

2021

community

A Special Supplement of
Jennings Daily News



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community

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On the cover: The late Vera Abraham is shown recently and in a dated photo with fellow educator, the late Robert Vincent.



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history

VERA
ABRAHAM

Legacy of a Legend



Community mourns loss of retired educator, community volunteer

By ALLISON CRYER

(Editor's note: Retired educator, community volunteer and service pioneer Vera Bell Perkins Abraham passed away peacefully at the age of 88 after battling a lengthy illness. Days after she passed, Jennings Daily News was flooded by former students, community leaders and friends sharing their memories and thoughts on Abraham's life and legacy. Seldom does someone leave such a significant mark on their surroundings. She is truly the definition of "Community" and we are honored to feature her posthumously in this year's Community Magazine.)

Vera Abraham (pictured at left and above with Ella Dartez) was genuinely shocked when she was named Kiwanis Citizen of the Year in 2016 for her outstanding contributions to the community.

Vera Abraham was known by residents throughout the community for her ability to leave behind a dose of goodness with every individual in which she came into contact.

"She always said she couldn't do what she did without the support of the community," said former student and Jeff Davis Parish Schools Curriculum Supervisor Dr. Kieren Coleman. "She was steadfast in trying to better the community and lift up those around her."

A 1954 graduate of Jefferson Davis Training School, Abraham was also a 1958 graduate of Grambling State University with a bachelor's degree in elementary education and further completed a master's plus 30 from Southern University and McNeese State University. She was a life member of the National Educators Association and the First Vice President of the local Retired Teachers Association. She was the Past President of Jeff Davis Parish (JDP) Teachers Association and also belonged to Delta Kappa Gamma Society, National Association of University Woman and GSU Alumni Chapter



3rd Anniversary at Our New Location!



Jeff Davis Parish Sheriff's Office New Facility 1530 La. Hwy 90 West

Fall 2021 marks the third year anniversary JDSO has moved into the new location at 1530 Hwy. 90 West (Shankland Ave.), just east of the new Jeff Davis Parish Consolidated Jail.

This location includes two buildings to better serve the people of Jeff Davis Parish. The smaller building, located at the front of the property, houses the 911 division and includes three new state-of-the-art communication monitors and equipment. It also houses patrol division operations, as well as a conference and training area. The front entrance of the building includes a video visitation center and a kiosk to accept phone card and commissary payments for inmates housed at the jail facility.

The larger building towards the back of the property houses the administration division, commanders' offices, detectives' offices, and public services operations involving taxes, civil issues, tickets, occupational licenses and bonds, as well as areas for meeting and training purposes.

Both new buildings provide JDSO employees with ample space in which to work, function and grow as an agency, as well as provide much needed storage for files and security for sensitive operations. They also allow for a cleaner and more organized environment for the public, allowing employees to provide the best public service to the people of the parish.

The former office spaces at the courthouse and CID buildings are still utilized by the Sheriff's office, but now provide more functionable space. The office space at the courthouse is still used to store files and house the sex offender and transport divisions, as well as the supporting members of the civil division. The former CID building, located on Robert's Avenue, is still maintained for agency impound, storage and fleet maintenance, as well as the D.A.R.E. and SRO offices.

"Although our employees are enjoying working in the new office spaces, our ability to provide quality public service is our top priority," explained Sheriff Ivy Woods. "Not only do we now have more updated technology to better serve the people of the parish, we also have plenty of room for future growth and updates as necessary."



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"Serving the people of Jefferson Davis Parish with pride since 1913."

of JDP since 1968. She was an employee with JDP School Board as a sixth-grade teacher for 28 years until her retirement in 1986.

Abraham was no stranger to volunteerism and helping those in need. In fact, everyone that knew her said it was her sole purpose in life to be of service to her church and community.

"She had a passion for helping people in the community," Coleman said. "She never asked if something was possible, she would always find a way. Not many people could tell her no. She was very convincing."

Abraham was extremely active even into her senior years. She was a member of Our Lady Perpetual Help Catholic Church where she served as President of St. Vincent DePaul Society. She was the Coordinator of Evangelization Team, Parish Council President, coordinator and teacher, Eucharist Minister and Altar Server Chair. She served on the committee of Dioceses of Lake Charles Catholic Charities and was a member of the 3rd Degree Knights of St. Peter Claver Ladies Auxiliary Court #132 for over 50 years. She was Grand Lady and has been Jr. Daughter Counselor, Louisiana State Board Member, a member of 4th Degree Father Herbert F. Schuster Gracious Lady and scholarship chairperson. She also belonged to the Equestrian Order of Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, as well as a charter member of the East Deanery Serra Club.

In addition, Abraham belonged to American Legion Ladies Auxiliary Unit 520 since 1960 and was the Past President of Jennings American Legion Hospital Pink Ladies and Advisory Board Member. She was JDP Head Start Advisory Board Member and Save our Children Board of Directors, as well as the JDP Greater Chamber of Commerce/Business Alliance, Council on Aging, Caring Hands, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Foster Grandparents and JDP Library Board of Directors.

"She devoted her whole life to the kids," said school board member Phillip Arceneaux. "She would take them out of state to conferences and conventions. For many of these kids, this was the first time ever getting to leave the



Vera Abraham was presented with an award for Citizen of the Year for 2019 by American Legion Seventh District Vice Commander Glenn McFarlain and Post 19 Commander Horace Naquin.

state."

One of her most notable projects was serving as the coordinator and director of JDP Summer Feeding Program for over 40 years. The program offered breakfast and lunch for any students under the age of 18 or those who are disabled and attending school. Activities are also scheduled each weekday so students can remain active and engaged in a positive, safe environment. The program often welcomed as many as 200 students a day with meals provided by Jeff Davis Parish School Board cafeteria staff.

Although it is impossible to collect the thoughts of everyone Vera Abraham has impacted over the years, all those who were asked about the former teacher and forever friend immediately flashed a smile as soon as her name was mentioned.

"The first impact I can remember her making on me was in my youth," Coleman said. "She even taught my mother, who always spoke highly of her as a teacher. When I got to James Ward, she was the most requested teacher at the school with a long waiting list. That was because she engaged the students and was present in the classroom. Even as she grew in age, she never lost touch with the children."

While Abraham ran in many

circles in the community, she was said to have had a soft spot for helping those who were suffering.

"She had access to working with the Who's Who, but also a tireless passion for engaging with the downtrodden, the common person and those who just needed love," Coleman said. "She loved everyone and her influence reached a very wide spectrum."

Former Jeff Davis District Attorney Michael Cassidy said Abraham taught him in fourth and sixth grade.

"She was an excellent teacher and was so kind, but also knew how to motivate and encourage the students," Cassidy said. "She always made you feel better about yourself."

Abraham worked tirelessly to help others in need and never wanted attention, he said.

"When she would win an award, she would only talk about the contributions of others and praise them," Cassidy said. "She was the most loving, caring, selfless, inspiring, encouraging, happy person I've ever known."

Former teacher Royce Levy and Abraham have been best friends since high school were roommates in college and even began their first permanent teaching positions at the same school in the same year.

"When I think of Vera, I think

of the quote, 'A faithful friend is a strong defense and he who has found such a one has found a treasure,'" Levy said. "Vera was a faithful friend and like a personal treasure to me. She always had a positive attitude. If you felt low in spirit, she could always lift you up with some pleasant and encouraging words. Vera saw a bright side even in the darkest situations. She was concerned about the welfare of others and always willing to extend a helping hand to anyone."

