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20 UNDER 40 2022

Star
Journal

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20 UNDER 40

is a celebration of young people, age 40 and younger, in Johnson County who are contributing to their community through business, education, civic involvement and community service. Through nominations from the community and the Star-Journal staff, the newsroom narrowed it down to the 20 Under 40 group for 2022. These young citizens are helping create a bright future for our area.

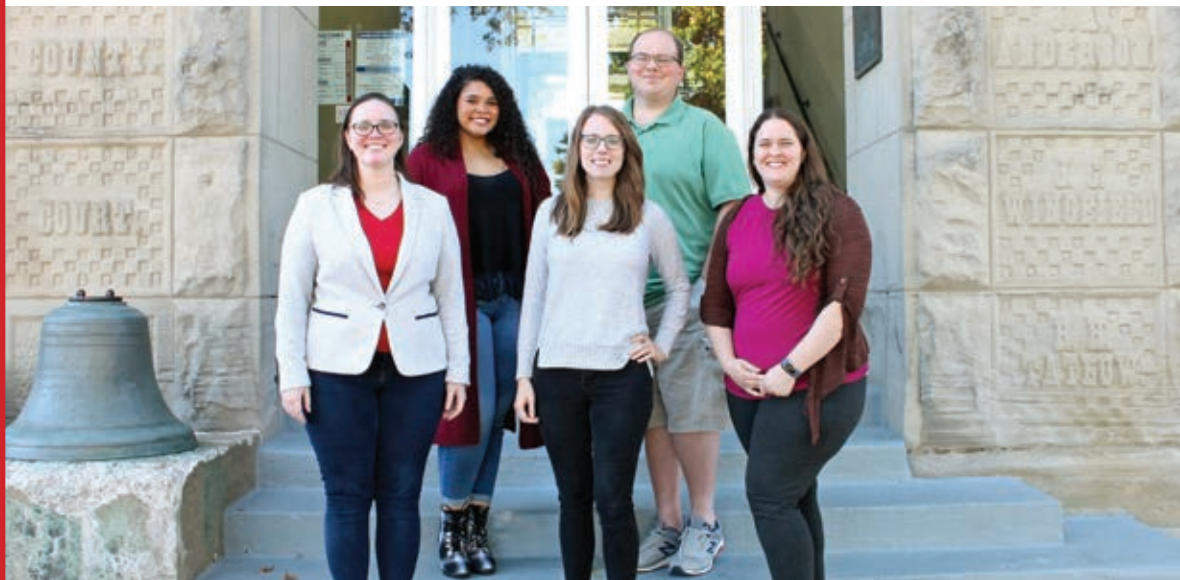
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Cover photo by Nicole Cooke | Star-Journal

Congratulations

to the 20 Under 40 winners of 2022!

We're inspired by the way you are fostering positive change in our community.



Warrensburg's Under 40 Employees

Pictured from left, Reporter Sara Lawson, Reporter Meliyah Venerable, Editor Nicole Cooke, Sports Editor Joe Andrews and Customer Service Clerk Holly Basinger.



Blevens growing her business, family legacy

By Nicole Cooke

nicolec@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Jess Blevens has worked as a florist for 16 years, but it wasn't until last year that she decided to add her own gardening venture to the mix.

31-year-old Blevens opened Well Planted Greenhouse in 2021 and has continued to work full-time at Awesome Blossoms, owned by her mom, Jennifer, in downtown Warrensburg. With the opening of her new business, Blevens is continuing her family's 80-year legacy of plant care in Warrensburg. The current 284-square-foot greenhouse is located on the same property where the original greenhouse, DeBacker Flower and Garden, started in the 1940s.

"I really just wanted to get the plant portion of the flower shop really going because it's been an explosion, everyone is really getting into (plants), and I love every minute of it," Blevens said while standing in her greenhouse. "It's not just a funeral plant, that's what everyone used to think, and I wanted to change that and make it more local."

Plants and gardening had always been a hobby for Blevens, but when she began caring for her grandpa's plants during the pandemic, it turned into something more. At the time, it was just his personal greenhouse.

"I loved that. I promised him I'd try and get a business going again in honor of him and whenever he passed, it was like, 'OK, I've got to get this going,'" Blevens recalled.

Blevens buys some plants from wholesalers, and even through some plant buy-and-sell groups on Facebook, and then she takes cuttings from those plants to have even more product to sell. Her greenhouse isn't open to the public, but that hasn't slowed her sales. Many of her plants end up at Awesome Blossoms or the Warrensburg Farmers' Market, where Blevens was a first-time vendor in 2022. She also sells online and hosts birthday parties, private parties, and pop-up succulent bars for events.

Blevens has an Associate's degree in horticulture, but she said she's learned

more through hands-on experience. And, having a green thumb seems to be genetic. She is the fourth generation to operate a greenhouse on the property; her mom went the floral route while her dad followed the landscaping path. Her husband, John, and their kids, 11-year-old Hanna and 8-year-old Luke, are also involved in the restored family business.

When she's not making floral arrangements or tending to her greenhouse, Blevens is busy being a parent, transporting the kids from countless activities and helping at school. The family enjoys nature and hiking, and spending plenty of time outside, even in the winter. But despite their constant activity schedule, her kids have gotten involved in the greenhouse too. Hanna and Luke create floral arrangements and terrariums to sell at the farmers' market. They also help their aunt, Jamie DeBacker, at Warrensburg Main Street with gardening needs in downtown Warrensburg.

And with whatever remaining free time she has left, Blevens has found more ways to incorporate plants into her life.

This summer, Blevens started a new "Little Plant Stand" on Gay Street, across from the Warrensburg Community Center. The idea came from little libraries — people could leave a plant or take a plant, helping spread the love of gardening throughout the community. The stand is closed for the winter, but Blevens said she plans to bring it back once the weather warms up in the spring, and she hopes to see the idea expand throughout Johnson County. She also grows vegetables to sell at the farmers' market, so stand visitors next season might also see some of Blevens' extra veggie plants for the taking.

She also has started doing container planting for businesses and private residences. She did several this summer, which she called a great learning experience, and she plans to continue that new sector of her business.

Blevens said Monica Mitcheltree, the Farmers' Market manager, calls her



Jess Blevens and her family pose for a photo on the Johnson County Courthouse lawn. Pictured are Jess, her husband, John, and their children, Hanna and Luke.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JESS BLEVENS

the "plant doctor" because she's gained a reputation for helping plant parents diagnose ailments and help bring the plants back to life. Blevens is the first to admit she's not an expert, but she does her best to help customers or teaches tricks for winterizing.

Kelli Eckett, the other flower designer at Awesome Blossoms, said Blevens has been a "plant doctor" for much longer than her year at the farmers' market.

Eckett said she's quick to refer customers to Blevens for any plant questions.

"She's so excited to talk to them and educate them," Eckett said. "She's all about it. She loves pulling up old references and tools handed down from past family members, education forms her grandma made, and before that. She really enjoys passing down family traits."

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Congratulations to Jessica Blevens and all of the other Top 20 Under 40 winners!



212 N. Holden St. (660) 747-7673

awesomeblossomsshop.com • awesomeblossomsshop@gmail.com

Sommer found home, career path in Warrensburg

By Sara Lawson

saral@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Adam Sommer, 37, decided to pursue law as a career in Warrensburg and made partner practicing law with a local law firm.

Sommer graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of Central Missouri in 2008 and graduated from law school at the University of Missouri in 2012.

"When I was a teenager, I wanted to be a musician, a lawyer or a weatherman," Sommer said. "I wasn't very good at science, so I figured it was either music or law and I gave what I will call a 'realistic try' to being a musician and found out that it was a very good hobby and I was probably better off, professionally, being a lawyer."

Sommer said he gained an interest in being a lawyer at an early age because of his parents' divorce and subsequent custody discussions.

Sommer said as he got older, he started to realize the impact of a lawyer in people's lives.

"It's just helpful in a custody case to have somebody who understands the stakes of a custody case," Sommer said.

Sommer said he was in college when he realized becoming a lawyer was truly an option for him.

"My (mom and stepdad) were both hourly employees," Sommer said. "They got paychecks, they worked very hard. I remember helping my stepdad as a night janitor at the local private school. I have memories of my parents just working hard and my mom ran a home daycare for a while. They were always doing something to make money. Even when I was coming out of high school, lawyer wasn't an attainable thing."

Sommer said his first political science class cemented his decision to pursue law.

"It's like some people take math and it just makes sense," Sommer said. "For me, political science was like that immediately. I was just like, 'this is how I speak, this is how I think, this is how I process.' All of this makes sense to me."

Sommer is originally from Warrenton and

came to Warrensburg for school.

"It's similar to what I grew up with where it's a centralized community with sort of a farming surrounding," Sommer said. "I really liked the university, I liked the professors and kind of just dug in."

While attending UCM, Sommer joined the mock trial team, where he met Doug Harris, who was coaching the team.

Sommer said Harris was the person who made becoming a lawyer feel attainable.

"Working with Adam while he was a student here at the university, I was immediately impressed with his just native talent with the law," Harris said. "From the beginning, even in mock trial, he was able to make a better presentation than many of the lawyers that I had been practicing against for years. I was fortunate to come into contact with him."

Sommer started answering phones as a law student for what was then Harris, Harris and Gilbert.

"I decided then that I really wanted to work here," Sommer said. "I really liked Warrensburg, I really liked the community."

Prior to his graduation and under supervision, Sommer was doing prosecution work with the City of Warrensburg while still attending law school.

"It was really just kinda getting your feet under you, proving yourself that you can do the work and that you're somebody who's trustworthy to show up every day and do the job," Sommer said. "Law has a super high burnout rate, much like education, much like teachers. There's this window where if you make it through the window, you probably will have a successful career."

Sommer received his license to practice law in the spring of 2013.

"It took three years basically then to when they asked me to formally join the business," Sommer said.

The name of the law firm officially changed to Harris, Harris and Sommer in 2019 with the retirement of Barry Gilbert.

Sommer said it felt good to have his name in the business name officially.

"Get to see that name and know my kids are

See **SOMMER**, Page 7



Adam Sommer stands near a bust of Mark Twain in his office at Harris, Harris and Sommer.
PHOTO BY SARA LAWSON | STAR-JOURNAL

Ross takes on teaching, coaching in first year at Leeton School District

By Sara Lawson

saral@warrensburgstarjournal.com

The last few months have been full of changes for Dane Ross, 32.

Dane Ross is in his first year teaching special education with the Leeton School District and recently purchased Old Drum Coffeehouse with his wife, Bailey.

Dane Ross previously worked with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Johnson County for three years as a match specialist and continues to volunteer his time as a Big.

"I was previously at Big Brothers Big Sisters for the last three years," Dane Ross said. "I just really enjoy working with children, but Big Brothers Big Sisters was a little bit more in the background. There was a lot of paperwork involved. It's still helping children, but I wasn't working hands-on with them."

Dane Ross said he really wanted to have an impact and decided to pursue teaching and now serves as the special education teacher for the middle and high schools in the Leeton School District. With the upcoming season, he will be the varsity assistant coach for Leeton High School basketball.

"I just have a room, we have three paras and we just work through subjects they're struggling with and help them get back into the classroom," Dane Ross said.

Dane Ross said he enjoys being able to work with kids and watch them grow.

"I enjoy seeing them grow up and seeing that change in them, knowing that hopefully I had an impact on them," Dane Ross said. "Have an impact on them growing up and becoming a productive adult."

Dane Ross said kids deserve to have a connection with an adult they can trust and count on to be there for them.

"Building that connection, being someone that they can lean on, not everyone has that," Dane Ross said. "I try to be a positive role model in my students' lives."

Dane and Bailey Ross both volunteer as Bigs with BBBS.

"Our Bigs, what we're looking for from our Bigs is for them to form a friendship with their Little and just be there to mentor them along the way," Executive Director Dana Phelps said. "It's the friendship of it that is most important."

