Greater BAYTOWN
September 2019

Wholly Walkamolies
Family walks from France to Spain

Lee College Foundation
Donor Spotlight: The Coffeys

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Welcome to the fall issue of Greater Baytown magazine.

Four Baytonians made a walking pilgrimage from France to Spain. The Wholly Walkamolies are featured on the cover and Pages 4-7. Oscar Chapa inspired his wife, Dr. Yvonne Thomas, sister, Cindy Garcia, and brother, Sergio Chapa, to hike with him. They made a trip of a lifetime, brought home recognitions and left painted Baytown rocks there.

Getting in shape? Check out Baytown’s Camp Gladiator, Page 8.

Like music? Freaky Deaky may be for you at Houston Raceway Park, powered by Pennzoil on Page 10.

Lee College is celebrating those who have helped them over the years. Read about one interesting couple giving of both time and resources on Pages 12-15.

Artist Ken “The Dauber” Pridgeon is still painting and we checked on him. Pages 18-19.

Did you know there is a Miss Greater Baytown? She is raising funds for the Miss Texas Teen Pageant. See Ella Carsey on Page 24.

Kids are practicing their STEM skills, thanks to the Lee College STEM Camp hosted by Lee College with experts from ExxonMobil, Lamar University and Lee College.

Last but definitely not least, “The Brunson is back, Baby” with a documentary, a grand-reopening celebration and lots of fanfare. Director Kenny Benitez and writer/producer Rick King talk about the making of the documentary on Pages 30-33 and then you can peruse lots of photos from the celebration. We hope you enjoy.

Oscar Chapa, one of four Baytonians who walked a pilgrimage from France to Spain this summer, places a Baytown Rock at the Cruz de Ferro (Iron Cross), where other pilgrims have placed their stones along the journey that follows “El Camino de Santiago”, the way of Saint James. (Contributed photo)
Oscar Chapa and Dr. Yvonne Thomas-Chapa finish the pilgrimage.

Dr. Yvonne Thomas-Chapa and Oscar Chapa at the Portomarin Entrance

Cindy Garcia and Sergio Chapa

Sergio Chapa at a sign for Santiago de Compostela

Cindy Garcia in front of Santiago de Compostela Cathedral

Sergio at the end of a difficult trail in Azura

Cindy arriving the city of Los Arcos
Four Baytonians went on a 34-day pilgrimage hike from France to Spain this summer, traveling 483 miles.

Yvonne Thomas-Chapa DMD, her husband, Oscar Chapa, and two of his siblings, Cindy Garcia and Sergio Chapa, carved out time to be together and called themselves the “Wholly Walkamolies.”

After a few days sightseeing in London, they officially started the hike on May 18 from Saint Jean Pied de Port, France, where they followed “El Camino de Santiago,” (the way of Saint James). Each hiker had a different reason for the journey.

“It’s a pilgrimage people do for spiritual reasons or because they made a promise to someone or to God. It’s been going on since the Middle Ages,” Oscar said. He has been hiking for three years and is known as “El Tejano” among fellow hikers.

Oscar wanted to get the others interested, so he picked a hike that allowed them to stay in hostels and hotel lodgings rather than camping. (Yvonne and Cindy do not camp.)

The hike follows an ancient trade route used by the Romans ending at Land’s End “Finisterrae,” which used to be thought of as the end of the world when common belief was that the earth was flat. Saint James was assassinated in Jerusalem in 44 A.D. His disciples transported his body back to his beloved Santiago in Spain, where he had previously been spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are many hikes leading to the shrine of Saint James in Galicia, Spain inside the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

Every pilgrim hugs the statue of Saint James, whose crypt can be seen directly beyond his statue.

The site is listed as a World Heritage Site “selected by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as having cultural, historical, scientific or another form of significance … legally protected by international treaties.”

Cindy and Sergio had to shorten their hike because of foot problems. Sergio had previously had a foot surgery that was giving him trouble, and Cindy developed severe blisters even though she had the proper foot gear.

Cindy enjoyed the small chapels, “Emitas,” along the way. What was most memorable for her was seeing a priest walk the trail barefoot. “At that point, I decided to stop complaining about my blisters. If he could walk barefoot through all this terrain, there was no reason we could not finish,” Cindy said.

