

# Jones Living

GRAY AND JONES COUNTY'S HOMETOWN MAGAZINE

FREE

SUMMER 2026



FARM DAY • ACTING, WRITING, ICE CREAM • REMEMBERING TERRANCE

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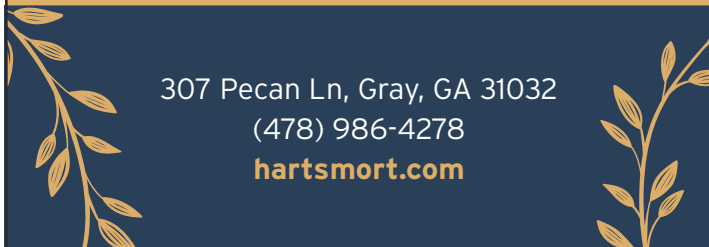
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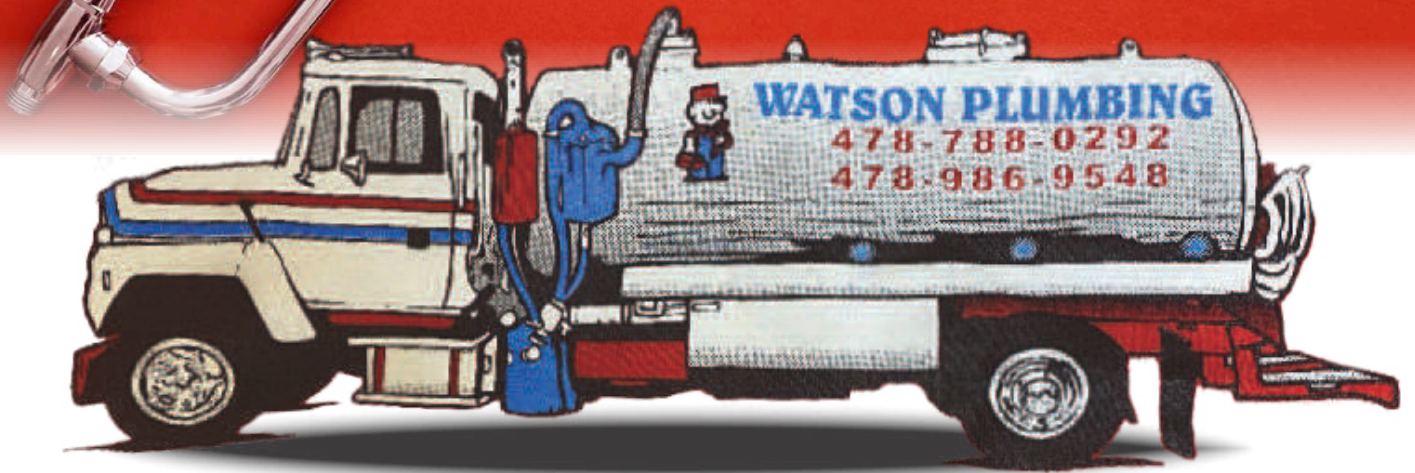
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# WHERE DO WE GET OUR FOOD?

## Jones County Pre-K students explore agriculture during annual Farm Day

Story by Bethany Tapee-Ward

Jones County Pre-K students learned about where their food comes from during the school's annual Farm Day event, which brings hands-on agricultural experiences directly to campus.

Pre-K teacher Lauren Goble spearheaded the April 21 event, which highlights Georgia agriculture through live animals, demonstrations, and community partnerships. Farm Day is held every year at Jones County Pre-K to introduce students to farming at an early age.

"Farm Day is so important because it exposes our students to agriculture. It is Georgia's largest industry, but less than 2% of the population actually does agriculture, and each year that number decreases," Goble said.

Students rotated through stations featuring livestock, pollinators, dairy education, and planting activities throughout the day. Goble said the experience

helps young learners understand how food reaches their table.

"Exposing our students to agriculture, they learn where food comes from and how it gets on the table, which helps them gain appreciation for agriculture," she said.

One featured attraction was the Georgia Mobile Dairy Classroom, a free educational resource available to schools across the state. The interactive classroom includes a live dairy cow and a working milking parlor.

Nicole Duvall led the dairy demonstration and introduced students to Elsie, a Jersey dairy cow. Duvall engaged the students with questions and facts about dairy farming.

"What color is Elsie?" Duvall said, prompting students to shout that the cow was

brown and white.

Duvall explained that Elsie is part of the second most common dairy breed. She also taught students that only female cows who are mothers can produce milk and that cows grow much faster than humans.



I want my students to be cheerleaders for agriculture. It is such a hard, volatile career with weather and pricing, and I really want our students to appreciate it and keep it Georgia's number one industry.

**Pre-K teacher and event coordinator Lauren Goble**

"Any mammal that has a baby makes milk," she said.

When one student guessed that Elsie was 20 years old, Duvall clarified that Elsie is only 3 and had her first calf at 2.

"Elsie weighed 800 pounds at 2 years old. She eats about 100 pounds of feed and drinks about a bathtub full of water every day," she said.

Duvall then demonstrated how cows are milked and explained the pasteurization process to students. She also taught them that milk is used to make foods such as cheese, butter, yogurt, milkshakes, whipped cream, and ice cream. When asked if feeding Elsie a

chocolate bar would produce chocolate milk, students quickly answered no.

Local agriculture played a major role in the event. Smith Farms brought a beef cow, pony, rabbit, and chickens for students to see and pet. Fifth-grader Tarver Smith and his pre-K-aged sister, Cecilia Smith, helped present the animals alongside their parents, Kalie and Kip Smith, and 4-H representative Elizabeth Rossman.

"Do you know how you have to have a driver's license to drive a car? I have to have this yellow tag on my cow's ear to show her," Smith told students.

Zeb Wilson from Round Oak Apiaries taught students how bees make honey and discussed their life cycle and environmental role.

"It's beneficial for kids to see agriculture, from honeybees to cows. Kids don't often get the opportunity to learn about agriculture, and it's beneficial for them to learn about it at a young age to give them a base knowledge and to get them excited," Wilson said.

Students also met Gino, a Nigerian dwarf goat brought by Maddie Armona.

"Gino the goat is a Nigerian dwarf goat that we raised up and bottle-fed inside," Armona said.

Gino is two years old.

"I wish I was a baby goat," one student said.

Keep Jones Beautiful and members of the Garden Club helped students plant seeds during the event. Director Abbie Barton spoke with students about the importance of recycling and environmental responsibility.

"One of my goals in stepping into



this position recently is to teach reduce, reuse, recycle to children at a young age, rather than having them hear about it in college for the first time for community service. Teaching students about recycling at a young age benefits everyone in our community,” she said.

