5659 or Rosell Christian Hamilton at (256) 335-3663. Mail Donations to 399 High Pine Drive, Russellville, AL 35654.

 Osborn Hill Cemetery will hold Decoration Day on Saturday, May 5. The first Saturday of May has been observed as Decoration Day for well over 100 years. All old flowers will need to be removed off the graves. Please make plans for that special day to come to the cemetery. Also, it's time again for annual donations. If you would like to donate to the Osborn Hill Cemetery Fund, please send your donations to: Osborn Hill Cemetery Fund, c/o Mrs. Lana Duncan, 2330 Colburn Mtn. Road, Tuscumbia, AL 35674.

 The Helen Keller Hospital Foundation is bringing a familiar face from Facebook and YouTube to the Marriott Shoals Conference Center on Saturday, May 5. Heather Land, known for her "I Ain't Doin' It" series of videos, is bringing her comedy and music show to Florence as a fundraiser for the Foundation. The show will begin at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are on sale by calling 256-386-4747. Ticket levels include: Bronze Level \$30; Silver Priority Seating \$40; Gold VIP Level \$100. The Gold VIP Level includes cocktail tickets, hors d'oeuvres, meet and greet with Heather Land, and a group photo. The proceeds from this event will benefit the Pediatric Unit at Helen Keller Hospital. For more information, call 256-386-4747.

 SAVE THE DATE: Saturday, May 12, for Pioneer Day, part of Franklin County's Bicentennial Celebration, from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. in Russellville on the east side of Sloss Lake on Hwy 24. Living history demonstrations to show how people lived, worked and played 200 years ago. Actors will portray historical figures. Native Americans. War of 1812 soldiers. Civil war camp. Food and artisan products for sale. Free admission. Free parking in the field across Hwy. 24 from the entrance. Free shuttle bus service. Join in the fun and wear pioneer clothing, if you wish. For info, email archive@hiwaay.net or call 256-332-8827 or 256-332-4085.

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'UNIT' from page 1

because it's a big liability we would be taking on."

Two citizens, Joanne Holifield and Sarah Nix, were on the meeting agenda to address the council about a K-9 unit and what they described as a rampant drug problem both in the town and at Phil Campbell High School.

"There is a need for a drug protection dog," Holifield said. "As for the cost, we've talked to businesses, churches and others willing to donate money and help with fundraisers. There is a way you could pay a handler for his off-duty time."

Bell distributed several articles and studies on K-9 units that show the start-up costs to be more than \$20,000. Additionally, he explained there would be costs for annual training, living expenses for the dog and a vehicle specially equipped to house a K-9.

Bell said he had spoken with the chief deputy with the Franklin County Sheriff's Department and was assured the town could request assistance from that K-9 unit any time it was needed.

Nix told the council about a "major drug problem" in Phil Campbell.

"If you can get the drug dog from the county, it needs to be here the whole month," Nix said. "It needs to go to the school. It needs to go to the apartments in town. We've got a prostitution ring going on here. And you can't warn people or school officials the dog's coming. That's what has been done in the past, and it's not right."

Franklin County sheriff Shannon Oliver said the dog was available for use across Franklin County, including Phil Campbell and at Phil Campbell High School.

"While the Phil Campbell Police Department is primarily responsible for enforcing the laws and ordinances in town, if they need our dog, it's a radio call or phone call away, and it will be there," Oliver said. "If school officials want the dog there, we need permission from the school to go in. If the

school requests us to be there, we will be there. That's something that would need to be requested by the principal and superintendent. And we could set up some times when it would be unannounced.

"Franklin County has a widespread drug problem. Sometimes when we search schools, especially the whole campus, it takes more than one dog. We have called in other counties and cities to have their dogs come too."

Bell said he spoke with Bear Creek mayor Connie Morrison about their town's K-9 unit. He said Morrison said the city had a dog given to the police department but still couldn't afford the expenses associated with it.

"They had \$80,000 in the dog in a short time," Bell said. "There are special housing needs and special vehicle needs per policy. They ended up selling the dog to another city."

Another issue with a K-9 unit in Phil Campbell is who would serve as the K-9 officer. Fike is the only full-time officer employed by the city. A collection of part-time officers are working to fill out the current schedule.

Although Bell believes his research has shown the town can't afford the costs associated with a K-9 unit, he said the council would not close the door on the idea.

"I appreciate everyone's passion. We want to do something to solve the problem, but we've got to communicate back and forth," Bell said. "We can come up with a plan and get with Chief Fike and present it to the council. And if we have the money in the budget, we will go forward."

Bell said he spoke with Bear Creek mayor Connie Morrison about their town's K-9 unit. He said Morrison said the city had a dog given to the police department but still couldn't afford the expenses associated with it.

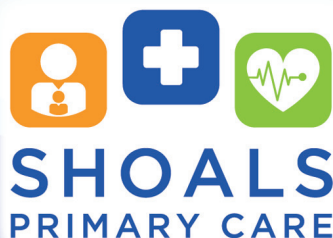
"They had \$80,000 in the dog in a short time," Bell said. "There are special housing needs and special vehicle needs per policy. They ended up selling the dog to another city."

As for fund raisers, councilman Jim Cartee said a non-profit organization would have to be set up in order to earmark funds raised for a specific purpose. Otherwise, funds donated to the town would end up in the general fund and not for a specific purpose.

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Letter to the Editor

To the citizens of Franklin County from Probate Judge and Commission Chairman Barry Moore:

It has come to my attention that there are people throughout the county who still have questions and concerns in regard to the theft of county funds by former County Administrator Crista Madden. As Probate Judge, I am happy to try to answer these questions and make sure the public has the facts, since I am also aware there has been some false information passed around at this point.

When something of this magnitude takes place, it's easy for the facts to get misplaced in a sea of speculation or for incorrect information to be spread by those who aren't fully aware of what took place. I believe strongly in honesty and transparency, especially in a situation like this that involves taxpayer money (money that the people of this county have worked hard for), and I fully believe our citizens should be made aware of exactly what happened, how the money was taken, how it went undetected, and how I, along with the rest of the commission and our office staff, plan to move forward to try to prevent something like this from happening in the future.

