

# Full Speed Ahead in 2022

# Splash

a PALATKA DAILY NEWS magazine



2022 Edition

# PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE



## Innovative Problem Solver

An innovative problem solver is a critical and creative thinker. A problem solver is inquisitive, makes decisions by processing and evaluating information, applies knowledge in an authentic context, is flexible in thinking, and learns through experimentation.



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# Splash

That's the sound of St. Johns River water slapping the sides of steamer Metamora more than a century ago in the historic photo displayed in a mural at the St. Johns River Center. It is also a fitting description for the kind of impression the people featured in the pages of this annual magazine have made on Putnam County.

This issue of Splash is centered on 26 men and women the Palatka Daily News and others with whom we consulted believe should be recognized for their impact on Putnam County. Some have been leaving an imprint locally for decades. Others are more recent and likely to accelerate their involvement as the coming years roll by.

Picking some people and not others such as has been done here is an exercise fraught with hazards. Choices were made based on community impact, not popularity. You may

look at our group and wonder why a particular person was chosen instead of another, also deserving individual. Please contact us with your thoughts.



Read these stories, flip through the pages of Splash and absorb the optimism shared about our community's future. Take a minute to appreciate the effort and years of dedication so many have devoted to making Palatka and Putnam County a better place for all.

Many plans and a host of good things are set to come together in 2022. Like the river captains from Putnam's bygone era of steamers and paddle wheelers, we say, Full Speed Ahead.

Michael Leonard  
Publisher

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## ON THE COVER

Gathering 26 busy people from all parts of Putnam County for a magazine cover photo shoot on a stormy morning can be a challenge, but 17 of the men and women featured in this issue of Splash were able to attend. Pictured inside the St. Johns River Center, left to right, are: front row, Lucia Valdivia-Sanchez and Sandra Gilyard; second row, Sheila McCoy, Danny Martinez, Karla Flagg-Wright and Karl Flagg; third row, Kitty Miller, Melissa Miller and Charlie Douglas; fourth row, Jonathan Griffith, Bill Pickens, Gina Sims and Terrill Hill; and back row, Ben Bates, Chance Clay, Holly Pickens and Benjie Bates.

Not pictured: Rick Surrency, Laura France, Breck Sloan, Wayne McClain, J.R. Newbold, Charles "Skeet" Alford, Tommy Clay, Joe Pickens and Bobby Pickens.



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Allison Waters-Merritt  
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# J.R. Newbold

Loving where he calls home

Putnam native admires the past but looks toward the future

Brandon D. Oliver

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Whether continuing his family's legacy at their South Putnam County business or helping organize an annual event of wonder for thousands of local residents and visitors, John "J.R." Newbold III does what he does for the love of his community.

Newbold loves the quaint, more down-to-earth vibe Putnam County offers, but he wants to see his community be in the position to grow and reap the benefits of that expansion. More than anything, he wants to see Putnam residents safe, happy, healthy and thriving.

He said he'd like "to have a higher standard of living for everyone in Putnam County. More jobs in our county will raise the standard of living. Economic success and security will lead to much improved educational success for our children in the future. We can surely continue the successes we are now experiencing and push for more."

Newbold's admiration of the area can be traced back for generations. His family has been farming in Crescent City since the mid-1860s, and he's carrying on the tradition. Although he left the area to complete his bachelor's degree at Florida Southern College in Lakeland, he made his way back to Putnam to join the family business.

For 32 years, Newbold has worked for Forest Groves Inc. in Crescent City and serves as president of the business. He had no doubt he'd return to Putnam, mainly because of the great experiences in his youth.

"Crescent City ... was a wonderful place to grow up, and (I) believed it would be an equally



Submitted photo



Michael Leonard/Palatka Daily News

TOP: J.R. Newbold III, the president of Forest Groves Inc. in Crescent City, takes a break from working on his family's farm. BOTTOM: Putnam County Fair Authority Chairman J.R. Newbold, left, and board member Doug Thompson talk at the Putnam County Chamber of Commerce Business After Hours at the fairgrounds.

great place to live and raise a family," Newbold recalled. "My positive experiences here drive me to participate in the community so that others can have the same quality of life I was fortunate enough to have experienced."

Not only is Newbold president of his family's business, but he also serves as president of Putnam County Fair Authority Inc., which, as the name suggests, hosts the Putnam County Fair in East Palatka.

The 2022 fair took place March 18-26 and is still fresh in people's minds. Newbold hopes everyone knows how hard the fair authority worked to make it happen, and how much they admire the community they serve.

Newbold said three of the people he most admires are Kelley Smith, a Putnam resident and former state representative; Dan Doran, a South Putnam teacher, mentor and leader; and his father, John Newbold Jr. What makes those three men so admirable is their commitment to their families, desire to see their community be great and the dignified way with which they carried themselves.

He hopes people see those traits when they look at him, and he'd like people to use that as inspiration to do great things for Putnam County.

"My service to the community has been centered around activities that I'm passionate about," Newbold said. "I hope others will notice that I'm involved in something that benefits others and that I'm having a great time in the process. I feel like that will encourage or inspire others to get involved as well."

# Danny Martinez

## A life of working and giving



Submitted photos

LEFT: Danny Martinez talks with former Gov. Bob Graham during a 1982 tour of the Georgia Pacific plant. RIGHT: Danny Martinez in a recent photo.

### Michael Leonard

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**D**anny Martinez is 94 years old, but only the calendar can make you believe it.

He worked as a tissue manufacturing consultant for Latin American companies until 2017 and is among Putnam County's most involved, generous, accomplished and respected people. When something good happens here, you can almost bet he has in some way had a hand in it.

"If you keep the mind working, the body will follow," Martinez said of his outlook on living.

That's what is helping keep Martinez going now, but what about 70 years ago? That's when he came to Putnam County with his wife, Katie.

Martinez was all of 128 pounds stretched over a 5-foot, 10.5-inch frame when he joined Hudson Pulp & Paper Corporation, Palatka, in June 1952. He was a freshly-minted graduate of the University of Florida with a degree in chemical engineering behind him and a bright future in front.

Martinez's original post as research chemical engineer changed often, always with an upward trajectory. Hudson was acquired by Georgia Pacific in 1979, with Martinez becoming mill manager. Well over 1,000 people working at Putnam County's largest private employer called Danny Martinez "boss."

Subsequent promotions took him to corporate headquarters in Atlanta as senior vice president before his retirement from full time employment in 1992. Atlanta was lucrative, cosmopolitan and exciting, but it wasn't home.

"I came back to Palatka. This is home," he said. "This is where my friends are." Counted among that group, living and deceased are well-known names like Bob Webb, Frank Oliver, Ben Bates, Ed Hedstrom and others.

Martinez has loaned his business and management acumen to dozens of public and private organizations in Putnam County and across the Southeast over the years. Three that are



On the job at Hudson Pulp & Paper Corp. 1954

Submitted photo

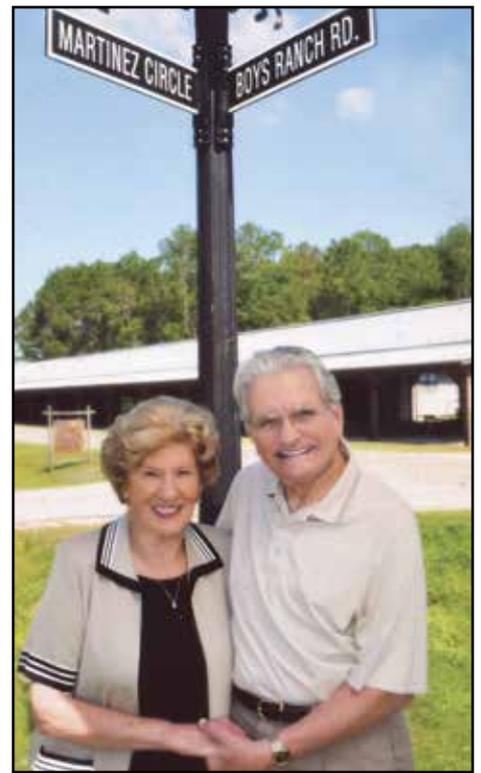
closest to his heart are Rodeheaver Boys Ranch, Haven Hospice and Rotary Club of Palatka. He is also a generous benefactor.

Growing up in Tampa the son of Spanish-speaking parents who made cigars for a living, Martinez saw enough of the less privileged side of town to appreciate his own “lower middle class” home. Those memories help spur him now to give from his excess to others, they and the loving care Haven Hospice gave his wife, Katie. The palliative care arm of Haven allowed Mrs. Martinez

to spend her last days at home before succumbing in May 2021 to Alzheimer’s disease.

“I feel like I was very fortunate – I worked hard – to have more than I could spend or give to the children as an inheritance,” Martinez said.

“In a big nutshell, I’ve decided that since this is my home, these are my friends, and this is my community, I want to invest in it to make it better.”



Submitted photo

Dan and Katie Martinez pose by street sign dedicated to the couple for his service to the organization at Rodeheaver Boys Ranch in 2010.

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# Sandra Gilyard

## Retired educator glad to have spent career in Putnam County



Sandra Gilyard, past Principal of C.H. Price Middle School, talks with students.

File photo/Palatka Daily News

### Daniel Egitto

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**W**hen Putnam County School Board member Sandra Gilyard recalls her childhood in San Mateo, she sees two forces as shaping her life more than anything else: her faith and her community.

