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MURRAY MOSAIC: STORIES OF GROWTH, DIVERSITY AND RESILIENCE



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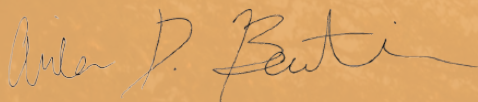
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Murray State's alumni have a history of doing great things after graduation. From starting businesses to publishing books, Racer alumni are known to follow their passions after school. This magazine is about the legacy of success that our predecessors have created. In these pages, you'll find filmmakers and professional wrestlers; you'll find poets and immigrants; you'll find Army specialists and cooks. They are all a part of the great *mosaic*--the stories that weave together to create the Murray State legacy we know and aspire to join.

As I finish my final year at Murray State, I'm inspired by the alumni that came before me and I'm grateful to be a part of the school that got them where they are today. This magazine is a love letter to their passion and perseverance. So much time, hard work, and creativity was poured into this publication; I hope you'll enjoy this year's edition of Gateway.

Thank you,



Ania Delaney Boutin
Gateway Editor & News Editor



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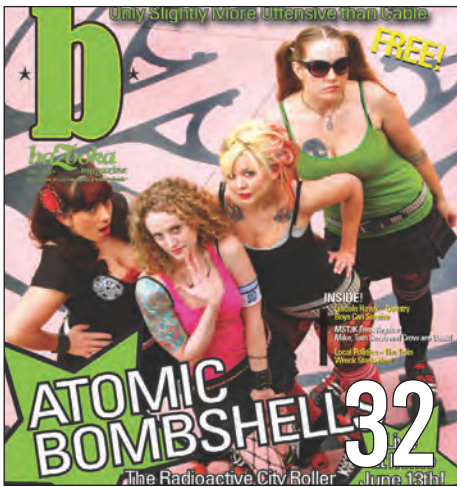
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Climbing t

A story of escape, immigration,
resilience and return

As a young man, he climbed the Alps to illegally cross the border into Italy and escape control of the Soviet Union. Now, he takes study abroad students back to his home country to share the beauty and culture of central Europe.

Zbynek “ZB” Smetana was born in what was once called Czechoslovakia, a Slavic country created in 1918 as part of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I. In 1948, due to a Communist coup, Czechoslovakia became part of the Soviet Union.

Born in the capital city of Prague, Smetana grew up in northern Czechoslovakia, attending school and finding his passions. As he grew older, he became increasingly frustrated with Soviet rule, recalling the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, in which Soviet troops invaded his country to stop reformist ideas in Prague. Smetana said the invasion resulted in a suppression of many freedoms that were gained in the 1960s.

“Well, being a teenager, I disliked this... so I started playing guitar and composing songs, something akin to protest songs,” Smetana said. “Something like Bob Dylan, critical of the establishment and, needless to say, it was not necessarily received friendly. And

because of that, I felt oppressed—politically and intellectually.”

When Smetana was 19, a popular protest site, the Lennon Wall, which is now a famous historic site, sprung to life in Prague. In honor of beloved artist John Lennon who was murdered in 1980, people in Prague, including Smetana and his friends, began to leave graffiti on the wall, using their art as a way to remember Lennon and express ideals of freedom and western culture. The Soviet regime in power viewed the artistic expression as a threat to political stability and quickly retaliated.

“Even such innocent outpouring of love for a pop star was seen as an expression of nonconformity,” Smetana said. “So first they whitewashed the wall, but that just made more clean surfaces to write on. So then they covered the wall with boards and put up posters, but the people ripped those down. It was almost like, the more they tried to suppress it... the more people cared... (The government) tried to control what people did and suppress these outbursts of spontaneity. I think that they were threatened by it in some weird way.”

Smetana decided that, if possible, he would at-

to freedom



Story by Ania Delaney Boutin

Photos provided by Zbynek Smetana
Map photo illustration from Pexels

tempt to escape Soviet control through immigration. As an adult, he traveled to Yugoslavia, a Communist state that, while linked to the Soviet Union, was not directly under Soviet control. From there, he found a rock climber to guide him across the Alps that lined the country's border and into Italy.

"I'm afraid of heights, so this was challenging," Smetana said. "When I look back now, I basically don't understand how I was able to do it. It was kind of scary. It took two days, and it was rough. When we ended up in Italy, we went to the nearest police station that we could find and, in very broken English, asked for political asylum."

From there, Smetana was processed and given a train ticket that took him to a refugee camp in Latina, just south of Rome, where he stayed for eight months. During his stay in Latina, Smetana explored the surrounding cities and even shook the pope's hand while attending a General Audience, in which the pope greets pilgrims in Rome every Wednesday.

While in the refugee camp, Smetana decided to apply to enter the United States as an immigrant. Once his application was approved, he traveled to Los Angeles, since he knew a friend living there from his

time in school. After getting settled, he started a job in woodworking but faced numerous challenges due to the language barrier.

"At that point, my English was so bad, nonexistent, frankly, that I mixed the words push and pull, which is not good because when somebody's holding up something and you push on it, they are not happy," Smetana said. "So I was amicably fired. Basically, I realized that to live in America, I have to know how to speak English, simple as that. And so I started going to English as a Second Language."

For months, Smetana spent his days in an intensive English program hosted in a trailer in a middle school parking lot due to a shortage of available classrooms. As he improved, he enrolled in California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, where he continued learning English. After graduating from the program, his reading skills were at an eighth-grade level, though he said he still had to work on his English speaking.

While attending university, he signed up for a drawing class and an art history class to fill general education requirements. It was there that he discovered a lifelong passion for the arts.

"You know how sometimes when you take a class,

you click,” Smetana said. “It wasn’t that I knew the answer to questions that the professor asked. I knew what the professor was going to ask before they did. So I just clicked. I thought, OK, this is it.”

After earning a scholarship to Rutgers University in New Jersey, Smetana continued his education in the arts. Smetana spent six years pursuing a master’s and doctorate, which he defended in 1997.

When the position of art historian became available at Murray State the next year, Smetana packed up and moved to the charming town of Murray, where he came to appreciate small-town living and the learning environment of the University.

“I do like the Murray State culture,” Smetana said. “Especially, from what I see of my colleagues, it’s student-oriented, teaching-oriented. I like the social aspect of teaching. It never gets boring because every class, every group of students is different. Every class of students has its own dynamic. And what I like is that we have a whole variety of students. We have students who are first-generation students who did not have the opportunities that other people had.”

A strong believer that opportunities enhance the learning experience, Smetana became involved with teaching study abroad classes, taking students to Greece and Italy. However, he found himself longing to take students to his home of Czechoslovakia, now known as the Czech Republic. Since the Velvet Revolution of 1989, which saw the end of Czech’s communist regime and returned many rights to the people, the political climate and safety of Czech had forever changed, opening the borders to travel.

“I thought everybody knows Greece, Paris and Spain, but nobody in the U.S. really knows the richness of Prague,” Smetana said. “Well, I know. And I still have some connections there. I speak the language, which is a plus. And so, I designed the (Prague study abroad) program in 2007 and started going.”

Smetana said the experience of visiting his birth city provides students with the chance to see a city unlike any other part of Europe.

“It’s not only that Prague is culturally rich and beautiful, but it is also one of the only major European cities that was not destroyed during World War II,” Smetana said. “During the Munich Agreement, Germany occupied Czechoslovakia without fighting, and so

the damage was minimal from the end of the war. And so all of the architecture truly is from the last 10 centuries, which is unprecedented—most European Cities are heavily rebuilt... so Prague is unique in that sense.”

While much has changed in Czech since he left as a young man, the chance to share the culture and beauty of the country with his students has given Smetana a greater appreciation for his home country.

“Through the experiences of the students, it allowed me to reconnect with the culture,” Smetana said. “It’s interesting sometimes to see how it’s viewed from the outside. I think that is healthy. Of course, professors are meant to teach, but teaching is also a process of learning. As students are asking me questions, it keeps me from getting frozen still and stale.”

Tessa Bradley, senior communication disorders major, was one of the students Smetana led abroad to the Czech Republic in the summer of 2023. She said the experience forever changed the way she views world history.

“You can read about the oppression and the injustices that occurred while Czechoslovakia was under Soviet control, but it’s a much deeper, more impactful experience when you’re there and can see the physical evidence. What makes it even more profound is standing next to a man who lived it and risked everything to escape,” Bradley said. “I remember standing at the Lennon Wall, talking about how young protestors used it as a canvas to share messages of freedom and resistance when ZB casually mentioned that he and his friends had



marked on the wall when they were young. This moment was surreal and a reminder that we were not learning distant stories of history, but actually the lived experience of ZB and so many others.”

“

WHAT MAKES IT EVEN MORE PROFOUND IS STANDING NEXT TO A MAN WHO LIVED IT AND RISKED EVERYTHING TO ESCAPE.

**”
-TESSA BRADLEY**

Bradley also said she deeply values the chances her study abroad experience gave her to grow. She said that Smetana helped her learn to navigate the city and become more independent, which was both nerve-wracking and empowering. She said Smetana helped her feel at peace, even in a country whose language she didn’t speak, and she appreciates his willingness to share his story with her.

“I think ZB’s story is book-worthy,” Bradley said. “He has lived such a unique life and has persevered through some incredibly difficult circumstances. I appreciate his willingness to share these experiences with his students, helping to humanize the history we were learning.”

Smetana said he values the opportunity he has to broaden students’ perspectives and enrich their knowledge of the world. He said he recently had a student write him a letter thanking him for taking her to Prague 10 years ago, citing how much the experience mattered to her.

“We are becoming too averse to discomfort. We don’t like to be challenged. We don’t like things that are hard... you cannot quit everything that is hard,” Smetana said. “That’s not the way we learn. Traveling abroad and seeing students thrown into the culture, I’ve seen, even within the span of a couple weeks, personal change and growth that’s impossible to replicate on campus.”

While the chance to shape young minds both in the classroom and abroad has been a rewarding experience, Smetana said he notices a concerning trend of



Above: Smetana returns to the site of the Lennon Wall to teach his students about the location’s history.

Left: Smetana’s official University art and design picture.

young people being less passionate about the state of the world.

“Historically, university students used to be some of the most politically active subgroups of the population. I don’t see that anymore; I see a kind of conformism and complacency,” Smetana said. “It was not easy to leave my country and to immigrate because I felt that things were not going in the right direction. But you have to pay attention to what matters. You have to be engaged. People say, ‘Well, what can I do?’ Well, you can do something. If you don’t do anything, nothing will change. Ever. It takes civic education. Know the issues and know what matters. We need to be active and not complacent.”

