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Welcome to this year's edition of 20 Over 50! After last year's astounding success of honoring outstanding citizens over the age of 50, we decided to keep that age category another year. The community did not disappoint! The nominations flowed in and we yet again have a stellar lineup for our annual magazine. The 20 local individuals in the pages that follow are those who have made big contributions to Hope and Hempstead County, and they have had a significant impact in our community. The people featured in this magazine exemplify the very definition of the word "visionary" and prove that any goal is attainable. There were even three married couples who had nominations for both husband and wife, so we featured these power couples together as a further testament to the merit of teamwork. Because as you will see throughout this publication, these extraordinary citizens share many of the same vital attributes like compassion, dedication, perseverance, heart, and so much more, all in the name of service. Each and every one has made a difference in the lives of those who live in Hope and Hempstead County and know that to truly be a champion of change, we all must work together for the greater good. We may be a small town, but we have big dreams. And these 20 Over 50 know how to make those dreams come true.

20 OVER 50

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Charlotte Bradley



*Service-driven leader
who gives back*

Charlotte Bradley is preparing for her upcoming retirement from Hope Water & Light (HWL) after nearly 38 years of dedicated service. Since starting her journey with the utility company, Bradley has exemplified what it means to lead with dedication, steadily advancing to eventually serve as Co-General Manager. Her career is not just a testament to professional growth, but a masterclass in community stewardship.

Bradley first joined HWL as a customer service representative. “It’s not just a job; it’s a career,” Bradley reflects. “It is all in how you see it and how you treat it.” Her commitment to growth led her from customer service to executive secretary, a pivotal role that broadened her understanding of the utility company’s operations and deepened her connection to the public. Driven to expand her expertise, Bradley pursued higher education, eventually earning two master’s degrees, in business and accounting from Texas A&M University-Texarkana, along with professional HR certifications from HRCI and SHRM. This academic foundation propelled her through several key leadership roles, culminating in her appointment as Co-General Manager in 2020.

Beyond her professional responsibilities at HWL, Bradley’s influence extends far into the civic fabric of Hope and the surrounding region. She has served in numerous leadership capacities, including president of the Southwest Arkansas Arts Council, president of the United Way, and president of the Chamber of Commerce Board.

Her dedication to education is evident in her work with the University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana (UAHT) Foundation Board, the Arkansas Single Parent Scholarship Fund, and her current role on the UAHT Board of Visitors. On a state level, Bradley received gubernatorial appointments to the Task Force for Excellence in Education and the Arkansas Board of Electrical Examiners, where she served as chair. Currently, she also serves as the Lieutenant Governor of Division 23 for Kiwanis and president of the Texarkana Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Bradley’s extensive civic involvement is fueled by a deeply personal philosophy. “I always like to think of myself as an individual who has a servant heart,” she shares. “Based on my belief in God and my belief in community, I feel that if you can give back, you should give back. God has blessed me so that I can be a blessing to others. If not me, then who? Somebody has to volunteer to make a difference.” This ethos has seamlessly aligned with HWL’s corporate values. “Hope Water & Light has been a blessing to me and my family,” she notes. “The utility strongly believes in community involvement, and that starts at the commission level.”

As Bradley prepares to retire at the end of the year, she looks forward to traveling and spending time with her grandchild. While her daily presence at Hope Water & Light will be missed, the incredible foundation she has built over nearly four decades of service will continue to benefit the community for years to come.

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Helen Byers

Across Hope and Hempstead County, the name Helen Byers is recognized as a mainstay of compassion, having dedicated an extraordinary 48 years to lifting up the most vulnerable in her community. Her remarkable legacy is defined by two equal chapters: 24 years at the Rainbow of Challenges (ROC) and 24 years leading the Hope In Action shelter.

Helen's journey began in 1978 at ROC, working in the sheltered workshop under Helen Bearden. It was here she embraced a vital philosophy: "We must focus on what the clients want for themselves, not what we think they want." This principle of respecting independence guided Helen as she worked one-on-one with clients, managed the office, and coordinated 22 legendary trips. To give her clients experiences they had never had, Helen organized journeys to Branson, Dallas, Dollywood, and Washington, D.C., where she arranged a tour of the White House. "I wanted them to experience things they never thought possible," Helen recalls. "I truly loved being there and working with the clients."

During her tenure at ROC, Helen was also instrumental in the creation and opening of the Melon Patch. This restaurant would allow clients to learn the skills needed in the workforce while also serving as a unique eatery for the community. The Melon Patch Restaurant remains a beloved staple of Hope, Arkansas, and this local gem continues to be a highly recommended spot for anyone seeking authentic Southern home cooking, most notably its popular fried chicken and down-home lunches.

In August 2002, feeling a clear calling, Helen retired from ROC and stepped into her next chapter at Hope In Action. She and her husband moved directly into the shelter and lived there for a time to oversee daily operations. Under Helen's watch, the facility has served as a critical safety net for Hempstead County, offering hot meals and lodging to those in need. "We are here to provide a safe place, food to eat, and a real chance," Helen explains. "What individuals do with that opportunity is up to them, but our mission is simply to give them that chance."

Running a shelter can be challenging, and success is not always visible. Yet, Helen remains anchored by moments of profound transformation. She remembers recently running into a former resident at Walmart who stopped to share her success. The woman proudly told Helen that her life was restored, that she had finished her college degree, and was working for the state. Helen returned to the shelter with tears in her eyes, sharing the encounter with her colleague, Craig Tomlinson. "This is exactly why we are out here," Helen says. "If just one life is touched and turned around, every single day of effort is worth it."

A local resident since early childhood, Helen's deep connection to her community is highly personal. She resides in her childhood family home, carrying on a legacy of care. Her decades of work at Hope In Action have given her a unique window into the challenges her neighbors face, strengthening her resolve to continue serving.

Ultimately, Helen's legacy is not recorded in awards, but in the countless quiet acts of kindness that have defined her nearly half-century of service. Through her unwavering commitment at ROC and her tender stewardship at Hope In Action, Helen remains a beacon of grace, reminding her community of the transformative power of love and a second chance.



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Gary Chambless



*Cornerstone of
Local Hospitality*

When local residents look back at the golden era of dining in Hope, the conversation inevitably turns to Western Sizzlin. The restaurant served as the center of community life, serving as the primary meeting spot where all the local civic clubs gathered. Whether families were celebrating Mother's Day, congregating for Sunday lunch after church, or enjoying a Friday night fish dinner, it was always the place to be. Even decades later, people in Hempstead County fondly talk about the outstanding service and iconic menu items like the sirloin tips, the Philly cheesesteak sandwiches, and, of course, the famous buffet.

