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Former Cross Country Runner

Greyhound excels as Marine

Robinson transitions high school
athleticism into military service

Story by Debbie Lurie-Smith

With multiple scholarships laid out before her, a Jones County High School graduate decided to enlist in the United States Marines and came out of boot camp an honor graduate, platoon leader and number one in physical fitness for her entire company.

PFC Addison Robinson graduated in December of 2025, left for boot camp the following March 17, while she was still 17. She turned 18 on Paris Island, S.C., graduating June 12. Her proud family, including her twin brother Gavin and grandmother, Dee Gattie-Sellers, traveled to the graduation to celebrate Addison's accomplishments.

After a brief 10 days at home, the PFC was off to Fort Geiger for 28 days for Marine Combat Training, with the next stop MOS (Military Occupation

Specialty) school.

During her short time at home, Addison was able to work in time for an interview to talk about her decision to enlist, her family and future plans.

The Marine was accompanied at the June 16 interview by her father, Tommy Robinson, who provided a lot of information about his daughter's cross-country career at JCHS.

Addison was First Team All-Region all four years of high school. She was the Region 2-AAAA Runner of the year in 2025 and seventh at state.

She said she started running while at Gray Station Middle School because several of her friends and Gavin were running.

"I didn't take it really seriously in middle school, but then my brother and I both won a race. I said, 'Well maybe I do like this,'" she said. "Then there was the joy of the team and the environment we were in. I've run ever since."





Why the Marines?

Addison said she wanted to join the military because she had always looked up to her cousin who was in the Air Force. She said the Marines gave the most discipline and honor, and cross-country racing was all about discipline.

She said her cross-country coach at JCHS, Geoff Moore, taught them the importance of hard work and discipline.

“Running, you have to be disciplined, and if I was going to join, I wanted to join the best of the best,” Addison said.

She was in Delta Company in boot camp that included 47 women. The total number of recruits in the company was 268. Addison was the highest scorer for physical fitness out of all of them.

The Marine said the physical activities were not a problem for her.

“I’ve always been physically fit. Running was a big part of training at boot camp, and I had spent seven to eight years running.”

And as for the weapons training, she had some previous experience in that, too, with her father and brothers being hunters.

Addison said she will learn more about weapons and combat training in her next session, and she plans to go into Intelligence and security for her specialty.

Anyone who has attended Boot Camp remembers the friends they went through the training with. Addison said her company was made up of people from all over the United States and the world, including Africa and Jamaica.

“Six people in our class became citizens at graduation. One of them had been in America for four months, and three of those months were in boot camp,” she said.

The Marine said everyone makes mistakes, but recruits quickly learn there are

consequences.

“They teach you if you make mistakes, you won’t make that mistake again. You go to the pit and have to work out,” she said.

Addison had a scholarship to the U.S. Naval Academy. She said with that scholarship, she could go to the Navy or Marines. She said she was able to talk to people who had taken both routes, which helped her make her decision.

The Marine also had other options because of her cross-country career. She had scholarship offers from West Point, Georgia Southern, Georgia State, Young Harris, Kennesaw State, Jacksonville and Alabama.

“It took a lot of prayer and deciding what to do,” she explained.

Addison was able to graduate early because of taking college and online classes. But she said graduating early was not a goal.

“It didn’t make a big difference to me because I was hardly ever on campus,” she recalled. “Sometimes I would go to school maybe for an hour,” she said.

Her father said he tried to talk her out of graduating early.

“She was bent and determined that was what she was going to do,” Tommy said.

Addison said she hopes to see the world while in the Marines, especially Japan.

“It would be cool to see the world and the type of militaries that are out there.”

Whether or not she is a career Marine depends on how she likes her first tour, which will be a total of five years. She said if she gets out after her first tour, she would have no problem finding a job in security.

Family pride

Tommy said Addison has two older brothers, Noah and Gage, who are also proud of her.

He said their relationships have gotten stronger since she became

a Marine, and Gavin is even thinking about the military.

“It’s powerful to see the graduation, that transformation. They go in as a kid and come out matured; they’ve grown. It’s pretty neat to see that,” the father said.

Addison agreed her experience in the Marines has strengthened her relations with her family.

She said she has grown physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, everything.

The father said Addison’s enlistment and her success have put pride at a whole new level.

“You are always proud of your kids. They’ve run races and done other things, but this is indescribable. You have to let them have their life. We are just here to support and love,” he said.

Tommy said he is confident in her future.

“If she can live through the Crucible, she can make it through anything,” he said. “I heard her friends in boot camp talk about how she dominated and could not be caught, and these were the guys talking.”

The Marine explained the Crucible begins with a six-mile hike carrying 60-70 lbs., then a three-mile hike with 25-gallon ammo cans. The hike back is nine miles. It is a 54-hour event and a total of 48 miles.

Addison said a lot of her confidence to compete was because of the way she was raised.

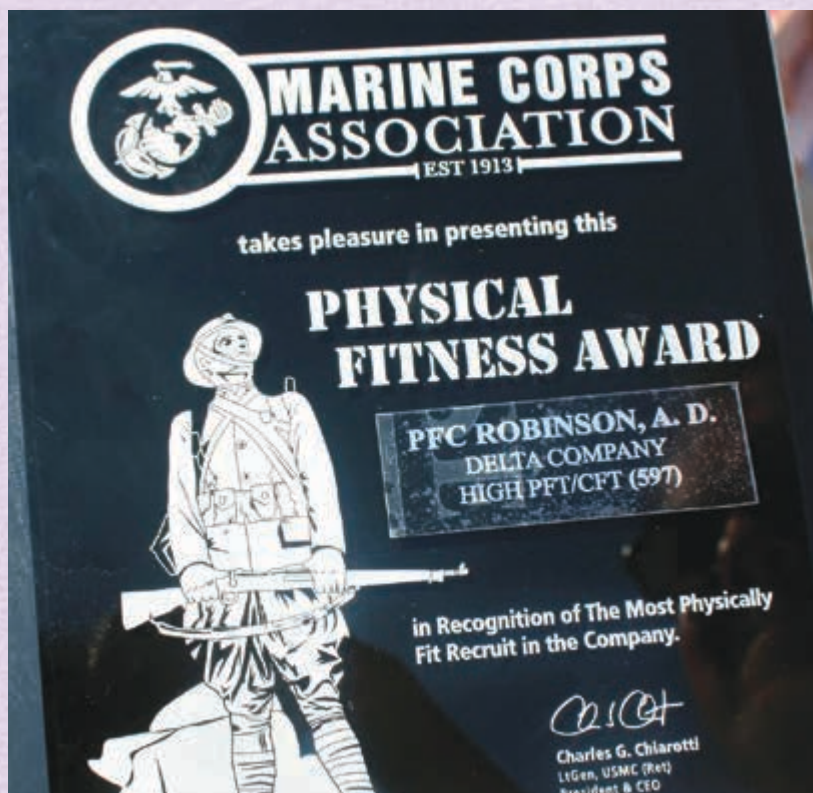
“I was always around boys; I tried to be as good as them,” she stated simply.

