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Center for Violence Prevention in its 36th year providing victim assistance - Page 9
101-year-old Mary Alice Hydrick keeps a busy schedule in Rankin County - Page 13

SWRANKIN NEWS

Vol. 11, No. 01 | January 2026

Pearl News

THE RICHLAND NEWS

THE FLORENCE NEWS

HCC graduates 900; Grandmother says it's never too late to get an education

Special to The Pearl News

Skylar Johnson was the only female in her commercial aviation cohort at Hinds Community College (HCC). The 19-year-old Brandon native says she loved her student experience at Hinds, but sometimes people not connected to the school would make unkind remarks about her pursuit to become a pilot.

To encourage Johnson, her grandmother often wrote the words, "I can," or "Psalms 3:14" on the inside of Johnson's hand. The Bible passage refers to the lament of David fleeing Absalom, expressing distress over foes but finding hope in a higher power.

"It would be just for her to look at in class if she needed it to give her strength. No one else could see it," Grandmother Donna Chapman of Byrum said.

Johnson joined nine hundred Hinds students earning nearly thirteen hundred credentials during four graduation ceremonies held December 10 and

December 11 at the Muse Center. She graduated magna cum laude and will pursue a bachelor's degree in aviation business science and management at Middle Georgia State University while accruing enough hours to obtain her pilot's license.

Among the entire class, four hundred sixty-six students graduated with honors.

Also graduating in December - the ceremony for students with last names beginning H-O - was 56-year-old Catrina Kitchens of Pearl. A licensed hair stylist for 33 years, she decided to return to school to pursue her passion of working with children. She had stopped taking college courses when she had children.

"It's been in the making for years," the mother of four and grandmother of six, ages 2-13, said. "I just never did it. I want to set an example to my grandkids that it is never too late to go after something."

Kitchens plans to obtain a bachelor's degree in early childhood education at Jackson State University and open a daycare center.



Special to The Pearl News

Catrina Kitchens of Pearl, a 56-year-old licensed hair stylist for 33 years, decided to return to school to pursue her passion of working with children. She said she wants to set an example for her grandkids that it is never too late to go after something. Kitchens plans to obtain a bachelor's degree in early childhood education at Jackson State University and open a daycare center.

Jackson State University and open a daycare center.

Honors student Chloe King, 19, of Terry, offered remarks on behalf of her classmates during the ceremony. After graduation, King plans to attend nursing school and continue her education to become an OB/GYN.

"Even when it was hard, we didn't give up," King said. "Some of us came to be the first in our families to graduate. Some of us came to start over. Some of us came chasing a calling. But all of us came because we believed, somewhere deep inside, that we could become more than who we were. And we did."

With six campuses in central Mississippi, Hinds Community College is a comprehensive institution offering quality, affordable educational opportunities with academic programs of study leading to seamless university transfer and career and technical programs teaching job-ready skills.

The 7th Annual Krewe de Roux Festival set for February

Special to The Pearl News

Central Mississippi's Largest Mardi Gras Festival will be held February 13-14, 2026, in downtown Brandon and at the Brandon Amphitheater.

Sponsored by the Rankin Chamber and the City of Brandon, all of Rankin County gets involved for a weekend full of parades, live music, food and fun.

The Parade and Block Party, where colorful floats, beads, and music fill the streets, will be held in Historic Downtown Brandon on Friday, February 13, from 6:30 to 10 p.m. After the parade of floats, there will be a free public concert by The Mustache Band on the Big Stage on Dining Street, drawing a crowd of all ages. The Band will bring their high-energy country hits to the big stage after the parade.

Partygoers can purchase a VIP ticket that covers access into the Rankin Chambers' VIP tent, where there will be seating, heaters, cocktails/beer, food and a view of the show. Access



Let the good times roll at the 7th Annual Krewe de Roux Festival and Gumbo Cook-Off on February 13-14 for a weekend filled with flavor, fun and festivities.

will be exclusive to VIP guests and corporate sponsors only. For more information, contact the Rankin Chamber at 601-825-2268.

Then, on Saturday, February 14, the Gumbo Cook-Off will be held at the Brandon Amphitheater from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m. Approximately sixty teams will provide sample-size gumbo in hopes of winning prizes like "Best Gumbo" and "Fan Favorite." This will be a family-friendly environment, with entertainment and activities for all ages.

Gumbo Cook-Off tickets are now on sale. Ticket prices will increase at the door, so interested attendees are encouraged to grab a ticket early and "Let the good times roll!" Adult tickets are \$20+ fees, pre-sale, and \$25 at the door, and child tickets for ages ten and under are \$10 pre-sale and \$15 at the door. Tickets can be purchased with cash or all major credit cards. For more information, registration for the parade and events, or to purchase tickets, visit RankinChamber.com.

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Justin Brown of RUES named RCSD 2025 New Teacher of the Year

By Susie A. Wolfe

In only his second year of teaching fifth- and sixth-grade Special Education at Richland Upper Elementary (RUE), Justin Brown has been named the Rankin County School District (RCSD)'s New Teacher of the Year.

Brown said he enjoys building relationships with students. He works with sixteen students and five teachers in regular classrooms and finds new ways to help them learn.

Originally from Shannon, Mississippi, Brown came to the metro area after receiving a Hinds Community College scholarship. He subsequently earned a bachelor's degree from Walden University and a master's degree from Mississippi State University in early childhood education while working as an assistant manager at Burger King in Brandon and as a teacher's assistant at Northwest Rankin Elementary in Flowood.

"Justin is a strong role model," said RUE Principal Lindsay Starbuck. "It is good for the children to see a male with a strong work ethic like Justin has. Many families don't have that at home. Every day, he helps staff and students do what is needed."

"Out of sixteen elementary schools in our school district," said RUE Assistant Principal Madalyn Robinson, "he is tops in my book."



Special to The Richland News

Justin Brown, a second-year teacher at Richland Upper Elementary, was named RCSD New Teacher of the Year.

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Photos special to The Richland News



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SCES Principal Gunn named RCSD 2025 Administrator of the Year

By Susie A. Wolfe

Steen's Creek Elementary School (SCES) Principal Catie Gunn has been named the Rankin County School District (RCSD) 2025 Administrator of the Year. This is in her twelfth year in that position that teaches Pre-K to second grade in Florence.

"This recognition is truly an honor and one I share with our teachers, staff, students and families. Sustained success in a school is never the work of one person—it reflects a collective commitment to doing what is best for students every day."

"We are proud of the welcoming, family-oriented atmosphere at Steen's Creek. Our Eagle families are deeply involved and supportive, and that partnership plays a key role in student success. We continue to build on that culture each year, because when families feel connected, students thrive."