Goble said Farm Day connects classroom instruction with realworld learning, especially through cooking activities she conducts in her classroom.

“Fridays in our class, we cook, and I always highlight a Georgia commodity, like apples, when our class made apple pie together,” she said.

Her students have made dishes such as strawberry donut bread pudding and pumpkin oatmeal, with future plans to cook with peanuts. Each student will take home a recipe book at the end of the year.

“Science, math, all of that goes into this cooking curriculum,” Goble said.

Goble’s passion for agriculture comes from personal experience. Her family are tree farmers in Jones County, and she grew up on a farm.

“I want my students to be cheerleaders for agriculture. It is such a hard, volatile career with weather and pricing, and I really want our students to



appreciate it and keep it Georgia’s number one industry,” she said.

She added that early exposure can inspire future involvement in agricultural education.

She also said she wants students to get excited now so they will take the agriculture pathways once they get to middle and high school. ♦





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## BEHIND THE BUSINESS

# Acting, writing, AND ICE CREAM

Entrepreneurs enjoy creative ventures,  
opening their downtown Gray business

Story by Greenberry Moore

It's not every day that an author and an actor live in a small town and depend on a small ice cream shop for their livelihood, but Paige and Billy Horne are doing just that — successfully.

The two entrepreneurs opened Cone Crazy on Main in the heart of downtown Gray in August of 2024, and it has been a popular spot since day one. The ice cream shop is attracting folks from all around Middle Georgia.

The two owners took different paths to get there. Billy, 40 now, graduated from Jones County High and went to work at what became UPS. Paige Peacock

dropped out of school in the ninth grade.

“I just didn't like high school,” Paige, now 37, confessed. “I would say now to give it a fair chance, but I was young, and I just wanted to be done with it. My mom was like, ‘Okay, if that's what you want, but go get your GED.’ So I did. I went and got it.”

After going to tech school for two years, Paige went to work at S&S Cafeteria at the age of 19.

“I worked there for 16 years. And I loved it. I mean, I made really good money. I just liked being in customer service.”

Billy, meanwhile, still working at UPS, got into



the movie and television industry in 2011 and worked both in front of and behind the cameras until COVID hit. That pretty much ended that career, and he began helping Paige with her 'part-time' job, writing novels.

### Surprise proposal, marriage on the bridge

The two have been married 12 years but together 20.

"We were just boyfriend and girlfriend for a long time," Paige said. "And we joked that we would be one of those couples that never got married. We're like, we'll just be together."

Then came the cruise in 2011. When they were off the ship and on the beach in Jamaica, Billy asked her to get her camera out of her book bag.

"I turned around, put my book bag on the ground, and I am digging through it, and I am getting my camera out. When I go to turn around, he's on his knee.

**Top: The Jones County-Gray Chamber of Commerce hosted a ribbon cutting in 2024 for Cone Crazy, a downtown Gray business opened by Paige and Billy Horne. At right, the Hornes were honored for their 'Emerging Business of the Year' by the Chamber.**





**Paige kissed Billy when she thought she was married. The officiant wasn't finished.**



**Paige ready to greet fans at one of her book-signing events.**

“I was very, very surprised,” Paige exclaimed. “When I turned around, I was in shock, like, I swear, you know how people say some stuff like the world will stop around you? I swear it did. Everybody was like in slow motion. And I remember I said, ‘Are you serious?’”

“I think maybe he said, yeah, and then of course I was like, ‘Yeah!’”

Billy said he planned it not too long before the trip.

“About a month before leaving to go on the cruise, I decided that’s where I wanted to do it,” he shared. “And then after that, I went over to her parents’ house and asked for their blessing.”

Three years after his proposal, they tied the knot, and again it was special.

“We had a very small wedding,” Paige recalled. “We found a covered bridge in Upson County, and we called the county, and we asked, ‘Hey, can we get married here?’ And they said, ‘As long as nobody’s there, it’s fine with us.’”

“So, we got the dress and tux and all that stuff, and we had the bridesmaids and the groomsmen and all that. We invited everybody there. We didn’t have any chairs for anybody to sit. They had to stand.”

### **A budding author grows up**

Paige, who has now written 13 novels, took a summer writing class at Mercer while in third grade. She wrote a story about her two dogs, and the class instructor compiled hers and the works of students into a book.

“That was the first time I got published, so that was really cool.”

Fast forward about 16 years, and Paige has gotten back into reading.

“Billy bought me a Kindle when it first came out,” Paige recalled. She started reading what she later learned were self-publishing



**From 'In Dubious Battle' in 2013. Billy, second from left kneeling, with actors Vincent D'Onofrio, James Franco and Nat Wolff.**

authors. She reached out to an author to find out more about that profession. The author explained it.

"You go to KDP, which is Kindle Direct Publishing. It's through Amazon, and you just upload your manuscript and you hit 'Publish.' And it's live on Amazon for everybody to read.

"So I started writing a book, just kind of playing around with it. I got Billy to read it, and he was like, 'This is good. You should keep doing it.'

"I got some of my friends to read it. They were all really into reading like I was, and they agreed, 'This is good. I need to know what happens next.' So I would kind of just be writing for them so I could send them what was happening next.

"Then before I knew it, I was typing the end. I was like, 'What? I did this? Oh my God!' And then the real work began.

"The writing part is easy. The marketing and all that, that's the hardest thing," Paige made clear. "The money that you spend, the

time that it takes to market ... It takes more time to market the book and try to get the book out there than it does to write the book.

"Then there are the book signings," she continued. "Those are a lot of fun, but they're also expensive. You have to pay for a table. You have to buy all your books to bring with you for people to purchase and you to sign them. But, it's almost like you are famous just for a little bit, because all these people know who you are when you go there. Then once it's done, you come back home and you are like, oh, I'm just a server again, you know, just a normal girl."

### **In front of and behind the cameras**

While Paige was writing romance novels, Billy was doing his own thing but in a different media. He got into acting, performing in several different shows, both television series and films, and he became a Production Assistant as well.

Billy said he has always had a passion for movies.

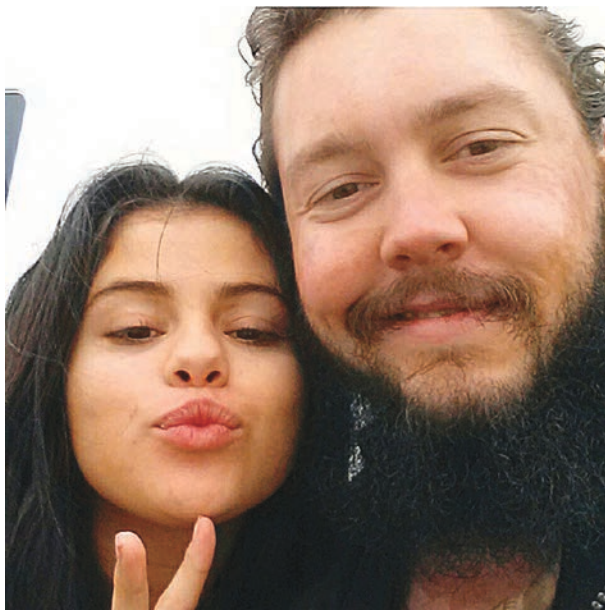
"I've always loved movies. My cousins were in theater, and they went to college for theater and everything, and I was around them a lot. They lived up in Indiana, so I'd go up there every summer. I kind of got the feel of the love for theater.