She said Coach Moore always made sure she did everything with the boys.

“I had to be as good as them. He prepared me physically by running and mentally being the best I can be. He and my dad taught me to be comfortable being uncomfortable, and that’s what boot camp is all about,” she explained.



Addison Robinson smiles on the podium after placing seventh in the 3,200-meter event at the May 10, 2025, state meet.



Addison received the Physical Fitness Award for Delta Company at the conclusion of boot camp out of 268 Marine recruits.



Addison Robinson became accustomed to running ahead of the pack at Jones County High School. To no surprise to those who know her, that dedication kept her in front after joining the U.S. Marines.



Calls from friends and family are a welcome break during boot camp.

What's next?

Addison plans to complete her college degree while in the military in either political science or psychology.

"When finished, I'll come out with college degrees and no school loans," she said. "It sets you up for life."

Tommy said the military is not for everybody, but he thinks it was a wise decision for Addison.

"I wasn't talking like that six months ago," the father said.

Addison said women make up 1% of Marines.

"It's good to know I'm a member of that small portion," she said. "Once a Marine, always a Marine."

Update

Since the initial interview in June, Addison successfully completed Marine Combat Training July 20 and was on her way to report to the Naval Air Station Oceana Dam Neck Annex in Virginia Beach to attend the Marine Corps' MAGTF Planning Specialist course. MAGTF stands for Marine Air-Ground Task Force, the Marine Corps' combined fighting force of ground, air, logistics, any command elements. ♦

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JCHS head cross country coach Geoff Moore gives his runners last-minute instructions prior to a race.

Greyhound Distance Runners



The Greyhounds' 2025 boys squad powered to uncharted heights, going on to finish third in the state.

Masters of the Course

High school cross-country runners
continue to put Jones County on the map

Story and photos by Brad Harrison

Gray and Jones County are known for a multitude of things.

In recent years, there's been an addition to that list — dominance on the cross-country course.

By the time any cross-country season nears its finish, one thing is usually certain — that the Greyhounds and Lady Greyhounds will make names for themselves in the region and beyond.

The last four years have seen

the Greyhounds and Lady Greyhounds entrenched as the class of the region, winning the crown all four times.

It's one thing to do something once. But to do it again and again? Both teams have done that, too.

"It's consistency, that's all it is. The runners who are good, they're the ones that do it year-round. It's like building a house. You start on the foundation and you build up from there. You get

strong by running all of those miles," Jones County head cross-country coach Geoff Moore said.

"It's about being consistent, the expectations and the buy-in. Once your kids believe they can do something, the sky is the limit."

But running at a high level, as many a distance runner knows, does not happen with one fell swoop. Much like a distance running event, it builds over time. And few things sum that up than



The Lady Greyhounds ran to a first-place finish in the 2024 Carrollton Invitational as three runners placed within the top nine. (Contributed)

the steady flourish of the JCHS cross-country program since Moore took over 10 years ago.

Moore didn't arrive in Gray as a high-school cross-country coach from the outset. When he came to Gray 15 years ago, it was as an assistant football and girls track coach at Clifton Ridge Middle.

But a funny thing happened over time.

"I kind of adapted a niche of coaching distance running," Moore said.

That adoption turned out to be transformational, as 10 years after taking over the cross-country program as head coach,

both teams are the standard to beat in the region, not to mention making a name for themselves in fields of runners outside the mid-state. In a sport usually dominated by Atlanta-area schools, Jones County has proven as individuals and a collective group that it can run with top teams.

The Greyhounds have finished in the top four of the state twice in the last four years, and a youth-laden Lady Hounds team took 12th last year.

Moore had the luxury of a well-established girls cross-country program when he took the head

coaching job with a roster that included Erin Leonard, a multi-time state champion regarded as the best runner in program history. That helped the Lady Hounds win a region title in Moore's first season at the helm. This was also within a slice of years that also included Kate Boland and a few years later, Laney Doster.

"We had always had a good girls program," Moore said. "I've never not had a girls team qualify to state."

The level of running has continued on, as the Lady Hounds have finished first or



The Greyhounds rolled to yet another first-place finish during a 2024 meet in Carrollton. (Contributed)

second in the region since 2014. It's not a coincidence that as the expectations have taken a step up, so have performances. Of the overall average combined finishes in track and cross-country, times set in the past few years by Addison Robinson, Isabella Sanchez, Madison Marshall, and Lilly Palmer have dwarfed previous showings by Boland, Doster, and Leonard.

On the boys side?

Last year's senior class included the overall best five in Armani Norris, Luke Thornton, Tyler Marshall, Gavin Robinson, and Shaun Williams.

They were part of a team that placed third in the state a year ago, a season that was every bit of a coronation of the journey of the boys cross-country program.

When Moore took over, the boys program had to fight through the region just to make it to the state meet, let alone win a region title. But after coming up a spot shy of state the first two years, Kyle Whipple and Austin Sullivan advanced to the state meet in 2019. From there, the ascension began.

"The expectation from there was to get to state every year," Moore said. "The goal became making it to state, then it got to be winning the region."

It's for that reason that even though a greater spotlight comes from running near the front at the state meet, that region titles are not shunned.

"You still want to celebrate a region title," Moore said. "You want to make it a big deal because we used to not have a chance."

So, whether the success happens close to home or from afar for Jones County's distance runners, it's a pursuit of goal.

"Every year we have an expectation of what we want to do. Our kids have bought into that." ♦



Clay Lacy poses after receiving the Greyhounds' Dedication Award from head coach Geoff Moore at the 2024 awards banquet.



The Greyhounds seized on the opportunity of home-course advantage for the 2025 cross country sectionals.