Originally from Cleveland, Mississippi, Gunn earned her Bachelor of Science in elementary education from the University of Southern Mississippi,

her Master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Delta State University and later completed her Specialist degree in educational leadership at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Gunn said, "Each step of my education has strengthened my instructional lens and shaped how I approach school leadership."

She started her teaching career at McEvans Elementary in the Shaw School District before moving to Rankin County. She started in Rankin County as a classroom teacher at Pisgah Elementary and Florence Elementary, later serving as the District Elementary Curriculum Specialist and as Assistant Principal at Puckett Attendance Center.

Gunn said that at Steen's Creek Elementary School (SCES), they have built a strong culture of learning, with students at the center of everything they do. Reading proficiency and academic growth are their highest priorities. According to data from the Mississippi Department of Education, Steen's

Creek Elementary has earned "A" accountability ratings in recent years, with reading proficiency levels that significantly exceed state averages. In the most recent accountability cycle, approximately eighty-five percent of the school's students met or exceeded the state standard in reading, and the school's growth data shows that students are consistently making academic progress year over year.

"Our intentional focus on high-quality literacy instruction has positively impacted overall achievement," said Gunn. "In addition to strong reading proficiency, state accountability data reflect high growth rates across grade levels, which tells us students are not only performing well but continuing to grow. That sustained growth is something we are very proud of and work hard to maintain."

Gunn has been married to Trey Gunn for eighteen years. He currently serves as Mayor of Florence. They have two daughters, Taylor Grace, who is sixteen, and Livi, who is ten.



Special to The Florence News

Steen's Creek Elementary School Principal Catie Gunn has been named the Rankin County School District Administrator of the Year. She is in her twelfth year in that position. She started in Rankin County as a classroom teacher at Pisgah Elementary and Florence Elementary, later serving as the District Elementary Curriculum Specialist and as Assistant Principal at Puckett Attendance Center.

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Legislative Update: From home to the Capitol



By Senator Brian Rhodes, State Senator, Mississippi District 36

As the Mississippi Legislature prepares to convene for a new session, I want to take a moment to share what I'm watching closely and what I hope we can accomplish in the months ahead.

Serving our district is an honor I don't take lightly. Each session brings new challenges, but the responsibility remains the same: to be a good steward of taxpayer dollars, to advocate for our local communities, and to make decisions that strengthen Mississippi not just for today, but for the next generation.

One area in which I hope to see meaningful progress is teacher pay. Our teachers are on the front lines every day shaping young minds, often with limited resources and growing expectations. While no single raise solves every challenge in education, competitive and consistent teacher pay is a clear way to show respect for the work they do and to help Mississippi retain quality educators in our classrooms.

Another issue that deserves serious, long-term attention is the Public Employees' Retirement System (PERS). For years, PERS has faced structural challenges that cannot be

solved with short-term fixes or political slogans. I believe it's time to have honest conversations about a multi-year cash infusion that helps stabilize the system and protects the promises made to teachers, law enforcement officers and other public servants. Kicking the can down the road only makes the problem harder — and more expensive — to solve.

I will also continue advocating for local projects that directly affect our quality of life. Roads, bridges, water systems and economic development efforts may not always make headlines, but they matter deeply to the people who live here. These projects keep our communities safe, support local jobs, and help rural Mississippi compete for future growth.

One of the most rewarding parts of this job has been constituent service. Whether it's helping someone navigate a state agency, connecting a family to the right people who can assist them, or simply listening and pointing



folks in the right direction, I've genuinely enjoyed that side of public service. Government can feel complicated and distant at times, and I believe part of my responsibility is helping make it more accessible and responsive for the people I serve.

Throughout the session, I'll continue to approach the work with the same principles that guide me at home: fiscal responsibility, respect for the rule of law, and a belief that government works best when it stays focused on its proper role. My faith also remains central to how I view public service. Scripture reminds us that leadership is about stewardship, humility and service — values that matter just as much in the Capitol as they do in everyday life.

The legislative process isn't perfect, and not every good idea becomes law. But I remain committed to listening, working with colleagues on both sides of the aisle, and keeping the people of our district front and center as decisions are made.

As always, I'm grateful for the opportunity to serve and for the trust you've placed in me. I look forward to keeping you informed as the session moves forward and to continuing the work of building a stronger Mississippi together.

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McLaurin HS counseling program honored as the Middle School Counseling Program of the Year

Special to SW Rankin News

McLaurin High School's counseling program was honored as the Middle School Counseling Program of the Year by the Mississippi Counseling Association (MCA) in 2025, highlighting its innovative strategies for student development.

The Rankin County School District (RCSD) also recognized these programs at its December Board of Directors Meeting. The Elementary School Counseling Program of the Year was awarded to Melissa Harrist and Melissa Frazier of McLaurin Elementary; Middle School Counseling Program of the Year was presented to Mia McDonald of McLaurin High; Secondary School Counseling Program of the Year was awarded to Jennifer Green of Puckett High; and Clinical Mental Health Counselor of the Year was given to Dr. Lashaunda Smith of McLaurin High School.

McLaurin High offers a comprehensive counseling program focused on academic, career, and personal-social development, utilizing Individual Success Plans (ISPs) for student goal setting, according to the RCSD website.



Special to SW Rankin News

RCSD celebrated Excellence in School Counseling during its December Board Meeting. They recognized outstanding counseling programs and professionals for 2025, honored by the Mississippi Counseling Association.

The program also provides support for college readiness, career exploration, mental health, and resources for military families, earning recognition as a top middle school program for its forward-thinking approach.

District officials say the keys to success of the RCSD programs include the Individual Success Plan (ISP). It is a

personalized, collaborative plan developed with counselors, teachers and parents to set and achieve post-high school goals.

Other key programs include those for mental health and well-being, bullying prevention, trauma support, and resources like the "Say Something" program for student safety.

Pearl Singers Choir excels at All-State Honor Choir in November

Special to SW Rankin News

The Pearl High School (PHS) Men's Glee Choir, directed by Sarah Little, delivered a featured performance at the 2025 MMEA/MS-ACDA State Conference on November 20, 2025. This performance, held at Main Street Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, was a major milestone for the Pearl Singers program, as it marked the first time a Mississippi high school program had both its Women's Chorus (January 2025) and Men's Glee (November 2025) selected for featured state conference slots in the same calendar year.

More than fifty students, representing Pearl Upper Elementary, Pearl Junior High and Pearl High School, also participated in the MMEA/MS-ACDA



Special to SW Rankin News

The MMEA/MS-ACDA All-State Honor Choir was held at the University of Southern Mississippi in November, where more than fifty Pearl Public School District students represented Pearl Upper Elementary, Pearl Junior High and Pearl High School. The Men's Glee Choir also performed.