Prior to her departure from her position as county administrator in August of 2017, Crista Madden handled many aspects of the county's finances as part of her job and had done so throughout her duration in this position. During this time, the Franklin County Commission went through an audit each year (just as many other businesses do), and there were never any negative findings or suspicious activities noted, nor were there any recommendations to change our internal controls or the way we handled our finances. Because of this, there was never any reason to question the job she did or to change any of our processes. As far as I and members of the commission knew, and according to the audits we received, our finances were in order and there was never any reason to suspect anything was wrong.

After her departure in August, other employees were added to the bank accounts for the County Commission's funds, and these employees began to take over Crista's duties. On February 7, 2018, an employee in the Commission Office noticed that there had been a steady amount of checks written to a particular company in our system but no checks had been issued to this particular company since Crista's departure.

Thinking this seemed strange, the employee began to look into the matter further. After requesting cancelled check copies from the bank for payments to this particular company, it was discovered that Crista's name and address appeared on these copies when the bank statements and check copies we had on file in our office listed this legitimate company in our system for these same checks. The employee immediately notified me of what had been discovered, so I advised this employee to request cancelled check copies from the past two fiscal years for each instance where this specific company had received a check from the Franklin County Commission. After we received these copies from the bank, it was discovered that each time a check had been written to this legitimate company, it had ended up being written to Crista with her name, address and endorsement on the check.

At this point I knew we were looking at a serious problem. There is certain protocol in place in

the event that something like this happens, and I knew the next step to take would be to contact the State of Alabama Examiners of Public Accounts so they could look into the matter and see exactly what we were looking at, so I contacted them on February 9, 2018. At this point, I made the decision not to tell anyone else what was happening, not because I wanted to hide anything but because I knew this was a serious situation involving the theft of public funds, and, besides Crista, I didn't know who else might be involved. For all I knew, it could have involved other people in the office, other county employees or even elected officials, and my main responsibility was to the citizens of this county.

So, not knowing who all might be involved and not wanting to take a chance and potentially interfere with the investigation or tip off someone who might be involved, I contacted the Examiners Office directly and let them handle it from there.

On February 13-15, 2018, the State Examiners sent three auditors to the Commission Office, and they looked through our files. After their initial investigation, they contacted the Alabama Attorney General's Office, which took over the investigation, and the matter was out of my hands. They were in charge of collecting evidence, and I, along with the rest of my staff, cooperated fully and provided all information and documents that were requested.

On March 1, the AG's Office issued a subpoena to the Franklin County Commission for files, bank statements and for the computer Crista used. I let the commissioners know that day that a subpoena had been issued and an investigation was taking place but couldn't reveal any other information at that time. Numerous files and records were requested up until March 13, as agents continued to determine the full extent of the theft, how far it dated back, which funds the money had been stolen from, how much money had been taken, and how the thefts had occurred even though the Franklin County Commission's finances had been audited and cleared every single year.

When the investigation was completed, I was informed that Crista had stolen \$753,889.21 from three main county funds from December 15, 2007 through July 27, 2017. The three main funds were the General Fund, the 7 Cent Gasoline Tax Fund, and the Solid Waste Fund, with the majority of the money being stolen from the Solid Waste Fund.

The way she managed to steal this money without it being detected by our auditors was by altering legitimate purchase orders and creating fake bank statements that were made to look exactly like the real bank statement. From what we learned, this was the process:

Prior to printing a check to this legitimate company she used as a decoy, she would place tape over the payee name and address line. Once she printed the checks and made copies showing the legitimate company's name, she would then remove the tape and reprint the check at her desk with her name and address in the payee section. This caused the check to show in our system and on the copies we had that it had been made out to a valid vendor.

When the bank received the checks, they would have had no way of knowing that a check made out to Crista wasn't legitimate, so this wouldn't have raised any red flags on their end either. When Crista would pick up the bank statements

from the bank, she would bring them back to her office and alter these statements, making exact replicas but having them reflect the valid payee instead of showing herself as a payee, so there was no record left in our files to show she ever made checks out to herself.

On March 19, 2018, Crista went before retired Colbert County judge Pride Tompkins, who was appointed to preside over this case after Franklin County Circuit Judge Terry Dempsey recused himself from the case. She entered a guilty plea to two ethics violations, Use of Official Position for Personal Gain and Use of Equipment for Personal Gain, which are standard charges when the funds that have been stolen are from a government entity and not a private business. Charges are handled differently in these cases than in regular criminal theft cases. Once the plea was completed, I was able to let the commissioners know what the investigation had revealed.

After pleading guilty, Crista's sentencing date, which was determined by Judge Tompkins based on his schedule and availability, was set for June 11, 2018, at which time Judge Tompkins will determine her punishment for these crimes. Contrary to what some have said and thought, Crista's punishment will not be determined by me or by anyone else in Franklin County. It will be solely determined by the judge appointed in this case.

I know there have been many people throughout the county who have been shocked by this crime, but believe me when I say that no one was more shocked than I was when we discovered the amount of money that had been stolen or that this had been going on for the past 10 years, almost two years before I even appointed her as the County Administrator. I have talked to other employers who have had employees steal from their business or office, and the feelings all seem to be the same—there was an initial shock, a deep feeling of sadness and betrayal, and then an indignation and anger that an employee would take advantage of their position and betray the trust of not only myself and the rest of our staff, but steal money from the people of this county who I have pledged to represent to the best of my ability.

Moving forward, I will continue to uphold this pledge. Even though I can not determine Crista's sentence myself, the AG's Office did inform me that I can write a letter on behalf of the people of Franklin County that will be read during the sentencing on June 11, which I intend to do. I want to make sure it is known that not only am I hurt and angry about what she did, but I'm also representing our citizens who are also hurt and angered that their taxpayer money was stolen.