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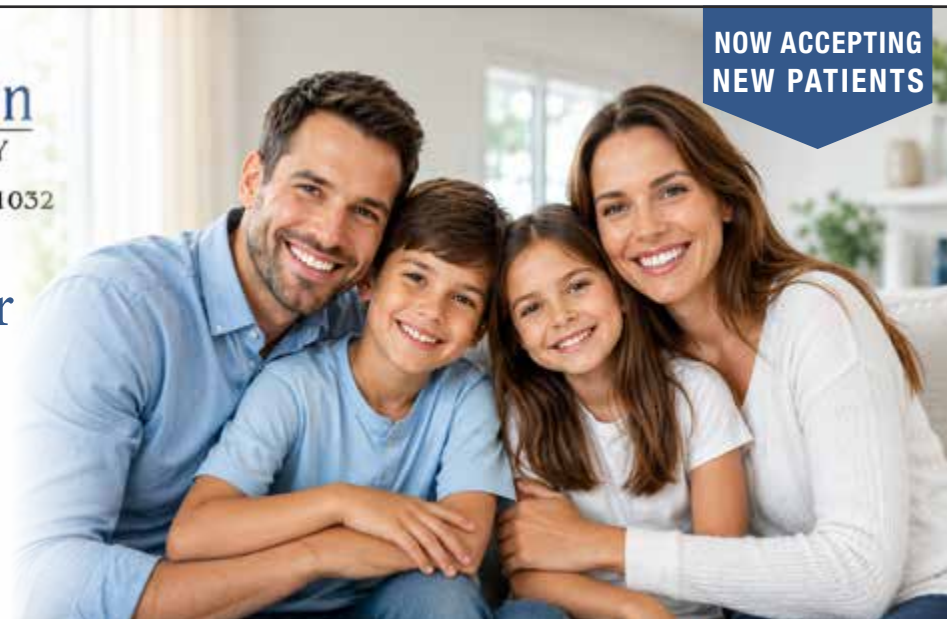
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Fortenberry points out some newspaper awards and honors.

Former newspaperman inspired early in life after father's fatal plane crash

Story by Greenberry Moore

Ken Fortenberry has proven he is willing to accept a challenge. He spent 50 years of his life trying to solve the mystery of his father's death. As a small-town newspaper owner, he successfully stared down a sheriff, and he challenged a U.S. congressman he thought should not be in office.

Fortenberry, who moved to Jones County in 2022 to be near one of his children and her family, has worked for various corporate newspapers and owned two community papers. He has written several books, including two involving his personal life and one about a man with Jones County ties whose contributions have largely gone unnoticed.

Fortenberry had a short political career. In 2012, he unsuccessfully challenged an incumbent in a heavily Republican congressional district.

“I have always had a passion for good government, and the incumbent who had the seat was a scoundrel,” Fortenberry stated. “I was a lifelong Democrat but switched parties to take him on in the Primary. I didn’t have a prayer, and I knew it. I just wanted him to know I would hold him accountable and give him hell.” The challenger received about 16 percent of the votes.

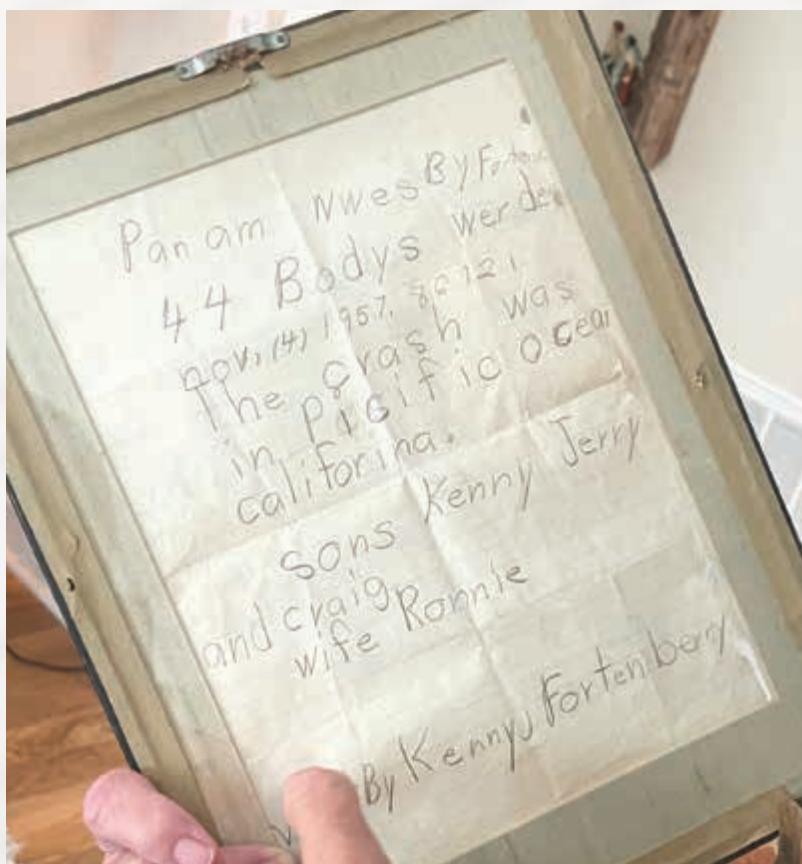
Flight 7 is Missing: the search for my father’s killer is Fortenberry’s account of a plane crash that took the life of his father and 43 others on a flight over the Pacific in 1957 — a crash that has never been explained publicly to this day. Fortenberry was six at the time, and the crash and death of his father — whose body was one of 25 never found — consumed more hours than he can count to learn what happened. He even wrote letters while still six years old.

“I just started working as a kid, beginning to write letters, going to libraries, doing everything I could possibly do to find anything that might help me understand what happened. It was a terrible tragedy, obviously.

“And you know,” Fortenberry continued, “that was an incredible mystery, obviously, so I wanted to solve it. And I



Fortenberry this year at the scene of his corruption fight 40 years ago.



A letter Fortenberry wrote as child regarding his father’s death. It reads: Pan Am News by Fortenberry 44 Bodys were dead Nov. 4, 1957. 86121. The crash was in Pacific Ocean, California. Sons Kenny Jerry and Craig. Wife Ronnie. Wrot by Kenny Fortenberry

Town, editor take spotlight on '60 Minutes'

By Jennifer Miller
News Greenwood bureau

MCCORMICK — Veteran television newsman Harry Reasoner and a film crew began shooting a segment for *60 Minutes* Tuesday.

Reasoner and seven staff members of the CBS show interviewed and filmed Ken Fortenberry's family and several other residents for a story about harassment against the family since he took over the local newspaper, the *McCormick Messenger*, about two years ago.