Phelps said Dane has been a Big since 2019.

"We're just very active in that program," Dane Ross said.

Dane and Bailey Ross became co-owners of Old Drum Coffeehouse in July, a recent venture after the previous owners offered to sell.

"It just seemed too good to pass up when we got the opportunity," Dane Ross said. "We found out the previous owners were going to close it and then they just kind of gave us the opportunity that if we wanted to give it a go, we could."

Dane Ross said he thinks it is a good thing the coffeehouse has remained in local ownership.

"This was just such a fast decision that we had to make because the previous owners wanted to shut it down," Dane Ross said. "We had a three-day window of answering whether we wanted it or not."

Bailey Ross previously worked as the marketing director under the previous owners and the offer was made for the Rosses to buy Old Drum Coffeehouse.

"It kind of got brought to us to buy it because I was pretty passionate about it as we were discussing things," Bailey Ross said. "Just one thing after another turned into us buying it because we were passionate about it and wanted to make sure that it stayed in the community and not changing it to something else."

Bailey Ross oversees the daily operations of the business and Dane Ross works most Saturdays.

"This is our first business," Dane Ross said. "It's gone really well. The support has been amazing, the support from the community. We try to participate in all the community events and do all of that."

Prior to owning a business named for the famous dog, the Rosses fostered a dog from Old Drum Animal Shelter and ended up adopting it.



Dane Ross stands with his wife, Bailey.
PHOTO COURTESY OF DANE ROSS

"I was trying my best to help out," Dane Ross said. "I know they were full for a long time, so we were trying to find a way to help without adopting another dog since we had four at the time. Now we have five dogs. The Old Drum name is very fitting, for Warrensburg, for us, because we love dogs so much."

Before the pandemic, Dane Ross would take one of his dogs to a long-term care facility to visit with residents.

In juggling time as a teacher and business owner, Dane Ross is also working toward his master's degree in special education teaching at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and has a bachelor's

degree in health studies for community health from the University of Central Missouri.

"After getting done with school and never expecting to go back, I just never thought that I would ever want to go back or need to, so that was just out of the question," Dane Ross said. "We built a life, we built a house, we have five dogs and I had a job literally 30 seconds from my house ... so that's been a big change, time-wise."

Dane Ross said the past few months have been full of changes.

Fowler helps future Johnson County residents find a place to call home

By Meliyah Venerable

meliyahv@warrensburgstarjournal.com

For 31-year-old Chelsea Lee Fowler, being a realtor is more than just finding someone a new house. It is finding a family a safe and comfortable place to call home.

“The idea of being able to find people that peace and comfort really brings me joy,” Fowler said. “So when someone suggested that to me, I started thinking about why I would want to do that. The first thing that came to my mind was to find people a place they can feel safe and comfortable.”

Growing up, Fowler wanted to be a singer or an actress, something where she would be entertaining people. Ironically, that carried over to her current occupation as a real estate agent. Now, she is able to put a smile on faces in her

own way as she assists people in finding their perfect place to live.

Fowler grew up in a small town in Arkansas. When she was about 20 years old, she decided to move to Nebraska with her previous boyfriend.

After leaving an unhealthy relationship, Fowler and her two sons moved to Warrensburg, where both her sister and mother live.

Her background is what inspired her to become a realtor. Fowler said that when she was in Nebraska, she didn't have a place to call home.

“We were in a place for a long time where we didn't have a place to live,”



Chelsea Lee Fowler is a Warrensburg real estate agent who is passionate about helping others find their home.

INSET: Chelsea Lee Fowler and her two sons, Raynen Willis, 13, and Roman Lee, 6. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHELSEA LEE FOWLER

Fowler said. “We were homeless, living in my car. We celebrated birthdays even in the back seat of my vehicle, eating cupcakes together.

“When we moved to Warrensburg, I was going to nursing school and I knew that I didn't want to go in that direction anymore; it was more of a safety net than anything. When I came down here, someone suggested to me that with my personality and my work experience, real estate would be a great option for you.”

Fowler thought finding someone a safe place would be rewarding and something she would love to do because she remembers how it felt feeling safe again in her own home.

“When I thought about the reason behind why I would want to do that, it kind of ties back into those moments where I was with my kid and we moved here and

we had a home,” Fowler said. “We were safe for what felt like the first time in several years.

“The idea of being able to help someone, not just find a place to live. It's not just a place where you put your clothes and your belongings. That is your safe spot, that is your comfortable spot. It's so much deeper and so much more rewarding than just finding a house. This

See **FOWLER**, Page 7

We are so proud of Chelsea for this recognition of the great work she does, and so appreciative of the support of the wonderful Warrensburg community both of Chelsea and of Homes by Darcy! We love the 'burg!

*Congratulations Chelsea,
and we love watching you grow!*



HOMES BY
DARCY

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666266th

SOMMER

Continued from Page 4

going to see that image is huge,” Sommer said.

Sommer specializes in family law and governmental entities in general, as well as city-level prosecution for several municipalities in Johnson County.

“I kind of tripped and fell into being a library lawyer several years ago,” Sommer said. “Libraries have a whole chapter of law in the Missouri Code.”

Sommer said someone in the Trails Regional Library system suggested his firm look into library law.

“It sort of became my thing to deal with these public libraries,” Sommer said. “That turns into they need lawyers for smaller projects and different advice. I’ve been advising close to a dozen public libraries in the State of Missouri over the

last five or six years.”

Sommer has coached the UCM mock trial team since 2013.

“Basically, the year out of law school, I took over doing that,” Sommer said. “Doug had left it prior. ... Since that time (UCM) has been competitive on a national level with division one schools who have law schools.”

Sommer said UCM’s academic rivals are Mizzou, Washington University and University of Iowa.

“We took it to that level and through that process, I’ve seen several students come through the program and go on to law school and become very good lawyers,” Sommer said. “Some went on to huge prestigious firms .. but they all have become very good people and very good

lawyers and we have two (associates) here now.”

Sommer said his biggest professional accomplishment is being able to help the students he coaches the same way Harris helped him.

Sommer and four of his friends started a scholarship program in his hometown after his high school music teacher died in 2020.

“We raised \$5,000 and we started giving out scholarships that spring in his name,” Sommer said.

Sommer hosts a political podcast called The Heartland Pod. He also continues to pursue music as a hobby and performs on occasion for charitable organizations, including the Western Missouri Medical Center Foundation.

Sommer serves on the WMMC Foundation Board and the Warrensburg Schools Foundation Board and also works to support his wife, Amanda, who volunteers with the International Rett Syndrome Foundation.

Sommer is also a fan of the works of Mark Twain and has a bust of the Missouri author in his office.

“I’ve won lots of cases, I’ve lost my fair share of cases,” Sommer said. “I’ve recovered lots of money for people, I’ve helped people with custody. I’ve had a lot of really good days in court and I’ve had plenty of bad days in court. I’ve had clients hug me and clients curse me. ... But that’s just part of being a lawyer.”

Sara Lawson can be reached at 660-747-8123.

ROSS

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“Working 20 minutes away, then not going to school and now I’m going to school; not owning a business to owning a business,” Dane Ross said. “That’s just been probably the hardest thing ... but it’s still

going well.”

Dane Ross said he is still trying to find that new work-life balance, but in his free time, he likes to jog as well as play in a cornhole league at Wood Chux and play

slow pitch softball in Holden.

“He is super hard working,” Bailey Ross said. “He is honestly one of the best people in the community.”

Bailey Ross said he goes out of his way

in almost everything he does.

“I stay pretty busy,” Dane Ross said. “There’s always something going on.”

Sara Lawson can be reached at 660-747-8123.

FOWLER

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is where they are going to be. This is where they lay their head, where they trust that their kids will be safe. It’s so much deeper than that to me because there were so many times where we didn’t feel safe and now we do.”

Fowler got her real estate license during the pandemic. One of the things she focuses on when helping people find homes is making sure they are getting their money’s worth. To do that, she puts herself in their shoes.

“No matter how big or small the transaction is, I always try to imagine that it is me buying it and not the person,” Fowler said. “That way, every decision I make and every bit of advice I give to the client is always what I would do and in their best interest. As opposed to putting myself first and thinking about the commission I gain from it. The idea is doing whatever is best for

that person.”

The biggest achievement for Fowler is breaking the cycle of abuse and giving her, as well as her children, a fresh start. Moving to Warrensburg has opened many doors for Fowler.

Fowler is now an agent for Homes by Darcy. Darcy Roach said she loves working with Fowler.

“I love working with Chelsea,” Roach said. “I love her passion for her community and clients. She’s always involved in the Warrensburg events and supports local businesses.

“Chelsea always has a smile and listens to her clients and customers. We are so lucky to have her as an agent at Homes by Darcy.”

The future is bright for “Worry Free with Chelsea Lee.” Her current broker is looking to expand, which will give Fowler the chance to expand as well.

Although there is an opportunity for her to open her own brokerage, she said she enjoys being an agent.

“I think the future is going to be really bright. I’ve had a lot of clients so far,” Fowler said. “I still have good relationships with those clients. As long as I continue to put my clients first and do what is best for them, I have no doubts that it is just going to keep getting better.”

Fowler’s past inspired her to be what she is today. She said she doesn’t want to hide her past from people. If anything, she wants to be an example of someone who got the strength to get out and do what she can to help others in those situations realize they can change their future as well.

“I think the more that people know it, the more you can come from any background and change where you came

from...” she said. “You can change those things. You can change your life and it doesn’t have to stay that way just because other people tell you that you have to; it’s your life.”

Every time she has a closing, Fowler donates a portion of her closing proceeds to Survival House. She said what the organization does is incredible and places like that helped her get out of her situation.

“What I really want to do for this community is just put them first and show them that I am here and I care about them and their situations,” Fowler said. “Things like this (20 Under 40) just constantly give me inspiration to continue and it shows that the work that I am doing isn’t going unnoticed or unappreciated.”

Meliah Venerable can be reached at 660-747-8123.

Byron finds passion in making others feel like a 'goddess'

By Meliyah Venerable

meliyahv@warrensburgstarjournal.com

39-year-old Delilah Byron left the United States Air Force to build her dream business. Byron decided that after she finished 12 years in the military, it was time to follow her new-found dream of a day spa, Goddess Studio.

"The inspiration behind the name Goddess Studio is to help every woman feel like a goddess," she explained.

"My favorite part is making people feel better about themselves. As well as improving their physical and mental health."

Goddess Studio offers a vast variety of corrective and preventive skincare and body contouring.

Byron is from Georgia, but her career brought her to Knob Noster.

When she was in high school, she took dual-college classes, so after high school, she decided to take a short break.

Byron's friend had a recruiter from the Air Force talk to her, and eventually, she decided it was something she would like to do.

After her time in the Air Force was over, she was looking for something she was passionate about. After getting a massage, she decided that was the career path she wanted to take.

"I used to get massages here and there and sometimes a facial," Byron said. "I decided that was something I would like to do. So I went to esthetician school and right when I finished that, I went straight to massage therapy school."

Byron knew she wanted to work for herself, but she also wanted to make the client experience special and affordable. She would not be able to do that through big-name spas.

"Because of the Air Force, I had a lot

of leadership and management experience," Byron said. "I didn't want to work for someone else. I wanted to be on my own, set my own prices and do my own services that I wanted to do.

"If you go to a lot of chain spas, they want to charge you for everything. Like if you get essential oils in your massage, every little thing. A little goes a long way, so I like being able to add something if I want to and not get in trouble for it."

Kelsey Sutherland is a customer of Byron's. She had a pleasant experience and plans to return.

"My experience was so friendly and inviting," Sutherland said. "Every session I have had has been comfortable and very informative about exactly what she's doing. I can tell the owner is extremely passionate about what she does and that really does make a difference."