While Smetana said he hopes young people will become more passionate about shaping the country in which they live, he is able to reflect on his own journey and appreciate where it brought him. Smetana officially gained his U.S. citizenship last year; this November, he enjoyed doing his civic duty by voting for the first time in the 2024 election.

That young man who climbed the Alps to escape Communist rule will lead another group of students abroad to Prague this summer, several decades after his escape.



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"If I had one thing to say to Murray State University and the PSE program here, it would be thank you. You gave me a new lease on life and allowed me to fall in love with my purpose again!"

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"I have learned that if you are passionate about something, learning about it and taking courses for it is simple and fun!"

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Collide

Student filmmakers achieve lifelong dream

Murray residents filed into Cheri Theatres in the early afternoon of Dec. 2, 2023. They made their way to the cashier, paying \$2 per ticket. Outside the screening room, the cast and crew of a premiering movie welcomed those who came to see their work. With high hopes and concessions in hand, everyone took their seats as the lights dimmed. The projector came to life, and “Collide,” a movie almost two years in the making, debuted to an audience of 113 people.

“Collide” was a collaborative film project led by Murray State students Zackary Claggett, Dustin Wilcox and Abbie Michalek. The 46-minute comedy thriller explores the dangers of dating apps through the story of Zeke (Holden Mast), a cynical man looking for relationships in the wrong place, and Jessica (Natalie Boyle), his murderous online match.

The film was produced under BigBeef Cinematography, a production company founded by Claggett, a Murray State graduate. Claggett came to Murray State from Caruthersville, Missouri, in the 2021 spring semester. He originally planned to attend Saint Louis University in his home state, but a tour of the Murray State campus with his close friends changed his mind.

“When I toured, they actually took me to the theater department because they thought I wanted to be in front of the camera and learn about acting,” Claggett said. “I told them, ‘Nah, I want to be the person behind the camera.’ So they sent me (to TV Productions)... I met Chris Haynes, and we had a conversation. I showed him some of my work, and he gave me a tour. I was like, this is actually what I want to do. I want to go here.”

From there, he continued to make film projects. The name BigBeef started as a joke between friends, but it carried into his professional branding as he did work for Murray State’s TV Club and freelance projects. In the spring semester of 2022, Claggett produced his first short film, “Grief,” a fictional story of a Murray State alumnus processing the death of his fiancée.

While working on “Grief,” Claggett made a strong connection with fellow crew members Wilcox and Michalek. He pitched the concept of “Collide” to Wilcox as their first film came to its conclusion. Claggett said



Story by Gray Hawkins
Photos provided by Brock Culp and
Zack Claggett



to make a profit off of the film, allowing Cheri Theatres to keep the money from ticket and concession sales.

“We want people to see what we can do rather than make the money off of it,” Claggett said. “Hopefully— eventually— with people knowing and seeing what we can do, we can make money from it because of our experience.”

Michalek said the day of the premiere was her favorite memory of her time working on “Collide.”

“It was so cool that we all got to witness something we made on the big screen,” Michalek said. “I know that’s a dream for so many of us TV students, and seeing all of our friends, family and even teachers come see what we spent so long on was ... a great payoff.”

Looking back at “Collide” more than a year since its premiere, Claggett said he could not have produced “Grief” and “Collide” if not for the connections he made.

“I made so many opportunities at Murray State— through Chris Haynes, through TV Club, through Jeremy McKeel and just the (journalism and mass communications) department in general,” Claggett said. “So many people are like, ‘You’re the guy who made that movie, I know you.’ Everybody in town knows me as Big Beef, and I love that. I hope one day I create a legacy here.”



First page: ‘Collide’ actress Natalie Boyle holds a prop during the filming of a scene.

Top: Zack Claggett has fun while filming a scene of the film.

Bottom left: Official movie poster created by Dustin Wilcox and Zack Claggett.

Bottom middle: Zack Claggett poses with one of the cameras used for filming.

Bottom right: Dustin Wilcox, Zack Claggett and Abbie Michalek pose with flowers at the film’s Cheri Theatre premiere.

Right: The first page of the film’s script.



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There's a place for you in CHFA.



@murraystatechfa

Story by MacKenzie Rogers
Photos by Rachael Houser

Crochet

Crochet

is what you make it

If you had asked Kaitlin Ostafew in high school what she wanted to pursue as a career, the words “crochet pattern designer” would not have been the answer given.

Known now for her modern crochet patterns and the recent publication of her book “The Art of Crochet with Sock Weight Yarn,” Ostafew has established herself in the crochet world, but prior to 2020, her world looked vastly different.

Raised in southern Maryland from infancy, Ostafew grew up in Lexington Park, where she attended Great Mills High School, the oldest high school in southern Maryland. During high school Ostafew received a diagnosis that would change her life.

“I was diagnosed with a few different chronic illnesses,” Ostafew said. “Slowly over the next couple of years after the diagnosis, I slowly lost my ability to function like a normal human.”

Diagnosed with postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, more commonly known as POTS and Chiari Malformation, daily activities slowly became daunting, leaving Ostafew disheartened and frustrated.

Initially, Ostafew attended Liberty University in Virginia, majoring in child psychology with the goal of becoming a child life specialist, but after a year and a half, she transferred online and returned home to Maryland due to her health and need for additional support.

“I already knew I wasn’t going to be able to jump right into the career field after college based on my limitations,” Ostafew said. “Just getting out of bed for the day was very difficult at that time.”

During this time Ostafew picked up the art of crocheting.

“I wanted to learn (crocheting) just to have something to keep my hands busy while dealing with my chronic illness symptoms because I was mostly having to stay on the couch all day,” Ostafew said. “I just needed something kind of mindless to do with my hands while I sat there, and so I slowly picked up crochet.”

Ostafew learned to crochet from one of her friend’s mother, a woman she grew to view as her second mother, having grown up around the





family. As a crocheter over the years, she discovered the online community of crocheting and the world of designing patterns.

Designing patterns had never occurred to Ostafew, but as she began testing patterns for other designers, she realized the financial potential of pattern creation and selling.

“I imagined to some extent that I could make some money out of it,” Ostafew said. “I didn’t think it would be my full career. I thought I could probably sell some handmade items at markets, make a little side money, something like that. But I never envisioned what it would turn into today.”

What started as a feasible side hustle turned into a full family business, with Ostafew’s husband assisting with the business and encouraging her to extend herself into publishing a crochet book.

“She took an opportunity to develop a business when her health was not great,” her husband Nicolas said. “She kept pursuing it over a few years and has grown an amazing audience of people that support her.”

“I could see where my business was going and see the potential that it could reach in the future,” Ostafew said. “I started dreaming maybe in five years or something I might write a book someday, who knows. And then it just kind of happened.”

In December 2022, Ostafew began writing the manuscript of what would become her book “The Art of Crochet with Sock Weight Yarn,” which was released in September 2024.

Between the beginning of the writing process and the publication, Ostafew had her first child.

“I love making blankets; those are my go-to. I

usually make baby blanket sizes just because it’s quicker for designing patterns,” Ostafew said. “Now that I have a son, I do see myself designing some more things for him.”

Her book features 15 patterns that use light-weight sock yarn in easy-to-follow instructions; from easy one-skein patterns like Autumn Stroll Earwarmers to creative patchwork pieces like a Sassy Scrappy Blanket, the book has a pattern for everyone, beginners and advanced.

Throughout her crocheting and pattern design career, one design has trumped them all and kickstarted her crochet business Sass and Stitch: a puff quilt pattern she designed two years ago. Ostafew said she has not topped the pattern yet.

Pattern designing is not the only thing Ostafew has dabbled into, as a little over a year ago, the couple began learning how to dye yarn.

“It’s a huge learning curve, especially working with natural dyes,” Ostafew said. “We dye our yarn from plant materials, so there are no chemicals in the process at all.”

The heart of needlework projects, the type of yarn one uses greatly changes the outcome of the project. Ostafew’s preference is sock yarn, a super fine, thin yarn.

“Sock yarn is mostly advertised toward knitters and there’s really no reason for that,” Ostafew said. “You can crochet with anything. You could crochet with a shoelace if you want. My goal with crochet is really to achieve that delicacy that knitting offers.”

Taking what began as a thoughtless hand activity, Ostafew has transformed it into a successful crochet business with support and passion in the middle.



Story by Ania Delaney Boutin
Photos provided by Amy Turner

Army internship launches public affairs career

The Black Hawk helicopter creeps closer and closer to the body of water, the rotor blades screaming with the speed of the descent. As the Black Hawk nears the surface, soldiers jump from the chopper, one by one, into the water below. This is part of intensive military training, and Murray State alumna Amy Turner is there to capture every moment of it.

A 2020 graduate, Turner said this is just part of her job as a public affairs specialist for the U.S. Army Cadet Command. A Department of Defense (DOD) civilian, Turner's work days can include anything from prepping a general for an interview to filming helicopter training for social media content. She said she wouldn't be where she is today without her time in Murray State's journalism and mass communication (JMC) department, where she majored in journalism.

"I loved my time at Murray State. The JMC department is fairly small and just so hands-on," Turner said. "I got to know my professors. You were always learning something, getting to try something new. You weren't just sitting, taking notes. You were outside of the classroom, doing something. I loved that."

Turner's love of hands-on work attracted her to the Cadet Command Public Affairs Office internship, a program in which students from across the country travel to Fort Knox, Kentucky, to cover cadet basic and

advanced training through videography, photography and writing.

Turner said she remembered speaking with an intern whose glowing review of the program convinced her that it was the perfect place to grow her skillset and expand her limits.

"(The intern) was talking about the experience and all the different things that she did," Turner said. "She was talking about the high ropes course training (that interns and cadets do). And the line that stuck with me is, she said, 'Normal people pay to go zip lining. You're getting paid to go. Where else are you going to ever have these opportunities?' My interest was definitely peaked. I thought it sounded awesome. My professor, Leigh Wright, encouraged me to apply. And that was that."

Turner interned with the Cadet Command PAO in 2019. She recalled being excited, then terrified once she heard she had been accepted. She said she remembers thinking: what have I gotten myself into? Despite her initial fears, she walked away from Fort Knox with added confidence.

"For me, and I know for a lot of interns, it can be really nerve-wracking if you're new to the Army experience, but it is so much fun," Turner said. "It's just a hands-on, get out in the field type environment..."

More than anything, this internship was a confidence builder for me. This internship felt like my first real chance to stand on my own two feet as a journalist. It was a chance to prove to myself that I am good at this, and I can do this.”

Richard Patterson, deputy public affairs officer, who oversaw Turner’s internship, said he was impressed by her growth, not only as a professional, but also as a person.