Tuesday morning Reasoner talked with Tom Wall, brother of W.C. Wall, who was McCormick County supervisor.

In W.C. Wall's obituary last year, Fortenberry mentioned that Wall had been indicted on charges of failing to withhold federal income tax for county employees.

Reasoner also talked with several residents at Strom's Drug Store on Main



Copy of "60 Minutes" coverage of saga during Fortenberry's time at *The Messenger*.

began this lifelong pursuit of just chasing everything I could find, trying to find people who had investigated the crash."

What is the reason Flight 7 is Missing?

When he was 13, the youngster wrote a letter to a federal airline agency to find out the status of the investigation.

"I got a letter back several weeks later, saying, essentially, they hadn't done a thing in seven years," Fortenberry reported with obvious disdain. "And it irritated the you-know-what out of the 13-year-old kid. So that began my lifelong quest."

As he grew older, Fortenberry's search led to a suspect who bought a one-way ticket from San Francisco to Honolulu, was an explosives expert in the Navy, and bought an unusually large amount of life insurance in the weeks before the crash.

"And, they didn't find his body either," Fortenberry pointed out. "So his wife, his widow, later sued because the insurance company wouldn't pay out. They said 'We don't have a body. We don't believe he was maybe even on that

plane.' And that was the end of that."

Later, Fortenberry attempted to obtain information from the investigator who was working the case.

"He wouldn't talk to me. He was afraid to talk to me." Later, though, the man did open up with Fortenberry and told him he believed the guy never got on the plane.

"The man said to me, 'My conscience is really bothering me and I'm going to start sharing information with you.' He died a couple of weeks later."

Fortenberry recalled that Pan Am reached out to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, asking for help.

To no avail. "And he never would because Hoover has to get his man, and all the evidence is at the bottom of the ocean."

As the quest continued, Fortenberry confronted the National Transportation Safety Board in D.C. They said they had nothing. He didn't buy it. He kept pushing, year after year, and finally one guy shared information.

"He starts reading me a file over the phone, and he said, 'I got

nothing in there except for this information on this guy.' And I said, 'Whoa! This guy? Who is this guy you're talking about?' This guy was never made public in any way."

Fortenberry ultimately decided 'this guy' was the one who did the plane in. The identity is revealed in the book that was published in 2020, when Fortenberry was 69.

College briefly before newspaper career

When that plane went down, it left Fortenberry's mother, Ronnie, just 32, with three boys to raise, ages eight, six, and two.

"I think it's remarkable that she was able to do that. And we're all halfway decent; we didn't end up in prison or anything," Fortenberry chuckled.

Fortenberry grew up in Spartanburg, S.C., graduated from high school in 1969, and went straight to the Army during the Vietnam War. He ended up in helicopter flight training, but President Nixon announced the program he termed Vietnamization, "which is to turn more of the war over to the Vietnamese to fight for

themselves rather than us, the Americans,” Fortenberry explained. “Of course, that meant they had to have helicopter pilots, Vietnamese-trained rather than Americans.”

The pilot students were in formation one day when the instructor told all those wearing glasses to fall out.

“I wore glasses, so I fell out over there,” Fortenberry recalled. “And my right eye went from 20-20 to 20-50 in two weeks! They just wanted to get rid of me from flight school so they could make room for the Vietnamese to learn to fly.”

Once he got out of the Army, Fortenberry enrolled at the University of South Carolina. He was also working at the Spartanburg newspaper. Sitting in class one day, he made a choice.

“‘Heck, I don’t like this. I like what I am doing at the newspaper.’ And that was the end of my university career. I ended up a full-time newspaper man.”

Fortenberry was the Managing Editor for the *Lincoln Times News* in 1973 when he met his future wife, Anna Jones.

“It was love at first sight,” he said with a big smile. “I loved her at first sight, and I love her now.”

They married in 1975 and have five children now, including a daughter whose husband is the men’s golf coach at Mercer University. Her two sons are excellent golfers, hence the move to Middle Georgia.

Jones was running for Mayor of Lincolnton, N.C., as a Republican.

“This was a big-time Democrat county at the time,” Fortenberry

explained. “Her family’s big-time Republican. You can’t run as a Republican in Lincoln County in 1973 and get anything more than the standard 15 percent.”

Who Wanted to Kill the Messenger?

Fortenberry worked with large daily newspapers a number of years but temporarily left the corporate newspaper world as an executive editor in 1985 and bought the *McCormick Messenger*, beginning a two-year saga that ultimately put Fortenberry and his family in peril and a sheriff in federal prison.

Shortly after purchasing the weekly newspaper, the new owner paid a visit to the sheriff, asking to begin printing the jail log. “You know, ‘Joe Blow got arrested for



Fortenberry holds replica of Pan Am plane that crashed.

this.' He wasn't going to have that. He wasn't going to have a newspaperman snooping around his place.

"And," Fortenberry stated, "my nose for news says, 'BS. You know he's hiding more than that.' Well, it turns out he was hiding a lot more than that. And before it was over, he ended up in federal prison. And, his replacement I exposed as an ex-con who couldn't read and write well enough to pass the state sheriff's exams.

"60 Minutes came to town," Fortenberry went on. "The *New York Times* came down. They love a story like that.

"We had our house bombed twice. I guess it's unfair to say it was bombed. They put acetylene bags that kind of shook the whole house and shook the foundation and all, but the sheriff's friends and family wanted us gone. So, they did that to us twice."

The case ultimately went federal, and the sheriff was tried for converting federal treasury checks to his personal account. He was convicted and sentenced to six months in prison.

Why put yourself and your family in that position, facing the possibility of harm? Fortenberry didn't hesitate.

"I really fundamentally believe that it's a newspaper's duty to pursue the truth aggressively, no matter where it may go, and to hold public officials accountable. I mean, seriously accountable."

While he made it clear he was not personally afraid of the sheriff or his group — "I just believe you do what you're supposed to do, the right thing" — he did consider his family's safety.

"I was concerned for my family. Yes, I definitely was. And, we ended up selling that paper in McCormick and getting out of town because of that. After you get bombed a couple of times, you think this is not good."

Years later, Fortenberry considered paying a visit.

"I put on one of those Facebook pages in McCormick that I really wanted to see how the town had changed. And, what is that, 40 years now? And kind of give the people a second chance because you know, everybody just ripped them."

He was not welcomed with open arms.

"The sheriff's son, who by this time is at least 50 years old, he said in response to me — and this is the way they are: 'Tell me when you are going to be here. This will be the last breath you ever take.' And a couple other threats in that vein. So, I contacted the FBI, and they did what they call a knock and talk. I never heard from that boy again."