Running a business completely on your own, along with raising three very active kids, is not an easy task by any means. But somehow, Byron is able to manage running from various practices and school and still run a successful spa.

"They are all active," Byron said. "They are 11, 9 and 6. Right now, they are all involved in sports. Between the three of them, they have practice six days of the week. So it is definitely hard."

There were struggles when starting her business, but the biggest struggle was the impact the pandemic had on clients and her ability to work with people.

"Anytime you're opening up a business, there is some sort of struggle," Byron said. "I opened up right when the pandemic hit. So when I got my momentum up and I was gaining clientele, COVID happened. Basically, all of those clients I got, I didn't have anymore because of COVID."

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PHOTO
COURTESY
OF DELILAH
BYRON



Brisbin has a heart for helping others

By Nicole Cooke

nicolec@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Jamie Brisbin has made a career in the finance and mortgage industries, but she really thrives in connecting with and helping people.

Brisbin, 36, is a Warrensburg native who lives with her husband and son on property just north of town that is part of her family's multi-generational farm.

She attended the University of Central Missouri but soon realized college wasn't for her and she left school to enter the workforce. She started her professional career in retail, operating stores for Stage. After moving to Pittsburg, Kansas, and Chilli-cothe to run other stores, she married her husband, Matt, and they decided to move back to Warrensburg to be closer to family to have more support for his health issues.

"This is crazy. We got married in '09, we had our son in '09, we moved back to Warrensburg in '09 and got new jobs. Bought a house, remodeled it and moved in by the end of '09," Brisbin said. "It was a very big year."

Brisbin joined the team at World Finance and she said it was a "good niche" for her to be a manager again, but this time in finance.

"I'm a numbers person, and come to find out, my passion really was in filing people's tax returns, which people think is so weird," Brisbin said. "When it's tax time and they dread it, I love it. To me, it was like a big puzzle, figuring out all the credits and write-offs and just trying to help folks figure out the best way to get the most out of their return."

In 2018, her husband had two major transplant surgeries, so when the CO-

VID-19 pandemic began in 2020, their family took many precautions. She jumped to another company that allowed remote work, this time working with mortgages because helping families find a home sounded rewarding.

However, Brisbin has a passion for serving and helping others, and she missed the connection with the community. So once the COVID vaccine was available, she joined a local company, USA Mortgage.

"It's my favorite combo: it's numbers and it's a puzzle to find the right loan for folks because mortgages are very complex," she said. "So I get that aspect of it but I get the aspect of volunteering and being in organizations in the community and networking with people, which I love."

She later moved on to a similar role with another local company, Fairway Mortgage, where she continues to help those in need and even recently had a full-circle moment with a client.

"At World, I got to help folks that had no credit or issues with their credit in the past that no one else wanted to touch. Those folks have rainy days like everyone else and need help getting groceries or getting their first car," Brisbin said. "Because of their limitations with credit, they had nowhere else to go, so I got to be that for them and guide them and direct them on how they could better themselves financially. It was this wonderful way of giving back as well."

"My dream, when I got into mortgage, was one day to help folks I used to work with now get into a home. And (recently) I just closed on one. I'm very excited for that. It's been a team effort for this individual and very rewarding for me."

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PHOTO
COURTESY
OF JAMIE
BRISBIN



Ridenhour sees IT company grow

By Sara Lawson

saral@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Max Ridenhour, 22, started an IT company before he started college.

Ridenhour's interest in computers started with the family computer.

"When I was a little kid, we had our old Windows XP desktop machine," Ridenhour said. "It was the first family computer. I just remember our dad had just gone and changed his profile picture, just something so small and I was like, 'man, how'd you do that.'"

Ridenhour started to figure out how to change settings on the computer, which led to further exploration of how computers work, which led to him working on others' computers.

"Got a whole bunch of donated computers, got some tables, I went through and set up a computer lab for like 15 computers and set it up for the children's program (at church)," Ridenhour said. "That was whenever I was like, 'yeah, IT is my thing, that's what I want to do.'"

Ridenhour partnered with Patrick Cymer to start an IT company, using their initials for the company name, PCMR.

Ridenhour said he and Cymer recognized the need in the community for IT services.

"At the time, we didn't have any computer repair that was reliable in our town and we noticed that and wanted to fill that need," Ridenhour said.

Cymer and Ridenhour started running the business out of Ridenhour's parents' basement.

"We were literally working on an ironing board for our first laptop teardown," Ridenhour said. "We got that all finished up, got

our first job done and it was like, 'all right, we can make a business out of this,' went out and signed the LLC document."

The team had to wait until Ridenhour turned 18 years old to make everything official.

"We came up with everything at Thanksgiving and I turned 18 in a month," Ridenhour said.

In the years since its founding, PCMR has grown.

"I feel we've definitely filled that need in our community," Ridenhour said. "Our growth has been crazy. We're looking at 100-150% year-over-year right now. It's nothing like I expected. It's turned into something way bigger than I thought it was going to turn into."

Ridenhour said starting a business before going to college was not his original plan.

"I had a lot of other plans before ... I was going to go to Mizzou," Ridenhour said. "I was thinking about working at Google or Microsoft or something like that whenever I graduated. This business has really turned into something more than just an idea."

Ridenhour attended Mizzou as a student for one year before becoming a systems support analyst in the Student Affairs Department for the Division of IT for about a year.

"In February of 2020, we had just set up our new location on Holden Street ... we really believed that moving into that spot was what was going to make or break us," Ridenhour said. "It was time to move out of our incubator space."

Ridenhour said they were only one month into a 12-month lease when the initial pandemic lockdown happened.

"We were on the phone one night and we talked for hours," Ridenhour said.

The partners decided to honor their signed IT services contracts as well as their new lease agreement and continue on.

"We pushed through and by June or July of that year, we actually started profiting for the first time," Ridenhour said. "We were busy and it was at that point we realized work-from-home is a long-term thing and people need their computers fixed. People still need IT."

Cymer left the company amid the pandemic. Ridenhour resigned from Mizzou to run the business full-time.

Ridenhour now primarily works in an administrative role with employees who focus on the computers and working with the consumer.

Ridenhour said he prefers to work with software, entrusting hardware issues to his employees.

Since taking on the business full-time, Ridenhour has become heavily involved in the Warrensburg Chamber of Commerce and currently serves on the board of directors, the Member Relations Committee, the Young Professionals Committee and the Marketing Committee.

"Max is from the community and loves his hometown and community and it's very evident with every conversation that we have," Chamber Executive Director Suzanne Taylor said. "He doesn't want to just grow his own business and be successful, he wants everyone to be. He wants to see his hometown grow."

Ridenhour said it can be difficult to find time for his hobbies.

"I'm a pretty busy guy," Ridenhour said. "I work a lot of hours. Sometimes finding things to do outside of work is a struggle for me."

Ridenhour's hobbies include riding his

PHOTO
COURTESY
OF MAX
RIDENHOUR



bicycle, hiking through local parks and playing Rocket League.

His favorite trail to ride is the Katy Trail from Boonville to Columbia and he is excited to ride the Rock Island Trail and the Spirit Trail expansion.

"Warrensburg is a pretty all right place to bike," Ridenhour said.

His favorite park is Cave Hollow.

Ridenhour is making plans for the future of his business.

"I'm kind of a futurist in a way," Ridenhour said. "I always have visions of where I wanted to go. I have a lot of big plans for PCMR. We're wanting to be in multiple locations. We're wanting to continue to grow."

Ridenhour said he plans to expand PCMR to other locations.

"We're continuing to grow year-over-year in the Warrensburg area," Ridenhour said. "I love the Warrensburg area. I grew up here, born and raised here, but I also realize there are other markets for us to grow into."

Ridenhour said he hopes to expand the business to reach throughout the state.

"I feel I've truly found my true gift of entrepreneurship," Ridenhour said.

Sara Lawson can be reached at 660-747-8123.

BYRON

Continued from Page 8

"My experience did come in handy. I had those management skills, so I knew how to go about calculating taxes and getting enough clientele to pay my bills."

Byron is a part-time instructor at her location in Warrensburg as well as the school in Sedalia. Because she had a good instructor who taught her a lot, she wants to give that to others just starting.

"I had a really good instructor and I loved her," Byron said. "I also had a not-so-good instructor, so I knew that I wanted to be an instructor. I had to learn a lot on my own."

Her ultimate goal is to open her own school. While that is in the works, she wants to continue to teach classes and advanced services. She wants to be a trustworthy

mentor and instructor to new estheticians.

There are still plenty of achievements in Byron's future, but so far, her family and the influence she has in the skincare and massage community are two of her biggest achievements.

"My biggest personal achievement is being a mom and raising my kids. I am already instilling the business side into

them. Now is the time to build a business and give back to the community," Byron said. "Business-wise, it is being able to own my own business and do what I really love. I love doing massages and skin care. I love making people feel good about themselves. As well as an instructor, I get to help shape future estheticians."

Meliyah Venerable can be reached at 660-747-8123.

The Howertons open their dream farm to the community

By Meliyah Venerable

meliyahv@warrensburgstarjournal.com

After spending a few years in Houston, Texas, 35-year-old Stacey and 38-year-old Jon Howerton decided to move to Centerview to live out their dream of opening a farm to share with the community. That is when Hazel Hill Farm was established.

When deciding on a name, the Howertons knew they wanted it to involve some of the history in Centerview or Johnson County. The house on the property was built in 1896, so it has some history behind it as well.

During their research, they came across a township of Johnson County that was established in 1856, Hazel Hill Township. They both really liked how it sounded, so they decided to carry it over to their family farm.

The idea of the farm was brought about when Stacey and Jon were living in Houston. They wanted to have a Christmas tree farm if they decided to return to Jon's home state of Missouri.

After visiting a farm in Texas, their idea shifted, but they kept the same principle of giving the community somewhere to gather and enjoy themselves.

"I definitely remember visiting Pleasanton Farms in Texas," Jon said. "I remember just being there and seeing people lined up to get in from the time that we got in until the time we left.

"That was one of the first moments where I was like, 'wow, this is happening here in Houston. There are a lot more people that live here, but I know that there's not a lot of places like this in Missouri.' So there we started moving towards putting together a cool venue place where people would want to come out and bring their family and kids and have fun."

Stacey said that growing up, she knew she wanted to do something with hospitality or hosting.

"I've always loved hospitality," Stacey said. "Like throwing parties and just having events for our kids. I've always

loved creating and crafting and making something fun for people to come to. I think hospitality and hosting is a gift that I have been blessed with. So I have always loved and focused on things like that."

The biggest struggle the Howertons have faced is the list of tasks to check off to make an event happen and be successful.

"For me, it's the amount of stuff that you don't know, that you think you know," Jon said. "You have the idea and you decide to throw the event, but then you have to try and figure out insurance and the 15 other things you need to do. All the business that you have to keep nice and tight. I've never really done a lot of work for myself, it has been for other people, so all of that stuff gets handled on the backside. Now that you're doing it for yourself, you're the person that has to figure out all of that stuff."

Stacey and Jon run the farm and host the events by themselves. Stacey said people often don't realize it really is just the two of them. The family and business balance can sometimes be an issue, but at the end of the day, they do it for their family.

"For us, we are married and we have four young kids. So trying to balance all of that and make sure that we're putting our family as a priority," Stacey said. "It's so easy to get wrapped up in business. But we realize that we are doing this for our kids and that is our main priority, as well as our marriage."

All of the countless hours spent working to make an event happen pays off when they get to see the joy and smile-filled faces at Hazel Hill Farm.

"The very first one that we did was such an achievement," Jon said. "I think that day we had around 400 people come out. That, to me, just felt really good. It was a combination of an idea, not knowing where we were going to live, what we were going to do because we were still in Houston, to actually open the doors and there was a line out to the road. It just felt really good to do something that the community thought was valuable.

