

The Post-Searchlight

the PURSUIT of HAPPINESS





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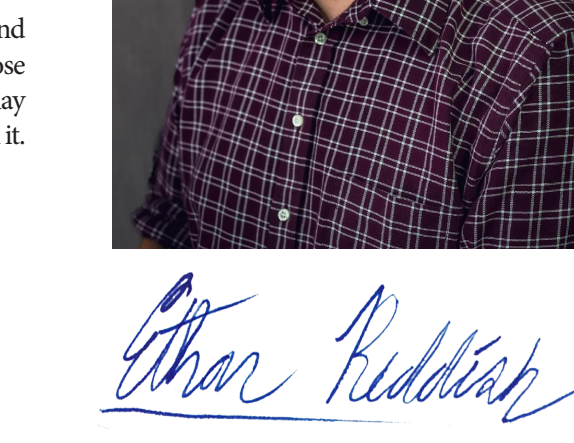
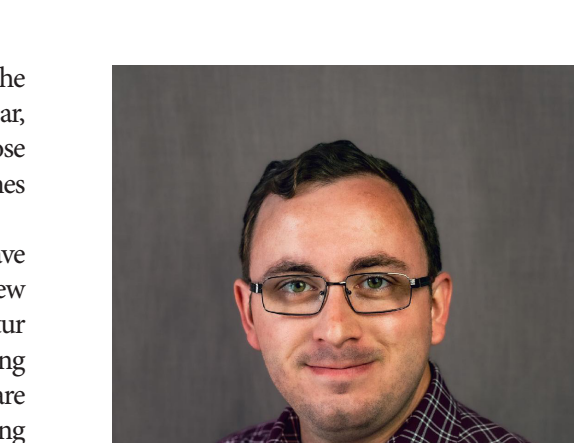
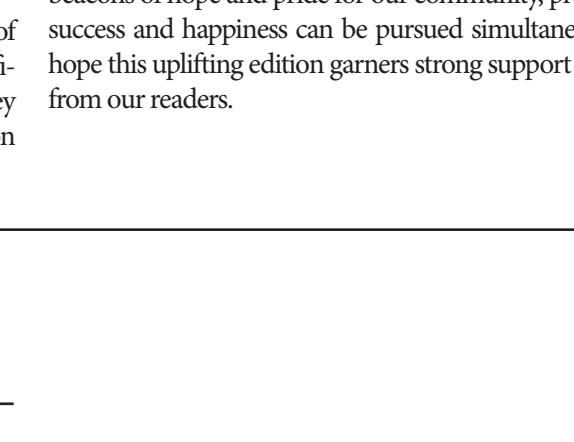
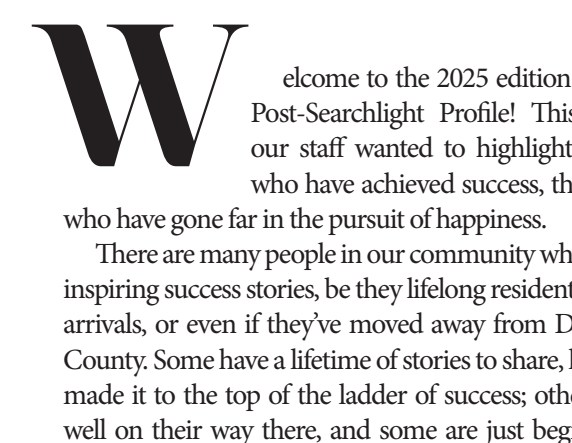
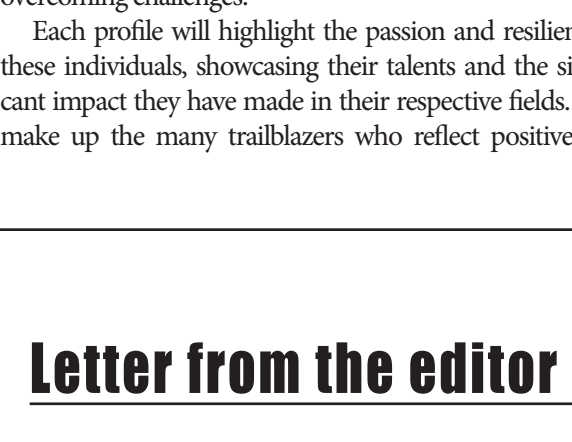
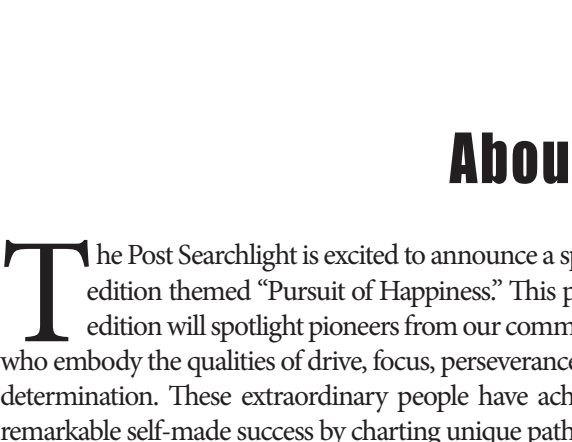
At Southwest Georgia Oil, we're proud to celebrate the extraordinary individuals featured in this edition - and it gives us a chance to recognize and thank our very own team of exceptional employees.

Special recognition goes to Glennie Bench, whose dedication and drive reflect the spirit of our entire company. From going the extra mile to creating amazing moments every day, our incredible team is here to serve our community and brighten YOUR day!



We're from here.

TABLE OF CONTENTS



DR. GORDON MILLER.....4

CAROL BUCKLEY.....5

GLENNIE BENCH.....6

BROCK TOOLE.....7

SHWETA PATEL.....9

ALICIA HURTT.....10

DEE PERKINS.....11

ERICK JUAREZ.....14

About this issue

The Post Searchlight is excited to announce a special edition themed "Pursuit of Happiness." This profile edition will spotlight pioneers from our community who embody the qualities of drive, focus, perseverance, and determination. These extraordinary people have achieved remarkable self-made success by charting unique paths and overcoming challenges.