Gary's path to becoming a restaurant legend began in 1967 at Perry's Truck Stop, where he filled up trucks and eventually transitioned to working in the restaurant. When the interstate bypass altered the truck stop's business, Gary spent nine years teaching school in Laneburg. However, his former employer, Perry, never lost sight of Gary's potential and continuously offered him opportunities to return to the hospitality business. When Perry and a partner named James Vess decided to build a Best Western motel with a restaurant beside it (Western Sizzlin), Gary received an offer he could not refuse: a one-third partnership. Gary resigned from teaching, moved back to Hope, and prepared for the next great chapter of his life.

Western Sizzlin officially opened its doors on January 30, 1984. The immediate success of the restaurant demanded relentless effort from the partners. By Valentine's Day, Gary had worked from daylight until closing, seven days a week for two straight weeks. Hoping to catch a break, he planned a quiet family supper at the restaurant with his wife, Pat, and their sons, Matt and Jason. Instead, they arrived to find the building completely packed with hungry customers. With people everywhere, the dinner plans transformed into a full family effort; everyone rolled up their sleeves to wash trays and serve guests, solidifying the restaurant's reputation as a dedicated family affair. This hands-on collaboration continued over the years as Pat and both sons helped with the business.

Over the next twenty-four years, Gary poured his heart into the business, eventually buying out their partner, James. He credited much of his growth to Perry, who taught him how to overcome his natural shyness. "I was so shy back then that I couldn't even talk to people," Gary recalls. "I had to carry a pot of coffee around just to have an excuse to pour a cup and chat. But once I got started, I realized how much I truly loved being around everyone." Over time, that shyness faded entirely, replaced by a deep connection with the public he served. "I just enjoyed being around people and loved what I did," Gary says. "Whether we were serving the regular crowd or hosting a big party, seeing everything come together properly for our guests was incredibly rewarding." His wife, Pat, eventually retired from her job at Meyer's Bakery to support the growing venture and travel with him during their well-earned breaks.

After selling the restaurant, Gary transitioned into a very active semi-retirement on Chambless Farms in De Ann, located on the historic land where his family once lived. While he enjoys the farm, Gary still owns the Hampton Inn and Holiday Inn Express hotels in Hope. Today, he channels his passion for public service into key leadership roles, serving on the boards of both the Historic Washington Foundation and the Hempstead County Economic Development Corporation. Although his restaurant days are behind him, Gary's legacy of warmth, hospitality, and community connection continues to leave an enduring impact on the people of Hope.



Dixie Coffee

If there is a common thread running through the life of Dixie Coffee, it may be that she never does anything halfway. Whether helping run an optometry practice, organizing church programs, launching a preschool, supporting foster children or teaching Mahjong, Dixie has a habit of finding something worthwhile and diving in completely.

Born in Memphis and raised in Covington, Tennessee, Dixie attended Memphis State University before taking a technician course at Southern College of Optometry. There she met a senior optometry student named Bill Coffee.

"I met him in August, we were engaged in November, and married in March," she said with a laugh. The quick decision worked out well. The couple celebrated their 54th wedding anniversary this year.

After three years of Navy life in North Carolina, they returned to Bill's hometown of Hope, where Dixie spent more than 40 years working alongside her husband in the clinic they built on South Main Street. "Some couples say they can't work well together," she said. "We made a good team. He did his job, and I did mine."

While serving as office manager, she somehow found time for side ventures. She organized school and church fundraisers, helping groups raise thousands of dollars through pizza sales. Later she entered the catering business, preparing meals for weddings and special events across Southwest Arkansas. "One of my favorite hobbies is cooking," she said. "I'm the happiest, probably, when I'm in that kitchen cooking for somebody."

Her commitment to children and education became another defining part of her life. At what was then First United Methodist Church, she helped establish what became a long-running preschool program, eventually adding classes for younger children and kindergarten students. Today, many former preschool students have children and even grandchildren who attended the same program. Dixie also served on the Hope Public Schools Board and worked with countless church youth activities through the years.

After retirement, she turned her attention to helping foster children and their parents with bedding, diapers, toys, food and other supplies by bringing The CALL to Southwest Arkansas. She spent years recruiting support, speaking in churches and developing fundraising ideas such as the annual Souper Sunday soup fundraiser. "I don't like to make an impression," Dixie said. "I like to make an impact."

Of course, retirement has also brought a new hobby. A year and a half ago, she decided to learn Mahjong. Predictably, she didn't stop at learning it. She began teaching it. A lot of teaching it. "I have taught many, many people now," she said.

Mahjong is a centuries-old Chinese tile game that rewards strategy, concentration and a willingness to learn what sometimes seems like an endless list of rules. The game has become so popular with Dixie and her circle that she now plays in Hope, Texarkana and Dallas, while teaching family members, friends and newcomers along the way.

Then again, anyone who knows Dixie Coffee probably isn't surprised. Whether it's raising money, raising children, raising support for foster families or raising the local Mahjong IQ, she has always been all in.



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Jesus Coronado



To protect & serve

Twenty-five years ago, Jesus Coronado embarked on his career in law enforcement with a focus on protecting those who cannot protect themselves. Since joining the department in 2001, he has progressed through key roles like patrol officer, investigator, and sergeant, before stepping into his current leadership position as Lieutenant over Patrol. His legacy is defined by his deep investigative expertise, quiet leadership, and a lifelong commitment to the safety of the citizens of Hope.

Protecting others has been Jesus's goal since childhood, when he first dreamed of helping people, especially children. This early aspiration shaped his career, leading him to spend eighteen years in the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) specializing in cases involving minors. Even as he manages patrol today, his passion for investigations remains. "My goal has always been to learn as much as possible and keep progressing my education in crime scenes and investigations," Jesus says, reflecting on the decades he spent honing his skills to serve those in need.

His meticulous work as the HPD lead investigator on the high school arson case stands out as a major milestone. Arriving at the scene, Jesus noticed crucial physical evidence, swabbing blood samples, securing fingerprints, and capturing photographs. His thorough fieldwork laid the foundation for a highly successful joint investigation with the State Police. Following a rigorous interrogation in Dallas alongside investigator Scott Clark, the suspect confessed. For his exceptional work,

Jesus received an official commendation from the State Police, a milestone he remembers as a deeply proud moment in his career.

During his time in CID, Jesus also secured a major conviction in a highly sensitive case involving the protection of young victims. His detailed investigation and careful collection of evidence brought resolution to the families involved. The offender was found guilty on all counts, receiving a landmark sentence of two hundred and fifty years. For Jesus, securing justice in cases of this magnitude represents the very core of his dedication to protecting the vulnerable.

Jesus's community dedication extends far beyond his law enforcement duties. He plays a vital role in organizing the Santa Cop program, raising essential funds to ensure children in need can experience the joy of Christmas. He also hosts the annual Back the Blue for Santa Cop softball tournament, which recently celebrated its fifth year and is held in memory of his late colleague, Jeff Neal. "The more money I can raise, the happier I get because that means we can buy more for these kids," Jesus explains.

