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HARRISON

MAGAZINE

Business Spotlight:

HEART & SOLE

*Skill keeps Slusser's
customers coming
back to his shoe
shop for decades*

Culinary Delights:

NEIGHBORHOOD STAPLE

*Restaurant serves up
community favorites*

FALL 2024 ISSUE



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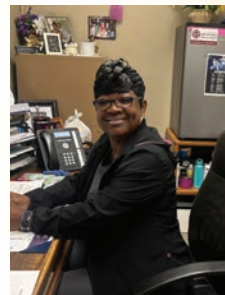
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What makes a community a community? Perhaps it is the festivals and community gatherings that bring all walks of life together in celebration and shared enjoyment? Recently the Greater Marshall Chamber of Commerce celebrated the 42nd annual FireAnt Festival, but do you know how and why it started? Visit the hourglass section of this issue and gain insight into the origin story of this annual event.

Many people would suggest sports is a community unto itself, but for anyone who has driven their child or grandkid to practice, or a game know sports is where again a cross-section of people come together around a common activity. Step into the batter's box with reporter Lauren Rosenberg as she visits The Infield Downtown and how it assists players chase their dreams.

For the foodies in town, they might define community as what culinary delights can be had around Harrison County. Meet Willie and Priscilla Henderson as they share their story and their food with you as part of our Culinary Delights section of Harrison Magazine.

Hard to have a community without small business, and in particular the individuals who run those businesses, especially ones that have become staples. Mike Slusser has been part of downtown Marshall since 1976 running Mike's Corner Shoe Store. Learn more about Mike and his craftsmanship in our business spotlight on page 8.

Community could be festivals, sports activities or businesses. These organizations all have one thing in common and that is people. In my opinion community is the fabric of people and the experiences they bring together that create the uniqueness of community. Our feature on MSGT. Brian Cumberland and his drive of service before self is an example of how one person interweaves to create a wider fabric of life for an entire community.

No matter how you define community, we can all agree that Harrison County has unique and uncommon people who make our community special.

Please, enjoy this issue of Harrison Magazine.




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ON THE COVER



Mike Slusser, owner of Mike's Corner Shoe Store
 Photo by Les Hassell

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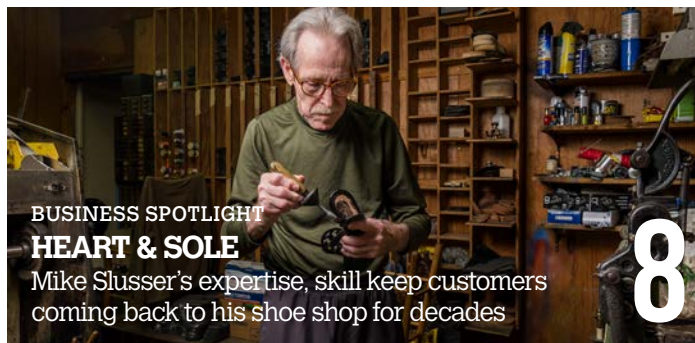


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HEART & SOLE

Mike Slusser, owner of Mike's Corner Shoe Store

MIKE SLUSSER'S EXPERTISE, SKILL KEEP CUSTOMERS COMING BACK TO HIS SHOE SHOP FOR DECADES

story by **Robin Y. Richardson** | photos by **Les Hassell**

For nearly 50 years, Mike's Corner Shoe Store has been a staple in downtown Marshall, offering a vast inventory of industrial shoes, safety boots, on-site shoe repair and more.

"I've been here since January '76. It's been good. It's been a good job," said owner Mike Slusser, expressing his gratitude.

In addition to great customer service and a friendly staff, Mike's Corner Shoe Store prides itself on being honest and fair, valuing every customer who comes into the store, located at 300 N. Washington Ave.

"I tell my kids the only thing they're ever going to remember about me is if I was honest and fair," said Slusser. "They don't care how much money you make. They don't care what you got. The only thing they're going to say about you is ... if you were honest. That's all they say about any of us.

"And without integrity, you have nothing," said Slusser.

As an expression of his appreciation, Slusser makes it his mission to support the community he adores.

"I've been here for (nearly) 50 years, and gave tons of work away. I kind of give it back to the people who have supported me," he said. "That makes sense to me. And it seems like it's worked."

Moving to Marshall in 1976, the Arkansas native began running the shoe store after buying it from his boss, at the time, who owned a chain of stores.

"I'm from Arkansas. I went to Walnut Ridge High School. Then I went to University of Central Arkansas for a couple years. I was playing ball; and just wasn't gonna make it, so it was time to go to work, but it was good," recalled Slusser. "I was working for a man while I was going to school that did repair and did the same thing I'm doing. I worked for him about six months, and he said, you want to buy this store? And I said,



Top, Mike Slusser, says the building was once home to one of the earliest morgues in the state.



yes. He had six or seven stores. And so he financed it to me and sold it to me, and that's how I got here."