"Rehearsal dinners or weddings. You



Stacey and Jon Howerton in front of their sunflower patch at Hazel Hill Farm in Centerview. The sunflowers were new to the farm this year. Hazel Hill offered days for the community to take pictures and pick sunflowers throughout the week.

FILE PHOTO BY MELIYAH VENERABLE | STAR-JOURNAL

get to see these people have such a pinnacle moment. Especially weddings, seeing parents watching their kids get married and these kids are super excited. You see everyone having a great time and, of course, it's all about their event, but the fact that we get to be a side piece on that, providing a place for that to happen, is just rewarding. It's just so cool that we get to have a small part in someone's big event."

After meeting the Howertons at church, Kendy BerisLavich's oldest daughter decided to have her wedding at Hazel Hill Farm. BerisLavich had nothing but good things to say about the Howertons.

"Their integrity and kindness from the day I met them made their business an easy choice for me," BerisLavich said.

"They were a pleasure to work with. This being my oldest daughter's wedding, I was new at all of it and Stacey walked me through a number of things and answered all of my questions, no matter how small or out there they were.

"The day of the wedding, they were so helpful with everything we needed. I couldn't possibly say enough good things about them. They were an absolute joy to work with and I'd recommend them to anyone."

The Howertons have big plans for the future of Hazel Hill Farm. Most of them are still in the process of approval, but they said they have more in store to share with the community.

Meliyah Venerable can be reached at 660-747-8123.

Koons takes on teacher, leadership roles in fire service

By Sara Lawson

sarasal@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Always seeking more knowledge, Captain Anna Koons, 37, has numerous accomplishments in her field as a firefighter and instructor.

“I think I was always interested in the emergency services,” Koons said.

Koons’ first experience in emergency services was while volunteering with the Red Cross providing disaster relief services.

“I kinda got into it with going to the fires and helping with family services,” Koons said. “So if they had damage to their home through fire or natural disaster, then we would help them from that point. That’s kind of where I got sight of the fire department.”

Koons became a student resident with the Warrensburg Fire Department in 2005.

Though not the first female firefighter with the WFD, Koons was the only woman in the department when she became a full-time firefighter in 2008.

“She’s always been a reliable person that provides feedback, has ideas to help the department grow, how to help the crews grow,” Fire Chief Ken Jennings said. “She’s always been very active in continuing her education in the fire service, which is something I appreciate.”

Jennings said Koons continually seeks opportunities to learn.

“That constant yearning for advancing her knowledge base, her education, has allowed her that supervisory role to be able to manage a crew effectively and provide that guidance to her crew,” Jennings said. “Also provide feedback for the entire department. I often say the captain’s role is really the backbone of the fire department, that makes it work.”

Koons is the first female captain in the department.

“I think it’s cool, but I don’t think it should be like ‘woman captain,’ it’s just a captain that happens to be a woman that opened doors,” Koons said. “There’s a lot of the kids that come up with their parents or moms that bring up their daughters ...

maybe it opens their eyes that there’s opportunities they didn’t think of before. I think our culture has changed.”

There are currently six women in the department.

“Having that diversity in the fire department is good,” Jennings said. “Her role as a captain, as we work together and how we interact with the public, I think it’s great for young women to see ‘yeah, this is an option for me.’”

Jennings said Koons has played a key role in providing feedback to improve policies and procedures in the department for issues that had not previously been addressed as well as training development.

“I like to help the community,” Koons said. “I like that it’s different every day, so (I am) not stuck in an office with four walls. I like working outside.”

As a captain, Koons is responsible for the day-to-day operations of her crew.

“The battalion chief does the shift, you do your crew,” Koons said. “You are in charge of running calls, making sure things get done within the fire station, daily operations, meeting the needs of your crew.”

Koons is responsible for making sure her crew is set to handle all the various calls the department responds to, including fires, a cat in a tree, EMS, a person stuck in a vehicle after a wreck and public relations.

While not on call, Koons volunteers with the Civil Air Patrol.

“My dad thought it was a good thing,” Koons said. “My dad is a pilot, so he knew that aspect of it.”

Koons said she joined CAP because it was challenging.

“I knew that they did camping, I liked aviation (and) emergency services,” Koons said. “Emergency services, that’s what really drew me and at that time, Warrensburg Squadron was really heavy in emergency services. I like the challenge.”

Koons continues to seek out new information actively and recently completed a course in Command and Control of Target Hazards at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland.



“It reviewed and went over hazards that could be in your community, like the hospital, schools, industry,” Koons said. “And you worked on your ability to be in command of those type of incidents ... and the other areas such as safety and PIO (public information officer) and the different jobs that you could potentially do in your own fire department.”

Koons has several certifications in the fire service, including live fire instruction, Officer I and II, and Instructor I and II.

Jennings said Koons has completed most, if not all, state certifications.

Earlier this year, Koons began teaching as an adjunct fire instructor at Blue River Community College.

“I really do enjoy teaching and that keeps you up to date with what’s being taught and the difference of how things change,” Koons said. “The more that science comes into the fire service and learning better techniques or refining techniques.”

Koons said being a teacher makes her a better officer.

“You also have to learn how to teach the same thing in different ways for different students,” Koons said. “I think that makes you a better officer cause you’re doing the same with your crew, teaching and bringing them up to replace you someday.”

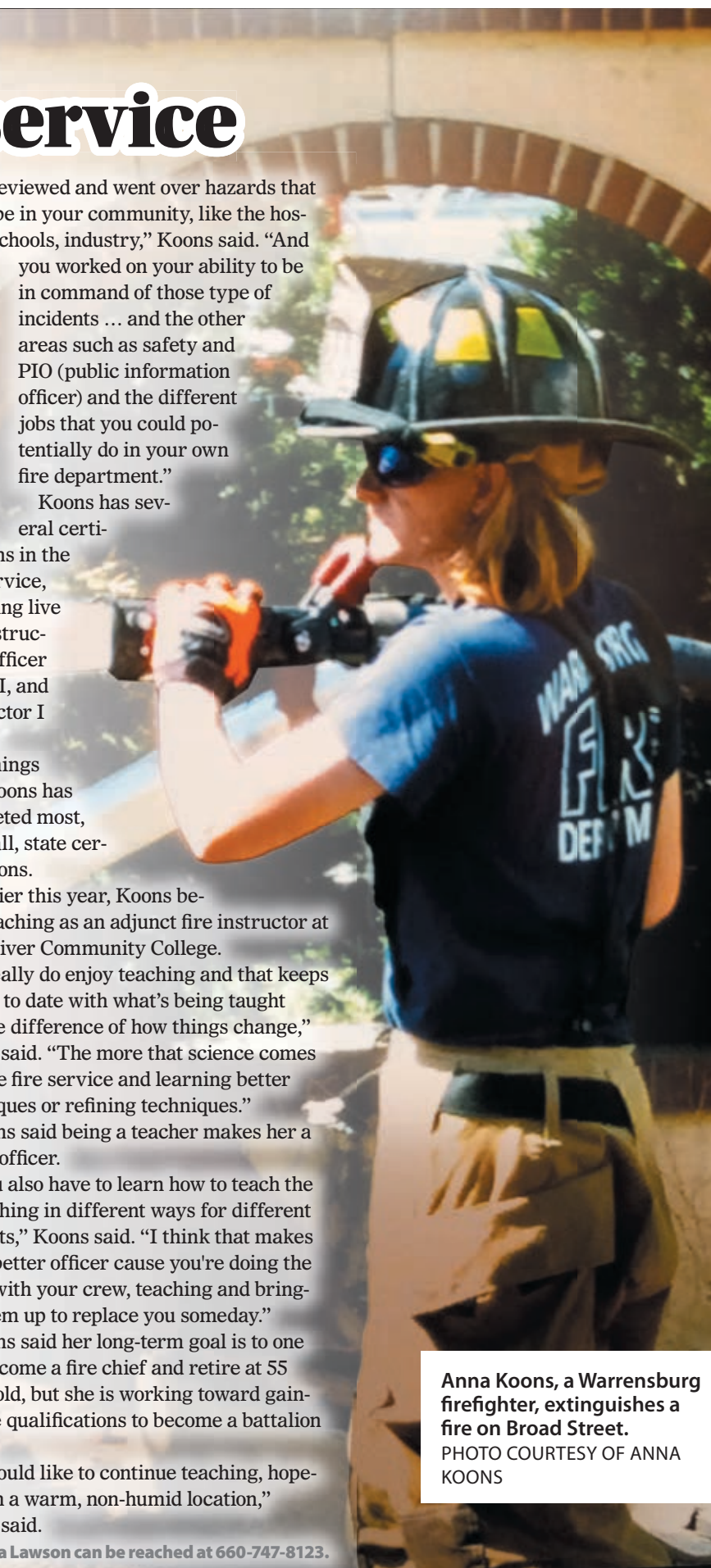
Koons said her long-term goal is to one day become a fire chief and retire at 55 years old, but she is working toward gaining the qualifications to become a battalion chief.

“I would like to continue teaching, hopefully in a warm, non-humid location,” Koons said.

Sara Lawson can be reached at 660-747-8123.

Anna Koons, a Warrensburg firefighter, extinguishes a fire on Broad Street.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNA KOONS



Villegas builds relationships, plans repairs as assistant city manager

By Sara Lawson

saral@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Though only having been with the City of Warrensburg for a few months, Enrico Villegas, 32, has identified and led initiatives for improvement projects that will impact the city for years.

As the assistant city manager, Villegas oversees the Public Works Department and works closely with City Manager Danielle Dulin.

"I saw the position, had immediate interest in it," Villegas said. "It's the profession I've been wanting to pursue."

Villegas said he enjoys working in local government.

"I like helping the community at large," Villegas said.

Warrensburg, being a college town, has a similar community profile to Vil-

legas' hometown.

"My hometown had a community college, not a university, but in terms of size, it's about the same," Villegas said.

Villegas and his wife, Sara, moved from Lawrence, Kansas, to Warrensburg and recently welcomed their third child into their family.

"One thing that's kind of neat is we have a lot of wooded areas, there's a lot more scenery," Villegas said. "It's not just a concrete jungle, so coming from the metro, you see a lot less of that, so I appreciate that. ... When you see built environment with no trees and stuff and you come here, it's kind of refreshing."

When not on the job, Villegas said he likes to spend time with his family, go for walks and take his kids to the local parks.

"We've been to Cave Hollow numerous times, we've gone to the Farmers' Market ... little things like that we like to do,"

Villegas said.

Villegas said his family likes to keep things down to earth.

"Since settling in ... I like it even more," Villegas said. "I feel very comfortable here."

Villegas was appointed as the assistant city manager in May and has previous experience in local government.

"My first job for a government, I was a construction inspector," Villegas said. "My official title was project inspector and I was assigned to road jobs, utility jobs. You name it, I had to inspect everything. That really kind of captured my interest in how cities plan things, how they budget for things."

Villegas said work captured his creativity and imagination.

"I always wanted to find ways to help and being able to work directly with developers and citizens on an as-needed basis really spurred my interest in want-

PHOTO
COURTESY
OF CITY OF
WARRENSBURG



ing to continue to grow in this profession and also advance my career."

Villegas has a bachelor's degree in psychology and said he was encouraged to earn a master's degree in public administration.

"It kind of gets more into the theory

See **VILLEGAS**, Page 13

Congratulations to

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VILLEGAS

Continued from Page 12

and the nuts and bolts of city government and county government ... my degree kind of gave me a backdoor into why cities do what they do," Villegas said.

Villegas said there have been a few challenges since joining the city.

"Probably the biggest one is our budget constraints and, to no fault of the city, to no fault of the citizens, we don't have, basically, enough money to fix everything that needs to be fixed," Villegas said. "That's not necessarily unique to us, but I am learning about the Hancock Amendment."

Villegas said the city is facing failing or outdated stormwater infrastructure and it can be difficult to determine where to start first.

