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# ON THE Cover

Khloe Higgins, daughter of Cody and Jennifer Higgins, enjoys an ice cream cone from Home Sweet Home. Photo by Jennifer Higgins.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

8

**HOME  
SWEET HOME**

36

**ELBERTON  
SPORT & PAWN**

14

**JUMPING  
WITH US**

42

**ELBERT  
SENIOR CENTER**

22

**RAINBOW BRIDGE  
OF GEORGIA  
PET CREMATIONS**

50

**MIKE CARROLL'S  
HEATING & AIR**

28

**HOPKINS  
COUNTRY STORE**

56

**DR. STUART  
ERWIN**

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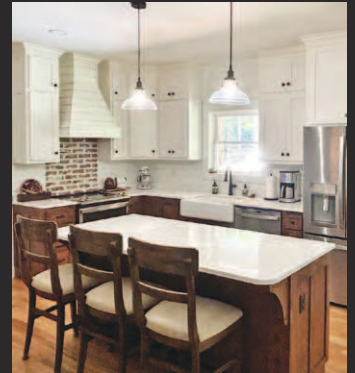




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# ADVERTISER INDEX

68 Market.....11	Elbert County Gun Club.....31	P&J Small Engines.....49
Ace Hardware.....17	Elbert County Health Department..26	Pamela Brown Insurance.....13
Anderson's Barber Shop.....62	Elbert Insurance.....39	Petersburg Towers Apartments...61
Arrowhead Pointe Golf Course....4	Elbert Memorial Hospital.....39	Pilgrim's.....64
Athens Technical College.....55	Elbert Senior Center & Transit....49	Pinnacle Bank.....2
Begley Mercantile.....62	Elberton 12 County Fair.....61	PJ Therapy Services.....49
Berry Funeral Home.....13	Elberton Granite Association.....21	Rainbow Bridge of Georgia.....55
Bicknell Supply Company.....17	NAPA Auto Parts.....45	Richard B. Russell State Park.....20
Bill Daughtry, Attorney at Law.....19	Esthetics by Elise.....62	Richards.....62
Blonde Willow Salon & Company..62	Elbert County Farm Bureau.....45	Rob Leverett, House Representative....7
Blue Cielo Farms.....25	First Baptist Church of Elberton...53	Sanders Furniture.....19
Bobby Brown Park.....35	First United Methodist Church.....53	Smith Business Consultants.....32
Bodyplex.....33	Hill's Paint & Lighting.....59	Southern Farm & Hardware.....41
Brady Builders.....5	Keep Elbert County Beautiful.....60	Southern Natural Stone & Landscape..40
City of Bowman.....25	Lake Russell Building Supply.....3	Sportsman Supply and Marine....55
City of Elberton.....27	Madden's Pharmacy.....41	Suburban Propane.....46
C&M Thrift Store.....62	Magnolia Estates.....47	Tena's Fine Diamonds & Jewelry..54
Designing Women Salon.....11	Maxwell Music Supply.....21	The Medical Center.....60
Dyal Jenkins, Attorneys at Law....63	McGee Heating & Air.....12	Turner Concrete.....33
Eagle Granite Company.....59	McIntosh Coffee Shoppe.....21	Ward's Pharmacy.....48
Elbert County School District.....31	Medlink.....18	Wilson Industrial Electric.....6
Elbert County Chamber of Commerce..34	Oconee State Bank.....25	Wright's Automotive.....19



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Rob also owns and runs a law firm in Elberton, and he partners with other small businesses, larger corporations, and local agricultural businesses and farm families to help ensure that Georgia remains the number one state in which to do business (and live!) for years to come.

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# HOME *Sweet* HOME

*By* Rose Scoggins

The smell of freshly brewed coffee and the welcoming sound of Christian music greets customers as they walk into one of the doors at Home Sweet Home on South McIntosh Street.

An old cotton warehouse was transformed into an artisan market and cafe, allowing those who enter the ability to remember history and sip a cup of coffee or eat a decadent cupcake while perusing creations from local artists and craftspeople.

Home Sweet Home is celebrating its fifth year of being owned by Jenny and Matthew Jenkins as they took it over from the previous owner around a year after the doors opened.

A breast cancer survivor, Jenny was in the throes of cancer treatments at the time. Her search for something to do to keep her mind busy, combined with Matthew's love for the historic building made the business a perfect venture.

What started with just 12 vendors in the nearly 13,000 square foot building has grown into 70 vendors – some of whom rent more than one of the businesses' 76 available spaces.

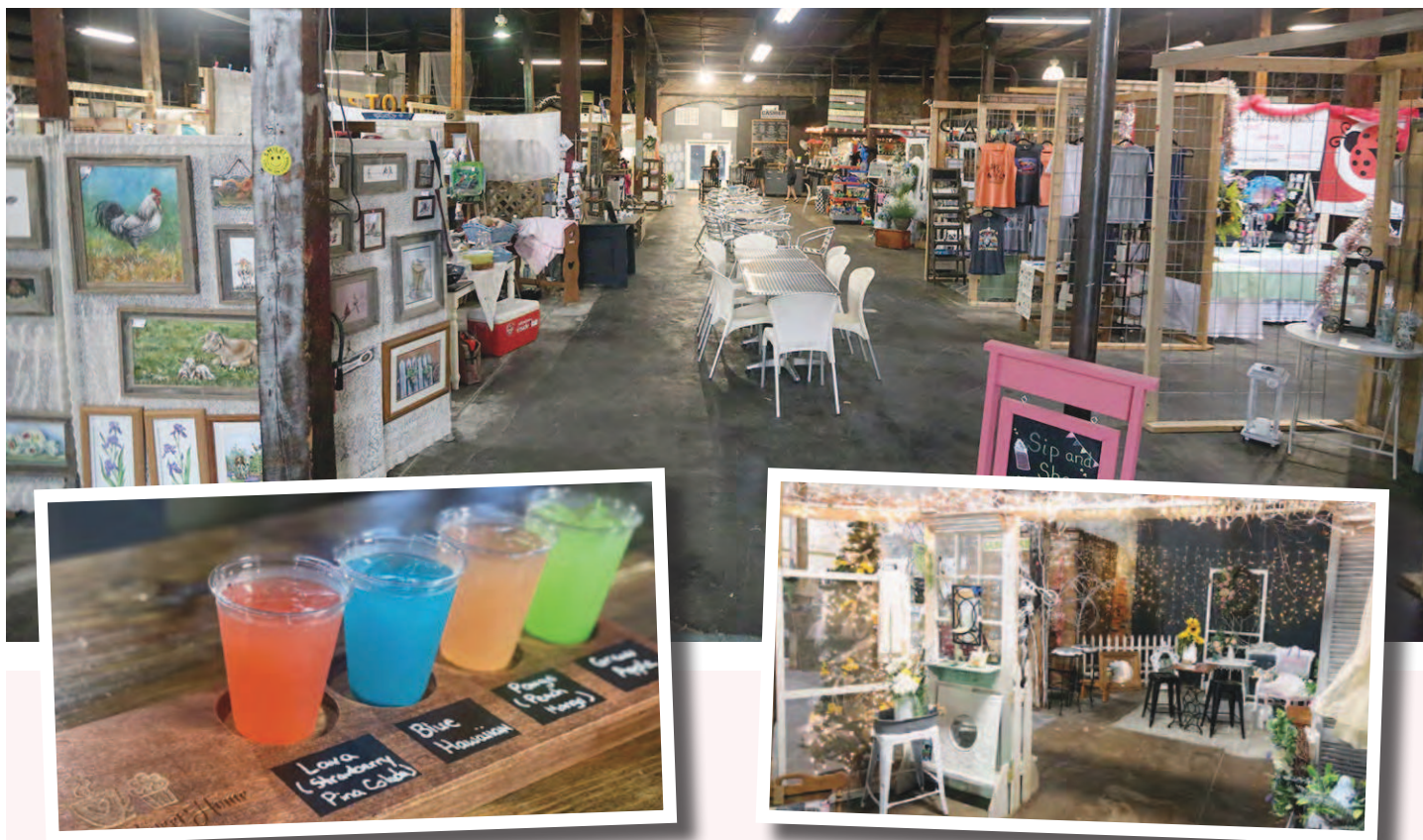
"We're always adding more, too. If we can find space, we add it," Jenny said. "We actually have a waiting list of people wanting to come in. That's a good problem to have."

