

INSIDE:

Area Arts.....	3
Meet Your Neighbor.....	6
Advice for Gardeners.....	7
Economic Development.....	8
Moody Fellow.....	11
Artist of Month.....	12
Page 13-18 online at www.WessonNews.com	

Wesson News

SPOTLIGHT

Fall Scenes Competition

Page 2

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Volume 9, Number 11

“Good News You Can Use”

November 14, 2021

Colleges partner on economic development



By Bob Arnold

Co-Lin and Southwest Mississippi Community College (SMCC) are partnering in organizing an economic development commission encompassing the eleven state counties served by the two colleges.

Co-Lin President Dr. Jane Hulon Sims announced the initiative at the culmination of an economic development summit last month hosted by her college and SMCC at the Thames Center on the Co-Lin campus.

The new commission will include local economic developers, business and community leaders and elected officials from Adams, Amite, Copiah, Franklin, Jefferson, Lawrence, Lincoln, Pike, Simpson, Walthall and Wilkinson Counties -- many of whom were on hand at the Co-Lin event sponsored by Canfor, Dungan Engineering and Rex Lumber.

Hulon said she and SMCC

cont. on page 8

Bigger Christmas parade planned

By Bob Arnold

The marching bands will be back, and Santa will definitely be coming to town to later meet with kids at the fire house for a bigger Christmas parade than the one nearly cancelled in 2020.

Last year, when the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to be the grinch that would steal Christmas, Ken Carraway, who is the primary parade planner as Chief of Wesson Volunteer Fire Department, which organizes the traditional parade, had to scale back the event. Wesson Attendance Center didn't send its marching band in the midst of the pandemic. Co-Lin's Show Band, Collette dancers and cheerleading squad didn't make it because of the college's early



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Santa will arrive at Christmas parade.

closing in November. Even Santa Claus was a question mark, although he finally did come to town. And many of the usual participants were also cautious about committing to the parade.

All that has changed, according to Carraway. The marching

bands will return, and Santa will arrive as part of the parade and meet kids from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. with his bag of goodies at the WVFD station, where cookies and punch will also be served.

cont. on page 5

Ups & downs of test-takers

By Bob Arnold

While Wesson Attendance Center (WAC) students demonstrated similar pandemic-diminished performance to other students locally and statewide in results from the 2020-21 Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP), WAC high school test-takers outscored their counterparts in Copiah and Lincoln Counties on the latest round of American College Testing (ACT) Service exams, as they did in the 2018-19 school year.

MAAP measures students'



progress toward academic goals that equip them with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in college and the workforce, and ACT is a widely-used college entrance exam that tests student proficiencies in English, math, reading and science. MAAP, which Mississippi teachers developed to align with learning

goals for state classrooms, measures student performance in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics in grades 3-8, science in grades 5 and 8 and English II, Algebra I, biology and U.S. history in high school. It categorizes student proficiencies as Level 1 to 5, with 1 as the lowest.

Wesson News sampled the performance of third and eighth grade test-takers on the MAAP ELA and mathematics tests and fully surveyed the performance of fifth grade,

cont. on page 4

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WGC competition inspires fall decor



By Bob Arnold

Driven by competition among Wesson Garden Club (WGC) members, the town became a venue for picture postcard autumn scenes last month.

WGC's Scarecrow Challenge unleashed eight teams of club members throughout Wesson to try to outdo each other in decorating the town for the fall holiday season and, in the process, inspired non-competing residents and business owners to participate in creating autumn displays as well.

The donation of 24 scarecrows to WGC prompted the unique fun competition to put them to good use and dress up the town for the fall season.

Competing teams received a location for creating their displays in a special drawing and three scarecrows to incorporate into designs; and they were asked to build their displays around one of four themes related to national, regional, state and local garden club programs -- "Plant America Plants Outdoors" (National Garden Clubs, Inc.), "Plant Deep South with a Rainbow of Color" (Deep South Garden Clubs, Inc.), "Garden Clubs Make Things Happen" (Garden Clubs of Mississippi, Inc.) and "Making Things Happen" (Wesson Garden Club). Although teams were allowed to spend money in creating their displays, they were encouraged to use items and materials from their homes and gardens. Teams and their display locations:

- **Team Camilia:** Pam Owens, Joy Westbrooks, JoAnn Miller and Sherry Davis. The grassy corner at Vera Boyles' Salon 51.
- **Team Crepe Myrtle:** Angie Wade, Cathy Warren, Sonya Cowen and Jane Hulon Sims. Street corner of Mill Town Spa.
- **Team Daffodil:** Robin Furr, Nancy Sullivan, Nikki Smith and Jennifer Peets. 51 Diner tractor.
- **Team Daylily:** Lisa Smith, Debbie Smith and Rhonda Ishee. Right of the front driveway at Boswell Regional Center.
- **Team Hydrangea:** Meghan Shephard, Denise Jackson, Pam McLemore and Jan Mullin Smith. Steel Outdoors.
- **Team Yellow Mums:** Marilyn Britt, Joy Phillips, Angela Hester, Linda Toten and Alana Hughes. Front of Wesson Library.
- **Team Sunflower:** Ramona Smith, Jean Ricks, June Owens and Debbie Hoaglin. Front of the fountain in the Fountain Garden.
- **Team Violet:** Sherri Carty, Dixie Thornton, Lori Doughtry, Emily McKinley and Brittany Warren. High school or elementary side of Wesson Attendance Center.

Members of Wesson Chamber of Commerce judged displays and awards will be announced at the November WPG meeting.



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Volume 9, Number 11

Circulation 5,000

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Wesson News is published on the
second Tuesday of every month
in Wesson, Mississippi.

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New locally produced movie coming soon

By Guest Columnist R. Shaw Furlow

I've mentioned over the years how our little corner of the world is a hot bed of talent. Our visual art and music scenes have grown, and there have even been a few films shot here -- big budget ones with well known stars and low budget films with local actors.

For about two years, we've been waiting for the premier of local musician and graphic artist-turned-movie producer J.F. Oakes' film, *The Band Forgettable*, which was filmed in Lincoln and Lawrence Counties. Without giving away the plot, it's about an aging musician and his struggles keeping up the pace of his dying career.