After selling the *Messenger*, Fortenberry returned to the larger papers until 1999, when he and his wife started another weekly newspaper, which set records for awards. They sold that paper in 2014 and have concentrated on writing since then.

A Brilliant Oddball

While *Flight 7* and *Kill the Messenger* are books recounting mystery and corruption, it was a biography that truly consumed Fortenberry and led him to proclaim Col. Telamon Cuyler a *Brilliant Oddball*. Fortenberry considers Cuyler both extremely brilliant and extremely eccentric.

"He was a master historian. He had probably one of the greatest collections of Civil War, even Revolutionary War, history of Georgia that existed in the world.

"But the other thing that he did which really made him more than weird is he was so obsessed with himself," the author continued.

"He wrote a diary of everything you can possibly imagine ... I have more than 5,000 documents that I scanned or took pictures of about his diary to help pull together this

guy's life."

During his research, Fortenberry discovered that Cuyler was instrumental in the establishment of the Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge in the Round Oak-Juliette area of Jones County.

"Telamon Cuyler wrote the proposal for that and sent it to Washington and pushed it to the senators, the congressmen, Department of Interior, everybody ... and pushed it year after year after year. And, ultimately it was done.

"He never got credit for that at all," Fortenberry pointed out. "I have the letters from Sen. Talmadge and the guys in Washington, saying what a great idea this is, but he put the whole thing together."

Another accomplishment of Cuyler that Fortenberry uncovered was the idea of farmers markets.

"He considered himself a farmer even though he was a rich New York City attorney all his life," the history buff shared. "He's a great friend of the farmer, and he proposed this crazy idea: let's have farmers markets. 'Let's have a place where our farmers can sell their goods.'

"The guy who was the secretary of agriculture at the time embraced the idea. Next thing, you know, couple of years later, we have farmers markets in Georgia. He never gets credit for that, not one single bit."

Fortenberry, realizing another contribution of Cuyler, pointed out that he spent years in Europe.

"He comes back with this crazy idea: 'What we ought to have in Georgia is a system of highways that connects one city to the other, Atlanta to Macon to Savannah, like they have over in Europe.' He's advocating interstate highways before Dwight Eisenhower ever came up with the idea after World War II."



Fortenberry with a book even at that young age.



Ken and Anna this year on the golf course.

Fortenberry, noting that there is so much more to share about Cuyler, pointed out that his ancestors, the Clowers, were among the first to settle in Jones County. Cuyler retreated to the family house in Wayside when he had troubles, and his mother moved in there in 1910 when she became partially paralyzed.

“Cuyler was with her for extended periods of time from 1910 to 1916, when she died,”

Fortenberry said. “Cuyler died at his house in Wayside in 1952 and was buried in Savannah.”

Since that novel was published in 2025, Fortenberry has slowed somewhat but is currently working on a fiction novel.

“Fiction is a lot easier to write than nonfiction,” he commented. “Nonfiction takes too much research. I said I will never write another biography. That man, I am serious — my wife would tell

me, ‘You are just thinking about him more than me.’”

Other than his current project, Fortenberry is not sure what the future holds.

“I’ve always got something in the pipeline,” he acknowledged. “I always say I’m finished. After I finished that book, I said I’m finished writing. But the next thing you know, I’m sitting here writing, you know. Who knows?”



Fortenberry at work in a corporate newspaper office.



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A sepia-toned photograph of a cemetery. In the foreground, an American flag is planted in the ground, its stars and stripes clearly visible. The flag is slightly tilted. In the background, several tombstones of various shapes and sizes are scattered across a grassy field. Bare trees with intricate branch structures are silhouetted against a bright, hazy sky, suggesting a late autumn or winter setting. The overall mood is solemn and reflective.

American Patriots



Stewart Family Cemetery

Meet some of Jones County's Revolutionaries

Contributed by Jones County History & Heritage

In today's busy pace, we seldom stop to think of those people who have given us these precious freedoms we enjoy. As we celebrate our nation's 250th anniversary of freedom, there are few people who really know anything at all about those men who served our nation during our war with England for independence.

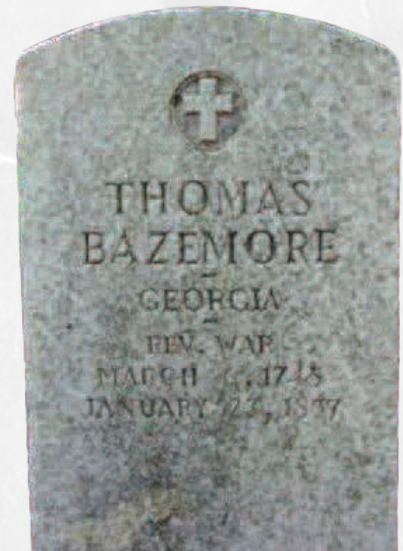
There are a few whose graves are marked and there are many who lie in unmarked graves.

These are the men that Jones County can recognize, who have marked places of rest:

Samuel Barron has no listing of his birth or death but a simple stone that recognizes the fact that he served with the Georgia Regulars during the American Revolution. Near him lies his first wife, Annie Brazil Barron, who was born in 1784 and died in 1809. Samuel would marry Joanna Braswell on March 22, 1793, in Warren County.

Thomas Bazemore quietly lies in a wooded lot among several depressions that are most certainly his family. This small homestead cemetery is marked by a hand-painted, wooden sign that was placed many years after his death. His marker states that he was born March 6, 1745, and died Jan. 23, 1837, and that he served in the American Revolution from Georgia.

John Hanna Brooks has a marker placed by the Ocoee Chapter DAR in Tennessee. The marker lists his dates of military service as 1775 - 1783, which





includes him as a patriot of the American Revolution. Brooks' grave is flanked by a co-patriot of the American Revolution as well as a patriot of the war of 1812.

George Cabiness has tombstones in two different cemeteries with the first being the Cabiness Cemetery. The Cabiness Cemetery has no inscriptive markers but are listed as per Carolyn White Williams' *History of Jones County 1807-1907*, which lists his birth as 1744 and death as 1822, including his Revolutionary War service.

There are also several unmarked graves with information included from the same source that would most certainly be his family members.

The Stewart Cemetery, much like the Cabiness Cemetery, has no inscriptive markers for George Cabiness and only includes information from Williams' history as well. He is listed as having been born in Amelia County, Virginia, in 1744 and having died in 1822. There is a family connection between these two cemeteries.