All-State Honor Choir at the University of Southern Mississippi.

The PHS Men's Glee Choir also presented a featured performance at the

State Conference. The ensemble is comprised of male singers in grades nine through twelve who perform high-level TTBB (Tenor, Tenor, Bass, Bass), focusing on tone, blend and expressive ensemble singing. The ensemble has earned multiple Best-in-Class awards at the Riverland Choral Festival and is widely respected for its mature sound and stylistic refinement.

"Their performance highlighted just how hard these students and directors have worked and how much pride they bring to the Pearl Choral Program," the school posted on their Facebook page.

The choir concluded their 2025 season with a festive Madrigal Feast on December 12, featuring live Renaissance music and drama.

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Old Truths for Today
J.T. Morgan

Overcoming Difficulties

Every person, at some time in their life, is faced with some kind of difficulty. Difficulties may seem insurmountable or something small and easy to overcome. With some of us, difficulties are many and are of the nature that they don't pass away quickly. The question is not whether we shall have difficulties, but whether we shall be able to overcome them. Will we overcome them or let them overcome us? Each one of us must face the circumstances of their own life. No two of us will face exactly the same things. There are fundamental principles that will mean much to everyone as we face the issues before us.

What is your attitude toward life? Do you have the attitude of the fatalist who thinks that all things are determined by fate and there is nothing we can do in the matter. Do you let the events of life make you bitter? Are you resentful toward the unpleasant things you experience? Are you a complainer? Do you complain about your lot in life and do nothing to change it? There are some who are chronic complainers. Are you a defeatist? Some recognize that there may be a solution to their difficulties, but they cannot find it and if they did know how to overcome them would still feel defeated. Others attribute all misfortune to sin. They say we bring all our difficulties upon ourselves by our own evil ways. (John.9:1-3).

Handicaps and misfortunes can be turned into blessings. Jesus used the blindness in the above passage, to show His great power and to bring glory to God. Surely we cannot read John 9 without being impressed with the greatness of the power of Christ. Nor can we fail to see the joy in the life of one who was so blessed by our Lord.

The apostle Paul had many difficulties in his life. But it was by all of these that he learned to say, "I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me." (Phil.4:13). In addition to many other things he had a "thorn in the flesh". We don't know what it was, but it troubled him and he sought the Lord three times that it might be removed. The Lord answered, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). He added, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecution, in distress for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor.12:10).

Think of Job who "was perfect and upright and one that feared God and eschewed evil" (Job.1:1). The Lord said "there is none like him in all the earth". At the request of Satan, Job was allowed to be tested and in time lost everything he had, even his own family. His wife even encouraged him to "curse God and die!" In the end God blessed Job twice as much as he had before (Job.42:10).

James says, "count it all joy when you fall into divers temptations; knowing this that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing". (Jas.1:2-4). Don't ever feel that God tempts you to do wrong. (Jas.1:13-14). Keep in mind Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 10:13. God will provide the way to overcome the temptations that come your way and will make you stronger, if you let Him. "Draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you" (Jas.4:8).

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Senior Spotlight: Robert Ingle



By Guest Columnist Shea Thames,
Director, Richland Senior Center

Mr. Robert Ingle
is a gem!

Mr. Ingle and I
had already bonded
over crafting
things as I learned
of his profession.

So, I coordinat-
ed so he could use his skills to
restore an antique podium for
the Richland Senior Center. It
would be used by the Exchange
Club at their regular meetings in
the Center on the first and third
Tuesday of each month.

Randall Walters, the Richland
Exchange Club president and a
Richland policeman, is happy
with the restoration. So, instead
of this multi-decade piece just
sitting there, it's now been re-
stored (thanks to Mr. Ingle!), and
the Exchange Club will go back
to using it.

Mr. Ingle has become quite
fond of projects with both Amy and me these last few months.

He is a regular Senior Center attendee, most often for our
Men's Breakfast and Study and is a pillar in both the community
of Richland and the community of The Richland Senior
Center. He is married to Shirley Ingle, and she is active in
our weekly SeniorCise Program and Women's Brunch Study.
They are both a blessing!



Special to SW Rankin News

Robert Ingle used his skills to restore the antique podium (shown) for the Richland Senior Center. It will be used by the Richland Exchange Club at their regular meetings.

Carson Rimes named Stephen D. Lee Scholar at Mississippi State



Special to SW Rankin News

Carson Rimes of Florence was recognized as a Stephen D. Lee Scholar during Mississippi State University's fall 2025 commencement exercises. Rimes is among twenty-six students who attained this honor among about 1,500 fall graduates. Stephen D. Lee Scholars have achieved a cumulative 4.0 GPA during their college careers. Rimes, who studied Biochemistry, earned a Bachelor of Science from MSU's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Emily Brewer named Pearl Public School District Teacher of the Year



Special to SW Rankin News

Emily Brewer, a fourth-grade teacher at Pearl Upper Elementary (PUE) in the Pearl Public School District (PPSD), was recently named the 2025-26 District Teacher of the Year. A sixteen-year teaching veteran, Brewer will represent Pearl in the state Teacher of the Year program. Brewer holds degrees from Mississippi State and Mississippi College. Brewer is shown in her PUE class.

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Pearl News

THE NEWS
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THE FLORENCE NEWS

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Michel family has four Eagle Scouts

By Susie A. Wolfe

Scout Troop 85 and Troop 108 have four Michel family members who are Eagle Scouts. The youngest, Kamdan, was awarded his honor on December 2, 2025. They are the children of Joey and Stacy Michel of Florence.

“Being an Eagle Scout is just part of our family life,” said Stacy Michel, who served as a scoutmaster during her kids’ school years. “The communication skills they were taught are priceless, especially for our son with dyslexia. The confidence and leadership from scouts has positively impacted each of my sons’ lives.”

All are graduates of Florence High School (FHS). The oldest at 25, Kevin, who received scholarships at Hinds Community College and the University of Mississippi, now works at the University of South Carolina Student Success Center. He handles teacher orientation and over 90 tutors for undergraduates.

Kyle, 24, works at Decal Guys in Richland. He is interested in mechanics and automotives.

Kolby, 18, is an FHS senior playing varsity soccer, which he plans to continue at a community college. Kamdan, an FHS junior, is on the bowling team, planning to study automotive and electrical in a trade program.

According to Jason Rideout, assistant scoutmaster for Troop 85 in Florence,



Special to SW Rankin News

The four Michel sons of Florence are all Eagle Scouts. Pictured (l to r) front row, are: Kamdan, 17, and Kolby, 18; and back row: Kyle, 24, and Kevin, 25.

“Scouts help keep young people on track to become great leaders in the community and the state. We promote God and country, community service, team building, communication and confidence.”

