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## *Dear Readers:*

The Advance's staff is delighted to welcome you to the 2025 issue of the Hometown Reflections. Over the past few months, we have been working diligently to create and design this publication highlighting just a handful of things that make Drew County/Monticello such a great place to live. We hope you enjoy this year's edition.

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# Main Street Art Gallery expands community impact with creative camps for kids

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

Since opening its doors almost three years ago, Main Street Art Gallery has offered local artists of all ages a place to learn about art and share their work with the community.

“Our original concept was to provide a place in Monticello where local artists could showcase their work,” gallery owner Stephen Coburn said. “Over time, it has morphed. We currently house three separate entities here; the gallery, my photography business, SCoburn Images, and our non-profit, Art Education Opportunities (AEO).”

Coburn added that on top of the main gallery and the 16 artists whose work is featured, the gallery now offers pottery classes, and through their Friday night and Saturday classes the gallery sees most of their action.

Through AEO, the gallery offers another service to the community, one focused on introducing local children to the arts.

“We do two different types of art camps throughout the year,” Coburn said. “One is a pretty major event for us, it is our week-long camp which we usually hold around June.”

Coburn said the kids usually range from five to 15 years in age, and there are usually 25-35 kids present each day.

“We have lessons each day, it’s not a just show up and do whatever you want type of thing,” Coburn added. “At one of the camps they studied a different artist each day and their project each day was to make something in that artist’s style.”

The other camps offered at the gallery are

one-day camps.

“We do these camps whenever the kids are out of school,” Coburn said. “We do this because we know that even though the kids are out of school, the parents aren’t always off work. We try to provide activities whenever there is no school.”

These day camps usually consist of one of two activities, they will either be able to paint ceramics or paint on canvas, depending on the camp.

“These day camps have been very well accepted by the community,” Coburn said. “We have our regulars who come in for everything that we offer. We feel like these camps are a way to meet a community need.”

“I volunteered at the Main Street Art Camps because I believe it is important to give children the opportunity to learn about and create artwork,” volunteer Adrien Richard said when asked why these camps are important and needed in the community. “The mind of a child is beautiful and their ideas for creativity are limitless. Whether or not the child pursues a creative profession in their adult life, I hope the Main Street Art Camps spark an interest in the child’s development of a creative outlet.”

“We are aware that in many places, fortunately not Monticello, art programs have been cut in schools. Our kids are fortunate, from Kindergarten all the way through UAM, they have access to great education in the arts,” Coburn said.

The cost of the camps is different, as should be expected. The day camps typically run \$30 and cover gallery time, instruc-



Photos by Jeff McDonald



tion, and all of the supplies used during the camp. The week-long camps run \$100 per day. The higher price accounts for this camp being five full days of time at the gallery, and increased amounts of supplies.

AEO helps cover some of the additional costs that may unexpectedly come up during the camps, as well as fund a couple of scholarships to UAM. All AEO funds are supplied through donors, or “Friends of Art” as they are affectionately known. If any readers would like to join the ranks and help Main Street Art and AEO continue providing these opportunities, you can contact Main Street Art Gallery or Stephen

Coburn via Facebook Messenger for more details.

Through its art camps and community-driven initiatives, Main Street Art Gallery continues to enrich Monticello by providing young people with the tools and inspiration to explore their creativity. As the gallery grows and evolves, it remains committed to fostering a love of the arts in the next generation. With ongoing support from the community, these camps will continue to provide invaluable opportunities for children to learn, create, and discover the limitless potential of their imagination.



# A legacy of care: Griffin Heating and Air

By JOANNA POOLE  
reporter@theeagledemocrat.com

Recently, I had the privilege of sitting down with Tyler and Kayla Griffin, to learn about Griffin Heating and Air, a local business that has stood the test of time.

Founded in 1980 by Tyler’s grandfather, Richard Griffin, the business has weathered changing technologies and economic downturns, and it’s clear why this family-owned operation continues to thrive today.