"So," Billy went on, "when I found out that they (film crew) were coming to Macon, I said, 'Hey, here's my shot. I'm gonna try to get on it.'"

The movie *The Crazies* was filming in Macon, and he learned through Facebook how to become an extra.

"I went to work on the film," Billy recalled. "On the first day, they asked me to be a stand-in for one of the actors, and that gave me a behind-the-scenes role on the crew."

Billy worked on the film for about three weeks, and during that time he networked, found other casting companies, and began working on more movie sets. "I fell in love with the



**Billy with Selena Gomez.**



**Paige and Billy at 'The Passage' wrap party with Mark-Paul Gosselaar.**

business and wanted to do more of it.” The up-and-coming actor was eventually laid off his regular job because of his movie exploits.

In 2013, Billy worked on a film directed by James Franco, *In Dubious Battle*. The film was an adaptation of the novel written by John Steinbeck. Filming lasted a little over a month, and he worked alongside Robert Duvall, Ed Harris, Sam Shepard, Vincent D’Onofrio, Selena Gomez, and James Franco.

Billy likes to share that he got an up-close picture with Selena, and her fans started spreading rumors that they were dating.

“I woke up the next morning to over 700 notifications. Her team had to sweep the internet of any photos of the two of us. It was definitely a highlight!”

In 2015, Billy was cast as a core Savior in *The Walking Dead* Season Six. That was a recurring role toward the end of that season.

The following season, he returned as a Savior and appeared in several episodes. When Cooper Andrews — who played Jerry, King Ezekiel’s right-hand man in the Kingdom — joined the show,

Billy was asked to serve as his stand-in.

During the last two seasons of the show, Billy was also working as a PA, and by the end of season seven, he was behind the camera only for two more years.

Paige acknowledged the work had its drawbacks. “The hours were grueling, 17-plus hours a day. He would get home late, get up at 4 a.m., and drive all the way back to Atlanta to make his call time.”

Billy echoed her observations. “I was working 14-hour days as a background actor and then even longer days as a PA. My longest day I worked was 23 hours. We were all exhausted.”

### **COVID spurs more books, new businesses**

According to Billy, COVID significantly slowed the movie industry for a while, and it changed his outlook.

“I went back a few times after the COVID quarantine was released. It was over and everything, so I went back a few times and just didn’t like it. It slowed down so much that Hollywood started pulling out of Georgia, and they went over to

the UK. They built a big studio over there, Marvel Studios.”

Paige commented that Billy then focused on helping with her books. “He created my website, helped with marketing and social media — which now has over 10 million views on my author TikTok — and helped kick-start my Georgia book tour.”

The couple opened their first business, The Well Tap mobile bar, in 2022.

“I found the idea scrolling TikTok when I discovered a couple of girls doing it in Pennsylvania,” Paige recalled. “I showed Billy, and he thought it was a good idea. He started researching, discovered nobody in the Middle Georgia area had a mobile bar like that, and he got on the phone with China.

“They built it for us and shipped it over. It was a scary time because it was when all the shipping containers were just sitting in the water, so we thought we’d never get it.”

Two years later, the couple pondered another possible business. They didn’t ponder long.

“We were going back and forth to Forsyth to eat ice cream,” Billy

recalled. “And we’re like, ‘This is a good idea. We need to see about bringing this to Gray. I think Gray could really use an ice cream shop.’ And, that’s where the idea came from, just taking little day trips. We would always stop and get ice cream.”

They found out a building space was up for lease, and they talked to the owner and shared their thoughts.

“She loved the idea, and the ball just went rolling from there,” Paige said.

“I mean, one minute we’re just talking about it, the next minute we were hauling stuff in here, and we were like, ‘What is going on?’”

The Hornes met with Downtown Development Authority officials and pitched their idea. “And they were like, ‘We love it. Let’s go.’”

“And I remember walking out of there, Paige smiled, “and Billy and I looked at each other, thinking, ‘This is really happening’. This was just kind of an idea. We didn’t really think we were going to do this.”

Paige said the DDA remodeled the space, but Billy was responsible for most of the interior.

“The wall, everything you see is Billy. He designed every bit of it, the layout, everything. Billy and I hung up that wallpaper,” she pointed out. “Dear God, if I never have to hang up wallpaper again, I’ll be all right.”

Paige described opening day as a mixed blessing.

“The first day, we were so busy we didn’t even know what to do,” she reflected, “and then the power went out for five hours. And I tell everybody this, so I’m a broken record. But I swear I think God did that intentionally so we could have a break because it was just so slammed in here, so packed.”

Even though the credit card machine was out temporarily, that didn’t faze the customers, Paige said.



**Paige and Billy with Izzy, their mobile bar.**



**The Hornes with Laura Starling opening day at the shop.**

“The people did not stop. They left and got cash and came back, and we still had a line out the door, but it wasn’t as crazy. But it was probably almost 90 degrees in here, and the people were just sitting in here, eating ice cream. It was melting everywhere. Nobody cared. It was so awesome.”

Nearly two years later, the number and combinations of ice cream specials are too numerous to list here. “You must come see for yourself what there is,” Paige suggested.

Billy pointed out that they have customers from Macon, Milledgeville, and Eatonton, just to name a few area towns.

“The word’s getting out all around Middle Georgia.”

Paige acknowledged that their business is somewhat seasonal, but Cone Crazy on Main is still going strong.



### **We love being here.**

We’ve heard it the whole time we’ve been here that Gray did need a place like this after all, and so that makes us feel good. But we wanted to create a spot where people could come, bring their kids, enjoy themselves and create memories.

**Paige Horne**



“This is a memory-maker for kids. I see it every day; the kids come in here after school. You can see it on their faces. They’re like, ‘Oh, look at this place.’ It’s a cool spot that I think people will remember when they get older, and then they will bring their



**The Hornes were slammed the first day Cone Crazy opened, but the success of their business has kept them smiling.**

kids. I think that’s pretty cool. Makes it pretty special.”

Away from the shop, Paige is still writing.