To become an Eagle Scout, scouts must achieve twenty-one Merit Badges, fifteen camping nights, forty to sixty hours of community service, and complete an Eagle Scout project. Examples of recent projects include updating the Marvin Methodist hiking trail and adding six benches to the FHS tennis court area, according to Rideout.

Pearl High School named Fall 2025 MHSAA eSports State Champions

CHAMPIONS



Special to SW Rankin News

Led by coaches Justin Gough and Coach Jostes, the PHS eSports team grew significantly from nine to fifty students by 2023, with inclusive opportunities for all students. They consistently compete and win championships in the MHSAA eSports leagues for games like Rocket League, Smash Bros., and Marvel Rivals.

Special to SW Rankin News

The Pearl High School (PHS) eSports team was named 2025 Fall Marvel Rivals champions in the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) eSports State Championship at the University of Southern Mississippi on December 9.

The PHS successful and growing eSports program also won the 2024 MHSAA Rocket League Championship.

The team grew significantly from

nine to fifty students by 2023, with inclusive opportunities for all students. They consistently compete and win championships in the MHSAA eSports leagues for games like Rocket League, Smash Bros., and Marvel Rivals, featuring multiple teams often securing #1 seeds.

The program offers various games, has varsity and JV levels, and provides students with competitive play through the PlayVS platform within the MHSAA framework.



Lisa & Stanley Hayman
Owners



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FMS names November and December Eagles of the Month

Photos special to SW Rankin News



The FMS November Students of the Month were recently honored. Pictured (l to r) are FMS Principal Brock Sistrunk, FMS Assistant Principal Dr. Kelsey Williams, Sixth Grade Student of the Month Rorie Jane Davis, Seventh Grade Student of the Month Liam Nolen, Eighth Grade Student of the Month Alyssa Houseton, and FMS Assistant Principal Tyler Walters. The award is sponsored by Tanner Wilson of Farm Bureau Insurance.



The FMS November Teacher of the Month was Jerry Barlow. Pictured (l to r) are FMS Principal Brock Sistrunk, Teacher of the Month Jerry Barlow, Teacher/Staff Recognition Sponsor Representative Lance Varner, FMS Assistant Principal Dr. Kelsey Williams and FMS Assistant Principal Tyler Walters.



The FMS December Students of the Month were recently honored. Pictured (l to r) are FMS Principal Brock Sistrunk, FMS Assistant Principal Dr. Kelsey Williams, Sixth Grade Student of the Month Brady Travelstead, Seventh Grade Student of the Month Lyric White, Eighth Grade Student of the Month Makenzie Charfauros and FMS Assistant Principal Tyler Walters.



The FMS December Teacher of the Month was Lauren McCoy. Pictured (l to r) are FMS Principal Brock Sistrunk, Teacher of the Month Lauren McCoy, Teacher/Staff Recognition Sponsor Representative Lance Varner, FMS Assistant Principal Dr. Kelsey Williams and FMS Assistant Principal Tyler Walters.



The FMS Staff Member of the Quarter was Brian Foster. Pictured (l to r) are FMS Principal Brock Sistrunk, Staff Member of the Quarter Brian Foster, Teacher/Staff Recognition Sponsor Representative Lance Varner, FMS Assistant Principal Dr. Kelsey Williams and FMS Assistant Principal Tyler Walters.

November/December Obituaries

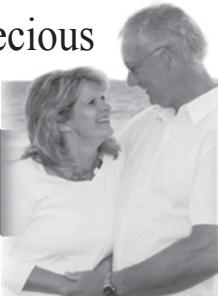
NAME	AGE	CITY	DOD	FUNERAL HOME
Helen Wilson Porter	90y	Richland, MS	11/01/2025	Chancellor FH
Andrew Ray Gibson	67y	Jackson, MS	11/01/2025	Chancellor FH
William Kennedy "Ken" Shaw II	76y	Gore Springs, MS	11/05/2025	Chancellor FH
Jeffrey "Jeff" Scott Hudson	67y	Richland, MS	11/06/2025	Chancellor FH
Janet Dorene Howerton	80y	Florence, MS	11/06/2025	Chancellor FH
Robert Joe Pierce	70y	Harrisville, MS	11/09/2025	Chancellor FH
Janet Null George	89y	Florence, MS	11/11/2025	Chancellor FH
James Eckford Clark	84y	Pearl, MS	11/12/2025	Chancellor FH
Jamee Vance Franklin	50y	Jackson, MS	11/06/2025	Chancellor FH
Joseph Daniel Parker	66y	Florence, MS	11/18/2025	Chancellor FH
Charles "Bud" Henry Burkley, Jr.	39y	Lucedale, MS	11/19/2025	Chancellor FH
Richard Lawrence Middleton	84y	Richland, MS	11/27/2025	Chancellor FH
Joesph Andrew "Andy" Jackson, Jr.	71y	Florence, MS	11/29/2025	Chancellor FH
Sylvia Stevens Clark	79y	Brandon, MS	11/28/2025	Chancellor FH
Stanley Keith Herrington	53y	Florence, MS	12/03/2025	Chancellor FH
Pauline Gardner Moak	99y	Richland, MS	12/13/2025	Chancellor FH
Collin Avery Knight	19y	Richland, MS	12/14/2025	Chancellor FH
Angela Flanagan Richardson	65y	Houma, LA	12/17/2025	Chancellor FH
Wayne "Buddy" Kindrex	76y	Florence, MS	12/27/2025	Chancellor FH
Bertha Elizabeth "Mickey" Loper	85y	Richland, MS	12/29/2025	Chancellor FH