Her dear friend and fellow volunteer with Big Brothers Big Sisters, Heloise Cassidy said Abraham was a very gentle and elegant woman.

"She was a friend to many and a co-worker in numerous facets of life," she said. "She was always following God's lead. So many times I tried to sing her praise, which she so deserved. In what I call 'the Vera way,' she would turn the compliment back on me. This was how it was with all she encountered. Hats off to you Vera! Kudos to you Vera! May our memories of you, a praiseworthy figure on earth, lead us to follow your way."

Former student Monica Hebert said Abraham was the type of person everyone should strive to be.

"She had a heart of gold and

having her as a teacher taught me so many things," Hebert said. "Her love of life and her compassion made her a standout teacher. I was in her class when the Challenger space shuttle crashed, killing the entire crew. She asked the entire class to bow their heads and pray for the crew and their families. She genuinely cared for everyone. Heaven has most definitely gained a beautiful angel."

Another former student, Debra Alatrisme remembers Abraham for her hugs.

"When she would see me outside of school, she would always give me a hug," she said. "She was a really good teacher and I will miss her so much."

Nicole Cole said Abraham had a special way of making learning fun.

"I will miss her so much," she said.

Teacher Debbie Ardoin said Abraham made her feel welcome when she first moved to Jennings from Lafayette.

"I first met Mrs. Abraham when we were at James Ward Elementary School," Ardoin said. "I knew very few people and she welcomed me with a huge hug and kind words. She was one-of-a-kind."

Abraham taught student Lanette O'Quinn in sixth grade in 1982, making an impression on her that would last forever.

"She was an amazing teacher and cared



Vera Abraham worked with Principal Robert Vincent in the 1970s and helped to navigate students and staff during a tumultuous time in U.S. history

about our feelings," she said. "The Lord blessed her with the gift of teaching and she went above and beyond when using this gift."

Cousin DeVille Mara said Abraham, who had no children of her own, treated all children as if they belonged to her.

"She made sure the children had a place to go in the summer to learn and have a meal they may not have gotten at home," Mara said. "Fly high from an angel on earth to your rightful

place in heaven. You will be greatly missed."

The most common memory of Abraham in the minds of former students was how happy and confident she made them feel. She was well-known for starting off the class in a positive way by asking the students for "one stomp, one desk and one clap." This routine was mentioned by nearly all of her former students.

Coleman said Abraham was a legend in the community that can never be replaced.

"She was a builder," he said. "She built you up and made you believe you were capable of anything. She also lifted up some of the community programs she was involved with her can-do attitude and positive spirit."

In her lifetime, she has received many awards and honors from clubs, community organizations and even the City of Jennings. However, Abraham told Jennings Daily News in 2019 that her accomplishments were made possible by people in the community who supported her and the many local projects that touched so many lives.

"You have a dream in this parish, just work on it and it will be accomplished due to community support," said Abraham. "People here will help. Contact people you know that are involved and keep working. Don't give up."



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‘Find what motivates you and cultivate it’

Local man credits exercise, support with stroke recovery

DAMON
SCOTT

BY AMANDA GIST

Damon Scott, 46, of Jennings, has worked hard to accomplish goals he set for himself despite physical limitations he faced after a massive stroke left him partially paralyzed.

“I had my first stroke in January 2019,” he said. “It was very mild and I only spent one day in the hospital.”

He said one year later, on Feb. 17, 2020 he had a massive stroke that affected three out of the four lobes of his brain and was hospitalized for eight weeks.

“The stroke affected

my right side and I lost my ability to swallow and talk,” he said. “I was in ICU when the pandemic started and I had no idea what was going on. My wife, Lori, was able to visit me for the first four weeks that I was hospitalized but as the pandemic grew, the hospital stopped allowing visitors. It was a very lonely time.”

Scott graduated from McNeese State University in 2005 where he received a nursing degree. He said he worked at Lake Charles Memorial Hospital (LCMH) at the time of his stroke. He also received most of his



Damon Scott has embraced exercise as a form of therapy following two strokes. He says he has lost a total of 110 pounds throughout his journey.

treatment at the same facility.

"It was difficult knowing the people I worked alongside were now struggling to keep the hospital properly staffed during that time," he said. "When I got to rehab, everyone was talking about how bad COVID-19 was getting and I realized they were in desperate need of nursing staff. I became depressed because I wanted to be able to help my colleagues on the frontline but I knew I wouldn't be able to work."

After seven weeks in inpatient rehab Scott was moved to outpatient therapy, all at LCMH until it was derailed due to Hurricane Laura.

"I moved to The Therapy Center in Jennings," he said. "I received speech and occupational therapy for a total of 18 months. I was medically cleared in June 2021."

Scott said he started doing Crossfit before his stroke as a way to change his

Damon Scott and his wife Lori enjoy singing in their church.



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lifestyle. Crossfit is a form of high intensity interval training and is a strength and conditioning workout that is made up of functional movement performed at a high intensity level.

"I started doing Crossfit in 2018," he said. "I think if I wouldn't have been going to Crossfit at the time I had my stroke, it could have been worse or I could have died. My physical therapist told me I had reached my maximum capability so I decided Crossfit would become my therapy. Sometimes my wife says I push myself too hard because I try to go too fast or lift too much, but I don't want to slow down. I only want to keep going. Crossfit keeps me motivated. The people I get to interact with everyday are like family to me. They visited me in the hospital and sent me a card they had all signed to keep my spirits up."

He said getting back to day-to-day life has been a difficult adjustment for him, but he finds comfort and encouragement from his family.

"I'm trying to get back to my regular routine and I have realized there are some things I can't do anymore, so I modify everything," he said. "Sometimes I get upset and I let myself get down about my situation, but I remember I have a daughter and a wife at home so I have to keep going for them. I can no longer supply an income, but I can do other things to support them. I can cook, clean and take care of things around the house. It



Damon Scott and his wife Lori at exercise class (top right) and with their daughter (above).

isn't easy because I have pain everyday, so I have to give myself a pep talk and take on the mentality that I can't stop — no matter what."

While he was searching to find something to keep busy, his brother-in-law offered to lend a helping hand in pursuing a new hobby.

"I recently got into gardening," he said. "I didn't want to sit in my house and watch television all day. My brother-in-law built me a raised garden bed so I didn't have to bend over. I've grown tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, okra, carrots and broccoli. I also

take care of all of our houseplants because if I didn't, my wife would kill them."

According to Scott, he has lost about 110 pounds throughout his journey and has encouraged his wife to join Crossfit, as well.

"It's easy to quit," he said. "And I don't think anyone would blame me if I did, given the circumstances. But your life does not stop because of adversity, you have to keep going. You have to find something that motivates you and cultivate it."



CATHY
SMITH

Improving their Lives



JHS Counselor Cathy Smith (left) assists junior Gracie Sonnier with future decisions in higher education. Smith has a passion for helping students succeed at both in school and life.

JHS guidance counselor considers her job 'the best ever'

By ERIN HARGRAVE

Cathy Smith is a counselor at Jennings High School (JHS) and is in her 25th year in education.

She has always considered herself a caretaker, even as a young adult, according to Smith.

"I've always taken care of things for everyone in my life," she said. "That's how I met my husband. He and my brother got into an accident and I handled the insurance claim."

Smith and her husband Ricky have been married for 41 years and share a son, Jonathan. After they were married, she stayed home and

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"I couldn't see myself being hidden in the back ... I wanted to be where the students were because they needed to feel comfortable with me."

~ Cathy Smith



took care of their home and child.