“I’ve been working on a book for probably about three years now, which is a long time for me. I used to get books out in like three months, but I only worked 20 hours a week. Now I don’t.”

She also now writes a column periodically for *The Jones County News*. “It’s called ‘Thoughts from Main Street’ because, here we are,” she said, looking around. “Personal stuff, stuff about downtown, maybe other

business owners.”

Billy’s days typically consist of doing whatever’s needed at the time for their shop, yard work, and other chores. But, last Fall, he spent time on the campaign trail, running for city council.

“I really wanted to do it, but then every now and again, I was like, ‘what am I getting myself into?’ But, yeah, I only lost by five votes.”

Billy said he had a lot of support, and that may influence his future political plans.

“I think I am going to do it again.” ♦



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Facing page: Gore at bat during the 2010 season for the Greyhounds.  
Above: Gore in the playoffs for Major League Baseball's Kansas City Royals.

A GREYHOUND GREAT

# He was always 'just Terrance'

Gore recalled for wide-ranging  
impact in majors and close to home

Story by Brad Harrison

**F**or most student-athletes to don the purple and gold of Jones County, most of their acclaim and impact are mostly confined to what they do on the field or court.

But when it comes to Terrance Gore, who died on Feb. 6, the indelible mark left by the former JCHS multi-sport standout, it's one that left deep imprints to those that knew him and even those who did not.

Gore's rare speed caught the eye of the Kansas City Royals,

who made the decision to draft him in 2011. He'd go on to be part of a team that advanced to a pair of World Series, winning it all in 2015.

The Royals utilized a rock-solid bullpen and late-game offensive weapons to find that success, and Gore was a major part of that.



**A locker in memory of Terrance Gore is on display in the JCHS football fieldhouse, serving as a reminder of those who have paved the way in the past.**

And Gore was recalled as a teammate and more, so much so that his former manager with the Royals, Ned Yost, was among those who offered an eulogy during Gore's February funeral at the JCHS Gymnasium.

"We continued to develop him as a young man. It was a testament of what he was able to do," Yost recalled. "When he got (called up), our locker room was next-level professional smack-talkers, and he'd just have a big smile. He'd walk through the room with a big smile; it was amazing. It's hard for me to call him Terrance because our whole locker room called him 'G-Baby.'"

Gore's lightning-fast speed caught the eye of other teams, as well. He also played for the Cubs, Mets, Royals, Dodgers and Braves, going in to be part of two other World Series-winning teams.

"He was one of most feared players in all of Major League Baseball," Yost said. "There was no way when Terrance entered that game that you'd even be successful in getting him out. It was a done deal."

But well before the bright lights of the majors, there was the place that was and remained home for Gore — Jones County.

And few people had more of a front-row seat for Gore's athletic exploits than Jay Jones.

When Jones began teaching at Mattie Wells Elementary in 2000, Gore was in third grade, and he'd go on to coach him from seventh grade on either football or baseball. But Jones had a good idea of what Gore could do well before that.

"When he was in elementary school, we'd do activities and games, stuff like that. He was head and shoulders faster than all the other kids," Jones recalled. "You kind of knew that 'this kid is different.' Even at that age, he was just different. But he didn't flaunt



**Terrance Gore was fearsome on the gridiron as well, rushing for more than 1,000 yards as a senior.**

it. I don't think he realized it at that age. He just excelled. He was always having a good time."

As Gore moved up in age, so did Jones, who would become the first baseball coach at Clifton Ridge Middle School. That span of time included Gore.

So where did Gore — who would go on to make a living stealing bases in the majors — play first?

Behind the plate, a position he had played in recreational ball. Given Gore's speed, that was advantageous when it came to corraling passed balls.

A friend of mine still kids me about being the only coach in the history of our middle school league who played the fastest kid in the league at catcher ... if a ball got by him, he was quick as a cat and was going to get it.

**Jay Jones**



**Former Greyhound Terrance Gore, who played in two World Series with the Royals, presents an autographed Kansas City cap to JCHS principal Chuck Gibson and athletic director Barry Veal for the school's trophy case at a 2014 basketball game.**

That mostly ended in Gore's eighth-grade year at the behest of then-JCHS head baseball coach Barry Veal, although Gore moved back to catcher for that year's postseason, aiding the Cougars to a league title.

Jones and Gore would continue to be linked. With Gore at JCHS, Jones coached him both as a baseball and football assistant, even being his football position coach for the Greyhounds, where he rushed for 1,000 yards as a senior.

"He was always laughing, always in a good mood. I think I only saw him in a bad mood once. He was always one that you could depend on. He never had a bad day of practice," Jones said. "He knew he was special and better than anyone, but he never antagonized anyone. But when it came time to be serious and if it was gametime, he'd say 'I got you, coach.'"

Jones County was home for Gore, and his former coach's memories are but one of many testaments of that, as Jones recalls that Gore took time to

submit a tribute video as part of a compilation when Jones retired at the end of the 2024 football season.

"Even for me, when they did my tribute video, he took the time to send it. I have that on my phone. If I ever contacted him and needed something, a photo or video, he was always willing to do that," Jones said. "He was always 'just Terrance,' and I think a lot of that comes from his mother. She taught him to be humble, and if anyone had to reason not to, it was him. He was the fastest kid that I ever coached."

Current Greyhound head baseball coach Noble Coley and head football coach Justin Montgomery never met Gore, but what he meant to both programs is still very evident.

In the football field house, a locker of Gore's jersey and helmet are on display, serving as a reminder of the foundation laid by those before the current Greyhounds.

"One of our bloodlines is honor, and we talk about honoring those

who came before us," Montgomery said. "Terrance is one who laid the foundation. We want to make sure we understand the history of this place, and honor someone who has paved the way for us in a lot of ways. He put Jones County on the map."

The Diamond Hounds quickly put together tributes for Gore after his death with an on-field logo and helmet stickers in honor of Gore.

"For us, it's 'how can we honor his legacy?' We want to do things the way that Terrance did, so now it's about trying to carry on that legacy in all we do."

It's a legacy that still resonates with people like Yost.

"Baseball is a routine game; your routine is always the same. For me, if we had a 7:30 game, I was always there at 8:30 a.m. and would walk by every player's locker and say a prayer for them," Yost said. "It was not for a victory, but for them to be a good teammate, dad, son, father, and person. He answered all of my prayers; he was 100 percent that. He's greatly missed; that's for sure." ♦

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TRAVEL

**Gander at the**  
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**GOOSE**  
**in Irwinton**



Story by Suzanne Lawler

## Most mornings in Irwinton begin slowly — with the hum of a coffee grinder, the clink of china and the smell of something sweet baking in the oven — at the Blue Goose.

On Main Street, inside a ranch-style house that feels more like a grandmother's living room than a business, strangers become housemates, cyclists map out long rides and a deaf tabby named Crustina greets guests like she owns the place.