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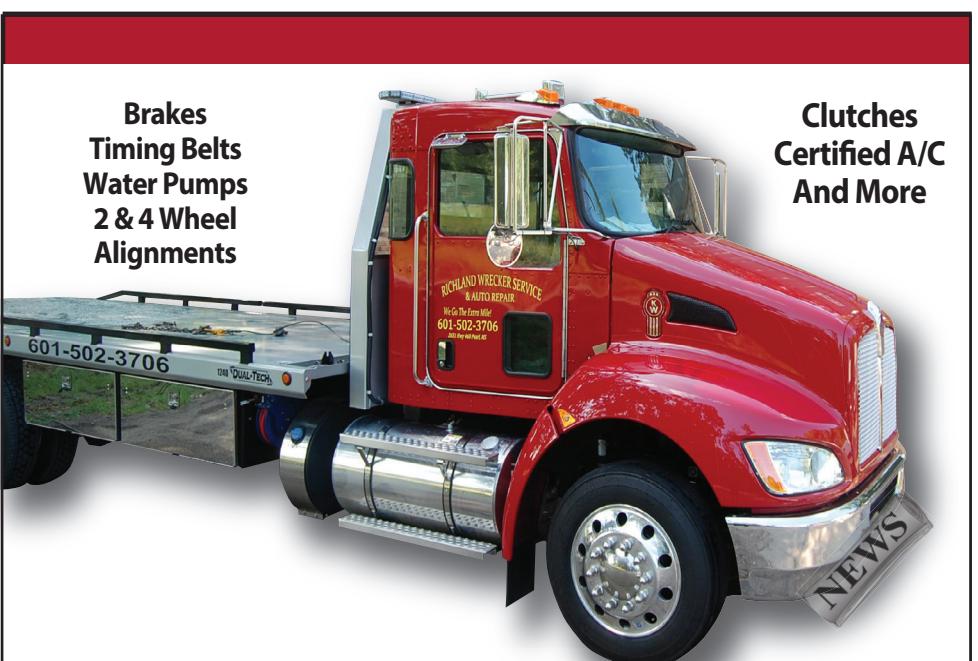
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Center for Violence Prevention in its 36th year providing victim assistance

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Sandy Middleton serves as the director for The Center for Violence Prevention in Pearl.

justice to victims, outreach efforts target underserved victims in rural communities, and specialized human trafficking programs are offered.

CVP operates two shelters: the Beacon, for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, and the Tower, for victims of human trafficking. Support services include case management, therapy, advocacy, crisis intervention and forensic medical services through The Bridge Forensic Clinic. CVP also operates a 24-hour crisis hotline and offers online/digital access to services. While CVP works to assist all victims, special programming and outreach efforts target underserved victims in rural communities.

CVP's Mississippi Victim Assistance Program provides essential trauma-informed and evidence-based services to victims of interpersonal violence, promoting safety and healing for each survivor. As a leading victim services agency in Mississippi, CVP seeks to advance the identification and response to victims while providing services that utilize best practices and trauma-informed approaches.

CVP facilitates integrated wraparound services including shelter, housing assistance, therapy, medical care, and more. Legal services are available to victims of human trafficking. In 2024, CVP assisted more than 1,300 individuals, answered more than 1,313 crisis calls, and provided 5,357 nights of services through its two shelters and transitional housing programs. Additionally, CVP collaborated with law enforcement agencies to assist 76 domestic violence victims identified through the Lethality Assessment Protocol (LAP), responded to partnered hospitals to conduct 77 forensic medical sexual assault exams, assisted 136 victims of sexual assault, and worked with Mississippi Child Protective Services (CPS) to screen and assist more

than 300 children from human trafficking tips.

Another component of the Mississippi Victims Assistance Program is the sexual assault response through the CVP's Bridge Forensic Medical Clinic. CVP has memoranda of understanding with six Jackson metro-area hospitals plus the National Guard to provide a sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE) and advocate response when victims of sexual assault present to emergency rooms. While these hospitals have this additional resource provided by CVP, hospitals around the state are not as fortunate.

In 2024, Mississippi passed House Bill 928, which requires hospital emergency departments to provide



medical screening, facilitate the sexual assault evidence collection kit and treat victims of sexual assault. To support hospital personnel in complying with this new state law, CVP will begin offering a forensic sexual assault evidence collection skills lab for qualified registered nurses and medical providers. The lab will provide an opportunity to learn about trauma-informed best practices using national standards and Mississippi's sexual assault evidence collection kit. Additionally, students will practice collecting evidence to better prepare them and overcome some of the barriers that cause hospitals to turn away victims. The skills lab will multiply the number of medical professionals available to assist victims, advancing care and justice for those who experience sexual assault.

Operating Mississippi's first specialized human trafficking program, CVP has spent the last decade collecting information and data, building partnerships to respond to victims, and developing an evidence-based trauma-informed recovery program. Officials say the scope of services provided by CVP and proposed in this project reflect the statistical and anecdotal data collected throughout this time.

Mississippi's rapid assessment team's coordinated response began in August of 2020 after House Bill 1559 was enacted. As a part of that team, CVP tracks

the number, age, and county for suspected victims listed in tips received from Child Protective Services (CPS). The data regarding tips does not include tips reported for suspected victims without any identifying information.

2022	325+ children	57 counties
2023	302+ children	58 counties
2024	278+ children	50 counties
2025 (to date)	164+ children	49 counties

While the reports show a decrease, CVP notes an increase in substantiated tips throughout the state, which may be attributed to the increase in human trafficking knowledge for trained professionals. Subsequently, as of press time, the Tower rapid response advocates reported that support services were provided to 60 children in 2025, compared to 39 in all of 2021.

During the first eight months of 2025, CVP's rapid response team responded to 164 suspected victims of human trafficking and assisted 99 confirmed victims of sex and labor trafficking through outreach services. CVP also provided residential services at the Tower to 21 victims for nearly 1,200 bed nights. Additionally, CVP has provided more than 197 services for victims of human trafficking with substance use disorder, as well as advocacy and emotional support to 8 minor victims of labor trafficking. More than 8,000 support services such as crisis intervention, legal advocacy, therapy, and case management were noted as provided to victims in 2025, as of press time.

CVP also continues to work systemically to address the crimes of interpersonal violence and the importance of providing justice to victims. For example, during this past legislative session, CVP worked to require hospitals to provide forensic exams for rape victims, after CVP had continued to receive multiple reports from all over the state of rape victims being turned away from emergency rooms. Hospitals were simply refusing to provide medical screening and testing for victims, as well as not offering to gather forensics. Legislation signed into law effective July 1, 2025, mandates hospitals to provide this care.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first article in a series on The Center for Violence Prevention's services and how its work is making a difference in the state and nation. In upcoming coverage, SW Rankin News will look in-depth at its services and what the community can do to help.

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Florence's Boy Scout Troop 85 graduates ten Eagle Scouts in 2025

By Susie A. Wolfe

"It is an amazing achievement for Florence's Troop 85 to have ten Eagles in one year!" said Assistant Scoutmaster Jason Rideout, whose son, Peyton, achieved the honor in March.

The ten 2025 Troop 85 Eagle Scouts include Maddie Macoy, Peyton Rideout, Luke Germany, and William McGuire, who achieved the rank in March; Jackson Malone, who achieved the rank in April; Kolby Michel, who achieved the rank in May; Davis Eaton and Colson Spencer, who achieved the rank in October; Cade Sillis, who achieved the rank in November; and Kamden Michel, who achieved the rank in December.

To achieve the Eagle Scout honor, scouts must complete twenty-one merit badges, fifteen camping nights, and 40-60 hours of community service.

According to Rideout, "It [scouting] keeps the young people on track to become great leaders in the community and the state."