Each profile will highlight the passion and resilience of these individuals, showcasing their talents and the significant impact they have made in their respective fields. They make up the many trailblazers who reflect positively on

Bainbridge, Georgia, and the Decatur County community, putting our town on the map through their noteworthy achievements. Their stories are a testament to the fact that through hard work and dedication, anything is possible.

This issue also aims to inspire future generations by sharing the journeys of these influential figures. They serve as beacons of hope and pride for our community, proving that success and happiness can be pursued simultaneously. We hope this uplifting edition garners strong support and pride from our readers.

The Post-Searchlight

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Letter from the editor

Welcome to the 2025 edition of the Post-Searchlight Profile! This year, our staff wanted to highlight those who have achieved success, the ones who have gone far in the pursuit of happiness.

There are many people in our community who have inspiring success stories, be they lifelong residents, new arrivals, or even if they've moved away from Decatur County. Some have a lifetime of stories to share, having made it to the top of the ladder of success; others are well on their way there, and some are just beginning the climb.

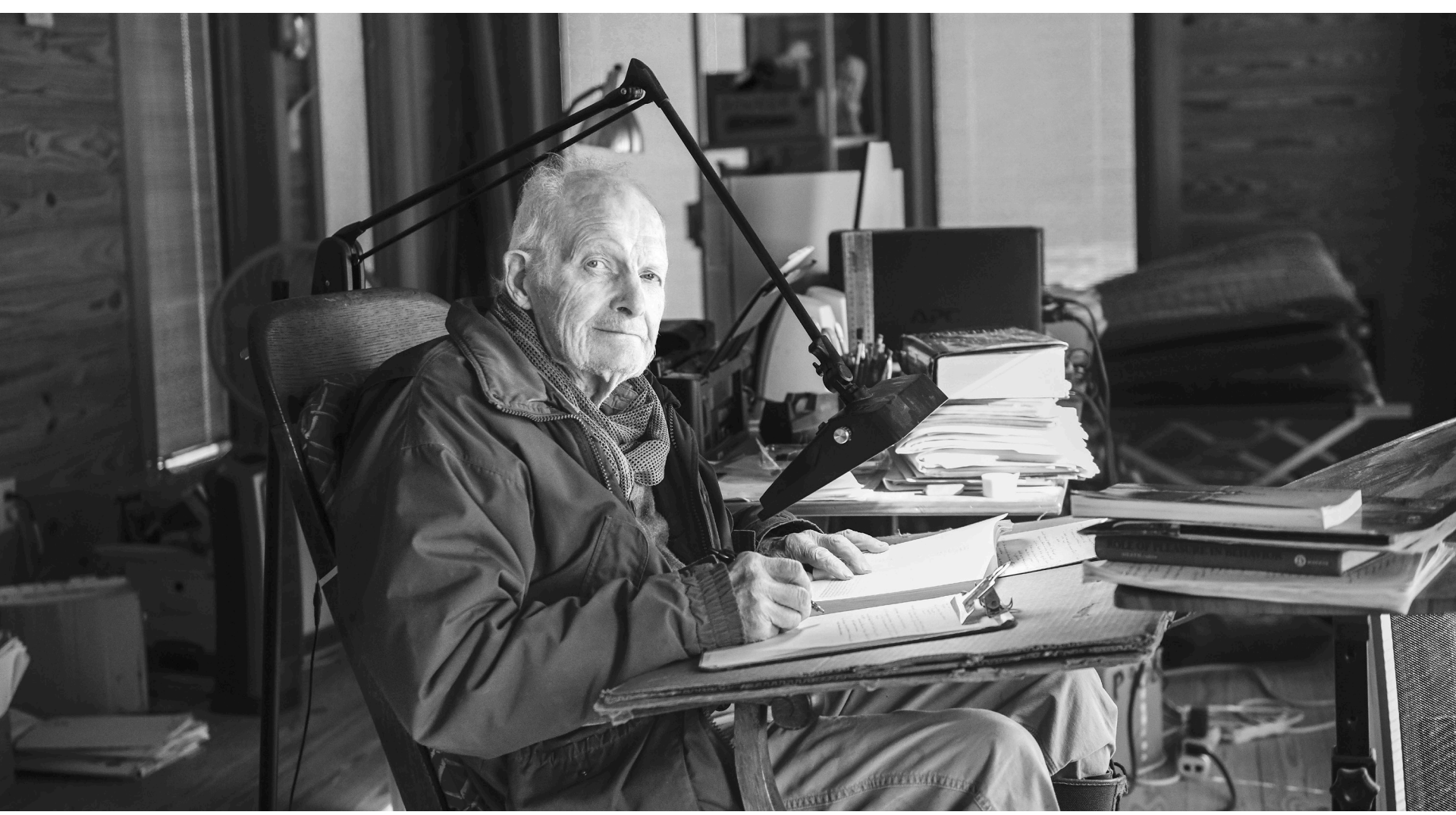
I hope these stories will not only give attention and credit to those who deserve it, but will inspire those who read them to pursue their own happiness. It may not be an easy climb, but these stories show it's worth it.



Ethan Reddish

DR. GORDON MILLER

A lifelong learner



Anna Kinchen-The Post-Searchlight

A MAN OF MANY TALENTS: Not only has Dr. Miller had a lifelong career as a doctor, he is a writer, with books ranging from medicine to spirituality published.

BY CODY MARMON
Sports Reporter

Dr. Gordon Chason Miller, born in 1936 to parents Herbert Miller and Cornelia Chason was raised in Bainbridge, he became a cardiologist, publicist, and lifelong learner. Now residing on a 960-acre tree farm in southern Decatur County, he reflects on his journey to success, marked by both joy and struggle, akin to ‘a horse kicking against the spike drawbar of a buggy.’

