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From tragedy to triumph

By **JEFF McDONALD**
 editor@monticellonews.net

For over 30 years Options, Inc. has been a shining light that serves women in Ashley, Drew, Chicot, Bradley, and Lincoln Counties. Options is a beacon of hope and a safe space for women, and their children, who have been victims of domestic abuse. Unfortunately, this is still a very prevalent issue in today's culture, but thankfully places like Options exist.

Options runs on a small staff and rely heavily on the efforts and hours put in by countless volunteers. One of the staff members who is doing great things for Options and the community is Danna Carpenter, Executive Director of Options, Inc.

I have had the privilege of knowing Carpenter since the day she was born. Her father was the big brother that I never biologically had, but he was my big brother nonetheless. Having watched Carpenter grow up, I feel that it is safe to say that she probably never saw herself as the Director at Options, or that she would be able to fathom the number of lives she would impact through her service with the organization. She shows a level of dedication and compassion that is second to none. Many people would be sur-

prised to know that she developed her passion for her job because she was profoundly impacted by domestic violence as a child.

Near the end of 2002, Carpenter lost her father, Joey Rice, and her great-grandfather, Eddie Bolin, in a horrific domestic violence event that greatly changed and impacted the lives of all who knew them.

"I lost them at four years old," Carpenter said. "I've been fatherless most of my life."

Since that time, Carpenter has gone on to marry her husband Ryan and become the mother of four children, Oaklyn (5), Barrett (3), and twin boys Hayes and Hollis (1). Carpenter and her family reside in Crossett where she has lived her entire life.

Carpenter got her start at Options several years ago. Her husband's stepmother was the Director at the time and was looking for volunteers.

"I volunteered with her and donated items because I have always been passionate about this work," Carpenter stated.

Whenever the Outreach position opened up in July 2021, Carpenter applied without hesitation.

"I knew that I wanted to be a part of this amazing organization and I accepted the position," Carpenter added.

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CARPENTER

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She worked in the Outreach position for approximately six weeks and fell in love with that part of the work.

When the Director's job became available, the Board of Directors offered it to Carpenter.

"Without questioning I took it," Carpenter said. "I wanted to make a difference for victims, survivors, their families, the community, and be an advocate for people that weren't able to advocate for themselves."

"One of the highlights of my job is making a difference to someone who is at their lowest and doesn't have anyone left to be on their side," Carpenter said. "We, at Options, help anyone and everyone that just needs a support system."

According to Carpenter, a client who left the shelter approximately two months ago gave her the following statement:

"Options' employees welcomed me and made me feel loved and showed me endless support. They made me feel so many emotions, but my number one thing is that they made me feel safe."

Carpenter said that knowing that she and the Options staff can make someone feel safe while in the lowest part of their life is the highlight of what Options does

"Even though it takes a victim seven times

to leave their abuser and stay gone, I want to be there the other six times just in case they need that extra support," Carpenter noted.

Carpenter also said that seeing the children's eyes light up when they know that they can eat whatever snacks they want without getting in trouble, or that they can play loudly, as kids do, without feeling like they have to walk on eggshells is a huge highlight.

"Seeing these moms actually get to enjoy their children being children makes what I do worth it," Carpenter added.

Unfortunately, there are also many obstacles that Carpenter and her staff face as an organization. One of, if not the largest, of these obstacles is funding. Over the past three years, the organization has lost \$300,000 in funding. She says that this is why community donations and volunteers are vital to Options' success.

Another major obstacle is the lack of mental health services provided in the region.

In this region, mental health carries a stigma. Unless someone is personally affected, it is usually a taboo subject. There are also limited resources in this area of the state. Having worked as a counselor, I can personally attest to this, and it is a major area of concern in our communities.

Transportation is also an issue that they face daily. Most of the clients don't have the ability to leave their situation because they have no transportation. They also struggle

to get people to help them because most abusers alienate their victims from their families. They also tend to be in control of all money.