She had gone to college right out of high school but did not finish at that time. When Jonathan started school, Smith said she felt like it was the right time to go back and get her degree.

"Jonathan's first day of kindergarten was also my first day of college," she said. "I wrote my first essay on what it was like starting school with my child. I was 30 going down a new path, but I think starting later in life made me a better teacher."

Her plan was to finish her teaching degree and then get her counseling certification. Smith received a masters in education technology before registering to go back to school for counseling.

"I knew how I wanted my career to go," she said. "I wanted to teach for 10 years, then be a counselor for 10 and eventually become an administrator, but I love what I do. I can't see myself in any other position than where I am currently. It's the best job ever."

Smith started her career in Acadia Parish where she taught for two years. She went on to work in Hathaway and Elton before a job would become available in Jennings.

While Smith was a counselor at JHS she unknowingly changed the life of her student Christin Crader Manuel. She had approached Smith with her plans to become a beautician. Smith said she encouraged her to reach

further for her education.

"I had no idea how much of an impact I made on Christin's future," she said. "She told me one day that if it had not been for me speaking with her she would not be where she is. Now she is a Health and Human Performance Instructor at McNeese State University. She thanked me for pushing her to go to college."

During Smith's tenure in Elton, she was awarded the honor of Louisiana Counselor of the Year. This award came with a trip to D.C. to attend a Gala for school counselors from each state. Smith said it was an amazing and memorable trip.

"There were counselors representing 48 states in attendance," she said. "I show my students the pictures from the event often. I have been only feet away from former First Lady Michelle Obama. It was definitely a phenomenal experience."

When Smith started working at JHS, she knew she wanted to be easily accessible to the students. Since the counselor's office is typically located in the back office, that wouldn't work for her, Smith explained.

"I couldn't see myself hidden in the back," she said "The school had an unused room in a central hallway that I asked for. I wanted to be where the students were because they needed to feel comfortable with me. I have a literal open-door policy with them and they know my office is open for anything."

JHS Counselor Cathy Smith (at right) proudly shows photographs she took while attending the School Counselor of the Year Gala in Washington D.C. Smith was named Counselor of the Year (above) in 2016 and represented Louisiana at the event.



Smith works hard every day to build relationships with students and assist them in any way. She goes into classrooms with students, checks on students she knows may be struggling and does whatever she can to improve the lives of her students, she said.

"I keep candy in a dish for students to pop in and grab," she said. "Sometimes that opens up a dialogue between me and the students. I recently received a grant to acquire Chrome Books for my office so students have a place to work. Some of these kids are going through things nobody knows about and I want them to know I'm here for them."

Through all of her years in the education system, there have been many memorable moments for Smith, but watching the students graduate is her favorite, she said.

"There is nothing better than watching a child reach their goal," she said. "Especially when you know how hard they have struggled or fought to get there. That's the job I love and I hope to be able to do it for years to come. Getting these students to graduation is the first step to their future and I'm grateful to be a part of it."





**TYLER
CONNER**

The Heart of a Greyhound

Conner overcomes cancer to live football dreams

By KEVIN BRUCHHAUS

The Welsh Greyhounds are looking for a lot more scoring from their offense this coming football season. After a touch-down or before a field goal attempt, comes a crucial part of the game that goes largely unnoticed. It is the deep snapper who starts the play and his snap must be unerringly accurate to gain either one or three more points for the offense.

In Greyhound land, senior Tyler Conner will be starting his

third season as the deep snapper for the red and black. But Tyler has a story that goes along with his ability to be an integral part of the success of the Greyhounds.

When Tyler was two years old, he was diagnosed with neuroblastoma. Tyler had a tumor growing behind his right eye.

"We were living in Roanoke at the time," recalls Tyler's mom, Dawn. "We noticed he had a swollen eye and we took him to several doctors without much

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success. Then we moved to Houston so Tyler's dad could finish chiropractor school. That allowed us to take Tyler to Texas Children's Hospital, when the proper test revealed his Stage 4 tumor. Needless to say, we were really scared out of our minds. Who recovers from stage four-cancer? His prognosis was really grim. But even at age two, Tyler had no quit in him. Through rounds of chemotherapy and radiation, while hooked up to IVs, Tyler would be running around the hospital. No one could keep up with him. Even when he had to have a bone marrow transplant, they couldn't keep him down. Today Tyler doesn't like any attention, but I can tell you he has been a fighter all of his life."

Tyler's dad, Joel, sees his son as a miracle baby.

"Less than 5 percent of children who have neuroblastoma survive. God has truly been good to us," he said. "I graduated from

chiropractor school on Dec. 16, 2006, and Tyler was declared to be in remission on Dec. 8, 2006. That was a great day for us, but it was a really long road."

Some of Tyler's treatments besides chemotherapy and radiation included stem cell transplant from his own bone marrow. Tyler's last therapy session for the cancer was in 2007. He had to continue having check-ups for 10 years. The cancer affected some of his hearing and eyesight, including having cataract surgery at age 15. Today, Tyler remains in remission and no longer has to visit cancer doctors.

Joel is pretty definite when he talks about Tyler's future.

"Tyler eats, drinks and breathes football," said Joel. "He wants to be a football coach someday, and with his never-quit attitude, I'm certainly not betting against him."

Now comes the recollections

of his battle from Tyler himself.

"I really don't remember any of it until I was age five," he said. "All I can remember is wanting to do what everyone else my age did and wanting to be better than most. I guess I have always been competitive."

Tyler took part in swimming competitively and was very serious about being the best he could be. He always loved football and was part of the junior high team in Jennings. He moved to Welsh at the beginning of his freshman year and had to sit out a year before being eligible. He went out for football his sophomore year and quickly found his niche as a deep snapper. He made the varsity and first team and the rest is history. Every punt, extra point attempt or field goal begins with Tyler snapping the ball.

Welsh head coach Cody Gueringer praised Tyler for his positive attitude concerning everything football-related.

"No one likes the grind of weight lifting during the hot summer months, but Tyler is there encouraging his teammates during the hard periods," he said. "He is the first to walk into the weight room and cheer on all the work taking place. To jump into the role of deep snapper with such a positive attitude is new to us. Most of the time when you mention special teams, most of the players want out. Tyler took on the job as a sophomore and has never looked back.

"Even today at practice, you can find Tyler on the sideline fine-tuning his snaps for both extra points and field goals, as well as deeper snaps for punting. He is never satisfied and is always looking to get better. He truly practices his trade. On punts, he is always the first downfield and is always looking to stop

opponents as quickly as possible."