Wesson News

Oakes is a talented man and is no stranger to the spotlight, having been on stages his entire adult life. You may remember we focused on him in 2018 when he won the Josie Award for Best Southern Rock song, "Bless Your Heart." The Josie awards recognize independent artists. Oakes had a successful career as a singer with the 484 South Band for eight years, and performed all over the region at clubs and auditoriums, opening for country stars and headlining shows.

So I asked him: Why a movie, and why now? I wasn't expecting the answer I got.

Oakes has been diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, which affects cognitive functions and memory. His doctor recommended he write for therapy. After mulling the advice for a few days, he decided writing the script was what he needed.

"I wrote the script in three months," he related. "Write what you know, they say, so I wrote this story about an aging musician."

How did he know about movie-making? "The internet is a wonderful thing," he said simply. On the internet, he sat in on master classes with Ron Howard. With the help of the internet, he figured out the equipment he needed, and then learned all he could about using the equipment. Veteran videographer JB Lawrence, who handled all the camera work for his film, helped him. Lawrence is an award winning producer of music videos and film.

Principle shooting took place in Lincoln and Lawrence Counties over a sixteen-day span. Every set is local, including my kitchen.

"I tried to get the best talent available and, fortunately, I have talented friends," Oakes says. "This would be considered a no-budget film."

Oakes plays the lead character, a singer with a successful southern rock band. You'll see many recognizable faces throughout the film. There's Oakes' daughter Amanda Rester and local musicians Charlie Hewitt and Tony Norton. The Bridge brothers -- Nick and Tyler -- and Kyle Graves are part of the band. A few of the leads were imported from New Orleans, Brandon and Jackson.

"I'm especially proud of the soundtrack," Oakes says. "There's a lot of good music there." And that's not surprising. While making a movie may be new to Oakes, making records is something with which he is very familiar. With 484 South, he recorded two albums, and



Special to Wesson News

Oakes (right) confers with Tony Norton.

now has two solo albums under his belt. "Our first album actually made money," he notes. That's a rarity, I assure you.

Oakes spent two weeks in Memphis recording his part with top drawer studio musicians. But that's not all. Carey Hudson, well known Americana musician from Hattiesburg, not only contributes to the soundtrack, but has a great scene in the film. Natchez band Learned Hill also makes an appearance.

Because Oakes is doing all post production himself, it has taken a bit longer to make than he thought. "I hope to release it around the first of the year, then it's off to film festivals," he says. "We'll see after that."

Just to be fair, I make an appearance in the film as a somewhat cranky guy. Me? Cranky? I hope it hasn't been cut in post.

This was a fun project to work on and I believe you'll be entertained by *The Band Forgettable*. I'll let you know when it premieres. Until then, support the arts, my friends.



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cont. from page 1

Ups & downs of test-takers

eighth grade and high school test-takers on MAAP general science, English, Algebra, biology and history exams, and the ACT test in Brookhaven School District, Copiah County School District, Hazlehurst School District and West Lincoln School District. The school districts encompassed test-takers at Alexander High School, Bogue Chitto School, Brookhaven Elementary School, Brookhaven High School, Crystal Springs Elementary School, Crystal Springs High School, Crystal Springs Middle School, Enterprise School, Hazlehurst Elementary School, Hazlehurst High School, Hazlehurst Middle School, Hazlehurst High School, Lightsey School, Loyd Star School, Wesson Attendance Center and West Lincoln School.

At Wesson Attendance Center, 32.2 percent of the sampled ELA and English II test-takers, on average, earned a 4 or 5 high proficiency level categorization in the 2020-21 academic year, down from 52.7 percent the previous year. An average 30.8 percent of the sampled math and Algebra I test-takers achieved the high proficiency levels, compared to 45.7 percent in the 2018-19 school year. On the science, biology and U.S. history testing, high proficiency students declined only a quarter of a percent from 58.85 percent to 58.60 percent at WAC.

In the 2020-21 MAAP testing, WAC students only out-performed test-takers at Copiah and Lincoln schools in fifth grade science, with 71.4 percent in the high proficiency categories. WAC students performed worst, with only 20.8 percent in the top categories, in Algebra I testing, but only Lincoln County students at Alexander Junior High School (81.8 percent), Brookhaven High School (23.4 percent), and Enterprise (29.4 percent) performed better.

Enterprise students (48.2 percent) bettered WAC student performance in biology (47.9 percent) and Crystal Springs Elementary School students (46.3 percent) and exceeded WAC students in third grade math (35.5 percent). Alexander Junior High School students (40.2 percent and 45.1 percent) and West Lincoln students (59.4 percent and 68.7 percent) out-performed WAC students in eighth grade ELA (35.6 percent) and eighth grade math (36.1 percent); Loyd Star students (40.8 percent) and West Lincoln students (54.4 percent) out-performed WAC students in English II (31.8 percent); Enterprise students (57.9 percent) and West Lincoln students (65.6 percent) topped WAC students (57.7 percent) in eighth grade science; and Bogue Chitto students (79.5 percent) and West Lincoln students (88.1 percent) out-performed WAC U.S. history test-takers (58 percent). Students at three Lincoln County schools -- Bogue Chitto (45.9 percent), Loyd Star (45.6 percent) and West Lincoln (56.8 percent) -- bettered WAC students in third grade ELA testing (39.7 percent).

By far, WAC test-takers performed best on ACT exams, however, with a 19.8 composite score -- three-tenths of a point higher than their 2018-19 score and four-tenths higher than that of West Lincoln's 19.4 composite score for 2020-21. The

sixty-eight ACT test-takers at WAC posted scores of 20.8 in English, 18.5 in math, 20.1 in reading and 19.5 in science. ACT composite scores were also 16.9 at Brookhaven High School, 13.4 at Crystal Springs High School, 15.1 at Hazlehurst High School, 17.2 at Bogue Chitto School, 17.4 at Enterprise School and 17.4 at Loyd Star School.

For the first time since MAAP tests were first administered in 2016, student proficiency across the state decreased in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA). Throughout Mississippi, math proficiency was down 12.3 percent to 35.1 percent from 47.4 percent and ELA proficiency off 6.7 percent to 34.9 percent from 41.6 percent. Statewide proficiency levels fell in all grades except grade 8 ELA, which increased 0.1% (35.6%) since 2019 (35.5%).