Adam Carson lies within

a stone enclosure with several unmarked graves. His tombstone has no dates but simply his name and American Revolution, Minute Men. Sites such as this are likely to hold many other Revolutionary War patriots.

John Childs' cemetery plot sits upon a commanding view of the surrounding area. His grave is well marked and gives his name and his birth as 1751 and death as 1825.

Within a short distance from John's grave is his wife, Susannah Satterwhite Childs, as well as numerous other family members. John is the patriarch of the Childs Family in Jones County.

Hugh Moss Comer and his wife Anne Trippe Comer lie in a prominent plot surrounded by a beautiful wrought-iron enclosure. Hugh's birth is not noted however his death is listed as 1836, and his Revolutionary service is also included. Hugh Comer was a Virginian during the Revolution and moved to Jones County after the war, becoming one of its earliest settlers. He served as Judge over Inferior Court as well as the County Clerk for several years.

James Comer, brother of

Hugh Moss Comer, lies in a family plot on his homestead. Also surrounded by a wrought-iron fence, his plot includes at least one or two unmarked graves within the enclosure and several outside. His tombstone was erected by his son James Comer, Jr. and states that he died July 16, 1837, and was a true Whig and served six years and six months in the American Revolution.

Benjamin Finney was born in Virginia and served during the American Revolution. He died in 1824 and is buried beside his wife, Anne, who died in 1826, and numerous other members of their family.

These are several of the men with roots in Jones County who fought to win America's freedom from England.

They have perpetual markers and enclosures that will hopefully preserve their graves for generations to come. Our hope would be that you remember them throughout this year and the years to come. If we remember the sacrifices of those who have taken a bold stand before us, their efforts will never be in vain. ♦



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Shannon Smith (l-r), Charm Mapp,
Chance Scott and Dr. Jessica Graves



Georgia Teacher of the Year: *Charm Mapp*

Story by Bethany Tapee-Ward

Jones County School System 2025–26 District Teacher of the Year Charm Mapp has been named the 2026–27 Georgia Teacher of the Year, a significant honor she has earned through 23 years of hard work and dedication in her math classroom at Clifton Ridge Middle School.

Mapp said she has always known education was the right career path for her.

“Ever since I was a little girl, I always wanted to be a teacher. I was always a good student, and math has always come easily to me. It used to shock me that other people did not love school as I did,” she said.

Mapp attended Georgia College & State University, where she earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in middle grades education and her specialist degree in curriculum and instruction. She is expected to obtain her doctorate in the same field this fall.

She began her career teaching math, reading, and English language arts and now serves as an eighth-grade enhanced algebra teacher, math team leader, and

gifted lead.

Mapp shared part of her teaching philosophy.

“I want my students to see that math is in everything we do,” she said. “I like to present math as a conversation and weave it into my students’ real-world experiences,” she said.

She said she intentionally connects classroom content to the specific students she teaches. For example, she said she asks her students involved in FFA about their competitions and uses those experiences in classroom warm-ups. She has also created equations based on her band students’ ticket sales and many other activities that reflect her students’ interests, boosting their engagement and retention.

“Everything you do in math is connected to real life,” she said.

Mapp spoke about what she has done in her role as Jones County’s District Teacher of the Year.

“One of the first things I did was speak at signing day at Jones County High School for the Teaching as a Profession class and at the district convocation at the beginning of the school year. I am also a member of [Jones County Superintendent Dr. Jessica] Graves’ Teachers Advisory Council because, as a teacher, I feel the pulse of our schools and can provide insight into what is happening inside our classrooms,” she said.

She has also returned to her alma mater, Georgia College & State University, to speak and participate in the Collegiate Middle Level Association Summit, as well as their senior send-off. In addition,



Mapp with her inspirational teacher, Terri Jenkins.

Mapp has worked with the Georgia Professional Standards Commission on an initiative focused on recruiting and hiring teachers and improving retention.

While completing this work alongside her duties as a classroom teacher, Mapp was also vying for the Georgia Teacher of the Year title. She discussed the competition process.

“In October of 2025, all the district teachers of the year received notice to attend an orientation with the coordinator from the state,” she said. “There, they went through the application process for Georgia Teacher of the Year, which was very similar to Jones County’s application process,” she said.

After completing the application process, Mapp said the state announced the top 10 finalists in March.

“There are 159 counties in Georgia, and there were close to 200 teachers vying for this title. Former state teachers of the year read over the applications we submitted back in October, and if you are selected as a finalist, they give you a surprise visit from the state,” she said.

She traveled to Atlanta in April as a finalist, where she interviewed in front of a panel of 13 judges. She also delivered a speech on why she believes in public education to an audience of 40 to 50 people, including fellow finalists, members of the State Board of Education, and representatives from the Department of Education. She said each finalist’s speech is evaluated, and the winner is selected based on that final stage.

She shared the contents of her speech, where she spoke about two personal stories that highlight the power of public education.

“Sitting in the middle of the seventh-grade hallway was a girl with a loud personality



that inadequately masked poor self-esteem. Through tears and sobbing, this student shared with her teacher that a classmate was bullying her. That third-year teacher sat on the floor beside the young girl to console her and then promptly had a conversation with the young male culprit that ended the bullying,” she said.

This moment became the foundation for a relationship that would continue to grow throughout the year.

“Throughout the school year, the young teacher poured into this student, letting her know that she was destined for greatness. The teacher let her lead warm-up problems and encouraged her to be a peer tutor. Today, that

seventh-grade student now holds a doctorate in educational innovation while leading various initiatives in her school,” she said.

Mapp revealed that this student was one of her own.

“That young teacher who consoled her was once an introverted teen with low self-esteem hidden by academic excellence. Yet, her ELA teacher peeked beneath the surface and modeled for her truly caring for and pouring into students’ lives. She encouraged this insecure teen to boldly stand before the class and recite Robert Frost’s ‘The Road Not Taken,’” she said.

This second story shifted the focus to Mapp and the teachers who shaped her path.

“At 13 years old, that student decided, ‘I want my future students to feel the way Mrs. Jenkins makes me feel about learning.’ And today, that shy, self-conscious girl stands before you as a top-10 finalist for Georgia Teacher of the Year,” she said.

She said these experiences illustrate how lasting a teacher’s influence can be.

“This is the power of public-school education. Teachers in public schools work with students from all backgrounds and abilities to plant seeds of influence that may reap a harvest days, months, or even years later,” she said.