The store became Slusser's livelihood.

"I stayed here in the store for a year. I slept in the back because we couldn't afford a place to stay," Slusser reminisced.

Marshall has been home to Slusser and his business, Mike's Corner Shoe Store, since.

"I was the youngest downtown and now I'm the oldest downtown," he teased.

"These windows are almost all original, except for about two or three," he said, highlighting some of the unique architectural character of the corner store, which was also the former home of Manly's furniture store.

"At its time, this used to be the busiest corner in town," Slusser said of the downtown hub.

Slusser cherishes the relationships he's built with his customers throughout the years. The feeling is mutual as many of them have become like family, gifting him with photos to display on his wall alongside his loved ones.

"These are just a few pictures in the store people have brought in," he said, showcasing the ones that deck his store. "I have them from customers from throughout the years, like a box full."

Photos range from graduation portraits to engagements. Other photos and artwork, including macaroni craft from the generations of employees' kids who have grown up at the store also adorn the wall.

"I've had eight kids come through here. I've let all of my employees bring their kids to work, and we just babysit them up here," shared Slusser.

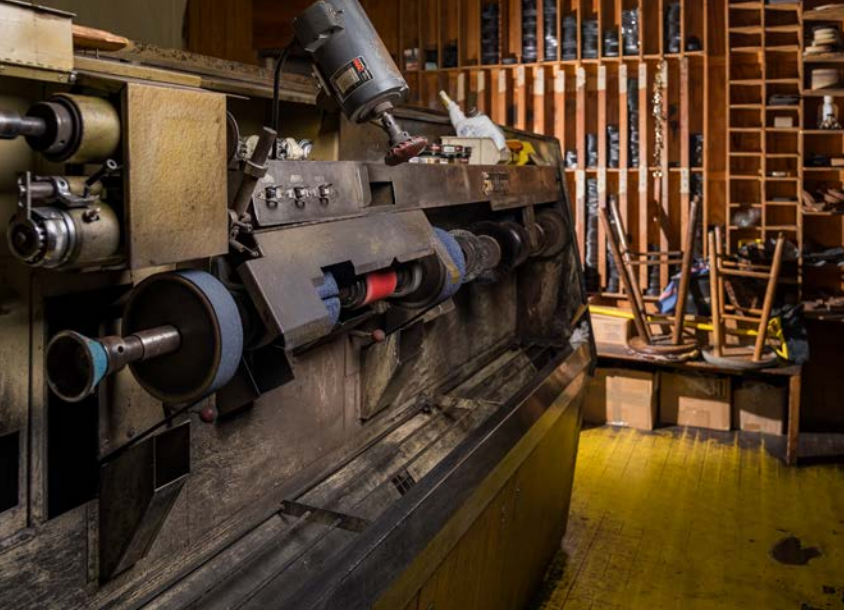
Autographed baseballs, plaques and trophies, highlighting his passion for baseball, also deck the store, reflecting on his days as a Little League baseball coach for t-ball and age 10 and younger leagues.

"These plaques are from when I coached baseball. That's what I wanted to do was coach, but God let me do it recreational-wise, for 15 years here," Slusser gleamed.

"The kids, you would think they wouldn't think about it, but to this day, they'll walk in here and talk about those games," Slusser beamed. "They don't forget. They remember the same thing I do."

Just like the unforgettable youth baseball games, Slusser's customers never forget the quality service and great selections they find at Mike's Corner Shoe Store.

"I won't buy work shoes anywhere else," Google reviewer, Yancy Roston, wrote. "Mike didn't just sell me a boot, he made



sure I bought my boot for my needs. He has a great attitude and is very helpful. Mike's Corner Shoes, my work boot place."

"I've bought boots from Mike for 30 years and his main concern is you, and he will also explain if the boot you are wanting will withstand the environment you work in and he will give you the best information of the brand you are wanting," added Google reviewer Steve Byrd. "Mike is the most honest man you will ever deal with."

Services and Selection

Many customers consider him "the best boot specialist in East Texas," offering a range of selection for customers' needs.

The store boasts over 90 styles of steel toe footwear, and offers major shoe brands including: Red Wings, Wolverines,

H&H, Twisted X, Justin, Ariat, Timberland and more.

Customers also entrust Slusser's expertise in repairing their special shoe. Some of his latest projects include replacing the sole and heel on a fine pair of Crocodile shoes and exotic Sea Bass boots.

"I've used Mike's for shoe, belt, leather repairs for years, custom shoe insoles, etc," Google reviewer Larry Watts wrote. "I've always left with more then I bargained for. Mike is truly an expert at his craft."