“The village did help raise the child,” Gilyard said.

She remembers her grandparents, who were some of the few Black community members who owned a phone in those days, taking calls from schools and relaying messages to parents.

She remembers how her grandparents’ house became a designated spot for nurses to administer shots that children needed to attend school. And she remembers how her grandfather used to leave whatever fresh produce happened to be in season on local families’ doorsteps.

“He instilled in each of us a value of family, education, respect - but first and foremost, God,” Gilyard said.

This upbringing has been the foundation of Gilyard’s career.

She said she has taken as her life’s “guiding force” Colossians 3:23: “Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.”

After leaving Putnam County to study at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee, Gilyard returned to find work as a teacher at Kelley Smith Elementary School. She loved it.

“I met some awesome people through the lives of the children I taught,” Gilyard said. “It is a fact that to teach is to touch a life forever, and my life was forever changed by the wonderful families in the educational arena.”

Gilyard spent the next 37 and a half years working as an educator, assistant principal, principal and parent liaison before retiring to be elected to and serve on the School Board.

Gilyard still sees a fellow school district employee as one of her greatest role models.



Sandra Gilyard

“Evelyn S. Green has a true commitment to education: the way she embraced me and many other aspiring teachers and took us under her wings at Kelley Smith Elementary School made a difference,” Gilyard said.

Other role models include her aunt, Lilla Holsey, who “inspired and motivated all of her nieces and nephews to further their education,” as well as her older sister, Regina Gilyard-Thomas, who is Gilyard’s “greatest cheerleader.”

Among Gilyard’s hopes for Putnam County is that it will develop more community spaces for young people and families. For instance, she advocated for constructing a local YMCA so residents can learn to swim.

“Putnam’s greatest assets are our youth and community-minded people - those who give back, those who choose to be part of the solution,” Gilyard said.



Sandra Gilyard is sworn in as Putnam County school board member in 2016.

File photo/Palatka Daily News



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# Charlie Douglas - Ushering in winds of change

Local businessman believes now is the time for growth in Putnam County



Charlie Douglas stands in front of newly renovated offices downtown Palatka.

File photo/Palatka Daily News

## Sarah Cavacini

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Putnam County native Charlie Douglas believes growing up in rural America taught him key life lessons, work ethic and the importance of community involvement.

Like other local leaders, he believes Putnam's greatest asset is its own residents. Douglas, managing partner of Douglas Law Firm and also a partner at Riverside Wealth Advisors, said the people here have a "can do" attitude and hearts for philanthropy.

"I was born and raised in Putnam County and have always loved the people and natural resources here," Douglas said in a email.

He admires people like lifelong resident



File photo/Palatka Daily News

Douglas and a partner purchased the historic Hotel James in 2021.

Bill Herrington, who opened the adult-living community Villa Farms, was president of the Putnam County Chamber of Commerce in 1992, was a founder and charter member of the Rotary Club of Palatka Sunrise and has volunteered his time with the Boy Scouts.

Douglas said Herrington's entrepreneurship and business intellect is to be admired, as is the director of the Cancer Center of Putnam, Dr. Anand Kurvilla, for his "sheer will and determination."

As for Douglas himself, he hopes people remember him as someone who tried to

spur Putnam County development.

The county should be focusing on utilizing its natural resources to the best of its ability, such as the St. Johns River, and working to leverage downtown Palatka and the Palatka Municipal Airport in ways to revitalize the area, Douglas said.

He added, "In every level of government, we need a business mindset that removes bureaucratic red tape in front of those who are trying to spur economic development."

Douglas also served in the past as the Chamber of Commerce's board of directors president, and hopes to see larger businesses, such as the next Georgia-Pacific or Seminole Electric Cooperative, come to Putnam. The county needs these large businesses that are willing to locate here and pay their employees a living wage, he said.

The businessman is "confident that the winds of change are here," and that there is a positive energy forming in Putnam.

Douglas aspires to be a positive part of that change.



Michael Leonard/Palatka Daily News

Charlie Douglas greets guests at the Putnam Chamber Business After Hours his law firm and tenants of his renovated office building hosted Dec. 16, 2021.

"I hope people will remember me as having a small part in the revitalization of downtown," Douglas said. "I want to leave Palatka better than I found it, and every day I try to help move the ball in a positive direction for our community."

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# Karl Flagg & Karla Flagg-Wright

Serving the community in multiple ways



Casmira Harrison/Palatka Daily News

Karl and Karla Flagg-Wright form an effective and compassionate father-daughter team in assisting families of the deceased and those working to improve the quality of life in Putnam County.

## Casmira Harrison

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**K**arl Flagg and his daughter Karla Flagg-Wright may be some of the hardest working people in the funeral industry. They're also two of the hardest working and most well-respected residents of Putnam County.

One only need to flip through the pages of this magazine to see the impact Karl Flagg has had on other people - not only with Karl N. Flagg Serenity Memorial Chapel, which Karl and his oldest daughter run, but with the Putnam County community as a whole.

Licensed as a youth minister at the young age of 11, Flagg left Putnam County in his young adult life to, among many other things, study to become a funeral director. He found his way home to Palatka - where he always wanted to ultimately be - soon after becoming a licensed funeral director in 1983. Next year will be 40 years as a director in the field.

Flagg has been pastor at Mt. Tabor First Baptist Church since 1991, served as mayor of Palatka from 2000 to 2011 and served as Putnam County commissioner from 2012 to 2016.

Flagg wears a lot of hats.

His daughter insists she tries hard to keep up. But it is easy to see she is holding her own.

She volunteers with the Putnam County Chamber of Commerce, Rotary Club of Palatka, St. Johns River State Foundation Board, plus runs the business side of things at Flagg Serenity, helping grieving families through one of the most critical times in their life.

"I live by the Rotary motto - service above self," Flagg-Wright said. "Our greatest asset is not anything material based but it is found within the integral citizens who work together to make Putnam a beautiful place to live and work."

Asked who she feels are inspirational people she admires, Flagg-Wright names local attorney Charlie Douglas and businessman Wayne McClain. She feels their countless investments, not just financially but in people, are giving opportunities to the next generation of leaders.

She considers her father a role model and mentor and lists him at the top when asked who she admires most.

She said it isn't just because he is her dad. It's because of his

passion and positivity.

“He is passionate about the continuous growth and development of Putnam County,” said Flagg-Wright. “He has never been ashamed of calling Putnam home. He is constantly seeking ways to improve and put Putnam on the map positively (and) has the same drive and passion, whether elected or in an official capacity or not.”

Flagg-Wright feels all three people on her list “do what they do because they love Putnam, not for any community recognition or personal gain.”

The respect Karla has for her father is reciprocated.

Karla Flagg-Wright did not start out working with her father, but ultimately found her way there. Karl said his daughter had been working in human resources, but was not fulfilled.

“You’ve got to do what you have a passion for,” Karl recalled saying to his daughter Karla. He said she has blossomed into her role at the funeral home and, in speaking, one can tell he is very proud of his administrative director.

“She’s caring and passionate about serving families,” said Flagg. “She also has this business side, that she’s able to balance the administration with the compassionate side (of the business).”

Flagg said to accomplish all the tasks in his very busy days, his daughter has done a remarkable job.

“She has basically just stepped up to the plate,”

said Flagg. “She stepped up and it’s really worked wonders.”

Both feel strong leadership, unity of purpose and unity of place are essential to making a better Putnam County.

Planning for and getting sustainable growth is one of Flagg’s wishes.

“My greatest wish for Putnam County is that our tax base becomes stabilized and that we’re able to realize the planned growth that we need, so that we are a sustainable county.”

Does Flagg feel that is an attainable wish?

“You better believe it is,” said Flagg. “We just need to rally our citizens and leadership that is trusted - leadership that’s willing to think outside of the box and leadership that is willing to lead.”

Flagg said unity is necessary to any goal Putnam County wishes to achieve.

“We must be unifiers, not dividers,” said Flagg. “We must see the common good of all citizens, not a political base.”

His daughter agrees and remains hopeful for Palatka and Putnam County’s future.

“Strengthen the bond of unity,” said Flagg-Wright. “The most critical & imperative things Putnam can do right now has nothing to do with any materials, establishments, places, or things to do but it has everything to do with preserving the essence of community - love, support and togetherness.”



Submitted photo

Karla Flagg-Wright has followed her father’s footsteps to serve grieving families at Flagg Serenity Chapel.

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# Pickens Family

## Joe, Bill, Holly & Bobby

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The Pickens family includes a former state legislator and current college president, a school board member, two government attorneys and a county commission chair.

One could argue that those could be the makings of a dynasty. But for the Pickenses, they say it's been all about giving back, and staying close to home.

Bill Pickens is in his sixth year on the Putnam County Board of County Commissioners and is currently serving as chair of that board for the second time. He owns and operates NAPA AutoParts in Crescent City, is part owner of another parts store in Pearson and, along with his brother Joe Pickens, owns several mini self-storage units.

The commissioner has been a Rotarian for 34 years, serving as president on two occasions, is involved in his church and, along with his wife Holly, has coached Little League Baseball and pitched in with Pop Warner.

He feels blessed that he can be the third generation of his family to operate a small business or to make a living in South Putnam and raise his family there.