Behind his decades of success is the strong foundation of his family. "My wife has been my foundation and my soulmate for over twenty-two years," Jesus shares. "Sharing our faith journey together at Unity Church is my ultimate blessing, and having her by my side makes everything I do in the community worthwhile." Through his dedicated work on patrol, his investigative achievements, and his charitable efforts, Jesus continues to make Hope, Arkansas a safer place.



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Carol Ann Duke

Dr. Carol Ann Duke has always believed that education is about opening doors for students. As Director of Magnet Programs for Hope Public Schools, Dr. Duke oversees initiatives that bring new learning opportunities to students across the district. But her commitment to education began long before she arrived in Hope.

Born at Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina, Dr. Duke moved with her family to Texarkana as an infant when her father, a dentist, purchased a practice there. Growing up, she discovered a love of reading and learning at an early age.

“My sister went to kindergarten and came home and taught me how to read,” she said. “I never picked up another Barbie. I’ve always had a book in my hand since then.”

That early experience helped shape a lifelong calling. Dr. Duke’s career has taken her through a variety of educational roles. She taught English, worked as a school counselor, served in higher education, trained teachers across the country and even worked with initiatives connected to the Gates Foundation and the Southern Regional Education Board. Along the way, she developed expertise in literacy instruction and career and technical education.

The desire to see policy adjusted on a larger scale eventually drew her into educational leadership. “That’s really when I got the bug to get out of the counselor’s office and move into administration and be able to really impact all students,” Dr. Duke said.

Ten years ago, she returned to Hope when the district launched the Hope Academy of Public Service. Starting with little more than a building, a team of educators and a vision, Dr. Duke helped establish the program from the ground up. “They gave me this chair and a key to the door, and told me to go make a school,” she recalled.

Today, she leads the district’s magnet initiatives, helping teachers develop innovative programs and experiences for students. Among the opportunities supported through the federal magnet grant are digital cinema, robotics, drama, STEAM activities, expanded programming and career-focused pathways. “We’ve been able to bring experiences to students that they might not have otherwise had,” she said.

Despite moving into a district-level role, Dr. Duke remains focused on students and relationships. “School is not just a place to come to learn,” she said. “It’s a place to come and be accepted and explore your own interests and your own future and your own goals.”

Outside of her job, Dr. Duke remains active in the community through church activities, the Hope-Hempstead County Chamber of Commerce Leadership Group and various local service efforts. She and her husband also support numerous educational and youth-focused programs.

Dr. Duke is optimistic about Hope Public Schools and the programs that have been developed during the life of the magnet grant, which expires after next year. “I’m excited,” she said. “The programs that we’ve started won’t go away. Those things will continue to be opportunities for our students.”

For Dr. Duke, that continued investment in students is what matters most. She remains inspired by the opportunities that schools create and the potential she sees in every young person who walks through the doors.



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Dr. Don Freel



*Civic leader serving
with cheer*

At an age when many might have long since stepped away from public life, Dr. Don Freel remains one of Hope's most recognizable and engaged citizens. A retired optometrist, military veteran, civic club leader and devoted volunteer, Dr. Freel has spent decades investing his time, talents, energy and buoyant good cheer into making Hope and Hempstead County a place that feels like home.

His remarkable story began nearly a century ago. Born in Texarkana in the Spring of 1935, Dr. Freel's path took him through military service in Korea, professional training in optometry, and eventually to Hope, where he would build both a successful practice and a lifetime of community service. After serving with the U.S. Army's 11th Evacuation Hospital in South Korea from 1959 to 1961, he returned to Texas to practice optometry before making what would become a life-changing decision: relocating to Hope.

What started as a profession quickly became something more. "My recollection of the good life in Southwest Arkansas and being close to Texarkana drew me out of Dallas," Dr. Freel, whose family had southwest Arkansas roots, said.

After arriving in Hope in 1965, Dr. Freel purchased an existing optometry practice and began what would become a distinguished career helping thousands of area residents preserve and improve their vision. Dr. Freel's work indeed extended beyond the walls of his offices on South Main. For years, he provided eye care for students at the Arkansas School for the Blind.

One of the organizations that became especially important to him was the Hope Lions Club. An early invitation to a meeting grew into a lifelong commitment. Since 1965, Dr. Freel has held virtually every office in the local club and has served as District Governor for Lions Clubs across 17 counties in Southwest Arkansas. He remains deeply involved with the organization today.

Just recently, Dr. Freel spent hours helping prepare catfish for another Hope Lions Club Fish Fry, this one held on the campus of UAHT. The event raised funds for the Hope Charitable Christian Clinic.

Dr. Freel is also very active in community events, attends civic gatherings throughout the county, supports the National Park Service's efforts at Historic Washington State Park and continues encouraging cooperation among churches to help lift local residents in need. "We just need to remember that we're a community," Dr. Freel said. "Hope has always answered the call to help others."

Friends and colleagues often remark on his presence at community coffees, public meetings, concerts, church events, and civic celebrations. For Dr. Freel, staying involved is both a privilege and a responsibility.

"What a blessing it has been to return with enough years under my belt to now have a new gift," Dr. Freel wrote. "At my age, I can walk up to anyone, offer my suggestions or recommendations on what they need to do, and then walk away." In our interview, we shared a laugh about that line.

For more than 60 years, Don Freel has shown community leadership is not measured by titles but by consistent service, genuine compassion, a willingness to show up and a joyful spirit that brings joy to all he meets.



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Deanna Gilbert

Deanna Gilbert has been feeding tasty and nutritious meals to Hope Public School students for nearly four decades. But through her leadership, volunteerism, and unwavering commitment to Hope and Hempstead County, she has also enriched the health of the whole community she proudly serves.

As Director of Nutrition for Hope Public Schools, Deanna has ensured that children and youth have access to healthy meals. Along the way, she has also become a strong advocate for school nutrition, a champion of local agriculture, and a familiar face in many of the organizations and projects that help make Hope a magical place to live. Her remarkable career and continued service make her a fitting selection among SWARK. Today's 20 Over 50 honorees.

Deanna's story began in Crossett, Arkansas, where she was born and raised before moving to Hope after marriage. In 1986, when her youngest daughter entered kindergarten, she accepted a position with Hope Public Schools. What began as a job soon developed into a lifelong calling. "I just love feeding kids," she said. "So many of our kids don't get meals like they should."

Starting as a cook, Deanna advanced to cafeteria manager and eventually to director, a position she has now held for nearly 20 years. Her dedication to professional excellence led her to become a certified director, serve as president of the Arkansas School Nutrition Association, earn Arkansas School Nutrition Director of the Year honors, and receive recognition on the national level as a Southwest Regional Director.