“Amy was a superb intern,” Patterson said. “She came as an outstanding writer. One of her goals was to improve her photography skills. She put a lot of hard work into learning and soaked up everything she could. By the end of the internship, she greatly improved her photography skills. She really came out of her shell in the internship... She became very outgoing and engaging with the other students and the staff. Amy truly impressed me with everything she did during the internship.”

Interns spend their mornings on assignments in the field, which could be anything from climbing to the top of a 64-foot rappel tower, entering a confidence (gas) chamber or trekking through the woods. If cadets are there to train, interns follow them. Afternoons are spent turning their coverage into content, which is then published and seen across the country. With time spent on videography, photography, writing and social media management, Turner learned new skills, which helped her in her current role.

“I had never touched a camera before this internship,” Turner said. “I learned photography from the ground up, and now photography is one of my favorite parts of my job. This internship gave me a lot of really helpful tactical skills, as well as the daily reps of having to produce something every day on deadline and getting feedback right then and there.”

Turner knew she wanted to do something similar to the internship for work, so when a position opened at Cadet Command a year after she graduated, she raced to get her application in. She said the open position was just what she needed as job opportunities were sparse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Patterson said bringing Turner back to work for his office full time was a “no-brainer” and that the time and patience she now spends teaching current interns is invaluable.

“Amy is truly a professional,” he said. “She continuously seeks to improve herself both professionally and personally... Her drive to tell the ROTC Cadets’ stories is truly impressive...Amy is a critical part of our team. Always pitching in, teaching, mentoring and improving herself. Hiring Amy was an easy choice and U.S. Army Cadet Command is all the better for it.”

Turner being brought back full time came as no surprise to her former professor Chris Haynes, senior instructor and TV operations manager. He said when Turner left the internship, she had increased confidence and passion for her work, which he knew would help her go far.

“Amy was a wonderful student to have in class, and



it wasn't a surprise when her Fort Knox internship resulted in a full-time position with that organization," Haynes said. "She was always good with deadlines and group work, but after her internship, she exhibited a whole new level of confidence and assertiveness in her roles on campus. Seeing her excel as a content creator, social media manager, and public affairs specialist affirms us as faculty in the JMC department. We love what we do, and we love to see our graduates find that same satisfaction wherever their path may lead."

Turner's satisfaction was found in her hands-on Army job, due in large part to the ever-changing nature of her role. No two days are the same.

"I love getting out into the field, tak-

Top left: Turner poses in the field out on the job.

Middle left: Cadet Reinhart checks his shooting accuracy.

Bottom left: Cadets row across a lake.

Top right: A Chinook helicopter lowers for landing.

Middle right: A cadet crawls in the sand during a training exercise.

Bottom right: Cadets practice transporting an injured soldier.

Middle bottom: A cadet qualifies on the M17 Sig.





ing photos and making videos, doing social media and getting to meet cool people and tell really cool stories,” Turner said. “Every day is different, and the Army provides so many opportunities that other job places just don’t have the ability to offer. I don’t know if there is any other job that would say, ‘Hey, today you’re going to be in a Black Hawk (helicopter) because we need you to make a social media video.’ Every day here is different. I always have a chance to learn.”

Turner said she didn’t know about the DOD civilian opportunities in the Army prior to her public affairs internship. After interning on Fort Knox, her eyes opened to the numerous jobs available, and she said that’s part of why she’s so encouraging of students interning and getting out of their comfort zone.

“Try everything. Take every opportunity that’s available to you,” Turner said. “I think we (Cadet Command) have the best internship on the block, but no matter where you end up, just get your feet wet. It’s invaluable to grow your confidence. Apply for everything, try everything, throw yourself out there, and do things that get you outside of your comfort zone, because that’s when we grow.”

Turner said she felt Murray State truly prepared her for her current professional role, and the internship helped her discover a passion for field coverage. As a media professional succeeding in her industry, she is a shining example of just how far Murray State graduates can go.

Top left: Cadets complete a helicopter training exercise.

Bottom left: Soldiers pose wearing their covers.

Top right: A cadet wears a gas mask to protect him in the CBRN chamber.

Bottom right: Cadets receive instructions in the rain.

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A couple's
harmony of
performance
and publishing

FROM
STAGE
TO
STUDIO

Story by Bri Hunter

Photo courtesy of Cassie Hall, Crowned Co. Photography;
other photos provided by Savannah Richey

From the stage of community theater and the field of marching band competitions to the hustle and bustle of Nashville's music industry, it's a love of the arts that ties Savannah Richey and Zac Boardman together. This same love is what pushes them to pursue their passions in the music industry.

Richey and Boardman, Murray State alumni, both started out showcasing their talent in Murray, Kentucky. Richey participated in Playhouse in the Park throughout her adolescence, and Boardman participated in Murray High School Tiger Band. Both pursued a degree in the music department at Murray State.

RICHEY'S LIVE TAKE

Richey graduated in 2023 and is now working as a booking assistant at Wasserman Music in Nashville, Tennessee. Wasserman Music is a talent agency that specializes in booking tours all over the world, from artists like Tyler Childers to Chappell Roan.

Richey discovered her passion for the arts when her mom stuck her in theater after seeing "Annie" at the Carson Center in Paducah, Kentucky. Richey had performed in more than 45 productions at Playhouse in the Park and began to learn about the licensing side of entertainment.

"The funny thing about how I realized that there is a whole industry for the arts was when I was in high school and I really wanted different shows to happen, but I was told the rights weren't available for these productions," Richey said. "So I started diving into what rights were, how to obtain them, what performance licenses were and all that stuff. That kind of sparked in me that there is a whole industry that does this."

During high school, she had been taking voice lessons with voice professor Tana Field-Bartholomew. Through those lessons, she realized the hobby was just what she needed.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do coming into school," she said. "During high school, I had taken voice lessons with Dr. Field. ... I knew I wanted to do something arts related, and she had told me about the music business major. I didn't even know that was a thing until I spoke to her about it. I didn't know that my current career path existed before Murray State."

When Richey entered this new realm, she thought the industry would resemble "The Devil Wears Prada." She said that proved to not be true at all.

"People are actually really open to meeting with you," Richey said. "Once you're in the room with them, they are wanting to help you. Some places can seem super intense because of the 'go go go' lifestyle, but once you get to know them, they are really great people."

BOARDMAN'S VIEW OF PUBLISHING

Boardman graduated from Murray State in 2022 and is working as a senior coordinator in mechanical licensing for BMG Rights Management LLC.

Boardman started out playing sports early in life,



as the majority of young boys do, but once he was 8 years old, he began taking piano lessons. He said that it really tickled a part of his brain that developed his love for music.

"My grandparents really nurtured that part of me," Boardman said. "Later, the high school marching band came along and I was in the Racer Band too. I was a little naive to the music business side of the world when I was a teenager, especially since I was living in a small town."

Originally an education major, Boardman eventually changed his course once he researched the opportunities within the music business. He said he had always heard about the music business students but wasn't entirely sure about it until Murray State opened that door.

"Murray State was always available for me to ask questions," Boardman said. "There are a lot of good people that have gone to the University and having that reputation follow me into my career really helped."

Pursuing a career in any field sometimes requires moving away from home. With Richey and Boardman both being from Murray, they realized if they wanted to succeed in the music industry it would require moving to a larger city.

Now based in Nashville, they experience the hustle and bustle of the music scene. With any career field, especially in the entertainment industry, there are

stereotypes revolving around the lifestyle and work environment. For women, it is slightly more challenging to get a footing in the industry.

Richey said based on her experience, sometimes you must apply for lower jobs to climb the chain.

“I started applying for jobs the January before I graduated and I applied to over 250 jobs,” Richey said. “By the end of April, I got offered my job at Wasserman. Most people want to go into a job that sounds really cool but that might not be your best opportunity and (getting that job may be) a lot harder than you think. It’s not a good idea to pass up a job that will just get you in the door just because it’s not what you want to do forever. I started out as a receptionist at Wasserman for about eight months, and after those eight months, I got moved to an agent desk.”

Boardman said the best part about internships is the time you get to spend with the experts and getting first hand experience.

“My internship was with Sony Music Publishing and they are one of the biggest music publishers in the world,” Boardman said. “It began as a remote internship and it was kind of an intimidating experience at the beginning of my internship because I was involved in meetings with global coordinators and directors for royalties, income tracking and stuff like that. Having direct access to the people who have been doing this for years and tracking trends in this industry is really cool because it leads to hands-on exposure.”

With the pair being in a demanding industry, they have persevered. Richey said they love to compare what they learn in different sides of the industry and analyze when rosters overlap how they can share in those successes.

“With him working at a label and me working in live music, we are able to see different sides of success

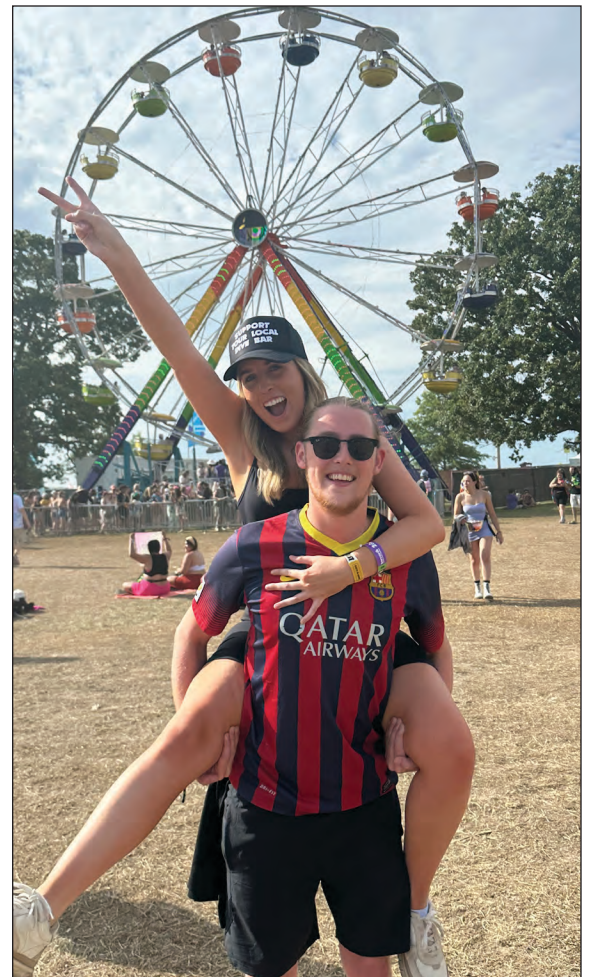
for artists,” she said. “An artist could have a single getting a ton of radio time and on the label side seem to be taking off, but that doesn’t always directly correlate with if the artist can sell a hard ticket.”