"Joe and I grew up on Lake Crescent, until we were about 10 or 11 years old," Pickens said of his upbringing in Crescent City, where he and Holly still live. "It's just a nice, rural setting, with extremely nice people."

Pickens said the generational nature of Putnam County shows in his business relationships.

"I'm doing business with people, families that my grandfather actually did business with."

Asked why he chose to make Putnam County home, Bill Pickens said he just wouldn't want to live anywhere else.

"I'm not, you know, a big city person or anything like that," Pickens said. "This is where I'm from, that's where I wanted to stay."

Bill's big brother Joe Pickens has been president of St. Johns River State College since 2008. Prior to that, he was the District 21 state representative - a position he feels was one of the best and most educational experiences of his life. In addition, he has served as a Rotarian, on the Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce, owns and invests in local business and works to better the county through the 1Putnam initiative.

While Joe Pickens spent a bit of time in Alabama as an attorney, he ultimately found his way back home.

"I have sometimes described my growing up in Crescent city in the '60s and '70s as somewhat idyllic," Joe Pickens said. "I just have so many very positive memories from that very impressionable time in my life."

Joe Pickens said when he left Putnam County for college in 1976, he had little interest in returning.

"However, my time away quite literally made me realize and understand that the grass wasn't necessarily greener," he said. "I did, indeed, experience many opportunities that I do not believe were likely to have been available for me had I chosen to live elsewhere."

Joe Pickens said being home is probably the thing that he enjoys most.

"Carole and I love our place on the river in South Putnam County, and

there are few things more enjoyable than experiencing the beauty that Putnam County has to offer with friends and family, especially Bill and Holly."

Holly Pickens, now a Putnam County School Board member, found her way to Putnam County through a teaching position in South Putnam. She said she stayed because she met Bill.

"I also stayed because I loved teaching and coaching at CCHS," said Holly Pickens.

After 34 years of teaching, she retired and ran for the school board. She and Bill volunteer at the church together, and help with food distribution. In the winter, she officiates youth basketball program and coaches in the youth volleyball program through the Putnam County Recreation Department.



File photo/Palatka Daily News  
SJR State President Joe Pickens at the end of his first year as the head of the school in 2008.

Asked how Putnam County has had an impact on her, she said it all goes back to family.

"It made me appreciate the slower lifestyle of smaller towns," said Holly Pickens. "Putnam gave me the perfect place to raise my boys and enjoy the outdoors."

Bill and Holly raised their two sons in Crescent City.

Their youngest son moved just outside of Putnam and, according to Bill, works for the state attorney's office in Marion County.

The oldest son, Bobby, whose name is officially Robert William Pickens, III, found a position as a town attorney for Crescent City with the law firm of Holmes & Young, P.A. Recently, the firm picked up representation of Pomona Park and so the younger Robert will be juggling some more work, in addition to being part of the Rotary Club of Palatka.

Having been born and raised in Putnam County, Bobby Pickens said it has had a major impact on the person he has become and so, he wanted to live and work here. The waterways, friends and small town atmosphere was an easy draw.

"I wanted to give back to the community that raised me," said Bobby Pickens. "I think Putnam County is a great place to live and is a hidden secret of Florida."

When asked to name three people they admire most, the family had some overlap in their choices.

Among Holly's favorite people are Al Carter, basketball coach and teacher at Crescent City Junior-Senior High, "because of his integrity and character," and Joyce Oliver, "because of her love and support for all that is Putnam County."

She also lists her husband.

"Not only because he is my husband, a great father and PopPop - but because I see how committed he is to bettering Putnam County," said Holly.

For Joe Pickens, he includes the late Paul "Dee" Causey.

"When I spoke at Dee's funeral in 2012 I began it with "my hero died," Joe said. "He was the big brother I never had, 10 years my elder, and for almost 40 years we experienced life, business and friendship in a very

impactful way for me.”

Joe also includes the late Bob Webb, also a former Rotarian.

Bobby also lists Danny Martinez and Wayne McClain among his inspirational people.

“(Martinez) is Mr. Putnam County - always willing to help and give back,” said Bobby. “(McClain) is funny, down to Earth, and you never see a service project in this county that he is not somehow involved in.”

Both Bill and Joe look up to each other.

“Bill embodies everything about a human being that I admire,” said Joe. “He is kind, thoughtful, caring, disciplined, intelligent and humble. I am not sure if I have ever looked Bill straight in the eye and told him how much I respect and admire him.”

The feeling appears mutual.

“(Joe) stepped out of his comfort zone into (the Legislature). He was a school board attorney and had his own law firm... he decided to run for state legislator and won... and now he’s the president of St. Johns River State College.

“Just to accomplish that,” said Bill Pickens, “His work ethic, the way he took care of family and business, and then give back to the community.”

The brothers’ father died years back, but he is the first person who Bill thinks of when asked who has inspired him.

“He’s still my hero,” said Bill Pickens, who said that’s where his whole family got their work ethic.

All four family members feel Putnam County is in need of further positive momentum and believe it is possible.

Bobby Pickens said Putnam needs to put itself in a position to manage the growth of the county properly when it comes.

“I feel our county will have major growth over the next 10 years,” he said.

Holly hopes students will have many career opportunities and that they will want to stay here and raise their children here. She and her husband both feel positivity is sorely needed in this area.

Joe Pickens said the people of Putnam need to believe in themselves



Submitted photo

The Pickens family Bobby, Holly, Bill, Ian, the oldest son, who works and lives in Marion, and his wife Shanae and their two dogs, Jasper and Jazmine.

and in the county they call home.

“I believe we are truly at a crossroads in the evolution of our county and that the positive growth that most people want to see is right around the corner,” said Joe Pickens. “While some of it will be the doings of others, much of it will be because local folks are investing in the county in ways not seen in quite some time. We have so much to offer, not just others, but to ourselves, if we will just open our eyes and our hearts and embrace it.”

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# Tommy & Chance Clay

Keeping it in the family



Trisha Murphy/Palatka Daily News

Tommy Clay Jr., left, and his son, Chance, have ranching in their blood with the Clay Ranch in Grandin being passed down from generation to generation since it started in 1858.

## Trisha Murphy

Palatka Daily News

tmurphyt@palatkadailynews.com

**I**t's like father, like son for Tommy Clay Jr. and his son, Chance, when it comes to ranch work.

A native of Putnam County, the elder Clay believes ranching is in his blood since his great-great-grandfather, Hiram Alderman, started the ranch in Grandin some 164 years ago.

Since that time -1858- the ranch has been passed down from generation to generation through Tommy Clay Jr.'s mother Lorene Alderman Clay's family.

"I chose to stay here because of our cattle ranch," said Tommy Clay Jr. "After nearly 70 years here, the friendships and contacts have been invaluable."

His son agrees.

"As the sixth generation, I wanted to continue our farming legacy," said Chance Clay, who for the past 12 years has served as president of the Clay Ranch LLC, with 2,600 acres. "I was born into a ranching family. I grew to love it at a young age and continue to love it."

Today, the ranch has diversified since its early years. The Clays have two different types of cattle operations, a cow-calf operation and a stocker calf operation. Not only have they diversified within the cattle industry, but also have a commercial blueberry farm along with a you-pick blueberry business in April and May each year.

Growing up in Putnam County and working outdoors every day has had a big impact on Chance Clay.

"Having access to the forest, rivers and lakes has taught me to love and appreciate the outdoors for recreation," he said. "I love to be on the water in our county. Putnam's greatest assets are its natural resources for recreation."

For Tommy Clay, he has good memories of playing football for Palatka South High School and enjoying the outdoors.

"If we had ski slopes, our outdoor opportunities would be a 10," he said, smiling.

The senior Clay has served the community by his involvement



Trisha Murphy/Palatka Daily News

Tommy Jr. and Chance Clay herd some of their cattle in their pasture on their Grandin family ranch.

with the Rotary Club in the past, serving as first president of the Putnam Land Conservancy and Court of Honor chairman for Boy Scouts locally. He plays the piano for community functions and services at First Presbyterian Church of Palatka, where he is the music director, and provides agricultural education tours for students on the Grandin ranch.

When asked what three local residents he admires and why, Chance Clay said a few came to mind and included Coach Jim McCool and his grandfather, Tommy Clay Sr.

“McCool had the ability to lead and rally boys on and off the football field,” he said. “My grandfather was heavily involved in the community, especially at the Rodeheaver Boys Ranch. I also

admired his knowledge of farming and ranching.”

For Tommy Clay, his list was easy.

“It would have to be Sheriff Gator DeLoach, who is a dedicated leader, Danny Martinez, who is a community leader of the highest degree, and Karl Flagg, who has contributed so much in so many ways,” he said.

Chance Clay believes the most important thing Putnam County can do for itself right now is to prepare for the growth that will come into the county in the next 20 years, to especially be ready for that growth that will come from the north and the east.

“The greatest wish I have for our county in the next 5-10 years is to see the restoration and beautification of the downtown and riverfront area,” he said. “We have already seen a great deal of renovation. It is very nice to drive over the bridge and see what has been done downtown. I believe in the next 10 years it will be even better.”

Tommy Clay said the most important thing Putnam County can do for itself is to continue the efforts that are now working.

“We should once again, continue the momentum that has been established,” he said. “I believe the next 10 years will show many wonderful improvements.”



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# Charles “Skeet” Alford, Jr.