“We went from Burgos to Sarria by bus bypassing several stages and reached a closer station. From Sarria on to Santiago is 117 km. You can’t take a taxi. You must walk. Most people start in Sarria and walk the last part. The last 100 km are required to get the certificate,” Cindy added. She loved the arrival in Santiago and thinks she will hike again, but shorter distances.

As it turned out they arrived in Santiago before Yvonne and Oscar. Cindy and Sergio were awarded as the 100,000 pilgrim-team this year, arriving June 7.

“We were surprised and had no idea we were the 100,000 pilgrims reaching Santiago. I like hiking,” said Sergio.
“The woods and the trails were great. The food was fantastic. It was all really good, except when it was really cold and raining (40 degrees with a 20 mph crosswind). I like being outdoors and hiking. I think I will do it again. Spending time with my family was wonderful in the very beautiful countryside,” he said.

Yvonne and Oscar arrived in Santiago on June 20. Yvonne’s most memorable parts of the journey were the dinners when they met other hikers. The hosts would cook for everyone family-style. They offered pilgrim menus with three-course meals for very little cost.

“Getting to know so many other pilgrims was really nice. We intend to keep in touch,” said Yvonne. They met three lady hikers from Japan who were traveling and writing about their experiences. They are considered dual pilgrims because they had also hiked the 40 km Kumano Kodo in Japan, the only other UNESCO sanctioned pilgrimage.

They also crossed paths with Christina Brunson of Austin, a relative of Howard Brunson who is credited with building the historic Brunson Theater in Baytown.

“It was nice sometimes just to walk by myself. You had time to think about things. I would pull out my phone and dictate things I want to do. My big takeaway was that I took seven weeks out of my life to do this, to get up and walk everyday. There is no reason why I cannot come back and take an hour here to exercise or an hour there to do my hobbies, take time out of my schedule to do the things I want to do,” added Yvonne.

Oscar loved the whole thing. “We went to two services that were very memorable. One was a guitar concert in one of the churches and one was a service for the pilgrims, where the priest hugged everyone. He gave each of us bread and a small stone with a yellow arrow on it,” said Oscar.

Yellow arrows are posted on the hiking trail to tell hikers which direction to walk.

“I enjoyed all the history. We walked over stone bridges built by the Romans. When I hiked my first hike, I spent so much time thinking about seemingly insignificant things. I realized everything I need is on my back,” said Oscar.

“You start wondering, ‘Why in the world do I need so much stuff at home?’ I wanted to simplify my life.” And he has.

Yvonne explained that a lot of the small towns along the trails exist only because of the tourism. In medieval times, pilgrims needed health care when they finished their travels, so hospitals were built to serve them along the routes. Small towns grew around the hospitals.

Yvonne, Cindy, Oscar and Sergio took turns journaling their travels in an online blog over the 34 days. See trailjournals.com/whollywalkamolies

Yvonne wrote, “Last year over 320,000 pilgrims made their way to Santiago.” Her final journal entry: “I carried my clothes and necessities in a backpack for seven weeks. That was all I needed! It gives perspective to our real needs versus our wants. It has only strengthened my resolve about my wants. Less is more.”

Yellow markers point hikers in the right direction along El Camino de Santiago.

Tourism information at: americanpilgrims.org

A roadside picnic
The beginning trail group from left Sergio Chapa, Cindy Garcia, Oscar Chapa and Dr. Yvonne Thomas-Chapa

The three siblings getting water from a fountain, Oscar Chapa, Sergio Chapa and Cindy Garcia

From left: Cecilia Pereira, Xacobeo 2021 Commissioner; Román Rodríguez, Minister of Culture & Tourism; Cindy García, Sergio Chapa, Segundo Pérez, Dean of the Compostela Cathedral

Cindy and Sergio received gifts for being 100,000 pilgrims to arrive at the Cathedral.

A priest hiking barefoot
CAMP GLADIATOR INSPIRES FITNESS

By Christopher James

In the earlier morning hours and evenings, gladiators emerge across Baytown and Mont Belvieu.

In the parking lots of churches, schools and parks, these gladiators of fitness come together to shed weight, get stronger and encourage.

The program, known as Camp Gladiator, was started in 2007 by Ally and Jeff Davidson and has grown in popularity ever since the first group of campers trained in a parking lot in Dallas.