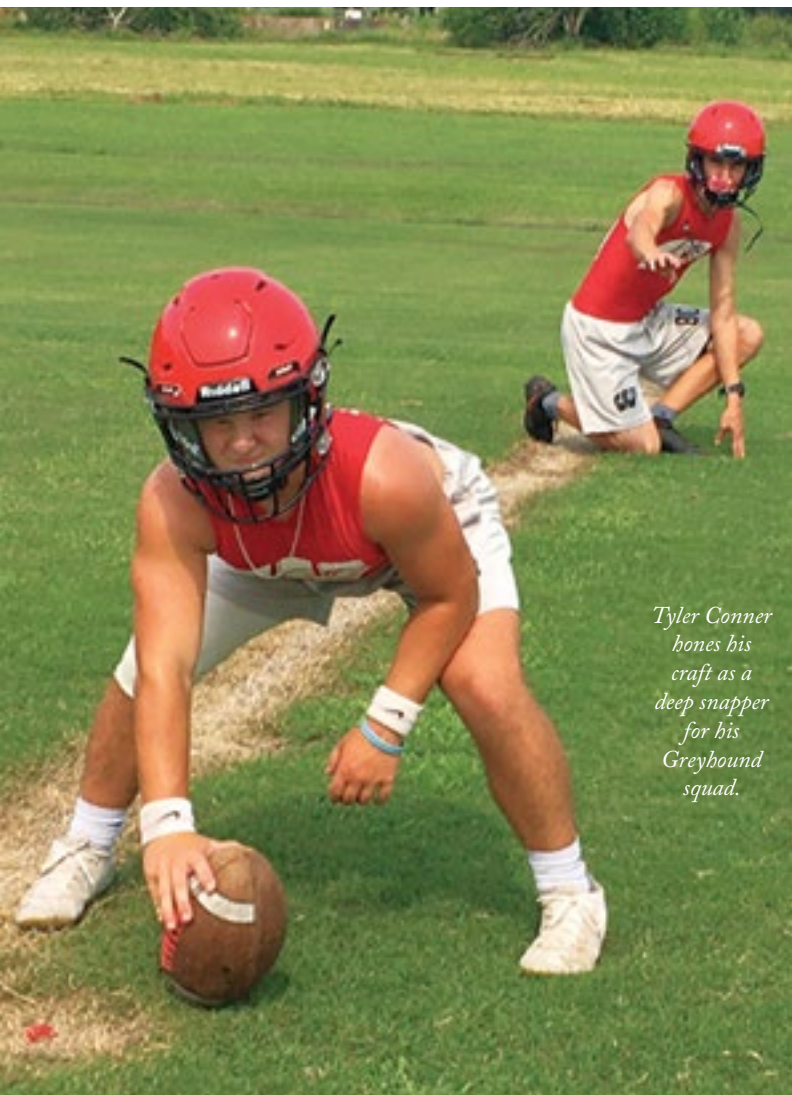
Tyler was always ready to work hard to succeed and to push others to succeed.

"Tyler understood at an early age that throughout life, no one will do it for you," he said. "You have to make your own way. Tyler is the epitome of taking the bull by the horns and doing it yourself. He will be the first one to tell you not to feel sorry for him or expect less of him. He is the most positive kid on our team. His peers really look up to him and appreciate all the encouragement he gives them. He is a huge integral part of our team. I wish I had 60 Tylers to work with every year."

Tyler's final words in agreeing to do this story were typical of his character.

"I don't want this story to be mushy or anything like that," he said. "Let's just make it as positive as possible."

But don't think for a second he has forgotten why he is still around today. "The grace of God is why I'm here today. That's the only reason and I remember every day that I owe it all to Him."



Tyler Conner hones his craft as a deep snapper for his Greyhound squad.

KALY
GIST

Photos by Amanda Gist

Kaly Gist always has a smile on her face and a thumbs up for her veterans.

Spreading Happiness

Jennings resident finds joy through service to military, senior community

BY AMANDA GIST

Jennings resident Kaly Gist has worked with both the military and elderly community throughout her adult life and has found the opportunity to be able to serve both at the same time.

In 2005, Gist moved to Jacksonville, Fla., where she received a bachelor's of science degree in human services and became a counselor for a volunteer organization called Fleet and Family

Support.

Gist said she was able to counsel military spouses, coordinate events for families of deployed spouses and provide support to those in crisis when necessary.

"I think that's when my eyes were opened to people in need and I wanted to find a way to help out," she said. "I was young and inexperienced to the

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needs of those around me and that opportunity opened up a whole new world to me."

Gist moved back to Jennings in 2008, after receiving the devastating news her oldest brother, Cory, had been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease.

"I wanted to be here to support my brother and my family through that difficult time," she said.

It was during that time Gist found her way into being of service to the elderly community, first by becoming a home health aide, then by starting her work at Jeff Davis Council on Aging (COA).

"I was a senior citizen

counselor, advocate and fundraising coordinator for COA," recalled Gist. "It was there my adoration for the elderly community really became clear to me. I really enjoyed what I was doing and I knew I wanted to do more."

Gist then set her sights on becoming a nurse to better assist people, but due to a missed deadline for the nursing degree program, she enrolled in the CNA program at SOWELA.

"I figured I would keep the momentum going by enrolling in the CNA program to get my feet wet in the medical field and I planned to attend the nursing

program at a later time," she explained.

Gist said her first round of clinicals was at the Southwest La Veteran's Home (SLVH).

"The first day I was scared to death," she said. "I had no clue what to expect. After the first week, I started to wonder if this was really for me. Do I really want to be a nurse?"

She said it was around her second week of clinicals when she met SLVH Activities Director Julie Benoit.

"I saw what they did and how they made the residents so happy," she said. "They seemed to have a lot of fun and really make an impact on the veterans. I was truly in awe of them."

Gist said her instructor started to encourage her to participate more in the activities department.

"I guess she saw something in me that I didn't see in myself and she pushed me to spend more time working with that department," she said. "I really and truly believe all of the stars had aligned. I started talking to the activities director and was told there was an opening for a therapeutic specialist position within the department. I expressed interest and got an interview. The hiring process can take a couple of weeks so I told myself if I was supposed to have this job then I would get the job, and I got it."

She said everything seemed to fall into place and believed it was divine intervention that sent her to all the right places.

"There were so many things that could have happened differently that would have taken me down a different path, but that isn't what happened," she said.

Gist recalls the exact moment



Kaly Gist helps resident veteran Maurice Conner (above) Facetime with his family when the COVID pandemic started. Gist and veteran Paul Boudreaux (below) work together for Staff and Veteran Teamwork Day to get the job done. Gist and veteran Red Perry (top right) enjoy some sunshine on the patio at SLVH.



that she knew, without a doubt, working in the activities department at the veteran's home was where she wanted to spend the rest of her career.

"I had been working there for about two weeks and was still learning, when we had our annual Memorial Day ceremony," she said. "At the beginning of each program we say the Pledge of Allegiance and a prayer. I had never been a part of anything like this. This was the first residential facility I'd worked at. I'd never given any thought that people in wheelchairs could actually walk or stand. When the pledge started, veterans in wheelchairs all started to stand and salute the flag. I was in shock and had goosebumps. I was so overwhelmed with pride I started to cry. These frail men and women respect and love the country so much that nothing stops them from saluting the flag the right way."

Gist said she remembers watching co-workers and staff members helping some of the men and women continue to stand throughout the entire pledge and into the prayer.

"I realized then that I was a part of something bigger than myself, something grand, she said. "The veteran's home was

exactly where I needed to be."

While she enjoys every part of her day, Gist said she is particularly fond of her morning routine.

"Everyone is wide awake and chatty," she said. "I'll hit the floor, first thing, with a cup of coffee and go around to each unit with my trusted activity cart filled with goodies and visit with as many veterans as possible. It starts their day off positively and mine, as well. I've been asked questions like, 'Do you have to be so loud?' or 'Why are you so happy in the morning?' But my personal favorite is, 'What exactly do you do here?' My answer to that question is always that I am here to spread happiness!"



Kaly Gist helps local musician Leroy Thomas entertain veterans at SLVH. Gist was presented with a personal washboard from Thomas' collection, which she treasures.