In the fourth grade, he decided to pursue becoming a doctor, giving him a constructive direction.

He obtained a Bachelor of Science during his four years at the University of Georgia and later received his Doctor of Medicine degree from the Medical College of Georgia. He chose Charity Hospital in New Orleans for its reputation for hands-on experience. He completed a rotating internship and a three-year internal medicine residency across various subspecialties. For three years, he managed the death conference, reviewing cases from both Louisiana State University and Tulane services. He then pursued cardiology fellowships at Tulane and the Medical College of Georgia. To this day, he remains grateful for his father’s funding of his college education.

“As an older child, I looked around and saw everything ain’t rosy,” Miller said. “Being a lifelong learner is distressing.” The most reasonable way to succeed in life is to find enjoyment in growing your knowledge, thinking about your existence, and working towards new goals.

That’s what Dr. Miller proceeded to do—practicing internal medicine and cardiology in Columbus, Georgia, from 1971 to 1993. He dedicatedly pursued the study of cardiology far and wide with the use of his sabbatical. His journey led him to Columbus, Georgia, where he provided services and tirelessly consulted on 1,200 echocardiograms for newborns around the clock where the first cardiac catheterization lab at Saint Francis Hospital was developed, he managed the dialysis service at the Saint Francis Medical Center.

“It was a demanding 24-hour job,” he said. “I doubted my ability to balance a family and keep pace with my medical practice.”

When working with his patients, Miller always kept his biblical values close to him: honesty, justice, forgiveness, kindness, grace, peace, and humility. He emphasizes the importance of honesty and objective truth, noting that it implies a specific type of truth, not just subjective truth.

In his book “Orthodoxy, One Physician’s Interpretation and Update”, Dr. Miller states, “Employing evidence and reason is logically consistent with the ultimate concern for objective truth because it is necessary for honesty and justice which are attributes of God implied throughout the scriptures along with the humanistic values of: forgiveness, kindness, mercy,

grace, respect, and humility.”

His principles practically applied to help real-life people, particularly those who needed medical assistance—noting the unique challenges medical professionals face and that each patient’s case is different and requires objective truth-finding.

During his time in Columbus, Dr. Miller published an illustrated book, “Principles of Health Preservation”, which observed the risk of atherosclerotic heart disease and the heart disease issues of young truck drivers due to dieting, smoking, and lack of leg movement. The book was distributed throughout the school systems in Georgia.

Cardiology wasn’t his only passion; his fascination with internal medicine guided his decision to pursue a career in medicine and surgery.

Internal medicine is a specialty that focuses on the care of adults, dealing with the diagnosis and treatment of nonsurgical diseases and a wide range of medical conditions, diagnosing and treating complex medical situations, and establishing long-term relationships with their patients.

“Internal medicine has always captivated me intellectually,” Dr. Miller reflected. “I did not wish to practice surgery without a comprehensive understanding of medicine and cardiology. I believed it was imperative to master both disciplines.” He recognized the importance of a holistic understanding of medicine and committed to repeatedly taking board exams to stay abreast of the latest advancements in the medical science field, ensuring he could provide the most comprehensive care.

“I immersed myself in various subspecialties, including endocrinology. Even during my time back in Bainbridge,” he explained, “I diagnosed two cases of pheochromocytoma, which is indeed a complex and sophisticated diagnosis.”

During the latter part of his illustrious cardiology career, Dr. Miller faced the dilemma of whether to endure living two hours away from his family or relocate to be closer for personal reasons. Ultimately, he chose to practice in Bainbridge for 23 years, contributing to his 53-year tenure in the medical profession.

“My sister couldn’t understand why I was spending more time at the house working 18-hour days. My father’s health deterioration plummeted,” he said. “I was 120 miles away and couldn’t do anything about it. I couldn’t tolerate being that far away from my parents; it hurt me.”

During Dr. Miller’s tenure in Bainbridge, he practiced clinical cardiology and internal medicine and implanted 100 more pacemakers for a total of 350 without a device infection. He meticulously documented his follow-up visits on complex heart patients in adherence to Medicare guidelines.

Growing more frustrated with how healthcare services influenced his work as a doctor he participated in state conventions in Savannah, Georgia, where

he appeared before the state medical board in civil cases. Dr. Miller presented his follow-up visit documentation and advocated for a resolution, urging insurance companies to evaluate doctors based on the quality of their work rather than the quantity of patients reflected in the submitted bills.

“No doctor can practice perfect medicine; nobody can,” Dr. Miller said. “But I believe my patients recognized my honesty, transparency, and dedication to improving their health.”

These reflections on his career reveal the intrinsic challenges of balancing a work-life relationship, irrespective of financial rewards, and underscore the significance of finding joy in one’s professional endeavors. “It’s a series of milestones,” Dr. Miller remarked. “Receiving a letter of passing after an exam would feel like the pinnacle of achievement at that moment. Yet, as time goes on, new goals and challenges emerge.”

Dr. Miller hopes his legacy will be forever remembered through his philanthropic services. He personally financed the establishment of a cardiology lab at Bainbridge Memorial Hospital and generously donated \$550,000 to the Georgia Medicine hospitals, specifically the Medical College of Georgia and

Memorial Hospital & Manor. He expressed immense gratitude for being welcomed back for additional fellowships.

He invested his resources to create a cardiology laboratory at Bainbridge Memorial Hospital, offering crucial services such as echocardiography that the community lacked before.

Now retired, Dr. Gordon Miller continues to grow his mind daily through the study of astronomy, an earnest effort to know God and Jesus well, thinking deeply about human existence and its overall connection to the scientific understanding and laws of nature, managing his tree farm, taking long walks, studying, and writing. His recent publication, “Orthodoxy: One Physician’s Interpretation and Updates,” delves into mental and spiritual health and examines the decline in church membership.