Today, she continues to share her expertise by helping train school nutrition managers throughout Arkansas. Reflecting on her career, Deanna credits mentors Sue Delaney and Brenda Miller for helping shape her path. "They were my bosses when I first started, and they probably shaped me into what I am," she said.

A real heart for service drives her work with Hope Public Schools. Beyond providing meals during the school year, Deanna helps oversee summer feeding programs that continue serving nutrition to children after the spring semester ends. She has also spent years advocating for school nutrition programs at the state and national levels. "I not only love fighting for our kids locally and statewide, but nationally," she said.

What distinguishes Deanna is that her service continues when the school day is over. Her passion for helping others extends outside campus kitchens. She manages the Hope Farmers Market, serves on the Southwest Arkansas Arts Council, participates in the Hempstead County Alliance, supports Farm Bureau Womens Committee educational programs and has volunteered at The Taste of Hope, among other endeavors aimed at lifting the quality of life where she lives. "I love to volunteer," she said. "I just love how downtown's getting revitalized."

Her work with the Farmers Market has continued to grow the Tuesday morning experience for shoppers at The Hub while providing opportunities and a gathering place for local farmers, canners, bakers and helping local organizations to connect with residents when they sponsor the day.

Perhaps Deanna's greatest contribution is the example she sets. Whether she is serving meals, mentoring colleagues, supporting local farmers, organizing community partnerships, or volunteering her time, Deanna approaches every task with enthusiasm, purpose and practicality.

After 40 years of service, Deanna Gilbert remains one of Hope's most dedicated champions. Her legacy can be found in healthier students, stronger community partnerships, thriving local initiatives, and countless lives touched by her generosity and know-how.



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Dr. Dale Goins



Unwavering commitment to community wellness

Dr. Dale Goins has been a familiar and reassuring presence in healthcare across Hempstead County for more than 40 years. Since arriving in Hope in 1980, Dr. Goins has dedicated his career to providing medical care in a rural community, helping patients navigate everything from routine checkups to chronic health challenges while witnessing dramatic changes in medicine along the way.

"I moved here in 1980," Dr. Goins said. "We worked in the old Hempstead County Memorial Hospital until '84 when we built a new hospital, and I've worked with it ever since."

Today, Dr. Goins continues that work through the Southwest Arkansas Rural Health Clinic, where he practices alongside nurse practitioner Tammy Wellman and Dr. George Garrett. His connection to rural healthcare stretches back to 1994, when he became involved with the clinic that would eventually become a cornerstone of local primary care. "In rural health clinics, our goal is to provide services to rural areas, particularly family medicine care," he said.

Over the years, Dr. Goins has seen medicine evolve from relatively simple diagnostic tools and treatments to an era of advanced testing, specialized procedures and rapidly changing technologies. "We can look back and see how simple our medical care was back in the '80s compared to what we're doing now," he said.

Yet despite those changes, he believes the mission remains the same: ensuring local residents have access to quality day-to-day healthcare. One of the efforts he is most proud of extends beyond his regular practice.

In 1998, local physicians and nurse practitioners established the Charitable Christian Medical Clinic, which continues to provide care for uninsured patients. "We provide services for people who have no medical insurance, and that's a very important part for our community," Dr. Goins said. "It allows us to serve without having to worry about the money and the finances."

His commitment to service also includes teaching Sunday school at First Baptist Church and supporting numerous community initiatives over the years.

Away from the clinics, family remains at the center of his life. He and his wife, Brenda, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary this year. Together they have three children, 10 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. "My recreational activities are at home with the children and grandchildren," he said.

When he finds a quiet moment, Dr. Goins enjoys reading science fiction and listening to music that ranges from classical and Christian selections to country favorites. Satellite radio he has found to be a bounty of choices. "You can pull up access to music, and you've got 30 Christian channels, and you've got 40 classical music channels," he said. "You can go to hear all of Bach and all Brahms. That's enjoyable."

For generations of patients and families across Southwest Arkansas, Dr. Goins' steady commitment has been a bounty as well. Through changing hospitals, changing technologies and changing times, he has remained focused on the same goal: caring for his community.

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Claudia Griffin

Whether breaking barriers in civic organizations or developing innovative classroom instruction, Claudia has spent her life finding creative ways to help her community thrive. From teaching in public schools to pioneering state-recognized collegiate programs and stepping into local government, she has left an indelible, positive mark on Hempstead County. Her entire career stands as a testament to the power of creative problem-solving and heartfelt advocacy.

Claudia's career as an educator began with a leap of faith. Hired on the spot to teach math at Yerger Middle School, she quickly proved to be an absolute natural in the classroom. Claudia went on to facilitate Yerger's Gifted and Talented program, where she famously championed experiential and highly innovative learning. "I set that program up, loved it, and sometimes got in trouble because we were too loud," she laughs. Believing in meeting students exactly where they were, she developed creative, hands-on math lessons that truly engaged her classrooms. Her innovative approach worked wonders; many of her former students went on to become successful attorneys, doctors, and even school chancellors.

After teaching at Yerger, Claudia joined the Department of Higher Education to help launch the Career Pathways Initiative at the University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana (UAHT). Recognizing that traditional funding would quickly run out, Claudia pioneered an innovative book loan program. By purchasing textbooks that were recycled semester after semester, she saved thousands of dollars, allowing the program to support vastly more students. Her highly efficient model proved so successful that it eventually became a recognized best practice across Arkansas. "We wanted to give students a real chance to succeed," Claudia notes of the program's massive impact.

Claudia's passion for development extended far beyond youth. She spent years with the Workforce Investment Board, helping establish local workforce centers, and worked with the Green Thumb program to connect older workers with vital jobs and education. Her civic leadership is equally historic. In addition to serving as a dedicated Girl Scout leader, Claudia broke barriers as the first female president of the Hope Lions Club, paving the way for future leaders. Her decades of public service culminated in her recent election to the Hempstead County Quorum Court representing District 1, where she continues to bring her trademark advocacy to her community.

Throughout her journey, Claudia also found deep fulfillment in teaching math to other professionals striving to earn their teaching degrees. "I loved teaching those who were working for their certifications," Claudia says. "It is incredibly rewarding to help the next generation of educators find their footing and passion." By empowering these non-traditional students, she knew she was indirectly impacting thousands of future pupils across Southwest Arkansas.

Ultimately, Claudia's life has been defined by a joyful, lifelong commitment to helping others rise. Whether through innovative classroom lessons, pioneering collegiate programs, or local governance, she remains a powerful advocate for progress and equity, proving that true leadership is about creating opportunities for everyone in Hope to succeed.