"Where do we take the first bite from

the apple," Villegas said. "We're trying to think about it programmatically, think about it strategically and also, given the money that we have, how can we make meaningful improvements given the constraints."

Villegas also works to continue relationships with surrounding communities, including Whiteman Air Force Base.

"It's like its own little city," Villegas said.

Villegas said there are a number of projects he is looking forward to, including improvements to West Market Street.

"I really hope we get the grant ... that project would be really good for the community and also be able to show the community that we are trying to make a meaningful difference and improve

things," Villegas said.

Villegas said he is also working to create more efficiency in the street department.

"Some minor changes, but I think that the community will be able to reap the benefits," Villegas said.

With Parks Maintenance recently joining the Public Works Department, Villegas said he is looking forward to strengthening the relationships between Parks and Recreation and the City of Warrensburg.

"I am looking forward to continuing to build those relationships with the employees, with the Park Board," Villegas said. "It's a good group of people, hardworking. They kind of fit right in with us."

Dulin said Villegas has been a benefit to

the City of Warrensburg.

"Enrico brings a wealth of experience and knowledge in public works and project management," Dulin said. "His thoughtful and considerate approach to leadership has been a welcome addition to the management team. He has new ideas to improve the efficiency of our capital improvement planning processes that will help us get more from our limited resources. He is pursuing grant opportunities for stormwater and park improvements. His passion for improving the quality of the built environment and social equity is exactly what the city needs as we tackle several capital improvement projects in the next several years."

Sara Lawson can be reached at 660-747-8123.

BRISBIN

Continued from Page 8

Her heart for helping others extends beyond her office. She is an elder with Cumberland Presbyterian Church and through her faith, she's learned the importance of helping your fellow man.

She's on the Warrensburg Chamber of Commerce board and recently completed a one-year term as the board chair. She's part of the Military Affairs Committee, Base Community Council, Women in Networking and Warrensburg Young Professionals. She helped restart WYP in 2016 and she said it's been fun to see how the group has changed and grown.

She also serves on the Johnson County Board of Sheltered Services Foundation, inspired by her mom's career working with people with disabilities. This year, Brisbin is part of CLIMB, and she's involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters' upcoming fundraiser.

And, she became part of 4-H in Johnson County when her son, David, became a member.

"My biggest driver is my son," Brisbin said of her community involvement. "He wants to farm north of town ... so my thought process is, if we're not leaving and this is his future, I want to ensure he has the best future possible. So I'm

going to do whatever I can to help Warrensburg be the best community for the next generation. I can't be one of those people who sits at home and complains but doesn't get off the couch and try to help. Whatever I can do to help make it a better future for the next generation so my son maybe has a little bit easier time than I did, I'm going to do it."

Chamber Executive Director Suzanne Taylor has worked with Brisbin since she joined the board in 2019. She said Brisbin was always respectful, professional, thoughtful and creative. Taylor said she also appreciated Brisbin's leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"She had some good ideas for how to help grow the chamber and to enhance the benefits and services for our chamber members," Taylor said. "Always willing to step up and volunteer. She also served on the Member Relations Committee and the Young Professionals Committee."

"She is just a leader that wants to serve and I think she will thrive in any environment or anything she takes on," Taylor added. "She understands the importance of networking, of community and partnership."

Nicole Cooke can be reached at 660-530-0138 or on Twitter @NicoleRCooke.

BLEVENS

Continued from Page 3

"... Jess just has a way of making them feel educated without making them feel like they've messed up. She's easy to grab because she's so knowledgeable and excited about it. She also gets personal messages (online) of plant questions because people know to ask her."

As word continues to spread, Blevens is already running out of room. On the other side of their home is another plot of land. In the next five years, Blevens hopes to use it for a larger greenhouse

that is open to the public.

Even though she's turned her love of plants into a small business, Blevens still enjoys spending all of her free time in her greenhouse.

"I feel like it's soil therapy, it's my escape," she said. "My favorite part is probably propagating and putting the plants in the soil. The tedious work, I really like that. It's definitely therapeutic."

Nicole Cooke can be reached at 660-530-0138 or on Twitter @NicoleRCooke.



The Well Planted Greenhouse is filled with plants purchased and grown by owner Jess Blevens. PHOTO COURTESY OF JESS BLEVENS

Prindles find balance in work, life as police officers

By Sara Lawson
sara@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Jake and Stephanie Prindle, 30 and 28 respectively, share a rank, a department and a life together.

The Prindles met because of their work and have both achieved the rank of corporal in the Warrensburg Police Department.

Jake Prindle said he wanted to be a police officer because his father served as an officer for 30 years.

"I grew up around law enforcement my entire life," Jake Prindle said. "It's all I ever wanted to do, so he is my biggest inspiration for coming into this profession."

Stephanie Prindle said she wanted to be a police officer because she had a friend in high school who did not have a good home life.

"Originally, I wanted to do forensics and the more I looked into forensics, I was like, 'no, I actually want to do the investigation,'" Stephanie Prindle said.

Jake Prindle graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of Central Missouri in 2014 and started his law enforcement career with the UCM Department of Public Safety before joining the WPD in 2017.

"I just really enjoy working in a college town," Jake Prindle said. "I just really like the atmosphere that's here in Warrensburg."

Stephanie Prindle graduated with a bachelor's degree, majoring in criminal justice and a minor in social work in New Jersey, and moved to Warrensburg following a guy she was dating at the time.

"It was not a good relationship and I decided I wanted to become a police officer and he was not very supportive of that," Stephanie Prindle said. "We wound up breaking up. He went back to New Jersey and I loved it out here so much that I just wound up staying."

Though both are officers, the Prindles have different areas of expertise.

Jake Prindle works as the alcohol en-

forcement officer and Stephanie Prindle works as a detective in the investigations division.

"I take care of overseeing the liquor licenses for the city," Jake Prindle said.

Jake Prindle does compliance checks with businesses and assists in identifying minors attempting to purchase alcohol.

"A lot of the stuff that I do, a lot of people don't have passion for," Jake Prindle said.

Jake Prindle said his greatest accomplishment is being certified as a drug recognition expert.

"I can testify in court as an expert witness if I need to be, but the whole purpose of the course is I do evaluations on people under the influence of drugs," Jake Prindle said. "Then I'm able to determine what category of drug that they may be under the influence of or the combination of things."

Jake Prindle serves as a member of the Johnson County SWAT team and is a breaching instructor.

"I'm good at destroying things," Jake Prindle said.

Jake Prindle also serves as a supervisor, training new officers as they come into the department.

"I specialize in sex crimes and special victims crimes," Stephanie Prindle said.

Stephanie Prindle said her favorite part of the job is when victims can find closure.

"Because I work special victims crimes and sex crimes, I feel like it's very beneficial for the victims," Stephanie Prindle said. "A lot of people find closure through this whole process. Especially for kids who are victimized. Kids are true victims ... and going through this entire process and catch whoever harmed them and put them in jail or prison is what makes it worth it for me."

Stephanie Prindle recently returned from crime scene investigation school and teaches at the UCM police academy.

"I just like being a detective," Stephanie Prindle said. "That was my goal since I was in high school and I finally got to hit



Stephanie and Jake Prindle are both corporals in the Warrensburg Police Department.
PHOTO COURTESY OF JAKE AND STEPHANIE PRINDLE

that within three years of being an officer, which is kind of unheard of. I'm just fortunate I had the opportunity when I did to become a detective."

Stephanie Prindle said an important point in her career occurred this past summer when two separate child sex abuse cases each pleaded guilty.

"They were pretty serious, pretty intensive investigations where it took months of investigation work and both of them pled guilty this summer without even having to go to trial," Stephanie Prindle said. "That was a big deal to me 'cause they were some of the first cases I worked as a detective."

Stephanie Prindle often speaks at Survival House.

Stephanie Prindle said her goal is to one day become sergeant of investigations.

"I do still want to be involved with the

investigation process," she added.

"(Stephanie) is extremely smart," Jake Prindle said. "She's very much got the geeky-nerd vibe of wanting to be very academic, so when it comes to learning things, going to courses, she absorbs that so quickly."

On occasion, the couple works together on a case, but most of the time, their cases are separate.

"As per city policy, we can't work on the same shifts, so we don't directly work with each other," Stephanie Prindle said.

"My wife works days, I don't get to see her all the time," Jake Prindle said. "Being able to balance your work life and your home life ... sometimes can be challenging. Luckily my wife understands what I do. When I come home and I tell her some of the terrible things that we

Elwell works to grow Leeton, Johnson County



Taylor Elwell, 33, serves as the mayor of Leeton. He is also president of the Johnson County Economic Development Corporation's Board of Directors and serves on the Whiteman Area Leadership Council and Johnson County Enhanced Enterprise Zone Advisory Board. PHOTO BY JOE ANDREWS | STAR-JOURNAL

By Joe Andrews
joea@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Back in 2015, Taylor Elwell sought answers. Recently married and a new homeowner in Leeton, Elwell found explanations weren't easy to come across. The curiosity led to his candidacy for mayor.

He was elected to a two-year term at the age of 25 on April 7, 2015, and remains in the position today at 33 courtesy of voter support.

"I just really felt like there were some things that we could do better at and some questions that I had that couldn't get answered," Elwell said. "We had a state audit in 2014, and that kind of showed some opportunities. We've had good people on the Board of Alderman and here at City Hall for many years, so it wasn't really anyone's fault per se. It was just something we could do better at."

As mayor, Elwell oversees all city departments while working to ensure all local, state and federal laws are followed by the city.

The elected position also includes

collaboration with the Leeton Board of Alderman, the Leeton Park Board, the Leeton Cemetery Advisory Board,

He also works with surrounding communities, boards, agencies and regional partners.

Most importantly, within the position, Elwell serves the citizens of Leeton as the city's chief elected official, whether it be in person, via telephone or by email.

Elwell's involvement in Leeton also includes membership with the Leeton Lions Club and attendance at the First United Methodist Church of Leeton.

"We're no different than a lot of communities," Elwell said. "We have our own challenges. Sometimes it feels like those challenges are a little overwhelming at times. We've got such a good group of people locally that really truly care ... That gives me energy when they're excited about it too. It's not something one person can do by themselves for sure. It takes a whole community to move things forward."

Elwell's role as mayor comes along with several other roles correlated with bettering both Leeton and Johnson County.

Current involvement includes member-

ship on the Whiteman Area Leadership Council Board, the Johnson County Enhanced Enterprise Zone Advisory Board and the Johnson County Economic Development Corporation Board of Directors.

Elwell also maintains a career as the Director of Therapy Services at Golden Valley Memorial Healthcare in Clinton.

He leads a team of physical, occupation and speech therapy professionals across inpatient, outpatient and home health settings.

"I've always been interested in human movement and how people move," Elwell said. "The human body is fascinating and how we can help people get back to what they want to do, whether that's after a traumatic injury, surgery, a stroke or whatever it might be."

Elwell's health care background paid off as President of the JCEDC Board of Directors just before the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

He worked with JCEDC Executive Director Tracy Branter and other JCEDC contributors to keep businesses up to date on the latest information throughout the course of the virus' beginning.

"His leadership, and his guidance has really been an asset," Branter said. "I can't even express how big of an asset that's been to our organization during that time because of his dual role. He knew what we did, he knew what our responsibilities were to our businesses. He also had that health care perspective. It was invaluable."

Elwell remains the President of JCEDC today within his three-year term. His involvement on the board began in 2017.

JCEDC helped Elwell and the City of Leeton recruit Dollar General, which opened in 2020, to Leeton.

Ongoing cooperation between the two entities includes parks and recreation, housing, and recruiting a new tenant for Leeton's vacant bank.