In conclusion, Dr. Gordon Miller’s remarkable journey and unwavering dedication to his profession and community are a testament to the qualities we seek to highlight in this special edition of The Post Searchlight. His story and those of other pioneers exemplify the spirit of drive, focus, perseverance, determination, and the pursuit of happiness.



CAROL BUCKLEY

A life blessed by elephants



Ethan Reddish - The Post-Searchlight

A LONG WAY FROM WHERE WE BEGAN: Carol Buckley purchased Tarra in the 70s. The pair would travel across the country performing in showbusiness, working at zoos, before settling in Hohenwald, Tennessee. After legal disputes, the pair finally settled in Attapulcus. (Bottom) Buckley delivers Bo his dinner of hay and produce.

BY ETHAN REDDISH
News Editor

Attapulcus has several noteworthy businesses and organizations that draw attention to the little town, including BASF and the University of Georgia's Attapulcus Research Center. However, one organization that has drawn many eyes from at home and abroad is Elephant Refuge North America (ERNA). As the name says, this is a sanctuary for retired elephants, and is the second one to be founded by Carol Buckley.

Buckley is not a Decatur native, having grown up in California. It was while growing up that she developed her lifelong love for animals, and specifically the relationships that people could build with them.

"During high school my friends knew that the perfect birthday present they could give me was a pet," she recalled. "You could say I was drawn to animals and felt like I could be myself with animals."

This love eventually led to Buckley attending Moorpark College to study exotic animal training. And it was while studying at Moorpark in 1974 that Buckley would meet her lifelong companion and adoptive daughter: a baby elephant then known as Fluffy. The calf had been recently imported from Myanmar to the Jungleland private zoo, only to be sold to the owner of a tire dealership.

Buckley took an immediate interest in Fluffy, and after helping care for her for a time, purchased her from the dealership, renaming her Tarra. Buckley put her training to work, and she and Tarra would go on to perform in shows, as well as make appearances in TV and film.

But, after several years on the road, the duo would grow tired of performing, and ultimately Buckley left show business behind. Instead, she began to work in zoos as an elephant caretaker. All the while though, just like any other parent, Buckley had bigger and better plans for Tarra.

"I dreamt my sanctuary dream for 10 years, starting from the time Tarra was 10 years old," she said. "I built the dream in my mind, step by step, acre by acre, until the vision was so real in my mind that it was time to manifest it."

That dream did manifest itself, as The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee. Buckley declined to renew her contract with the Nashville Zoo, and purchased a parcel of land in Hohenwald, Tennessee, in November of 1994. The barn was completed in March of 1995, at which point she and Tarra moved into their

new home. Over the coming years, the sanctuary would grow, accommodating more and more elephants.

Unfortunately, hard times for the duo were on the horizon. Buckley ended up disagreeing with, and ultimately falling out with the other members of the Sanctuary board. She was removed from her position at the Sanctuary, and also lost not only her role as Tarra's caregiver, but even her visitation rights.

Not one to give up easily, Buckley pursued legal action, ultimately winning custody of Tarra, albeit after ten years of fighting in the courts. It was during this ten-year period, amid the legal turmoil, that Buckley would spend time in Asia, training locals on how to properly care for elephants.

It was also during this time that Buckley decided to start over and found a new sanctuary. After three years of looking, she nearly settled on a spot in southern Alabama.

"I knew it wasn't quite right, but allowed myself to be influenced that perhaps what I was looking for did not exist, and that this piece of land was close enough to my vision," she recalled. But within just a few days, she came across the property in Attapulcus. The hot and humid climate of Decatur County and southwest Georgia is perfect for elephants, as it's rather close to their native habitat.

"Immediately it was obvious that this was it, we'd found the land for the new sanctuary in Georgia."

Now, Buckley resides on the sanctuary grounds with Tarra, as well as the other two residents, Asian elephant Bo, and the most recent arrival, African elephant Mundi. She hopes to expand the sanctuary's staff and facilities in order to take in more elephants, as well as their educational efforts in the local communities.

Few people can say they've left such a legacy behind, having done so much to help such majestic and endangered animals. Though, Buckley feels she's gained from her efforts as well.

"Spending my life learning from and caring for elephants has brought me profound joy and amazing experiences," she said. "For this I am eternally grateful. The wisdom and intellectual depth elephants possess is difficult to convey in words, they simply have an indescribable presence. My life has been blessed by elephants."



GLENNIE BENCH

Dedication to community



Submitted Photos

HOW TO DEFINE SUCCESS: "If Southwest Georgia Oil is successful, then I feel successful," Bench said. "If Memorial Hospital is successful, I feel successful. If the city of Bainbridge is successful, then I feel successful."

BY CODY MARMON
Sports Reporter

In the heart of Bainbridge, Georgia, a beam of dedication and community spirit shines brightly through the efforts of Glennie Cox Bench. As the President and Chief Financial Officer of Southwest Georgia Oil Company since 2018, Bench's influence exemplifies generosity and professionalism in her personal pursuit. She demonstrates exemplary leadership within her company and is considered a steadfast pillar of strength in her community. She serves as the Chairperson of the Hospital Authority for Memorial Hospital and Manor. Her efforts contribute to regularly improving the quality of healthcare services and fortifying the hospital's ties with Bainbridge through her public accountant financial background. She is also a member of the Bainbridge City Council, where she has served three terms.

She balances a demanding career, family responsibilities, and community service with determination, inspired by the significant impact dedicated individuals can have on their communities. Raised in a family committed to community and civic service through politics as city council members, state legislature and secretary of state for Georgia, she was instilled with the expectation to contribute meaningfully to the general public. Under her stewardship, SWGA Oil has grown significantly, successfully operating a 150-million-gallon wholesale operation of 80 convenience and grocery stores, employing 1,300 people across three states.

Her leadership qualities are acknowledged by Mike Harrell, the CEO, who described her as "ferociously loyal to her family, this community, and Southwest Georgia Oil Co."