The scout group, led by Scoutmaster Ricky Dukes, is working on a spreadsheet to document all of the Eagles from Troop 85 since its inception in 1952 by founder Sonny May. They meet weekly on projects for team building, merit badges and community service.

According to the mother of four Eagle scouts, Stacy Michel, "The communication skills Scouts teach have been priceless to my sons. The program has given them confidence."

If there are former Eagles in the community, please get in touch with Troop 85 to let them know that you are an Eagle Scout and what year you received it. The list currently has ninety-plus names already."

EDITOR'S NOTE: See article on four Eagle Scouts in Michel family, also in this issue, on page 5.



Special to SW Rankin News

The ten Troop 85 Scouts that achieved the Eagle honor in 2025 include (l to r), first row: Kolby Michel, Maddie Macoy, Peyton Rideout and Luke Germany; second row: Kamden Michel and Colson Spencer; and third row: Davis Eaton, Jackson Malone, Cade Sillis and William McGuire.

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Pearl lays fiber to upgrade the City's connectivity

By Susie A. Wolfe

The City of Pearl Public Works Water and Sewer Division completed an \$80,000 fiber construction project to its facility at McKay Circle in December. This included control access for all doors and gate; new 360-degree cameras covering the entire facility; interior cameras specifically monitoring expensive inventory; and a full alarm system for doors, windows, glass breaks and motion.

"This future-proofs technology delivery, inventory management, asset security and personnel management," said Pearl IT and Communications Director Frank Hutton. "By implementing cost effective software and hardware, this allows for efficiency in government."

The City of Pearl spends a considerable amount of money on network cyber security, according to Hutton. They contract with Palo Alto for their Cortex XDR network and endpoint solution



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The City of Pearl spent the end of 2025 improving the connectivity of its McKay Circle facility. This future-proofs technology delivery, inventory management, asset security, and personnel management, according to Pearl IT and Communications Director Frank Hutton.

delivering state-of-the art protection from malicious software and viruses. They run next generation firewalls, not only in their main network facility, but also deployed throughout their extend-

ed wide area network. They also maintain strict network controls for remote workers, laptops, tablets and phones. If it touches their network, it's tightly controlled, he maintained.

Hutton explained that the City does not rely on cloud delivery for critical systems but continues to host on-premise solutions through a secure internal network operations center with a hardened backup facility. These systems include the ability for the City's 911 dispatch facility to deliver critical services to citizens without interruption from an internet outage. City services including water delivery, location security, City cameras and traffic monitoring in critical areas are all handled internally by his four-person department and are not dependent on third-party delivery systems.

The City will continue their push to connect all outlying City facilities in 2026, said Hutton. These include water wells, sewer lift stations, City parks, and other remote facilities in the city. Secondly, they will be upgrading systems that are over ten years old to include older control access systems and cameras. That is ongoing as technology continues to improve.

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Tiny Miss Rankin County headed to Nationals for the second year

Special to SW Rankin News

Two-year-old McKinley Belle Nissen, daughter of Alexis and Tyler Nissen of Pearl, has been crowned Grand Supreme at the America's Best Pageants preliminary event, earning the title "Tiny Miss Rankin County" for the second year in a row.

This past year, Nissen attended Nationals and proudly earned the "Community Title Award" in her age division, an honor that reflects all she accomplished in the community for Rankin County throughout the year. She also captured several other awards like Midwest Shining Star Supreme.

She is sponsored by Tutor Family Dentistry, Auto Brokers, Against the Grain, and The Sourdough Lady, Mississippi.

Nissen will once again represent Rankin County at the national competition in Nashville, Tennessee, in September 7-11, 2026.

"We are so proud of our girl," said her parents. "She's already doing amazing things for the community, and we know she has a bright future ahead."

In the past two years, Nissen has won eleven crowns, eight sashes and five trophies. Her family says they are excited to see what she will achieve at Nationals in 2026.

To inquire if McKinley can attend an event, contact her pageant email at Mckinleybnissen@gmail.com.



Photos special to SW Rankin News

McKinley Belle Nissen, Tiny Miss Rankin County, is going to Nationals to represent Rankin County. A Pearl resident, her parents say she is always looking for things to do around the community to help out where she can.

Waters named ASA executive director

Special to SW Rankin News

The American Subcontractors Association of Mississippi (ASA of MS) recently announced that Joel Waters has been hired as their new Executive Director.

Waters is the former Executive Director of the Mississippi Concrete Association, serving from 2016 to 2025, and has been instrumental in their growth and success. Prior to 2016, Waters was Executive Director of the Big Brothers Big Sisters of MS.

Waters has also previously been an active board member of Build MS and instrumental in the growth of that organization, along with several ASA members on that Board.

Waters brings vast experience in the Mississippi Association community and has strong ties to the Subcontractor sector and knows how to operate in the Association space.

Cody Curry, 2025-2026 ASA of MS Chairman states, "ASA of MS is proud to welcome someone of Joel Waters' work history, character and work ethic as our new Executive Director, to continue the successful growth of ASA of MS well into the future."

Waters is a 1984 graduate of University of Southern Mississippi, where he was a member of the USM baseball team.

Waters and his wife Susan have been married for 43 years and reside in Madison. They have three married children and five grandchildren.



A Walk Down Christmas Lane draws Florence families

By Susie A. Wolfe

The Florence Business-2-Business (B2B) Group sponsored "A Walk Down Christmas Lane" on Earl Clark Drive in Florence on Friday, December 19, from 5 until 9 p.m. There were activities including judging the tree decorating, a coloring contest for two- to five-year-olds, and The Grinch movie under the stars. There was also music, free food and drinks, visits with Santa and photos with the Grinch.

Officials estimate that around 250 to 275 people came to the completely-free event for the Florence community, thanks to the business professionals who donated and sponsored trees. The B2B Group, organized by Brandye Renfroe, has approximately thirty members.

The tree decorating winner was South Rankin Medical. Florence Medical Clinic was second place, and Restoration Church was third. The coloring contest for two-, three-, four- and five-year-old winners received a total of one hundred dollars.



Special to SW Rankin News

Karen Forkin with the Florence B2B Group is shown at the December 16 event collecting letters for Santa. The free event was sponsored by the businesses in town who have a big heart for the community. Forkin is a small business owner of OhhMy! Gifts and Things Boutique in Florence.