## Always the opportunist

Mark Blumenthal

Palatka Daily News

mblumenthal@palatkadailynews.com

The first business Charles “Skeet” Alford Jr. ever came into involved family.

“When I got out of college, my dad put us to work in the woods,” he said. “It was called Alford Brothers. My brother (Bryan) and I started our own logging crew. We started at the bottom. Dad helped us get started. We cut down wood and hauled it to the paper mill.”

Humble beginnings, but over time there would be more businesses to be bought and owned. Alford owns a number of businesses, ranging from cattle to a holding company to a trail riding park to two radio stations. That’s scratching the surface.

Alford said buying all the businesses meant being an opportunist.

“My parents (Charlie and Jessie) taught me if I see an opportunity to do something, think it through and then see if you can better yourself,” he said. “It was always about trying to better the situation. If you could make something better, then do it. That’s how we were raised. So we grew all our businesses that way.”

Alford enjoys most the possibility of taking what he’s bought and “making something out of nothing.” He said it’s been a learning experience to see what he’s grown.

“I love building stuff. I love learning,” he said. “I get more satisfaction from the operational side of it. It turns into work, but I love building it.”

And nothing gives Alford more pleasure in building than Hog Waller, located on County Road 310. He fondly remember when he bought it and how it has turned into a facility that can hold 7,000-8,000 trail-riding enthusiasts.

18 | Splash 2022

“What we built out at Hog Waller started as a simple mudhole thing and now we’ve built it into this large park,” he said. “When the county was having people mud-bogging in places where they weren’t supposed to be, Ed Taylor, who used to be county commissioner, asked if we can help give those folks somewhere to go do this legally. So my brother (Bryan) and sister (Kay) all studied it and we came up with the idea of Hog Waller.”

Alford said the siblings began with 92 acres of land and a simple mudhole and have built it up to a 1,200-acre park with RV sites, a

store, 56 camper hookups, a licensed restaurant and plenty of area for riding any kind of vehicle. The park has hosted a number of big riding events over the years and will host another in mid-April.

Besides Hog Waller, Alford owns both Natkim radio stations in Palatka, oldies station WPLK and country station WIYD. He co-owns JSB Cattle, LLC with Jack Burney and A&H Excavation, Inc., where he’s president.

But as Alford explained, it’s a family enterprise involving Kay and Bryan, who passed

away in 2013.

“This isn’t about me. It’s me, my brother and my sister. We did this as a family thing,” said Alford, who has been married 40 years this year to Dawn and has two daughters, Natalie and Cricket. He is a grandfather to seven.

“That’s one thing I’m really proud of. We stayed together. We had an opportunity to split all this up and go our separate ways, but we did this as a family. Everything we do, we do together.”



Mark Blumenthal/Palatka Daily News

Skeet Alford at one of his many Putnam County businesses, Hog Waller a 1,200-acre trail-riding and RV park.



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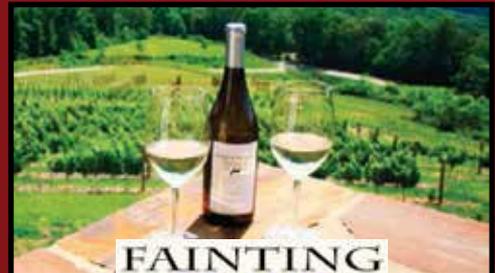
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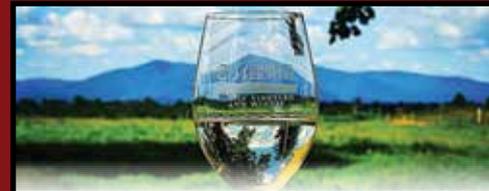
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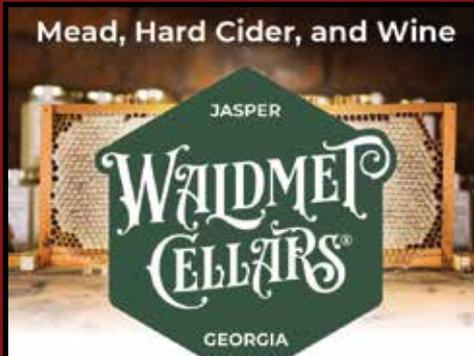
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# The Men from Beck

## Breck Sloan & Wayne McClain

Michael Leonard

Palatka Daily News

mleonard@palatkadailynews.com

**B**reck Sloan and Wayne McClain are two of the busiest, most effective people you will ever meet, and they're also among the most giving of their time and resources.

### BRECK SLOAN

Sloan is president and McClain vice president of Beck Automotive Group. The Palatka-based business is a sales, service and parts juggernaut that sells and services vehicles in Putnam County and beyond in North Florida. It wholesales parts to retailers and other dealerships from Central Florida north to Central Georgia.

But "moving metal" isn't what drives these two Putnam County leaders today. Their track is on making Palatka and Putnam County even better than they found it.

Sloan came to Palatka in 1990 to work for Carl Beck in the automotive business Beck owned in the river town and its environs. He said he "liked the people" in Palatka, so this became home, the place where he met his wife and raised his children. Some 32 years later, Sloan is now principal owner and president of the multi-line and diversified Beck Automotive Group.

By any definition, Breck Sloan has been highly successful in his chosen line of work. His dealerships are well managed by competent professionals. The parts wholesaling business Beck has developed is growing gangbusters, operating vans loaded with deliveries 24 hours a day. Beck Automotive Group is thriving.

"Putnam County has impacted me in every facet of my life," Sloan said. "I have been extremely fortunate and blessed to be able to earn a living and build a life and make wonderful, long-lasting friendships.

"And at this stage, I think it is challenging me to give it all back."

Sloan is involved in many projects ongoing around Palatka, mostly behind the curtain because he shuns the spotlight. But he is a driving force behind the proposed Cypress Cove project, a partner in the purchase and ongoing redevelopment of the old JC Penney building, Hotel James and numerous other downtown structures.

Beck Automotive Group's philanthropy is known across Putnam County. Sloan said he is simply returning some of what he has been



Breck Sloan



Wayne McClain

given. That mindset may be attributable, at least in part, to the three people he names as Putnam County residents he admires: his professional mentor, Carl Beck; businessman and developer Norm Jutras; and Wes Westberry, his mother's late husband.

"All three we lost in the last year," he noted. "All generous, kind and giving, an example to us all. They walked the walk, not just talked the talk."

Sloan described himself as "Putnam County's biggest cheerleader."

To that end, he said the most important thing Putnam County can do for right now is, "Prepare. Prepare, Prepare."

Why?

"The next 20 years, we are going to see growth the likes of which, I believe, no one can comprehend," Sloan predicted.

### WAYNE MCCLAIN

Don't look for Wayne McClain on the golf course, at the hunting lodge or with a rod and reel in hand landing a trophy bass. Not that he has a problem with any of those leisure time activities, they're just not his passion.

"I volunteer. That's what I like to do," said McClain.

For sure. A biographical sketch of McClain shows him currently serving on eight volunteer boards in Putnam County, as well as his civic club and professional duties and affiliations.

Like Sloan, he's been blessed by Putnam County and is giving back.

McClain is a Jacksonville native, former school teacher and principal. He also had successful career stints with Mobil Oil Corporation, Miller Brewing, and Toyota.

His work took him, and wife Julie, around the United States and world, but it wasn't until they came to Palatka in 1995 that they found home.

The McClains first visited Putnam County with Carl Cannon, former publisher of the *Jacksonville Times-Union*.

"He had a river place on West River Road and he told us he wanted to sell it," McClain recalled. "Julie and I bought it initially as a weekend place.

"We were living at that time in South Florida.



File photo/Palatka Daily News

LEFT: Beck Automotive President Breck Sloan, Beck Ford General Manager Brian Freeman and Beck Chief Financial Officer Brad Sloan hold the Ford Motor Co. 2020 President's Award. RIGHT: Wayne McClain and wife Julie participate in a Palatka Sunrise Rotary Club Wild Game feast.



Submitted photo

In 1999, I retired from Toyota after 25 years because I didn't want to move back to California. We came to stay here for a couple of months to get our bearings -- that was in 1999 -- and we kind of fell in love with this community. And here we are today."

McClain said Putnam County gave he and Julie their first sense of "being in a real community. That's why we fell in love with this place and have stayed."

Putnam County is filled with people who are talented, compassionate and committed to making a positive difference, he said. Three he names in particular are: Danny Martinez, Karl Flagg and the late Carl Beck.

McClain's community involvements puts him in contact with people of all races and socio-economic levels. He sees and understands things most of us don't, so his answer to the question of what is the most important thing Putnam County could do for itself right now, is telling.

"Get rid of the statue," he said without hesitation, referring to the Confederate soldier statue in front of Putnam County Courthouse. "That's not going to be a popular answer, but that's my answer."

McClain believes with its location, improving school system and the addition of residential housing, there will be no holding Putnam County back.

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# Terrill Hill

## Returning home to have an impact



Palatka Mayor Terrill Hill stands in front of Palatka City Hall.

File photo/Palatka Daily News

### Sarah Cavacini

Palatka Daily News  
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**T**he Palatka mayor's favorite memory is leading the Palatka High School Panthers on the field every Friday night as the team quarterback before graduating in 1990.