"I was humbled by it because you don't recognize that other people see things in you, maybe that you don't even see in yourself," Bench said. "And it's not as though you go out about your day trying to be those things, you naturally are."

Reflecting on her journey, she remembered the numerous challenges faced by her organization, from stabilizing hospital finances—transforming them into a sleeping giant—to responding to devastating hurricanes. Despite these hurdles, it was the moments of triumph and resilience that truly defined her success. For Bench, success meant contributing to the greater good and ensuring the prosperity of the organizations she cherished.

Bench is deeply dedicated to our hospital. There is an untapped potential. Overseeing the financial aspect effectively,

they are ready to launch new and exciting facilities and services for the community. "Our goal is to transform Bainbridge into a small healthcare hub," Bench said. "Encouraging people to come here instead of heading to Dothan, Tallahassee, Albany, or Thomas."

When asked why she took on so much for Bainbridge, Bench's answer was simple but profound: "I love this community, and I feel a deep sense of responsibility towards it. When you are committed, you owe it to the organization to be ferociously loyal. These are my people, my community, our company, our hospital. I get very emotional about challenges to those organizations, and I'm determined to support them with all I have."

Her husband Steve Bench, former decorated high school football coach and current Decatur County Sports Hall of Fame Board of Director, occasional question of "why" she cares about Bainbridge so much always lingered in her mind. But Glennie's answer was clear: when someone believes you have something valuable to contribute, and you have the time and willingness to commit, it's worth the effort. Her involvement in various roles ensured that Southwest Georgia Oil Company remained an integral part of the communities it served.

There is no such thing as self-made success without adversity or setbacks. The ability to balance many different things is not unique to Bench. Still, it is something that all women who work outside the home face.

"I think women in our community would understand that it has its own unique challenges. I have always felt very supported in trying to strike that balance, whether it's from my husband or our son or Mike Harrell, the owner of our company," Bench said. "There's always been the grace of abundant flexibility from all of those people that you live with or work with, and that requires some give and take."

Katherine Schaeffer, a research analyst at Pew Research Center, found in the 2023 Fortune 500 list that women CEOs reached an all-time high of 10.6%, with 53 women leading major U.S. companies.

"It is unusual. In fact, Bench said. "I just got off the phone this morning with a woman who wants me to speak at a conference because it is so unique to have the president of a company in our industry be a woman. It is becoming less unusual as time passes."

Overseeing a company like Inland Oil & Gas Corporation involves setting new standards and policies, creating new management levels, and coordinating various projects. But it also comes back to being the heartbeat of a community.

"It is immensely rewarding, specifically having come off of a hurricane season where we had three hurricanes come through Florida and Georgia and a little bit in Alabama," Bench said. "Seeing how our retail stores embrace the need to serve their community during those times is one of the most rewarding things about it; our stores believe they are in service to their communities, and so they take it seriously that they try to stay open to the last minute until it's just not safe for them to be open."

Because success is subjective, it can be defined in multiple ways. It might refer to short-term goals or overall life achievements. However, for Glennie

Cox Bench, success is determined by organizational success.

For her, focusing on organizational success means emphasizing the collective achievements and growth of the group they are part of. It's about fostering a thriving, productive environment where each member can contribute their best, leading to the organization's overall success.

"I don't think about personal success. If Southwest Georgia Oil is successful, then I feel successful," Bench said. "If Memorial Hospital is successful, I feel successful. If the city of Bainbridge is successful, then I feel successful. So, it is defined by those organizations."



BROCK TOOLE

Success built through fellowship



BY ETHAN REDDISH

News Editor

Some people believe life is nothing more than coincidences and random chance, while others believe everything happens for a reason. Brock Toole falls into the latter camp, in part thanks to how his business, Satisfied Foods, came about.

A Bainbridge native, Toole previously worked in logistics with the Puerto Rican government and Walmart for 19 years, and also served as the assistant superintendent at Oconee County Schools. The genesis for Satisfied Foods had a seemingly unassuming beginning: one day, Toole had been smoking fish he and his brother LaDon had caught. The pair's friend, Darrell Goodman, who had recently moved back from Maryland, made his own fish dip, before eventually persuading Toole to try his homemade pimento cheese. Toole, while typically not a fan of pimento cheese, relented, only to find himself enjoying Goodman's batch.

This simple interaction would lead Toole and Goodman to consider starting their own restaurant, before eventually settling on creating Satisfied Foods instead. One factor Toole differentiates Satisfied's cheeses with is their use of high-quality products, while also using less mayonnaise.

"People would just line up to buy it," Toole said of the cheese. The pair founded Satisfied in the Watkinsville/Athens area in 2019, and went into production in 2020. In the intervening years, the business has expanded not only their variety of cheeses, but their market, now supplying Satisfied products to Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and South Carolina. Originally, the local Dixie Dandy was their first partner; now, other Bainbridge businesses like KGD Produce carry their products, with Southern Philosophy serving them as well, while stores in Cairo, Thomasville, and the Tallahassee area also partnering. So many businesses either serve or cook with Satisfied products that even the odd celebrity has gotten a taste, with Toole recounting how Jimmy Buffet was served a Reuben with Satisfied cheese.

Speaking of musicians, music has been a love for both Toole and Goodman, and has had some influence on the business; Satisfied itself and their lineup of cheeses all derive their names from songs.

The business has changed some since opening, with Goodman no longer a part of the business, and Toole having had to close the business's Athens kitchen in order to move to a larger operation in Lithonia, Georgia, to keep up with their expansion.

"It kept morphing through our relationships we'd built," he said.

But Satisfied Foods is not the only business that Toole started through friends and simple interactions. In 2020, Toole also began home brewing with South Main Brewing in Watkinsville. It all started when Toole allowed a friend brew beer at his residence, or rather, the 2-room 1828 kitchen at his residence. It was here that they would hold events, letting people try their beer and cheeses.