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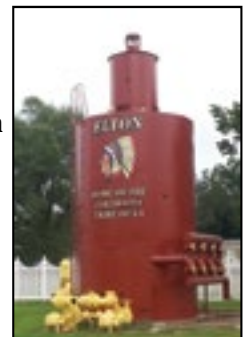
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BRENNON CONNER



Photo courtesy of
Marlene Touchet

A STROKE OF GENIUS

Local swimmer captures six state championships in high school career, readies for college

BY KEVIN BRUCHHAUS

When thinking of high school sports around South Louisiana, the avid fan usually goes to football, basketball or even baseball. However, one Jennings native has sparked the popularity of swimming by setting the state of Louisiana on fire.

Jennings High School swimmer Brennon Conner has become a household name in not just the swimming fraternity, but around Jeff Davis Parish with all the accomplishments he has been able to achieve in his time with the Bulldog swim team.

Conner has captured a whopping six state championships in his high school



Brennon Conner during a recent competition (above and at left) and receiving his gold medal (right).



career, not to mention many more with his club teams in the summer. At the recent LH-SAA State Swim meet, Conner won the 50-yard state title and the 100-yard state crown. Even more impressive than that, he broke the all-time LHSAA record in the 50-meter, and tied the all-time mark in the 100-yard. The 50-yard record he broke was already one that he owned from his sophomore year.

With all the accolades he has achieved, the humble Conner explained it was all due to hard work and extreme sacrifices from his parents.

"The achievements are great and I'm very proud of them, but it took an extreme amount of work to get here," he said. "I practiced nine times a week, sometimes waking up as early as 3 a.m. to get to the pool and then doing it again later that afternoon. There were a lot of days where I was so sore it was

"The achievements are great and I'm very proud of them, but it took an extreme amount of work to get here."

~ Brennon Conner

hard to even get out of bed. But, I couldn't have done it without my parents throughout the years. They have made so many sacrifices to help me achieve my goals. They would drive me every day to where I needed to go, and supported me in everything I wanted to do."

Conner recently signed his National Letter of Intent to further his swimming and academic career at the University of South Dakota (USD) in Vermillion, South Dakota. He chose USD over four other schools, and said there was a connection that made his choice an easy one.

"I knew the coach there at South Dakota from my time

with my club team, and I knew the kind of guy he is. They have a great swim team up there and the school is very nice," he said. "It will take a little getting used to moving so far up north, but they have so many nice things up there that attracted me to the school. They have a big dome up there with a football stadium, a nice pool and volleyball court in it. It's a top-notch facility."

Conner is not the only swimmer in the family, as older brother and former Bulldog Breydon also swims at Millsaps College in Jackson, Miss.

To call Conner just a swimmer would be the ultimate mistake due to everything that the senior

has already accomplished in his young life. He not only carries a 4.0 GPA at Jennings High School, he has taken the Cajun seasoning world by storm by creating his own seasoning tabbed BDaddy's Cajun Seasoning. The ever-growing seasoning is just another venture Conner has turned successful, and he balances that with everything else he is involved in.

According to Conner, during COVID-19 quarantine he had the idea to come up with a non-MSG seasoning of his own. With the help of his father, BDaddy's was formed.

"I would see all these different seasonings on the shelves and wanted to try and make one of my own," said Conner. "I know a lot of people say some seasonings are too salty and others like me can't have MSG, so I started playing around in the kitchen to find a good combination."

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Photo courtesy of Marlene Touchet

Conner discussed a multitude of people, coaches and athletes that have helped him along the way, but pointed to special friendships that have helped him to dream big in his pursuits.

"Travis Etienne Jr. and Trevor Etienne have both been big in inspiring me to be the best I can in what I do. I got to meet Travis when his jersey was retired, and he continues to send me texts

telling me to keep grinding and working hard," he said. "That really meant a lot to me for someone who has achieved so much to be a good friend to me. Trevor and I have always been

close, and it's been amazing to watch him become the great athlete and young man he has become. They are both guys you want to model yourself after."



Brennon Conner (above) won the 50-yard state title and the 100-yard state crown at the recent LHSAA state swim meet. Conner (at right) is shown with his older brother, former Bulldog Breydon, at a past high school swim meet.



**GISSELLE
FUENTES**



Giselle Fuentes signs her National Letter of Intent with Northeast Texas College to continue her softball career.

Big Dreams

CAN COME TRUE

Lacassine's Fuentes to continue softball career in college

BY KEVIN BRUCHHAUS

College athletic scholarships are extremely hard to come by. Hundreds of high school athletes throughout the country see their playing careers end after their final contest in the senior season. Throw in the fact of attending a small high school and those odds of attaining the chance to play at the next level can severely shrink compared to larger high schools across the country.

Lacassine High School (LHS) is a Class B school that just

added softball four seasons ago, however, it has seen two athletes sign scholarships to continue their careers at the collegiate level. The latest signee to follow in the footsteps of Haylie Hoffpauir is LHS senior Giselle Fuentes. Recently, Fuentes signed scholarship papers to continue her academic and playing career at North Texas Community College in Mt. Pleasant, Texas.

Fuentes has been a member of the Lady Cardinals softball team since she was an eighth



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grader at the school, and has turned herself into one of the premier players in all of Southwest Louisiana. Fuentes is a utility player that can play anywhere on the field, but more importantly can swing the bat like nobody's business. The sweet, shy senior discussed what it was like during her time at LHS, and why she ultimately decided to stay at the school instead of opting to switch to perennial softball schools in the area.

"Before LHS started the softball program here, I was looking at where I could possibly attend to further my softball career," said

Fuentes. "But once they did, it was a no-brainer to stay here and help to build something. I love the small-town mentality and the fact that we have support from the whole community. This group of girls that are on this team are like a family, and that was truly special for me."

So far in her high school career, Fuentes has been named to the All-District Team three years running, and has also been a member of the All-Jeff Davis Parish Team an equal amount. However, despite her accomplishments on the field, Fuentes has maintained a 3.7

Giselle Fuentes has been named to the All-District Softball Team, as well as the All-Jeff Davis Parish Team three years running. She recently signed to continue her softball career at North Texas College.



GPA all while balancing school softball, travel softball and other things.

"Balancing both softball and academics can be tough, but my parents have always been big advocates of making the grades first," added Fuentes. "You have to be able to be at managing your time and realizing what comes first. If I don't make the grades, my dream of playing college softball may not have existed. I want to be a good role model for my younger teammates not only on the field, but in the classroom also."

Besides playing high school ball at LHS, Fuentes has played a slew of travel softball through the years. She played with ICE Softball out of Lake Charles during her eighth and ninth grade years, then moved on to play with Bullet Softball her sophomore season. The past two seasons, she has switched over to MOJO Softball out of Beaumont, an Elite level team that travels the country to play.

To Fuentes, she had a lot of people to thank for growth in the softball world.

"I just want to thank every coach who has invested the time in helping me become the player I have become. Without them, I wouldn't have had the chances I have had," said Fuentes. "I want to give a special thanks to my high school coaches. Coach Trahan, Coach Eric and Coach Taylor. They have all helped me and this team grow each year."

Fuentes explained how important her family has been to her in this process, and said without them none of this would

be possible due to their sacrifices and dedication.

"They are so proud of me because I will be the first to be able to have the chance to go to college," added Fuentes. "My mom has sacrificed so much to get me to where I needed to go, and when she couldn't because of work, I always had my grandparents and uncles always willing to jump in and help. My entire family has always been there, whether it was to help me fundraise, cheer for me or help me practice."

Fuentes explained she had several opportunities from other colleges interested in her, but one trip to Northeast Texas College was all she needed.

"When I visited, it almost felt like home," she said. "It's a small community and I felt it wouldn't be a hard adjustment coming from a small town myself. It's just got that friendly, hometown feel to it that completely made me feel comfortable."