Mayor Terrill Hill remembers being part of a team that represented the community "with great Panther Pride," and playing in front of a crowd that supported and cheered on the young residents of Palatka.

Although the mayor's journey took him away from Palatka for a little while, he found his way back.

Hill said he returned home after going to college, obtaining bachelor's and master's degrees and becoming a lawyer, to be a voice for the community.

"I returned to Palatka to open up my law office in an effort to be a voice for the voiceless and to provide access equity and a sense of justice to individuals who were historically underrepresented in the judicial system," he said in a statement.

As someone who grew up in a single-parent household in Putnam County's public housing, Hill said those "adversities" pushed him to persevere. He realized he can do anything through Christ.

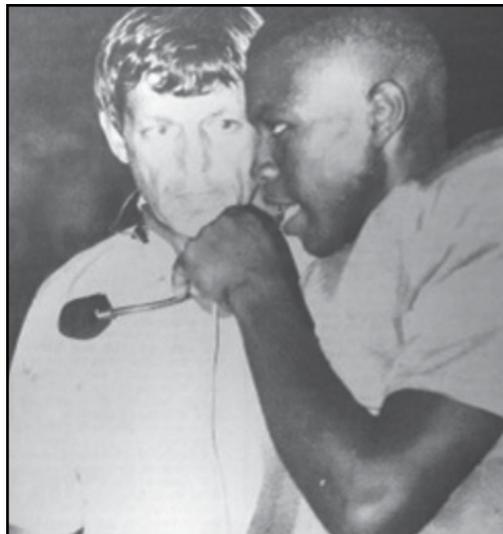
The Palatka mayor strives to be impactful even to young residents. He hopes to connect with local youth and push them to "set goals that were outside their current circumstances."

Stopping to listen to fresh perspectives from today's younger generation and telling his own stories is something Hill enjoys doing.

"The greatest asset in Putnam County is the people," Hill said. "Our citizens are prideful, knowledgeable and ready to promote Putnam's rich history."

He does not have to look far when he thinks of the people who most inspire him.

Hill's sister, Sharon Williams, and his brother, Greg Session, are two of the people he admires most in this



Archives/Palatka Daily News  
Hill talks with Palatka Panthers Offensive Coordinator Wilson Edwards on the sideline during a game in 1989's undefeated regular season.



File photo/Palatka Daily News  
Palatka Mayor Terrill Hill listens to people speak during a city meeting next to commissioner Justin Campbell.

community. The mayor said his sister exemplifies a commitment to her family, God and an unconditional love for the community.

“She is my biggest supporter,” he added.

Session gave up a professional baseball career to return home and dedicate his time to serving the Putnam County Sheriff’s Office for more than three decades – coming out of retirement and returning back to duty, Hill said.

“He is a soft spoken person who treats all people with respect and dignity,” the mayor stated. “I recall inmates stopping by our house to thank him for the way that he treated and inspired them while they were incarcerated.”

Looking away from his family, Hill also admires Palatka resident John L. Williams – the city’s “most famous citizen” and retired National Football League player.

Williams dedicates his time to working with local youth, advancing the community and investing in local businesses. Williams tends to fly below the radar, Hill said, though many people see him as an icon in Palatka.

“John L. Williams’ humility is his defining trait,” the mayor added.

Hill hopes that with the help of everyone in the community becoming a unified voice for the future that Putnam County’s true greatness will shine. He said the community needs to get out of its own way and overcome the stigmas that divide it.

“Putnam County as a whole needs to employ innovative strategies to break the chains of poverty and diminish the effects of the same,” Hill said. “I often say that Putnam County and Palatka are like baseball – we never know how good it will be until we let everybody play.”



*Making Haven Hospice Stronger!*

The Haven Hospice Foundation congratulates its board members Danny Martinez (chair) Wayne McClain (vice chair) and Norlene Roberts on this special occasion supporting the Putnam County community and building the Foundation one brick at a time.



Danny Martinez

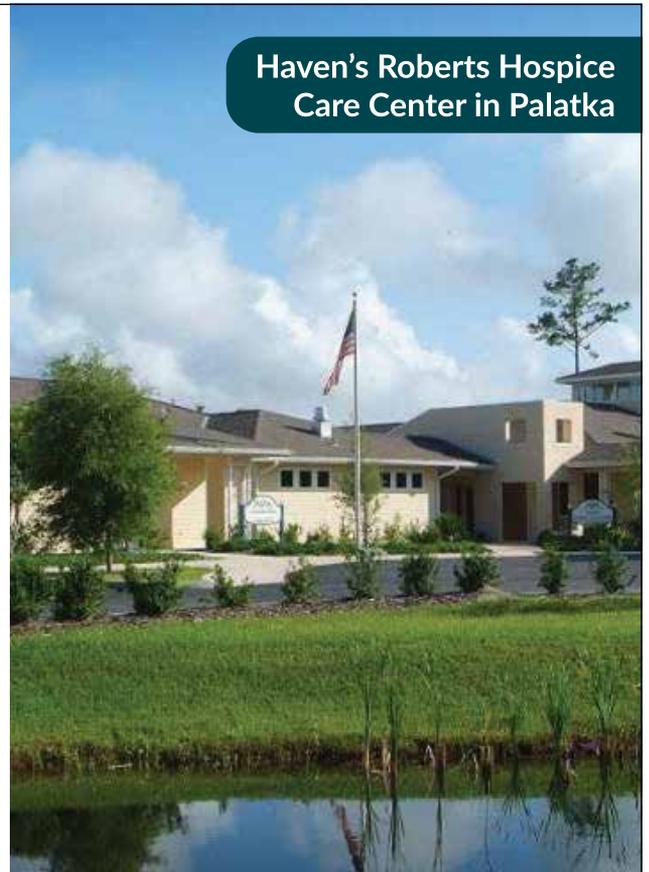


Wayne McClain



Norlene Roberts

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Submitted photo

## Kitty Miller

The joy of helping others

Kitty Miller, president of the South Putnam Christian Service Center, is pictured during the Dan McNutt Third Memorial Golf Tournament on Jan. 15 at the Oaks Golf Course in the South Putnam community. The tournament was to benefit the center that ministers to those in need.

**Trisha Murphy**  
 Palatka Daily News  
 tmurphyt@palatkadailynews.com

**K**itty Miller has a servant's heart and one she doesn't mind sharing with the many charitable organizations she has served as a volunteer.

"I do enjoy volunteering," said Miller, who moved to the South Putnam community of Georgetown more than two decades ago with her husband of 50 years, T.C. "If I did not, I would not, but I enjoy it because it is rewarding."

The Millers purchased their property in Georgetown in 1995 coming from Volusia County.

With the move, Kitty Miller saw the need to hit the ground running, helping with organizations that minister to shut-ins, area youth and those in need, including the South Putnam Christian Service Center, where she serves as president.

"She is an asset to the Putnam County community," said Priscilla DeChaine, secretary at the center. "She is very thorough in all of her planning and is very much involved in whatever she is organizing. She is a fine leader who is always willing to help."

The South Putnam Christian Service Center is an all volunteer agency that assists those in need in the community with food

and financial assistance.

Miller is also an active member with the Timucuan Weimaraner Club of Florida, whose mission is to promote the improvement of the Weimaraner and responsible dog ownership. The Weimaraner is a very versatile breed and many club members are actively training their dogs in obedience, tracking, hunting, agility, rally and conformation shows, according to its website at [www.weimtime.net](http://www.weimtime.net).

When not volunteering, Miller enjoys spending time boating.

"I love it and spending time with my family and pets," she said. "I enjoy the relaxed way of life and I just love the St. Johns River."

Miller believes fresh-water boating is one of the greatest assets Putnam County has to offer.

"It has been a great experience living in Putnam County," she said. "We are happy we retired here and enjoy living life boating."

Miller has given of her time and talents to many organizations over the years, including Meals on Wheels of Putnam and Volusia counties, Catholic Charities, Farmworker Ministry, Middleton-Burney Elementary School and at her church, First

Presbyterian of Crescent City.

She has also served as a volunteer with the American Red Cross in Jacksonville, Big Sister and Special Olympics in Palm Beach County and the hospital in Volusia County.

With 27 years of living in Putnam County, Miller has come to admire some of the residents she now knows, including Nancy Harris for her great leadership qualities, Don Holmes for his long-term dedication to the community as a whole, and Holly Pickens, who is dedicated to the youth in the county.

Miller believes the most important thing Putnam County can do for itself right now is to be watchful of the area's growth and to make sure there isn't too much, too fast.

"I'm hopeful the county can wisely grow the tax base over the next 5-10 years," she said.

Miller finds encouragement to keep on volunteering when she reads the Bible verse Matthew 25:40: "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

"All are worthy of our compassion," she said. "I always try to think 'what would Jesus do?' throughout my day - and what should I do that would be pleasing to him."

And, according to DeChaine, she does.

"She greets people with a wonderful smile and is always attentive to her clients' needs and concerns," she said.

South Putnam Christian Service Center is in a new location at Miller School on South Park Street, building 4, Crescent City.



Submitted photo  
Kitty Miller enjoys dinner at the former Belle's Bistro restaurant in Crescent City.

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# Gina Sims

## Loving Putnam, seeking controlled growth



Submitted photo

Gina Sims and her children, Leslie, left, and Tyler, right, volunteer at Bread of Life soup kitchen in Palatka.