Along with a great shopping experience, Slusser said he always strives to keep a clean and comfortable environment for customers.

In fact, a sign at the register kindly instructs to "please ring the bell only if Mike is vacuuming."

"I try to keep it real clean," said Slusser.

Most special is the rare personalized shoe fitting service the store still offers to help customers find their perfect fit.

"We still fit like the old times," Slusser said.

It's an invaluable service Mike's Corner Shoe Store is



pleased to still offer. It brings Slusser great joy to help a customer achieve the proper fitting.

"Remember when you went in, you sat down, and they fit you?," reminiscing on universal customer service in the past.

"You know, when you go to a store now, you wait on yourself, you fit yourself. If you put on a shoe, if it doesn't feel like you can walk out the door, that's the wrong size," explained Slusser. "It doesn't matter what the size says. But if you can get up and walk around in and say: 'I can wear these right now', then that's the one you should buy. If you say, 'I think it'll be better later', then you've bought the wrong pair."

"It's got to be done right here — period," said Slusser.

The store has also offered some shoe shining services throughout the years.

"Yes, I shine a lot of shoes, a lot of people's shoes," said Slusser. "But Marshall, I would say, on a whole, it's been very good to me. I got great customers, so it makes it really easy."

Mike's Corner Store is open 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday; and 9 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. Saturday. **FM**

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Service **BEFORE SELF**

MSGT. BRIAN CUMBERLAND HELPING TO
TRANSFORM HARRISON COUNTY COMMUNITY



story by **Nicholas Osborn**

photos by **Meredith Shamburger** and
contributed to **Harrison Magazine**

Never one to put himself before others, MSgt. Michael Brian Cumberland has a mission to transform the youth, and the community around him, for the better.

This mission of excellence has helped him to earn the 2023 AFJROTC Outstanding Instructor Award helping the Marshall ISD JROTC program, placing him in the top 10% of instructors around the world, and helping his unit to earn both the Distinguished Unit with Merit award and the “Silver Star” Community Service with Excellence award, placing them in the top 5% around the world. Inspired by his faith, Cumberland is now looking to all of Harrison County and beyond to create change in the community that matters most to him.

“This job has given me an avenue to not just be in this job, but be in the community,” said Cumberland.

Transforming Himself

Cumberland’s own story begins with a theme that would eventually come to define his outreach work — helping his own little brother when his dad left their family.

“Dad left when I was 8 and a half,” explained Cumberland. “I had a 6-month-old little brother that I basically raised. I was the tender heart young one who wanted to make everybody proud, and he was the holy terror.”

He said that after the experience of playing as an adult and father figure to his little brother, he felt the need to better align his priorities in his life. This calling led him to join the Air Force out of college.

“I needed to grow up,” Cumberland said. “So, I decided to go to the Air Force. Of course, me and one of my good friends from college both agreed to go together and he backed out at the last minute.”

Cumberland’s service in the Air Force saw him working on instruments and autopilot flight control systems on aircraft. His first airplane was the B-52 located in Shreveport, Louisiana, and the experience marked a significant moment in him calling the local area his own home. After several years of working in flight control systems, Cumberland was given the opportunity to become an Airman and Leadership School instructor (ALS). This position emphasized the importance of communication and team building skills for management positions in the military.

“That’s where I really got into helping people, because even though they’re becoming supervisors, they’re still the young part of the Air Force. That’s the 20-year-olds that’s going into those phases,” said Cumberland.



“I got to be a part of that and kind of start that process already,” continued Cumberland. “That’s where I really felt like I belonged and had a purpose. I felt comfortable in the classroom.”

With an interest in technology and penchant for going out of his way to help others, Cumberland found success in his service as an ALS instructor. Although he wishes he would have volunteered to deploy more than he initially did, Cumberland said the experiences he shared with the people who mentored and worked alongside eventually taught him about life in general, helping to shape the same lessons he passes on to his cadets with the MISD JROTC unit and the greater community.

“That was great,” he said. “I met a lot of people on base because the higher-ups and all of us are involved in their leadership classes and that next generation of leadership.”

“I got to share those personal experiences in life with these cadets,” Cumberland continued. “And not just the cadets, the people I’ve met and mentored along the way. It taught me a lot about life.”

As his career in the Air Force came to a close, Cumberland served as a recruiter for the military. He shared a story about how his last recruit he put in the Air Force would go on to become one of his most cherished memories throughout his service.

“There was this young lady, and she basically wanted to be a



teacher. I talked to her and everything, I was like if you want to be a teacher, be a teacher. I said, you should try it out and see what you like,” said Cumberland. “She was dead set on it, she didn’t really want to go into the military. So, she went to the internship as a teacher. A couple of days later, I got a phone call saying I want to be in the Air Force.”