With North Texas College serving as a junior college, Fuentes hopes her talents can lead her to the Division 1 level to finish her career.

"I'd love to be able to come back closer to home and play at McNeese, Lamar or UL-L after my time is done at Northeast Texas," said Fuentes. "But the main thing is, I want to make sure I can continue my degree in criminal justice along the way. You can't play softball forever, and education is definitely important."



Giselle Fuentes gets set to hit another pitch for the Lacassine Lady Cardinals.

CREED
ROMANO

'Only the Beginning'

Romano aims
to make mark
in parish

By Allison Cryer

Seven months ago Creed Romano took over the helm as CEO of Jeff Davis Economic Development, the Chamber of Commerce and the Tourist Commission after Marion "Butch" Fox, a legend in the industry, lost her battle to COVID-19. Now he is making his mark on the parish by implementing his vision for economic growth and quality of life enhancement for all who reside or work in Jeff Davis Parish.

Born in Sulphur and raised in New Orleans, Romano said he fondly remembers coming to Southwest Louisiana to visit his beloved grandmother every summer and on holidays.

"I always loved Southwest Louisiana and I feel like I belong here," he said. "When I would come to visit, I loved working with Granny at the fabric house."

Romano received his J.D. from Mississippi College School of Law in 2003 and his bachelor of arts in political science and international relations from the University of Mississippi in 2000. He also served on the Calcasieu Parish Hurricane Recovery Task Force in February, developing a working economic framework for rebuilding the region and businesses, growing employment and encouraging economic resilience.

Romano currently lives in Lake Charles with his wife of 25 years, Aimee, who is a teacher, and 16-year-old son. He plans to move soon to fulfill his dream of owning a small farm in the rural areas of the parish.

After seven months at the helm of Jeff Davis Economic Development and Tourism, Creed Romano says he is blown away by the passion displayed by residents for their community.

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"I have always been fascinated by agriculture and rice farming," he said. "The farmers here are so passionate and that inspires me. Food security is an issue across the globe and the agriculture industry is extremely important worldwide."

He is currently working on plans to increase agritourism in an effort to attract visitors and grow business in the industry.

"Agritourism helps preserve rural lifestyles and landscape and has a considerable role in the future development of rural areas," he said. "Knowing where your food comes from is important."

In November, ground broke on a new facility in Lacassine expected to open new global markets to area rice farmers. The farmers raised nearly \$5 million for the \$21 million three-acre rice milling facility.

"This is only the beginning for our parish. I see many other opportunities to lure new industry here, improving the lives of residents and creating quality jobs," he said. "In my heart, I truly see so much potential for this parish."

He said he is excited about crossing the finish line on the long-awaited Geographical Information System (GIS) platform that is expected to make it easier to do business



Creed Romano kicked off the stuffed animal sleepover at the Lake Arthur Library by reading "If You Give a Moose a Muffin" by Laura Numeroff.

in Jeff Davis Parish. The project was originally started by his mentor, Fox, whose vision was to implement technology that would make Jeff Davis more competitive in the marketplace.

"Having GIS allows us to collect, analyze and display large amounts of data that will provide government, business and private professionals with the information needed to make important decisions affecting drainage, site selection,

land management, resource development and natural disaster recovery efforts," Romano said. "This platform will help us retain and attract new businesses and create quality jobs for the betterment of our residents and parish."

He also talked about getting another site certified through Louisiana Economic Development's Certified Sites Program. The first site in the parish, T.O. Allen Industrial Park North in Iowa was certified in 2017.

From what he has observed in his short tenure, Romano said he has been impressed with the level of commitment Jeff Davis residents have to their community.

"People here seem to be very involved," he said. "Everyone I have met is so fiercely proud of their parish and their passion inspires me. Passion and dedication to our community are what is required to ensure Jeff Davis Parish reaches its full potential and improves conditions for the next generations."

Romano said his success over the last seven months would not have been possible without the help of his talented staff, Tourism Marketing Director Dione Sabelhaus, Executive Assistant

Leah Harford, Graphics and Communications Coordinator Jaime Lee and Chamber of Commerce Director Linda Leblanc.

"Enhancing economic development is a team effort," he said. "It's much more successful when you work with staff who are passionate about what they do and with a community that cares."

The pandemic not only impacted the business climate here, but also changed Romano's perspective and priorities on life.

"The pandemic forced us all to reevaluate our lives and we have come to realize that life is short and should be lived to the fullest," he said. "Family, faith and a true sense of community have become more important in these hectic times in which we find ourselves. You can find all three of those things here in Jeff Davis Parish, along with the best food, music, scenery and fun festivals, as well as the friendly folks who are always there for you during difficult times. Jeff Davis is an amazing place to live, work and raise a family and I am so happy to get to be a part of its story."



Creed Romano (right) met with District 25 State Senator Mark Abraham (left) and District 37 State Representative Troy Romero for Louisiana Chamber Day at the state capitol in Baton Rouge.

WILLIAM
QUALLS

'ALWAYS
STRIVE
FOR

GREATNESS'

BY ERIN HARGRAVE

JHS assistant band director goes above and beyond for students

William Qualls has been the assistant band director for the Pride of Jennings marching band at Jennings High School (JHS) for six years.

The basic duties he performs align with his title but he also goes above and beyond for his band students in an effort make them the best possible musicians they can be.

Qualls grew up in the small, unincorporated area of Deville and was a graduate of Buckeye High



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School (BHS) class of 2012.

Sometime around the fifth grade Qualls said he became inspired by music. He recalls listening to his choir director sing by an empty pool and thinking I want to do something like that.

"All I knew was that I wanted a musically-related career," he said. "I wasn't thinking anything specific, but I knew then music would be an important part of my life."

In high school, Qualls said he was in the BHS marching band and loved it, but his band director settled for average. He said that's not what he wanted for himself or what he expects from his band kids.

"My teachers always settled for good enough from their students," Qualls said. "My students have the potential to be great and I never want them or myself to stop at mediocre."

After graduation, Qualls started his higher education at Northwestern State University (NSU) where he was a member of the Spirit of Northwestern (SON) band. He was slated to graduate with a degree in music education but left a few credits shy of his degree. Qualls was not sure he'd finish his degree or venture down another path in his education.

"I'm not sure what I would go to school for if I went back," he said. "I don't think I'd pursue



William Qualls researches music (above) for the JHS Pride of Jennings marching band. Below, Qualls conducts the band.

music as a major. Ideally, I'd like to get a degree in something else because I love what I do and I never want this to feel like a job."

Qualls said JHS Band Director Brandon Strain is responsible for getting him into role as assistant band director role.

"I was not looking for a job at all," he said. "I was working at the bank and Brandon called asking if I wanted to join his new band. I didn't think twice about

it, I told him 'Yes'."

Even though he was excited about the new job, Qualls said he was nervous, as well.

"Of course I was a little scared," he said. "I was going from a good paying job, to uncertainty. I had also grown accustomed to a lifestyle where I only had to worry about me and the new job required me to be responsible for students. But, I look up to Brandon in a lot of ways. I trusted that he had my best interest at heart and it paid off."

In 2010, Qualls gave his first private lesson to a student. He said at first he felt lost.

"I wasn't sure what I was doing," he said. "I knew what the problem was, I just didn't know how to help him fix it."

Now, he brings what he learned from his time in SON and as a student at NSU to the band students at JHS. Qualls gives private lessons to any student interested at no out of pocket cost to parents.