### Trisha Murphy

Palatka Daily News  
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**G**ina Sims has a vested interest in the community where she lives and believes by volunteering she has become an asset to Putnam County.

It is evident by the many organizations Sims has been a part of, including serving as a former co-chair of FL Roofing Sheet Metal Association Young Professionals and the FRSA Ladies' Committee, president of the San Mateo Woman's Club, vice chairwoman of the Chamber of Commerce Education Foundation, member of the Chamber of Commerce Economic Development Committee, coordinator for the St. James United Methodist Youth Cake Auction, and co-director of the Putnam County Fair Pageant.

She has also served on several boards for organizations, including the Putnam County Parks & Recreation, the Putnam County Chamber of Commerce and a member of the executive board for the Chamber and the Palatka Rotary, where she will serve as secretary for 2022-2023.

Sims said she has a cares deeply for the local community and its people.

"I want to see Putnam County grow in a positive way and I'm not afraid to put in the work to help," she said.

Sims and her husband, Les, live in East Palatka and have been married for 22 years. The couple have three children, Alyssa, Leslie and

Tyler. They are co-owners of Armstrong Roofing since 2016.

"I've been with the company since 2004 and this company has been in my family for over 80 years," she said. "I also have a passion for fitness and engaging in my community.

That passion for engaging in the community couldn't be more evident to Sims' husband.

"The greatness of a community can be measured by the compassionate actions of its members," he said. "My wife is one of the most compassionate people you will ever meet."

Sims was born and raised in Putnam County and loves her town, the people and the area.

"I feel like Putnam County has molded me into the person I've become and given me such a strong sense of community," she said. "It has also taught me to look out for my neighbors and nurtured my leadership abilities."

Sims believes she has honed her skills by following other locals' examples, such as Charlie Douglas, Kim Daley and Wayne McClain, as well as her dad Terry Turner.

"Charlie is still relatively young but has already managed to build a successful law firm," she said. "He's investing in local real estate and playing a pivotal role in the revitalization of downtown."

Besides that, Sims said Douglas serves with several key organizations throughout Putnam County.

“He gives a lot of his time to ensure our county is a better place,” she said.

Daley, who serves as a victim’s advocate for the Putnam County Sheriff’s Office, and board member with the Bread of Life soup kitchen, has made a big impact on Sims, too.

“She has such a strong sense of community,” Sims said. “She and her husband, Bobby, give so much of their time and energy serving different organizations, always trying to make a positive difference in Putnam County. She has a heart of gold and a smile to match, never meeting a stranger and doesn’t judge a book by its cover.”

Also on Sims list of those she admires is McClain, who serves on just about every board or organization in the county, she said.

“He is always trying to encourage positive changes in our community and quite often when good things are happening in our community, there’s a good chance he’s in the background somewhere helping, but if you weren’t involved, you’d never even know.”

Sims believes the most important thing about Putnam County and what it can do for itself right now is to figure out a way to allow, but control growth.

“While we all want new businesses to come, and for Putnam County to grow some, we don’t want to turn into St Johns County and lose what makes us so special, our small town Southern charm,” she said.

Sims said her wish for Putnam County is to move up substantially on the list of counties that are great places to live.

“I do believe we can achieve this in the next 5-10 years and that we are headed in the right direction,” she said. “Our school district is making big positive changes and our schools are making huge improvements, crime is down, the healthcare system is improving, our downtown is being revitalized and we have several community leaders investing back into our community.”

When all is said and done, Sims said one of her favorite things about the county is watching people pull together to help one another.

She said her favorite thing to do in Putnam County, and anyone who knows her will attest to it, is socialize with her fellow community members.

“I look forward to every chance I get to spend time with people in our community, whether it be at birthday parties, fundraisers or the Chamber of Commerce After Hours,” she said. “I love the people in our community. I feel so blessed to be able to live in such a beautiful rural area, but still have access to so many big cities at the same time.”



Submitted photo  
Gina Sims, center, was inducted into Rotary Club along with two other new members, Matt Buckles, right, and Dameon Church, left.

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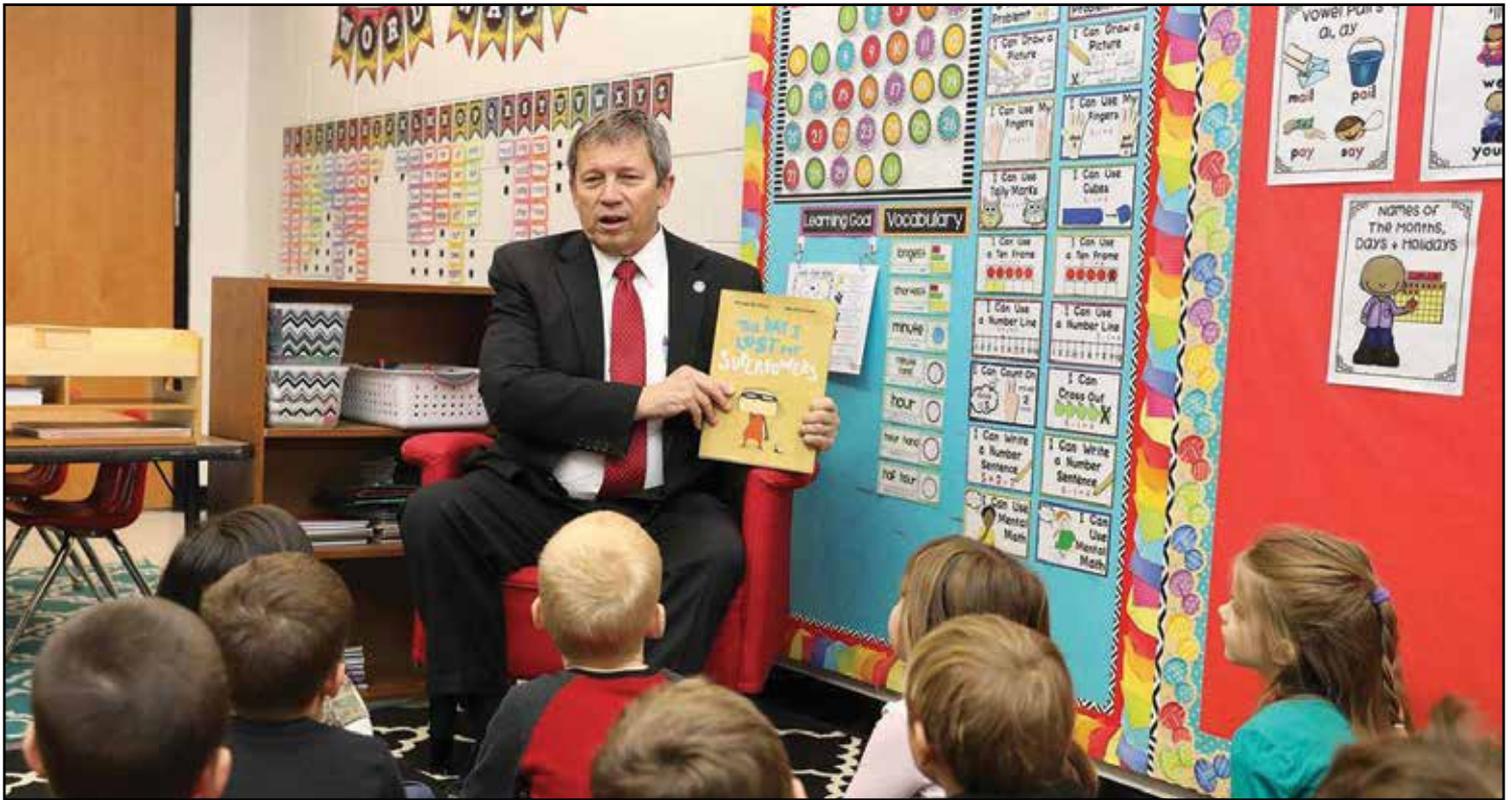
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# Rick Surrency

## Superintendent believes Putnam's future is bright



Submitted photo

Superintendent Rick said he enjoys interaction with students, such as reading a book to young school children.

### Daniel Egitto

Palatka Daily News

degitto@palatkadailynews.com

Superintendent Rick Surrency has spent 36 years in Putnam County education, but he still marvels at what young people are capable of doing.

Surrency's favorite activities in the county all revolve around youth. He loves going to Friday night football games at Putnam County high schools and attending school events where students show off what they've learned.

"Our greatest asset in Putnam County is our children," Surrency said. "Our children will be responsible for carrying on the hopes, dreams and values that we hold dear."

That's part of what gives Surrency so much hope.

Over the past few years, Surrency has seen the district's graduation rate skyrocket from 54.9% in 2015 to 92.5% in 2021. And as the district sets plans to build nine new schools over the next 10 years, he believes the improvements will only continue.

"We now feel that we can do anything we set our minds to. I can see the future of Putnam County is bright because we all came together to make that happen," he said.

Surrency has witnessed this kind of unity countless times in Putnam County. He talked about how he has seen residents

strengthen one another during their lives' most challenging periods, bringing "food, clothing, furniture or whatever it takes to support you."

"People in Putnam County just love you because they want to," he said.

And Surrency loves doing his part for this community. His favorite aspect of his job, he said, is getting to hear back decades down the road from residents whose lives he touched.

He recalled one recent message he received from a former baseball player who he coached 30 years ago. The man wanted to thank him for convincing his parents to let him transfer to Palatka High School from another school so that he could play.