"We break bread with good people and get by with the help of our friends," Toole said. It was while brewing beer at his house that Toole met Nick Farley, who is now the current brewer at South Main, which opened its permanent location in 2022. "Almost every partner we got, we broke bread with them." Toole also met and partnered with Dublin native Brad Allen in both businesses. He attributes their

Toole hasn't forgotten his roots in Decatur County. He emphasized his team's work ethic, which he attributed to "a good 'ole SOWEGA upbringing, not to mention a solid foundation of teaching from our parents and grandparents." Throughout this entrepreneurial journey, family and those Southern traditions have been a key ideal. "Sense of community is really big for us," he said. "I've found through music, food, and fellowship, you can make lasting bonds."

Submitted Photos

LIVING THE DREAM: Toole, pictured with his wife Christie, daughters Chloe and Sophie, and son Dylan, has built his businesses through connections and friendships. (Below) An example of Satisfied's cheese.





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SHWETA PATEL

Dedicated to children



COMMITTED TO SERVICE: Patel put her career in physical therapy (pictured above at Regional Therapy Services) on hold to work with the Decatur County Board of Education in 2021.

Submitted Photos

BY ETHAN REDDISH
News Editor

Some parents feel called to get involved in the process of their child's schooling, perhaps joining a parent-teacher organization. But some are so dedicated, they find themselves chosen to participate at the state level. This is a honor that Shweta Patel has now received twice.

Patel moved from India to Bainbridge in 2006 to join her husband, and became a US citizen in 2009. She had already graduated with a Bachelor's degree in physical therapy in India, and proceeded to attend Bainbridge College to get the corresponding American degree. She had also, for a time, been a stay-at-home mother, but as her son and daughter began attending school, she decided to take an active role, working as a parent volunteer in the Decatur County school system.

"I have participated in so many volunteer works," she recalled, "especially fundraising events and organizing fundraisers and all, working at school half of the time throughout the year."

She even put her physical therapy career on hold to work with the school system, having passed completed her courses in 2021, around the time the Decatur County school system began to reorganize and consolidate the schools and grades. Patel stated she was approached by Kim Johnson to work as a parent volunteer at Hutto. "So I just held onto my career for physical therapy for one year and started working as a volunteer for a time."

Patel's volunteer work did not go unnoticed, and she was nominated by the Board of Education to be a member of the State Superintendent's Parent Advisory Council (PAC) for the first time in 2021. This council consists of parents from across the state, and provides input on new policies that will impact students and families alike. One area of focus is on increasing parent engagement; to that end, Patel has contributed in ways like creating a video about the State's Multi-Tiered System Surveys, encouraging parents

to take the surveys.

This service with the PAC was enough to get her nominated and ultimately chosen to participate again this past fall. According to Dr. Crycynthia Gardner, the Decatur County Board of Education's Family Engagement Coordinator, while the Board of Education nominates parents for the council, it's ultimately the state that chooses. The fact that the state selected Patel twice to serve on the council speaks to her dedication.

Patel will serve with the 2024-26 PAC, and continue to encourage parent engagement. One way will be raising awareness of several Department of Education apps for parents, aimed at keeping parents informed about what their students are learning.

"For example, what my child will be learning in fifth grade, in science," Patel said as an example, "so you can open up that science app, click on the fifth grade, and you can see all the answers to things asked by parents. And if you send a question, they will answer you."

When not working with the Parent's Advisory Council, her physical therapy practice keeps her busy. Not content to rest on her laurels either, Patel stated she plans to continue her volunteer involvement in the school system after completing her current PAC term.

"My main goal is to serve Decatur County Schools as a volunteer," she said, "and get more parents involved in it and support the school system, because we are in a really blessed country, where they constantly work for education and for the kid's future."

"As partners in the education system of our children," Patel concluded, "your support is vital to the success of our school community. The investment in education today will definitely improve our children's future with great potential and knowledge."



ALICIA HURTT

Success in spite of strife



THIS ONE GOES OUT TO THE LADIES: After starting her career in real estate, Hurtt has since transitioned to providing services to women in the community with her Women's Wellness Center. (Bottom) Hurtt cuts the ribbon with the Chamber of Commerce at the Women's Wellness Center.

Submitted Photos, Mahalia Grier-The Post-Searchlight

BY MAHALIA GRIER
Staff Reporter

Success is subjective and has multiple meanings to different people, but the path to success is rife with strife. In order to be successful, one must overcome difficulties, be determined, and maintain a drive and passion. Alicia Hurtt's success story is unique, as she found success through the work she provides for women in the community.

Hurtt's journey to success started in Maryland, where she obtained her real estate license and opened a property management company as an investor and landlord. Inspired by her experiences, Hurtt wrote and published her first book, "The Real Estate Journey: Overcoming Obstacles," which advises anyone going through problems that hinder them from buying a home. Hurtt's hard work and determination earned her the 2024 Greater Capital Area Association of Realtors (GCAAR) for high production volume. She also completed the GOLDMAN Sachs 10KSB program, an initiative that helps small business owners in the United States advocate for policy changes to help businesses, employees, and the community.

After years of working and living in Maryland, Hurtt faced a turning point in her life when her mother died, and she quit her job. Seeking a fresh start and warmer climate for her Rheumatoid arthritis, Hurtt decided to move.

"We didn't know where we would

land," she said. "I knew that after my mom passed, I wanted to move away from Maryland. I wanted something different, something new. I also quit my job, so it was all on my husband." Hurtt's husband's job allowed for flexibility, and Bainbridge met their criteria and price range for a home.

After Hurtt's mother passed, she said, "I wrote a lot for therapy and healing, but it wasn't anything from which I was making money. I was coaching and counseling women, and I decided to teach a few classes, but overall, I was just being a mother."

Hurtt adjusted to life in Bainbridge well, continuing to write and publish books. So far, she has published 39 books of different categories based on herself, her family, ghostwriting, and sentimental novels. Hurtt's latest project is the Women Wellness Center, which is a connection to her website called "I See My Baby."