The program is now offered in over 350 cities and over 3,500 locations nationwide, including right here in Baytown thanks to Baytown native, Andrew Contreras.

“Everyone works toward the same mission of trying to be better versions of themselves,” Contreras said. “Camp Gladiator is very much a team-oriented program that is fast-paced and high energy.”

Camp Gladiator is a four-week outdoor group fitness program that provides a 60-minute, full-body, workout that incorporates both cardio and strength training.

Over the four-week training cycle, week one focuses on endurance, week two on strength and agility, week three increases the intensity and week four tests your limits.

A fifth week, known as “bold week,” is also offered to bold members as an exclusive workout.

“What I like about is that I feel strong,” Lori Comanich said, who became a member after her first session. “At this point in my life, I needed more muscle building and toning, versus just cardio. But I was able to take it easy when I first started so that I didn’t hurt myself. Trainers will help you modify your workout if you have aspects that limit your ability.”

The program is for all fitness levels and all ages, as each camper can go at their own pace within a set time limit.

“Everybody is getting an equal amount of high-intensity workouts based on the time and what they can do within that time period,” Contreras said.

When the program was first started in Baytown back in 2016, Contreras offered two morning sessions at the Memorial Baptist Church north campus parking lot.

“It has grown immensely from when I started at ground zero,” Contreras said.

Since bringing Camp Gladiator to the area, the program has ballooned to about 15 different locations in the greater Baytown area with over 500 bold members and four trainers.

Children under the age of 15 can also participate for free if accompanied by a member.

“It’s an awesome sight to see because the parents are setting a really great example for their kids, and the kids are having a blast joining in,” Contreras said.

To give people a taste of what Camp Gladiator is all about, they offer a Saturday morning workout at 7:30 a.m. at Alamo Elementary, 6100 N. Main St., that is a free community workout.

“Anybody can come out, you don’t have to be registered with the camp, and we encourage people to come check it out,” Contreras said.

For more information, visit www.Facebook.com/CampGladiatorBaytown/
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‘WHEN THE LIGHTS WENT DOWN’
The making of the documentary on the Brunson Theater

Director Kenneth Benitez, writer/producer Rick King and Eddie Gray inside the Baytown Historical Museum

Photo by David Olivarez
When the Brunson Theater opened for its new life as a center of downtown business in August, celebrants who attended also shared memories of the structure's former life as a movie house with a film premiere of their own.

“When the Lights Went Down” is a 40-minute documentary about the theater and its role in Baytown’s Heart and History.

When the Brunson Theater opened in 1949, Baytown had existed in its modern form for only about a year following the consolidation of the former communities of Goose Creek, Pelly and Baytown. While Texas Avenue had once been downtown Goose Creek, the Brunson helped redefine it as downtown Baytown.

By Mark Fleming

Drone Operator Erik Kolflat

Photo by Rick King
Filming inside the Baytown Cafe & Taqueria in Baytown’s Historic West End

Rick King interviews Dr. Chris Warford

Writer/producer Rick King sets up vintage Coca-Cola theater signage for the documentary.
Writer/producer Rick King introduced both the film and many of the people who contributed to making it at a screening in Town Square after the theater's ribbon-cutting Aug. 28. The 8 p.m. show-time corresponded to the showtime of the first film to play at the Brunson Theater at its original opening celebration exactly 70 years before.

“It’s been a great passion project,” King said. “I don’t know how many hours I’ve put into it, but I’ve made the director go far beyond what he ever thought he was getting involved with, with this film.”

The film was directed by Kenneth Benitez, who has worked in film in the Houston area for 15 years.

The City of Baytown approved a contract to produce the film in November of 2018, and King, himself a Robert E. Lee High School graduate who grew up in Baytown, filmed 13 interviews with people connected to the theater. More than 75 people contributed to the production with information, photographs or recollections.

While most of the interviews were conducted at familiar Baytown locations, such as the Trophy Barbershop, Lee College Performing Arts Center, BDI Resources and Sterling Municipal Library, others took place as far away as Salt Lake City, Nashville and Grand Rapids.

Other elements of the documentary included historic film clips, photos from the theater and video from modern Texas Avenue and Tabbs Bay.