As they climb their way through the music dreams, Richey and Boardman are able to do so together; their time at Murray State may have brought them together, but it’s their shared love of music that keeps them going strong.

Left photo: Richey is shown alongside coworkers, at the 2022 Country Music Association awards show.

Bottom left photo: Boardman with coworkers at a ‘work happy hour’ at BMG Rights Management LLC.

Bottom right photo: Boardman and Richey at Bonaroo, a four-day music festival in Manchester, Tennessee.





Story by Harper Spaulding
Photos provided by Charley Allen

The *Scar* It Leaves

Writer makes her debut with poetry collection

For those pursuing a degree in writing, life after university can be uncertain. Your future career, what you will publish and what you will do outside of campus can be a mystery. But for this Murray State alumna, the campus provided a place not only to pursue her future career, but her dream of writing poetry as well.

Charley Allen is a freelance poet and the director of web design and digital marketing on campus. In 2024, Allen published her first poetry collection titled “The Scar It Leaves” through Finishing Line Press.

Allen received her undergraduate degree in creative writing in 2003. During her time at Murray State, she served as the athletics director for Springer Residential College. After graduation, she remained a part of campus staff, and now approaches her 21st year as a staff member. During this time, she climbed the ladder to become the director of web design and digital marketing.

Allen said the highlights of her time as staff include redesigns she helped make to the Murray State website in 2014, which helped bring the website to the forefront of responsive design.

Shawn Touney, executive director of marketing, branding and communication, said Allen is a selfless and caring staff member, and he complimented her ability to work with others for a common goal.

“Charley has the ability to offer that collaboration, guidance, expertise and a sense of calm and trust for an area she may be working with,” Touney said. “She is well respected across campus and the community and has earned that over the years because of who she is.”

During her time as a Murray State staff member, Allen also pursued her interest as a freelance poet. Allen said her interest in poetry started young, first sprouting in second grade when she heard her teacher reciting poems by Shel Silverstein. Later in fourth grade, she participated in a contest to write a poem about Operation Desert Storm. Allen said after doing well in this competition she realized she could pursue her interest in poetry.

“That kind of proved to me that, hey, maybe this is something I can do, and maybe this is a place where I can write some things that other people want to hear,” Allen said.

On Jan. 12, 2024, Allen released her first 15-piece poetry collection titled “The Scar It Leaves.” Inspiration for the collection came after hearing about the New Women’s Voices Chatbook Competition put on by

Finishing Line Press, an annual competition for female writers who have not previously published a full-length collection.

Allen said she looked at some of the poetry she had written over the past few years, and she recognized common themes of generational trauma and addiction. She compiled those poems, along with new ones written for the competition, into her first collection. Later, Finishing Line Press published that collection.

A month after the collection’s publication, Allen held a book launch and author signing at the Murray Art Guild. Allen said she and the event organizers had expected 20-30 people to show up that day, but ended up with twice that amount. She said she was amazed at the support the community showed her.

“Looking out across that room when I get up to read is a moment I will carry with me forever. It might have been the best night of my life,” Allen said.

Allen said when publishing the collection she had hoped it would be able to reach just one person and make a connection or impact on them. Now, Allen said she receives comments at almost every reading from people wanting to share their experiences with addiction and how it has affected their family. She said the book’s reception has been a beautiful and humbling experience.

Much of her poetry stems from her real-life experiences dealing with addiction in her family, including seeing the toll it took on her brother. Allen said she often writes as a way to work through her thoughts and emotions. Many of her poems start out as journal entries, where she sometimes plays with metaphors as a way of describing her emotions.

Constance Alexander, a friend and fellow poet who also wrote a blurb for her poetry collection, described the emotional impact of Allen’s work. She discussed how it tackled difficult and often uncomfortable subjects such as addiction, denial and scars in an honest and straightforward way.

“I think that her work is direct,” Alexander said. “She doesn’t try to add a lot of ruffles and splurges to it. She has something to say and she says it with directness and is disarming in its honesty.”

Allen said the experiences and connections she found at Murray State were important to her growth as a writer. She originally came to Murray State because it was close to her family and hometown of Pottsville, Kentucky. She said the University’s creative writing program gave her opportunities to learn from

amazing professors. She split her time at Murray State studying poetry and fiction, which helped her form her narrative poetic style.

Ann Gosser, administrative assistant for the department of art and design and a longtime friend, described their time together at Murray State as fun.

“Charley is a very thoughtful friend who I think has a lot of empathy and care for her friends,” Gosser said. “She’s got a ton of great humor, but it’s like a great balance of humor and empathy and care.”

Along with being a poet and member of Murray State’s staff, Allen is also an outspoken advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. As a gay woman, Allen said she was influenced by Matthew Shepard, a young gay man whose death during her senior year sparked a national conversation about hate crimes and anti-gay violence. She said she got in trouble in high school for publishing editorials about gay rights and gun control in the student newspaper, which she co-edited.

Allen said her time at Murray State provided a space to learn more about herself and her identity. Though Allen said she felt lost after the reaction her friends and family had to her coming out, she is grateful for the support she had from professors who encouraged her through that time.

“I wanted to come out, and college seemed like the perfect place to do that. I’m a first-generation college student and I saw college as an opportunity not just to learn and grow but to be my authentic self,” Allen said. “Those lessons have stuck with me and it’s important to me to write and talk about difficult things like abuse, homophobia, grief and addiction.”

As a staff member, Allen said she has spent time working on different University committees to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. She said it was amazing to see how much more open and welcoming Murray State has become over the years.

Allen said her time serving in diversity committees on campus led to her being appointed in 2019 to

the Human Rights Commission for the city of Murray. During her time at the commission, Allen helped pass an update to the city’s non-discrimination policy to include a clear procedure for discrimination protections on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. Allen said she wanted to make sure every Murray citizen had a voice when it came to tackling discrimination and enjoyed protections under city ordinance.

Though Allen said it was a battle to get the policy updated, she received help and support, including from the West Kentucky National Organization for

Women. The ordinance was updated twice in 2023 and 2024 to include clear protections for LGBTQ+ citizens.

The 2023 update to the ordinance earned her the “Trailblazer” award from Murray Pride.

Since the publication of “The Scar It Leaves”, Allen has continued to write poetry. Allen said she has focused a lot on trying to get her work out to new people, including doing poetry readings. She has a goal to write a full poetry collection in the future.

One of her recent poems, “Legacy,” was nominated as a finalist for the 2024 Chaffin/Kash Poetry Contest held by the Kentucky State Poetry Society. Allen said the poem was about gaslighting and how learning the truth can hurt you.

As for advice for new students getting into poetry and writing, Allen said it is so important to gain new

experiences and insights outside of classes, as well as not be afraid to make stories personal.

“They say write what you know, and the more experiences you have, the more you have to draw from,” Allen said. “Write from the heart. I think we can write about social issues and those sorts of things, but being able to make that human and make that personal. Don’t be afraid to be vulnerable.”

The following poem, titled “There’s a Poem in This Place,” was featured in “The Scar It Leaves.” Allen said the poem was about the difficulties of growing up in the Bible Belt and maintaining the love for the place you call home.

//

**THOSE LESSONS HAVE STUCK
WITH ME AND IT'S
IMPORTANT TO ME TO WRITE
AND TALK ABOUT DIFFICULT
THINGS LIKE ABUSE,
HOMOPHOBIA, GRIEF AND
ADDICTION.**

//

- CHARLEY ALLEN

There's a poem in this place
where the crops roll green into the tree line,
where the ghost of a city rests beneath the lake,
where the storms take houses down past the studs,
where the factories shut down,
where the lightning cracks like a whip,
where the trees twist and turn around barbed wire,
where the people who leave don't come back,
where the people who stay wear the past like shackles to their feet

There's a poem in this place
where we grew up in shadows,
where the gospel bloomed like ragweed,
where the secrets sprouted like dandelions,
where the whispers always came after the smile,
where we learned loving wasn't always right

There's a poem in this place,
where the sky some days is a blue so pure it makes you forget,
where the sun sets so red-orange-purple it takes your breath to see it,
makes you want to reach out your hand to share it
but still believe it was meant only for you

- "THERE'S A POEM IN THIS PLACE"
THE SCAR IT LEAVES
CHARLEY ALLEN

Story by Madison Miller
Photos provided by Chrystal Galloway
and Gabe Camacho



A REBORN

CITY

And the alternative magazine
that brings it to **life**

Paducah may be known as a quiet, conservative river town famed for its quilt museum and charming historic district. Beneath the surface, Paducah is also a thriving hub for local musicians, visionary artists and creative entrepreneurs who bring a vibrant, eclectic energy to the community with their diverse perspectives and bold ideas.

Mainstream media and traditional Southern culture often overlook the creative community in Paducah, but the publication of Bazooka Magazine from 2009 through 2012 tapped into the flow of creativity and transformed it into a space for these overlooked voices.

Rather than competing with local publications, Bazooka Magazine, which gets its name from “The Paducah Song,” set out to be something different — an original outlet that captured the grit and pulse of the alternative, punk rock nightclub scene, unfiltered and authentic.

The magazine quickly became an information hub and community for people searching for alternative narratives and creative expression.

This community would not have been possible without Chrystal Galloway, or as some know her, Bella Bazooka. She crafted Bazooka from the ground up to offer a voice fighting back against inequality and to give herself an outlet during a difficult time in her life when she battled postpartum depression.

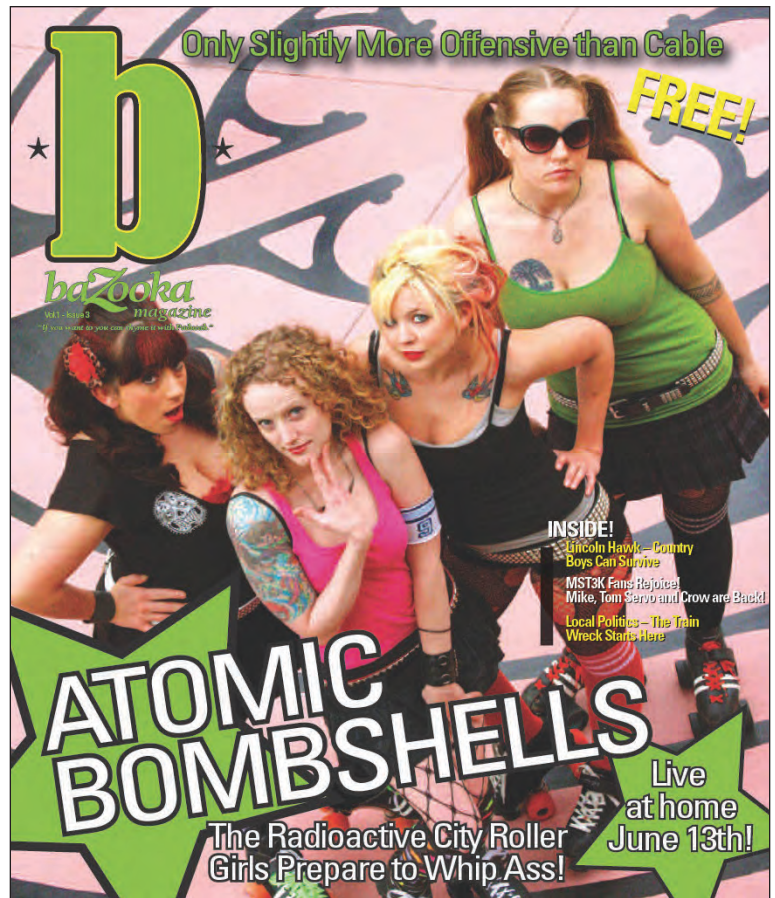
“I spent 2008 in a green recliner,” Galloway said. “It wasn’t all bad, but there were times when it got really difficult. I wanted to die. I literally had nothing to lose anymore. So, I decided to do the one thing I had always wanted to do: start my own paper — a wild and crazy zine that spoke truth to power.”