Goods from vendors range from wooden signs and creations, clay earrings and jewelry, fresh flowers, art pieces, broken glass creations, soaps, home decor, antiques, furniture, t-shirts, candles and more.

"I like the artisan market because a lot of these people



## Home Sweet Home



create and put a lot of effort into making their items,” Jenny said. “A lot of these people are local or at least somewhat surrounding. It really surprised me how many people are talented in Elberton. They do a lot.”

Along with the market, Home Sweet Home is known for its cafe, serving coffee, fruity refreshers, cupcakes from Kellie’s Cakes and other baked goods.

Jenny said Home Sweet Home’s coffee is a unique blend that can only be found locally and is crafted in Covington by the store Bread and Butter. The blend had an overwhelming majority vote from customers five years ago when the Jenkins took over and has stayed a constant in the cafe. Joe Stephens, Jenny’s dad, transports the freshly ground coffee to Elberton every week.

The coffee can be served in a regular brew, latte, cappuccino, mocha, macchiato, americano or red eye. Espresso is also available. Non-dairy add ins like almond and oat milk are on the cafe’s menu along with flavor shots of caramel, salted caramel, vanilla, hazelnut and sugar free options.

For non-coffee drinkers, Home Sweet Home offers their unique Red Bull specials – fruit flavorings like peach, raspberry, pina colada, strawberry and green apple paired with a Red Bull. Strawberry lemonade, berry, peach and green apple refreshers are also available.

Sweet foam and whipped cream can be added to top drinks off.

With a variety of drinks on the menu, Jenny said something to eat was next and the partnership with Kellie Drake from Kellie’s Cakes was born. Kellie delivers fresh cupcakes, and the occasional slices of cakes and other goodies, weekly. Her cupcakes feature a variety of flavors including her popular banana pudding.

Along with the cupcakes, the cafe features assorted baked goods including cinnamon rolls, spinach feta pastries, brownies and chocolate chip cookies. The store also recently began carrying edible cookie dough from Alumni Cookie Dough out of Athens.

After getting requests from customers to serve lunch as well, Jenny said she began working on homemade family recipes to bring to life in the store. Lunch options include her mother-in-law’s homemade chicken salad and her step-mom’s pimento cheese sandwiches.

Customers can grab a sandwich or scoop of the homemade flavors along with a side of chips, potato salad in the spring and summer or a soup of the day in the fall and winter. Pre-made “grab and go” boxes including a sandwich, chips and a dessert are available.

For kids of all ages, the cafe offers a variety of ice cream flavors complete with waffle cones and waffle bowls. Ice cream can be turned into milkshakes or scooped between two cookies to create an ice cream sandwich.

With their vast menu options, Jenny said the cafe has





Home Sweet Home owner Jenny Jenkins enjoys the relationships made with vendors and customers of the artisan market and cafe. The business offers a wide array of homemade goods along with coffee, baked goods, savory lunch items and ice cream.

attracted a group of “regulars” that help keep the place running.

“Our biggest support, which I just love, is the city police,” Jenny said. “We have our regulars that come in and I think that’s what I love about Elberton – everybody kind of knows everybody. When they come in, I immediately know what they’re drinking. The girls get to know the regulars and you get a special feel when you come here. It’s not just walking into some random coffee shop.”

While Jenny can be often seen behind the register, her team at Home Sweet Home includes her dad, Joe, who has been with her since the store’s opening and works with the vendors, and a group of high school girls who create the drinks behind the counter.

“Most of them are juniors and seniors which I absolutely love because they’re pretty hardworking and it’s usually their first job, which most people would probably frown upon, but I look at it as a learning experience for them,” Jenny said about her baristas. “Hopefully I’m preparing them for their dream job one day.”

Jenny also said she’ll have vendors step in to help whenever needed.

“They want me to be successful too and it makes them successful,” Jenny said. “It’s a team effort for sure.”

Between the variety of market items and cafe, there’s a little something at Home Sweet Home for everyone.

A photograph of the storefront of 68 Market. The sign above the entrance reads "68 MARKET" in large, bold letters, with "ANTIQUES • GIFTS • HOME GOODS" written below it. The display features various items including glass jars, bottles, and a tiered stand with more jars. Below the display, a blue shelf holds several wooden cutting boards. At the bottom, the address "15 N. McIntosh St., Elberton" and phone number "706-498-6543" are listed, along with Facebook and Instagram social media icons.

An advertisement for Designing Women Salon. The top half features the salon's name "Designing Women Salon" in large, bold letters, with the tagline "The Complete Salon" in a script font below it. A photograph shows four women smiling, with a sign in the background that reads "Every family has a STORY WELCOME to ours". The bottom half of the ad contains the text "Trust us with all of your hair care needs!" followed by "Since 1997", the phone number "706-283-HAIR (4247)", and the address "314 N. Oliver Street, Elberton".



## Home Sweet Home

"And its pretty family-friendly," Jenny said. "A lot of our customers will come right after school and it ends up being a big activity here. We have games for the kids to play."

Whether it be with vendors or customers, Jenny said her favorite part of running Home Sweet Home is the relationships she has the opportunity to build.

"I think that was one of the main reasons I really knew I would love this business, because I like the social interaction and I love to get to know people in the community," Jenny said. "I've met so many people...that aren't anywhere near here that come here. I almost feel like it's a destination place. We really get a lot of outside people that come here just because they saw us on social media. I love to meet the new people too."

As a main stay, Jenny said she wants to see the community thrive and is thankful that Home Sweet Home can be a part of that.

"It brings a lot of joy to me for sure. It's not something I have to do," Jenny said. "I wanted to do something that really brings something to the community and something fun for everybody. I want Elberton to be successful. I want to see it thrive and I think privately-owned small businesses are the way to go."





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# Jumping WITH US

By Mark Wells

Festivals, birthday parties, church and community events across Northeast Georgia and upstate South Carolina for the past 11 years have featured brightly colored bouncy houses, train rides and water slides for children – and adults – of all ages thanks to Elbert County's Jumping With Us.

In 2012, O'Neal Saddler, owner of Jumping With Us, and post commander for Georgia State Patrol's Toccoa Post, came up with an idea for the business that blossomed into what he now says is the largest inflatable company in the area.