“That last person I put in was actually my daughter,” he said.

Cumberland said that he was able to be there for his daughter at a time when she was seeking a purpose, just like he was when he joined the military. The full-circle moment offered a



*"We can make this,
community stronger"*

and guiding them," continued Cumberland. "In this position and with her, I tried to guide her sometimes and open her eyes to different opportunities, but the decision has to be theirs. It's very hard to guide sometimes."

Transforming the Youth

In relating this experience to his work with the cadets of the MISD JROTC unit, he said that oftentimes starting out with more than one hundred recruits can present challenges in identifying how and when to guide others to a path that can help them to become successful. As his mission to transform those around him continues, it isn't something that he takes lightly.

"That's the thing, you have to find what motivates these kids," said Cumberland. "We go through life and we have a lot of issues and have a lot of problems. Everybody has their ups and downs, but whether you use those to help people or not is up to you. That's what I've gotten to do."

He credits his own experiences in both his family life and his service in the military with providing him the credibility to relate to youth who are struggling with similar issues in their own lives.

"The decision is still yours," he said. "But you do get a little bit more credibility when they understand that you've gone through that."

His service with the Air Force and the three core values present have continued to shape his mission in working with youth. These include integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all you do. Together, these values have imparted wisdom on cadets of the MISD JROTC unit and helped Cumberland to utilize his own real-world experiences to convey their importance in everyday life. Through the years of imparting these lessons to students, Cumberland said that although every year is different and poses its own unique challenges, the internal values that people need have not changed.

"Every year is different. Every year has your different groups, your different challenges, but overall it's still the same. It's still the same internal values that people need. When everybody gets that it's not about them, it's about somebody else. If people would just live that way, it would be a great thing."



chance to reflect on the impact of finding the right path and ensuring that our priorities are aligned in order to be successful.

"There was quite a solemn feeling," said Cumberland. "We say we know what's best for people, or we know what the greatest odds of being best for people are, because people can not do what you think they need to do and still be very successful. But, you see some of these people's lives and think you just gotta get off that path and just come here, or do this."

"It's very hard to tip-toe the area of telling them what to do



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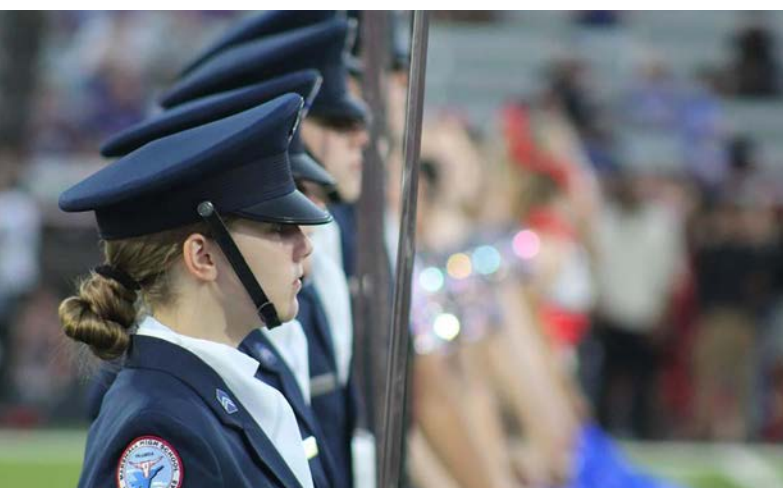


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Finding success with the MISD JROTC unit and working to continue instilling the values that helped to shape his own life has also played a vital role in Cumberland finding his own purpose. Guiding others has, in its own way, helped Cumberland to seek guidance for an even larger calling in his faith.

“A rank is a rank, a job is a job, but a purpose is a purpose,” emphasized Cumberland. “I’m a God-fearing man, and I’ve ran away from Him many times. I feel like he is drawing me to a purpose.”

“He runs faster than me, He will catch me and He will guide me to where I need to go,” said Cumberland.

Transforming the Community

Cumberland’s decision to work in youth development and mentoring can be traced back to the personal spiritual experiences that pushed him to have a closer relationship with God. After recovering his Transformer Bible he used throughout his time in high school, Cumberland spoke with his preacher about how he could continue acting in service for others

through his faith.

“I was like, I feel like I’m led to be doing something. He said, well I don’t want to tell you what to do,” explained Cumberland. “Because God might have you cleaning toilets in the church. You need to figure that out.”

“Well, I opened up the Bible and it was marked at Romans 12:2; do not be conformed but be transformed,” said Cumberland.