I will request a punishment that fits the crime, and even though it was already specified in her plea agreement that she must repay the money she stole, I will reiterate the necessity of this money being repaid as soon as possible and that every cent goes back into the funds that were stolen from, a majority of that being the Solid Waste Fund.

This is something I have taken very seriously, and I have already been working with our staff to prevent this from ever happening again. While we can not change the past, we can most certainly take steps to ensure that the taxpayer's money is protected from this point forward now that we know records can be manipulated in a



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Several families, baby

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Contractor shall include all applicable taxes with all material prices. The Board will not furnish tax exemption certificates.

No bidder may withdraw his bid within 60 days after the actual date of the opening thereof.

Each bidder must be licensed as a contractor under the laws of the State of Alabama and will be required to advertise completion of the contract in accordance with Alabama State Law.

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'LETTER,' from page 9

way where wrongdoing is unde-
tectable by an audit.

The main thing that allowed Crista to steal this money came from the bank statements and her altering them to look exactly like the official bank statements, down to using identical fonts and graphics. To make sure this doesn't happen again, I and two other employees are now listed on the accounts for the Franklin County Commission's funds at the bank. One of these employees is designated to pick up all bank statements from the bank and return them to a separate employee at the office immediately. This employee, who does not have any access to the funds and whose name is not be listed on any accounts and who has no access to writing checks, then opens the statements and verifies them to make sure nothing is incorrect or suspicious. Once the statements have been verified, this employee initials the verification and dates it. The statements are then given to a third employee who reconciles them.

I hope this answers the questions Franklin County citizens have had about this situation, how it was able to go undetected for so long, how

we handled it, where I stand on a recommendation for her punish-
ment, and how we plan to prevent this from happening again in the future. It is very important to me that our citizens are kept informed and that you know you can count on me to be open, honest and transparent, even when situations are tough and it would be easier on me both personally and professionally to not be so transparent.

I take my position very seriously and truly appreciate the citizens of Franklin County for allowing me to serve them in this capacity. I, along with the commissioners and our staff, have learned a great deal from this experience, and I know it will allow us to be better and more cautious leaders and public servants moving forward. If anyone has any further questions or concerns about this matter, you are more than welcome to contact me at the Franklin County Commission by mail at P.O. Box 1028, Russellville, AL 35653, or by phone at 256-332-8850, and I will be happy to assist you in any way I can.

Sincerely,
Barry Moore
Franklin County Probate Judge

Letters to the editor may be sent to franklinfreepress@yahoo.com.

GWAM holding fundraiser to provide clean water

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

According to the USGS Science School, the average American uses between 80 and 100 gallons of water each day.

Clean and accessible water is something most of us take for granted. For the citizens of Ghana, a West African country rampant with poverty, getting water each day involves up to a six-mile hike carrying a five-gallon water bucket that weighs more than 40 pounds. Often, that water is contaminated and polluted as well.

It was out of concern for the plight of the people of Ghana that Ghana West Africa Missions (GWAM) was formed. The organization began out of a mission drive in a Michigan church, Traverse City Church of Christ, in 1987. A fundraising effort garnered more than \$85,000, enough to build 15 wells for people in northern Ghana to have water to drink, wash and cook with.

James Nipper, vice-president at Russellville-based Petro Chemical Energy, serves on the board of directors of GWAM. Since 1987, the organization's efforts have led to more than 1,000 new water wells and the refurbishment of 2,500

more in Ghana.

Nipper and his family, along with Ricky McWhorter and his family, will travel to Ghana next month on a 10-day mission trip. It will mark the second visit to west Africa for Nipper. McWhorter has traveled there 16 times since 2007.

For the citizens of Ghana, a West African country rampant with poverty, getting water each day involves up to a six-mile hike carrying a five-gallon water bucket that weighs more than 40 pounds. Often, that water is contaminated and polluted as well.

McWhorter, a retired environmental scientist who worked for the State of Alabama, is the associate director of GWAM, which is based in Searcy, Arkansas. McWhorter lives and works in Moulton.

GWAM will hold a fundraiser Sunday, April 22 in Florence. The event is called "A Walk in Her Shoes," and will involve volunteer teams carrying five-gallon buckets of water for one mile. McWhorter said the purpose of the fundraiser is twofold.

"We want to accomplish two goals," McWhorter said. "First, to raise awareness of their poverty in

the world. Second, we want to give people the opportunity to make a difference, either through monetary donations or in-kind services."

Funds raised in the second annual walk will be used by GWAM to drill new wells in Ghana. McWhorter said last year's walk raised more than \$12,000. The goal of this year's fund raiser is \$20,000. A similar event in Moulton last year raised \$10,000.

Having personally seen the benefits of his organization's work, McWhorter has a special appreciation for the support received by individuals and groups in the United States for GWAM.

"One of the thrills of being able to raise funds here in the states is to see that well drilled and the smiles on those children's faces," McWhorter said. "It really changes your perspective on the world and what's really important and how fortunate and blessed we are in the United States."

McWhorter said the cost of drilling a well and getting it operational is approximately \$7,000. Once complete, the average well provides water for 400-500 people in a community.

For more information on the April 22 event to be held in Florence, log onto www.gwam.org and click "Find a Fundraiser."

The Bricks closing April 22 after sale to MS Industries

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When officials from MS Industries II, LLC, approached Trent and Michele Stephenson about purchasing the Bricks Inn and Restaurant, the couple didn't answer right away.

The following week, after Trent suffered a heart attack and had three coronary stents inserted in a procedure last Tuesday, their answer came.

It was time to sell.

The Bricks Restaurant will close at 2 p.m. on Sunday, April 22. When and under what name it reopens will be up to Steven Smith, MS Industries CEO.

"I really think this whole process was driven by God," Michele said Monday afternoon. "They came to us two or three weeks ago and said they were going to open a restaurant in downtown Russellville and asked if we wanted to sell. We said maybe."

"When Trent had his heart attack and three stents with 90 percent blockage, we contacted them and made the deal. There was a lot of stress in owning a restaurant, but we love doing it. It was just time to sell."