It's not the kind of destination people stumble upon by accident. There's only one stoplight in town and no beaches or mountains to draw a crowd. But for those who make the trip, the Blue Goose offers something harder to find:

a quiet, deeply personal kind of getaway.

The Blue Goose is part hostel, part gift shop and part bakery.

Donna Asbell and her husband, Roger Bacon, first opened the Blue Goose in St. Marys in 2011 before bringing the concept home to Wilkinson County a few years later.

If you want a cup of joe, they make their own syrups, and a delightful barista named Ginger will greet you with a genuine, warm smile. "She makes

everyone comfortable," Asbell said.

The Blue Goose doesn't have an extensive menu. If you're looking for a meat-and-three, Asbell will send you down to MaeBob's Dining Room. What the Blue Goose does have is a bakery that will make you drool. Try an ooey-goey bar, a guest favorite. "Some people stick them in the freezer and eat them bite by bite, while others eat them as soon as they walk out the door," Asbell said.

You can also dive into a bowl of

decadent banana pudding. Asbell and her crew know a thing or two about the dessert. They run the official state banana pudding cookoff and festival every year. If you're lucky, you may visit when carrot cake is featured. The staff grates fresh vegetables for the layered treat. "We also make our own different kinds of ice cream," Asbell added.

The Blue Goose is also a hostel — a term that simply means shared living spaces. Guests may see one another in the kitchen or living room, and the bathroom operates much like it would at home: one at a time.

The rolling terrain of Irwinton and the surrounding countryside attracts athletes who are drawn to the laid-back hostel. "We have cyclists come here because this is the first place they can ride flats and hills in the same area," Asbell said. "Most of the teams that come want to do about 160 miles, so they can do that in a weekend with some variety."

Other visitors come for a slower pace.

"We'll have someone come from Savannah or Atlanta, and I'll ask what brings them to Irwinton," Asbell said with a chuckle. "They'll say, 'We just wanted to get away.' You can't get much farther away than Irwinton."

And there's nothing wrong with that.

Relax on the rustic back porch, decorated with wildflowers and soft evening lights. The only thing likely to interrupt your solitude is a loving cat named Crustina.

The stray tabby is a bit unusual-looking — her ears bend awkwardly, and her face is flatter than most — but around here, she's more popular than the Blue Goose's namesake out front.

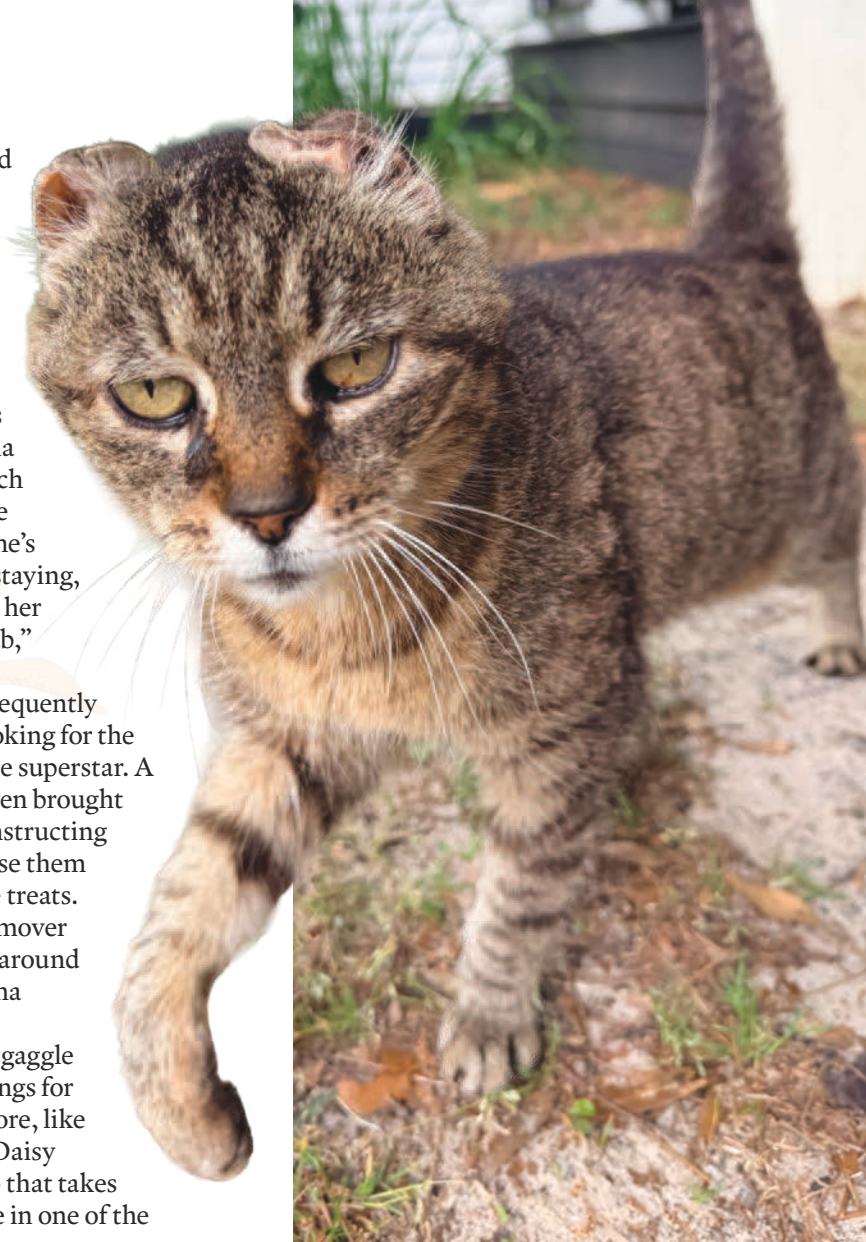
"Crustina showed up about three months ago, and she was very, very thin," Asbell said. "She

has this loud meow and wouldn't stop."

Asbell fed the cat and took her to the vet. It turns out Crustina is deaf, which explains the volume. "She's here, she's staying, and she has her own fan club," Asbell said.

Guests frequently show up looking for the town's feline superstar. A few have even brought gift cards instructing Donna to use them to purchase treats. "She is the mover and shaker around here," Donna chuckled.

There's a gaggle of other things for you to explore, like the Rustic Daisy flower shop that takes center stage in one of the



rooms. Plant yourself for a spell and check out the colorful vases and flowery décor. Order a few stems to take home.

A few feet away, you can visit the gift shop, which has the usual wares like regional jams

and jellies. You can also buy gifts such as a sourdough starter kit, T-shirts and floppy hats. And if you're in the market, pick up a cold-brew maker. Plus you can't leave the place without purchasing a plastic version of its

namesake — a plastic goose to perch on your front porch.