"When these students come back to you years later and thank you for the contribution you made in their life, there is no greater feeling," Surrency said.

Surrency sees Putnam County as at the beginning of a "major transformation." He is heartened by recent improvements in the local economy as well as

the school district.

"As superintendent, I want to leave our school district and county in a much better position than it was when I took office," he said.



Rick Surrency

# Laura France

## School district employee loves living in Putnam County



Submitted photos

LEFT: Assistant Superintendent Laura France poses beside two recent graduates. RIGHT: Assistant Superintendent Laura France enjoys a moment with colleagues at Putnam County School District.

### Daniel Egitto

Palatka Daily News

degitto@palatkadailynews.com

After growing up in Palatka and spending 28 years in various positions at local schools, Laura France has come to a conclusion: there is no place on Earth like Putnam County.

“I cannot imagine being anywhere else and being as happy as I am here,” France said. “There are lots of places I would like to visit and many places that I love to travel to, but this is home.”

One of France’s favorite parts of Putnam County is its numerous festivals and events. Among her fondest childhood memories is when she would go to the Catfish Festival and watch her grandfather make swamp cabbage.

He would always give her a bowl of it along with a gigantic strawberry shortcake, and she’d eat these behind his booth.

France also loves going out on Putnam County’s numerous rivers and lakes, and said her favorite aspect of the county is its natural beauty.

But the best thing about this area is its residents.

“Putnam’s greatest asset is the people that live and work here,” France said.

France’s local role models include Karl Flagg, who she admires for “his commitment to faith, family and our community.” Another role model is Jimmi Symonds, who “was relentless in making improvements that positively impacted students” when France worked with her.

France also looks up to the “quiet grace” and servant leadership of Karen Hughes, who supports many Putnam County School District activities.

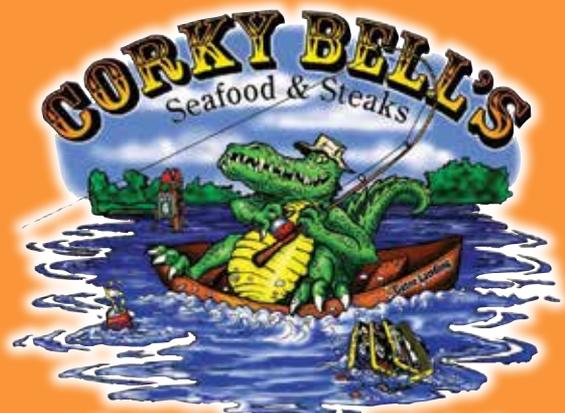
France, who is currently the school district’s assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, believes that investing in children is vital for the community’s future.

“Our students are the next generation of Putnam County citizens, and by providing them a solid foundation, we are shaping a brighter future for our county,” France said.

France’s greatest hope for the county is that it will grow “in a

positive direction.”

“Growth will occur,” she said. “How do we make it viable for our community, not just larger?”



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# Lucia Valdivia-Sanchez

## Nurturing diversity in Putnam County



Submitted photos

LEFT: Lucia Valdivia-Sanchez speaks to Putnam County students. RIGHT: Lucia Valdivia-Sanchez relaxes in a favorite spot.

**Sarah Cavacini**  
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Crescent City resident Lucía Valdivia-Sánchez did not always call Putnam County her home, but since moving here in 1990, she fell in love with serving the community.

It's the residents that are Putnam's greatest asset, she said, because "we are community-oriented and resilient."

Valdivia-Sánchez is the director of the Northeast Florida Educational Consortium's Florida Migrant Interstate Program. Before taking on this role, she worked for the Putnam County Migrant Education Program for 25 years.

"Putnam County provided (me) the opportunity to develop as a servant leader while raising my family," she said. "I have witnessed our students achieve their goals and families nurture their entrepreneurial spirit in our community."

The director's best experience in Putnam is attending graduation ceremonies for adult learners in Crescent City. Valdivia-Sánchez has worked to bring higher education and career development opportunities to migrant and seasonal farm workers locally, while also volunteering for local service organizations and helping younger generations in need.

She said Putnam County needs to invest in bringing career opportunities to the area because she has seen valuable professionals leaving the county to look for better jobs.

"This brain drain has created a vacuum of role models and we are

doing ourselves a disservice by not keeping these professionals in our community," Valdivia-Sánchez said.

She hopes efforts to uplift Putnam's career and educational opportunities can start soon because she loves this area. It's why she stayed and decided to raise a family here.

"I became involved in the school system to support my children and just fell in love with serving the community," the Crescent City resident said.

Valdivia-Sánchez admires people like Linda Osborne, who helped bring the migrant education program to Putnam County, and Crescent City's small business owners.

"Palmeras Restaurant, Botanitas Elvis, Baja Taco, El Amigo (Restaurant), Juan's Auto Salvage and J&J Tires are all owned by first generation immigrants who made Crescent City their home and are thriving as well as providing jobs locally," she added.

For Valdivia-Sánchez, a native of Michoacán, México, investing in the local youth and finding a way to bolster diversity is her hope for Putnam's future.

"We have a unique opportunity with natural bilingual students coming into our school system," she said. "If we focused on nurturing and developing their native language at the same (time) that they acquire their second language we could have a fully bilingual community."



Submitted photo

Valdivia-Sanchez takes a group of migrant children on a field trip to Universal Studios in Orlando.

Valdivia-Sánchez said this focus could give many more opportunities to local students, and she thinks it could be achieved in the next five years if the community works together to address this “unique approach” to local education.

“My wish is that we start looking into this opportunity right now,” she said.

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# Jonathan Griffith

## Palatka upbringing shapes general service director's career



File photo/Palatka Daily News

City of Palatka official Jonathan Griffith oversees removal of cypress logs from St. Johns River in July 2014.

### Daniel Egitto

Palatka Daily News

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Palatka's General Services Director, Jonathan Griffith, didn't just grow up in downtown Palatka.

He also sees himself as growing up on the St. Johns River and in the Ocala National Forest. These days, in fact, boating down the undeveloped stretches of the St. Johns between Palatka and Welaka is Griffith's favorite Putnam County activity.

"Putnam County has given me a deep appreciation for community and cultivated in me a strong sense of place," he said.

Griffith credits his Palatka upbringing with shaping his interests and career.

He has poured his love of the river into efforts to improve Riverfront Park and build the riverfront's nature-based playground. Griffith's love of his community, meanwhile, has driven his work with numerous development projects: from assisting in the reconstruction of South 9th Street to replacing 15 miles of Palatka drinking water lines.

"I don't think I would have sought an education in urban design, redevelopment and now capital projects if I had not been exposed to all Putnam County had to offer," he said.

Griffith devotes his life to giving back to the

county that gave him so much.

In the 12 years Griffith has spent working with the City of Palatka, he said he's secured over \$78 million from the state and federal government for infrastructure and community development projects. He has also served on the Board of Directors at Ride Solutions, Palatka Main Street and the Rotary Club of Palatka.

Some of Griffith's Putnam County role models include Karl Flagg - "a person of integrity and a voice of reason when the community needs it" - and the service-oriented leaders Wayne McClain and Melissa Miller.

Thanks to the efforts of people like them, Griffith thinks Putnam County currently has "momentum on its side." Pointing to numerous promising projects currently underway, Griffith said he believes the most important thing residents can do right now is to take advantage of recent government grants and "focus on the work at hand."

"This, with proposed business and housing developments, will allow us to achieve a greater quality of life, if we support one another in our efforts," he said.



Jonathan Griffith

# Melissa Miller

## Arc of Putnam County leader talks inspiration and giving back



Sarah Cavacini/Palatka Daily News

Melissa Miller, CEO of the ARC of Putnam County, smiles in her office in March.



Submitted photo

ARC of Putnam County employees work with a facility consumer.

### Sarah Cavacini

Palatka Daily News

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The Arc of Putnam County's new leader looks to her parents as role models, and to the people who served before her as she embarks on this fresh opportunity.

Chief Executive Officer Melissa Miller started her job in January, replacing Kari Bates who moved on to work as the president and CEO of Jacksonville's ARC.

However, Miller is no stranger to the Putnam County organization which provides programs and services "that enable people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to achieve their full potential," a statement on the ARC website reads.

"I love the community and the people. I am grounded here," Miller said. "The generosity and community spirit of the citizens of Putnam keep me connected to Putnam County."

Part of her giving spirit comes from the people she admires, including Bates, the ARC's youngest CEO, Putnam chapter founder Jim Whittaker, and former St. Johns River State College President Dr. Robert L. McLendon Jr.

Miller served as the college's vice president prior to becoming the ARC CEO and still does part-time general counsel work for the school. While there, she helped develop the "Girls Can" program, which aims to uplift high school girls with a day of campus-wide empowerment through panelist discussions and guest speakers helping women succeed, the Daily News reported in 2020.

Now, at the ARC Miller's day-to-day tasks are different than when she worked at the college.

One Tuesday afternoon in March, an excited voice greeted her, and poking his head into Miller's office, Jonathan Hurt told her he already had

his brackets lined up for college basketball championships. It was a reminder that she needed to get a jump on her picks. March Madness qualifications had started.

She smiled, and as Hurt listed all the upcoming games and who he thought would win, Miller assured him she would get started on her own choices as soon as possible so they could talk more basketball.