State Superintendent of Education Dr. Carey Wright attributed the poor testing results in 2020-21 to "the disruption and stress caused by COVID-19," which "had an impact on student performance in every state in the country." "The impact has been more marked in mathematics than in English Language Arts," Wright said. "I am proud of the way Mississippi students, families, teachers and school leaders persevered through the most challenging school year of their lives."

Though most Mississippi students had access to in-person learning most of the 2020-21 school year, hybrid learning, quarantining and numerous weather-related school building closures created obstacles to teaching and learning. The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) provided districts pandemic-related flexibilities to administer tests. Schools provided safe testing environments to all students including full-time virtual learners who took assessments at schools. The overall participation rate for assessments was 96.9%, close to the 98%-99% rates of previous years.

Due to COVID disruptions, grade 3 students were not required to meet a passing score on the reading assessment to be promoted to grade 4. Students still had to meet all other district requirements for promotion. Students who took required end-of-course high school assessments including Algebra I, English II, Biology and U.S. History were not required to meet a passing score. Though overall statewide proficiency levels dropped, proficiency levels did not drop in every grade, subject and school. Notably, Ocean Springs School District improved its district-wide ELA proficiency level since 2019.

Pre-pandemic, statewide student proficiency rates increased every year since MAAP tests were first administered. By 2019, Mississippi had become a national leader in education because students were making faster progress than nearly every other state.

"This year establishes a new baseline for statewide assessments," Wright said. "As the world moves to recover from the pandemic, I am confident Mississippi students will progress just as rapidly as they did before."

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cont. from page 1

Bigger Christmas parade planned



Special to Wesson News

Co-Lin community luncheon returns.

Carraway is still recruiting parade participants, hoping to recruit floats and vehicles that will feature members of the Wesson High School homecoming court and beauty and beau winners, area government officials, business leaders and community service volunteers; trucks from Wesson Volunteer Fire Department, siren-sounding cars from Wesson Police Department and marchers from the America Legion, Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts and Girl Scouts. Anyone who would like to participate in the parade should contact the fire department through email (wessonfd@gmail.com) or phone (601-265-1694). There will be a registration form on the Wesson Volunteer Fire Department Facebook page.

The parade will roll at 4 p.m. on Friday, December 3, at 4 p.m. following its normal route south through town and then back north. Nena Smith dancers will assemble at Wesson Baptist Church, while all other parade participants will line up in the old Sunflower building parking lot.

Lights and decorations on Highway 51 and side streets downtown will provide an appropriate Christmas ambiance for the parade.

As usual, on the Sunday before the parade, November 28, members of the WVFD will get the town's decorations out of storage and install them on utility polls throughout the area.

The Spirit of Christmas Awards program, sponsored by *Wesson News*, the Wesson Chamber of Commerce (C of C) and Wesson Garden Club (WGC), will incentivize businesses to decorate their locations. The C of C presents cash prizes to local businesses in recognition of distinctive Christmas decor and creative displays as judged by WGC, which also recognizes residential decorating through its Yard of the Month program.

Several weeks earlier, on November 17, another traditional Wesson holiday event cancelled last year in the midst of COVID-19, will return to help prepare the community for the season of joy and cheer: Co-Lin's community luncheon at the Thames Conference Center on its Wesson campus.

For the eighteenth year, some 300 persons, including Co-Lin employees, members of community social and civic organizations, employees of area businesses, families and individuals, will be on hand at the buffet luncheon featuring turkey, ham, country vegetables, salads and a variety of desserts from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. The community event evolved from a 2002 marketing showcase of the Thames Conference Center facilities and food service into a venue for food, fun and fellowship involving an increasingly wider community. Reservations are recommended. Contact Brenda Orr (601-643-8671) or Tricia Russell (601-643-8702/tricia.russell@colin.edu).

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Stigall treads rocky business road

By Bob Arnold

When Donna Stigall opened Le Soul restaurant in Hazlehurst two years ago, she had no clue what she was getting into.

"I had no experience in the restaurant business," she says. "I never waited on a table, let alone managed a restaurant. This is the hardest work I've ever done. It's not just serving good quality food, but hiring a staff and organizing them to work together well. I have made a lot of mistakes and continue learning. I'm a fighter, though, and am determined to be successful. I am committed to making it work for customers and others who want me to succeed."

Folk in the area who love good food and are willing to tolerate the birth pangs and confusion that go with opening and building a restaurant business are rooting her on.

Stigall was born and grew up in Natchez, Mississippi, with two sisters and a brother. She recalls riding her bike and playing on the streets in the downtown area near the Roman Catholic cathedral a few blocks from her home. "Small and a safe place to live for a child, it was the perfect place to grow up," she says.

At 14 years old, she got her first job there working for her father, who owned and operated a collections agency and tax service with branches throughout Mississippi. She went through school at Natchez until her family moved to Clinton, Mississippi, just before her senior year in high school. Rather than start a new school year there and have to make new friends and start a new life in midst of her senior year studies, Stigall completed her course work during the summer and received her high school diploma from Clinton High School when she was 16 years old.

While working at Gayfers, a clothing retailer at a Jackson mall, Stigall attended Hinds Community College in Raymond, Mississippi, and then went on to the University of Mississippi at Oxford, where she decided she preferred beaches to academics

after a semester, and relocated to Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

In Florida, Stigall maintained a relationship with a long-time sweetheart whom she had met as an eighth grader in Natchez, married him in 1980 and moved with him to Lafayette, Louisiana, where he worked in the oil fields and they started a family. After a divorce, Stigall came back to Mississippi in 1996 to live near her parents, who resided in Brookhaven. She settled in Crystal Springs and started her own business there in 1997 making loans for Pay Day and selling cellular phones. The business, which she calls Stigall Investments & My Mortgage Company, LLC, now specializes in renting properties and brokering mortgage loans, and continues today as a much-needed funding source for her fledgling restaurant.

In 1999, when one of her three sons decided he wanted to play high school football at Madison, Mississippi, she moved there, and then relocated to Hazlehurst in 2019 to be near her Crystal Springs business and have an easier drive to her properties and other interests in Lafayette.