Mapp emphasized that those small moments often lead to long-term impact.

Charm Mapp

Jones County

Clifton Ridge Middle School



"In public education, the influence of a teacher knows no bounds. At this very moment, there are students sitting in a 6th-grade math classroom whose futures are being molded by the influence of Dr. Pinkard. I'm sure Dr. Pinkard doesn't remember all she learned in my classroom, but I know she learned that she was destined to be a dynamic and innovative leader," she said.

She continued by reflecting on the educator who shaped her own classroom values.

"I don't remember all I learned in Ms. Jenkins' class, but I know I learned about the climate and culture I wanted to create in my own classroom," Mapp said. "I'm not sure what Mrs. Jenkins learned from her teachers, but the impact of her foundation lit the spark for many amazing futures."

She said this kind of influence extends far beyond a single

classroom.

"The ripple effect of just these three educators continues even today. In fact, the ripple effect of public education just successfully sent four astronauts around the moon. Across this state and country, public school teachers are planting seeds such as these daily, and this is why I believe in public school education," she said.

Former Clifton Ridge Middle School Principal Chance Scott said Mapp's influence extends far beyond her classroom.

"Charm Mapp is one of the most exceptional teachers I have ever met," Scott, who is now the principal at JCHS, said. "She teaches every child as if they are the top kid in the school. She expects each child to be a distinguished learner, and she helps her kids set achievable and obtainable goals throughout the year.

"Her students are not just her students for one year. She continues to check in on and guide them throughout life. Mrs. Mapp has helped shape me into a better educator by challenging me to see all students can show growth."

Former Clifton Ridge Assistant Principal Shannon Smith echoed that sentiment.

"Some people are called to teach, but Mrs. Charm Mapp was born to change lives. I have known Charm since our college days. She truly embodies the belief that kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Georgia could not have chosen a more deserving person to represent the very best of education," Smith said.

When Mapp found out she was being named Georgia Teacher of the Year, she said the moment was both unexpected and deeply humbling.

"It was very humbling. The 10 finalists really bonded as a cohort. At first, I was a little skeptical because it is a competition, but our group text is still active today. We have truly become like a family. Four of us even got matching tattoos. Any of us could have won, but to be recognized for something I have poured half my life into means so much," she said.

She also reflected on the gala experience held at the Georgia Aquarium.

"The conference and gala for all the district Teachers of the Year was emotionally overwhelming in the best way. Every Teacher of the Year who wins needs to attend," she said.

As Georgia Teacher of the Year, Mapp will be leaving her classroom at Clifton Ridge Middle School for one year to serve as a public ambassador for education, as well as vying for the National Teacher of the Year title.

"I have wrestled with leaving my classroom because I love being with my students. I will go on a speaking engagement tour as a

public ambassador for education, speaking to district leaders and teachers," she said. "I will also serve as an ex-officio member of the State Board of Education, attending meetings to provide a teacher's voice, and be part of the state superintendent's Teacher Advisory Council for the next three years.

"I officially start July first, and I will also be competing for Teacher of the Year at the national level."

She spoke on the influence she hopes to have in this position.

"I want teachers to know what they do and say matters. I want to pour that into public education across the state," she said.

Dr. Graves said Mapp's work reflects the district's commitment to excellence.

"Mrs. Mapp represents a standard of excellence that we continuously commit to within our district," she said. "Every single day she plans with intentionality, always pushing students to reach their full potential. It is evident in

her teaching that she engages all students by helping them to see how learning will be applied when students pursue their post-graduation goal to be employed, enlisted, or enrolled," she said.

She said Mapp's impact can be seen in both her students' growth and the example she sets for other educators.

"As a district, we celebrate Mrs. Mapp's incredible and well-deserved accomplishment. We are proud to champion her work across the state as she challenges teachers and leaders to level up each day in support of high-quality teaching, learning, and leading," Graves said.

This was Mapp's concluding words to her fellow educators.

"Relationships with students matter more than anything. What do you want them to remember about you and your classroom 10 or 20 years from now?" she asked. "It will not be the content. That is important, but what they are really going to remember is how you made them feel. Be mindful of that every single day." ♦





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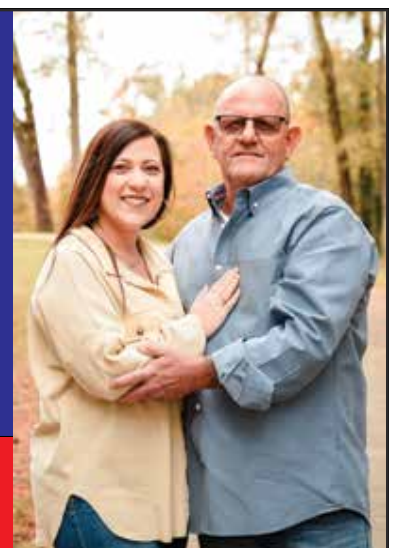
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Fields of Gold



Take a Day Trip

Oliver Farm's sunflower blooms transform a tiny Georgia town into an unforgettable destination

Story and photos by Suzanne Lawler

Rarely do we get the chance to step into a place that truly takes our breath away — a landscape so stunning it feels like a movie set or a glimpse of heaven.

You might not expect to find such a place in Pitts, Georgia, but every summer and fall, that's exactly what awaits visitors at Oliver Farm.

Each year, Clay and Valerie Oliver welcome guests to experience their sprawling sunflower fields, transforming this small, South Georgia community of about 400 residents into a destination for photographers, nature lovers and families alike.

The journey is part of the experience. Oliver Farm sits about 30 minutes off the interstate in rural Wilcox County, but the drive is well worth it. Along the way, visitors pass lush, green fields that give way to brilliant white cotton each fall. Classic barns, tractors and towering grain silos complete the timeless rural landscape.

"When the sunflowers are blooming, you stand in front of them, and it puts you in awe. You can hear the birds and see the bees," Clay said.

The Olivers work hard to make every visit welcoming and accessible. Guests can climb a viewing platform for panoramic





views of the fields, drone operators are welcome, visitors are encouraged to pick flowers, and accommodations are available for those with special needs.

"We delight in seeing people out in the fields because sometimes people don't have access to the land," Clay said. "They don't have the means to walk through a big field. They don't have the ability to pick these flowers or be out there as long as they want just to let nature heal you."

And heal it does.

Some visitors stroll along the edges of the fields taking photographs, while others wander row after row, losing themselves in a sea of golden blooms.