The center is a haven to empower women who are struggling with loss, infertility, lack of faith, and depression by providing them with support, resources, and advocacy, while offering holistic services such as Yoni steaming services, motherhood guides, and journals for overcoming life challenges. The center also partners with other services including Birth Doula Services, Postpartum Doula Services, and Virtual Doula Services. Additionally, the center also offers classes, seminars, and webinars to support women's wellness. One of the center's standout offerings is the annual Women's Wellness Retreat in

Negril, Jamaica, scheduled for November 2025. Hurtt describes the opportunity as a way for women to rejuvenate, relax, and rediscover their inner strength. The trip is to also trust in God fully and release their burdens and align with God's purpose.

Coming to Bainbridge, Hurtt was able to adapt to the new environment, progress her passion, overcome her struggles, and commit to a new project that helps women in the community.

As the executive director of the Women's Wellness Center, Hurtt

continues to expand the center's offerings and reach. She is positively impacting the community by offering women the space to have resources and support. Her story is a powerful lesson that explains success isn't about personal achievement but about lifting others and making a difference in their lives. Hurtt's journey is evident as she continues to empower women, inspire others, and overcome obstacles to help others succeed.



DEE PERKINS

Brush with celebrity



Submitted Photos

MAKE IT BIG TIME: Prior to returning to Bainbridge, Perkins (pictured above with the BMS step team) served as choreographer for the Albany State Passionettes, and even worked with celebrities like 2 Chainz and Kendrick Lamar.

BY MAHALIA GRIER

Staff Reporter

Some people gain success through work and effort, while others inherit it. Dee Perkins' starting point to success was apparent since he was a child in elementary school. "I was the kid that was always at recess making up cheer teams or dance teams," Perkins stated. "Many of the girls would try out for my team. So, every day, we had auditions at recess, and I knew I always wanted to coach. It's just something about me making up something, teaching it to somebody, and watching it come to life basically off the top of my head."

It wasn't until 8th grade that Perkins' middle school teacher saw his passion for dance. He stated, "I was a troublesome kid in school. I used to get in trouble for not sitting still in my seat because I always wanted to make a beat for everybody to dance to," Perkins recalled. "So, my 8th grade teacher sent a letter to my mom and she said, 'Dee is a great kid. He's very energetic. He's not a problem, but he wants to have dance practice throughout the class.'" Eventually, Perkins' middle school teacher found a way for him to channel his energy by signing him up to Lucretia's School of Dance. Perkins had dance class every Tuesday and Wednesday for two hours.

For one year, he danced at Lucretia before he joined Murkerson's Dance Academy, where he started as a cheerleader. From 9th to 10th grade, he became a hip-hop team instructor.

After two years with Murkerson, Perkins did basketball cheer from 10th-12th grade. Even though Perkins had an outlet for his energy, he would still be in class making up routines, but he always got his work done.

After high school, he became a cheerleader at Albany State University (ASU) for his first and second years. During the summer, the captain of the Passionettes dance line offered him a position as the choreographer, where he coached the dance line team at ASU from 2011-2013.

After Perkins' third year of coaching the Passionettes, a former HBCU dancer from Morehouse College reached out to Perkins and offered him the opportunity to be the lead choreographer for her dance company workshop. He accepted the position and started working for the company in 2012.

In 2013, Perkins received news that his

boss submitted videos of his choreography with the Passionettes to Robin Thicke, who was looking for two HBCU dancers to perform in his music video. The news got out, prompting other HBCU members to enter the audition. Almost two weeks later, Perkins' videos were chosen along with another dance team. Perkins went out to LA for five days to do the video shoot, where he also met and worked with famous artists like 2 Chainz, Pharrell Williams, and Kendrick Lamar.

He stated, "It was a great experience. I thought I was a celebrity. I was on a video set with people I see on TV. They were walking around me like it was a normal day." After the video shoot, Perkins was invited to the MTV VMA in Bronx, New York. He recalled, "Robin Thicke loved the performance so much that he wanted it performed in the MTV performance." Perkins went to the MTV performance as a supportive choreographer for the girls. Still, the director contacted Perkins and asked him if his choreography could be featured in Robin Thicke's music video "Give It 2 U."

This video shoot with Robin Thicke gave Perkins a new level of exposure and attention. Different high schools, colleges, community dance teams, and many up-and-coming Atlanta artists reached out to him. He also worked along with Dianna Williams, also known as Mrs. D from the TV show "The Dancing Dolls." He stated, "From my experience, lots of people knew my work from being Passionettes Fans. Every other weekend, I was flying somewhere or either traveling somewhere to host a camp for someone and hosting or judging a competition while still working for the company that got us the recognition."

In 2016, Perkins' choreography travels with big-name celebrities were put on hold when he received surgery on his head. Following this, in 2017, news about his grandmother's declining health prompted Perkins to return home, bringing his showbiz travels to an end.

When he returned to Bainbridge, he started subbing at the school. "I had the middle school and high school fighting to get me every week," he joked. "The kids love me, and I know how to get on their level and keep them in line simultaneously." Perkins subbed for five years. He stated, "After being in the school system from 2017 to 2019, I had already built a reputation for myself as a middle and high school sub-teacher. In my second year of subbing, I was asked to be the assistant cheer coach



in 2018 at Bainbridge Middle. In 2019, I was the basketball cheer coach at the high school."

Following his coaching at both BMS and BHS, as well as his grandmother's passing, Perkins was stuck at a crossroads: either going back to Atlanta or continuing to coach in Bainbridge. Eventually, the middle school principal, Quinten Fuller, presented him with an opportunity to coach a Step Team at the middle school in 2020. He answered, "I can step because I was in a fraternity, Phi Beta Sigma, where I pledged in Albany State in the spring of 2014. So, I've always been into step and dance."

Perkins was concerned with the ins and outs of teaching middle school because he had never coached middle school students. After further discussion with Fuller, Perkins decided to take the position, and he's been teaching the step team for five years.