At Hazlehurst, Stigall purchased a building on the south side of Gallatin Street, to add the "charming apartment" on its second floor to her portfolio of rental properties. "I had fallen in love with it twenty years earlier and never forgotten about it,"

she says. The first floor of the building had been a lighting and antique store, which the wife of a Hazlehurst government official suggested would make a good restaurant location and that Stigall might want to open one. "Hazlehurst needs a good restaurant," she told Stigall.

Le Soul was born, and it has been a rocky road. "I enjoyed the design and construction work, shaping a space for a restaurant, but I wasn't prepared for the work of managing it, even though I like business challenges."

There have been the challenges of



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Donna Stigall talks with customer at Le Soul.

creating business systems, developing a loyal customer base in a venue that allows people to relax and get to know each other and, above all, building a competent, reliable staff with people who function well together and you can trust to operate the business when you want to take time off. Over the short two years she has managed Le

Soul, Stigall has employed an estimated ten cooks. For an all too brief time, she unloaded the work on Chris McSwain who transplanted the former Porches restaurant business at Le

Soul, but another job took him away and Stigall was again "a prisoner of my restaurant," while getting everything on track.

Good quality food with a Louisiana touch and striving to give her customers the best has helped propel Le Soul to a point at which Stigall believes it can successfully hurdle the "third year business hump." Le Soul now has a good, reliable cook, its staff is melding and Stigall continues to work on making its service run smoothly consistently. Tweaking Le Soul's New

Orleans style Sunday brunch -- unique to the area -- is high on her current agenda: Adding more breakfast items to the menu that features catfish, steak and Bloody Mary and mimosa specials. Music, perhaps a live jazz trio. Sports on wide flat screens.

Stigall is even seeing a future with some time to spend with her three sons -- Braydon, who works for his father's oilfield services business; Arin, a medical technical; and Payton, a mechanic -- and their families, including five grandchildren -- Kannon, who is studying at LSU; Jaleh, 13, Karah, 10, Parker, 8, and Cali, 5.

What are your hobbies?

I long for the days I can travel again. I'll go anywhere, but I want to spend time with family and enjoy my condo at Destin, Florida.

Are you a reader?

I do a lot of online reading in connection with business, but sitting down with books is another thing!

Do you enjoy movies or theater?

I am looking forward to movie theaters reopening in the aftermath of COVID-19. *Top Gun* is at the top of my list. I enjoy high school plays, little theater and TV movies, as well. I have no favorite actors or actresses. Just give me a good script.

Are you into music?

I enjoy everything except rap. I like Adele. But there are a lot of great artists locally, too. I played the saxophone in high school. So, yes, I really like jazz. But I am not a musician.

What would you do with lottery winnings if you were so lucky?

I would clear up my debt, invest in Le Soul to make it a big success, take care of family and friends and give to the legitimate charities focused on animals, sick and abused persons and people in need.

How would you change the world?

The world needs a lot of help. Things are sad today. People need to live like Jesus. How you make that happen, however, is way over my head.

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Gardeners get year-end advice

By Bob Arnold

Wesson Garden Club members last month received some sage advice from a Co-Lin gardening pro about season-ending gardening tasks.

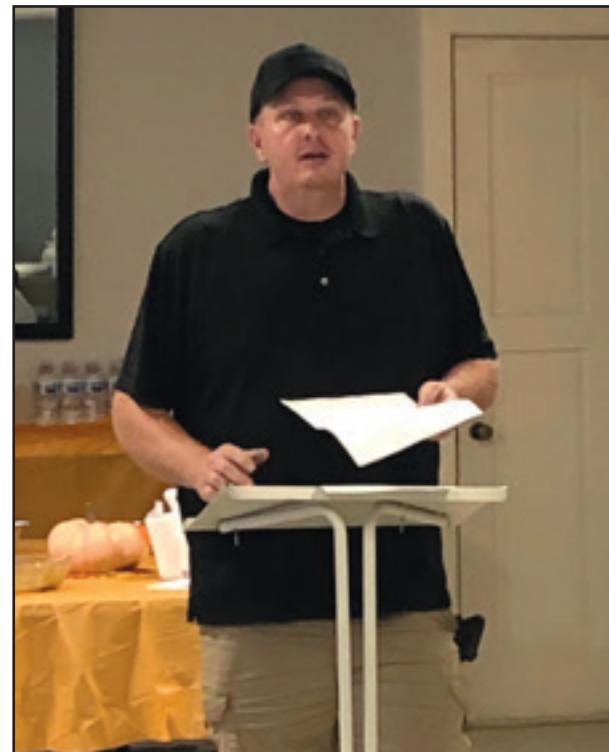
Guest speaker Jacob Prisock, a talented landscape designer, consultant, and Grounds Department Supervisor at Co-Lin, talked about "Putting Your Garden to Rest" and answered various gardening and landscaping questions in a presentation at the Garden Club's October meeting.

At the meeting, Club members also discussed:

- A bluebird housing project. Houses for bluebirds are being placed along the east side of Highway 51 to welcome these special feathered friends.
- Beverly Anderson King memorial bench dedication. The event is November 5 for the late Garden Club member and leader. A short memorial dedication service is planned, and Co-Lin will provide cookies and punch. The Club is paying for a fresh flower arrangement at the table.
- The Scarecrow Challenge -- a competition among teams of Garden Club members to create decorative fall displays at businesses and other locations around town (see story elsewhere in this issue).

The Club met October 14 at Wesson Baptist Church. On hand were members Sonya Cowen, Debbie Hoaglin, Denise Jackson, Pam McLemore, JoAnn Miller, June Owens, Pam Owens, Jean Ricks, Meghan Shepherd, Debbie Smith, Nancy Sullivan, Dixie Thornton, Cathy Warren and Joy Wesbrooks. Hostesses Pam McLemore, Meghan Shepherd and Cathy Warren served a meal.

The Wesson Garden Club is a member of The Garden Clubs of Mississippi, Inc., and The National Clubs, Inc.



Jacob Prisock

Special to Wesson News

WESSON AREA DINING GUIDE



To advertise your restaurant in our dining guide, call Bob Arnold at 601-990-3003 ext. 700

cont. from page 1

Colleges partner on economic development

President Steven Bishop, along with officials involved in economic development in the 11-county region would work on formulating and implementing strategies to recruit new business, support business expansion and create jobs as part of the commission.