So make a trip to Irwinton; it's surely not a wild-goose chase but a chance to get away and treat yourself to some low-key rest and relaxation. ♦



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Members of the Stanford family: Marcus (l-r), Jeff, Kandy, Ansley and Amber in the body shop office after the business reopened.



BUSINESS BOUNCES BACK

# Stan's continues family tradition of resilience

Story by Debbie Lurie-Smith

A family owned and operated business in Jones County reopened last month, better than it was before a fire and a tragedy shut it down for nine months.

# The Jones County News

PUBLISHED IN THE INTEREST OF

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Legal Organ for Jones County and the City of Gray

## Arson Suspicions Probed

Two fires that occurred Monday, January 5, are currently under investigation by different bureaus.

In the early morning hours, the Deputy Sheriff patrolling discovered a fire within Stan's Grocery, in Wayside. A general alert was put out, and all the County Volunteer fire departments responded, as well as two units from Jasper County. Water had to be obtained from Bradley, so a steady convoy of pumps shuttled back and forth for water to extinguish the intense blaze.

"Wayside only had three stores, and only two that sold gas, so now there is only one that sells gas," a neighbor of the store said at the time of the fire. James Stanford, owner of the store, had no insurance on the building itself; however the contents were covered. He estimated the damage at about 160,000. We are starting to rebuild ready, of course," Stanford said.

The incident underwent a formal investigation last week. The State Fire Marshal, a division within the office of the State Comptroller General, sent

### MLKing, Jr. Memorial Set

A commemorative celebration, sponsored by local civil rights and community organizations and a local newspaper, will be held January 16, in honor of the birthdate of the late Dr. Martin Luther King. The day-long event will begin with a memorial march at 9 am from Unionville Recreation Center on Speer Avenue to Macon City Hall. Sponsors of the celebration will include the Martin Luther King, Jr. Club and Adult Club, NAACP, SCLC, Macon Courier, Ruth Mosley-son's Center, Unionville Movement Association, Ebony

trained investigators to the scene. Mr. Burton Wilson, Field Supervisor for the office in a 29 county area, along with Frank Areber, a fire marshal for Baldwin and Jones counties, thoroughly sifted through evidence at the scene.

"We have turned in a preliminary report to our supervisor, Mr. Fred Smith. At this time I would say that the investigation won't go any further. We did find some evidence that it might have been a malfunction of the electrical wiring. We found 15 or so feet of parched 600 volt wire, near the fuse box in the center of the building. The back of the building was constructed with pine wood in the trusses, which gives off a substance similar to kerosene when it is burned - that leads us to a dead-end trying to determine if a flammable material was used to start the fire. We don't really know what started it, and we probably never will."

A mid-afternoon fire that same day, the 5th, sent three fire units out to the home of Nelson and Mary Jo Padgett, on Harris Chambers Road. Jim Starr, an employee with the Millidgeville Fire Department and a resident of Haddock, was one of the first on the scene.

"I was driving back up the (Harris Chambers) road, and I spotted the black smoke coming from within the house. I found a water hose, and broke out one of the windows to allow smoke and heat to escape, and sprayed it down. Of course, I had such little water pressure that it wasn't doing any good. None of the residents of the home were present, and as a result we had to tow a car away from the house - we didn't have the keys, and it was too close for comfort. We had gathered some of the redeemable items in the house together and placed them under salvage cover. I went back the next day



Stan's Grocery, in Wayside



The Padgett home, on Harris Chambers Road

to be sold on foreclosure less than 24 hours after it burned. It was foreclosed to pay off a note of indebtedness taken out at the Macon Bank. The sale did not

these things, and we have had a professional fire investigator go out to the scene, in fact he spent two days there. We don't have this report at this

Above: 1981 news article reporting the fire at the original Stan's. Below: Destruction to the body shop as the result of the 2025 fire.



Stan's Body Shop at 4250 Gray Highway is now celebrating 50 years serving the residents of the Gray and Jones County communities. When the shop reopened its doors April 20, everything inside was brand new, including a \$150,000 state-of-the-art paint booth.

Jeff Stanford and his daughter Amber talked about the history of the business during an April 21 interview. Amber Ruff came to work at Stan's Body Shop in 2018, joining her brother Marcus Stanford, who has worked at the business since 2008.

Jeff said Stan's first opened in 1976 in Wayside. The address of the business was 1495 Highway 11, and it included a grocery store with gas pumps. He said his dad James built the buildings that housed the store and shop after returning from the Air Force in 1975.

Jeff said his first job was pumping gas and stocking the cooler when he was 11. The body shop business evolved from his father's hobby of auto repairs and painting cars for family and friends.

The owner recalled that the first Stan's burned to the ground Jan. 1, 1981.

"We never knew the cause. It was thought to be a car that caught on fire," he said.

Jeff said his father had no insurance on the buildings or business.

"My dad went to Gray and got a loan for \$150,000 and rebuilt it."

He said the interest on the loan in 1981 was 15 percent. When James rebuilt the buildings, he made it into a convenience store with gas pumps and a body shop.

"I liked the body shop better than mechanic repairs. Back then you did everything — tires, transmissions and a salvage yard," Jeff said.

The owner said when he graduated high school, he started



Above: Firefighters on the scene and more vehicles damaged due to the July 6, 2025, fire.  
Below: The April 20 reopening of Stan's Body Shop complete with flags in celebration.



working full-time at the body shop and took control of the shop, including estimates. He said back then that part was easy.

"We fixed people's cars and then billed the insurance company. Now it's all about approvals and supplements," he said.

By the 1990s, his father's health was declining, and they began leasing out the convenience store.

Jeff said his dad died in January of 2000, and at about that same time H&H Body Shop opened in Gray. Not long after, he realized the business was not as busy, and it was time to move.

"It was all about convenience. Now there was self-service gas, and people didn't want to drive seven extra miles to Wayside," he said.

The owner said he rented a building on Gray Highway in 2001 that was the former location of Mann's Beauty Supply. He said business increased right away and kept growing. In 2007, Jeff purchased a shop on Gray Highway located near the red light leading into Gray.

He recalled in 2008, many

local businesses were being forced out of their buildings due a bank changing hands and the recalling of balloon loans. That included the business that was at their current location.

Jeff said after the building sat empty for more than a year, he was able to purchase it at auction. Stan's opened at 4250 Gray Highway in 2014, and business was good.

"Everything was going so well, I was considering retirement," he said.

### July 6, 2025

Jeff said he was out of town, about three hours away that Sunday morning, when Amber called to tell him about the fire. Amber said it was Marcus who called her, stating that one of his friends had spotted the fire.