Last year, the Step Team competed

against 30 teams at Westover High School, winning first place. Even though Perkins' received more love and recognition in the dance community in urban areas, he decided to stay in Bainbridge and give back to the Decatur County Schools. He stated, "I don't plan on going anywhere. I thought Bainbridge was too small for me, but I'm never too big for myself. I love the fact that I can be the person who I am to the kids. A lot of kids don't have a person who cares about them and who's gonna push them to stay on the right track." Even though Perkins lives in Bainbridge, he's still making waves on social media with almost 100,000 followers on Instagram watching his quirky dance moves and entertaining cheer chants.



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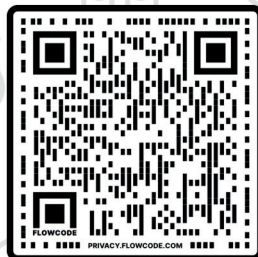
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ERICK JUAREZ

On the road to success

BY MAHALIA GRIER
Staff Reporter

Erick Martínez Juárez, a Bainbridge resident, has achieved a level of success that has taken him to greater heights. Juárez is the second son of migrant farmworkers Maricela and Loreto Juarez. Having lived in poverty and had a primary school education, Juárez's parents migrated to the United States from Mexico in the mid-1980s in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families. The couple beat the odds by having a strong work ethic, which they passed on to Juarez and their other children, who continue to prosper today.

As a child, Juárez spent most of his time surrounded by family and other farm workers with whom he shared a house. The house was small and had no air conditioning during the hottest months. Juárez wasn't much of a farm worker, but his father would take him and his siblings to work to show them the essence of hard work.

Juárez attended school in Attapulugus, where African Americans and Hispanics made up the majority. In second grade, a teacher saw that Juárez was "special" and took the initiative to give him a test that revealed that he was gifted. This experience changed Juárez's dynamic circle and placed him around other gifted students, opening up another world so different from his own.

In Bainbridge High School, Juárez encountered an environment with the majority of the students being African Americans and Caucasian. He stated, "Going to school at Bainbridge High, I saw that half of the school was black and the other half was white. Less than 2% are Latinos." Juárez recalled how he felt alone because he couldn't find someone who looked like him in school. His loneliness became a driving force for his studies, and he excelled exponentially. He also volunteered over the summer as a Spanish interpreter for the Emory Framework project, which played a big part in his life. "It was something new, and it planted the seed of me seeing myself doing something like this later," He explained. The Emory Farmworker program provides free health screenings through mobile clinics and organizations. This experience inspired him to pursue medical school. In 2010, Juárez was the first Hispanic valedictorian of his class to graduate from Bainbridge High School.

After high school, he applied to the United States Military Academy West Point and Harvard University, which he got into, but he decided to go to West Point. Juarez "wanted to give back to his country in the most honorable way possible." However, Juárez's plans changed when one of his high school friends died in a car accident, and he realized that he wasn't joining the military academy for the right reasons. He left the academy after his first year. Later, he decided to spend some time soul-searching.

Eventually, he re-applied to Harvard, and to his surprise, he was accepted a second time and started in the fall of 2011. Juárez attended Harvard on a merit-based scholarship and financial aid package. He stated, "A lot of people in these parts of the country don't have access to nor do they think they can get in, but these schools have a lot of wealth and funds for essentially poor people



like me to go to those free of charge." He graduated with honors and a BA in the neurobiology program in 2015. After graduating from Harvard, he enrolled in Augusta University and completed his medical degree. He is continuing his studies in neurology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Juárez will complete his residency program in December 2025. He has yet to determine where he would like to continue to work. He predetermined that he would

practice in California for a few years, but intends to spend the bulk of his career in Georgia.

Additionally, Juárez is interested in going into politics later in his career. He believes the best environment to pursue this goal is in Georgia. When Juárez is not working in residency, he loves to spend time with his girlfriend and exercising.

WORKING HIS WAY UP: Juárez attended both Harvard and UCLA, where he is finishing his residency. He is pictured below at a Bainbridge Rotary meeting with June Faircloth, after discussing his participation in the Duke University Talent Identification Program in 2015.

Submitted Photos





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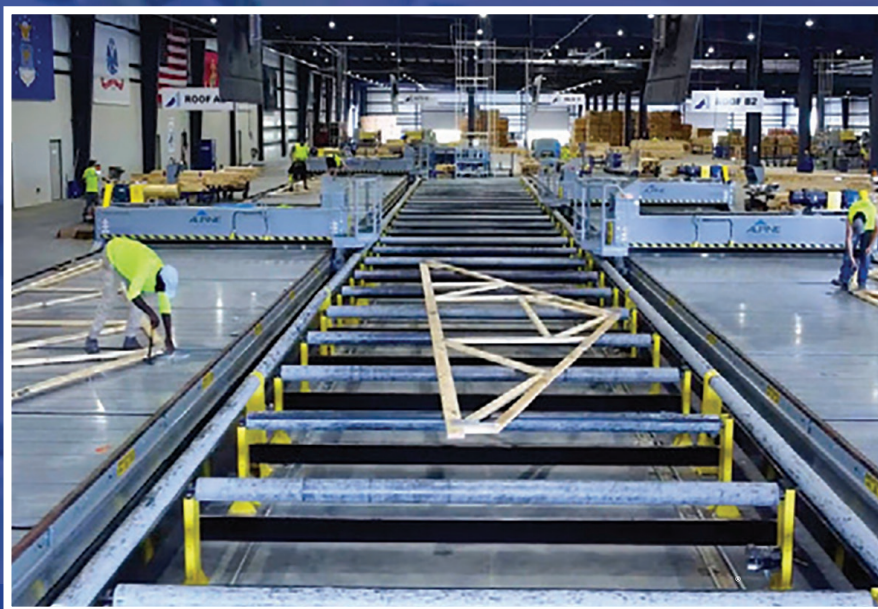
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