Hulon declared that "it was time to act" and go beyond talk. "If not now, when," she implored.

At the economic development summit, Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves led an assortment of speakers that set the stage for Hulon's announcement:

- Reeves laid out basic economic development guidelines.
- Dr. Bill Ashley from the Mississippi Development Authority (MDA) cited demographics data facing economic developers in Southwest Mississippi.
- Cooperative Energy's Mitch Stringer discussed the economic development process.
- State Workforce Director Ryan Miller spotlighted Accelerate, Mississippi's new workforce development program.

Reeves cited the "focus on workforce" as the most significant change in economic development in recent years. "We used to emphasize incentives -- tax breaks, for example," he explained. "Now it's labor -- people trained for high-demand jobs." He added that Mississippi has been good at "training workers to the specs" of businesses locating in the state, but "we're doing it backwards." "We need to do the training first to recruit -- to meet the needs of businesses looking to locate somewhere before they make their decisions," he pointed out.

The Governor also said economic development must be data-driven, based on the reality of communities and the needs of businesses. "Consider the Return on Investment you want from

recruiting a business -- the types of jobs, per capita income," he counseled. "Think through the jobs situation -- jobs available, skills needed."

Above all, economic development is about working together, Reeves said. "We create opportunities working together, not by competing," he asserted.

MDA's Ashley highlighted key demographic realities that Southwest Mississippi economic developers must factor into their business recruiting strategies in their eleven-county region. Significant data:

- Total population of 228,665.
- A workforce of 87,000 with 8.55 percent unemployed.
- 20,000 workers commute outside to jobs outside the region and 20,000 commute to jobs inside the region.
- 57,000 work in manufacturing, which produces \$774 million annually followed by transportation/warehousing (\$766 million), government (\$318 million) and agriculture (\$124 million).
- Production workers are predominantly in the 25-44 year old age group.
- The most concentrated and competitive industries are poultry, plastics, apparel, paper, power generation with the most jobs in production, healthcare and business and financial sectors.
- The most job postings are for work in transportation/materials moving, installation and repair and production, with 12,530 for truck drivers.

Stringer reminded economic developers about the nature of their work.

"Your job involves retention and expansion of existing business as well as the slow, often unrewarding work of recruiting," he pointed out. "You are, above all, a project manager. But you have many other concerns: Community development towards improving quality of life that businesses seek in locations. As a subject matter expert, serving information-seekers. Finally, trying to keep a lot of people happy."

The economic developer's all-important customer -- the business location decision maker -- has higher expectations and a shorter timeline today -- about six months, with a focus on site elimination and a lot of unknowns, Stringer said. In order of importance, he said site decisions are based on labor skills, highway access, energy sources, overall community quality of life, labor and site occupancy costs, tax rates, tax exemptions and other incentives and shipping costs.

Miller, who leads AccelerateMS -- the new Mississippi workforce development program, said his office has launched an "ecosystem approach" in which localized needs of eight distinct regions or ecosystems are identified to build a customized labor pool that drives economic growth.

"Our office has the support, encouragement and direction of the full state leadership," he said. "For the first time in state history, this is a coordinated approach to workforce development like we have never seen before."

In the wake of COVID-19, the state recognized the need for an office to coordinate workforce development -- an office to create new partnerships with industry and recruit and retain talent, Miller pointed out.

"We needed to promote a healthy workforce with a strategy that looked at everything from top to bottom, left to right, and stem to stern," he said. "We have some new tools that have emerged from COVID-19 -- Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and other virtual learning platforms." Miller added that Mississippi "has a lot of partners with this office who are doing some great things to make sure that our workers receive the training they need to fill skilled jobs and pursue the most rewarding career paths."





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Aldermen decisions, economy, COVID & driving

Special to Wesson News

Former WPD Chief returns. Former Wesson Police Chief Chad O'Quinn thought he retired, but the Wesson Board of Aldermen at their meeting last month brought him back to the Police Department as a part time officer. At the meeting, the Board also: Approved travel and related expenses of Police Chief Stogner to the Chiefs Convention at Ridgeland, Mississippi, December 14-17. Moved Officers Tim Stevens and Kelsie Evans from part-time to full-time with the Wesson Police Department (WPD). Authorized an agreement between WPD and Co-Lin to jointly pay \$21,800 over five years to bring an RMS NIBRS complaint system into compliance. Approved payment of an \$11,341.61 balance on a loan with KS State Bank for the Water Department's Hawk Scada System through closure of a \$19,511.50 general obligation account at Copiah Bank and its transfer to the water account.

Economic boosts. A wide array of investments by businesses in Brookhaven is boosting the area economy. Tortilla Soup has opened on South Whitworth Avenue. Rex Lumber is building a wood pellets plant. Mill Creek subdivision has leased three quarters of its homes. KFC is moving to a new location across from its present home on Brookway Boulevard, which Rally's Drive-In Restaurant will be remodeling for a new operation. Tropical Smoothie Cafe continues to work on setting up operations at the former Payless Shoes location on Brookway Boulevard. Blue Sky convenience will replace its current Brookway Boulevard facility with a "bigger and better" store. A large convenience store/gas station is under construction at the old Coke Plant location on the corner of Highway 51 and Natchez Avenue. Construction will start soon on a new Los Parrilleros restaurant on Brookway Boulevard Extension in front of Home Depot.

COVID in Mississippi. Throughout Mississippi's population of 2.8 million, 16.6 percent of people have tested positive for COVID-19 and 3.3 percent have died from the virus and related causes. Among new cases, five percent were fully vaccinated people, who also accounted for 13 percent of new deaths. Eighty-five percent of COVID-related hospitalizations were unvaccinated people. So far, Lincoln County has recorded 5,400 COVID-19 cases with 134 deaths; and Copiah, 4,411 cases with 89 deaths.

Driving Smart resources. Travel resources, including special videos, are available from the Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) to promote driving safety at its web site, GoMDOT.com/DriveSmartMS. Among issues covered by the videos are navigating work zones and intersections. MDOT officials say simply paying attention and staying off cellular telephones, especially in work zones where road conditions may change quickly, is one of the most important safety steps drivers can take. Other simple safety steps are wearing seat belts, keeping a safety

distance between other vehicles, obeying posted speed limits, being patient in traffic, using designated drivers as needed and watching for cyclists and pedestrians.