Tyler, the current owner, is no stranger to hard work. Though he didn’t start the business, he has continued the legacy with passion and dedication. Tyler took over Griffin Heating and Air in December of 2017 after his grandfather’s passing, initially stepping in to keep things going until a more permanent decision was made. But what started as a temporary arrangement became a lifelong commitment to a business that has become integral to the community and surrounding areas.

The evolution of the heating and air conditioning industry has been remarkable,

and Tyler was quick to reflect on how far things have come since his grandfather opened the business. In the early days, Richard could carry just five or six parts in his truck and still resolve most customer issues. There were no cell phones, tablets, or high-tech diagnostics—only pagers, radios, and a lot of elbow grease. The shift from older air conditioning systems to the smart motors that are now the norm is just one example of how the industry has adapted to meet the needs of the modern world. But through it all, one thing has remained constant: the focus on the customer.

That focus on people is the secret that has kept Griffin Heating and Air in business for a little over four decades. Tyler’s approach to customer service is simple yet profound: treat others how you want to be treated. That ethic permeates every aspect of the business—from the moment a call is answered to the repair job that follows. When customers reach out, they don’t just get a service; they get a commitment. Tyler and his team take the time to listen, solve problems, and, perhaps most importantly,

See **GRIFFIN** Page 12

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GRIFFIN

Continued from Page 9  
go the extra mile.

Kayla went on to give examples of how Tyler has gone above and beyond to make sure that people are taken care of.

“When he says that, he truly means it,” Kayla added. “There have been a few times in the 13 years we’ve been married when Tyler’s gotten out of bed in the middle of the night because someone’s power went out. One time, someone had just brought a newborn home, and it was cold, and their heat was out. It’s equal to emergency work, and you have to go. Just because it’s five o’clock doesn’t mean he stops working.”

This commitment to service is a rarity in today’s fast-paced world, where many businesses prioritize efficiency over relationships.

One local sentiment that resonates with me is the idea that I’d rather have a good product and great service than the other way around. Tyler Griffin embodies this philosophy. He values quality and reliability, but he also understands the importance of being there for his customers, no matter the time of day or the weather outside.

But there’s more to Griffin Heating and Air than just great customer service. Loyalty, a trait often overlooked in today’s world of fleeting business transactions, is one of

the pillars on which this company stands. “You can’t buy loyalty,” Tyler said, and it’s clear he lives by that statement every day. His dedication to treating customers fairly and honestly has created a loyal customer base that trusts him and his team to take care of their homes and families.

That loyalty was put to the test during the global pandemic of 2020. Like many businesses, Griffin Heating and Air faced challenges as the world shut down. At a time when people were hesitant to let anyone into their homes, Tyler maintained his reputation for honesty and transparency, ensuring customers knew exactly what to expect in terms of service delays and safety measures. Despite the increased workload, Tyler and his team didn’t compromise on the quality of service.

Even today, as Griffin Heating and Air faces the challenge of finding qualified workers, the essence of what makes the business special remains: a commitment to people. While larger corporations may offer the promise of bigger teams and faster service, they often lack the personal touch that Tyler and his family provide. When you call Griffin Heating and Air, you’re not just getting a job done; you’re getting someone who understands your needs and is invested in your well-being. It’s a rare find in today’s world, and it’s the reason Griffin Heating and Air has been successful for as long as it has.



Courtesy photo

Tyler Griffin, his family, and his team are more than just local business owners—they are part of the community. Their work goes beyond air conditioners and furnaces. They provide peace of mind, knowing that when something goes wrong, there is someone you can count on to make things right. Griffin Heating and Air is more than a business. It’s a legacy

of care, dedication, and service that continues to make small-town life just a little bit better.

It’s hard to find a business that has been around for as long as Griffin Heating and Air, and after hearing their story, I have no doubt that they’ll continue to serve our community for many more years to come.



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# Monticello School District opens Billie Arena

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

In December 2024, the Monticello School District held the grand opening of the newly constructed Billie Arena with the Beth Maxwell Memorial Classic tournament.

According to Superintendent Sandra Lanehart, the new arena is 51,841 square feet. The total capacity is 2,681 people, with stadium-style seating available for 2,001, according to Athletic Director Blair Brown.