*Pioneer for education
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As Medical Director of our Rural Health Clinic, Dr. Goins has dedicated himself to improving the health and well-being of the people of Hempstead County. Thank you for answering the call to serve. Your contributions are deeply appreciated, and your example inspires us all.



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Steve & Mittie Harris



Preserving historic character and local arts

Life after 50 has been no time to slow down for Steve and Mittie Harris. Instead, the couple has continued to invest their talents, experience and energy into strengthening Hope, preserving its downtown, supporting local arts and helping beautify the community they now proudly call home.

Their journey together began more than two decades ago in an unexpected way. While Mittie was living in Bossier City and Steve was living in Nash, Texas, the two met online through Match.com. “We were one of the success stories,” Mittie said with a smile. The relationship grew quickly, and after they married, Mittie moved to Hope, where the couple has since become deeply involved and very visible wherever town improvement is happening.

Before arriving in Hope, both built careers that prepared them for leadership and service. Mittie spent years working in retail, including a position she loved selling fragrances for Dillard’s in Bossier City. Later, she joined the Kansas City Southern Railroad, where she rose into management and traveled extensively. “It was amazing,” she said. “I got to travel, go see our clients and teach them how to use a computer.”

Steve’s career followed a different path but was equally focused on helping communities grow. A graduate of Rhodes College in Memphis with a degree in economics, he has spent much of his professional life working

for state governments, regional organizations and economic development programs in both Texas and Arkansas. Along the way, he also developed subdivisions, built homes and worked in real estate development in communities throughout Texas. His experience eventually led him to serve as an economic development director in both Nash, Texas, and then Hope.

Today, Steve and Mittie continue to put those professional skills to work. Steve serves as president of the Hope Downtown Network, where he has helped continue to improve the looks and the profitability of downtown. In fact, both now live in an upstairs apartment that was once a suite of offices in downtown Hope.

The couple has also invested personally in that area through the renovation and stewardship of other properties. Working together, they have helped breathe new life into buildings while preserving the character that makes the city unique. Mittie has handled much of the design work while Steve focuses on other aspects of development.

Mittie’s community involvement includes supporting the arts. She serves as vice president of the Southwest Arkansas Arts Council and frequently volunteers wherever help is needed. An artist herself, she views creativity as both a personal passion and a way to strengthen the community. Her commitment to service began long before moving to Hope. In Louisiana, she volunteered with United Way and organizations serving children and adults with developmental disabilities. “Those children and people need so much,” she said. “They need education, they need physical help, they need people just to care about them.”

Steve’s record of volunteer leadership is equally impressive. Over the years, he has served with the Hope Rotary Club, Habitat for Humanity, workforce development organizations and professional associations in both Texas and Arkansas. In addition to service to

Hope, Steve manages a 200-acre family tree farm near Spring Hill that includes pine plantations, hardwood forests, wildlife habitat and restoration efforts designed to support quail populations.

Together, Steve and Mittie Harris represent a powerful example of how experience, leadership and a commitment to service can continue creating positive change long after retirement. Whether supporting the arts, revitalizing downtown, conserving natural resources or simply lending a helping hand, they continue to make Hope stronger through their partnership and dedication to community.

It is my pleasure to serve Hempstead County and I appreciate being recognized in this year's 20 Over 50. It is an honor to be a part of this incredible community.

Thank you!
Terrie James

Maurice Henry

Maurice Henry's career with Hope Public Schools is not just a profession, it is a genuine calling. For over four decades, the District Director of Facilities and Transportation has worked tirelessly to ensure that schools run safely, efficiently, and with deep care. His legacy is built on a foundation of hard work, hands-on mentorship, and an unwavering commitment to the community he calls home.

Maurice's story with the school district began in 1982, shortly after graduating from Hope High School and earning an Industrial Maintenance certification at Red River Vocational Technical School. That institution, now known as UAHT, honored his career by naming him its 2019 Outstanding Alumnus of the Year. Starting as an apprentice mechanic and bus driver, Maurice steadily rose through the ranks of the school district. He gained invaluable experience in various roles, including custodial supervisor, crisis management coordinator, and health and safety coordinator, before taking the helm as Director of Facilities and Transportation in 2017.

His dedication has earned him prestigious accolades, including serving as national president of the National School Plant Managers Association (NSPMA) and being named both the 2015 National and 2022 Arkansas Plant Manager of the Year. Beyond leadership honors, Maurice has championed vital improvements. He helped implement the Operation Hero work order system and helped launch the first classes for the Arkansas Facilities Director Certification Program. He also introduced a GPS tracking system called "Here Comes the Bus" to allow parents to locate school buses in real time, and served on the 2003 state task force that established safety and facility standards across Arkansas.

Maurice's influence extends far beyond school walls. He is a mainstay of Hempstead County, serving as secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, past president of the Hope Kiwanis Club, and past Worshipful Master of Ambrosia Masonic Lodge 224. Additionally, he spent 11 years on the Arkansas Public Employees Retirement System (APERS) board, serving as Vice Chair to help grow the system to over \$6 billion. In the past, he has also served on the state Fire Protection License Board, worked as a Hempstead County Reserve Sheriff's Deputy, and advised the Hempstead County Farm Service Agency Board.

A great joy for Maurice is the deep relational trust he has built over generations. "Because of my longevity in this district, I often know a child's mother or grandmother," he explains. "They know my character, which makes it easier to handle discipline and guide students." To support local youth further, he co-founded the Brotherhood of Fulton to assist families in need, and he mentors young men in the juvenile drug court.

He credits his ability to serve to his wife, Gracie, of over three decades. "You have to have a supportive family," shares Maurice, who also pastors the Corinth Baptist Church in Tollette. "This work takes time away from home, and having her support is everything."

For Maurice, leadership boils down to a simple philosophy: "We cannot live our lives selfishly. It is about spreading the wealth, and I don't just mean money. It is about sharing your knowledge, your time, your ability, and your talent. If you keep those shared, eventually everyone benefits." Through his dedicated hands, the city of Hope continues to benefit immensely.



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*Honoring the leaders who maximize our
community's potential*

Terrie James



Leading extension services with passion

As SWARK Today dropped in to interview Terrie James, who is Staff Chair for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service in Hempstead County, Terrie showed us a stationary bicycle whose pedals, if pushed hard enough, can propel the spinning of the blades on a blender, installed just above the front wheel. After the interview, this reporter helped make a smooth and tasty blueberry-strawberry smoothy thanks to Terrie's help, and a recipe involving ice, Greek yogurt, lowfat milk and the berries. It was just one example of the kinds of equipment she uses to bring nutrition and agricultural knowledge to local students.

For more than two decades, Terrie James has helped better understand the agricultural system that sustains them. She leads programs that touch nearly every aspect of life in a rural place, from agriculture and youth development to nutrition, food safety and community improvement.