Social Security benefits increasing. Millions of retirees on Social Security (SS) throughout the nation will receive a 5.9 percent boost in their benefits in 2022 -- the biggest cost-of-living adjustment in 39 years as a result of inflation related to economic recovery following struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the average retired worker, the increase will be \$92 per month, bringing the average retired worker's compensation to \$1,657 a month and the typical retired couple's to \$2,753.

NEWS NUGGETS

Toy collection. The nation-wide 75-year-old Marine Corps Toys for Tots program is collecting donations of toys, books and other gifts at the Game Shop in Brookhaven from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. Monetary donations can be made through www.hazlehurst-ms@toysfortots. The program helps under-served children during each Christmas season to help assure "all children receive a little Christmas."

Pastor appreciated



Special to Wesson News

Strong Hope Baptist Church celebrated Pastor Appreciation Day last month with presentation of plaque and appreciation cards to Brother Matt Scopel (left) by Deacons chairman Bob Owens. Those in attendance enjoyed a time of fun, food, and fellowship.

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Civilian military participation gains supporters



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Pictured at Wesson Aldermen meeting are (left to right) Alderman-at-Large Van Graham, City Clerk Angela Hester, ESGR Area 5 Chair Lynn Holloway, Mayor Alton Shaw, Ward 1 Alderman Larry Hall, Ward 2 Alderman Jarrad Ashley, and Ward 3 Alderman Billy Ellison. Assisting with local Statement of Support effort and not pictured was ESGR State Training Director Dr. Tim Lea.

Special to Wesson News

Wesson Mayor Alton Shaw and the town's Board of Aldermen have joined a growing support network that advocates for employee participation in the military.

The Mayor and Aldermen signed on to the Statement of Support (SOS) that is the cornerstone of the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) work to promote cooperation and understanding between Reserve Component Service members and their civilian employers and to assist in the resolution of conflicts arising from an employee's military commitment.

ESGR, a Department of Defense program established in 1972, encompasses nearly 3,300 volunteers in 54 committees located across all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam-CNMI (Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands), Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Wesson SOS signees joined hundreds of thousands of employers that have signed ESGR Statements of Support pledging their support to Guard and Reserve employees. Mayor Shaw and each Alderman signed their own separate statements to:

- Fully recognize, honor, and comply with the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act;
- Provide managers and supervisors with the tools they need to effectively manage employees who serve in the Guard and Reserve;

- Appreciate the values, leadership, and unique skills Service members bring to the workforce and encourage opportunities to hire Guardsmen, Reservists, and Veterans;
- Continually recognize and support the nation's Service members and their families, in peace, in crises, and in war.

The intent of the SOS program is to increase employer support by encouraging employers to act as advocates for employee participation in the military. Supportive employers are critical to maintaining the strength and readiness of the Nation's Guard and Reserve units.

The first Statement of Support was signed December 13, 1972, in the Office of the Secretary of Defense by the Chairman of the Board of General Motors. President Richard Nixon was the first President to sign a Statement of Support, and in 2005 every Federal Cabinet Secretary and all Federal agencies signed a Statement of Support to signify their continuing efforts to be model employers.

ESGR volunteers from small business and industry, government, education, and prior military service bring a vast wealth of experience to assist in serving employers, Service members, and their families. Together with Headquarters ESGR staff and a small cadre of support staff for each State Committee, volunteers work to promote and enhance employer support for military service in the Guard and Reserve.

Know your heart health numbers

By Guest Columnist Dr. Stephanie Duguid

We live our lives by the numbers: phone numbers, PIN numbers, account numbers. But do you know the heart health numbers that could literally save your life?

There are five key numbers you need -- including one surprisingly easy one that could give you a lifesaving preview of your cardiac risk:

1. Your Body Mass Index (BMI)
2. Your waist size
3. Your blood pressure
4. Your cholesterol levels
5. Your blood sugar (glucose) numbers

If you know these key heart health numbers, you can take action to reduce your chances of developing heart disease, diabetes, and other major chronic illnesses:

Healthy numbers mean a healthy heart. If you follow a healthy lifestyle -- eat a balanced diet, get regular exercise, and avoid smoking, you can even turn bad numbers around. "Small changes can make a big difference," says Lori Mosca, MD, director of the Columbia Center for Heart Disease Prevention in New York City. "When measuring your heart health numbers, don't just look at where you are -- look at where you're going."

Here's a quick guide to your heart-health numbers:

1. Body Mass Index (BMI) is a calculated measure of body fat based on your current height and weight that applies to adult men and women. It is simply a useful reference measurement and a screening tool to help determine weight categories that may lead to health problems and is strongly correlated with various metabolic and disease outcomes. However, athletes may have a high BMI because of increased muscularity rather than body fatness. A BMI of 18.5-24.9 is considered to be in the Normal Weight category.

2. Waist Size: The Connection to Heart Disease. If you can only remember one number, your waist size is the one to know. Why? Because your waist size predicts your heart disease risk better than your weight or your BMI. If your waist size is equal to or more than 35 inches in women and equal to or more than 40 inches in men, your risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, metabolic problems, high blood pressure and abnormal cholesterol increases. It's easy to measure yourself. Just get a non-elastic tape and measure around your belly button.

3. Blood Pressure: Key to Heart Health. Blood pressure consists of two numbers. Your systolic pressure (top number) measures the pressure of blood against artery walls when the heart pumps blood out during a heartbeat, while the diastolic pressure (bottom number) measures the same pressure at rest between heartbeats, when the heart fills with blood. High blood pressure (or "hypertension") increases your risk of heart attack, stroke, and kidney disease, and can damage your brain, eyes and arteries, too.



You may have no symptoms of high blood pressure, which is also known as the "silent killer." About 60% of all Americans more than 60 years old have high blood pressure, and it occurs more often among African-Americans. In Mississippi, nearly a million people have high blood pressure, and 300,000 of them don't know it. One in three adults in the U.S. -- about 74 million people -- has high blood pressure or pre-hypertension. Normal blood pressure is below 120/80. Pre-hypertension pressure is 120 to 139 (systolic) and/or 80 to 89 (diastolic). Hypertension (High Blood Pressure) is 140 or higher (systolic) and 90 or higher (diastolic).