"I rented one of the jumping houses for a birthday party in 2012 and it was dirty and filthy," Saddler said of the beginnings of Jumping With Us. "I had to pick it up from the company and return it when I was done, and my wife and I sat down and thought about it and decided that would be something good that I could do in life – maybe in retirement was actually the goal. We didn't think it would take off so fast." The company has since grown from two inflatables to offering a multitude of different services to meet the needs of any party for any age group.

"We have waterslides, we have mechanical bulls that we just added recently, we also have a video game trailer that we added a year and a half ago," Saddler said. "We have a trackless train, we have all kinds of mechanical wipeout games that you set up and kids jump over and under. We have water pools. I could go on and on. We have over 100 different items."

According to the Jumping With Us website, the company offers a variety of bounce houses, dry combo bouncers, wet combo bounces, toddler inflatables, water slides, dry slides, dry bounce and slides, wet bounce and slides, walking water pools, dunk tanks, obstacle courses, interactive games, a mobile gaming trailer,





## Jumping With Us



**Jumping With Us, owned and operated by Dewy Rose native O'Neal Saddler and his wife, Deandra, has been a main stay in the Elbert County community for the last 11 years. The business offers a variety of options for bouncy houses, inflatables, water slides, a video game truck and foam parties.**

foam parties, water volley ball, a trackless train, a mechanical bull and foam parties.

The website also lists “extras” including generators, pool water, concessions, a cotton candy machine, a popcorn machine, a snow cone machine, tables and chairs, an ice cream stand and “Happy Birthday” yard sign kits.

An Elbert County native, Saddler grew up and currently resides in Dewy Rose. He started his law enforcement career with the Elbert County Sheriff's Office and worked a stint with the Department of Natural Resources as a ranger before he landed with the Georgia State Patrol (GSP) in 2002, where he has worked ever since.

During his career with GSP, Saddler worked with the Athens post before working his way up the ladder and being named the commander of the Toccoa post. Saddler was selected to serve on University of Georgia (UGA) Football Head Coach Kirby Smart's security detail that follows the coach around while performing official duties.

“I think it has given me the ability to not want to give up so easily,” Saddler said of how his law enforcement career relates to Jumping With Us. “The job that I do sometimes is a non-quitting job. It's something that you can't give up on – your life depends on it and that teaches you the value of determination. Business is definitely a determination because it's not for the weak; the weak will not survive so I think it has a lot to do with it honestly.”

In order to balance the two demanding jobs, Saddler said he depends on his wife, Deandra, and his employees to take care of the business when he is on a trip with the UGA football team or otherwise occupied with the GSP.

“That's where my guys and my wife come in. That's why she's the backbone of it when it comes to getting everybody where they need to be. I am more of a hands-on guy when I'm off, but so far we have a really good relationship with the staff and even when I'm not there everything runs as if I was there,” Saddler said. “I have four guys that work for me and if we're doing a festival, you can look and see 10 or 15 of us. I have support staff as well. A lot of family members have come out. My mother-in-law and so many others that we have that we kept pretty much close knit together over the years. We have built a family – relatives and outside family – and we're definitely thankful for that.”

Saddler said it was a challenge to grow the business when first starting out, but thanks to local advertising, word of mouth and the help of social media, the business has grown exponentially over the last 11 years.

“It's all been a surprise,” Saddler said. “I thought we were going to get us two little units and we were just going to do this on the weekends when I have a day off. Before long I needed a trailer and we would take the units to a customer and they would be like ‘Do you have this?’ and I would say ‘No I don't have that, I actually didn't think about that’ and





then it just kept growing over time and I'm like 'There is really a demand in this area because we don't have a lot to do.'

In addition to the local community, Saddler said he has served customers from as far north as Cherokee, North Carolina to as far south as Augusta and that Jumping With Us serves residential and commercial customers.

As the business grows, Saddler said he is continuously looking back to see where he can have the most success. He said he also has a relationship with other inflatable businesses from other states and that they use each other's ideas to a mutual benefit.

"I've got one that I'm really good friends with in Texas," Saddler said. "He and I share a lot of ideas that work in Texas that I use here and he'll take some of my ideas in Georgia and use it in Texas. We've built a 10-year relationship now. We actually build off of each other and that's probably my go-to person. I have several other companies that we swap ideas with, but I just research, I look at it, my wife looks at it and we come to an agreement and we go after it."

While he uses other companies for inspiration, Saddler said Jumping With Us is still set apart from its competition by the supreme customer service they provide when somebody rents their equipment.

"The gaming trailer, we stay with them – we have that customer interaction. We added the foam simulator last



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## Jumping With Us

year that shoots out foam on kids and adults – we stay there with it. We offer package deals that actually bring us with it,” Saddler said. “Here lately we’ve been doing so many big corporations that required us to go with it and that’s what separates us. We’re one of the few companies that have licenses and are insured so it allows us to get the schools – I think we did every school in Elbert County this year except the high school – and Madison County and Franklin and Hart. So we’ve been able to separate ourselves with that.”

Another aspect that separates Jumping With Us is their website. Saddler said he has a large portion of the website automated to make it as easy on the customer as possible.

“While we’re asleep at night, we’re getting bookings. People are able to get on [the website] and book for themselves and schedule it,” Saddler said. “I have everything automatic like reminders and messaging and everything. We don’t even talk to some of the customers until we get to their house – that’s how automatic I’ve gotten the business, so that’s a blessing.”

While the high demand in the local area has resulted in the business growing rapidly, Saddler said that did not come without challenges.

“Any challenge would be the workforce, just getting peo-

ple who actually want to work,” Saddler said. “With COVID that was the biggest thing for us. We were down during COVID a lot, but we got through it all and God brought us back threefold.”

Even with the tough times, Saddler said the help of the community has been a massive benefit to his business.

“We do a lot of business in Elbert County and a lot of churches and families depend on us,” Saddler said. “This is home and it’s going to be home for us. Honestly, it’s always great when you look on there and see that Elbert County booking because you know you’re going to be right at home to do it and it’s even better when you get on Facebook and someone says ‘Hey I’m looking for a jumping house’ and everybody says ‘Go up Bowman Highway, they’re there on the right – that’s always a good thing.’”

The community support is what Saddler said has resulted in Jumping With Us becoming a main stay in the Elbert County community.

“That’s an honor for me,” Saddler said of being considered a main stay. “If you asked me this 10 to 13 years ago I would have never believed it. We’re honored and we’re very thankful and we continue to plan on being here as long as God gives us grace.”



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# Rainbow BRIDGE OF GEORGIA PET CREMATIONS

*By* Mark Wells

For many families, pets are very important and crucial parts of the family dynamic. Some depend on their pets for emotional support to get through a tough time while others view their pets as their own children. Because of this bond, when a pet passes away, many families look for a way to properly pay respects to their furry friend who meant so much to them.

That's where Rainbow Bridge of Georgia Pet Cremations and owner Nora Nix come in.

"It's an awesome responsibility, but I welcome it," Nix said. "The people who are calling me, the one thing we have in common is that we're pet lovers. No matter how different we are, we have something we can build on just through pets. I love being part of the community. I love being here when they need me – it just satisfies my soul, helping somebody through a tough time. I've always been comfortable with that and I just kind of naturally brought it to the pet world."

While in high school in Dahlonega, Nix had her interest piqued by the funeral business.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do...and I picked up a book that was in the library that was about funeral service and I thought 'Wow,'" Nix said. "As a kid I didn't think much about it. I had been to a funeral before, but I never thought about that as a career. I wanted to know more."