So just over two months after its grand opening, the Bricks Inn and Restaurant will close its doors for good, at least under the ownership of the Stephensons. MS Industries' agreement with the Stephensons includes the name Bricks Inn and Restaurant, so it could be reopened later under the same name, Michele said.

The Stephensons purchased the 7,400-square-foot historic building located at 114 North Jackson Avenue in July of 2017. They undertook a major renovation and opened their doors February 19.

They are no longer accepting reservations for their five-room hotel, but Michele said that all pending reservations will be honored.

While their tenure as restaurant owners was brief, the Stephensons say they learned a lot about the business during the two-month run.

"I think our food might not have been what everyone wanted, but we wanted something different,"

Michele said. "We didn't want to serve the same food every other establishment serves. We wanted to bring something different to Russellville."

Michele admits operating a restaurant is a full-time, 'round-the-clock, stressful business. And her husband's health is far more important than continuing down that path.

Just over two months after its grand opening, the Bricks Inn and Restaurant will close its doors for good, at least under the ownership of the Stephensons. MS Industries' agreement with the Stephensons includes the name Bricks Inn and Restaurant, so it could be reopened later under the same name.

"We are in a very stressful business. And we'd rather see Trent be healthy than own a business," Michele said. "We love seeing people come in each day and visiting with them so we'll miss that."

"My dream was for people from Florence to say, 'Let's go to Russellville to eat at the Bricks,' and they did, so that was rewarding."

The hardest part of selling and closing down was informing the 15 employees at the Bricks, including executive chef Ryan Matthews and his wife Amy, who also is part of the Bricks' team.

"Unfortunately, news got out before we had a chance to tell them," Michele said. "Our employees started texting the night we were at the hospital. That was hard, because we wanted to be face-to-face when we told them."

Michele said MS Industries' ownership of the building and business will be final on or before June 1, 2018. There is nothing in the sale agreement that mandates when MS will reopen the restaurant, or whether it will open at all.

But Trent expects to see the restaurant reopened some time this year.

"We just had someone offer us more money than we could refuse, so we made the deal," Trent said. "The fun part was putting this together—the construction, renovation and decorating. But living here all the time is the part we didn't like."

"It was just a business opportunity, and it made

too much sense not to do it. And my having the heart attack sealed the deal."

The Stephensons said Matthews will begin a new job next month.

"Russellville is going to miss a chef like Ryan bringing in steelhead trout, red snapper, sweet potato biscuits and black eyed pea fritters. Ryan is the real deal," Trent said.

Although his vision for the Bricks didn't turn out like he planned, Trent hopes the venture will serve as an economic kick-start for downtown Russellville.

"We just wanted to make Russellville a better place, and maybe we started a spark down here that will help get downtown going again," he said.

The Bricks will feature live music both of its remaining Saturdays. This Saturday, April 14, Joseph Baldwin will perform from 6-9 p.m. The following Saturday, April 21, Haley and Sam Webster will perform from 6-9 p.m.

Officials from MS Industries II, LLC, were unavailable for comment prior to press time.



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Lady Bobcats set sights on county crown

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

After finally breaking through last spring and earning a regional berth for the first time in a decade, Phil Campbell's girls won't be satisfied with anything less than a return trip to Huntsville next month.

According to head coach Doug Jackson, however, the quest for postseason success actually begins much sooner—and much closer to home.

"The county tournament is the first of four tournaments during the season where you want to walk away with a win," Jackson said. "It's the first priority."

The area tournament, regional tournament and state tournament are all rapidly approaching, but the Franklin County softball championship will be decided this Saturday at Belgreen High School. Phil Campbell (14-3 overall through Sunday, including a 5-0 mark against county competition) is the top seed, and there's more at stake for the Lady Bobcats than merely priming the pump for a playoff push.

They haven't won the county title in six years, and Jackson knows how badly his five seniors—Darby Elliott, Karley Ertle, Leeah Jackson, Olivia Knight and Chloe Roberson—want to go out on top.

"Winning would mean so much to all of the girls," he said, "but especially to those seniors. These girls have worked so hard, and I know they would love to bring the championship back to Phil Campbell for their last county tournament in the black and gold."

The Lady Bobcats were certainly playing like championship contenders coming into the week. Through Sunday, they had won five straight games, putting up double-figure run totals in each and out-scoring their opponents by a combined margin of 69-22.

Jackson hopes to see more of the same Saturday at Belgreen, where Phil Campbell has a bye and is scheduled to face the winner between Belgreen and Red Bay in a first-round game.

"For us to win the tournament, our pitching staff must come out strong," he said. "We need to throw strikes and limit base hits and walks. Offensively, we need to continue swinging with power and putting up those big numbers."

The biggest numbers this season belong to Leeah Jackson, a senior shortstop and Snead State signee. She had collected multiple hits in nine of the team's first 17 games, batting .619

See 'COUNTY,' Page 16

READY for a REPEAT



Pictured (from left) are RHS varsity tennis players Katie Burns, Addie Scruggs, Emma Claire Bragwell, Kaydee Holland, Callie Palmer, Anna Woods, Ellyse Strickland, Rebecca Parrish.

A perfect regular season in section play has Russellville's girls primed to make a run at a second straight tournament title

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

One year after claiming the program's first-ever sectional championship, Russellville's girls tennis team looks primed and ready for a repeat.

The Lady Golden Tigers won four section matches in four days last week, beating Central 9-0 on Monday, Wilson 9-0 on Tuesday, Deshler 6-3 on Wednesday and Brooks 8-1 on Thursday to put the finishing touches on an unbeaten regular season in sectional play. The Class 4A/5A, Section 8 tournament will be held next Tuesday, April 17 at Russellville, and the reigning champs have established themselves as the clear-cut favorites.

Head coach Charlotte Dollar and her players are excited for the postseason to begin, but they also know a second straight sectional crown will not come easy.

"We're looking forward to the section tournament," said Dollar, whose team finished 10-0 in section play and was 11-3 overall heading into Monday's final regular-season match. "As always, it will be filled with some great teams trying to make their way to the state tournament. It should be a really good tournament with some awesome tennis."