After first responders entered the building, a body was discovered. Investigators were called to the scene, and it was soon discovered the fire was not accidental.

Jones County Sheriff's Office Investigator Lt. Crystal Murphy

was the lead investigator in the case. She said she was contacted at 9:15 a.m. July 6 about the fire and suicide.

Murphy said the fire was extinguished by the fire departments before she arrived. Gray Highway was shut down in front of the body shop at 9 a.m. and one lane was reopened at 9:20 a.m.

Several cars inside the shop were damaged, along with the interior of the building, but the structure was still standing. The office portion of the building had water and smoke damage.

Murphy said the investigation was straight forward. She said the criminal part was over because there was no one to charge.

Gray Fire Department Chief Keith Eisele said the structure involved was in the county, and the city provided mutual aid. Jones County Fire Department Capt. Gary Harrell was the incident commander.

The reason the fire was started at that location remains a mystery.

Stanford said the Gray and Jones County Fire Departments



did a wonderful job, and Amber added a thank you to the community for all people did to reach out and help.

### Moving forward

Unlike his father, this owner of Stan's had insurance. Jeff said he got a call from his insurance agent, Bob Farnsworth, even before he arrived home to tell him not to worry. He said he had a check in hand two weeks later to start rebuilding.

Jeff said most of the damage to the building was from the heat and soot.

"Rebuilding has been a long road," he said.

The owner also talked about the former employee who started the fire before taking his own life. He said he had known the man for 30 years and had worked for Stan's many years ago, but he was far from a disgruntled employee. Jeff said he knew Jackson had problems over the years, and he always helped as much as he could.

"I always considered him a friend," he said.

Jeff said the building was cleaned last summer. During that time, he rented a stall from Craig Amerson at H&H to finish a few cars that were in the parking lot when the fire happened.

"Craig was a customer before he bought H&H, and we are still friends. I appreciated his help," he said.

The owner said he values his customers and rented the stall a couple of more times to take care of a few cars for regular customers. He noted if a shop does a good job for people, 90 percent of them will come back.

At the first of 2026, Jeff said they started putting the shop back together. He said his takeaway from the experience is to always have good insurance.

"It is nice to have all new equipment," he added.

The owner said a body shop can be a stressful job, mostly because of insurance companies. Amber said a big part of her day is spent writing supplements to claims. She said the adjusters now want to create their estimates from pictures of the damaged cars, which results in unrealistic repair numbers.

Jeff said it is not possible to see all the damage to a vehicle from a picture.

Amber added they are perfectionists at Stan's and are going to be sure a car is repaired correctly and not with inferior parts.

The owner said he enjoys working and plans to continue for a few more years to make sure the business is back on track. He said he especially enjoys working with his daughter and son.

"I don't like sitting at home. I like doing things like driving out of town to pick up a part when that's needed," Jeff said. "I don't have to worry about anything here; I know the business is in good hands." ♦

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DAY TRIP

# The splendor of Tallulah Gorge

Story and photos by Ed Williams



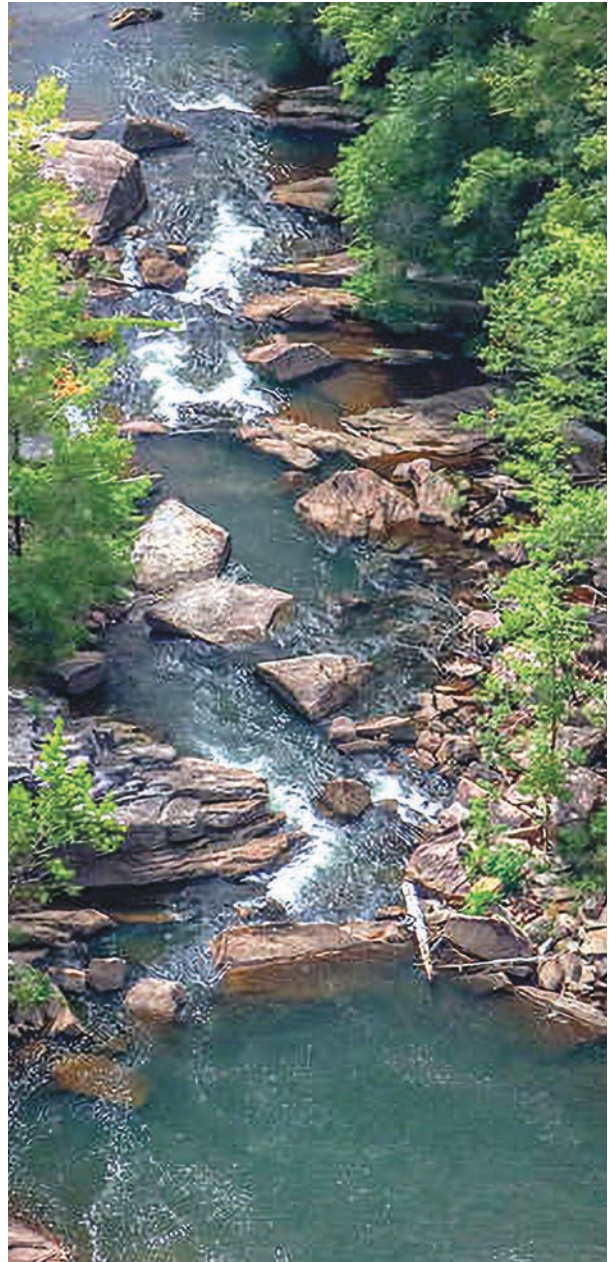
If you want raw beauty combined with the splendor of nature there's no better place to find it than Tallulah Gorge State Park. This beautiful park is located in Tallulah Falls, Georgia and offers everything from hiking over a high in-the-air suspension bridge to white water rafting and swimming in the gorge way down below.

You can do Tallulah Gorge State Park in a day from Lake Country, but it will be a busy, long day. I got up early, drove 172 miles from my home on Lake Sinclair, and spent around four hours on the trails and gorge overlook platforms. Then I drove back and ended up getting home around 6 p.m. I will freely attest that I didn't have to be rocked to sleep that night.

Here are some facts about Tallulah Gorge State Park – the gorge itself is about a thousand feet deep. The park also features a 63-acre lake, a suspension bridge 80 feet above the river, and six major waterfalls.



Certain parts of the park are not easy to access and can be tricky. For example, if you want to go to the gorge floor you have to sign up for a permit. Only 100 permits are given daily, so you need to get there early for that. The permit gives you the right to walk down flights of steps to get from the top of the gorge to the bottom. Like 1,132 steps to be exact. And as bad as that was to walk down, imagine what the walk back up was like. I was carrying a backpack with camera equipment and will freely admit it made a man out of me. Don't even try to do this if you're not in good condition and an experienced hiker. If you can't make it, you'll have to be helicoptered out at your own expense.