"Money should never be an issue," he said. "I don't want a student's financial situation at home to get in the way of their potential. I'm trying to give my

band kids the opportunities I didn't have as a child and for me it's a double win. I'm growing better musicians and the students are becoming better musicians."

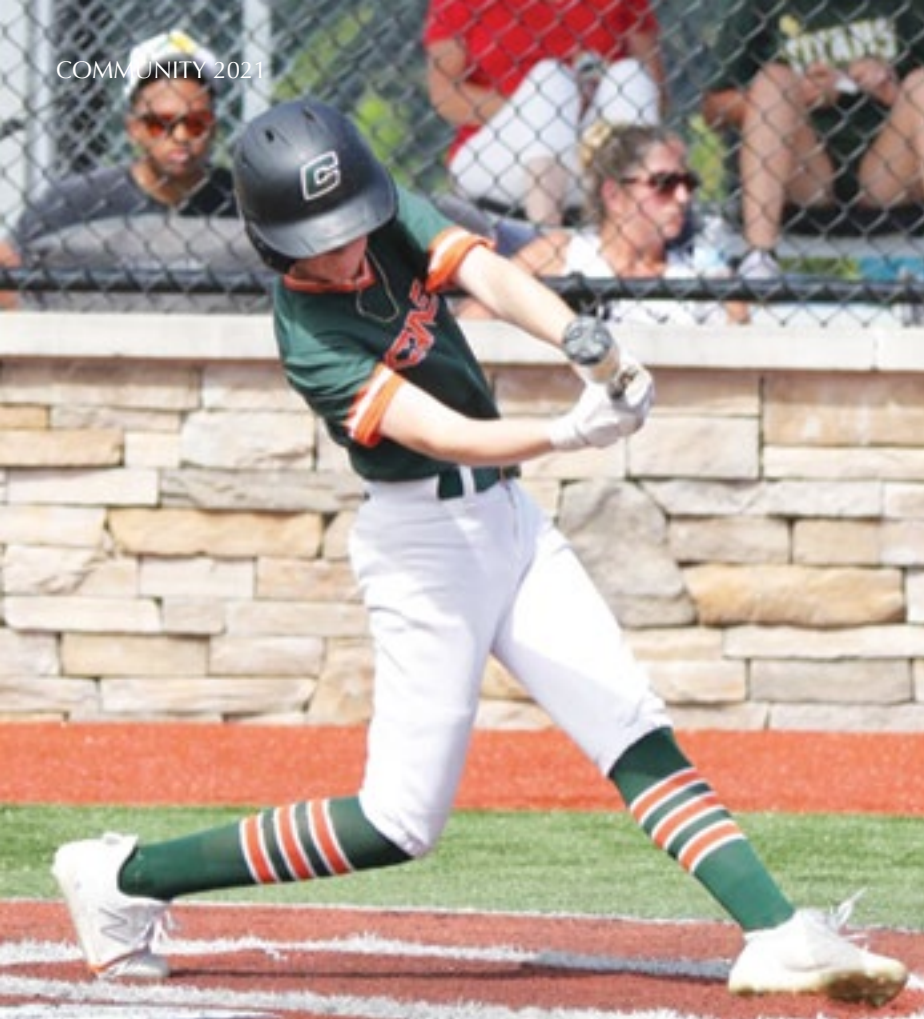
The JHS band has grown tremendously since Quall's first year with them and now has over 200 members. He teaches private lessons to 35 students each week. He said he is proud of his students and has enjoyed watching the program grow.

"I've watched these children grow up," he said. "Most of them have been with us since the beginning of our time here. I've seen them at their worst and cheered for them at their best. The band has grown in more than just numbers. The level of talent they are reaching is amazing."

If his students only remember one thing he taught them, he hopes it's about hard work, according to Qualls.

"I always tell them they won't get anywhere if they don't work for it," he said. "When you put your all into it then you'll be proud of it in the end. Anything worth having in life is earned."





Owen Galley takes a huge cut at a pitch in one of his many at bats for the Canes.

OWEN
GALLEY

For Love of the Game

Local youngster looks forward to future in baseball

By KEVIN BRUCHHAUS

For as far back as he can remember, 12-year-old Owen Galley had a baseball in his hand. It's something that is part of every aspect of his life, his hopes and his dreams. Vacations during the summer were spent at numerous baseball complexes across the southern United States, as most travel baseball parents can appreciate. Owen plays on one of the top 12u baseball teams in the state of Louisiana and is based out of Lake Charles.



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The Welsh/Roanoke Middle School product was not only born with the ability to stick out on baseball fields everywhere he goes, he prides himself on out-working anyone to become the best he can.

"I completely fell in love with the game of baseball as far back as I can remember," he said. "There is just something about being a part of a team that makes me truly enjoy it. I love having the opportunity to play at different places, see areas I normally wouldn't see and be able to compete against such great teams. The fact that I can do it with all of my buddies makes it just as sweet. We have been playing together for so long that they are like family."

Galley started out attending Lacassine High School as a youngster, but after his mother, Ashley, accepted a position as a nurse in the Welsh school system, Owen made the move, as well.

The move to Welsh will also allow Owen to compete on the gridiron with the Greyhounds. However, according to his father, Chris, baseball continues to be his first love and has been for as long as he can remember.

"The game has taught him so many things and he's been blessed to play for a wonderful coach in Welles Cooley. Not only has that enhanced Owen's abilities on the baseball field, but Welles is teaching them how to be good men as well," Chris said. "I love seeing the work ethic he puts into honing his craft. It doesn't matter how cold it is, if it's raining or whatever, he is out there putting in work. He doesn't want anyone else to say they outwork him. He has a desire to be the best that he can be."

On top of being a standout on the diamond from the time he stepped on the baseball field, Owen is also a fantastic student that carries a 3.8 GPA in