"I feel like Johnson County moves together when we're working on a project, or we're working on an issue," Elwell said. "Generally, all of those voices, whether it be school districts or other tax entities, local governments, they all seem to move in the same directions and that's always

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Dr. Layton Gray: Opening up a new world of chiropractic

By Meliyah Venerable
meliyahv@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Dr. Layton Gray, 29, is the owner of Gray Chiropractic and Wellness Center in Warrensburg.

Gray grew up in Iola, Kansas. He went to Cleveland Chiropractic School after achieving his undergrad degree.

He said that since middle school, becoming a chiropractor was the plan for his future.

"We were a small town," Gray said. "So I played baseball, basketball and football. A lot of outdoors stuff. I was and still am really big into hunting.

"I've always wanted to do a medical profession," Gray said. "Through a series of eliminations, I decided I didn't want a hospital setting. So I settled on chiropractic because I grew up with it for most of my life, and I thought it would be a good fit."

Moving and starting his own business in Warrensburg was not necessarily the plan. After the original plan of working in Marshall fell through, Gray and his wife, Alexia, found a place in Warrensburg that just happened to be a perfect fit.

"Coming to Warrensburg was kind of a coincidence," Gray said. "I had a great uncle who was a chiropractor in Marshall who we were going to take over for. But it didn't work out. We decided we were either going to open up right away or work with someone for a year or two. Somehow I ended up in Virginia.

"I practiced under a guy who had a really good high volume practice for about two years, then we were done with the east coast and wanted to move back closer to family. We were looking all over for practices for sale or towns we would be interested in."

Gray met his wife Alexia in Manhattan, Kansas, during his last year of chiropractic school. Since meeting, they have had two kids and now run the chiropractic center together. Gray said she handles almost everything for him, as well as her own business that is starting up.

"She does, really, everything," Gray said.

"I just go in the back and adjust to people. If it touches finance, marketing, being involved, it is 100% her. I just play the nice guy in the back that treats people."

Despite hearing

failed stories from other friends about working with their significant other, the Grays gave it a shot and it is still working out for them.

"We didn't really have an option starting off," Gray said. "If it didn't work, she would just pick a different place and go somewhere else and we wouldn't think two things about it. We kind of pre-planned that maybe we wouldn't be able to work together. But it has been three years and it hasn't been an issue. Even though we're in the same building, we don't really see each other."

As the receptionist for Gray, his wife gets to see the reactions of the patients he helps daily. She said he is always focused on his goal of helping others.

"Although no two patients are alike, his goal has always remained the same," Alexia Gray said.

"He focuses on improving health and wellness for as many people as he can. He has met and treated many members of our amazing community and is excited to now also expand his reach to our community's animals as well."

Recently, Gray took classes on animal chiropractic. He was mostly treating horses and dogs. He said it was rewarding to see the relief on the animal's face. But he is not satisfied with just that. He is ready to achieve more.

"I feel like I haven't scratched the surface on what I want to achieve," Gray said. "I just did animal chiropractic. There is a college you can take after you have your chiropractic degree, that was pretty exciting. It was something I always wanted to do. It has been nice since I have owned my own business."

In the future, Gray would like to open a facility that allows him to do both his passions: chiropractic on humans and animals.

"I want to own my own building to design my own way," he explained. "So I could get to a point to have one large facility with a barn-like setup, so people can bring trailers and drop horses off. Then on the other side, I can treat humans. So at any point in my day, I can have four-legged or two-legged patients."

Meliyah Venerable can be reached at 660-747-8123.



Layton Gray, his wife Alexia and their two children, Wyatt and Wesley.
PHOTO COURTESY OF LAYTON GRAY

Suhecki follows her passion for helping others

By Meliyah Venerable

meliyahv@warrensburgstarjournal.com

After moving to Warrensburg four and a half years ago, Rachel Suhecki, 36, has become heavily involved in the Johnson County community.

Suhecki is the Finance Director for the Boys and Girls Clubs of West Central Missouri, where she oversees everything that involves finances and grants for the 12 club sites.

She also serves on many different Republican Women boards. She serves as the first vice president for both the Johnson County Republican Women and the Fourth Congressional District Republican Women. She is also the public relations chair for the Missouri Federation of Republican Women.

Growing up in Northeast Ohio, Suhecki wanted to be a lawyer after her parents told her that she would be good at it.

"I always wanted to be a lawyer," Suhecki said. "My parents always said that I was very argumentative and very good at being argumentative. So I planned on being a lawyer."

During her sophomore year at Ohio Valley University, she chose to get her Bachelor's in Accounting, just in case she decided against attending law school.

"I got to probably my sophomore year of college and I thought, 'you want me to go to school for six more years to be a lawyer?'" she recalled. "So I decided to find a different major in case I don't go to law school. So I chose accounting."

After meeting her now husband, John-Paul, at Ohio Valley, she chose not to attend law school.

Four and a half years later, the Su-

heckis moved to Warrensburg, where she is a member of the Warrensburg Church of Christ; her husband is a minister there as well. Suhecki said her faith, along with her husband, is one of the driving reasons she has achieved the success she has seen thus far.

"I have been a Christian my entire life," Suhecki said. "I really depended on God for everything that I do. I also have a wonderful husband. He's just amazing. He supports me in everything. Every once in a while, I pull out what kind of sounds like a crazy idea, and he's all on board. He does what needs to be done to take care of everything. I couldn't do any of that without him."

After finding a love for baking, Suhecki finally opened an in-house bakery. Suhecki's Sweets not only makes custom cakes for purchase, but she also donates cakes to organizations like the Boys and Girls Club and other nonprofit organizations.

"I have always loved to bake," Suhecki said. "I watched 'Cake Boss' while I was pregnant and couldn't do anything else. When my oldest was having his first birthday, I really wanted a cool and custom cake. Then I saw how much they cost and I was a grad student with a 1-year-old, so that wasn't happening. So I decided to do it myself. I've just had fun with it for the last 11 years."

"Starting last fall, I would have friends and family members say, 'I need to order a cake from you' and I'd say, 'you can't order a cake from me, I don't have a cake business.' I heard it so much and got so many requests for cakes that I just made a logo and registered with the Secretary of State, and now I have a cake business."

Not only does Suhecki enjoy the decorating part of the cake, but she also gets a kick out of the scientific aspect of the actual baking.

As one would imagine, it is no easy task to make any sort of food, let alone cake, with two young boys running around. That is why Suhecki spends her late nights baking. She said it is a big stress reliever and a step away from her daily tasks.

When working with the various Republican groups, she helps educate voters and supports the Republican candidates running for office.

"A lot of what we do is education," Suhecki said. "There are a lot of ideas out there about different issues that if someone thinks it through, the logical conclusion doesn't make sense. A lot of times, we are just so busy in our lives that we don't take the time to think things through. "So we are very much involved in education. People's political decisions are their own decisions. We just want to make sure that they have the information they need to make those decisions."

Suhecki said she is heavily involved in the community because she wants to help the community as well as see a change in the future of Missouri and the United States as a whole.

"I definitely want to give back to my community. I do donate a lot of my cakes to local charities and charity auctions," she said. "So I try to help out in the community as much as possible, but it is also very much that I want the state of Missouri and the country to thrive in the right direction. So I care about the community on all levels."

The Johnson County Republican Women Executive Board said Suhecki is a hard-



PHOTO
BY MELIYAH
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working, dedicated woman. They are appreciative of her time and cheerful personality.

"Rachel is one of the hardest working women under 40 we know," Lorri Kobe and the board said. "She shows her dedication to God, home and community in everything she does. Rachel is a supportive wife and very active mother of two young boys. In addition to being employed full-time, she is active in her church, runs her own online bakery and serves on a number of community Boards and Committees. She is a natural-born leader who has never met a stranger and who is always willing to cheerfully offer a helping hand."

For the future, the Suheckis plan on staying in Warrensburg and continuing to help the community grow in the right direction.

"I really want to continue working with the Republican Women and the Republican party," she said. "I definitely see a big crossroads for America coming up and I want to be a part of the solution for that. I want to develop my baking and my business. I want to watch my kids grow up, go to college and be successful."

Meliyah Venerable can be reached at 660-747-8123.

PRINDLES

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have to deal with or unfortunate things that we have to come across, she's able to understand what's going on."

Stephanie Prindle said they work to keep their work and personal lives separate.

"He's really good at, when I get too invested in a case, he's good at pulling me back out of it," Stephanie Prindle said.

The Prindles enjoy being outdoors and

spent their honeymoon traveling to different national parks.

The couple met while on the job but decided not to officially date until they discussed policy with the police chief.

"Maybe not even a year later, he proposed," Stephanie Prindle said. "It was just that instant ... both of us were like, 'yep, this is my person.'"

Sara Lawson can be reached at 660-747-8123.

ELWELL

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forward. I think a lot of that is due to what Johnson County Economic Development does for Johnson County."

Elwell said his balance between life, work, being mayor and his numerous other involvements wouldn't be possible without the staff at city hall.

He added progress across all areas in Leeton keeps him hungry to do more.

"Everybody asks me 'how long are

you going to do this,'" Elwell said. "I say, 'I don't know.' When it stops being fun, or when people decide I shouldn't do it anymore, I'll quit. I feel like we got more to do ... I'm really excited with all we've got coming forward in all of those different areas, both here locally and regionally within Johnson County."

Joe Andrews can be reached at 660-747-8123.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI CONGRATULATES



TIFFANY COCHRAN
EVENTS AND ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT
SENIOR DIRECTOR



TRAVIS HUME
UCM FARMS
DIRECTOR



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for being recognized with the
Top 20 Under 40 Community Achievement Award.

*Thank you for your leadership and dedication
to the University of Central Missouri
and the Warrensburg community.*



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UCM alumna Tiffany Cochran gives back to University, community

By Meliyah Venerable

meliyahv@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Tiffany Cochran, 39, is the Senior Director of Events and Alumni Engagement at the University of Central Missouri. Cochran is a 2005 graduate of UCM. She got her fashion and merchandise degree in three and half years, then started her career with The Buckle before she returned to her alma mater.

While attending UCM, Cochran met her now husband, Casey Cochran, who also has deep ties to the Johnson County community. Casey owns and operates two businesses, Cochran Lawn Care and Casey Cochran Rentals. Together they have two daughters, Silvie, 8, and Maisie, 4.

After graduating, Cochran worked for the retail company, The Buckle. While at The Buckle, she held many positions. After taking a management training pro-

gram, then turning an underperforming store into a performing store, she began to train store managers for the company. She was able to build strong relationships and help develop young people to become strong and successful leaders.

“Helping younger people find their path has always been exciting for me,” Cochran said. “It was always fun to hire somebody who was just a part-time employee who was working in high school. As they continued to work or go to school, they realized that it could become a career path. It’s very validating that I was able to help some people find their career path.” She attended an event at UCM during one of her recruiting trips for The Buckle. While she was recruiting students, she became the recruit for UCM.

“One day, when I was recruiting at the UCM campus, I was recruited to come work for the UCM Alumni Foundation,” Cochran said.

Prior to accepting the full-time position

at UCM, Cochran had been an adjunct professor, volunteering on the fashion advisory board and speaking to classes about interviews and resume reviews.

As the Senior Director of Events and Alumni Engagement, she is the “friend-raiser” for the university.

“I’m not necessarily raising funds for the university,” Cochran said. “But I’m helping keep the connection with alumni for the university. I help plan events, we have multiple different activities we do to connect with alumni.”

Associate Vice President of University Advancement Jackie Johnson said Cochran is deserving of the 20 Under 40 recognition. She said Cochran is so successful at the University because she genuinely cares about the students, university and alumni.

“She excels in her work and has increased alumni events and interactions twofold in the last few years,” Johnson

PHOTO
COURTESY
OF TIFFANY
COCHRAN



said. “She accomplishes so much because she is driven, innovative, and most importantly, she genuinely cares that UCM alumni maintain a good connection to their alma mater. This is not something that can be trained and makes her the perfect person for her role.”