“In February 2022, the voters of Drew County voted to extend the district’s construction bond,” Lanehart said. “These funds have been used to construct a student parking lot, new tennis courts, and the Billie Arena. Patrons were able to enjoy the 2024-2025 basketball season in comfortable stadium seating.”

The arena played host to the 8-4A Regional Conference Tournament February 26-March 1. Unfortunately, both the Billies and Lady Billies teams were eliminated in the first round. When asked if the arena was adequate for hosting this type of tournament Brown gave the following reply.

“The arena, the building itself, did meet the requirements to host a Regional, and would do the same for a State tournament,” Brown said. “What made our tournament such a huge success was the people! We had staff and community members volunteer countless hours. They went out of their way to make this tournament the best it could be. Our student hosts and workers were outstanding.”



Courtesy photo

“The seating, music, concessions, video, and hospitality rooms were first class,” Brown added. “Our guests told us how well they were treated by our students and volunteers. That makes the difference and is part of what sets the Monticello School District apart.”

Lanehart and Brown were also eager to point out that Billie Arena has the potential to make a huge impact on Monticello and Drew County.

“Billie Arena will allow Monticello School District to host more Regional and State basketball tournaments in the future,” Lanehart said. “This will bring people in from all over the state and have a positive impact on our community and

our economy.”

“The impact on our community will be huge,” Brown added. “We will host basketball tournaments each year. The teams and the fans will stay in our hotels, shop

in town, and eat at our restaurants. We, the Monticello School District, have the finest venue in the state of Arkansas, for

See **ARENA** Page 16



Photo by Jeff McDonald

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# ARENA

Continued from Page 13

a district our size. That creates pride and demonstrates the commitment we have in our district and our commitment to our students.”

Lanehart said the following in terms of the commitment Brown mentioned.

“MSD is committed to providing exemplary educational facilities. The history of the district is witness to this commitment. The district enjoys the advantage of a supportive community in terms of willingness to pay their share for the pro-

vision of outstanding facilities, whether academic, administrative, or athletic.”

“Billie Arena will allow MSD to host graduations and other school events, as well as community events, in a comfortable, climate-controlled environment,” Lanehart added when asked about other uses for Billie Arena.

Billie Arena is a state-of-the-art facility that is sure to have a positive impact on both the Monticello School District and the community as a whole. If given the opportunity, stop in for a visit, you will not be disappointed.



Photos by Jeff McDonald



# AGFC and Red Hills Fishery deliver Titan Maxx Largemouths to Lake Monticello

FILE STORY BY JEFF McDONALD  
editor@monticellonews.net

On Friday, May 3, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission Director Austin Booth, along with other representatives from AGFC, and representatives from Red Hills Fishery, located in Boston, Ga., met at the Hunger Run Access at Lake Monticello for a special presentation. Despite the rainy weather, there was a good number of people in attendance.

“I can assure you that this rain is not indicative of our level of excitement for being here,” Booth stated. “This is a big day for the state of Arkansas and for Southeast Arkansas especially.”

“In 2022, we set out on a journey called Natural State Tomorrow,” Booth added. “One of the goals of Natural State Tomorrow was to align the efforts of the AGFC with the interest of Arkansans. Sounds pretty simple right? One of the results of

that has been basically thinking comprehensively about how we do better by Black Bass Anglers.”

Booth continued by stating that Bass anglers have a significant impact on the economy in the state. The US Fish and Wildlife Services estimates that the exact impact is roughly \$1.3 billion. Booth noted that this is a lot of money, and it is because Bass angling matters to a lot of people.

“When we thought about how we are going to do better by our Black Bass anglers, to elevate the Black Bass experience that we have in Arkansas, we thought about two things, Booth said. “First, the quality of the fish that we have, and then the quality of the habitat we are providing for the fish. Where these two things come together is where the AGFC is trying extremely hard to improve what we have for the benefit of the people.”

Booth then showed a bucket of fingerling Largemouth Bass and announced that



Photo by Jeff McDonald

they were of the Titan Maxx strain.