4. Cholesterol: Predictor of Heart Attack. Cholesterol isn't all bad -- it's a type of fat that's actually a nutrient. But there's "good" cholesterol and "bad" cholesterol. When we measure cholesterol and blood fats, we're really talking about three different numbers: HDL, LDL, and triglycerides. They combine to give you a "lipid profile" score, but the three individual scores are most important. Strive for total

cholesterol of 200 mg/dL or lower, HDL ("good" cholesterol) of 50 mg/dL or higher (women), or 40 mg/dL or higher (men); optimal LDL of 100 or lower and triglycerides of less than 150 mg/dL. Adults 20 and older should get a lipid profile every five years.

5. Glucose/Blood Sugar: Type 2 Diabetes Concern. Whether you have type 2 diabetes or not, you need to watch your blood sugar and your hemoglobin A1C levels. Glucose is sugar stored in the blood as your body's main source of energy. If your glucose is too high or too low, you may have diabetes. One out of three people with diabetes in Mississippi either don't know they have it or aren't getting treatment. The average fasting blood sugar range is between 80 and 99. Diabetes can strike anyone of any age. Symptoms include frequent urination, extreme hunger, thirst, unusual weight loss, increased fatigue, or blurry vision.

If you have been diagnosed with diabetes, you need to have your A1C number checked. Your A1C number tells you how well you're controlling your blood sugar over time. Left untreated, diabetes can lead to heart disease, blindness, amputation of arms or legs, and kidney disease. Normal blood sugar is less than 100 mg/dL fasting. Prediabetes blood sugar is 100 to 125 mg/dL fasting, or an A1C of 5.7% to 6.4%. Diabetes blood sugar is 126 mg/dL or greater, or an A1C level of 6.5% or higher (and you've gotten these results two or more times)

No matter what your numbers, the most important thing to know is that they can all be helped by healthy lifestyle choices. "Even small changes in your physical activity, your nutrition, and your smoking habits can have a major impact on your heart health," Mosca says.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Stephanie Duguid is Dean of Academic Instruction at Co-Lin. She is also an athletic trainer and nutrition specialist and has been teaching courses related to those two areas as well as practicing what she preaches for more than twenty years.

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Dr. Reed Freeman named Moody Institute Fellow

Special to Wesson News

Co-Lin Engineering and Science Instructor Dr. Reed Freeman of Georgetown has been named a 2021 Moody Institute Fellow for a proposal selected among a competitive pool of applicants.

He will receive an award of \$1,000 to fund his enrollment in university-level courses in the field of environmental and natural hazards associated with Earth's surface geology, water resources, and atmosphere.

Dr. Freeman believes expanding his knowledge of these topics will greatly benefit students at Co-Lin.

"I have observed that student interest perks up noticeably when classroom discussions include environmental and/or natural hazards," said Dr. Freeman. "By spending more time on these topics, I am confident that student engagement and enjoyment will grow. Also, I believe that non-science major students in physical science classes will be more likely to continue to include science courses in their further education."

The Moody Institute Trust Fund (MITF) was established in 1990 in



Special to Wesson News

Dr. Reed Freeman

honor of Dr. George V. Moody, the first Executive Director of the State Board for Community and Junior Colleges (SBCJC). The purpose of the Moody Institute is to provide funds for enrichment experiences for faculty members employed in Mississippi's public community and junior colleges.

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Artist of the Month

Brookhaven Regional Arts Guild (BRAG) members have chosen Gayle Quick as their September Artist of the Month for *Stairway to Knowledge*. Each month, BRAG members submit artwork based on which their fellow members choose the Artist of the Month. Member voting is on the 27th of each month from 8 a.m.- 10 p.m., and BRAG announces the chosen artists on the 28th of each month. BRAG is an offshoot of Brookhaven Trust organized in the early 1990s to save and restore Mary Jane Lampton Auditorium now part of the Mississippi School of the Arts on the former historic Whitworth College Campus. The Trust's Fine Arts Committee, tasked to preserve the arts in Brookhaven and help revitalize its arts community through exhibitions, art talks and competitions, evolved into BRAG after a group of area women started meeting on a regular basis in the mid 00s to create works. BRAG first met in January 2014. Contact BRAG at 813 Highway 51 N, Brookhaven, MS 39601-2079 or visit BRAGarts.com.

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Ornamental peppers for holiday decorating

By Guest Columnist Gary R. Bachman

An idea I've been playing with is growing some ornamental peppers indoors during the winter and using them in Christmas and holiday season décor.

This was one of those wild and crazy ideas -- and maybe has a touch of horticultural heresy -- because everyone knows that poinsettias are the end-all, be-all holiday plant forevermore. But still the idea stuck with me, and I'm so glad it did.

Slowly over the years, garden centers and floral designers have been adding ornamental peppers into their holiday creations. In fact, the Chili Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University has developed an entire series of ornamental peppers to celebrate the holidays, from NuMex New Year's Day to NuMex Christmas.

What I like about using ornamental peppers as holiday plants is the fact that the plants continue to produce multicolored fruit over most of the winter. Most of the ornamental peppers grown for the holidays stay small and are well mannered.

A couple of my landscape favorites are perfect for holiday use.

Chilly Chili seems to explode in a dramatic, colorful demonstration. This 2002 All-America Selections winner holds the fruit above the foliage. Fruit starts as yellow-green and transitions to a bright orange and brilliant red.

Chilly Chili is a great choice for container planting, as the plants reach just one foot tall and wide. These peppers are not hot and are probably the safest to grow around curious children.



Special to Wesson News

A unique decorating idea.

The ornamental pepper variety Sangria holds its slender fruit pointing upward boastfully as if getting ready for a party. This pretty ornamental pepper bears fruit in almost unbelievable numbers so that they resemble confetti. Young Sangria peppers emerge greenish yellow and then march through a wonderful parade of colors from orange, lilac, purple and finally on to a glorious crimson red. Unlike Chilly Chili, Sangria peppers are hot, hot, hot!

Growing ornamental peppers for the holidays is really easy. Find a bright window where the plant can receive about six hours of sunlight a day. Temperature-

wise, if you're comfortable, the plants will be happy. To be more specific, this means daytime temperatures in the low 70s and a little cooler at night to the mid-60s. Temperatures in this range will help encourage and prolong the flowering cycle and production of the colorful fruit.