I've returned to these fields year after year, and every visit feels like a bucket-list experience. I've watched strangers strike up conversations and leave as friends. It's not unusual for RV travelers to plan vacations around the bloom, spending several nights in Pitts so they can wake each morning to sunflowers stretching as far as the eye can see.

"They do get kind of big," Clay said with a chuckle. "We space them out so they are healthy. They make a pie-plate-sized head, maybe 8-10 inches in diameter have a sturdy stalk, and they'll grow up maybe five or six feet tall."

While visitors come for the breathtaking scenery, the sunflowers are far more than a beautiful backdrop. They are a working crop and an important part of the Oliver family's agricultural legacy.

Clay's father began farming in 1973, and today his brother continues growing traditional row crops, including cotton, corn and peanuts. More than a decade ago, Clay planted his first sunflower crop with the goal of producing cooking oil.

"In 2012 I grew my first crop of sunflowers for oil production,

and by the end of that year we had pressed oil from sunflowers,” Clay said.

The flowers are grown from high-oleic sunflower seeds and eventually become cold-pressed sunflower oil.

“It’s going to have that golden, rich, nutty taste of a sunflower seed,” Clay said. “It’s really heart healthy for you. It’s versatile where it can be used for salad dressings, butter substitutes, and also you can use it to cook. It has a 400-degree smoke point.”

Visitors can purchase the farm’s sunflower oil, along with peanut and pecan oils, at The Station, a charming farm store the Olivers created inside a restored gas station. Today, it serves as the hub of the Oliver Farm experience.

Guests purchase tickets, pick up maps to the sunflower fields and browse shelves filled with locally made products, many featuring a sunflower theme. Decorative platters, fresh produce, pecan flour, flags, beef jerky, sweets and countless other locally produced items make shopping part of the adventure. Don’t be surprised if Clay and Valerie are there to greet customers, pose for photographs or share stories about their family’s love of the land.

That love extends well beyond sunflower season.

Even after the blooms have faded, the Olivers encourage visitors to explore Pitts through self-guided community tours

highlighting the town’s unique history. Stops include the old jail, the Turtle Trail and even the site where a meteor struck the area decades ago. The maps are also available during sunflower season.

The Olivers’ efforts have earned national attention. Their farm has been featured in several national magazines including the New York Times and recently was featured on PBS.

It’s easy to understand why. Whether you’re wandering through acres of towering sunflowers, shopping for locally made products or discovering the charm of rural South Georgia, Oliver Farm offers an experience that proves some of Georgia’s most unforgettable destinations are found far from the interstate. ♦



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The fall blooms are expected to peak in early to mid-September. Follow their

progress online or on the Oliver Farm Facebook page.

Visitors also can learn more about Oliver Farm and The Station by visiting: oliverfarm.com • thestation31072.com

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Backyard Feeding Frenzy

Story by Lynn Hobbs

Here he is again, one of God's amazing creations, staring me down eye-to-eye. He's 3-inches, 0.12-ounces of beauty that can fly forward, backward, straight up, straight down, or even hover mid-air like a helicopter.

Even though it seems there are hundreds of colorful, pollinating florals around our yard, make no mistake, this guy wants more.

I'm not fooled by his smallness—he is determined to eat us out of house and home. My husband and I may as well become shareholders in the sugar-manufacturing conglomerates so we can recoup a small portion of the bags of money I've spent making the 1-to-4 parts sugar water the hummingbirds crave.

Each morning, I rise before the crack of dawn to wash and fill the all-you-can-eat buffet of feeders hanging around our yard. As the sun peeps over the horizon, I pull back the kitchen window curtain and see him hovering impatiently at the window because he knows my morning routine.





I carefully balance the filled feeders so not a drop spills as I carry them out the door and into the battle zone. As I proceed, these exquisite hummers become miniature birds of prey, darting back and forth figuring out which hook I'll head to first. Once the feeders are in place, they all dine amicably, simultaneously. They are hungry, so there isn't a single fight at the table as the first meal of the day begins.

As the minutes pass, the colorful males launch a feisty, day-long territorial battle over each feeder.

One will perch on a nearby fence, tree branch, or even on top of the feeder itself. From there, he constantly guards the battle stations of homemade nectar and chest-bumps the other hummers away with loud chirps. It's a showy exhibition of nature's masculinity at its finest.

But one female has her own cunning strategy of dining without disturbing the peace. She waits demurely in a hidden place under the eaves without making a peep. As soon as king hummer fights off the squadrons and chases them to a faraway tree to prevent imminent return, she moves in. She doesn't hover at the feeder as she dines. Instead, she confidently sits on the little perch and chugs that sweet liquid like my sons used to down Powerade after baseball practice. She doesn't come up for air until a familiar hum breaks the silence, signifying king male's return. She abruptly disappears to her hiding place until the next opportunity arises, and I smile triumphantly at her success.

At the end of a long day at work, I return home, pull into the driveway and open my car door. In an instant, the tiny-but-mighty ruby-throats swarm down from the trees and command my



(Virginia Lynch photo)

attention with their agile, aerial acrobatics.

The drone of their rapidly approaching wings sound like miniature WWII aircraft zooming in. They chirp me off in no uncertain terms, using chirps that would probably make a sailor blush. Their antics cause me to question my audacity of being a single minute late to refill their feeders. What kind of a person am I, delaying their dire need for a sugar fix? Just in case I didn't get the message, they impatiently zoom around to the emptied feeders as if to point them out, then zoom back again to chirp-fuss some more.

Unlike the peaceful (dare I say,

"humdrum"?) morning feeding, the evening feeding time buzzes with chaotic excitement. The bees and hornets have emerged and occupy the feeding ports, feasting on the dribbles left by the sloppy-eating hummers. The stinging insects join my ranks of being chirped-off by the hovering hummingbirds as they wait to dart in on a nectar-filled plastic flower as soon as the insect flies away. Likewise, I must engage defensive dodging tactics to replace the emptied bottles with filled ones.

Last year, a new culture in feathered behavior presented itself, and already has returned this year. I've caught small

chickadees in the act of sitting on the nectar feeder perches, seeming to dine while keeping king male hummer and his backups busy defending their turf. Neighbors have reported woodpeckers doing the same. Plainly, sugar water trumps "birds of a feather flock together," and backyard hummingbird feeder-keg parties are becoming a trend.

But my feathers aren't ruffled – I know king male and quick-witted female ruby-throats will fly above the rest and reign supreme. My triumphant smile returns.

Backyard life is a grand life, indeed. ♦



(Virginia Lynch photo)

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