Russellville's girls played plenty of that last week, dropping a total of just four courts in four matches. Sophomore Anna Woods was 4-0 at No. 3 singles, and juniors Emma Claire Bragwell (No. 5) and Addie Scruggs (No. 6) also went unbeaten in singles play. Sophomore Katie Burns was 3-1 at No. 1 singles, and No. 2 Rebecca Parrish—the team's only senior—also went 3-1 in singles play.

Sophomore Ellyse Strickland was 2-1 at No. 4 singles, with sophomore Kaydee Holland filling in

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Pitching powers PC to third straight area title

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

Winning an area championship is never easy. Especially when you have to win it twice.

Phil Campbell was leading Lamar County 7-5 with two outs in the bottom of the seventh last Wednesday when senior closer Joe Hardy induced what appeared to be a game-ending groundball to second. Freshman Ridge Raper gloved it and threw to first, seemingly sealing the win and clinching a third consecutive area title for the Bobcats.

Seemingly.

"Ridge made a pretty good play in the hole," head coach Jonathan Raper later said. "He fields it and throws the runner out. The [field] umpire calls him out, and we go running on the field [to celebrate]. Then the home plate umpire says we dropped the ball at first and puts us back on the field [on defense]. And instead of runners at first and second, they put runners at second and third."

Suddenly, the Bobcats had gone from celebrating another area championship to fighting like mad to keep one from slipping away. With the tying run at second, Hardy fell behind the next batter 2-0 before retiring him on a fly ball to centerfielder Mike Wrona to end the game and clinch the area championship.

Again.

"We expect to be in the playoffs and to play for an area championship," Raper said. "That's where we're at with our program. That's what we're gonna do. To accept anything less would have been a disappointment."

"It was a strange ending," Raper said. "First we were excited, running onto the field, thinking it was over. Then we had to turn around and re-do it. It was a little bit of a heartache when they put us back out there. But it was sweet either way."

The 7-5 win gave Phil Campbell (18-9 overall through Sunday) a two-game sweep of Lamar County to go along with an earlier two-game sweep of rival Red Bay. With a 4-0 record and only one area series—against last-place Sulligent—remaining, the Bobcats had wrapped up the Area 14 title and will open the Class 2A playoffs at home later this month for a third consecutive year.

"It's nice not to have to go right down to the last minute and sweat it out and worry about stuff," said Raper, whose team was scheduled to open its series against the Blue Devils at home on Tuesday before traveling to Sulligent on Thursday. "It's good to control your own destiny."

A third consecutive area title was by no means a given for the Bobcats, who came into the season looking to replace the veteran bats of Hayden Copeland, Gage Roberson, Nick Swinney, Colby Baker and Nick Taylor. [Those five combined for more than 600 plate appearances in 2017, and Copeland and Swinney were also two of the team's top starting pitchers.]

Breaking in five new starting position players and replacing 70-plus innings on the mound was bound to be a challenge, but Raper doesn't make excuses. The standard for Phil Campbell baseball has been set. The roster may change from one year to the next, but the expectations don't.

"We expect to be in the playoffs and to play for an area championship," Raper said. "That's where we're at with our program. That's what we're gonna do. To accept anything less would have been a disappointment. The kids who came before these guys set the standard, and they handed it down."

"There was a lot of uncertainty when we started this year, but I thought we had kids who could play and do a good job for us. They've accepted their roles and done a good job. They've done everything I've asked. They've worked their back ends off, and they never complain. I demand a good bit of them. I ask a lot of them, and they always practice hard. They show up, rain or shine—it doesn't matter. The only day off they get is on Sunday."

"I'm proud of them for the way they've stepped up."

First-year starters Ridge Raper, Austen Baker, Nate Owens and Cole Motes have stepped into more prominent roles, but veterans like Hardy, Wrona, Brody Nix, Chase Hutchens and Peyton Thomas are still steering the ship. Thomas, a UNA signee and the reigning Class 2A Hitter of the Year, slugged his 28th career home run in last Tuesday's series-opening 10-0 rout of Lamar County. Through Sunday, he was batting a team-best .385 with six homers, nine doubles, 18 RBIs and 20 runs scored while reaching base at a .520 clip and walking twice as often (17 times) as he struck out (eight).

Hardy, a senior, had posted a solid .368 on-base percentage through Sunday and was second on the team with two home runs, 15 walks and 18

See 'PITCHING,' Page 15



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'PITCHING', from page 14

runs scored. Nix, another senior, got off to a slow start at the plate this season but delivered a clutch two-run single that proved to be the difference in last Wednesday's area-clinching win in Vernon.

Raper raves about Wrona's defense in center, and the speedy senior has also contributed to the team's small-ball approach on offense with three sacrifice bunts, seven stolen bases in eight tries and 16 runs scored through Sunday. Hutchens was leading the team in sac bunts with four and had a strong series against Lamar County, doubling and scoring three runs in the opener and then driving in a run in Wednesday's finale. Fellow seniors Daniel Smith and Brandon Thomas have contributed primarily as base runners, combining for 28 runs scored on the year.

Then there's the new blood. A series of leg injuries forced Hardy to move from his customary spot behind the plate to the middle infield, but Baker has thrived as the team's everyday catcher and leadoff hitter. The freshman led the team through Sunday with nine multi-hit games on the season and was tied with Thomas for the team lead in hits with 30. Baker also ranked second on the team with a .312 batting average and third with six doubles.

Raper, another freshman who hit .289 last year in limited at bats, was batting .280 this season through Sunday with a .406 OBP and more walks (13) than strikeouts (11). He ranked among team leaders with 21 hits, four doubles, 12 RBIs and 13 runs scored. Owens, who had only 22 plate appearances as a sophomore in 2017, has broken out this season with seven multi-hit games, nine doubles and a team-leading 25 RBIs.