Following this moment of realization, Cumberland said he understood that he needed to be working with the youth. In speaking with the leadership at his church, an opportunity was extended to begin a new club working with early college-aged kids. This led to Cumberland creating what he called the Transformers. Today, after following his passion in working in youth development in his career helping the JROTC unit, he is eager to expand his efforts to the greater community in Harrison county and beyond.

“I said, can we just call it the Transformers, because they’re transforming into adulthood,” said Cumberland. “So, we created the Transformers, which leads me to now.”

“My wife and I are in the beginning process to start a non-profit organization and to work with the area youth, not just JROTC cadets,” he said.

Alongside his wife, who is a Christian life coach and employee at Marshall ISD’s Price T. Young Fine Arts Academy campus, the Cumberlands are set to establish what they are referring to as Camp Transform. This nonprofit organization would become an outreach resource for people in the community including mothers and the youth centered around the biblical verse that initially inspired his mission to transform those around him.

“The ultimate goal is to create a camp-like setting, not nec-



essarily a campground, but a camp of people that are working and doing that together with the anchor verse being Romans 12:2,” said Cumberland.

Although the concept of Camp Transform didn’t happen overnight, Cumberland said the purpose that has driven him to continue pushing others to find their own excellence has always been there.

“I think it’s very important, and it took me a long time to realize,” said Cumberland. “Like I said, I was a good kid, but until you have purpose and until you’re realizing why you’re having that purpose and why you’re having that purpose and why you’re doing things, you’re kind of lost.”

Ultimately, Cumberland understands the weight of molding the next generation and described most effective means as simply living as an example. He said he is blended and blessed with six children and has learned that it is crucial for his actions to speak for themselves in his mission to transform. Driven by his own upbringing, service in the military, and career in the JROTC unit at MISD, Cumberland is eager to expand his outreach efforts through the nonprofit organization and implementation of Camp Transform. This latest endeavor looks to continue his efforts to not just benefit the youth in the area, but to uplift and inspire the local community through a faith-based mission.

“I run a lot of times, but with this nonprofit organization, he’s been running towards us, and pushing me and her for a long time,” said Cumberland. I’m scared, believe me, because it’s a big thing. But I hope maybe I have made connections in the community and that they will believe in us when we do this, and help us.”

“We can make this community stronger,” continued Cumberland. **HM**

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Neighborhood Staple

MARSHALL RESTAURANT SERVES UP COMMUNITY FAVORITES AT NEW TOWN LOCATION

story by **Robin Y. Richardson** | photos by **Les Hassell**

“Great Place, Great Taste!” is more than a slogan for Soul Palace, located in the historic New Town neighborhood at 612 S. Carter St. in Marshall.

It’s exactly the type of service, food and atmosphere patrons to the nearly seven-year-old eatery will find once they step inside.

“I came (first) for my uncle. Then, I came back,” said Sonnesha Garbutt as she returned to the restaurant for a second time on a recent Tuesday to enjoy one of the popular platters herself.

A longtime dream of hers, owner Priscilla Henderson opened the establishment May 1, 2018 after cooking and helping manage other kitchens and restaurants throughout the

city.

“I’d been working for so many different people in the restaurant business for so long.... I was like: ‘If I could do it for them, then I could do it for myself,’” recalled Henderson.

“Most of all, I walked out on faith,” she said.

Infusing her passion and faith, she utilized everything she learned throughout the years from her mentors, Hazel Hicks, co-owner of Hicks Grocery; and Claudia Campbell, who was the kitchen manager for the former El Chico restaurant in Marshall.

“I’ve been having a passion for cooking. It’s been my passion,” shared Henderson.

“I got started at Hicks Grocery. That was my first job ever

was with Ernest and Hazel Hicks,” she said, sharing she was 19 years old, at the time. “Then I went on to El Chico’s. That’s where I met Claudia Campbell. She took me under her wings and she taught me everything. She taught me a lot. But I’ve always enjoyed cooking — always.”

And in tribute of the historic and predominately African-American neighborhood, New Town, Henderson named the restaurant in honor of the soulful spirit of the Black culture.

“To be honest, being a restaurant in the neighborhood and cooking with ‘soul’ was the inspiration behind the name, she said.

But what makes Soul Palace particularly unique is its diverse menu, offering not only soul food but specialty burgers,

fried fish and more.

“A lot of people thought, because it was called the Soul Palace, we were going to cook downright soul food. We offer soul food, but we also offer burgers, fries and fish,” said Henderson.

“Most of all we have our famous Kool-Aid. It’s a tropical Kool Aid,” she said, sharing how it’s become a favorite of not only children, but adults, too. “Everybody really likes it.”

Soul Palace prides itself on making all food made to order, making it hot and fresh just like customers like it.

“We don’t use frozen meat,” shared Henderson.