Her path to Hope began hundreds of miles away in Kansas City. Terrie grew up in St. Joseph, Missouri, and attended Missouri Western State College. Her education led her to a commission in the Army National Guard and eventually to officer training in Georgia, where she met the man who would become her husband.

Their military journey took them around the world. After marrying, the couple moved to Izmir, Turkey, where their oldest son was born. Later assignments brought them back to the United States, including stops in Kansas, Arizona, California and St. Louis. Those experiences allowed Terrie to build relationships with a variety of organizations that would shape her future. "I've been very involved with Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, hospital auxiliaries, those type things," she said.

After relocating to Mena, Arkansas, Terrie met then-Extension Staff Chair Carla Vaught. The introduction opened the door to a new calling: Extension. In 2003, she accepted a position with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service in De Queen. After serving there for 11 years, she moved to Hope in 2013 and became the Hempstead County staff chair.

One of the things Terrie enjoys most about working for the Extension Service is the breadth of its mission. "A lot of folks do not realize extension does have a variety of things besides just agriculture."

Those areas include instructing people of all ages in family and consumer sciences and overseeing youth development through 4-H. Meanwhile, Terrie has expanded her own expertise through the years, becoming involved in nutrition education, financial literacy, family life programming, food preservation and food safety training.

Whether helping citizens understand local ballot issues, stepping in to support emergency response or organizing 4-H competitive teams, Terrie sees extension as a practical resource for everyday life. "I always view extension as giving you the resources and the direction and the hands-on opportunity to actually put skills into play."

In recent years, Terrie has seen growing interest in skills that had fallen by the wayside. "We have seen upticks in interest in food preservation and food production, home gardens, square foot gardening, backyard gardening," she said.

She also encourages people to understand the challenges farmers currently face. "We want to continue to keep our communities viable and our families healthy, eating locally, buying locally, growing your own."

Through education, encouraging volunteerism and her lifelong commitment to service, James continues to help Hempstead County residents make good decisions and build a stronger communities.

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Monty McFadden, Jr.

James “Monty” McFadden, Jr. has dedicated his life to serving families during their most difficult moments with dignity and grace. As the co-owner of McFadden & Hitchye Funeral Enterprises in Hope, Arkansas, Monty brings more than 35 years of experience as a licensed embalmer and funeral director. Rooted in a generational tradition of caring for others, his path has been defined by service, humility, and a deep commitment to the community he calls home.

Monty’s roots in funeral service run deep. His grandfather founded Hicks Funeral Home more than 95 years ago, a business later managed by his mother. Looking back, Monty credits her for shaping the course of his life. While serving in the U.S. Navy aboard the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69), her encouragement inspired him to enroll in mortuary school in Dallas. “If not for some of the decisions my mom made about my life, I wouldn’t be here,” Monty reflects.

Before entering funeral service full-time, Monty balanced a dual career, working for the USDA while also serving in the family business. After two decades alongside his family, he co-founded McFadden & Hitchye with Kim Hitchye, a licensed funeral director, embalmer, and insurance agent who helps oversee the funeral home’s operations. Supporting the team is Kay Smith, who studied at Harvard University and oversees public relations and communications.

“We serve everybody,” Monty says. “We don’t care about color. Helping those in need during their most difficult time is more important than race, class, status, or any classification that exists. Compassion outweighs those factors every single time.”

While Monty prefers to keep the focus on the families he serves, the funeral home’s impact extends far beyond Southwest Arkansas. Through livestreamed services and digital outreach, McFadden & Hitchye has reached millions of viewers and received messages of gratitude from around the world, helping families stay connected regardless of distance.

Beyond the funeral home, Monty has also made a lasting impact through sports. An avid tennis enthusiast, he coached his twin daughters, who earned all-conference and all-state honors. His passion for the game led him to become a U.S. patent holder through the invention of the Tennis Pro Power Server, a tennis training device designed to help players improve their skills. Today, one daughter, Shauna Sorensen, serves as a licensed funeral director and embalmer, while the other, Amber White, is a licensed hair stylist and cosmetologist.

Monty now carries that tradition forward by coaching his granddaughter, Monica Bobo, a funeral attendant, all-state athlete, and youth tennis player currently ranked among the top ten in Arkansas. “I’m a part-time coach and a full-time Pawpaw,” Monty says. “As much as I love the game, maintaining that family connection is more important to me than anything.”

“We just want to fly under the radar and stay happy,” he adds. “This is the best life I’ve ever lived. I thank God for it.” Monty’s quiet dedication remains a cornerstone of the Hope community, leaving a legacy reflected in the families he serves, the players he coaches, and the lives he has helped shape.



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Twyla Pruden



*Communicating hope
through benevolent service*

Twyla Pruden has spent much of her life helping organizations tell their stories. Today, in retirement, she has become part of one of Hope's most important stories herself.

A native of Nashville, Arkansas, Twyla graduated from Nashville High School before attending what was then Southern State College, earning a degree in English with a minor in journalism. Her career would take her through newspapers, advertising, television, public relations, legal work and education, giving her a remarkably varied professional background. "My job that I started working when I was still a student was with the Banner News," she said.

After leaving Southwest Arkansas, she worked in Monroe, Louisiana, where her positions ranged from advertising and public relations to paralegal work. In 1988, she returned to the area to join KXAR radio in Hope.

Not long after arriving, she met Jerry Pruden, who she married in 1989. Together they raised two sons. Their younger son, Isaac, now works as a graphic designer for Amazon in Seattle, while memories of their older son, Jim, remain especially dear.

Professionally, Twyla's career continued through Hope Public Schools and later at what is now the University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana Foundation. Looking back, she recalls her years at the college with a special fondness. "That was probably the most fun job I've ever had," she said.

Before that, however, one of her most meaningful roles came while supervising in-school suspension at Beryl Henry Elementary School. Working one-on-one with students who were struggling academically or behaviorally gave her an opportunity to make a direct difference. "One of my best job memories, actually, is working with those kids," she said.

Since retiring in 2017, Twyla has devoted much of her energy to volunteering at Hope In Action, the community food pantry that helps residents facing difficult circumstances. What began as a commitment of a couple of hours each week soon grew into a larger role. Today she serves on the organization's board of directors and as its secretary. "You have to have a heart for people to do things like this," she said.

Her admiration for longtime Hope In Action leader Mae Delaney is evident, but Twyla also speaks about how volunteering for an organization that serves about 3,000 people per year has affected her personally. "I feel like it's made me a different person, or a better person to be here," she said.

The experience has also deepened her appreciation for the generosity that exists throughout the community. Churches, businesses and individual donors help keep the pantry operating, ensuring that families have access to food when they need it most. Outside her volunteer work, Twyla remains an avid reader and self-described "grammar snob," a title she embraces with a smile. Yet whether she is editing a sentence (I hope this one passes muster!), helping a student or assisting a neighbor in need, the motivation remains much the same.