Motes, another junior, was sporting a solid .345 OBP through Sunday with 12 walks and 17 runs scored. He went 2-for-5 with three RBIs in the two-game sweep of Lamar County last week.

The Bobcats' team batting average is down more than 30 points from last season, and they were averaging 5.8 runs per game through Sunday compared to 7.4 per game a year ago. But Raper's assertion in the preseason that pitching

would be his team's greatest strength has proven to be right on the money.

Phil Campbell's team ERA through Sunday was 2.18, more than half a run lower than last year's 2.77. Thomas (4-3 with a 0.67 ERA, four complete games, a strikeout/walk ratio of 60/8 and only 20 hits allowed in 42 innings) has been every bit the ace he was expected to be. Owens, meanwhile, has taken a major leap forward after throwing 29 solid innings (3.14 ERA) as a sophomore in 2017. The junior lefty was 5-2 through Sunday with a 1.94 ERA and 43 strikeouts in 36 innings. He had completed three of his five starts, including a one-hit, 10-strikeout gem in a 12-0 rout of Sheffield on March 3.

"Something we talk about and stress is that it's not always the best team that wins—it's the team that plays the best that day," said Raper, whose team had won six of its last seven games through Sunday and will host either Fyffe or Section in what promises to be a tough first-round draw. "Those teams that have beat us in the playoffs have been really good teams. They're just as good as you are, and one bad inning can be the difference. Our goal is to learn to play seven complete innings. We've done that some games, but the key is playing that way game after game. Hopefully, we're peaking at the right time. I still don't think we've played our best baseball yet."

Ridge Raper has also been a revelation after working only nine innings as an eighth-grader in 2017. The freshman righthander threw six strong innings against Lamar County last Wednesday, running his record on the season to 4-1 in seven starts. Through Sunday, Raper had posted a 2.08 ERA in 37.1 innings while striking out 43 batters and walking only 11.

Hutchens and Motes each have a complete game win under their belt this season, and Hardy has flourished in a relief role. The senior righty was 3-0 through Sunday with two saves and only two earned runs allowed across eight appear-

ances (only one of which was a start). Hardy had struck out 28 batters and walked nine while holding opponents to only 12 hits in 21.2 innings.

As a staff, the Bobcats had struck out 206 batters through Sunday while walking just 61 in 173 innings. The team's pitchers had combined for 11 complete games, including four shutouts.

"On a given day, we can run four or five kids out there who we feel like will pitch pretty good," Jonathan Raper said. "We've had our days, of course, but for the most part we've been able to hold people to two or three runs. So if we can get four to five runs on the board, we definitely feel like we can win. We've won quite a few games 3-0, 3-1, 2-1. Pitching-wise, it's been pretty solid all year long."

Backing up that pitching with good defense and timely hitting will likely be the key to Phil Campbell's quest to put together a deep playoff run. The Bobcats have been bounced in the second round by nemesis Mars Hill each of the past two seasons.

"Something we talk about and stress is that it's not always the best team that wins—it's the team that plays the best that day," said Raper, whose team had won six of its last seven games through Sunday and will host either Fyffe or Section in what promises to be a tough first-round draw. "Those teams that have beat us in the playoffs have been really good teams. They're just as good as you are, and one bad inning can be the difference. Our goal is to learn to play seven complete innings. We've done that some games, but the key is playing that way game after game."

"I think this team has been hitting better as the year goes on. We've had some different guys get big hits for us, and we've done a pretty good job of moving runners over and bunting and just taking advantage of what they give us. The key is accepting our roles and doing whatever we've gotta do for the good of the team, as long as we're ahead when it's all said and done."

"Hopefully, we're peaking at the right time. I still don't think we've played our best baseball yet."



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'COUNTY', from page 13

and reaching base at a ridiculous .704 clip. Of Jackson's 26 hits through Sunday, a staggering 19 had gone for extra bases—including seven home runs and nine doubles.

Jackson was leading the team with 21 RBIs, 25 runs scored and 17 stolen bases in 17 attempts, but she is by no means the only offensive weapon for the Lady Bobcats (who entered the week batting .317 as a team and averaging a healthy 7.1 runs per game on the year). Freshman Katie Thomas was batting .365 through Sunday while ranking second on the team in hits (19), doubles (four) and RBIs (12). She had walked six times while striking out only twice in 59 plate appearances this season.

Junior Abby Davis was batting .364 (16-for-44) through Sunday while tying Jackson for the team lead in triples with three and ranking second in runs scored with 16. Sophomore Kallie Allen came into the week with multiple hits in four straight games and was batting .462 (12-for-26) on the year with 15 runs scored and 16 stolen bases in 16 tries. Kenner Scott, an eighth-grader, has also provided a lift at the plate, batting .295 (13-for-44) through Sunday with a .411 on-base percentage and 14 runs scored.

"Winning would mean so much to all of the girls," Jackson said, "but especially to those seniors. These girls have worked so hard, and I know they would love to bring the championship back to Phil Campbell for their last county tournament in the black and gold."

As for the seniors, Roberson had an inside-the-park home run and a double in last Thursday's 10-6 win at Covenant Christian; the speedy Elliott had stolen seven bases in eight tries on the year; and Knight was leading the team in sacrifice bunts with five.

Sophomore Emily Swinney had gone 8-0 in the circle through Sunday and was leading the team in innings pitched with 41. Eighth-grader Emma Ergle was 6-3 on the season with 40 strikeouts and only 11 walks in 37.1 innings.

If the Lady Bobcats want to win the county championship, they'll have to take it from Belgreen, which beat Tharptown in last season's final. The Lady Bulldogs brought back nearly every key contributor from a year ago and have already beaten county rivals Vina (twice) and Red Bay this season. They lost a pair of games to Phil Campbell, including a 4-3 defeat on March 5.

"We lost our second baseman, Shellie Barber, from last year's county championship team," Belgreen coach Chris Scott said. "She was a big part of what we did. Emmie Scott has stepped up and handled that spot for us. We are a good defensive team this year behind our great ninth-grade pitcher Emma Dempsey, and we have several power hitters led by Cortny Williams, Camie Terrell and our great catcher, Kaycee Wilson.