Most unique is the fact “she makes her own seasoning for everything,” her granddaughter, Janyah Okra, beamed.

Soul Palace’s most requested entrees include the hearty-sized burgers and tasty seasoned fries, followed by its mouth-watering fish and tantalizing chicken spaghetti.

“Our burgers are No. 1,” said Henderson. “And we do plate lunches daily, different plate lunches. And everybody around here, they love my chicken and spaghetti.”

Henderson’s husband, Willie, said the chicken spaghetti is such a hit that customers crave it nearly every day.

“That’s what everybody wants,” he chuckled. “They want it every day. It’s rather good!”

Lunch time is most busy for the establishment as they’re taking several call-in orders, many of which come from schools.

“We do a lot of orders for the schools,” said Henderson.

As a neighbor to Wiley University, Soul Palace also caters to college students, offering a special discount every Monday night.

“We have College Night on Monday nights. We give them a burger, fries and a drink for like \$7,” noted Henderson.

Friday’s menu is also a hit, featuring buffalo ribs; and fish plates with a diverse choice of hush puppies, fries, Coleslaw and chili beans.

The daily main menu offers diverse selections, ranging from “Something Light,” featuring an assortment of salads; to house platters (including chopped steak with grilled onions, mushrooms, homemade brown gravy, mashed potatoes, beans and roll or Texas toast) and Big Meaty Burger (consisting of two patties, double cheese, bacon, and jalapeno peppers, served open-faced with French fries or steak fries.

The menu also includes a variety of baskets, featuring a choice of chicken strips, chili cheese dogs, pork chops and more. Specialty sandwiches, including pork chop, chicken fried steak or chicken are served on Texas toast with lettuce, tomatoes and mayo.

A yummy Philly Cheesesteak Po’Boy is also available on the as well as “small bites,” including a mix of appetizers, ranging from homemade onion rings, cheesesticks, fried pickles, fried okra, chili cheese fries, chili cheese nachos, meat pies, chili



Owners Willie and Priscilla Henderson

cheese nachos and more. Freshly cooked veggies are also on the menu as well as yummy options for the kids. Deserts, snack bar items and drinks are additionally available for purchase.

The restaurant has grown so much throughout the years that Henderson also stays busy with her side catering services, PK's catering, which is an extension of Soul Palace.

The catering side of the eatery is named in honor of Henderson and her granddaughter, Kamori, who assists her with the catering business.

"I do catering events out of here," she said, sharing her signature chicken spaghetti is most requested. "I was just honored to do the Johnsons' wedding; and I cook for funeral repasts and stuff like that. We do a lot of different things."

Community Outreach Efforts

Since opening, Soul Palace has become a staple in the community with not only patrons appreciating its service but also organizations such as the New Town Neighborhood Association, who once presented the establishment with a Community Pride Award in recognition of the eatery's role in revitalizing the area.

In addition to offering good food and service, Soul Palace also strives to be active in the community by participating in philanthropic efforts, often serving as a host site for the annual Community Bike Ride and Toy Drive, sponsored by Henderson's daughter's nonprofit, The Open Arms Foundation.

"We just help out," said Henderson. "We've done so many different things here."

Henderson thanked those who have assisted her at the restaurant along the way, including her husband Willie, groundskeeper Kevin Williams, and cashier Betty Bush.

"I love her to death. She's like a mom. She keeps it going; she keeps me going," Henderson said of Bush.

Most rewarding for the restaurant has been having the opportunity to give back to the community during times of need.

"The best feeling I ever had was when we lost power for so long... we were without power, but I was still able to give back," Henderson said as she reflected on the citywide power outage in the summer of 2023. "The next day, we came in here, the lights came on, we threw everything away, but we were able to get some food in. It wasn't a lot, but we were able to give hot dogs, fries and a drink for the kids."

"We gave free food even though we lost everything, too," she said. "I was thankful. The people were very, very thankful. And I always try to give back, because without them, there would be no Soul Palace."

Soul Palace's hours of operation are: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday; and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday. **HM**





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THE INFIELD DOWNTOWN GIVES OPPORTUNITIES FOR EAST TEXAS KIDS

story by **Lauren Rosenberg** | photos contributed to **Harrison Magazine**

On the corner of Washington and Burleson in downtown Marshall lies a complex where young baseball and softball player's dreams come true. At The Infield Downtown, you'll see members and their kids inside the batting cages working on their hitting and practicing fielding and pitching on the artificial turf.

The Infield all started around a decade ago when Glenn and Karen Bickerdike noticed there wasn't a place in Marshall for their kids to practice. After wanting to open a facility where not only their kids but other Marshall youth could practice baseball and softball without traveling to Longview or Tyler, the Infield Downtown was born.