“These little guys come to us from Red Hills Fishery. They may look small now, but every single one of them has the ge-

netic potential to become absolute monster Bass that people will come from all across the country to fish for,” Booth said. “These fish have more high quality genetic

markers than any other fish in the country. These fish, for the first time today, will be stocked in Lake Monticello. This is important for one reason, this is the first time in the history of our country that a fish with these genetic qualities will be stocked in public waters. This is big for the state of Arkansas, but it is also a big moment for the Black Bass community as a whole.”

“We could say a lot about Lake Monticello and it’s history and why it’s under renovation. What is most important is where we’re going from here,” Booth stated. “When we thought about which body of water in Arkansas was going to receive fish of this nature, Lake Monticello was the perfect place. The reason isn’t just the amount of habitat improvement that has been done, or the infrastructure improvements that have been made. The most important factor for us was the community that Lake Monticello serves. We are thrilled about this, we wish the rain would have cooperated, but as they say, ‘the fish don’t care about the rain.’”

Representatives from Red Hills Fishery then spoke to educate everyone on what makes the Titan Maxx strain so special. Red Hills is a fishery that solely focuses on Largemouth Bass, more specifically, the DNA and genetics of the species. With the Titan Maxx, they have found the fish with the best possible genetics and spawned them which has never been done.



Photos by Jeff McDonald

“We are super excited today because since day one, we’ve had a great vision of not only helping private lake owners but the public fishermen as well,” Steven from Red Hills stated. “Today is the very first time that Titan Bass are going into a public body of water. This is monumental not only for you guys, but Red Hills as well. This has been a long time vision for us.”

Steven added that in the Titan Maxx strain they have not only studied the genetic markers, but they have also found

DNA that is indicative of growing trophy bass.

Red Hills stated that in an average body of water, approximately one percent of the native fish have the genetics and DNA to reach trophy status. With the Titan Maxx, every single fish is representative of that one percent, 100 percent of them have the ability and potential to become a once in a lifetime catch.

In an ideal setting, such as Lake Monticello, Titan Maxx are expected to grow at

least two pounds per year, but have been recorded growing as large as three pounds per year in smaller private lakes. This is impressive because a one pound per year growth rate is considered successful for native Largemouths.

9,250 Titan Maxx were dispersed throughout Lake Monticello today. An additional 12,950 will be stocked in the coming months, bringing the total to 22,000 potential trophies swimming in Lake Monticello.



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# Grimes named UAM Vice Chancellor for University Advancement and Alumni Engagement

SPECIAL TO THE ADVANCE (FILE STORY)

The University of Arkansas at Monticello (UAM) has announced the appointment of Dr. Landon Grimes as vice chancellor for University Advancement and Alumni Engagement.

Dr. Grimes, a Monticello native and 1998 graduate of Drew Central High School, has sixteen years of combined experience in both public and higher education. His career in education began at Monticello Intermediate School as a fifth grade teacher for three years before returning to UAM as the training coordinator for the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center. He returned to Monticello Middle School to teach seventh grade English for two years and then became the assistant principal at the middle school for two years. He moved to central Arkansas for five years,

where he served as the junior high principal at Harmony Grove in Haskell, before returning to UAM. In 2021, he became the partnership coordinator for the UAM School of Education and later served as the assistant dean for the school.

Dr. Grimes earned multiple degrees from UAM, including a Bachelor of Arts in English degree in 2008, a Master of Arts in Teaching degree in 2009 and a Master of Educational Leadership degree in 2014. He also earned an Education Specialist degree from Arkansas State University in 2019 and a Doctorate of Education degree from Harding University in 2023.

“Dr. Grimes is a graduate of UAM with a proven history of leadership as a principal, and most recently, as the assistant dean in the School of Education at UAM,” Dr. Peggy Doss, chancellor of UAM, said. “He has a deep love for the universi-

ty and is committed to its growth and success. His enthusiasm and loyalty will serve UAM well as he connects with alumni and works to advance the university’s mission. We are so pleased to have him as a vice chancellor at UAM.”

“As vice chancellor, I’m eager to work alongside our talented team to strengthen UAM’s connections with alumni and secure resources that empower our institution to thrive,” Dr. Grimes said. “We have a vibrant community of alumni, and I believe by nurturing these relationships, we can harness their collective passion and support to propel UAM to even greater heights. I am truly humbled by this incredible opportunity and excited to embark on this new chapter with the passionate UAM community. Go Weevils!”