"We still have a lot of speed on the bases with Katie Dempsey and her sister Gracie. Kelsey Wilson has really stepped up this year at third base and at the plate, and Bailey Wood has done a great job for us at shortstop. We have some girls who come off the bench as role players and really help us."

Scott said the Lady Bulldogs don't plan on letting the county crown go without a fight.

"As far as us repeating and winning the county tournament again," he said on Sunday, "I'll say this. When this group comes to play like they're capable of, I would put them up against anybody in the state."

Tharptown, which made it to the championship game last year, is already off to a good start this year, having beaten Vina in a first-round game last Thursday before wet weather put the remainder of the tournament on hold until this Saturday. The Lady Wildcats are led in the circle by pitchers Olivia Ergle and Taylor Cameron, who as of last week had combined to strike out 124 batters while walking only 25 and allowing just 63 hits in 73.2 innings.

Sophomore Shaylee Wieting, who earned All-State honorable mention as a freshman last season, is once again setting the tone for Tharptown offensively at the top of the order. Wieting went 4-for-4 in last Monday's 9-2 win at Shoals Christian, raising her season average to .422 (19-for-45). She was leading the team with 22 runs scored and 15 stolen bases in 16 tries.

Catie Dawson was batting a team-best .514 (19-for-37) with a home run and 15 RBIs. Senior Ameliah Dawson hit a grand slam in the win over Shoals Christian and was batting .406 (13-for-32) on the season. Sophomore Brooke Daily was batting .436 (17-for-39) with four doubles, nine RBIs and 15 runs scored.

Saturday's tournament at Belgreen will be double-elimination.

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'REPEAT', from page 13

for Strickland [who was under the weather] on Monday against Central and earning a 10-2 win.

The Lady Golden Tigers were even more dominant in doubles play, dropping just one court (No. 1 against Deshler on Wednesday) the whole week. Parrish and Woods were 4-0 at No. 2 doubles, with Holland and freshman Callie Palmer also going undefeated at No. 3 doubles. Burns and Strickland were 2-1 at No. 1 doubles, with Burns and Bragwell teaming up in Strickland's absence to beat Central 10-0.

Russellville dominated that Monday match against Central, dropping a total of just four games in nine courts. Burns, Parrish, Woods and Bragwell each won their singles match 10-0, with Holland and Scruggs rolling to 10-2 wins. The Lady Golden Tigers won all three doubles matches 10-0.

Tuesday's match against Wilson was another 9-0 whitewashing, but Wednesday's showdown with Deshler—last year's sectional runner-up and the greatest threat to a Russellville repeat—was a different story. Deshler won No. 1 and No. 2 singles and also took the No. 1 doubles court, but the Lady Golden Tigers came out on top everywhere else with Woods winning 8-5 at No. 3 singles, Strickland winning 8-5 at No. 4, Bragwell winning 8-6 at No. 5, and Scruggs winning 8-5 at No. 6. Parrish and Woods prevailed in a 9-7 nailbiter at No. 2 doubles, and Holland and Palmer cruised to an 8-2 win at No. 3 doubles.

"The girls have been amazing," Dollar said. "They have stepped up to challenge after challenge. We have some really good teams in our section, and the competition has been tough. But our girls always found a way to win."

Thursday's 8-1 whipping of Brooks capped off a perfect season for Russellville in Section 8, which includes the four opponents from last week along with Fayette County, Haleyville and Hamilton.

"The girls have been amazing this season," Dollar said. "They have stepped up to challenge after challenge. We have some really good teams in our section, and the competition has been tough. But our girls always found a way to win."

Going into Monday's regular-season finale against Lauderdale County, Russellville's only three losses this season had come to Class 6A opponents Decatur, Florence and Hartselle. Dollar credits assistant coach LeAnn Strickland for much of the program's growth in recent years.

"LeAnn deserves a lot of the credit for our success," Dollar said. "She was the one who got several girls started playing tennis a few years ago. She has given them lessons and worked with them a lot over the last few years."

That hard work has already resulted in a historic achievement with last year's first-ever section championship. Russellville is ready to make a run at a repeat next Tuesday. The top two teams from the sectional tournament will advance to the state tournament, set for April 23-24 in Mobile.

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Anna Woods Sophomore, Russellville

Woods helped Russellville's girls finish off an undefeated season in sectional play last week. She went 4-0 at No. 3 singles, posting wins over Central (10-0) on Monday, Wilson (8-1) on Tuesday, Deshler (8-5) on Wednesday and Brooks (8-3) on Thursday. She also teamed up with senior Rebecca Parrish to go 4-0 at No. 2 doubles.

Woods did not lose a sectional match all season in singles or doubles, helping Russellville finish 10-0 in Class 4A/5A, Section 8. The Lady Golden Tigers will take aim at a second straight section tournament championship next Tuesday.



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Golden Tigers drop first area series since 2014

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

Russellville rallied from a late deficit to beat Brooks 9-4 in the first game of last Thursday's doubleheader, but the Lions answered with a three-run seventh inning in the nightcap to take the tiebreaker game 4-1 and hand the Golden Tigers their first series loss in area play since 2014.

Russellville (18-12 overall through Sunday) and Brooks (17-13) both came into this week 3-1 in Class 5A, Area 16, with one series remaining for each. The Lions were in position to clinch the area title outright with a two-game sweep of Lawrence County. If Brooks loses one of the two area games against the Red Devils, Russellville could still clinch its fourth straight area championship with a sweep of East Limestone. The Golden Tigers need to win at least one of the two area games with the Indians to clinch a playoff spot. [The series was set to begin Tuesday at Russellville Baseball Stadium and will conclude Thursday in Athens.]

If Brooks and Russellville finish tied in the area standings, the Lions will hold the tiebreaker edge by virtue of their win in last Thursday's second game at Russellville Baseball Stadium. The game—which featured four inning-ending double plays turned by the Golden Tigers, but also four plays on which they ran into outs with poor base running—was tied 1-1 going to the seventh. Russellville starter Caden Parker, who had struck out five Brooks batters while walking just one through six sharp innings, started the top of the seventh by issuing back-to-back four-pitch walks to Peyton Plants and Carson Daniel.