## Rainbow Bridge of Georgia

The school librarian sent Nix to a local funeral home and the funeral director gave her a book on restorative art.

"I thought 'Well this is fascinating, I think I'd like to try that,'" Nix remembered.

With a career now in mind, Nix attended Gupton-Jones College of Funeral Service in Decatur and worked in Savannah in the funeral home business for 10 years.

"I loved it and thought 'This is it, this is for me,'" Nix said.

After moving back to the area and taking a small break from the business, Nix opened Rainbow Bridge in 2018 on a tract of family land.

"Once I made the decision to do it, I just kind of jumped in," Nix said.

After getting her building put up and the necessary equipment to operate, Nix said she started "going door-to-door" in order to try and self-promote her business. While the long days on the road were tough at first, they eventually paid off when a veterinarian reached out requesting Nix's services.

"I can tell you exactly where I was when we got our first [call]," Nix said. "I was so excited that they gave us a chance and of course we're still with them," Nix said. "Then after that I guess your confidence [grows]. People talk in the business; it's actually a small community in the veterinary world and I think that kind of helped. If they needed us to do a house call, things like that, some of the other places they were working with would not do that, but we try to be flexible and be there for the family and I think that's what helped us grow – just the dedication and being there when we're needed."

Now five years later, the business has 15 offices that refer clients to Rainbow Bridge, and Nix said she expects to receive over 2,500 calls this year. Nix credits her wealth of experience from 25 years in the funeral business alongside her unwavering compassion as the cornerstone for Rainbow Bridge's success.

"We are available 24 hours and I always answer the phone. I felt like it was very important to structure this

after the funeral business," Nix said. "We also make house calls. With at-home euthanization becoming more popular, we get a lot of that as well so we do come to the home whenever we're requested. Anything we can do to make it easier on the family."

Rainbow Bridge of Georgia offers services to customers from Lincoln to Rabun County. Cremation is done one pet at a time and keepsakes are included in the overall

price to help honor pets. Pricing is based on the weight of the pet up to 250 pounds.

"I treat them just like I would want my own pet treated. Before the cremation takes place, we make a clay pawprint for them and...put their name on the back and we try to return a lock of fur if we can...and of course an urn is included in the cost," Nix said. "If you wanted to order a particular urn that's absolutely fine, but what you're paying for, we wanted to make sure was quality. I think the pawprint is very important because that's the last thing they touch and to me that really means something – it's just like a fingerprint, they're all different and unique. I'm

running a business that I care deeply about. At the end of the day I still have to survive, but you can make it affordable so people who want to use the service can."



**Nora Nix, owner of Rainbow Bridge of Georgia, said her favorite part of her job is building strong relationships with customers she's helped through the tough time of losing a pet.**

Nix said her favorite part about what she does is building strong relationships with customers that she helped through the process.

"Meeting the people and hearing the stories of how they found the pet and how the pet came into their life – to me that's the best part – when they're sharing and opening up and I do think it helps heal, just talking about it," Nix said. "Sometimes when the death first happens they can't talk about it, but by the time we're doing the return, they'll tell me their stories and I love that part. One time I sat at a lady's house for four hours. She didn't have children, she had the sweetest little chihuahua that had finally passed and that was her child. We watched home movies, we



looked at picture albums, and when she was ready she let me have her and that's OK. As long as it takes and we're friends now. She'll call me up, we'll have lunch – it's a good thing – that's why we're here, to help people."

Nix said through those relationships, she finds a purpose to continue to do what she does. Being someone that people can count on in a time of need or grief is what

motivates her to continue giving to others.

"It means everything," Nix said. "When you have that drive to be in the service industry, to serve people, you're not satisfied with anything else. So you want to be that person that they call when they need you, just so you can help them through it. It's something that your soul needs. That's why I'm here."

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# HOPKINS Country STORE

*By* Rose Scoggins

A car pulls up in front of Hopkins Country Store at 3224 Anderson Highway and owner Sanford Hatcher begins walking towards the small country store's cash register.

"Sam coming in here, he works in logging," Hatcher comments with a smile. "He's going to get two Diet Cokes and a couple packs of crackers."

As the customer walks to the drink cooler at the back of the store, Hatcher strikes up a conversation as though he's talking to an old friend. When the customer returns, he places two Diet Cokes and a pack of crackers on the counter.

"You know," Hatcher smiles and says about the familiar relationships he's built with his customers. "I love the people."

After a little over a year and a half of owning Hopkins Country Store, the Gainesville native has gotten to know his customers in order to help better serve them.

Hatcher worked in the film industry from 1996 to 2022 in catering and food services, using his services on sets like "Stranger Things" and "Black Panther."

A lover of food, Hatcher began cooking when he was 17 and decided to pursue a career in the industry after receiving advice from his father.

"My dad gave me probably one of the best bits of wisdom he's ever said to me. He said 'Figure out what you really like to do and figure out how to



## Hopkins Country Store



Hopkins Country Store is a main stay in the Rock Branch community as a one-stop shop, offering gas, diesel, basic fishing supplies, live bait and snacks along with owner Sanford Hatcher's smoked barbecue, ribs, daily breakfast, Wednesday lunch specials and more.

make money doing it.' I love to cook and had an opportunity to go to culinary school. I had a chef I was working with and he said 'Look, you can apprentice and make money or you can go to school and spend money, but we're going to teach you the same thing.'"

Hatcher decided to stick with the chef and learned his way, working under chefs all over the world. He also spent time working for chefs in Louisiana who taught him the flavors of cajun cooking.

Before purchasing Hopkins, Hatcher previously owned his own catering company in New Orleans and owned a craft service company for around 15 years.

Throughout his time traveling and cooking around the world, Hatcher never forgot about the Elbert County community where his family had owned property for over 30 years on Gin Branch Road. When he made the decision to purchase the store that's been around since 1985, Hatcher said it was like "coming home."

"This is the longest I think I've ever been somewhere in my life. I've been all over the world and I always wanted to come back here," Hatcher said. "I'm here for a reason. I wasn't going to buy the place. I'd made the decision not to buy it. I couldn't sleep and I was up drinking coffee and I saw my son, and God was like 'Yeah. Let's do this.' God's like 'Let's do this.' I started

the negotiations."

While the former owners offered some food items such as barbecue and hot dogs, the store's menu has vastly expanded since Hatcher took over.

Breakfast is available every morning through breakfast sandwiches, burritos and bagels. The store does not sell biscuits as Hatcher said he wanted to provide a more unique variety of options for customers.

Fresh grilled chicken, hamburgers, hot dogs with chili and smoked sausages can also be found at the store every day along with loaded homemade barbecue sandwiches and sauces.

"I had a lady tell me 'There's too much meat on that sandwich,'" Hatcher said. "I said 'How can there be too much meat on a sandwich?' She says 'You just make them so big.' I'm a big guy, I like to eat. We serve a substantial BBQ sandwich for sure. We don't make as much money, but for me it's about that experience of opening up a sandwich and saying 'Yeah.'"

Lunch specials are offered on Wednesdays and include a meat and two sides. Specials have included items like barbecue chicken with sautéed squash and a cucumber/tomato salad or macaroni salad, grilled chicken over rice with squash and green beans, baked spaghetti and meatballs with salad and garlic bread, cajun red beans and rice and jambalaya.