With that raw energy and courage, Galloway was not afraid to make waves in the conservative atmosphere in Paducah. She openly discussed topics like politics, sex and liberal perspectives.

“When you come out with something that is

“PADUCAH, PADUCAH
IF YOU WANNA
YOU CAN RHYME IT
WITH BAZOOKA
BUT YOU CAN’T POOH-
POOH PADUCAH
THAT’S ANOTHER NAME
FOR PARADISE.”

- “THE PADUCAH SONG,
THE GANG’S ALL HERE
(1943)



Right: A 2009 Bazooka Magazine cover.

Left: Chrystal Galloway revived Bazooka magazine in 2024.

open-minded, non-judgmental... and talk about things that aren't 'safe for the church newsletter,' people are going to be shocked," Galloway said.

Bazooka magazine covered local artists, band reviews, roller derby and sometimes even took on an investigative journalism role. Galloway's mission was clear: she wanted the truth to be told and voices to be heard. This commitment extended beyond just content; it fostered community engagement as well. Matt Valentine, a dedicated reader, recognized the magazine as an essential gathering place for the community.

"It gave the community a place to come together, a safe space where information that wasn't in The Paducah Sun could get out and be shared," Valentine said.

The magazine gained a reputation for its comprehensive events calendar, which sparked a surge in community activity. To bring events into the public eye, Bazooka offered a platform for event promotion to generate interest and inform the public. Because of this, more activities emerged.

"It was really kind of a renaissance in Paducah," Galloway said.

Thanks to Galloway's bold vision, Bazooka became a refuge for the underrepresented, bringing people together in an uncommonly open and inclusive space.

The magazine published 33 issues between March

2009 and June 2012. By the end of its run, the final issue alone printed more than 5,000 copies, each estimated to be read eight times.

Even at its conclusion, Bazooka was still gaining momentum.

"It didn't stop because the paper was failing," Galloway said. "In fact, during the last month I was publishing, I received a call from one of the biggest law firms in Paducah wanting to advertise. It was just the fact that I went down."

After years of tirelessly building Bazooka, health challenges arose, and the demands of raising two children compelled Galloway to prioritize her family and personal well-being, leading her to step away from the magazine.

During this time, she focused on staying healthy and raising her children, Jack, 20, and Bella, 17. In 2018, she also earned her bachelor's degree in journalism from Murray State.

Now, with renewed energy and vision, Galloway is ready to relaunch Bazooka under the new name Bazooka Reloaded, reigniting its bold voice in the community.

Galloway said her experiences have deeply influenced her current approach to the magazine, making her feel "much more comfortable" with her anger about inequality and more willing to act on it.

Reflecting on the magazine's early days, Galloway

said she often avoided certain stories due to concerns about her family’s safety, given that her children were just 1 and 3 years old at the time.

“But now, with my kids nearly grown—one is already an adult—I feel like I don’t have as much to lose,” Galloway said. “I now have the confidence not only to speak truth to power but also to take action.”

Galloway plans to be more inclusive with Bazooka Reloaded, ensuring that diverse communities are represented.

“I’m trying to be more all-encompassing in my efforts to include diverse groups, especially minorities in our area, like the LGBTQ community and non-Christians,” Galloway said. “I want to expand the focus to those who don’t often get heard.”

Bazooka Reloaded will maintain the same sense of authenticity as before, perhaps even more so. In the first issue, which was released in November 2024, Galloway shared a raw and honest account titled, “The Rise, the Fall, and the Rebirth of Bella Bazooka,” where she opened up about her struggles with postpartum depression and bipolar disorder.

Terra Hays, a long-term friend of Galloway, said her vulnerability has had a positive impact on others.

“She shares her story, even when it’s terrifying because she knows others need to hear it,” Hays said.



Above: Bazooka Reloaded launched with this cover in November 2024.

“If she didn’t, so many people would be out there thinking it was only them, that no one else had ever struggled through the things they have.”

Additionally, Bazooka Reloaded came full circle as her own children, Jack and Bella, step in to bring fresh perspectives, adding a new generation’s voice to the magazine’s legacy.

Bella said her mother’s courage and advocacy have influenced her values.

“My mother having the bravery to write about controversial topics, and to be the first to do it in Paducah was so inspiring,” Bella said. “It made me the person I am today. I always go to any protest and contribute anything I can to important causes.”

Jack said he hopes the magazine will have the same effect as it did originally.

“Hopefully having the magazine back gives people a center point to really put out their best work and find connections, cultures and communities that they really resonate with,” Jack said.

Bazooka Reloaded will be distributed in Paducah, Mayfield, and Metropolis, primarily at venues like bars, tattoo parlors, and smoke shops. For more information about Bazooka Reloaded, contact bazookareloaded@gmail.com.



Above: The June 2010 cover featured the Paducah music scene and a CD release party.

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GLOBAL AMBITIONS: AN ENTREPRENEUR'S JOURNEY FROM STUDENT TO INDUSTRY LEADER

Story by Bri Hunter
Photo courtesy of Cheeky Simmons
Photography; other photos provided by
Cui Liu





Stepping off of a 16-hour flight into a new country can be daunting. For some, meeting and living with people you have never met before is a nightmare. For others, it is an inspirational venture that contains a lifetime of lessons.

Cui “Tray” Liu, chief executive officer and founder of Tray Liu Design and Tray Liu Rentals, forged her business through hard work and a fiery entrepreneurial spirit.

She originally came to the United States from Leshan, China, as a high school exchange student at Grayson County High School. Liu decided she wanted to attend college in the United States.

After touring universities in Kentucky, she found Murray State. Liu originally wanted to major in pre-law until her adviser gave her some valuable advice.

“(My adviser) said if I did pre-law, four years later, if I change my mind, then I’m stuck because there isn’t flexibility in pre-law,” she said. “What I do now aligns perfectly with what I studied. Murray State played a crucial part in my educational background through helping me start my business.”

Liu graduated in 2003 with an international business degree. She began working with a company in the home furnishings industry and started her own business in 2015. Not only did education assist her in starting her business, but she said that having the right attitude to start one will dictate whether you are ready or not.

“If you have an entrepreneurial spirit, it’s like a fire inside you,” Liu said. “Everyone thinks that passion will launch a business, which is true, it is very important to have passion, but the biggest part is you have to have a lot of knowledge behind that passion to increase your success rate. I think for students in school, I would be taking every advantage that you have to learn. Learn from people you know, from your course, your professor, all of those are going to help you get the knowledge you need to contribute to your success.”

Liu said soaking in all the information taught either by a course at Murray State or through hands-on learning in an internship is beneficial to anyone. Free resources are very beneficial as well to help people meet their goals. Liu said it’s important to utilize free resources while they are free.

“Use the resources right now, the free resources,” she said. “When you become a running business, the majority of the time those resources aren’t free anymore.”

Before she began her business, Liu worked for an



Above: Liu, alongside her husband and son, celebrate a birthday.

Right: Liu credits her parents for her work ethic and dedication.

employer for 12 years. From those years, she learned the importance of a mission statement and core values. She began her own business specializing in furniture design in 2015.

“When I started my business, the first thing I did was to write out my mission statement, our values and core values,” Liu said. “I realized I needed something to anchor and those are the things I want to make sure I give, which are things that I loved having when I worked for someone, what that business meant to me and what I can give to others. I want to promote growth, both personally and professionally, for my coworkers.”

For any business, it is common to sub out positions. If a business needs its finances organized, typically, an accountant is hired to fulfill that duty. Liu said while that can be beneficial for the business, it’s important to know your business from the inside out.

“If you own a business and you don’t understand numbers, you can’t run a successful business,” she said. “You’re not going to understand where you’re making a profit and where you are losing money, (because) you can’t read a profit loss statement, you don’t understand balance sheets. Being in school right now can increase that rate and wanting to learn, rather than seeing it as

“SUCCESS HAS TO BE WORKED AND PAID, EVERY SINGLE DAY BECAUSE RIGHT NOW YOU MAY BE AT THE TOP OF YOUR CAREER. IF YOU’RE AT THE TOP, YOU KNOW WHERE YOU WILL END UP EVENTUALLY? YOU WILL EITHER KEEP GOING UP OR END UP GOING DOWN.”

- CUI LIU

being forced to learn, will change the impact of education.”

Liu credits her family for her entrepreneurial spirit. While her parents work in different industries, she grew up seeing how dedicated her parents were to succeed. Liu said success is rented, not owned.

“Having a family who taught you a good work ethic is important,” she said. “Sustainable success takes years of hard work that many people don’t see, and that is something my family has taught me. Success has to be worked and paid, every single day because right now you may be at the top of your career. If you’re at the top, you know where you will end up eventually? You will either keep going up or end up going down.”

In any industry, whether it is entrepreneurial or a corporate job, burnout can occur. Society has normalized the hustle and bustle of fast-paced industries and now some workers find themselves hopeless and full of stress. Liu said burnout is nothing new.

“From my experience, the more you are aware of burnout and the initial signs of it, you can stop a bad burnout from happening if you take the right steps,” she said. “Being able to have awareness of who you are and learn from failures- experiencing burnout isn’t a bad thing. Burnout could be from an outside environment too. You’re going to have seasons that are a lot harder and burnout will be easier to happen then you’ll have seasons where you can rest and recoup and grow.”

Liu has learned the work-life balance, despite being in a demanding position. She dedicates devotional time every day to spend with God. She also spends time with her family and friends and looks to others for motivation. She said every day is different and she doesn’t have a set routine.