After the Bickerdikes' kids grew up and aged out of sports, they sold the business to Scott Carlile. Carlile's sons played baseball and he wanted a place where not only his sons could practice but so could other kids. His vision was the same as the Bickerdikes, and he wanted to continue that onto the next generation.

"[The Bickerdikes] got to the point where they were willing to sell the business so I approached them and bought it around two years ago," said Carlile.

Back when the Bickerdikes owned the business, people could rent out cages for 30 minutes to an hour. When the pandemic hit in 2020, they had to change the business model to members only where you'd pay a monthly fee and get unlimited, 24-hour access to the facility. That way they could limit staff and abide by the COVID-19 restrictions. When Carlile bought the business, he kept it that way.

"When I bought the building all the restrictions from the pandemic were pretty much lifted but I continued with that model [of a membership]. We have birthday parties where little kids and their families will rent it out for two hours. We shut the whole facility down and they'll play kickball, wiffle ball, or whatever they want on the astroturf in here," said Carlile.

Aside from renting out the facility for parties, Infield also hosts college players. When it's cold outside, the ETBU soft-



ball team, and sometimes their opponents, will come out and work on their craft indoors. Aside from ETBU, they also hosted Marshall, Wiley and many other Marshall area high schools and youth academies.

“The ETBU women’s softball team have done really well and have hosted a lot of major tournaments. When those tournaments have been here, the facility provides teams from all across the country a convenient place to practice,” said Carlile.

Carlile doesn’t run the business on his own. He brought in former Marshall and Wiley University baseball player Brandon Bilnoski to help run the facility and day-to-day operations. Bilnoski was approached by Carlile to help him out and he quickly said yes.

“When Scott bought The Infield, I was coaching his youngest son on my select team, Texas Elite. Scott approached my brother (Robbie Bilnoski) and myself about running the day to day operations for The Infield. In return, Scott told me I could conduct my lessons at the facility. I am truly grateful for the opportunity because my dream has always been to have a baseball/softball facility of my own [to help grow the sport in Marshall],” said Bilnoski.

The impact the Infield has had on the Marshall community is immense. With the facility located right downtown, people from other areas of Harrison County like Elysian Fields, Harleton and Waskom get the chance to practice together and meet new people as they grow up.

“The impact that The Infield has made on the community was only a fraction of what it could have been! We started in 2024 giving each team at the Dixie Youth Baseball and Softball Association a free hour of use so players and coaches could experience what we have to offer as most kids around East Texas would not have the opportunity to use an indoor facility,” said Bilnoski.

The impact The Infield has on the kids who’ve experienced



"...BE A *part* of HELPING THEM
ACHIEVE THEIR DREAMS AND
ACCOMPLISH THEIR GOALS
in a small way"



the facility goes beyond the field. Carlile and Bilnoski have been able to watch these kids grow into young men and women with great maturity. A prominent aspect of this growth is the mental game of sports. It's important to have a positive mentality even when your game performance doesn't result in what you want it to be.

"Baseball, I used to tell my boys all the time, is the only sport I can think of where if you fail seven out of 10 times you're a Hall of Famer. That's a .300 batting average. Baseball and softball challenge you on the mental side as much as the physical," said Carlile.

The honor of seeing these kids grow is not something Carlile and Bilnoski take for granted. They have seen many of these kids grow up playing T-ball all the way to playing in high school and beyond.

"There's several players on the [Marshall] baseball team that I've coached before and then they got old enough to play

in High School. I've seen them up here putting in work and nobody knows they're in here. So that's really neat to be a part of helping them achieve their dreams and accomplish their goals in a small way," said Carlile.

"As a native from Marshall, I have always wanted to see baseball/softball get back to the powerhouse they once were! When I look at the kids that get memberships and take private lessons, they generally have the most success. It's crazy to see kids that I have worked with starting at the age of 6, now in high school. It's rewarding to hear how the coach/teachers talk about how great of a kid they are. That's the biggest testimony as to what sports in general can do for a kid," said Bilnoski.

With plans to upgrade Airport Park to include turf baseball and softball fields, Carlile and Bilnoski hope the park will help grow the game in East Texas and get more kids involved at an early age just like The Infield is doing. **FM**




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A TRIP BACK IN TIME

FIREANT FESTIVAL, BRANCHCHILD OF FORMER NEWS MESSENGER PUBLISHER, STILL GOING STRONG 42 YEARS LATER

story by **George Smith** | photos special to **Harrison Magazine**

Forty years. 1982. I was a newcomer to Marshall, and had just finished up a two-year stint as publisher of the “Stuttgart Daily Leader” in Arkansas.