For Twyla, a life well-lived is measured not by accomplishments alone, but by the people helped along the way.



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Congratulations

Gary Chambless!

We appreciate all you have done and
continue to do to better our community

Juan Rivera

Juan Rivera has welcomed generations of families through the doors of Amigo Juan for more than a quarter of a century, building a business that has become as much a community gathering place as a restaurant. The restaurant in the beautiful orange building on 1300 Hervey celebrated its 25th anniversary this past January.

It opened when Southwest Arkansas was slowly recovering from the Christmas Ice Storm of 2000, which knocked power out for a quarter million Arkansas households, including most of Hempstead County for up to three weeks. But Amigo Juan got power back early and was able to serve emergency workers as well as patrons needing a hot meal in a time when they were scarce.

Right now, Juan remains focused on the same principles that helped establish the restaurant's reputation throughout Hope and Southwest Arkansas. "We've really just done the same thing we've always done, try to be here for the community when they need us," he said. "We try to be good businesspeople, so the community enjoys coming to see us."

Maintaining that consistency has become even more important as economic challenges have affected both businesses and customers. "We just have to make sure that we do the best we can," Juan said. "Try to keep the quality, and right now, with the economy the way it is, try to hit the prices where we can still pay the bills, but at the same time not hurt the customer."

Over the years, Amigo Juan has become a regular gathering place for civic organizations. The restaurant hosts meetings in its next-door annex for Kiwanis, Lions and Rotary clubs, helping provide a home for many of the volunteer efforts. "Those clubs do a lot of things for the community," Juan said. "We're just lucky to have them around."

Juan himself continues to serve on the Hope Tourism Commission, where he enjoys seeing projects come to fruition that improve quality of life for local residents. His commitment to local youth remains equally important. Having watched his own children grow up around the restaurant, Juan has long supported youth sports programs. "We've been on and off for the last several years sponsoring the Hope Baseball Association," he said. "Sometimes it may look like a little help, but among all of us, the business and the individuals around here, we make it possible."

Community events also remain a priority. Juan noted that Amigo Juan supports both the Watermelon Festival and the Southwest District Fair and has sponsored Hispanic Night at the county fair for many years by providing entertainment.

Behind the restaurant's success, Juan is quick to recognize the support of the community itself as well as employees and family members. "One thing we always do is make sure that we give credit to our community for being so supportive," he said. "My parents and my wife have been tremendous."

As he looks toward the future, Juan remains grateful for the town that embraced his family and business. "Life has just been good. Hope has been good to us," he said. "Hopefully, we stay here for a long time to come."



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Freddie Smith



*A steward of education
through faith*

Freddie Smith's story is one that demonstrates admirably that a life of service is more than just an obligation; it is a calling. As a retired rehabilitation counselor, a dedicated pastor, and the longtime Chairman of the University of Arkansas Hope-Texarkana (UAHT) Board of Visitors, Freddie has spent his life working to uplift others. His journey from humble beginnings to a respected community leader is a testament to the power of perseverance, education, and faith.

Growing up in Crittenden County, Arkansas, as the child of sharecroppers, Freddie learned early the value of hard work. His educational path was not without obstacles; after initially struggling academically in college, he persisted. He earned an associate degree from Southern Baptist College (now Williams Baptist University), followed by his bachelor's and master's degrees from Ouachita Baptist University. This personal journey fueled his lifelong belief in the transformative power of education and his desire to help others access it.

In 1977, Freddie began his professional career as a rehabilitation counselor for the Arkansas Department of Rehabilitation Services, a role he dedicated himself to until his retirement in 2014. Working closely with local schools, he supported clients from the School of Hope and local sheltered workshops. He specialized in helping students with 504 plans transition to college, trade programs, or meaningful employment. "I did anything from counseling to the work of putting people to work," Freddie recalls, emphasizing his hands-on approach to changing lives.

Those at the college recognized that Freddie's skills would be invaluable to the institution in a governance role, and this led to his recommendation to the UAHT Board of Visitors, where he has now served for 38 years, currently holding the position of Chairman. In this role, he has been a passionate advocate for educational access, championing initiatives like the Hempstead Guarantee program and high school collegiate academies that allow students to earn associate degrees alongside their high school diplomas. Freddie is also a longtime member of the UAHT Foundation Board, another role in which he proudly serves, encouraging education and workforce training for all.

Freddie's dedication to Southwest Arkansas extends far beyond education. He has pastored Canaan Baptist Church in Texarkana for many years, providing spiritual guidance to generations of families. His civic contributions are equally vast, including serving on the Hope In Action board, as past president of both the Hope Kiwanis Club and the Hope Baseball Association, and working with local youth programs.

Behind his decades of service is the vital support of his family. Freddie credits his achievements to his wife, Linda, and their children, Fred and Andrea. Even in retirement, Freddie's generous spirit remains active. He maintains a large garden, and the majority of his fresh harvest is distributed to neighbors and those in need.

Ultimately, Freddie's philosophy is rooted in a simple desire to leave his community better than he found it. "If I am to be remembered for anything in life," Freddie reflects, "I hope it is that I tried to help people." Through his quiet generosity, pastoral care, and academic leadership, Freddie continues to be a guiding light for many throughout Southwest Arkansas.

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Karen Smith

Few roles in public service demand as much exactness and versatility as that of the County Clerk, a challenge that Karen has embraced with remarkable grace. Having served as the Hempstead County Clerk since 2017, she has become synonymous with exceptional administrative precision, integrity, and genuine community care. Her commitment to meticulous accuracy was recently highlighted when the State Board of Elections selected her office for a random audit, which Karen and her team passed with a flawless and perfect one hundred percent accuracy rating.

In her daily role, Karen oversees a highly complex and demanding set of responsibilities that keep Hempstead County government and its various departments operating smoothly and efficiently. Her office is tasked with managing all county payroll, processing all of the county's bills, and keeping meticulous records for the Quorum Court. Furthermore, she administers critical legal documents including probate records, adoptions, and marriage licenses, while also coordinating local elections. Managing these vital duties requires a rare blend of administrative expertise and patience, qualities that Karen brings to the office every single day. Her natural ability to handle the intricate details of county business has earned her the deep trust of both county staff and local citizens.

Karen's rewarding journey to the clerk's office began in 2013 when she accepted a position as Deputy Treasurer, which allowed her to learn the inner workings of the county courthouse. When the previous long-serving County Clerk, Sandra Rogers, announced her retirement, trusted colleagues strongly urged Karen to run for the County Clerk position. Initially hesitant to enter the political arena, Karen decided to launch her campaign and was elected in 2016. "I have always classified myself as a servant," Karen reflects. "In this office, I get to meet so many different people from all walks of life. Helping them navigate county business is truly an enjoyable part of my work."