“I can go from ‘I can conquer the world’ to ‘Today



is not such a great (day)’ to ‘I want to quit and sell my business right now,’” she said. “Then at three o’clock, I could have an employee that comes in my office thanking me for sitting down with them and listening to them. Something as small as that fuels me again and reminds me of my purpose. It can be a rollercoaster. I always tell people to not give up; most of the time you just need to rest.”

At her office in Murray, Liu said everyone has a “comment jar” on their desk. The purpose of the jar is for people to write short, encouraging notes to others for motivation. She said on the days she wants to walk away, she pulls out some of those notes and reads them. It reminds her why she started and what she has to look forward to in the future.

Along with growing personally and professionally, finding a mentor or multiple mentors isn’t as hard as it seems. In the small town of Murray, Liu said there are so many people willing to mentor younger people, but they aren’t typically asked.

“I think going to people to ask for help, whether you are asking to go out for coffee or lunch or anything like that, going to them and saying ‘I need to be mentored,’” she said. “People are very much willing to help you or connect you with someone who can help you. At the beginning of my business, there were so many people offering help because they wanted to see us succeed.”

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FROM THE *stage* TO THE *ring*

This actor-turned-wrestler
embraced life's detours

Story by Chelby Melvin

Photo provided by
Scott Lesh Photography

Since adolescence, we are taught to dream big, to aspire and to pursue what we want in life. In what feels like the blink of an eye, adolescents become adults. Some hold tightly to those wonder dreams, while others find their desires shifting somewhere along the way. Yet, few are ever taught to embrace the possibility of change.

This is Leva Bates' story. A Murray State theater alumna turned professional wrestler, Bates has challenged the notion of resisting life's turns. Instead she encourages others to embrace them wholeheartedly.

During her time as a theater student, the Madisonville, Kentucky native was deeply involved in the department, actively participating in studio theater with student directors and even attending prestigious events like the Southeastern Theatre Conference alongside faculty. Although Bates was invested in cosplay and fitness at the time—two skills perfect for a wrestling career—the idea of it had yet to cross her mind, despite occasional suggestions from others. After graduating in 2003, she even took on various performance roles from stunt work to playing Barbie for several years with what was then known as the Diamond Agency, a modeling agency she was signed to before wrestling came onto her radar.

Lissa Graham-Schneider, theater professor, recalled Bates' competitive nature during theater students' "king of the bed" matches while on conference trips. The matches were a battle for bed space, as more than four students were often assigned to one room. Students would combine the two hotel beds to wrestle each other, and losers were banished to the floor with sleeping bags.

"... She never hit the floor. She was always one of the ones sleeping in the bed," Graham-Schneider said.

Little did Bates know that the same tenacity would later fuel a career in professional wrestling. Ironically, it was Bates' then-boyfriend who initially envisioned breaking into the ring.





Photo provided by Leva Bates

“EVEN THE WEIRDEST OPPORTUNITY MIGHT BE THE THING TO OPEN DOORS FOR YOU.”

-LEVA BATES

Her final nudge to take a chance on wrestling came when co-workers at an early stunt gig suggested it to her.

“They were like, ‘Well if you dance, do stunts and act, why don’t you do wrestling?’” Bates said.

Eventually, they convinced her to attend a wrestling school, a training institution designed to train students for careers in professional wrestling entertainment.

Since 2006, Bates has built her career, becoming best known for her work in WWE’s NXT. Her “mistake” of failing to pack sweatpants for a rehearsal, unintentionally birthed one of her most prominent personas in wrestling—Blue Pants, an underdog character inspired by her cosplay style and the simplicity of blue pants, which management and fans alike grew to love.

“Blue Pants was a joke that took off,” she said. “I realized I didn’t pack any workout pants, so I just had to throw on my gear, which were blue pants.”

Later, in All Elite Wrestling (AEW), Bates posed as “The Librarian,” where her book-carrying entrances, conservative attire and humorous crowd-sushing brought a playful twist to the ring.

Aside from those, Bates incorporated cosplay even when performing independently, with her “queen of cosplay” gimmick forging her trendsetter status within wrestling entertainment. Her passion resonated with the profession’s fanbase, opening doors to foster one of her own.

With these highs came lows; however, leading Bates to face both internal and external noises. Behind closed doors, the excitement of each performance was

sometimes overshadowed by feelings of inadequacy. She contended not only with her opponents in the ring, but also with the persistent voice that often said, “I feel like I’m good, but am I really?”

In the world of entertainment—a place where every step is scrutinized and every mishap is magnified—there was a constant demand for perfection from outsiders.

“It’s not just wrestling, but entertainment in general...it’s a cutthroat business,” Bates said.

In navigating these obstacles, Bates has given up vanity searching and comparing herself to others, emphasizing the significance of self care.

“Just focus on what you can do and grow that, nurture that and stop worrying about everyone else (and the noise on the Internet,” she said.

Looking back on her journey, the now 41-year-old acknowledges that wrestling was not in her original plan.

“It wasn’t like I grew up saying, ‘I’m going to be a wrestler,’” she said. “Even as a kid, I was like, ‘Oh, I want to be an astronaut. No, I want to play an astronaut. I want to be a scientist. No, I want to play a scientist.’”

Throughout the course of her professional life, she has learned that the best paths are not always the ones we set out to follow.

“A lot of where I’ve been was not planned,” Bates said. “It was one of those on the whim (decisions), ‘Sure, I’ll go to wrestling school with you.’”

Bates said she hopes her story inspires others to welcome life’s detours. Her advice? Ride the wave of life and embrace every encounter.

“Even the weirdest opportunity might be the thing to open doors for you,” Bates said.

Bates has found success on her own terms, recently participating in opportunities ranging from independent gigs to performances at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida. She is now fully supporting herself through her greatest passion—performing. For Bates, every role and every stage is a testament to her journey, proving that by welcoming unexpected turns, she has created a life centered on doing what she loves the most.

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Turning *passions* into businesses

Entrepreneur turns her love of cooking into dream job



DOWNTOWN TATION

Story by River Murt
Photos by Nyx Alverson

The family dinner table can be a place where fond childhood memories are made. For AnneMarie Tanner, a Calloway County native, she grew up with a mother who made it a priority to make farm-fresh, home-cooked meals for her family, which instilled a love of cooking and nutrition in Tanner.

As an adult, Tanner shared this love with her friends by cooking delicious and healthy meals to share with them. After her recipes received such a warm reaction, she developed a passion for sharing her knowledge of making fresh, nutritious food with others.

With this philosophy, Tanner opened Fitmeals Murray in 2016, a meal prep and delivery service involving locally sourced ingredients in collaboration with farmers. The goal, in addition to doing the shopping and cooking for you, was to get people off processed foods.

“It was my mission to serve food that was not only

local, seasonal, kind of more natural but also taste great,” Tanner said.

Tanner’s character as a businesswoman began to blossom during college. She started at Murray State in 1996, earning her general education requirements, then transferring to Bluegrass Community and Technical College, where she earned an associate’s degree in business. She then earned a bachelor of arts in design at the University of Kentucky in 1999. In 2020, she earned her master’s in business administration at Midway University.

Tanner began her first business out of necessity while attending the University of Kentucky. As she was studying design, an area in which the thin job market worried her, she applied herself as the commodity—the service to the need. She started with the \$75 she had and printed business cards, putting them in the mailboxes of all the professors on campus.

// I LOVE THE CREATION. I LOVE THE SYSTEM, THE PEOPLE AND THE PROCESSES. THOSE ARE MY NICHE. //

- ANNEMARIE TANNER



“I was the organizer,” she said. “I could organize your files...there were a lot of music professors, so I would organize all their music. Things like that because I saw a need, ‘Oh there’s a need, I can do that.’”

Tanner dedicated about 10 hours a week to her micro-business and soon found her income growing. She said this gave her a moment of realization that she was more than capable of managing her own business.

LeAnn Darnell, a lifetime friend, praises Tanner. They became friends in the second grade at the Murray Elementary School and have worked together in the following years and since then Tanner is one of the hardest-working women she knows.

“AnneMarie is an entrepreneur at heart,” Darnell said. “She has the ability to turn what some would see as coal, into a diamond.”

Since her time at the University of Kentucky, Tanner has only grown her history of enterprising. For the last three years, she has worked as the owner of Paris Station, a historic downtown building in Paris, Tennessee, which she preserved as a restaurant and brewery.

“I love the creation,” Tanner said. “I love the systems, the people and the processes. Those are my niche.”

Tanner said she excels by making businesses feel like a creative process, from the design aspects to the customers and the numbers that go into it. For her, it’s a puzzle she can complete.

And the process of creating that diamond can be just as rewarding as the diamond itself.

“For some people, it’s the dream to turn their passion into a business,” Tanner said. “For me, my passion is creating the business.”

Tanner and her husband, Matt Tanner, have been together for 16 years. He has worked as a helicopter pilot, race car driver and Army flight surgeon. Matt Tanner currently works in the business with AnneMarie and is a medical science liaison.

Matt described his wife as a supportive and loving partner. He talks about his wife with pride. He said being together with AnneMarie is the most important thing in the world to him

and their relationship only continues to grow stronger and deeper as they continue to work together.

“She has a large reservoir of tenacity, resilience and grit, which is part of our success,” Matt Tanner said. “Paris Station is such a large project ... so it requires grit and perseverance, even during the times when we had no money, when we couldn’t make deadlines and when we generally failed. We continued to solve problems and invest in our talent, and it has pulled us this far.”

AnneMarie Tanner said the biggest challenge she faces is finding where she fits in the world. She said in the past she felt she was hard to employ, and that she didn’t tick the boxes that businesses or employers wanted. Her interests vary and range far, so much that she and Matt occasionally sit down and wonder what daring, thrilling or adventurous thing they’d like to do next. AnneMarie thinks about what makes sense in her “story,” and the sense of what she ought to do. But in her story, AnneMarie Tanner doesn’t seem to suffer from imposter syndrome.

In her story, AnneMarie Tanner carries a family legacy, one that doesn’t allow her to doubt herself. Looking back at her ancestors being moved out of the Land Between the Lakes area, she doesn’t hesitate at a challenge. She thought of her father who immigrated here, her mother-in-law who immigrated here, neither speaking English, and the latter starting her own business. With this history in her blood, she’s so inspired by this success. If they could succeed, then how could she not?

“If I lost the home and everything, I can be happy and okay ... knocking on that next door and saying ‘I’m ready to work,’ and I can be able to work. ... I can humble myself to know I can mop floors, I can clean toilets, I can do anything to get to the next phase,” she said. “Starting over doesn’t scare me anymore.”