The day it was announced that I was the new publisher of the News Messenger, that story was overshadowed a tad by the stunning news that Lone Star Steel was shutting down. Not a good start to a job that

depends on money flowing from wallets to cash registers and from cash registers to advertising, which is supposed to stimulate the “buy-me” gene, thus completing the economic circle.

With stores destined to close and the unemployment rate guaranteed to spike, my mind immediately went into crisis management mode: What could the paper do, with me, a newcomer, as a fledgling publisher with only two year’s experience, to change this negative news into a positive, to create a raging waterfall of money for the community, for the paper, when finding a trickle was a daunting task?

A year before I had been chairman of the World Championship Duck Calling Contest in Stuttgart; six months before I had been the founder of a new South Arkansas “reason to have a party” — the Arkansas Mosquito Festival. For a wacky idea for a pesky critter that created much pain and suffering in the

FireAnt-MarketFest 1983: Getting it right the first time!



MARSHALL NEWS MESSENGER

107th Year...No. 78, 50 cents

Marshall, Texas, Sunday, October 5, 1982

310 Pages, 10 Sections

Marshall gets a little zany for FireAnt Festival



HARRISON MAGAZINE



wa -

ter-drenched rice and soybean fields surrounding the town, it proved quite successful.

We filled the main street of town with booths and patterned the main event — the World Champion Mosquito Calling Contest — loosely after the Duck Calling event; entrants had to mimic the feeding, mating, “run away” and “long distance” calls of the mosquito.

In 1981 Stuttgart, a community whose existence was based on agriculture, was going through a severe drought, the worst, farmers said, in 50 years. In starting the MosquitoFest, the paper’s internal motto was: “If you can’t beat ‘em, bring in new revenue and have fun while doing it.” We published a special Mosquito edition of the paper that was one of the biggest issues of the year.

In a phrase: A good time was had by all.

Scant months later, with an economic crisis looming in Marshall and unemployment going from 4.2 to more than 19% overnight, it seemed like the perfect time for a new festival. Marshall already had Stagecoach Days, but there was room in the fall for ... what else? — a FireAnt Festival.

It was not an easy sell. The chamber, at first, was not enthused. Mike Wood, local bank president, was chamber CEO, and he couched me on the dangers that a newcomer faced by coming into town and starting something that, on the surface, was a solid 10 in the negative category.

He softened a bit when I told him that the paper would underwrite the entire festival, if needed, that I had already secured a national sponsor (American Cyanamid, makers of Amdro, the fire ant killing granular product, for \$25,000) and that the sheer wackiness of the festival would attract a lot of attention and visitors. I assured him that the chamber would not lose any money and any profits from the event would go back into the chamber’s coffers.

The festival was a “GO!”

The first festival, with tons of volunteers who were looking for a respite for “bad news,” went extremely well. Television

stations from as far away as Houston and Dallas showed up. Why? The craziness of the festival and its insane events were the key. By the third year, National Geographic sent a team down to check us out and the Smithsonian requested items for display.

I remember the National Geographic reporter asking: “Why a festival to spotlight the fire ant?” My answer: “If we were having an azalea festival, would you be here asking questions?”

Way back then, we had these events, Some of which still remain:

- The World Championship FireAnt Calling
 - The WC FireAnt Roundup
 - The FireAnt Costume Contest
 - The WC Pizza Crust Fling (throwing a pizza crust for accuracy and distance. It died a horrible death after Year 1; the debris, when washed away with fire hoses, clogged the sewer lines.)
 - The WC Beverage Coaster Throw (accuracy and distance)
 - The WC Rubber Chicken Chunking (accuracy and distance)
 - The Tour de FireAnt bike race (to Lake of the Pines and back)
 - The FireAnt 5K
- And,
- The Texas Open Gurning Championship (ugly face-making).

The fact that the winner of the gurning contest was eligible to compete at the world event held annually since 1297 in Ireland gained a lot of press and attention. Each contestant had to sign a release (the small print officially made it clear the winner was responsible for his/her expenses to the world event).

The big draw were the trophies: Six-foot-tall trophies for first place, 4-foot for second and 3-foot for third. Plus \$100 for all winners. Coors of Longview sponsored the trophies and advertised their product by making branded cans as trophy stanchions.

Volunteers organized an Old-Fashioned Stump Speaking, where politicians gave speeches from, where else, atop a stump.

Protocol was pretty much tossed out the window. The normal rate for booths were \$25, \$35 with electricity; that first festival, the chamber changed \$75, with or without electricity. That first festival, all planned spaces sold out, and additional spaces closed out portions of two streets around the square.

Fun. It was a lot of fun. And an estimated 30,000 folks showed up at the initial event.

Is it as much fun this days?

Forty-two years. Seems like just yesterday. Or, maybe the day before. **AM**

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