Dr. Grimes’ appointment began March 1, 2024.



## CITY MODERNIZES EMERGENCY RESPONSE CAPABILITIES WITH NEW FIRE TRUCK



Photo courtesy of Mayor Jason Akers

SPECIAL TO THE ADVANCE

“Our citizens and our first responders both deserve the best and most capable equipment available,” Mayor Jason Akers said. “We are proud of our Fire Department to deliver that.”

The City of Monticello enhanced its capabilities with a new addition to the fleet of fire and rescue vehicles that arrived last year for service. The new truck is a 2024 Pierce BXP pumper truck, situated on a Freightliner M2-106 chassis. It possesses the capabili-

ty to disperse 1250 gallons per minute and boasts a 1000 gallon tank.

The truck is outfitted with all needed equipment and tools needed for being self sustained on a fire scene. The truck will replace a 1999 model truck that had become prone to maintenance issues. Monticello Fire Department Chief Eric Chisom oversaw the design of the vehicle to ensure the finished product met the needs of the community and capabilities of the Fire Department.



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Breaker held a Grand Re-Opening ribbon cutting at noon on Friday, August 16. Mayor Jason Akers wrote a proclamation honoring the Reese family for their resilience in the face of adversity. Clarissa Pace honored the Reese family on behalf of the local NAACP chapter for having the longest black owned business in Drew County with over 40 years of service. Monticello's Breaker is a Drew County landmark, and the only Breaker Drive-In remaining in the United States. Breaker opened to the public at noon on Saturday, August 18.




Above right: The first 25 patrons to dine in during Arby's grand opening received free Arby's for a year. The line started at 3:30 a.m., and the final members of the 25 showed up around 7 a.m.



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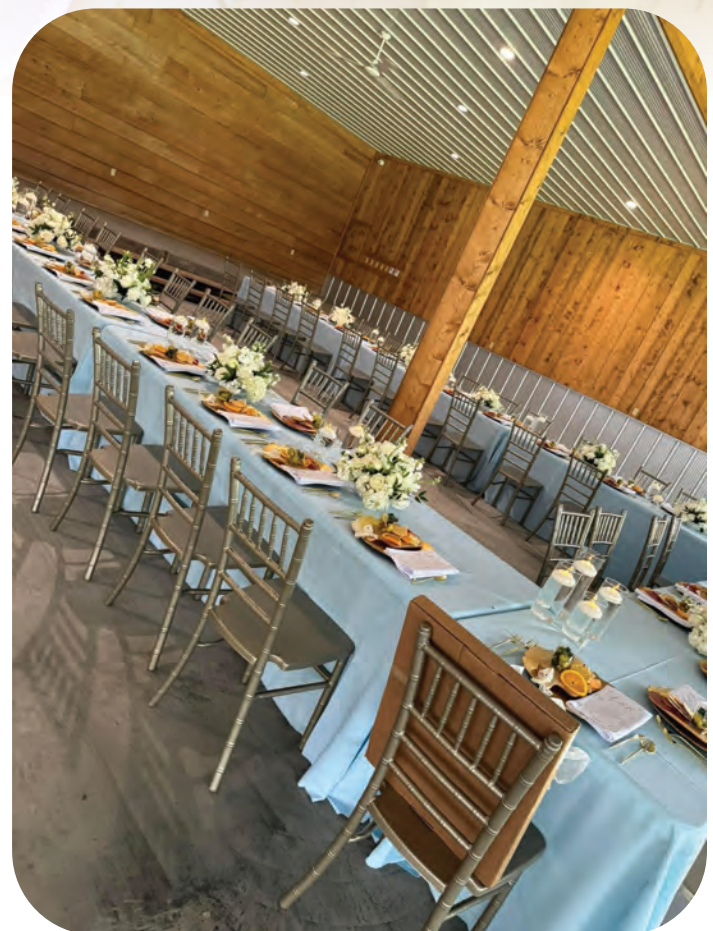
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