On Saturdays, Hopkins offers Hatcher's special barbecue ribs and sides of baked beans and "big cut" coleslaw with an apple cider vinaigrette base. The ribs are rubbed with Hatcher's special dry rub and smoked slow for 12 hours.

"We take them off, wrap them up and finish them. They just fall apart," Hatcher said of the ribs that sell out every Saturday. "Smoking meats is a joy. It's low and slow and getting that perfect smoke on something is great."

Hatcher said he goes through around 24 racks of ribs each Saturday and encourages anyone who wants them to call ahead to order as they sell out quickly to customers who come all the way to Hopkins from as far east as Anderson and Greenwood, South Carolina and west as Bowman and Royston.

"Food is a joy for me," Hatcher said. "I love to cook and see people enjoy food. That's what brought [me] here and a need, a need for something out here. There's nothing out here. We try to keep our prices more than fair. I'm not trying to get rich, I just want to be here. I just want to live and have a good life for me and my son."

Along with the providing a location for the community to purchase home cooking, Hopkins Country Store is a one-stop shop that offers gas, diesel, basic fishing



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## Hopkins Country Store

supplies, live baits, drinks and snacks.

The store is open from 5:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday, allowing customers the chance to come in most any time of day.

"It's a meeting place, it's a landmark. We use this place as a landmark coming from Elberton, coming from Anderson, coming from Hartwell, because they all intersect right here," Hatcher said. "At 4:30 a.m. I'm here making breakfast. Sometimes you'll have people who are just getting off work and they'll come in and get breakfast on the way home and you get to see a smile."

As Hopkins is one of the only stores in the Rock Branch area of Elbert County, Hatcher said he enjoys being able to provide a service that people don't have to travel all the way to town for.

"I hear it every day, especially on Saturdays. People coming in every Saturday for ribs and sides are like 'We just live up the road.' Especially the aging group that comes in – they come in and sit and drink a cup of coffee and talk about farms," Hatcher said. "We try to keep our grass cut, we try to keep a clean parking lot and make it inviting. We put little funny sayings on

our signs. Again, we want people to feel welcomed and feel the warmth that is in here. We're supported by our locals. People come here just for that reason – they want us here, want us to stay here."

While he hopes customers enjoy the food he finds joy in preparing each and every day, Hatcher also hopes to be an example of faith and hope to each and every person who walks through the door of Hopkins.

"This is a faith-based community. Faith is a big thing that we're starting to lose in this country. If we can show a life to somebody who maybe doesn't have that faith – if we can be an example of kindness," Hatcher said. "Our whole motto is 'Hopkins Country Store – Little Store, Big Heart,' and that's what we want to be. We can see it in people. If we can touch the lives of people here like they're touching our lives, then it's a success. God brought me here. There's a reason I'm here. I might not know that reason every day that I'm here, but God shows me why I'm here. It's that little glimmer of hope on a daily basis. You always get that little bit. You look around the world and hope is not a thing a lot of people have. Can we give hope? Can we be hope? I think we can."



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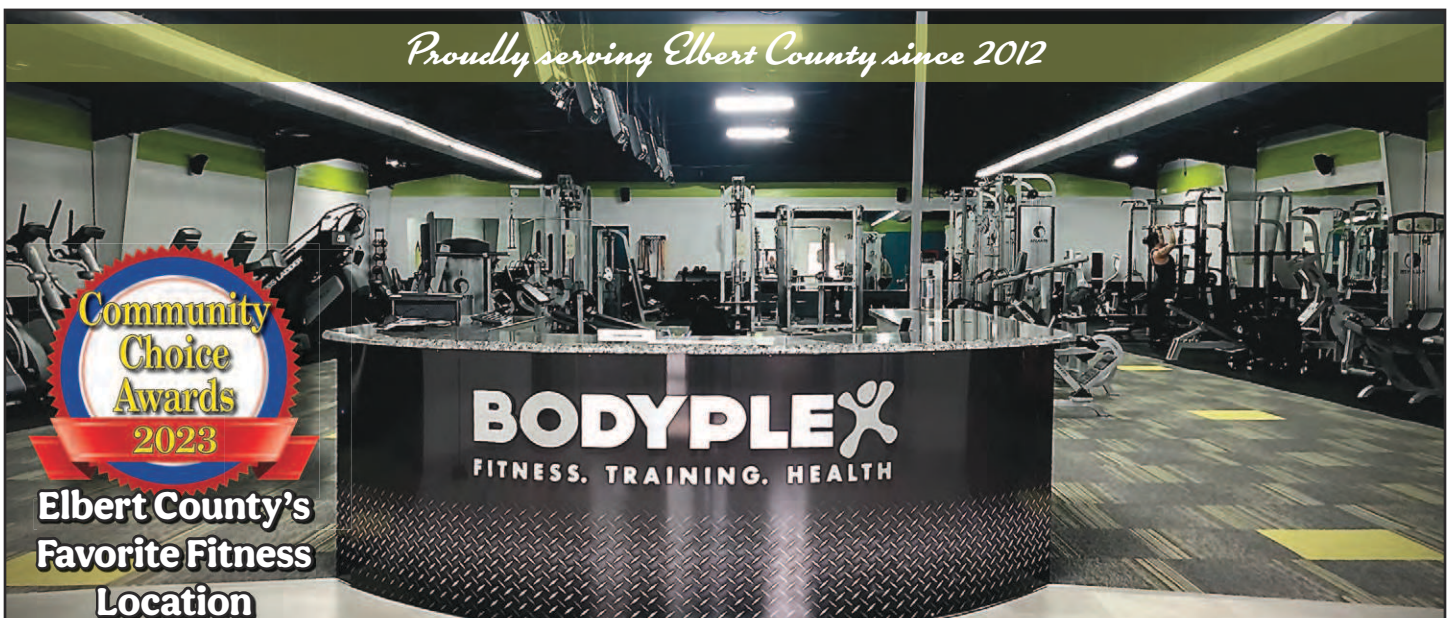
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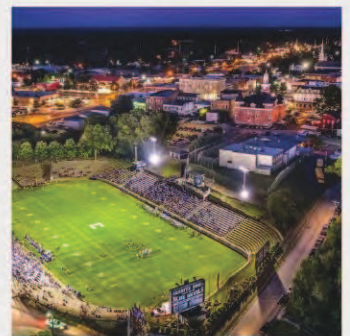
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# ELBERTON SPORT & Pawn

*By* Mark Wells

Scenes depicting hunting, fishing, camping and aspects of the great outdoors greet drivers on Elbert Street from the side of Elberton Sport & Pawn. The brightly colored mural beckons outdoorsmen into the store that offers firearms, outdoor equipment and a variety of items from the pawn side of the business.

Owner Ty Sigman said the newly-painted mural, along with the clean interior of the store, are part of intentional efforts 20-years in the making.

Elberton Sport & Pawn's roots are traced back to when his father, Tim Sigman, decided to buy a pawn shop around 1996 or 1997 that was located across the street from The Medical Center of Elberton. The elder Sigman changed the name to Elberton Sport & Pawn and the business was born.

Tim was later diagnosed with Lou Gherig's disease, and Ty took the business over around 2002.

After almost 20 years of operating in the shop on College Avenue, Sigman bought his current building on Elbert Street six years ago and moved into the heart of town. The new store, at 11,000 square feet, is over five times the size of the store the business started in.