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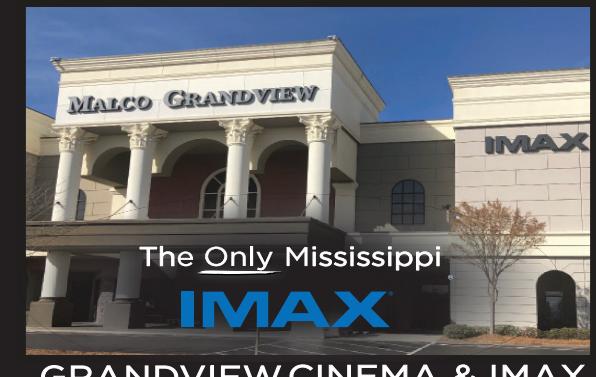
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101-year-old Mary Alice Hydrick keeps a busy schedule in Rankin County

By Susie A. Wolfe

Mary Alice Hydrick's 101st birthday celebration was held on December 9, 2025, at the Richland Senior Center with her family there supporting her.

At 101-years-old, Mary Alice Hydrick lives in the Florence house her parents bought in 1932. She graduated from Florence High School in 1942 and retired from BellSouth after forty-six years. She drives herself to senior activities in Florence, Richland and Pearl weekly.

Hydrick said, "God keeps me going. It can't be anything but God!"

Hydrick has been a member of First Baptist Church in Florence since April 20, 1941. Byron Green, Music Minister, said that she is one of the oldest members there, but not the oldest. They also have another lady that is 104 years old.

Hydrick says she is very close to her family. She has one daughter, Connie (Leonard), of Madison. There are two grandchildren, Stacy Williams (Tad) and James Roberts (Stacy), and four great grandchildren, Knox and Nash Williams, and Addi and Lani Roberts.

Hydrick describes her weekly/monthly schedule



Photo by Susie A. Wolfe

A celebration for Mary Alice Hydrick's 101st birthday was held on December 9, 2025, at the Richland Senior Center, with her family in attendance. Pictured (l to r) are: Connie Roberts, daughter; LeiAnne Gray, Pax Hospice birthday party sponsor; Hydrick; Rebecca Kincaid, Pax Hospice; Stacy Williams, granddaughter; Addi Roberts, great granddaughter; Leonard Roberts, son-in-law; Stacey Roberts, daughter-in-law; and back row: James Roberts, grandson.

like this: The first and third Mondays, she plays Five Crowns at the Richland Senior Center. The second Monday, she plays Pokeno. Tuesdays she plays cards in Richland.

The first and third Wednesdays, she plays Bunko in Florence, and the second Wednesday, she goes to the Methodist luncheon. The fourth Wednesday, she plays Bunko in Richland. Every Thursday, she works at the History Room in Florence. Every fourth Thursday, she attends the Baptist lunch in Florence. And the first Friday, she plays Bunko in Pearl.

She is the historian at the History Room for the City of Florence. In fact, it was renamed two years ago in her honor. It is now the Mary Alice Hydrick Heritage Room.

Hydrick collects and catalogues Florence news in the room every Thursday, gathering history and memorabilia from schools, churches, community groups and obituaries. Every news item - from Florence or about Florence natives - has been put in one of Hydrick's binders.

Hydrick is walking Rankin County history. If you can catch up with her, she has great stories to tell.

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BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

Edible Paper Store & Co. opens up customized baking for everyone

By Susie A. Wolfe

Mississippi's only baking supply shop able to customize edible images, toppers and food colors is located in Pearl, Mississippi. The Edible Paper Store & Co. serves as a go-to destination for anyone wanting high-quality custom toppers and custom edible images for cakes and desserts. It provides both everyday essentials and specialized supplies for creative baking for both professional bakers and home bakers looking to enhance their desserts' appearance and creativity.



Photos by Susie A. Wolfe

Kathy Reynolds at The Edible Paper Store & Co. makes cake gems like logos and bows on her printer with sugar paper and edible ink.

The Edible Paper Store & Co. is a cake decorating supply shop that offers custom edible paper prints, specialty tools, and baking supplies for home bakers, providing an alternative to buying in bulk online. It is run by a long-time resident with extensive experience in baking and creative arts.

Owner carries a wide range of products, including edible images, toppers, food colors, and silicone molds, and provides in-house printing for custom designs. The store aims to be an affordable local resource for unique decorations and professional-grade supplies, with options for in-store pickup and delivery.

"[We offer] anything that can be printed for home cottage bakers to professional bake shops," said Reynolds. "We offer items in-store that can only be pur-

chased online. Sizes for photos, logos or any design can be printed, from one inch size to fit an Oreo or strawberry to 11" X 17" for a half of a sheet cake."

Reynolds, a Mississippi University for Women (MUW) art education grad, is the only employee at present, and she consults, designs and prints images on a sugar sheet that is then able to be eaten on cakes, cupcakes, etc.



The Ball Wall offers bakers and decorators the opportunity to only buy the variety they need for a specific baking project, versus having to purchase in bulk.



Owner Kathy Reynolds can put a child's photo and name into a graphic and print on sugar paper to go on the birthday cake.



Sugar Dazed Sprinkles is the Edible Store's own brand of edible sprinkles available in-store or by mail order.

She said all of her mom's family are artists, and it runs in the family. Even one of her daughters and a 10-year-old grandson are artists. Reynolds is from Columbus, Mississippi, and still has family there. Her three daughters, Bridgette, Sydnie, and Kirstie, and her four grandchildren, Rylee, Hunter, Kyler and Waylon, live there.

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Web: EdiblePaperStore.com

Her mom told her "Do what Granny did," so, sixteen years ago, Reynolds started baking for friends. Her first custom creation was an adult 12-layer Minion cake that she posted a photo on Facebook, and the business took off! She spent fifteen years making cakes from home before expanding approximately ten years ago. She taught herself all about making edible images on sugar sheets, and she now spends sixteen to eighteen hours a day creating designs for everybody, not just bakers. Her shop has everything anyone needs to personalize images for cakes, cookies and desserts.

The Edible Paper Store also offers baking supplies, a variety of items from "box to the topper," including professional-grade food colors like SugarArt and Colourmill, edible paper, and sprinkles and decorating tools, including Silicone molds, cookie cutters and other specialty tools, plus cake boxes and boards.

Reynolds also produces her own brand of sprinkles under the Sugar Dazed brand. Her goal is to make baking and decorating affordable for the cottage and home bakers. Instead of buying bulk, she offers only what bakers need, like sugar art or edible glitter, at seven to nine dollars a jar.

The Edible Paper Store & Co. also provides edible paper products such as wafer paper, frosting sheets, custom edible images, cake boards, pans, cake drums, and toppers for decorating cakes and other confections.

Reynolds is active on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, showcasing recent cake design examples and store supplies as well as offering monthly give-a-ways and fun how-to's.

The Edible Paper Store is located at 2901 Old Brandon Road. Contact Kathy at ediblepaperstore@gmail.com or 601-987-7727.