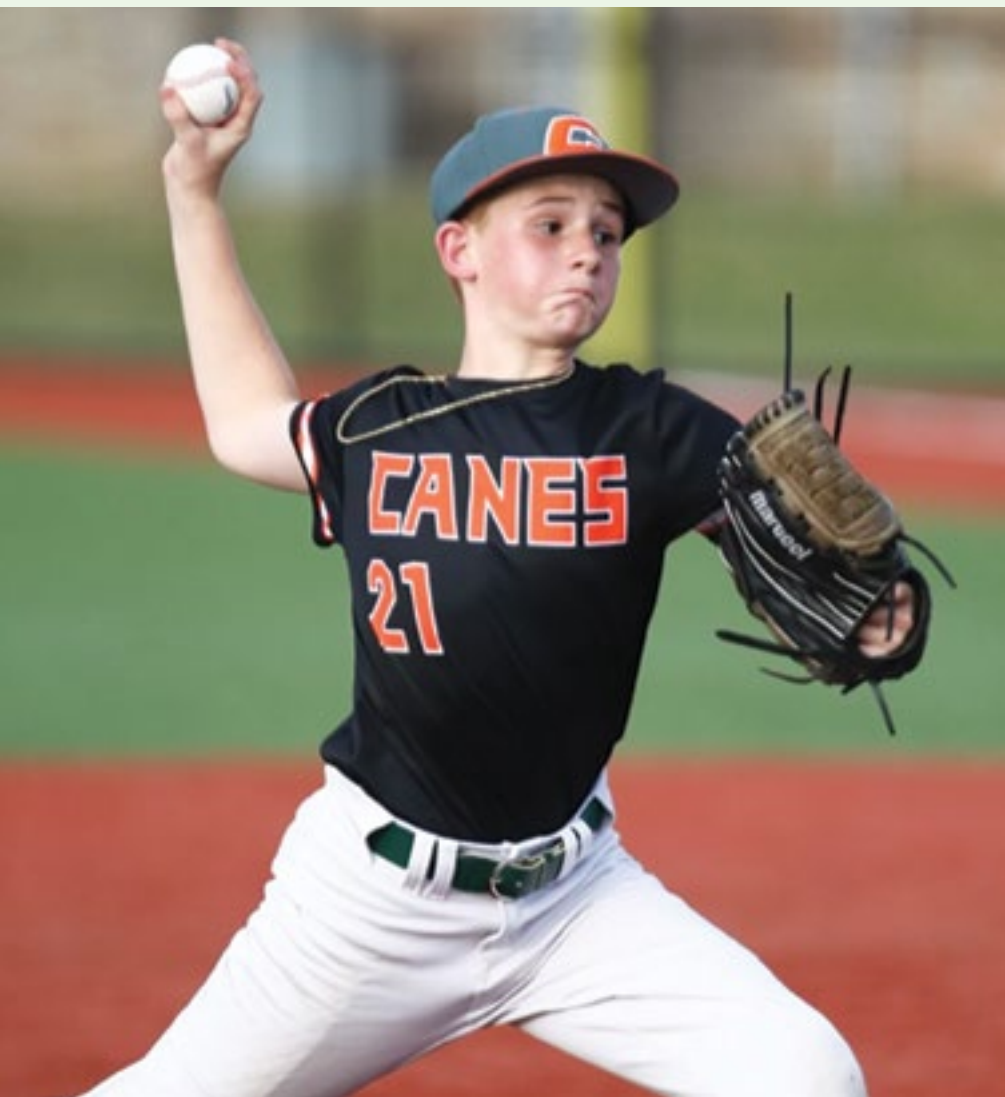
the classroom and is a member of the Beta Club. He has also raised hogs for a number of years and placed several times in events. However, it's the game of baseball that makes his eyes light up when talking about his future.

"I just love the game and all the lessons that it teaches you about life," Owen said. "I had to learn that baseball is a game of failure, and it's how you handle that failure and adversity to become better in all areas of growing up. I'm really excited about getting to high school and continuing my career. I'm going to continue to work hard until that point and my goal is to start as a freshman once I get to Welsh High School."

Like most kids in Louisiana, Owen explained his dream is to one day don the purple and gold of the LSU Tigers. As a 12-year-old pitcher that can already light the radar guns up at 70-plus miles-per-hour, that dream just

may become a reality. For now, Chris explained it's the memories Owen is making as a youngster that some kids may never get the chance to experience.

"I'm so proud of him not just because of the success he has had, but the way he handles himself and his work ethic," Chris said. "Baseball has helped turn him into a great young man with the lessons he has learned from all of those who have helped him along the way. The game has opened a lot of doors for him, and to see how much he loves it makes me a proud father. But, he knows that for him to continue to pursue his dreams, he has got to continue to put in that same kind of work. I can't wait to see where his future takes him and hope he continues to make the connections that he has already begun to make."



Owen Galley warming up (above), then cutting loose a fastball (left) for his Canes team during a tournament in Tennessee.

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ONELLION

Turning weaknesses into strengths

ZAM director works tirelessly to promote arts in JDP

By ALLISON CRYER

In his book "A World of Art," Henry M. Sayre defined the four roles traditionally assigned to artists: to produce a record of their surroundings, to express emotions in a tangible or visible manner, to reveal truths that were either universal or hidden and to help people view the world from a different or novel perspective. One local leader has made it her mission to use the arts as a way of uniting the diverse community of Jeff Davis Parish through shared experi-

ences that can change perspective and increase understanding of the world around us.

Zigler Art Museum (ZAM) Executive Director and Lake Arthur native Tessa Onellion works tirelessly to promote the arts in Jeff Davis, never backing down from the challenge at hand. Diagnosed at a young age with ADHD, Onellion says as an adult, she has learned to turn what she once thought were weaknesses into strengths.

"I thrive on a challenge," she said. "I work best when there is

always something exciting going on and focus the best under pressure. I cannot work when things are slow and boring. Being busy keeps me balanced."

Onellion wears many hats promoting the arts in the parish, including serving as Jeff Davis Arts Council Executive Director, A Block Off Broadway Community Theatre board member, Louisiana Development Ready Communities (LDRC) Quality of Life chair and a volunteer for the Jennings Festival Association.

Onellion took over the helm of

ZAM just before the COVID-19 pandemic devastated many arts programs around the country.

"I am proud to say that we made it through the pandemic with success," she said. "The last few receptions have been extremely well-received with more diverse crowds and I think that is because people have a new appreciation for the arts after being quarantined in 2020."

In her role at Jeff Davis Arts Council, she works to improve opportunities to enhance arts



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and humanities programs in the parish. For example, each year the Arts Council assists local youth through mini-grants aimed at helping teachers implement art in the schools where the subject has been completely eliminated from the curriculum. The Arts Council also sponsors a theatre group for youth, ZAM art workshops, the Harvey Rabbit drug awareness program, student art exhibits and summer art camps, Turn It Up Tuesdays, Jennings Alive Festival, ABOB and the Strand Theatre.

As LDRC Quality of Life chair, she is working to help Jeff Davis Parish become development-ready and competitive by creating and implementing a strategic community and economic development plan.

Her proudest accomplishment, however, has been working with A Chip Off the Old Block (CHIPS) youth theatre program.

"CHIPS program is my baby," she said. "When I started working with CHIPS, it was still evolving so I got to help amp it up to the thriving program that it is today," she said.

Recently, an unwelcome challenge arrived while Onellion was vacationing in Maryland with her husband, Jason.

"While riding a scooter around Baltimore, I had an accident that resulted in a tibial plateau fracture and emergency surgery," she said. "I was lucky I didn't lose my whole leg. I am now calling myself the 'bionic woman.'"



Tesha Onellion (above, center) and her Zigler Art Museum "dream team," Museum Assistant Jannie Crochet (left) and Executive Assistant Bailey Guidroz (right). At right, Onellion stars as Marjorie in ABOB's 2011 production of "Seeing Stars in Dixie." Below, Onellion and her husband, Jason, help to build the set for a play.



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Despite being stuck at home for six months during the recovery process, Onellion somehow manages to remain upbeat and positive without missing a beat.

"I am still managing all of my roles with the help of my wonderful assistant, Bailey Guidroz," she said. "I am looking at this experience as an indicator of success, not failure. There was a time when I would have been too nervous to even try to ride on a scooter in a location I know nothing about. I have no regrets because I am truly living my life to the fullest and sometimes you have to take risks."

A 1998 graduate of Lake Arthur High School, Onellion said she has always lived and worked in Jeff Davis Parish because of the slower, more personal pace here.

"In our parish, friends and families still come first," she said. "I love way of life here and would like to continue to showcase

our diverse culture that is often overlooked."

Onellion plans to continue promoting the arts and community involvement in the parish she calls home.

"In general, there is a lack of participation, which hinders our growth as individuals, as well as a community. If everyone gives what they are able to offer, then no one has to carry the majority of the burden."

She encourages all citizens to get involved in their own community in order to improve life for everyone.

"We all have opinions about what should be done and how community leaders can improve conditions here," she said. "Go out and talk to volunteer and civic groups to see what they need. Also, be sure to find something you are passionate about."



Despite a months-long closure, Tesha Onellion and her staff at Zigler Art Museum stayed busy during the COVID-19 pandemic, even making masks when the government-mandated face coverings were a hard thing to come by.

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