Jaret Ward came on in relief, and Mason Hanback dropped down a perfect sacrifice bunt to advance the runners. Plants scored the go-ahead run on a wild pitch by Ward, who proceeded to walk Jacob Hall. Pinch-runner Kobe Warden stole second, and Russellville elected to intentionally walk leadoff man Lake Spurgeon to load the bases and set up a force play at home plate.

Brett Urban foiled the strategy with a high chopper through the right side of the drawn-in infield, driving home two runs to make it 4-1. Spurgeon was thrown out at the plate trying to score on another wild pitch, but the damage was done. The Lions had scored three runs on just one hit, making the most of four walks, a sac bunt and a wild pitch.

In fact, all four Brooks runners who scored in the game reached base on walks. Derek Urban drew a leadoff walk in the top of the third, moved to second on a sac bunt by Warden and then scored on a single up the middle by Spurgeon to make it 1-0. Brett Urban flied out to deep left-center for the second out, and senior centerfielder Tom Barkley Scott threw out Spurgeon attempting to tag up and take third.

It was the third consecutive inning for Brooks to start the game that ended with a double play. With two on and one out in the top of the first, Parker got cleanup hitter Avery Cox to hit a groundball to third that Houston Kitterman turned into an easy 5-3 twin killing. Plants singled with one in the top of the second, but he was doubled off first base after rightfielder Devin Buckhalter made a terrific sliding catch on Daniel's drive into the gap.

While the Golden Tigers were getting outs in bunches on defense, they were giving them right back—and then some—with careless base running. Parker walked to lead off the bottom of the third, and courtesy runner Colton Madden moved to second on a sac bunt by Hunter Briles. With two outs, Rudy Fernandez smoked an RBI single to left to score Madden and tie the game 1-1. Spurgeon walked Ezzell to bring Kitterman to the plate with two men on, but Fernandez strayed too far from second on a ball in the dirt and got caught in a rundown before being tagged out at third to end the inning.

Parker pitched around a pair of two-out singles in the top of the fourth, and Russellville was in great position to take the lead in the bottom of the inning. Kitterman reached on an error and moved up on a sac bunt by Brock Malone. Walks to Buckhalter and Scott loaded the bases with just one out. The rally crashed and burned, however, when Cox—the Lions' veteran catcher—picked Kitterman off third for the second out and then caught Buckhalter wandering too far from second on a ball in the dirt a couple of pitches later.

Russellville's last, best threat came in the bottom of the sixth when Kitterman's mile-high pop-up down the first-base line dropped in for a one-out hit, but he was thrown out trying to take second on the play. The Lions grabbed the lead in their next at bat, and then Hanback finished off his three scoreless innings of relief by pitching around a two-out walk to Parker in the bottom of the seventh.

Parker (5-1) took the loss, allowing three earned runs on six hits in six innings. He struck out five and walked three. Russellville managed only three hits as a team, singles by Fernandez, Ezzell and Kitterman.

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'AREA,' from page 18

The Golden Tigers swung the bats much better in last Thursday's opener, which they had to win to prevent Brooks from clinching the area title. After an RBI single by Cox in the top of the first staked the Lions to an early lead, Kitterman and Buckhalter both delivered two-out RBI singles in the bottom half to put Russellville on top 2-1.

Just as they had done in last Tuesday's series opener (a 4-2 win at the Florence Sportsplex), the Lions rallied for three runs in the third inning. They loaded the bases against Fernandez on three walks, and then Plants bounced a two-run single through the middle to give Brooks the lead. Daniel followed with an RBI double to make it 4-2.

Brooks starter Jacob Hall was still protecting that two-run lead with one out in the bottom of the fifth when senior leadoff man Noah Gist battled deep into the count and then singled on a 3-2 pitch. Fernandez flied to center for the second out, but Ezzell crushed a game-tying two-run blast—his fourth home run of the season and the 11th of his varsity career—to left-center to square the game 4-4.

The Golden Tigers took the lead and broke it open with five runs in the bottom of the sixth. Malone and Buckhalter both reached on infield hits, and then Scott bunted for a hit to load the bases. Parker's sacrifice fly broke the tie, and then Gist followed a base hit by Briles with another sac fly to make it 6-4.

Reliever Brett Urban walked Fernandez to load the bases and then hit Ezzell to force home another run. Kitterman reached on an error with two outs, allowing courtesy runners Omar Tompkins and Madden to score and make it 9-4.

That was plenty for Fernandez (3-2), who recovered from a shaky start to dominate over the final four innings. The senior righthander did not allow a hit or a walk after the third, striking out six. He finished with nine strikeouts (matching his season-high) in a complete game, giving up four earned runs on five hits and four walks. He threw 64 of his 104 pitches for strikes.

Ezzell was 2-for-3 with a homer, a double and three RBIs. Gist went 2-for-3 and scored twice, and Buckhalter was 3-for-3 with an RBI and a run scored. It was his eighth multi-hit game of the season, tying him with Fernandez for the team lead.

The Golden Tigers were scheduled to open their final area series of the season at home against East Limestone on Tuesday. The series will conclude with a doubleheader next Thursday in Athens.



PHOTO BY KYLE GLASGOW

Fernandez recovered from a rocky start to hold Brooks hitless over the final four innings of Russellville's 9-4 win last Thursday. He finished with a season-high nine strikeouts in a complete game, but the Lions came back to win the nightcap 4-1 and take the series. The Golden Tigers entered the week needing to win at least one of two area games against East Limestone to clinch a playoff berth.

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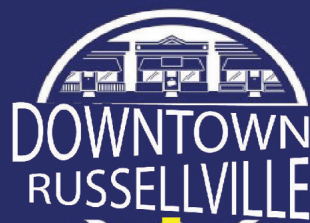
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