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Richland HS names Character Trait Students of the Month



Photos special to SW Rankin News

Maycee Fallin was named Richland High School's November Character Trait Student of the Month. November's character trait was Trust, "putting your confidence in someone you can depend on." Fallin is an eighth-grade student, and her teachers describe her as "extremely trustworthy, dependable and respectful. She consistently demonstrates integrity and earns the trust of both peers and staff."

McKenzie Young was named Richland High School's December Character Trait Student of the Month. December's character trait was Joy, "finding a way to be happy even when things don't go your way." Young is a tenth-grade student, and her teachers say "she is truly a joy to have in the classroom. Her positive spirit extends beyond the classroom and brightens our entire campus."

A Little Brown Light: Christmas Day



By Guest Columnist
Becky Brown

PSALM 23:2003

The Lord is my Shepherd.
He knows what I need.
I shall not want for anything.

He makes me to lie down in pastures of green.
He leads me beside the quiet stream.
He heals my soul on this path that I take as He leads me to walk for His righteous name's sake.

So, maybe I walk through a valley today.
Well, it's just a shadow anyway!
I know You are with me, so I will not fear!
Your touch and Your voice I can feel and hear.
I will rest in the face of this enemy as the oil of Your presence pours over me.
Goodness and mercy shall run after me.
All of my days You will walk with me.

You are my house and You are my home.
Father, know I am never alone.
You are my Shepherd.
You know all my needs and I will rest in the strong arms that will carry me.
I will rest in the strong arms that will carry me.



Words and Music by Becky Brown (With a little help from King David) Copyright 2003 littlebrownlight ministries



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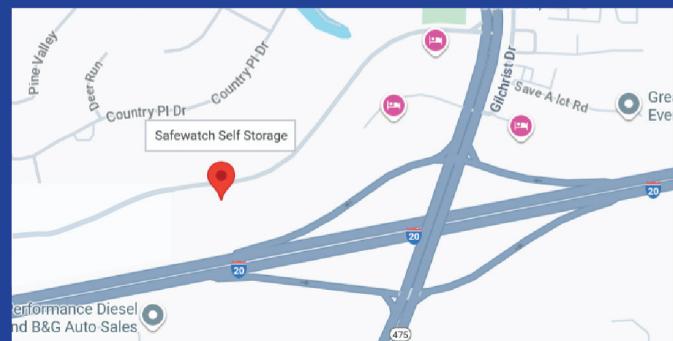


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Rankin Junior Auxiliary holds 40th Anniversary benefit gala



Photos special to SW Rankin News

This year is a historic milestone for the Junior Auxiliary of Rankin County as they celebrate "Forty Years of Love in Action." To commemorate this anniversary, they are hosting a 2026 Children's Benefit Gala, "Hearts of Ruby," from 7 until 11 p.m. on February 21, 2026, at the Clyde Muse Center in Pearl. All proceeds will benefit the Junior Auxiliary's service projects for children throughout Rankin County.



The Junior Auxiliary of Rankin County was "putting love in action" the last two months of 2025 with a Winter Clothing Drive for the Kindness Closet and serving as Santa's Elves.



The JA is dedicated to assisting families with a particular emphasis on children.

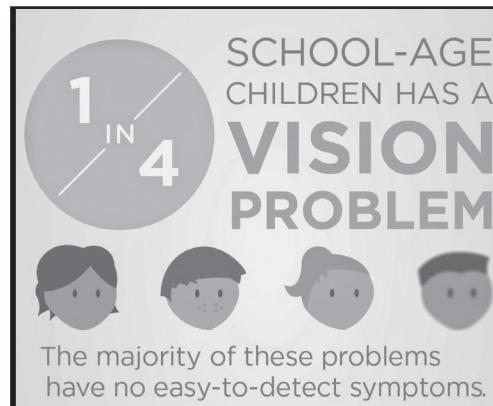
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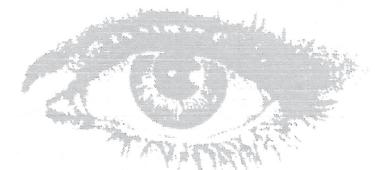


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Florence High School's Patrick places first in Young Artisans Show



Special to SW Rankin News

Logan Patrick, a student at Florence High School, earned first place in the Young Artisans Show hosted by the Mississippi Craftsmen's Guild. The school posted that Patrick's "talent, creativity, and dedication truly stood out among an impressive field of student artists."

Gray named Pearl Firefighter of the Year



Photo by Susie A. Wolfe

Fire Chief Todd Burkes, Josh Gray (center), and Assistant Chief Blake Ball.

Special to SW Rankin News

Josh Gray was named the Pearl Fire Department 2025 Firefighter of the Year in December.

According to Fire Chief Todd Burkes, "Josh is a tremendous asset to our department. His work ethic, positive attitude and commitment to giving his all every single day do not go unnoticed. That dedication is contagious and has a powerful impact on those around him."

The honor is especially meaningful, as Gray was nominated and selected by his coworkers, an unmistakable testament to the respect and admiration he has earned within the Department's ranks. He is noted for his strong work ethic and contagious positive attitude.

The Pearl Fire Department has four fire stations, fifty-seven firefighters and fire officers, twelve nationally registered paramedics, three nationally registered EMT-Advanced, and one nurse.

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Knobloch served as manager of December 13 All-Star Football Game



Pearl Pirate football player Jason Knobloch was selected to serve as a manager for the 39th Annual Mississippi-Alabama All-Star Football Game. This year's contest took place at M.M. Roberts Stadium on the campus of the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, on Saturday, December 13, 2025. Knobloch has been offered a scholarship opportunity to continue his education and serve as a manager for the Wolfpack football team at Copiah-Lincoln Community College.

R-F Garden Club tours Tucker home



Special to SW Rankin News

The Richland-Florence Garden Club at their December tour of the home of Deborah Tucker in Brandon. Front row (l to r) is pictured: Annajeral Knight, Becky Holley, Connie Snow and Susan Harrison; and back row: Perri Paul, Gaynell Ainsworth, Lynn Wynne, Rita Wigal and Debbie Knight.

By Guest Columnist Susan Harrison,
Richland-Florence Garden Club

On December 11, 2025, the Richland-Florence Garden Club (RFGC) traveled to the home of Deborah Tucker. They enjoyed seeing the creative ways she has decorated her home. Every room in her home told a story about her family and the love for Christmas they have shared for years. They had delicious cookies, apple cider and a wonderful time.

also so decorated.

The RFGC ladies got a lot of ideas for their own homes and said they appreciated Tucker allowing the club to come and see all of her handiwork. Each room in her home told a story about her family and the love for Christmas they have shared for years. They had delicious cookies, apple cider and a wonderful time.

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