First page: Paris Station is located in a historic building in downtown Paris, Tennessee.

Second page: AnneMarie Tanner sits in her restaurant.



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KENNETH HURT

Always uplifting others

Kenneth Hurt believes in lifting up others on the climb to success. It's what has fueled him in his decades of service to his country and to his community, and it's what earned him the African American Heritage Lifetime Achievement Award from Murray State University in spring 2024.

"I was just so pleased to receive (the award)," Hurt said. "I'm very proud to have it, and I didn't ever think I would get an award like that."

Hurt's lifetime of achievement began in 1973 with his graduation from Lane College with a bachelor of science in business. Afterward, he worked in railroad transportation and freight traffic, specializing in communication with train crews and dispatchers. He worked for railroad transportation for 10 years until he landed a new job with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in 1987 as a revenue officer.

Hurt said being responsible for collecting the taxes that people owed was "not for the faint of heart," seeing as the task often came with bad news or the seizing of assets.

"I always worked with people," Hurt said. "I was able to come up with an agreement that the taxpayer could live with and the government could live with so

they could go on about their business and I could close their case. I did that for about 30 years."

During his time working for the IRS, Hurt was the first African American revenue officer in western Kentucky. He eventually climbed the ranks to supervisory revenue officer, where he was once again the first African American to hold the position.

After Hurt retired from the IRS in 2017, he started his own firm, Hurt's Consulting, where he continues to help taxpayers resolve their financial issues.

"What I do is consult people with tax issues relative to tax liabilities that they may or may not owe, and I help people to resolve their tax liability problems with the government," Hurt said. "I love to help people with their tax problems, if they have one, and (we) try to get to the bottom of it. I stay pretty busy with that."

Around the same time that Hurt began his career with the IRS, he joined the Naval Reserve in 1986, where he served as a data processor and information technology (IT) specialist, responsible for the maintenance of the Navy's computers and technology. While being a Navy reservist, he traveled all over the world, visiting various countries.

"The thing about the Navy Reserve, a military re-

“ IT’S NOT WHERE YOU START OR HOW YOU START (THAT MATTERS), IT’S WHAT YOU WANT TO BECOME, AND YOU CAN BE ANYTHING THAT YOU WANT TO BE. ”

-KENNETH HURT



serve, is when there's a war, sometimes you have to go to war. So, when the World Trade Towers were blown up in 2001, I found myself in the Middle East," Hurt said.

During his deployment in the Middle East following 9/11, Hurt pursued his master of business administration (MBA) degree in quantitative financial controls through Murray State.

"I was finishing up my MBA and did some of the coursework online while I was in a war zone. I got back in July and (graduated) in December of 2002," Hurt said.

Hurt retired from the Navy Reserve in 2011. At the time of his retirement, he had worked his way up to the title of IT chief and had served his country for 25 years.

Aside from his career pursuits, Hurt became the president of the graduate chapter of his fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, in 2006. Hurt joined in 1970, and he has remained an active member, having recently received his 50-year pin in 2020. On Nov. 17, 2021, he was presented with the Certificate of Omega Man of the Year 2022. Hurt said he enjoys helping others through the efforts of the fraternity, where the members focus on helping others in college with their mentoring program, awarding scholarships and promoting voter registration.

"We try to uplift others as we climb," Hurt said.

His community service efforts have also extended beyond his time in Omega Psi Phi. He is particularly active in McCracken County, where he was a mentor for youth from 1996 to 2000. He is still a juvenile volunteer counselor at the McCracken County Juvenile Facility and serves on the Foster Care Review Board. Additionally, he has been involved with the Red Cross, where he was a disaster volunteer from 2001 to 2010 and helped with blood drive delivery from 2017 to 2019.

Hurt's efforts and resolve to help others have been felt by those around him as well. Robert Hargrove and

Winfred Nunn, close associates of Hurt, are familiar with his contributions, which include serving as president of his fraternity, avidly attending church and being an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

"His tireless efforts to help fund and administer scholarships to Paducah's youth cannot be (diminished)," Hargrove said. "Each year, through golf tournaments, talent shows and essay contests, Ken helps to ensure that the financial support for our scholarship is met.

"Ken has that thing called tenacity laced with a taste of perseverance. When there is a task to be accomplished, just get Ken involved and you can rest assured that the job will be completed timely. Ken has the attitude that if it can be done, he can do it."

Nunn said he especially appreciates Hurt's contributions to the African American community and Black youth.

"He has tried to help people, young African Americans, to get into college," Nunn said. "He is a pretty well-rounded guy who has achieved for himself and would like for others to do what he's done. He likes to inspire people to reach their greater heights."

On receiving the African American Heritage Lifetime Achievement Award, Hurt expressed gratitude to Lane College and Murray State, where he received his two degrees and participated in his fraternity. He said both colleges helped him achieve his goals and aspirations.

Hurt offered some words of encouragement to others with big dreams.

"It's not where you start or how you start (that matters), it's what you want to become, and you can be anything that you want to be," Hurt said. "Whether that's managing lots of people or being a neurosurgeon or being an astronaut, the sky's the limit on whatever you want to be."



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Harmonizing life in music, teaching, and family and passion



Story by Sam Hunter
Photos provided by Steven Page

Steven Page, a dedicated music educator and beloved director, is making waves not just in the classroom but throughout the music community. With 26 years of experience, Page has cultivated a reputation for fostering talent and building lasting relationships with his students.

“I want my students to know that I care about them as individuals,” Page said. “It’s not just about their performance in band or choir; I’m invested in their entire lives.”

A 1998 graduate, Page spent his five years at Murray State involved with the Racer Band, while majoring in music education. His passion for teaching has never waned, even as he juggles numerous responsibilities—including directing, judging competitions and spending time with his family.

His daily routine is nothing short of hectic. Rising at 5:20 a.m., he prepares breakfast for his family before leaving for school at 6:40 a.m. After teaching, he often drives a bus route and visits local schools to provide feedback on their marching band rehearsals. This season alone, he has attended 29 rehearsals at nine different schools.

Page said he tries to never let an opportunity pass by.

“If there’s an extra hour, I’ll fill it,” Page said. “Whether it’s running or sneaking in a quick date with

my wife, Shana, I make it happen.”

As he looks back on his journey, Page acknowledges the importance of balance in his life. While burnout is a concern for many educators, it has not been for Steven.

“I’ve never felt burned out because music education isn’t just my job; it’s part of who I am,” Page said. “My relationship with Shana also keeps me grounded.”

Shana agrees, highlighting the couple’s connection as a source of strength.

“We prioritize time together, and we genuinely enjoy each other’s company,” Shana said.

Page said he feels fortunate for Shana’s support, citing her as the person that helps him keep balance.

“Teaching is just one aspect of my life, not the main thing,” Page said. “I have a great relationship with Shana, and maintaining balance helps me stay energized and passionate.”

Despite the demands of teaching, Page emphasizes the importance of fundamentals in music education.

“I focus on developing individual players rather than just group success,” Page said.

Page’s influence extends beyond his classroom; he has also earned opportunities to judge band competitions across the country. He began this journey in 2002 and has built a strong reputation in the music community.



First page: The Page family poses for a family photograph.
Top: Steven takes a walk with his wife Shana, who he says is his biggest supporter.
Bottom Right: Page conducts a marching band competition.



“I’ve just tried to keep doing good work, and people keep asking me back,” he said.

Page had a phenomenal start with music going back to his college days. John Fannin, who directed the band at Murray State from 1995 to 2020, recalls Page as an exceptional student.

“He actively contributed to class discussions and formulated strong philosophies and ideas,” Fannin said. “He wasn’t someone who did the bare minimum. He participated in everything—from the marching band to jazz ensemble and pep band—demonstrating his enthusiasm and eagerness to engage.”

As he continues to inspire students and fellow educators alike, Page remains a testament to the power of dedication and love for music education. Fannin said he always believed Page was destined for a successful career in music education.

“His commitment was evident; he marched with

a professional Drum and Bugle Corps, and there was never any doubt about his career path. I always knew exactly what he was destined to do,” Fannin said.

With a family background steeped in music—his mother, Nancy Page, was a respected band director—Page’s journey was strongly influenced from an early age.

“Steven’s early exposure to music education through his mother and his trombone teacher, Ray Conklin, set a solid foundation for his future,” Fannin said.

Page’s journey shows that it’s possible to thrive in both personal and professional spheres with passion, hard work and a supportive network.

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Story by Sam Hunter
Photos by Kristopher Fister

Rooted in *Blue & Gold*

England carries a family legacy

Carlie England's journey at Murray State represents more than academic pursuit; it embodies a family legacy of connection, community and Racer pride.

As a biology major on the pre-dental track with minors in chemistry and business administration, England is following in the footsteps of her mother, a 1999 Murray State alumna. Raised as a Murray State fan, England grew up immersed in the campus environment. However, it wasn't until later in high school that she chose to attend Murray State over the larger Southeastern Conference schools she had once considered.

Her mother described her choice as "actually quite surprising." She praised England's wisdom in choosing Murray State, noting that "she made a brilliant financial decision... knowing she's going to have at least four more years of dental school at a larger university."

England's mother always knew her daughter would thrive at Murray State.

"I knew she would do amazing things here," her mother, Mikki Durst said.

The connection to Murray State within England's family runs deep. Durst, was a public relations major and was a highly active student. Her involvement included roles on the Campus Activities Board, as director of the Miss MSU Pageant, and as a Public Relations Student Society of America member. When England competed in the Miss MSU in 2024, it was a nostalgic and full-circle moment for her mother.

"I was the director of Miss Murray State in 1998, and seeing Carlie represent Sigma Chi in Miss MSU 2024 was surreal," Durst said. "It was a great experience for her, and I loved seeing her on stage."

Their shared experiences highlight family pride and deepen the legacy that connects generations of Racers together.

This legacy is also evident in their family's dedication to Murray State's traditions. Durst, who has enjoyed returning for Homecoming, Family Weekend and other campus events, expressed excitement about now attending events she missed during her own time, including Greek Elite, Rock-a-Thon and All Campus Sing.

“Now I’m attending events that I never participated in because I was not part of Greek life,” Durst said. “And it’s been so much fun to see how much effort and planning goes into all of these events.”

England has also immersed herself in these traditions, even serving as the Homecoming chair for her sorority, Alpha Gamma Delta, last year. Her mother, an Alpha Gamma Rho Little Sister, joined England in float-building and reminiscing, an experience England described as “special,” as it allowed them to bond over shared experiences and see how things have evolved at Murray State.

As Durst reflected on her own Murray State journey, she said she cannot emphasize enough how important the lifelong connections that students build are.