The documentary will be available at a future date on the city website at www.baytown.org.
Director Kenneth Benitez, writer/producer Rick King and Kirk Lowe inside Trophy Barber Shop on Texas Avenue near the Brunson Theater (photo by David Olivarez)

The six concrete panels (reliefs) designed by Rudolph Wagner, clockwise from top left, represent: Oil Refining, Mercury - the god of industry, Fishing, Shipping, Oil Production and Chemistry.
Director Kenneth Benitez and writer/producer Rick King interviewed Michael Kinerk, an author/historian of art deco for the documentary. The Brunson Theater was designed as ‘deco echo’ because it was built post-World War II. Six reliefs on the face of the theater and the box office are art deco style and illustrate the industries in the Baytown area at the time the theater was built. ‘Deco echo’ imitates the style of art deco in a lesser fashion.
Penelope Riordan, great great granddaughter of Howard Brunson is looking inside the Theater’s front door. Her mother, great granddaughter Marissa Brunson Riordan is holding her stroller, while speaking with Brent Brunson, great nephew of Howard Brunson.
BRUNSON THEATER
Grand Re-Opening

Former Councilman David McCartney, Councilman Bob Hoskins, Bob Leiper and Jim Moss visit in front of the Brunson.

From left, Brent Brunson, great nephew of Howard Brunson; Penelope Riordan, great great granddaughter of Howard Brunson; Marissa Brunson Riordan, great granddaughter of Howard Brunson and Martha Brunson Buehler, daughter of Howard Brunson, who traveled here from Bountiful, Utah.

City Manager Rick Davis tells the story of how the Brunson Theater’s re-grand opening came about. Will Carter of Congressman Brian Babin’s office and state Rep. Briscoe Cain each presented the city recognition.

At left, Deaven Sanchez, Danita Sanchez, Dorean Sanchez and Tudy Sanchez stand in front of his classic 1972 Chevelle SS.

Benjamin Ochoa and Liliana Gallegos, owners of Sabor of Mexico decorated their shop for the re-grand opening of the Brunson Theater Aug. 23, 2019.

photos by Carol Skewes
From left, City Manager Rick Davis, Councilman Chris Presley, Councilman Charles Johnson, Mayor Brandon Capetillo, Councilwoman Laura Alvarado, Councilwoman Heather Betancourth, Councilman David Himsel and Councilman Bob Hoskins.

From left, Clara Rolle, Cynthia Blake and Yvette Spencer of Springhill Suites

From left, Wiley Kolflat, Amy Lynch Kolflat and Mister McKinney

From left, Reggie Lewis, Nakahah Lewis and Ronald Burns are pictured inside a 1950’s photo frame inside Sabor of Mexico, on Texas Avenue during the Brunson Grand Re-opening

From left, Sandra Bell, Jo Hinkle, Michael Plato, Anna Beth Herrington, Eileen Knox and Cherry Silliman

Myla, Debra, Jared, Mason and Aubrey Fulleylove (from left seated), standing Benjamin Ochoa and Liliana Gallegos, Dave and Gay Brock.

From left, Clara Rolle, Cynthia Blake and Yvette Spencer of Springhill Suites

At right, Mike and DiAnne Wilson with David Kadjar.

At the Brunson concession stand, from left are, Mark Landers, Drew Potts and behind him is Branson Potts.
Writer/Producer Richard King of the documentary “When the lights went down” premiered in Town Square August 23, 2019.

Lee College Regent Gina Guillory was interviewed in the documentary.

Lee College Regent Mark Hall and his wife, Nancy, stand in front of their 1959 Cadillac.

At right, Hope Wolf is pictured with her father, T.A. Wolf, the voice of John Wayne in the Brunson documentary, “When the lights went down.”

Harvey Ramos stands with his 1965 Ford Mustang in the Classic Car Show in front of the Brunson Theater’s Grand Re-Opening.

Documentary Director Kenny Benitez and Writer/Producer Richard King introduce “When the lights went down.”

photos by Carol Skewes
It’s been almost a decade since Ken Pridgeon painted his first portrait of a fallen soldier.

It was of Army Pfc. Wesley R. Riggs, a 19-year-old Baytown resident who was killed in Tikrit, Iraq when an explosive device detonated near his position. Since then, Pridgeon has painted hundreds of paintings of men and women who served and died for their country.