On the gorge floor, you will see lots of beautiful water and rocks. Looking up and around is amazing as this gorge is immense and beautiful. Walking around down there can be interesting. You have to wade through the river to get to the other side to hike around some and that water is rushing fast and hard. Be sure to wear something you can get wet in, be careful, and prepared for anything.

If you want to hike the gorge floor, check ahead of time for the certain times of planned water releases from the Tallulah Gorge Dam onto the gorge floor. There are times they have planned water releases from the Tallulah Gorge Dam onto the gorge floor. They periodically let extra water through either for



aesthetic reasons or even higher water through for whitewater rafting enthusiasts. Hiking the gorge floor won't be accessible during these water releases.

If you don't want to descend and ascend back up from the gorge floor, there's still plenty to see. You can circle much of the gorge rim from the park's trail systems; the views up there are amazing. Be sure to check out the waterfalls as you circle around.

If you want to bring pets, you can walk them around the rim trails but they will not let you

take them down into the gorge. Pets can get hurt down there for a number of potential reasons and thus they aren't allowed to the gorge floor.

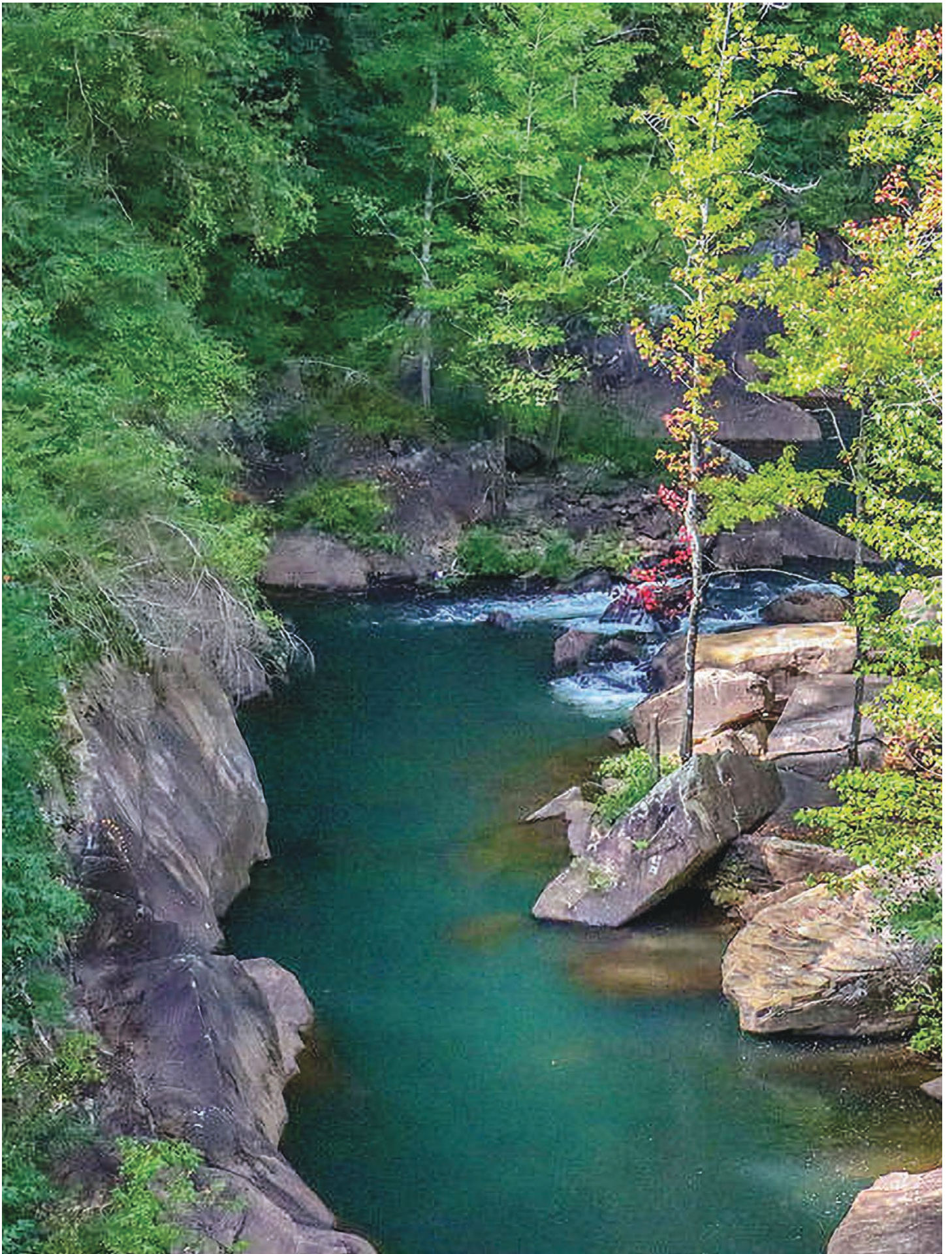
Oh – for some of you who may remember, Karl Walenda actually tight-roped across Tallulah Gorge back in 1970. I actually saw both of the towers he used to string the tightrope across as I hiked the rim trails. They're old and rusted out now, but if you remember this little part of Georgia history you'll recognize them when you see them.

All in all, Tallulah Gorge is a great experience! And don't let my single-day schedule influence you, you can easily spend several days there and have an excellent time. Plenty to do at the park and plenty in the surrounding area to keep you busy and occupied. Go, enjoy yourselves, and if you walk over that swinging suspension bridge, just know that it's better than morning coffee as a quick pick-me-up!

For even more info check out [gastateparks.org/TallulahGorge](http://gastateparks.org/TallulahGorge).







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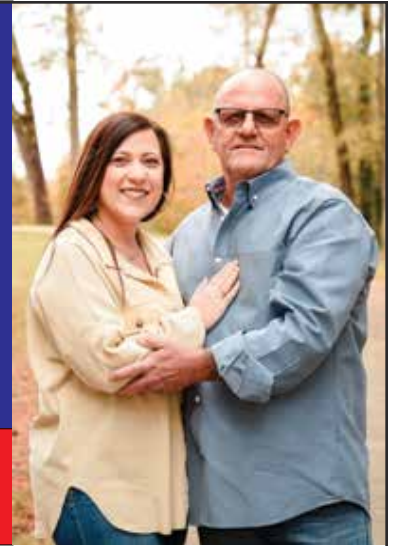
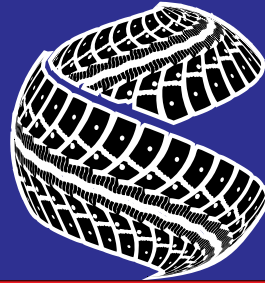


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