Beyond her professional duties at the courthouse, Karen is an active civic leader in Hempstead County. She made history within the Lions Club as the first member from Hope to be elected to serve as District Governor twice, spent twelve years of her life coaching the local Piranhas swim team (and her daughter), and has dedicated nearly thirty years of her life to scouting, serving for fifteen of those years as a Cubmaster. Guiding local youth, including her own beloved son, toward achieving the prestigious and hard-earned rank of Eagle Scout has been a true highlight of her community work. "One of the things I have found out over the years is that helping people succeed is its own reward," Karen says. "My goal is simply to help others be the best they can possibly be."

Karen's lifelong dedication to service is deeply rooted in her faith and her connection to Hope Methodist Church, where she has been an active and valued member of the congregation since her childhood, serving as the financial secretary, head of security, and trustees co-chair. Supported in all her professional and civic endeavors by her children and family, Karen continues to beautifully and consistently exemplify what it means to be a true servant leader in the Hope community.



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Milko & Sheba Smith



*Bridging cultures
one meal at a time*

Milko and Sheba Smith have been welcoming customers through the doors of Sheba's Family Restaurant for almost 20 years, building not only a successful business but also a reputation for hospitality, generosity and community service.

The couple's story begins in two very different places. Milko grew up in Waldo, Arkansas, while Sheba was raised in Hyderabad in the southern Indian state of Telangana. Their paths eventually crossed in Hope after Sheba moved to the United States as a teenager. "We met here when he was working at the rent-to-own business," Sheba recalled with a smile. "Guess he decided he couldn't live without me."

Together they launched Sheba's Family Restaurant on May 18, 2007, transforming the former Pizza Hut building on North Hervey Street into what has become one of Hope's best-known dining destinations. The restaurant quickly found its footing.

The Smiths developed a voluminous menu designed to appeal to a broad range of customers while still showcasing some of Sheba's Indian heritage. Breakfast served all day remains among the restaurant's most popular offerings, along with catfish, chicken fried steak and hamburger steak as well as six different pasta entrees. Indian specialties have also earned a loyal following. "People love the Indian dishes," Sheba said. These include Chicken Curry and Chicken Tikka Masala.

As the restaurant grew, so did its reach. Catering services became an important part of the business, serving events across Southwest Arkansas and beyond. The Smiths have catered functions in Hope, Prescott, Bradley, Ashdown and Texarkana, as well as numerous banquets and community gatherings.

Family has remained central to the operation. Their daughters, son-in-law and other family members have all played roles in helping the business succeed. Even a young grandson named Carti has become something of an unofficial ambassador for the restaurant, greeting customers and making friends in the dining room.

While their professional accomplishments are significant, the Smiths are equally known for their work for the community. Milko has been active in the Hope Lions Club since 2016, including serving as club president. Through Lions projects ranging from fish fries to charitable initiatives, he has found opportunities to build friendships and serve others. "It's been a great asset," Milko said of his Lions membership. "We've made so many friends. It's been a really good learning experience."

Sheba is also a Lions Club member, although she describes herself as working more behind the scenes. She has additionally supported United Way efforts and countless community causes over the years. "If anybody needs anything, I'm always there for them," she said.

The Smiths have also supported local tourism, with Milko even serving on the Hope Tourism Commission, and civic development efforts while helping provide meals for community organizations, fundraisers and public events.

For 19 years, Milko and Sheba Smith have built more than a restaurant. Through hard work, family involvement and a dedication to helping others, they have become an important part of Hope, serving their community one great meal at a time.

Congratulations!

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Thank you for your dedication to our community



Danny & Judy Watson

True partnership is built on a foundation of mutual support, a truth that Danny and Judy Watson have demonstrated throughout their forty-seven years of marriage. Throughout those years, the Watsons have woven their lives together, creating a shared legacy of civic devotion in Hope, Arkansas. While each has achieved significant professional milestones, their accomplishments have always been a joint endeavor. Supporting each other through demanding careers and public offices, they have shown how a committed couple can multiply their positive influence on their community.

Their journey began on South Walnut Street, where Judy's mother owned a dress shop and Danny's mother ran a bookstore next door. Although they first crossed paths there, the connection (and first date) truly began with a chance meeting on a summer night during one of Hempstead County's most beloved traditions, the Hope Watermelon Festival. That encounter marked the start of a lifelong team. From managing a local print shop together in their early years to serving as co-presidents of the high school booster club while raising their sons, Justin and Andrew, they have always approached life as a unified front, making decisions together.

In her professional life, Judy has dedicated nearly four decades to advocating for individuals with developmental disabilities at Rainbow of Challenges. Joining the organization in 1989 as a direct care worker, her commitment led to her through a myriad of positions, eventually resulting in her advancement to CEO. Judy explains that she regularly visits the programs to reconnect with the clients, whose genuine joy inspires her. "You can walk in, and it is just pure enthusiasm all day, and all the time," Judy shared. "They are always going to give you one hundred percent no matter what they are doing. Serving individuals such as these is the most rewarding job anyone can have." Her dedication also extends to civic roles, including serving on the Hope Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors and the Planning and Zoning Commission.

Danny's career of service is equally extensive, spanning law enforcement, state politics, and community leadership. After serving with the Hope Police Department and the Arkansas Highway Police, he transitioned to corporate safety leadership. His dedication led him to serve fifteen years on the local school board, eight years on the Quorum Court, and eight years in the Arkansas House of Representatives. Danny also dedicated over seventeen years to the local Kiwanis Club and served as president of the Hempstead County Relay for Life. Reflecting on his service, Danny notes the deep value of community involvement. "There is so much satisfaction in civic duty and helping other people, especially your church," he said.

Today, they remain active in Unity Church, and when reflecting on their deep roots in the congregation, Danny expressed his gratitude for how faith has shaped their household. "It has just become a part of our life," Danny noted, "and you can see the positivity in it." The thread tying their accomplishments together is mutual encouragement and shared faith. When Danny decided to run for public office, or when Judy's demanding hours at Rainbow of Challenges required extra help at home, they adjusted as a team.

Today, their legacy of service lives on through their children and grandchildren. Looking back on their decades in Hope, the Watsons remain humble about their vast contributions, attributing their success entirely to their partnership. They have shown that while individual dedication is powerful, a shared commitment to lifting others up is truly transformative. Through forty-seven years of working side by side, Danny and Judy Watson have proven that the strongest communities are built when we choose to serve together.



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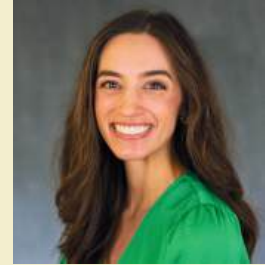
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