As with all indoor plants, correct watering is important. Keep the potting mix consistently moist, not waterlogged, as this condition leads to root rot issues that cause the flowers drop off.

Over the past couple of weeks, I've already seen nice selections of ornamental peppers produced for the holidays at local garden

centers. Consider getting one or two to complement your poinsettias.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Dr. Gary Bachman is an Extension and research professor of horticulture at the Mississippi State University Coastal Research and Extension Center in Biloxi. He is also the host of the popular Southern Gardening television and radio programs. Contact him at southerngardening@msstate.edu. Locate Southern Gardening products online at <http://extension.msstate.edu/shows/southern-gardening>.

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Haas Foundation helps Co-Lin students

By Guest Columnist Gary R. Bachman

Co-Lin's Precision Machining Technology program for the fourth time has received a Gene Haas Foundation grant.

The \$8,000 grant will help support Co-Lin precision machining students with scholarships. Grant funds are meant to promote careers in manufacturing and machining and help train students to become skilled machinists.

"The scholarship funds we receive from the Gene Haas Foundation mean so much to our students and our program," says Program Coordinator Bo Johnson. "They help relieve some of the financial burdens on our students to allow them to focus on honing their craft and preparing for the workforce. We are grateful for our continued partnership with Haas."

The Gene Haas Foundation donates millions of dollars every year to manufacturing education



Special to Wesson News

Co-Lin's Precision Machining Technology program received an \$8,000 grant from the Gene Haas Foundation. Pictured (left to right) are Angela Furr, Executive Director of the Co-Lin Foundation & Alumni Relations; Bo Johnson, Precision Machining Program Coordinator; Brent Duguid, Dean of Career, Technical, and Workforce Education.

and the community. In 2020, the Gene Haas Foundation provided more than \$17 million in grants, bringing the total since inception to more than to \$100 million.

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Co-Lin launches construction academy

Special to Wesson News

The groundwork has been laid and dates set for the first of many foundational construction skill training sessions of the new Co-Lin Workforce Construction Academy. The initial offerings are Basic Plumbing and Concrete Masonry and are being offered this month.

The Academy is designed to be available throughout the Co-Lin district on rotation. While classes will begin on the Wesson Campus, individuals closer to the Natchez Campus or the Simpson County Center will also have access to learning these valued career skills.

“One of our primary goals at Co-Lin is to provide skills training that meets the needs of our local business and industry,” says Co-Lin President Dr. Jane Hulon Sims. “As the need for plumbers and brick masons continues to rise, we hope to answer the call for skilled



Special to Wesson News

workers with the announcement our new Basic Construction Academy.”

It’s no secret that the demand for skilled trade workers is outpacing the supply here in Mississippi, specifically, when it comes to construction skills, and Co-Lin is targeting this shortage through a recent grant awarded by the Mississippi Department of Employment Securities through the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Governor’s Reserve funds. As the sub-recipient, the

college is receiving \$180,000 and is planning a multifaceted, construction skills focused training academy. This first year will include three courses in foundational plumbing, concrete masonry, and brick masonry. Future courses such as carpentry, construction framing, and roofing are on the drawing board, as well as, secondary level plumbing classes.

The start of the Co-Lin Construction Academy Basic Plumbing was November 1. Classes are meeting Monday

through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. for 16 weeks. The Concrete Masonry session started November 4 and is meeting Thursdays from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. for 16 weeks. Tuition is \$100. Upon successful completion, participants will be skilled for an apprenticeship with an experienced tradesman. Additionally, students will earn an OSHA Construction card and a CPR/First Aid certification.

Participants in the program must be 18 years of age or older, achieve a minimum of Bronze level on the ACT WorkKeys Assessment, and submit a valid background check and negative drug screen. College credit is not available for these programs. Application packets may be downloaded and printed from the Co-Lin website (www.colin.edu/constructionacademy) or picked up at the Thames Conference Center on the Wesson Campus. Visit careertraining@colin.edu for information.

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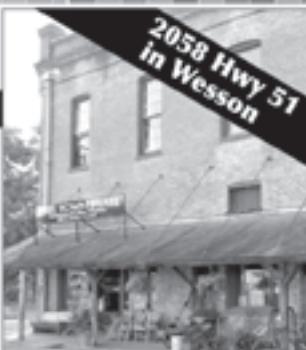
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Grants help students complete degrees

Special to Wesson News

Students who left college at least two years ago without a degree can apply for a grant to help overcome financial barriers that may keep them from returning to college to complete the requirements for their degrees.

The assistance is available at any of Mississippi's public universities or community colleges, including Co-Lin, under the Mississippi Complete 2 Complete (C2C) program funded by W.K. Kellogg Foundation through \$1.3 million it has awarded to the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL).

C2C Tuition Assistance Grants provide one-on-one support for adult learners who have earned college credits, but not a degree, and enable them to turn their deferred dreams of earning a degree into reality.

Qualifying returning students receive a \$1,000 grant that can be renewed every semester. The award helps pay for any coursework needed to graduate and can help repay prior debt to allow students the opportunity to return and graduate.

There are more than 200,000 prior students that qualify for the Complete 2 Compete program. Since May, the C2C program has reached out to former students through postcards as well as internet and social media ads. Over the summer, C2C Coaches processed more than 2,700 applications and helped at least 620 former students enroll in one of Mississippi's 15 community colleges, eight universities, and medical center. In just four months, an additional 208 returning students were added to the already 2,400 who have graduated since the program launched in 2017.

While thousands have earned enough credits for a degree, even more are closer than they think. Additional information on C2C can be accessed at www.msc2c.org or by calling 833-222-4338.



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Wesson Garden Club's Butterbeans meet



Special to Wesson News

Butterbeans, Wesson Garden Club's youth group, started its new year celebrating the fall season. The group of third-to sixth-graders met on the grounds of the Old School, painting pumpkins and listening to stories. The purpose of the club was explained to the members: learning about nature, preserving natural resources, beautifying the surroundings and being productive members of the community. The club members are active partners with Wesson Garden Club members in beautifying Wesson. The club is planning a nature scavenger hunt and to help improve the grounds of the Old School.

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