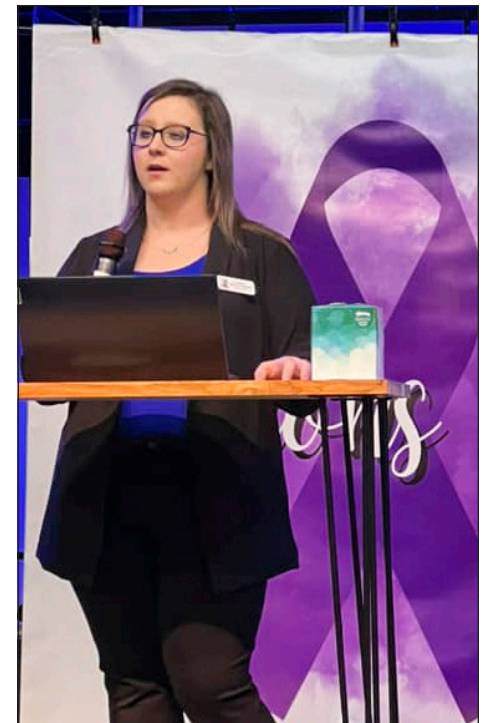
Carpenter said that another obstacle is that domestic violence carries a certain stigma as well. This stigma makes it hard to help victims. The common question of, 'Why don't they just leave?', can't be simply answered. There are many reasons.

"We want to help every single person that reaches out to us, whether they are ready for help or not," Carpenter stated. "As stated earlier, it takes someone an average of seven attempts to leave their abuser for good. I've had many clients tell me that leaving is one of the scariest things they face while in their abuse because they can't read their abuser, and they can't prepare for what the abuser is thinking or how they are acting."

"As Director of Options, I would like for everyone to know that we need your support," Carpenter said. "We need the people that we serve to know that they have people who are on their side when they've been told countless times that they don't. I want the people of the communities that we serve to know that we are for the people. We want to help. We want to make a difference. We want to be a support system. If you need support due to violence or homelessness, please give us a call."

Carpenter, like countless others, has let her past define who she is. The difference

between her and many others is that she let it make her a stronger and more compassionate human being. Forged in the fires of tragedy, she has triumphed over adversity and now stands as a champion for those who haven't found the strength or courage to fight back yet. To say that I am proud of the woman she has become is an understatement, and I look forward to seeing how many more lives she changes.



One woman's journey to bring a community together

By JOANNA POOLE
reporter@theeagleanddemocrat.com

Before 2018, something that the city of Monticello needed was a good place to get a great cup of coffee, along with a place to gather and hang out without any expectations. It needed to be a place with a relaxed and laid-back atmosphere. What would've been even better is if these were combined into one place. No one had yet to successfully open any place like this. But that would soon change.

Annette Taylor thought that exact thing when she moved to Monticello. Before relocating to Southeast Arkansas, Taylor had been working in sales.

"Before I moved to Monticello, I had been in sales my whole life and there weren't any opportunities here for that type of thing," Taylor said.

Something else that Taylor noticed was that there wasn't a place for good coffee and conversation. There was no place to gather and hang out. Yes, there were places like McDonald's where you could get a quick cup of coffee or a bite to eat, but not



without the expectation of quickly eating

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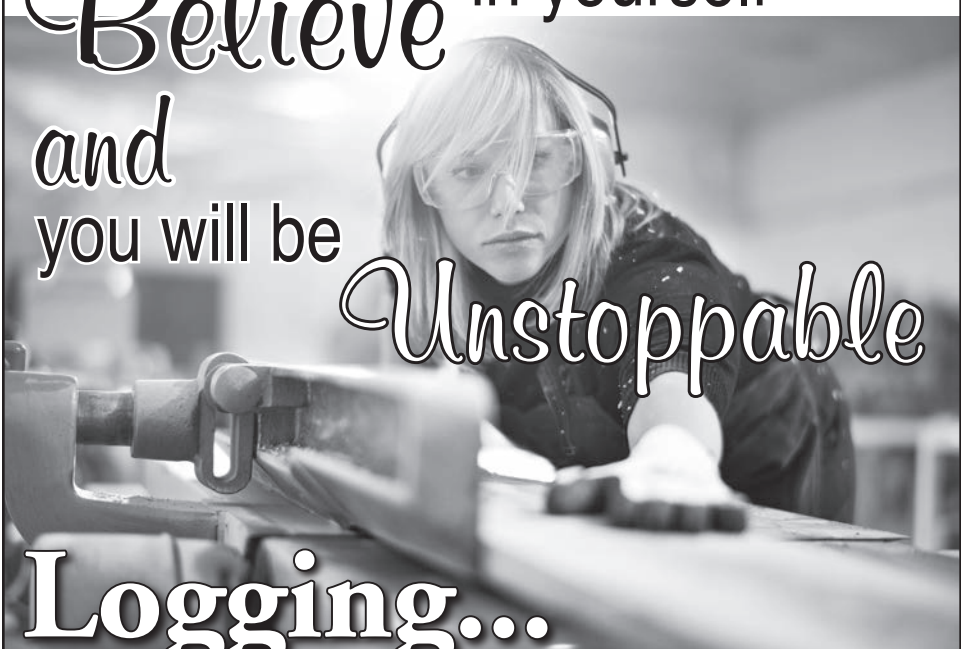
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TAYLOR

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and leaving. Also before moving to Monticello, Taylor would spend weekends in Las Vegas with her daughter Lore Ward and Ward's family where they would go to coffee shops. There they would sit and talk, have coffee, and enjoy each other's company.