In 2021, as part of the university’s 150th-anniversary celebration, Cochran and her UCM co-workers worked together to break a Guinness World Record

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Yarborough makes the leap to new, successful career

Jess Yarborough is the owner of Parlour Seven, a skincare studio in downtown Warrensburg.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JESS YARBOROUGH

By Nicole Cooke

nicolec@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Jess Yarborough’s career path might seem a little unorthodox, but once you hear about her passion for skincare and helping others, her current role as the owner of Parlour Seven makes perfect sense.

Yarborough, 36, studied criminal justice in college and worked for several years as a child welfare worker. But as time went on, she realized she needed a career change. She went to esthetics school because of her love for makeup and all things skincare. She graduated from the Academy of Salon Professionals

in Sedalia in August 2019 and didn’t waste any time getting her license the following month.

Yarborough and her husband, Matt, moved from Warrensburg to Kansas City in November 2019 and she planned to start working in a salon or spa. And then COVID-19 happened.

The beauty industry seemed to be on hold, and Yarborough feared she might have to return to her former career as she struggled to find a new job.

On a random day, she returned to Warrensburg for lunch with her mom at Old Barney’s, where she previously worked, and her old boss said he was looking for some help.

“In that moment, I had made up my mind what I was going to do. I was going to go back and work at the bar and open this as a side hustle,” she said laughing as she looked around Parlour Seven. “I was formulating all of this in my brain, but I hadn’t really voiced it to anybody because I thought they would think I was insane for trying to open a business during COVID, but I did it anyway.”

Yarborough found a room for rent and started to build her makeup and skincare clientele.

In two months, she found the current location of Parlour Seven, 105 E. Pine St. All the puzzle pieces began falling into place. She initially didn’t have a lot of support for her ideas, but less than two years later, Yarborough’s business is constantly busy.

“In school, they give you the basic education you need to pass your boards, and then you really learn everything in the real world,” she said. “So while I did work in a salon for a very limited amount of time, I just hopped in with both feet and told myself, ‘you’re smart enough to do this, you can keep researching and learn whatever it is you need to know in order to do it.’ It still blows my mind that I actually did it. Some days I just sit down and look around and think, ‘this is mine.’”

Yarborough continued working at Old Barney’s until this spring when her Parlour Seven schedule became too busy. As she worked to grow her client list, she’s now working to create boundaries to make time for herself.

“For the past year, I have been grinding so hard and busting my tail to make sure people

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Hume advocates for agriculture with University Farms



Travis Hume, mules coach, stands with the live mascots, Mancow and Molly, for the University of Central Missouri. PHOTO BY SARA LAWSON | STAR-JOURNAL

By Sara Lawson
saral@warrensburgstarjournal.com

At 29, Travis Hume is working his dream job with the University Farms.

Hume serves as the director of farms for the University of Central Missouri and his wife, Britni, who works for the UCM Foundation, was featured in the 2021 20 Under 40.

“She’s my whole world, Britni,” Hume said.

The couple has a little girl.

“They’re the reason I get up every morning,” Hume said. “Everything I do here, all the work I put into this town, it wouldn’t matter if it wasn’t for those two.”

Hume is responsible for advocating for the various locations and agricultural interests maintained and operated by University Farms.

Hume works closely with Brandon Nevils, the farm operations coordinator who manages the day-to-day operations of the farms.

“My job is to kind of do the bureaucratic side of it,” Hume said.

Hume manages finances for the various properties and is the point of contact for anyone who wants to make use of one of the farms.

“I’ve got to be the one that fills out the annual budget every year and I have to present that information to the provost and justify what we’re gonna make and how,” Hume said. “The farms are not part of an academic unit at the university. Anybody at the university can utilize the farms. The agriculture department is who we work with most, but biology comes out here, the police academy comes out here. A lot of fraternities and sororities use this (and) ROTC. So I’m the point of contact to try to schedule all of those different col-

legiate activities.”

Hume also serves as the coach for the live mules.

“I’m their caretaker and I pick the team every year and do all the tryouts and manage the team,” Hume said. “I’m also the coordinator and planner and hauler for anywhere the mules go. Anywhere that you see the live mules, I’ll be with them.”

The university has two live mascots, Mancow and Molly, that are housed on university property.

“The amount of work we put in here that nobody knows about and nobody ever saw, to get (Molly) ready to go ... to get her prepared for the events that she goes to and the people that she sees, I’ll never get a formal award for but for me that was a huge deal,” Hume said.

Hume said it takes innumerable hours of training to ready a mule to be desen-

sitized to the number of people and noise present at UCM Football games.

“We bought (Molly) in 2017 and just this year, she went to a football game by herself,” Hume said. “It took five years to get her ready.”

Hume has been nominated for a Learning to a Greater Degree Award twice.

“We are grateful to have Travis as the director of University Farms,” UCM President Roger Best said. “He brings energy and passion to his work and its connection to the UCM Agriculture program as well as our community at large. Travis has demonstrated tremendous vision in the development of UCM’s farms and how we can better serve our students, but has also crafted a vision that will allow us to partner with our stakeholders in Warrensburg, Johnson County and our region.”

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HUME

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Hume is a UCM alum, having graduated with a bachelor's degree in Agriculture Business, a master's in Career and Technical Education with a focus on administrative leadership and is working on an Education Specialist degree.

"I had lived and worked on the farm the whole time I was a student, 2011-15," Hume said.

Hume lived on the Mitchell Street Farm until he graduated and was then hired on as the farm manager six weeks later.

Hume said he pursued his master's degree because he is obsessed with finances and state budgeting.

"I took a little liaison and went and worked for Ag-Power as a service manager and that's when they hired Brandon as the farm manager," Hume said.

Hume returned to the university in January 2021 to take on the director of farms position, exactly 500 days after he left.

"(Travis) is dedicated to UCM but constantly looks for ways that UCM Farms and UCM as a whole can serve as a resource and benefit to our local communities," Best said. "He consistently goes above and beyond, whether pulling calves at all hours of the day or night, ensuring

students are fully engaged in our farm operations, securing community-based partnerships and relationships that are mutually beneficial or determining the resources we will need to remain competitive for the next 20 years. Travis personifies work ethic and integrity and exemplifies all of UCM's core values."

Hume also has experience as an instructor, having taught agronomy at Missouri Valley College for two years.

Hume said his interest in agriculture began because his family owned farmland.

"My dad, he wasn't a farmer by any means, he just owned the land and rented it to the neighbors so he had a place to deer hunt, but I would go up there with my grandpa and bale hay," Hume said.

Hume sold hay and firewood in high school.

Hume said he wanted to attend UCM because of the university's partnership with John Deere and even considered a career as a John Deere salesman.

"I worked for all the big-time farmers around here just because I was hungry and didn't know anybody, so I needed to make some kind of money," Hume said.

"I made it through school and they hired me here and I kinda just stuck. I love this university."

The money generated by the farms is put back into the farms' operations for the following year.

Hume said his favorite part of the job is the whole of the job.

"This is a dream job ... being able to give back to your alma mater, be a coach for a division II athletics team and then I'm farming," Hume said. "How cool is it that we get to be out here, raising calves, raising crops."

One of the university's farms will be part of the UCM deer harvest program and Hume, an avid hunter, said he is going to enter the drawing to get a chance to take part.

"We're gonna enter the drawing," Hume said. "We want to bow hunt too, there's some big deer in town."

Hume said his greatest accomplishment has been raising his daughter.

"She's been the best thing that's ever happened to me," Hume said. "Whatever I do to deserve her, I don't know. But that's been the best thing, her and Britni."

Sara Lawson can be reached at 660-747-8123.



Travis Hume, right, is pictured with his wife, Britni, and their daughter. PHOTO COURTESY OF TRAVIS HUME

COCHRAN

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for the Largest Ridden Parade of Mules. Johnson worked with her and said that under stress, she is still a joy to work with.

"I had the opportunity to get to know her more during frantic Facebook stalking sessions where we looked for potential mule owners who might participate and we bonded over the heady task of setting a world record," Johnson said. "Even in the most stressful times, she keeps things fun. I am honored to be her teammate and thoroughly enjoy working alongside her."

Recently, Cochran started a master's program. She said she gets to experience every side of education this way. It helps her relate to the students and faculty as well as alumni.

"I'm definitely involved on campus," Cochran said. "And in my master's program. I also am an adjunct faculty member for the fashion program. I help them out with a textiles science course...I think that helps me in my current role because I am able to see what students experience in the classroom. So when I have conversations with

alumni, I am able to reference what it is like to be a student, a faculty member and what it's like to be an alumni."

When not working at UCM, Cochran is giving back to the community. An organization she is proud of supporting is the Johnson County Cancer Foundation, which was started by her father-in-law, Bob Cochran, in 2007. She likes to take part in everything she possibly can. Whether it be with Warrensburg Main Street, the school district or the community in general, she wants to be involved as much as possible.

Cochran looks forward to helping the community grow, as well as her children.

"My family, my husband and my kids are one of my proudest achievements," Cochran said. "I like seeing them find their own successes in whatever activities they decide to be involved in. I look forward to volunteering my time in local initiatives and activities with my daughters/family after completing my master's of science degree."

Meliyah Venerable can be reached at 660-747-8123.



Tiffany and her two daughters, Silvie and Maisie. PHOTO COURTESY OF TIFFANY COCHRAN

Elkins works to engage students with community

By Sara Lawson

saral@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Emily Elkins, 36, serves as the social worker for Sterling Elementary School.

“I got my master’s degree in social work,” Elkins said. “I graduated in 2018 with my master’s and I have always wanted to be a school social worker. As long as I knew what social work was, I have always wanted to be a school social worker.”

Elkins said her goal has always been to work within a school district, but she knew she did not want to be a teacher.

“One of my favorite parts ... is the community engagement piece,” Elkins said. “I’m huge whether it’s about us going into the community and doing service learning projects or bringing the community into our school.”

Part of Elkins’s responsibilities is organizing programs and initiatives that involve the community, such as visits with the Missouri Veterans Home.

“One time a month, we did a project with them and then they got to come here also and we did a panel,” Elkins said. “There was six veterans and each (served during) different wars and the class got to ask them questions and then they answered based upon their experiences. It was so cool.”

Elkins also worked with the Justice Center for students to participate in a mock trial of a fairy tale character. Elkins was also part of the initiative to have a group of students work with Warrensburg Main Street to organize the first Movie on the Lawn this past summer.

“One of my favorite things about this job is the service learning piece and we’ve had a lot of other opportunities,” Elkins said.

The latest program at Sterling is called WATCH DOGS, which encourages male relatives to take a more active role in their student’s school life.

“Just having the kids get the opportunity to learn real-life things, I love it,” Elkins said. “It’s one of my favorite things.”

Originally from Hannibal, Elkins came to Warrensburg for college in 2004 and graduated in 2008 with a degree in child and family development.

“At that time, I honestly thought that was the closest degree I could pursue,” Elkins said. “I thought it was the closest thing to social work ... I don’t really know if I knew what a social worker was. I knew what I wanted to do. Through my experience, I had learned that having a master’s degree would help me a little bit and I went back to school in ‘16.”

Elkins worked as a children’s case manager for what is now Compass Health, then joined the Children’s Division with the Missouri Department of Social Services while she earned her master’s degree from the University of Missouri.

In total, Elkins has worked as a social worker for 15 years.

“Emily Elkins was a wonderful addition to the Sterling Elementary staff in 2018,” Superintendent Andy Kohl said. “She is a tireless advocate for students, teachers and families in our district. Emily worked hard through our years of COVID to ensure that the district had a plan to address student and family necessities. She has worked to mobilize community resources so that students have their basic needs met and can concentrate on learning in the classroom. We are so blessed to have such a kind and compassionate individual as our Social Worker at Sterling.”

Sterling Principal Angela Grammer said Elkins works to support the needs of families and students.