Although Miller took the CEO position at the ARC in January, she knows all the names of the consumers that come through the facility. Sammy Moore, for example, is a hugger, she said, and he loves getting paperwork copied to fill up his activities binder. The first time Miller met him she made copy after copy until the machine finally jammed, she said, laughing at the memory.

Miller spent time serving on the organization's board before becoming CEO and is also involved in other nonprofit work, such as helping the Lee Conlee House. She said her parents, although they are no longer with her, are the people she calls role models.

They ran a grocery and convenience store business locally, and Miller said her first job was working in the Palatka grocery store.

I was positively influenced by the supportive community and by attending and graduating from public schools and St. Johns River Community College in Palatka," she said.

Miller said her greatest hope for Putnam's future is that people invest in education and encourage business investments and job creation to boost the community.

"Putnam County taught me you can learn here, work here, play here and meaningfully contribute here," she said.



Submitted photo

An Arc of Putnam County constituent interacts with a therapy dog

# Ben & Benjie Bates

## Like father, like son



Submitted photo

Family times are special away from work, too for Ben and Benjie Bates. Ben carries Benjie's son Brayden while Benjie gives a ride to his daughter, Blair.

### Michael Leonard

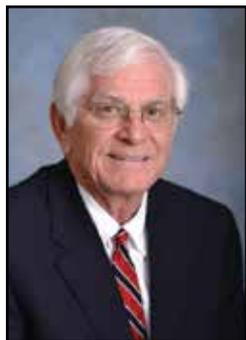
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**L**ook around Palatka and Putnam County and you'll see the imprint of Ben and Benjie Bates in a lot of places.

The father and son own and operate perhaps the biggest insurance agency in the county, the largest volume home sales firm, and are involved in developing and marketing housing subdivisions. And beyond successful business ventures, the two are active – very active – in revitalization efforts for the city and county.

Ben Bates is one of the founders and the managing leader of 1 Putnam, the private organization working to bring vibrancy back to Palatka's downtown and other parts of the county. Prior to 1 Putnam, he was again a founder and leader in the Putnam Forward organization.

He has put his time and money into each group. Bates is, in addition, a silent contributor to numerous local causes, both as



Ben Bates



Benjie Bates

an individual and as part of a small group of men who pool their resources to uplift the community.

Bates came to Palatka in 1973 after an honorable discharge from the Army. His two sisters taught school here and encouraged him to join them both as a resident and in the school system. He taught for two years, but that was not to be his career.

"When I was at Fort Lewis, Washington, in the Army, I got bored in the evenings, so I took a couple of courses in real estate and business insurance. I liked them.

"So I started my agency in 1975. Forty-seven years later, I'm still here."

Bates met his wife in Palatka, the daughter of former First Baptist Church pastor John Pelham, and his life's trajectory in Putnam County was set. He has been a board member and chairman of Rodeheaver Boys Ranch, Putnam County Chamber of Commerce and numerous other groups over the years.



Submitted photos

LEFT: Father and grandfather – Pops – making sure the next generation grows up strong. RIGHT: Benjie and Ben Bates give a closer look at an item away from the insurance and real estate offices.

Son Benjie went through the Putnam County school system, playing on the offensive line during two of the Panther football team's best years. Benjie Bates is not of the imposing size one thinks about with linemen – "We were small but fast," he quipped – yet he and his teammates were good. Dad Ben brags they went undefeated in the regular season his junior year, with only two losses as a senior.

The son joined the father in the insurance business in January 2005, one month after graduation from the University of Central Florida. He has since taken his place as a volunteer with local organizations also, following Ben Bates' footsteps.

Ben said his family's relationship with Putnam residents has been one of mutual benefit. The two name Wes Larson, Danny Martinez, Bob Webb, Breck Sloan and Pelham as Putnam leaders, both deceased and living, to admire.

"Any success I have is because of the people of Putnam County," Ben Bates said. "I just feel like this county has been very good to me, so now what can I do to show my appreciation and make it better for everybody else?"

Benjie Bates thinks of Putnam's natural beauty when naming the community's assets. He recalled, "I was playing golf with a friend from college and I said, 'Look, there's a bald eagle.' He said, 'Where? I've never seen one.'"

"Well, that's a common occurrence here. We take that for granted."

Part of the family "leave it better than you found it" credo is appreciating and maintaining Putnam's natural beauty while at

the same time working to better the standard of living. As the volunteer head of the Putnam Chamber's economic development push for more broadband, Benjie Bates is working toward that, and having success.

Both agree that the community is poised for significant growth over the next decade, but said the level of that growth will depend on citizens working together with mutual respect.

Benjie compared Putnam's immediate future to a blank canvas. How the painting turns out "is up to us," he said.

Ben added, "I know that great things are in the future of Putnam County. I can feel it. We know it is happening. The major thing is to do it right so that we have a community we can be proud of."



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Trisah Murphy/Palatka Daily News

## Sheila McCoy Give peace a chance

Sheila McCoy, executive director of the Palatka Christian Service Center, points to the cross and heart on the center's sign and said she is most grateful to God for touching hearts in the ministry to help others in need.

**Trisha Murphy**  
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**S**heila McCoy believes the community should give peace a chance, and that is why she wanted to make her permanent home in Putnam County to do her part to make sure it happens.

"I wanted to make a difference in the community," said McCoy, who has served as executive director of the Palatka Christian Service Center for the past 12 years. "I wanted to show integration could be peaceful."

That train of thought for McCoy has made her determined to improve the quality of life for herself and her family. It is one of the driving forces, too, as to why she took the position at the service center.

"I wanted to assist others in overcoming obstacles," she said. "But my main reason is I wanted to be in the service of the Lord for those in need."

Gladys Jones has known and worked with McCoy as a volunteer at the center for the past five years.

"I find Sheila to be supportive, caring, dedicated and an inspiring listener and counselor," she said. "She makes herself available to talk with you, pray with and for you and encourages you. I have come to love her and thank God for bringing her into my life."

McCoy and her husband, James, have been married for 53 years and have three children, eight grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. She serves as the pastor of God's Manna Healing and Deliverance Ministries. Currently the ministry's services are broadcast on Zoom.

Through her position at the Palatka Christian Service Center, McCoy has seen changes for the better in the community.

"I am amazed at the giving of our community," she said. "I get a warm fuzzy feeling, but I am most just grateful to God for touching

hearts."

The center is open 9 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Monday through Friday at 2600 Peters St. in Palatka. It offers assistance to the needy with rent and utilities, food stamps assistance, chaplain services, referrals, small food closet, supplies for the homeless, some used medical equipment, clothes and transitional housing, Thanksgiving baskets and Christmas toys distribution.

"This is the first year we were not able to have the free income tax service, but we are hopeful to find a site coordinator for next year," McCoy said.

The center has moved four times in its service to the community since its start. In 2007, the center relocated to Reid Street and the building was named the Heart of Putnam building.

"The name struck a chord in our community, or rang a bell within the community," McCoy said, smiling. "Our vision of shared space and overhead of nonprofits in the same place still benefits the community.

The center moved from its Reid Street location to Peters Street in 2014 in an effort to reduce overhead costs."

McCoy said going from a 12,000 square foot space to a 6,000 square foot space has had its challenges for the center, including limited parking and storage space, but has helped to reduce the center's operating costs.

"It has been an adjustment and we do not have the space for some of the services, but we managed," she said. "The cold weather shelter was greatly impacted, but we offered what we had."

That shared space includes a prison reentry program in the building and a thrift store called Hardly Used Boutique that is open 9 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Fridays.

The center also has services including rent and utility assistance, transitional housing, Social Security linked computers and partnerships with many other nonprofits.

According to McCoy, she has had others in the community who have inspired her by their good works.

“My high school teacher Louise Osgood saw potential in me,” she said. “Curly Hurst, a manager at Winn-Dixie, gave me a job as cashier in the 1960s and my friend Annie Mae Spell taught me many things about life.”

McCoy believes the most important thing the county can do for itself is to make public the strategic plan to improve the community.

“We need to be a catalyst to bring together citizens interested in addressing the needs,” she said. “My greatest wish for our county is better communication and collaboration between the city and county governments. It is obtainable in the next 5-10 years.”

For McCoy, she sees more

and more nonprofits starting to meet the needs in the community, but the money available for assistance has not increased.

“I have seen a definite increase in the availability of food for those in need,” she said. “The need for housing requests is increasing and the amount of rent and utilities are increasing.”

McCoy said the backbone of the local center is its individual donors, followed by churches who show their support.

“We could not operate the thrift store without donations from the community,” she said.

McCoy said she would love to see a campaign begin to change the perception for some on helping those in need.

“Most people are working and need some help,” she said. “We screen our clients and they must substantiate their need.”

When not working at the Palatka Christian Service Center, McCoy enjoys her quiet time.

“I love the small town atmosphere,” she said. “I like to go down to the river to meditate. It’s so peaceful. I can get lost in just the awe of it.”



Submitted photo  
The Palatka Christian Service Center’s 2020 board of directors include in front, from left, Shawn Dale Goddard, Cheryl Mayhue, Patricia Baxter, Sheila McCoy (executive director), Kim Daley and Linda McDowell. Back row: Paul Mack, Lorenzo Wright Sr., Ryan Simpson and Donald Holton.

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