'Wow, this town needs a place like that,' Taylor thought.

That's what initially inspired her idea to open Monticello Coffee Company. Soon after, Ward told Taylor that she and her family had decided to move to Monticello as well.

"I have an idea," Taylor told Ward.

Ward loved the idea and the two decided to become business partners.

On December 27, 2017, Taylor and Ward closed on the building where Monticello Coffee Company, or MOCOCO as the locals like to call it, now sits. They opened the doors to the public for the first time on March 18, 2018.

The building used to be a Pizza Hut and the outside still has a slight resemblance to the past business. But that's where the likeness ends. As you walk inside, the first thing you notice of course is the smell of coffee. The next thing is the addition of live plants, a few handmade sweaters, and a shelf full of MOCOCO merchandise. When you walk in the doors, you'll receive a greeting and a smile from an employee.

Taylor and Ward are huge supporters of local small businesses. You can find items from other small businesses that range from freshly baked bread that is replaced weekly to handmade leather items like cup sleeves. As far as seating goes, you can find normal tables and chairs. There are also other seating options like more comfortable chairs and a couch. If reading is your thing, there is a library of books that works on a "take one, leave one" system. Music is usually playing, and the atmosphere is relaxed. If you want to drink your coffee and then leave, MOCOCO is your place. If you want to do some homework, office work, or just visit with your friends, MOCOCO is your place. There is no time limit on how long you can stay, and the staff never makes you feel like it's time to go.

Taylor had a couple of hills to climb before the doors to Monticello Coffee Company were officially open.

"My husband's family is from here and they told me that I was crazy," Taylor said.

She was told that Monticello would never support a coffee shop.

"But I knew I had to try anyway, and my thought was if it didn't work, it didn't work," Taylor said.

Even with doubts from family, Taylor knew that if she didn't try, she would never know and that would have left her won-

dering for the rest of her life.

While she knew what kind of business she wanted to open, Taylor admitted that she had an idea of what to do but she didn't know where to start. She knew the process was going to be hard. The first thing that she did was reach out to the Small Business Administration.

Because at first, I wasn't sure what the SBA is, I did a little research. The SBA is the only cabinet-level federal agency fully dedicated to small businesses and they provide counseling, capital, and contracting expertise as the nation's only go-to resource and voice for small businesses.

"They walked me through a million things," Taylor said.

They looked at her business plan and helped her improve things that would make it easier for the loan approval that she needed.

Because Taylor is such a large supporter of buying local, she said the only thing she regrets is using a bank out of California for her loan because that's who the SBA put her in contact with.

"At the time, I didn't really understand the SBA and banking and how they tied together," Taylor said.

When Monticello Coffee Company first opened, Taylor wasn't roasting her coffee beans. At the time, she was selling and using another great company, but her goal was to be able to roast and sell her own product. She wanted to be more involved in the entire process from bean to cup. That led her to invest in a roaster and start looking at coffee growers. Deciding on what farms to buy from was not a quick process. She has a serious vetting process that includes making sure the employees of the farms she buys from are paid a livable wage. In the coffee world, it's a well-known fact that coffee growers are some of the poorest-paid people in the world. She also loves it when the farms are owned by women.

"We want to make sure that we source our coffee from farms where employees are paid a decent wage," Taylor said.

To this day Taylor and Ward still do a lot of research on the farms they buy beans from. She said that they get a lot of people who reach out wanting to sell her the beans they grow.

"I always tell them that I'm willing to look at their product," Taylor said.

It's not uncommon for coffee brokers to send samples so that business owners can try their beans, but Annette quickly tells them that that's the last thing she does. One of the first things Taylor does when she considers buying from a broker is to vet the farms that the beans come from.

"I need to make sure that they run a positive-impact farm," Taylor said.