"We had to do a lot of work to the building. All the rollup doors, the windows, the alarm system – the biggest expense was a new roof," Sigman said. "When I bought this building six years ago, I had tarps and buckets with runners to try and catch all the water before it got downstairs. I feel like it's been six years of



## Elberton Sport & Pawn



Elberton Sport & Pawn, owned and operated by Ty Sigman, offers a variety of items including guns and accessories, electronics, outdoor equipment and more. Sigman also makes pawns for goods.

spending money on this building, but we're getting there."

While Sigman has been building and expanding his business, he's made an intentional effort to keep the store and the items within the store in top shape.

"I want it to look nice. When my dad bought the business it was a hole in the wall pawn shop. There wasn't \$10,000 worth of inventory sitting on the shelves and I considered the inventory to be junk," Sigman said. "My dad would take in just about anything just to try to make a loan and I'm not like that. If I don't feel like it's something that I can resell, I won't loan any money on it."

From lawn care tools to antique radios, Sigman stays busy, making a pawn, or loan, every day the doors are open.

"A pawn is a loan," Sigman said. "A lot of people don't know that. They think a pawn is just selling something, but when you pawn something that means you want to come back and get it. It's the most basic form of a loan. Let's say you bring a rifle in and you borrow \$100 on it and you've got 30 days to come back and get it and you pay back \$125. It's pretty high interest, but most of the people can't just go to the bank and get a loan, plus the banks don't want to fool with a \$200 loan."

Because of the general unfamiliarity with pawn, Sigman said he spends time educating his customers on why he is unable to loan them as much money as they would like him to on certain items.

"Typically if I'm going to loan 'X' number of dollars and you've got 'X' interest that you've got to pay on that, I can't have it too close to what it would cost to buy a new one," Sigman said. "It depends on the item and it depends on how fast I think I can sell it."

Sigman said a pawn in his store is for 30 days with a 10-day grace period, meaning he won't take the item a customer has pawned until 40 days after the pawn. After that 40 days, the item is placed on the shelf for sale.

If customers are unable to pick up the item within the 30-day window, Sigman said they can pay a finance charge to repawn the item and restart the 30-day clock.

"I ask people 'Do you want to get this back or are you just selling it?' That's probably my most popular question and some people think 'Hey, if I tell him I'm going to come back and get it, I can get more money out of it' and that's not the case," Sigman said. "If it's something that I think I can sell faster, that's what I'll pay more money [for]."

Even if a customer elects to forgo the pawn process and just sell the item, Sigman said there is still a waiting period before the item goes out into his store. The Elberton Police Department requires Sigman to hold the item for 30 days so that they can verify that the item was not stolen.

Sigman said pawning also has a relatively high risk compared to other retail stores because of the nature of the pawn, meaning he is constantly watching the market for different items to ensure he offers the best price





possible.

"It's all kind of the same patterns over the years," Sigman said. "New stuff comes out and it's hot and it starts decreasing in value. I use game systems as an example. I've seen what they do when they release three months before Christmas time – you just watch it. You've got to know and you've got to have guts. There's a lot of ways to make money with this stuff, but you've got to be willing to roll the dice and risk it and take the chances to do it. You've got to be careful. Don't bite off more than you can chew. I try not to get too crazy with stuff."

While pawning items is the foundation of Sigman's business, he said a shift to focusing on firearms could be in the store's future. As a lover of firearms, Sigman became a certified National Rifle Association pistol instructor a few years ago after he had the idea to offer pistol classes to the community.

"I've grown up around guns and all of that. Always enjoyed shooting as a kid – shot on the 4-H shotgun team," Sigman said. "I never did come back and set up my classes but it's still an option. I've been doing the pawn shop thing for about 20 years, but I always wanted to do a gun store or sporting goods store so that's the direction I'm trying to head. I'm not going to get away from pawn. I'm going to keep doing loans and used stuff, but I want to start a lot more new stuff."

However, Sigman said starting to offer more firearm-re-

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## Elberton Sport & Pawn

lated items has been a process because of the high cost of the firearm business.

"It's a lot of money," Sigman said. "All of this stuff that I want to stock is expensive. Holsters, magazines, cleaning kits, you've got Rem-oil wipes, safes, rings, bases, thousands of lights and accessories. There's a lot of options out there so we want to get a good variety of those options in here. I want people to be able to protect themselves. For new gun shooters, I try to educate them a little bit about gun safety and the mechanical side of firearms and how to handle them. More defensive and hunting and then just fun shooting."

Sigman said he wants to also incorporate maintenance into his offerings and makes sure to pay attention to the safety aspect of firearms as well.

As he transitions into the future, Sigman said he wants to continue to build on the availability of his inventory as well as support the local community that means so much to him.

"It makes me very proud," Sigman said of being a main stay in the community. "I feel like I've been working very hard for a lot of years to get to where I'm at. It's humbling."



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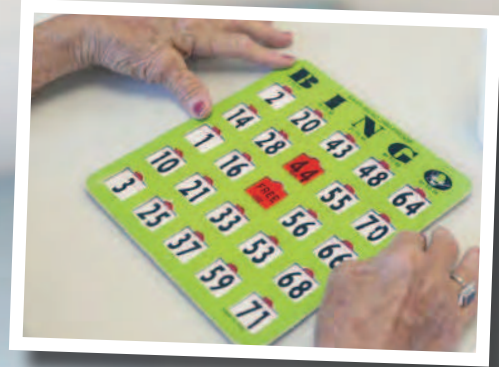
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# ELBERT *Senior* CENTER

*By* Rose Scoggins

*"I-26, I-26.  
G-49, G-49.  
G-58, G-58.  
I-20, I-20.  
O-69, O-69."*

Marie Glenn calls out the numbers listed on balls that pop to the top of the Elbert Senior Center's bingo machine. On a Friday morning just before lunch, the center's dining room is nearly packed with a crowd with green bingo cards in front of them, eagerly awaiting to get the right combination of numbers.

It takes only a few minutes before someone yells out "Bingo!" and retrieves the first prize of the day.

The Elbert Senior Center, located at McWilliams Park at 1045 Mobley Hill Road, hosts bingo games twice a week that are the highlight for the center's members, director Lisa Dixon said.

"It's nothing for me to walk through there and it be quiet and everybody is concentrating on bingo and just yell 'Bingo' and everybody looks," Dixon laughs. "Just to mess with them."

Dixon has been the center director since August 2022 and has been with the center since January 2021. She took over the position after longtime director Rebecca Stephens retired.

Throughout the bingo game, Glenn pauses from reading the numbers and shares a message from the center's "Grateful Box," where members can share something they're grateful or thankful for.



## Elbert Senior Center



"I think it's just something that gives them something extra to make them feel good," Dixon said.

Martha Lee, a longtime senior center member who sits in the same chair in the dining room every day, said the bingo games are one of her favorite activities.

"I love this place," Lee said. "I have enjoyed it, especially after my husband died. At our age, we get lonely and this is good to help you out."

Along with bingo, members are able to participate in a wide variety of programs and opportunities including exercise classes, monthly trips, educational programs, holiday celebrations, games, crafts and outdoor activities.

The center recently started a new program called "Arm-chair Travel" where members are given the opportunity to "travel" to different places from the comfort of their own chairs. Recent trips have included places like Hershey, Pennsylvania, Hawaii and Washington, D.C.