At first, Pridgeon’s portraits could be seen at his Texas Avenue shop. But as the paintings grew in number, along with Pridgeon’s popularity, the little shop was unable to hold them all. The arrival of Hurricane Harvey did not help since Pridgeon’s home was one of many ruined in the floods.

In April 2018, Pridgeon packed up his portraits and left Baytown for a place on Cutten Road in Houston. He was able to secure the place thanks to the efforts of Cheryl Whitfield, National Memorial Ladies director. Strategically placing Pridgeon’s portrait gallery down the street from the Fallen Warriors Memorial, it still brings in visitors to see the faces and the names of soldiers who died while wearing the United States uniform.

Pridgeon said while he would have loved to stay in Baytown, things have worked out for him.

“The gallery is beautiful, and everything is fantastic,” he said. “We were on TV four times a couple of weeks ago. Even now, my son is going to get hooked. He is down in Dickinson and giving away a couple of portraits to families. That is what this is all about, giving portraits to the families so they can have a little closure and remember their lives a little more.”

Pridgeon said he still gets plenty of visitors to the gallery. His gallery is open Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, but is just a phone call away if anyone wants to view the portraits.

“I just live 10 minutes away, and I’ll be more than happy to come here and share with them,” Pridgeon said. “If someone wants to come, we try to make sure that someone is here to guide and give a tour, tell them a little bit about the guys and the girls.”

A first-time visitor, Molly Peplau of Tomball, found out about Pridgeon’s gallery at a church meeting he was attending.

“It fulfills the purpose that gallery serves,” Peplau said. “I like the personal details about each of the people.”

Peplau is an artist herself and visits many galleries in and around Houston.

There had been some elaborate plans to house the portraits before Pridgeon made the move. At one time, there had been talk of the gallery being moved to the old Hefner Building (also known as the former location of Culpepper’s Furniture), next to the historic oak tree on Texas Avenue. Pridgeon had an idea...
about having each portrait hung up with a button visitors could push and a recorded voice would tell them about the portrait they were viewing.

“I am the button right now,” Pridgeon said, laughing.

Pridgeon made it clear he harbors no ill will toward anyone living or working in Baytown.

“There was never any hard feelings toward Baytown,” Pridgeon said. “They wanted to give me the Brunson, but it didn’t have a roof on it (at the time), and you can imagine what kind of mess I would have been in with that. The armory was another idea, and that is now being used for what it is supposed to be used for. I asked how much it would cost to renovate the old Wilkenfeld Furniture store on Texas Avenue and they said $2 million. I said OK let’s build the house.”

Pridgeon is of the belief that everything works out for the right thing.

“I do not worry about it,” Pridgeon said. “I quit worrying about it when I figured out that nothing that you plan ever comes out the way we plan it. When you live to be 84, you see there is a lot of that stuff going on. But you learn a lot of lessons. They are difficult, and they hurt. But you can tell people in order to be successful you have to jump off the mountain and get your wings on the way down. You are going to get bumped up, and things will not always go right. Well, I cannot brag and say I jumped off the mountain. I fell off the mountain.”

Asked why he keeps on painting the portraits, Pridgeon just smiles.

“It is difficult to quit when people are hugging your neck and saying ‘Thank you, so much’ or ‘I cannot thank you enough. This is the greatest gift anyone has ever given me,’” Pridgeon said. “If compliments were gold, I’d be the richest man in the world.”

Pridgeon’s advice on how to keep on going is based in faith.

“I think we are supposed to enjoy as much of this as we can,” he said. “But if you study your Bible and you see the plan that was put into place, and if you will follow that plan, you will be one happy camper.”

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When you ask Don Coffey about his days as a Lee College student, the former regent smiles from ear to ear. That’s partly because he met his wife of 41 years, Jenice Coffey, while they were both enrolled in the same history class taught by well-known professor, John Britt.

As teenagers growing up in Baytown, they both knew they wanted to go to Lee College after high school. But the couple never dreamed it would someday lead them on a journey to help other people reach their lifelong goals of achieving a higher education.

“The instructors we had here were so dedicated,” Jenice said of her Lee College days. “And I’m certain the students today feel the same way. When you go to a university, you don’t generally have a personal relationship with the instructors the way you do at Lee College. That’s what made the difference for me.”