“The connections you make at Murray State with other students, faculty and staff last a lifetime,” Durst said. “I had no idea that I was networking for my future career while I was in college.”

This sentiment is one England has taken to heart, as she has become deeply involved in Greek Life, the Student Government Association and other organizations that allow her to forge similar connections. For England, Murray State feels like an extension of home.

Her mother described the campus community as “welcoming to all” and supportive of students’ academic and personal growth. Durst shared while she believes it’s a parent’s responsibility to instill proper morals, Murray State creates an environment that “encourages students to be outstanding academically and involved on campus.”

This environment has allowed England to pursue her passions and take on leadership roles, a journey her mother believes has enriched her daughter’s college experience.

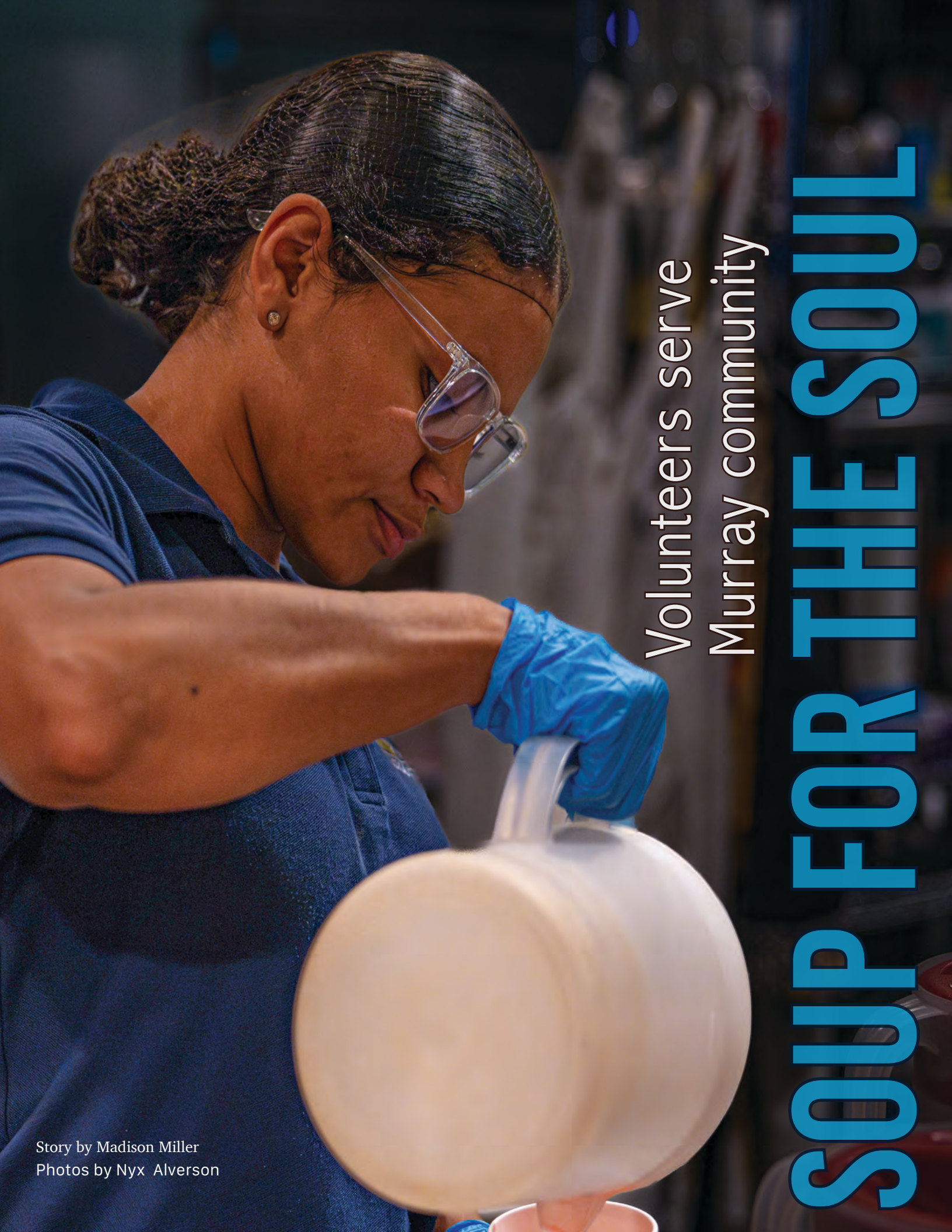
Reflecting on her family’s legacy, England said she knows she will carry her Racer pride well beyond her time on campus. Inspired by her mother’s advice, she has focused on making the most of every moment at Murray State. Her mother’s words echo as England works toward her goals.

“It’s more than an education at Murray State,” England said. “You get the tools to succeed professionally, a network of classmates and professors to rely on and friendships that will last a lifetime.”

Both mother and daughter agree that Murray State has shaped them into the people they are today, and England hopes to pass along the same love for the campus and its traditions to future generations.



All Photos: England and Durst pose at spots around Murray State’s campus, including the Quad and the steps of Lovett Auditorium.



Volunteers serve
Murray community

SOUP FOR THE SOUL

Story by Madison Miller
Photos by Nyx Alverson



As I step through the doors of Soup for the Soul, the warmth in the air isn't just from the simmering pots of stew but from a shared sense of purpose and community.

The smiles of volunteers set the tone—a small crew making a meaningful impact. As I tie my hair back and grab an apron, I quickly feel that being part of this community is less about giving and more about becoming part of something larger, where every bowl and every conversation truly matters.

Founded by Debbie Smith, a three-time cancer survivor, Soup for the Soul was inspired by her first-hand experience of witnessing local hunger in the community. Motivated by gratitude and a desire to give back to her community, Debbie posted on Facebook calling for support to start a soup kitchen. The response was immediate, and with the community's help, she built Soup for the Soul into a registered nonprofit organization. Since 2015, it has been a haven in Murray, Kentucky, providing free, hot meals to anyone in need—no questions asked.

On average, they serve between 60-80 individuals a night. In 2023 alone, Soup for the Soul served nearly 16,000 meals.

However, the goals of Soup for the Soul go beyond offering a meal.

“Our mission is to serve the hungry of our

community by sharing the love of God through giving food for the body, kindness for the soul and hope for the future,” according to Soup for the Soul's website.

They achieve their mission through local partnerships, working hand-in-hand with local organizations to provide support for many in the community.

“If somebody reaches out to us and it stays within our goals, mind, body and soul, then they can come in and be a partner with us,” said Chairmember Noraa Ramsey.

One standout effort is the Summer Lunch and Literacy program, which ensures children who rely on school meals have access to food, snacks, and books during the summer. Ramsey, a teacher at North Calloway Elementary, has been involved since the program's inception.

“They brought me in because they knew they wanted to help kids more, but they didn't know how to reach them if their parents couldn't drive,” Ramsey said.

What started as a program serving 75 children now supports over 400 annually.

When I arrived, the preparation crew had already started cooking dinner for the night. Tonight, we were serving taco soup, rice, corn chips and fruit cocktails.

The ladies volunteering mentioned it was an





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First page: Volunteer ____ pours beverages into cups for meal service.

Full page: A local man picks up a box of dinner from Soup for the Soul.

Above: Student practical nurses from West Kentucky Technical community college volunteer in the kitchen.

Right: Volunteers box up multiple dinner boxes.

easy night for meal prep, which came as a relief with only three of them able to make it to the kitchen. The volunteer crews rotate by organization, each taking a specific shift, and tonight's team from St. Leo's Catholic Church handles every fifth Wednesday. Despite their dedication, it's not uncommon for teams to run short-handed, especially in the years since the pandemic.

"After that time, it was tough getting all our volunteers back," Morgan said. "Many of our longtime servers returned, but we also had to build entirely new teams. It changed a lot for us."

Volunteer Coordinator Debbie Farley said that they are lucky to have always had exceptional and compassionate volunteers.

"They're so giving, they genuinely want to be here and help. Sometimes you think there aren't many people like that anymore, but being here has shown me there are so many in this community who truly care," Farley said.

With the meal nearly ready, I joined Morgan to transfer the steaming soup from the large cooking pot to the serving pans. Tonight, we had prepared about seven gallons—enough to fill dozens of bowls.

The kitchen soon became a well-coordinated assembly line of scooping, passing and packing as we loaded boxes, each containing a hot meal to be passed out through a drive-through window outside. Clients

would pick up their box from the window and, if they wished, bring it inside to eat.

As we packed the first set of boxes, clients began to trickle into the dining room. Soon, it was time for the second crew to take over. With five volunteers on shift this time, serving went smoothly, and the air filled with a gentle buzz of conversation.

Looking around, I didn't just see a group of hungry people—I saw individuals from all walks of life, each with their own perspectives. They had come here out of necessity, but many had stayed for the sense of belonging that filled the room. Tonight, Soup for the Soul wasn't just serving food; it was creating a place where people could gather, connect and find comfort in the simple act of sharing a meal together.

An older gentleman, whose name I didn't catch, sat at one of the booths. He's the kind of person whose presence suggested a lifetime of stories. I had the chance to sit with him and ask about his connection with the kitchen.

"My experience with the kitchen started when they first opened," he said. "I'd usually drop by on a Friday after work, pick up a meal and make a donation because I thought it was a really kind thing. In 2014, my wife—she suffered from dementia—had to move into a nursing home. After that, I didn't feel like cooking for myself, so this place became a real blessing. When I retired, money wasn't always available for eating out,

and the kitchen was here for me. I've enjoyed it, not just for the meals, but for the camaraderie and witnessing life here."

Another client I spoke with started coming after a fire destroyed her home. As I looked around, I noticed families with young children, seniors and individuals with disabilities—all of whom were deeply grateful for the warmth of a hot meal.

Chitra Solomon, a volunteer, said she's learned so much from the clients, adopting their gratitude into her own life.

"I feel there's so much more to learn from them," Solomon said. "They smile, they appreciate everything and are thankful even for the smallest gestures."

My time at Soup for the Soul gave me a new perspective on the strength of the Murray community and the quiet resilience of those who gather here.

Soup for the Soul's work would not be possible without donations from community members.

"Our most pressing and continual need is finances," Morgan said. "We're so grateful for the support we receive, whether it's monthly donations, year-end contributions, or even a check dropped off unexpectedly. Many also give through our website, and every bit helps us keep going."

Morgan's words echoed in my mind as I looked around at the bustling kitchen and the dedicated team of volunteers. It was clear that every donation, no matter the size, played a vital role in sustaining the mission of Soup for the Soul.

As the evening came to a close and the last pot was scrubbed, I felt a deep satisfaction in my soul—not only from helping but from being part of a place where generosity and connection are served as often as the food itself.





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