“She is one of the first people to contact new families when they arrive to town and is able to work with them on getting all their paperwork and information to get started at school,” Grammer said. “If we have a family in need, she works with that family to get them what they do need. She finds resources, she finds monetary sources, she works with the Tiger’s Den at the middle school ... she helps families fill out free and reduced forms so that we’re able to provide them breakfast and lunch.”

Grammer said Elkins always has snacks in her office and checks to make

sure kids are not hungry.

“She supervises students, she also provides support to our staff,” Grammer said. “She’s a safe person to go to if our staff or families or students need a safe place to go. She is an amazing partner with our community.”

Elkins said a major part of her job at Sterling involves attendance.

“It’s super important for all of our kids to be here every single day, so one of my big responsibilities is watching attendance every day and if the kiddos aren’t here, then we call the caregiver every single day to try to get their attendance verified,” Elkins said.

About two years ago, Elkins started implementing Student Success Team meetings.

“The whole purpose of that is to get the family in the building and to introduce ourselves ... one of my favorite things is every single time we have a family in here, we all learn something new about the kid or about the family,” Elkins said.

Elkins said a large portion of her job is to build relationships with the families of students.

“The parents, they don’t feel like you’re



Emily Elkins stands with her husband, Jason, and their children.

PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY ELKINS

working against them anymore,” Elkins said.

Elkins said in her experience, social workers can be seen in a negative light.

“I want to be able to help every single family in this building, no matter what their story is, no matter what their background is, what’s going on in their life,” Elkins said.

Elkins said there are always resources to help families.

“I can always find what I need, whether it’s from an agency, a resource, our school district, some person in the community,” Elkins said. “I can always find it, which is awesome. I don’t think every community can say that.”

Elkins said her greatest accomplishment is her family. Elkins and her husband, Jason, have a 5-year-old and a 1-year-old. Emerson, 5, was recently awarded Volunteer of the Year through Warrensburg Main Street.

In her free time, Elkins enjoys riding her bicycle and reading.

“I just love being outside, playing with my kids,” Elkins said.

Sara Lawson can be reached at 660-747-8123.

Relationships, helping students succeed drive Collier

By Joe Andrews

joea@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Coming from a family of educators, pursuing a career in education proved to be a natural fit for Creighton Collier.

Collier, 29, is in his seventh year as a history teacher at Warrensburg Middle School.

He accepted the role in the spring of 2016, shortly before his mom, Alisa Collier, retired from the Warrensburg R-VI School District after 27 years as a first grade teacher.

"I remember the day that I got the job offer, Jim Elliott, my former principal, met me and John Finnane, who was the principal at Maple Grove at the time," Creighton Collier said. "Jim offered me the job at the middle school, and John had called my mom in and she was surprised, she was excited."

The meeting led to the exchange of a baton, signifying the transfer of education service from Alisa to Creighton.

Teaching goes much deeper within his family tree as he also grew up around other educators, including his grandpa.

"My grandpa was actually who inspired me to become a teacher," Collier said. "He taught social studies. He coached as well. I've just been blessed to not only have a family of educators but some of the best teachers growing up in the Warrensburg district."

Collier went through Warrensburg schools growing up and graduated from Warrensburg High School in 2012.

He said he initially struggled with organization growing into school but found his focus through classes he enjoyed with the help of his teachers.

"I liked math, and I liked language arts, but social studies was always my favorite," Collier said. "I loved history."

Collier obtained a bachelor's degree in social science education from Northwest Missouri State University in April 2016. The degree led him back to Warrensburg, where he teaches eighth grade American History and Career Exploration courses.

"One of my greatest philosophies as an educator is that a student won't care about how much you know until they know how much you care," Collier said. "I think once you build

a relationship with a student, they'll listen. That takes care of everything from getting them to learn, helping with classroom management, classroom behaviors."

Collier's American History class starts with early exploration leading up to colonization. The timeline continues to the Civil War before wrapping up with the reconstruction period.

He also finds time to highlight current news with his students.

"I teach history as a story of our country and how we have gotten to where we are today," Collier said. "I also like to show the news in my class because I like to connect things that are going on in our world and our country. I think that's important to be an educated citizen so they are not just learning about our past, but also knowing what's going on in our present."

On top of teaching, Collier also serves as the head cross country coach and an assistant track and field coach at Warrensburg High School.

The positions span from his middle school cross country coach Kim Yancey. She initially recruited him after seeing his performance running laps in a middle school health class.

It led to him joining the middle school team before continuing on to high school, where he ran for coach Dan Plott. Collier was a member of the 2011 Class 3 boys state champion team.

"Just seeing the history of our program made me so excited to coach," Collier said. "I wanted to kind of give back just like my coaches did and help them achieve their goals, but also team goals of being there for each other, being an unselfish team runner ... If they're having fun, they're getting personal bests and they're also treating it as a lifelong habit, that's what I love."

On top of coaching, Collier also spends his summer as a member of the district maintenance crew. He is also involved with the Warrensburg Schools Foundation.

"As a Warrensburg alumnus, he understands firsthand the meaning of 'Tiger Pride,'" Warrensburg R-VI Superintendent Andy Kohl said. "We look forward to many more years of Creighton's positive influence on the students and athletes in the Warrensburg School District."

Collier said he makes sure to attend events outside of his coaching obligations throughout

the year to ensure students have someone there watching them.

At those events and around town, he is often stopped by current and former students.

"Just before we interviewed, a student yelled out my name, 'Mr. Collier,'" Collier said. "It makes me feel good. They keep me young. I already know I am young, but they make me feel just happy. I love my job each day because of my students."

Collier added seeing students succeed is the ultimate reward of his career.

"It's one thing to have a goal, but seeing that student work towards that goal and me helping them along the way, and seeing all the work and dedication they put into achieving that goal, that's what's most rewarding to me as a mentor and a coach," Collier said. "When I see that in cross country and track, when I see a student that doesn't understand a concept finally gets that click, that's what makes my job worth it."

Joe Andrews can be reached at 660-747-8123.



Creighton Collier is in his seventh year as a history teacher at Warrensburg Middle School. He also serves as the head cross country coach and an assistant track and field coach at Warrensburg High School. PHOTO COURTESY OF CREIGHTON COLLIER

Warrensburg R-VI Congratulates



Creighton Collier
&
Emily Elkins



You made the Top 20 under 40 Community
Achievement Award!!

WHAT AN HONOR

Your achievements are a great example for
students and staff in our community!

Norton helping empower others through ministry

By Nicole Cooke

nicolec@warrensburgstarjournal.com

A call to ministry while growing up has led Peter Norton to being the senior pastor at First United Methodist Church in Warrensburg.

Norton, 37, grew up in a family very involved in the Methodist church and his grandparents were ministers and missionaries. Throughout his life, Norton said he felt very supported by his church family and was encouraged to see himself as part of God's mission and ministry in the world.

Norton said he didn't think about going into ministry at a young age, but he did attend Truman State University for Religious Studies. He also has a Master's in English Literature and a minor in Philosophy and Religion. He then taught English at a Catholic School in South America for about a year.

"I really liked how they would have mass and spiritual direction for the students. Being in that environment, I'd like to be part of those conversations," he said. "I was teaching English and literature there, so when I got back to the United States, I got even more involved in my home church. I did things like visit people in the hospital, help with youth group, I got to preach, be part of Bible studies."

Those experiences led him to attend seminary in Dallas, Texas. He found opportunities for ministry in the church and the community, such as working with refugees. He also met his wife, Katharine,

while in Dallas.

While he has a lifetime of involvement in the church, Norton said his call to ministry has been gradual, with many opportunities to serve and grow his relationship with God.

Norton was first appointed to the First United Methodist Church in St. Charles and paired with a more experienced pastor. There, he said he learned how to help the church find its mission and vision to help people grow in their faith.

In 2019, the couple moved to Warrensburg for Norton's appointment as the senior pastor and have since welcomed two sons, William and Lucas.

"The biggest thing I'm doing is helping the people in the church to see themselves as ministers for Christ. For me and the other staff, our job is to empower the members of the congregation to do ministry," Norton said. "For example, I do a lot of pastoral care, visiting people in the hospital. We have empowered a team of volunteers to do hospital visits, write cards to people. I'll teach Bible studies, but we just recently launched seven small groups and I'm not leading any of them. I'm always coaching other people."

As a young pastor with two young children, Norton has been working to help improve the offerings for youth at the church. He said part of a community church's responsibility is to reach out to young people and young families and help them develop a strong sense of faith.

The church hired a Next Generation Minister in the last year, Kelly Weinberger,

to help focus on the birth through 18 age range. The church now has a Bible study on Sunday nights for middle and high school students, and the youth group took some mission trips to Kansas City and Whisky Ridge Horse Rescue.

Donald Riffle, a member of the church council, said Norton is a good listener and that even as a young minister, he works well with congregation members of all ages. He has especially helped grow the youth program during his time in Warrensburg and also helped start the new small group program. Riffle said Norton ensured the congregation could provide input on the small group topics rather than just presenting a new program formed by the staff.

"You just feel comfortable working with him, you don't have to keep your thoughts to yourself. If he asks an opinion, he wants to hear from you," Riffle said. "With a rapport like that, it makes the relationships develop. I feel like that's what it's all about, it's the relationships you develop within the church."

Norton is a member of the Rotary Club and enjoys spending time with his family and neighbors, but his community involvement really stems from his role in the church. Whether it's hosting a dinner for college-age members or being involved in a Bible study, Norton said that ministry is a lifestyle.

"What's kept me excited about ministry is every day, I see people's lives being changed by the Holy Spirit," he said. "As a minister, you have a front row seat to people learning they are loved by God,



Senior Pastor Peter Norton, 37, of Warrensburg, stands inside the historic sanctuary at First United Methodist Church in Warrensburg. PHOTO BY NICOLE COOKE | STAR-JOURNAL

hearing that from other people in their lives, in the church. I've seen families really find reconciliation after a lot of pain and separation.

"It's exciting to see trust grow, hope grow, as people see they are part of something bigger than themselves or part of what God's mission is in the world and the community around us."

Nicole Cooke can be reached at 660-530-0138 or on Twitter @NicoleRCooke.

YARBOROUGH

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know I'm here," she said. "Marketing, word of mouth, and just when people come in for their appointments, making sure they have the best experience because when they leave, they're going to go talk about you ... and if it's good, that helps you get more clients."

Yarborough is passionate about skincare because she enjoys helping and educating others. She said many women want to take better care of their skin but don't know how. That's where Yarborough steps in.

"They know what they want, but they don't know how," she said. "Being able to

educate them and see the difference, but a huge part of what I do is when they come in for a new client facial or consultation, I send them home with a sample products routine. So they're not just listening to me tell them what to do, they actually have it in their hands and they can try it and they can see it."

With acne clients, she helps them find the root cause, whether it's hormones, gut problems, or food allergies. Then she finds ways to treat each case with education and products.

"Instagram influencers are overwhelm-

ing these days and they often offer misinformation and I'm trying to counteract that," she said. "... Just because it works for them doesn't mean it's going to work for you. I'm trying to get out accurate information."

Kristen Miller, a licensed cosmetologist, joined the Parlour Seven team this year. When Yarborough realized she needed another set of hands to keep up with demand, she reached out to Miller.

Miller has been an apprentice with Yarborough as she works to get her esthetician license and said she's learned so much already.

Miller said she admires Yarborough's drive and determination. She noted Yarborough strives to be the best because she believes her clients deserve the best.

"Jess's passion for skincare is so real. She truly does care about the needs of each and every single one of her customers," Miller said. "She's passionate about educating the rest of the community and always posts little educational posts on the Parlour Seven Facebook page. She just wants to heal everyone's damaged barriers and help everyone to have healthy and happy skin."

Nicole Cooke can be reached at 660-530-0138 or on Twitter @NicoleRCooke.