To make the trips even more special, Dixon said she and Glenn, who is the center's activity director, try to come up with things to give them that relate to each place like a Hershey bar for the Pennsylvania trip and a Hawaiian snack for Hawaii.

A partnership with Elbert County Emergency Services allows members to receive blood pressure checks along with other health programs provided by the center, through Northeast Georgia Healthcare Matters and Family and Consumer Sciences County Extension Agent Christa Campbell.

Dixon said she and her staff also try to incorporate educational programs and "any kind of program that will better" members including programs on how to realize a scam and programs that allow for increased socialization and cognitive health.

In addition to the communal dining room, the center currently has a library and a small gym that members utilize during the center's open hours, Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

A walking club meets every day from 12:30 p.m. to 1 p.m. to take walks in the gym, around the track or back and forth to the tennis courts on days with nice weather.

Following three regular rounds of bingo and a "Come on Down" round where everyone receives a prize, members are treated to a lunch prepared by head cook Carol Ann Brown.

On the first Friday of the month, those with birthdays are noted by a birthday chair covering, a rendition of "Happy Birthday" from fellow members and a cupcake with their meal.

Along with the average 25 to 30 members who eat meals in the center's dining room, the center also serves around 70 clients in its Meals on Wheels program.

Meals are cooked at the center Monday through Friday and then delivered by a team of three part-time drivers to residents all throughout the county.

"We are from the tip top of Bowman all the way down to the bottom part of [Elbert County]," Dixon said. "We range





Elbert Senior Center Director Lisa Dixon and the center's staff work each day to provide a place for those who are 60 and older in the Elbert County community to have a good meal, fellowship and participate in a host of activities with other members.

from the whole county and everywhere in between.”

In order to receive meals through the program, Dixon said those interested must go through the Northeast Georgia Area Agency on Aging's aging and disability program as the program has screening requirements.

Those able to enjoy the meals and fellowship in person must be members of the center. Center members must be 60 or older. Memberships include a yearly membership fee and other fees can be associated with activities. A weekly meal donation is also held in order to help cover costs of the meals, along with the center's grant from the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission.

“I am hoping to grow both client bases, especially the home delivery,” Dixon said. “I did not realize, until here recently, how many people in this community could benefit from Meals on Wheels.”

Along with increasing their weekly meal participants, Dixon said she has goals to establish a computer and technology lab, start a dance class, reestablish overnight trips and expand the center's garden.

The center's garden, grown by the hard work of the members in raised beds, includes a harvest of squash, tomatoes, okra and peas that are often used in the weekly meals. In addition to growing their own vegetables, the Northeast Georgia Regional Commission provides a program that allows members to receive fruits and vegetables through a “Farmer's Market.”

Dixon said her favorite activity, and one of the mem-

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## Elbert Senior Center

ber's favorites, is the monthly outings to places like Anderson, Athens and Commerce. One of the most recent outings was to a dinner at The Quarry Plates and Pours and a performance of "Murder on the Orient Express" at The Elbert Theatre. A future trip on the schedule is to Royston and the Ty Cobb Museum.

"We try to think of things that are in our community that aren't that far," Dixon said. "Travel is one of the biggest things that I've heard that they want to do."

In addition to employing Dixon as the director, Glenn as the activities director and Brown as the head cook, the center has three employees that work through a Senior Community Service Employment Program that allows older Americans to reenter the workforce. The program has several "host" sites, with the Elbert Senior Center being one of them. Those employed through the program help out wherever needed at the center and can most often be seen as the smiling face behind the front counter.

Dixon said she's thankful for the community's support behind the senior center, whether it be through meal vouchers provided by the Elberton Elks Lodge for members or donations from local churches and other organizations.

"The community is really behind us in helping us do the things we do here," Dixon said.

While she enjoys the many activities at the center, and all of the games of bingo, Dixon said her favorite part of being the center's director is the relationships she's able to establish with the members.

"I feel like I'm doing something down here. I feel like I've connected with the community and it's something I enjoy doing. It's something I love. I love being able to go out there and make them smile and make sure they have a good meal, make sure they have a good place to come where they feel safe and loved and welcomed," Dixon said. "We have some great clients. I have fallen in love with them. I tell them – I gained a bunch of mamas and daddies when I came down here."

Dixon encourages those interested in joining the center to contact their office at 706-283-2033 and said the Elbert Senior Center is excited to continue to be a main stay in the community.

"We're here. A lot of people don't know that we're here," Dixon said. "We've been here for a while and we're not going anywhere. We'll provide services until we just cannot provide services anymore."

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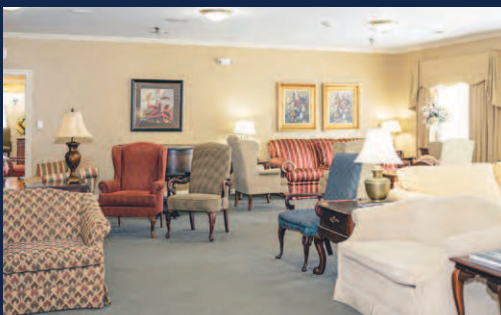
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## MIKE CARROLL'S

# Heating & Air

*By* Mark Wells

In the summer months, as the temperature climbs closer to triple digits, or in the winter months when the temperature plummets below freezing and a layer of frost coats the grass, many of Elbert County's residents know one name to call to make sure the temperature inside their home remains consistent: Mike Carroll of Mike Carroll's Heating & Air.

Carroll, an Elbert County native who graduated from Elbert County Comprehensive High School in 1993, has been working ever since he was old enough to push a wheelbarrow.

"My daddy was a contractor so he built houses and roofing and I was on the job at five, pushing wheelbarrows. That's all I knew," Carroll said. "When he built a house, he did everything from the plumbing to electrical to the sheetrock to the roofing – everything except heating and air. That's the only thing I didn't know how to do when I graduated high school."

At the age of 12, Carroll entered the workforce as he began working at Trinity Granite making \$2 an hour. After graduating high school, he attended Georgia College in Milledgeville and became involved in the heating and air business.

After a year in Milledgeville, Carroll moved back home to Elberton and continued working for a company based out of Athens, perfecting his craft and building contacts that, unbeknownst to him, would later be crucial in establishing a foothold with his own business.



## Mike Carroll's Heating & Air



**Mike Carroll's Heating & Air has been a main stay in the Elbert County community for nearly 25 years as owner Mike Carroll started the business in 1999. Car-**

"The commercial company that I was working for – I opened up a residential end so I built up a lot of communications with a lot of contractors in the Athens, Oglethorpe, Hart County and Elbert County area at that point," Carroll said.

Carroll left the company due to the commute and began working for a granite countertop company, but the heating and air business followed him home.

"I had so many calls coming in for the air conditioning, I just said 'Well, we'll just open up a business and keep going,'" Carroll said. "I had hired my own crews to help me on the residential end so I had guys right off the bat that I could call easily."

With the help and inspiration from another local heating and air business owner, Paul King, in 1999 Mike Carroll's Heating & Air was born.

Carroll offers installation of Carrier and Goodman air conditioners and heaters and provides service and stock parts for all manufacturers. They also do air duct installation.

"We repair, replace, upgrade – we do it all," Carroll said. "We do not do duct cleaning – we can replace the







roll prides himself on providing superior customer service and enjoys being able to provide a needed service to his hometown and “family.”

duct work cheaper than you can get your duct work cleaned.”