Coffee is usually brought into the United States in giant shipping containers. Because Monticello Coffee Company is

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TAYLOR

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in a smaller building, Taylor doesn't have enough room or roast enough coffee to make large purchases, so she typically ends up going through other brokers that bring in the coffee. She vets the brokers as well.

When someone opens any kind of business, the question of success is always in the back of their mind, and it wasn't any different for Taylor.

"When we first opened, we were slow," Taylor said.

MOCOCO had the initial two-to-three-week crazy rush that every business gets. People would stop in just to see what was going on or what was being sold. Then, business just kind of stopped. After the rush, people would come in every once in a while.

For Taylor, the first two years were a struggle. It was hard to make payments and payroll. But then, as we all know, in 2020, COVID happened.

"I know for most businesses COVID was a terrible thing, but I think it actually benefited us," Taylor said.

The drive-through was a huge asset and business didn't really stop. Taylor believes that the drive-through was probably the one thing that saved her business.

It also helped that Arkansas was a state that didn't shut down for a year.

"That was a complete blessing," Taylor said with a smile.

Taylor also said that she didn't open Monticello Coffee Company to get rich. She said she hasn't taken a paycheck the entire time she's been in business. Her goal is to make sure that her employees are taken care of, and that the community has a place that they can go to and are proud of.

"I come here, work every day, and I don't get paid because I want to make sure that this place stays here," Taylor said.

The fact that Taylor has never paid herself shows that she loves her job and the business that she's in. Her employees reflect her business model of positive impact as well. They always speak to you whether you're coming or going. In the hiring process, potential employees are told that they are expected to speak to guests as they walk through the door.

"It's not only our community that walks through the doors, but also travelers and we want them to have a positive experience so that they want to come back," Taylor said.

Employees will even call you by your first name if you're a regular. In today's world, that small detail speaks volumes. It gives a sort of "Norm walking into

Cheers" vibe.

When Taylor and Ward decided to open the doors of MOCOCO, they didn't simply choose to open. They did their research and even went to coffee school to learn how to make the drinks that they would be serving. They didn't want to give anyone a bad experience and together, they spent countless hours standing in a gutted building, talking about what they needed to do. They had a vision of what they wanted it to look like and they wanted to ensure that that vision was brought to life.

But Taylor isn't only a business owner. She's running for the office of State Rep-

resentative.

When asked what made her decide to run, she said that at first, she was asked by the previous representative to do so. But Taylor was hesitant at first. Her initial response was that she needed to think about it. But after prayer and conversation with her family, she said she couldn't think of a reason why she shouldn't.

"The way I can make a better impact on my community is at the state level," Taylor said.

She knows that there are a lot of things that Southeast Arkansas is missing. She

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TAYLOR

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sees that this part of the state has been left behind and that if the right people are in office, a real difference can be made. High-speed internet is one of those things.

During the COVID quarantine, she saw that parents would have to do things like drive to a location where a bus was sitting and that students would have to sit in cars and do their schoolwork. She also sees that having something as small as access to the internet could bring more people to Monticello and Drew County. But Taylor is also aware that it's not just Drew County that needs help in that area. Both Bradley and Desha County are also in the same situation.

"There are all of these little communities that need help and I think that's important," Taylor said.

She understands how important it is to work in your own community, but reaching out to all of Southeast Arkansas is critical. One thing she's noticed is that people with brilliant minds graduate from the University of Arkansas at Monticello and then they leave. One of her goals is to keep those graduates in Drew County so that the community can grow.

"We need to figure out a way to keep

them here," Taylor said.

Two issues that she will focus on during her campaign will be infrastructure and education. Like many who are in the field of education, she has looked at the LEARNS Act.

"It had good intentions, but I think they pushed it a little too fast and didn't really think it through," Taylor said.

The downfall, in Taylor's opinion, was that people in the education system weren't involved in the decision-making process.

"I don't think it's a bad thing, but it needs to be revamped and made better," Taylor said.

Monticello Coffee Company is the first business that Taylor has ever owned but she's doing it the right way. The business is thriving and with it, Taylor is making Monticello a better place to visit and call home. She wants the community to grow, and she wants to make a difference. If you haven't stopped by yet, make time in your day to do so. Coffee isn't the only thing that is offered. There are delicious salads and sandwiches. If coffee really isn't your thing, stop by and get some fresh flavored or regular lemonade, or even a cup of tea. Stop in for a good conversation and you'll see that Monticello Coffee Company will become a place that you want to continue to visit over and over again.

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