After starting his own business, Carroll said that he later went to Athens Technical College to gain more knowledge in his field and graduated in 2002. As the business continued to grow, Carroll said he’s strived to provide superior customer service over the competition.

“When they call here, they get me. When somebody calls and they want an estimate or there’s something on their house they need looked at, they get me. I’ve got guys that help me, but when they call, they get me. They get somebody with 40 years of service that’s been doing it forever,” Carroll said. “They get somebody that’s got the technical knowledge, somebody that’s got the license and the insurance. That’s the biggest thing that sets me apart from the competition. I’m personal to the people here. I grew up here, everybody knows me here, my mama and daddy are still here, my grandparents [lived] here, everybody knows me here.”

Carroll’s employees have also been with the business for an extended period of time, meaning they also have a wealth of experience.

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## Mike Carroll's Heating & Air

"Right now we've got four guys that have been with me forever. I just had one retire – he had been with me 15 years. One has been with me for 12 years. My nephew, [Hunter Chapman], is kind of taking over everything and he's been with me five or six years and I've got a couple of laborer guys that have been with me a couple of years."

In addition to the experience, Carroll prioritizes building relationships with customers.

"That's one of the things that I ingrained into my head guys and my nephew as well. These are the people you're going to see every day. These are the people you're going to see at the grocery store. They're going to be at La Fogata eating and you're going to see five or six people that you just fixed their air conditioning last week," Carroll said. "You have to be personal in order to maintain the future of the business. We go to recreation ball games and we see customers. It only takes one disgruntled customer to affect 100 future customers. We pride ourselves [that] hopefully nobody has a complaint about Mike Carroll's Heating In Air. If something doesn't go right then we did everything that we could possibly do to make it right."

Carroll said he's witnessed the effects of his personalized customer service and commitment through seeing returning customers.

"They're all repeat business. I don't know that I've had very many customers at all that use me and then go to somebody else. They always come back," Carroll said. "We go over the top. We're here to make money, but it's not about money. We have to satisfy in order to make money in the future."

Carroll, who said he has an innate desire to help when needed, has made it a commitment to serve his hometown and the people he considers his family.

"It's the people that I know and the people I was born and raised around. It's family here," Carroll said. "I like the slower pace. Here I can spend time with my customers. I like for everybody in Elbert County to know that they can call me. We go to the grocery store and I'll have 15 people come up and talk to me about something with their house. I go to the Blue Devil game and I don't see the game. I'm literally talking to people the whole time. But it gives you the satisfaction of being needed and filling the need of not just one or two – but the whole community. There's a satisfaction in that."

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# DR. STUART

Erwin

## GENERAL DENTISTRY

*By* Rose Scoggins

For the past 45 years, Dr. Stuart Erwin has been serving the Elbert County community through general dentistry. Erwin opened his practice, which has been a fixture on Laurel Drive, in July 1978.

Becoming a dentist was always the goal for Erwin, who said he realized the dream as a boy growing up in Elbert County. After graduating from Elbert County High School in 1970, Erwin attended the University of Georgia for two years before being accepted to the former The Medical College of Georgia in Augusta to fulfill his childhood dream of becoming a dentist.

In November 1975, Erwin graduated and spent the next two and a half years serving in the United States Army to fulfill a scholarship requirement he received for dental school.

“When I was in dental school, Vietnam was still going on. It wasn’t exactly the easiest thing for them to get dentists to sign up to go in the military,” Erwin said. “They were offering scholarships and we all knew where we were going to go as soon as we got out of school.”

As the war ended before Erwin graduated from dental school, he spent his time working at a dental clinic at Fort Hood, Texas. His first three to six months were spent working in an old World War II barracks while a new clinic was built.

“We had a brand new, state-of-the-art clinic. Everything was the newest stuff,” Erwin said. “I was fortunate for that because not everybody had that type of experi-



## Dr. Stuart Erwin



ence in the military.”

Erwin said his military experience was also unique as he was attached to the First Calvary division rather than a medical unit.

“It gave me a good opportunity to get comfortable with what I’d been taught to do, plus I was surrounded by people that had been there for a while, that if you had any issues or problems, they could jump right in and help you with it,” Erwin said. “Of course after I was there for a while, I was the guy helping the new guy.”

After serving his time in the Army, Erwin returned home to Elbert County and opened his dental practice in 1978. In 2014, his daughter, Amanda Erwin Chandler, joined him at the practice. Erwin sees patients two days a week while Chandler sees them the other two days a week. The office is closed on Fridays.

When patients walk into or call the office, they’re greeted by receptionist Beth Smith. Trudy Greenway serves in the front desk area as well as the bookkeeper and insurance clerk. Patients are then seen by hygienists Katie and Breanne Ferrell along with dental assistants Shari Dye and Hannah Graham.

With the exception of Graham, who has been with the

**Dr. Stuart Erwin has been a fixture in the Elbert County community at 22 Laurel Drive for the last 45 years as he offers general dentistry needs.**





office for the last three months, Erwin said his staff have all been a fixture at the office for years.

“They’re like family. We’ve watched each other’s children grow up,” Erwin said. “They help me take care of the patients. The staff, they make everything that happens here possible.”

The office offers different aspects of general dentistry to patients including routine cleanings, fillings, crowns, bridges, implants, extractions and some root canals. Erwin said one of his favorite aspects of the job is that “no two problems are the same.”

“The other thing is getting to know the patients and keeping up with them,” Erwin said. “You get to know folks – you never see them outside the office – but yet they’re folks you’ve known for many, many years. We’ve got some patients that are grown now that their parents were little kids when we started.”

With 45 years of experience under his belt, Erwin said he has seen a lot of changes in general dentistry over the years with one of the biggest changes being the technology.

“The technology – when I started in the industry, we did not have any computers at all,” Erwin said. “All of our paperwork as far as the scheduling, the billing, the insurance

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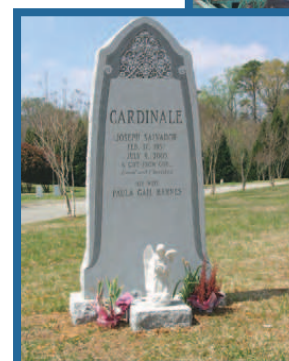
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## Dr. Stuart Erwin

processing and all of that was done by hand.”

Other changes have come to the techniques used as fillings or crowns that were once done with metals are now done with “tooth-colored” and ceramic materials. Along with changes in equipment and updated safety and sterilization standards, Erwin said there have been also changes in the ability to replace teeth using implants that previously would’ve required a denture.

“Very few things are like it was when I was in school,” Erwin said. “When I was in school, I had a professor that would encourage us to do continuing education. Now, in Georgia, we have to do 40 hours every two years of continuing education.”

Erwin said he has enjoyed his career in general dentistry and is thankful to be a main stay in his hometown.

“You can go to town and you’re not interacting with a bunch of strangers because half the people you meet, you know who they are and you speak to them and they know who you are,” Erwin said. “[You’re] surrounded by friends rather than just a stranger on the street.”

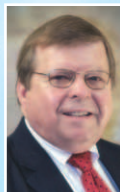
Erwin is married to Karen Seigler Erwin, also an Elbert County native. The couple lives in Dewy Rose and has two children – Amanda and Adam.



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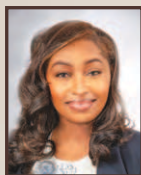
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