Photo by Estefany Sanchez.
Don was first elected to the Lee College Board of Regents in 1984 while still a student pursuing an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts. Jenice fell in love with history because of the professors she had, and went on to teach history and English for 27 years at GCCISD. She was even named Texas State History Teacher of the Year.

But after serving 31 years on the board, Don noticed the cost of college tuition and books increasing over time. It was then the couple decided to begin funding student scholarships in order to give back to the college that had made such a big impact on their lives.

“It truly changes people’s lives.”

Don served as chairman of the Lee College Foundation Board four times, and was also vice-chairman of the Lee College Foundation Board of Directors. He practiced law in Baytown for nearly 30 years, and served as Harris County Justice of the Peace for eight years before retiring in 2018. Throughout his time in public service, he saw first-hand how important education is to the community.

“People like to talk about the American dream,” he said. “As a judge, I saw so many people trying to get out of poverty, trying to feed their families through crime.”

“I realized the only real way people are going to get out of poverty is by getting an education and getting a better job. That’s what I hope to see through giving to the Foundation: more people having an opportunity to create a better life and get a piece of the American dream without...
turning to criminal activities.”

Don and Jenice always encourage others to support the Lee College Foundation because they believe it is one of the few things someone can get involved in and see such a positive impact in the community.

“Baytown’s future is tied to Lee College’s future,” said Don. “What’s good for Lee College is good for Baytown. For a community college this size, we have one of the largest foundations and give the most scholarships of anybody that I’m aware of.”

“It truly changes people’s lives.”

As a long-time educator, Jenice feels the socio-economic level of students in the area has gotten lower than it was previously. But she also believes, if given the financial support they need, these same students will be productive Baytown citizens after earning a college degree or certificate.

“There is such great promise in Baytown; such great potential. But there is also a great need,” she said.

The Lee College Foundation was established in 1968 to provide financial support for deserving students. Because of the selfless generosity of people like Don and Jenice Coffey, the Foundation will provide a total of 642 scholarships to students this year. To learn more about the Foundation and help students reach their education goals, contact Pam Warford, Executive Director, Lee College Foundation and Resource Development, 281-425-6361, or pwarford@lee.edu.

Don Coffey delivering the keynote speech at the 2015 Lee College spring commencement.

photo by Kim Christiansen
Greater Baytown celebrates the lifestyle, career and good works of people in our unique communities. Writers and designers each month share compelling, interesting stories about the people and places that make our hometowns special places to live, work explore and relax.

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The Baytown Sun
Ella Carsey is Miss Greater Baytown in more ways than one. As a junior at Ross S. Sterling High School, she cheers on her Rangers, sings in the varsity choir, participates in PALS and serves on student council — with aspirations to someday serve on city council.

But she also had the ambition to represent Baytown, which was realized in February when she applied to be part of the Miss Texas Teen USA 2020 pageant.

Once the 16-year-old was selected, she couldn’t believe it.

“At first I was excited, and then I was like, oh no,” Ella said, who was both nervous and thrilled about the news.

Come Nov. 29, Ella hopes the Baytown community will rally behind her as she participates in the prestigious pageant, but first, needs their support to fulfill her ambition.

Ella is looking for sponsorships to participate in the pageant that will be held at the Hilton Houston Post Oak Hotel. So she’s asking local shops and restaurants to sponsor or make in-kind donations. Thus far, Shay’s Jewelry and Excellence Salon committed to Miss Greater Baytown and her pursuit to become the next Miss Texas Teen.

“It’s an honor to represent Baytown because I get to show them who we are,” Ella said.

In her spare time, Ella is a worship leader in the youth praise band at Rollingbrook Fellowship who loves to bake anything sweet.

She also enjoys producing an inspirational lifestyle blog that can be found on Instagram under Spoonful of Laughter.

“Her platform for the pageant is the Special Olympics,” her mom Allison Carsey said. “She’s worked with them since she was in elementary school, and plans to continue to work with them this year.”

During the preliminary show and competition, held on Nov. 30, about 90 contestants will be judged in fitness attire and evening gown. The competition will culminate with the announcement of the top 16 semi-finalists, the selection of the top five, and finally the crowning of Miss Texas Teen 2020 at the final show and competition on Dec. 1.

The new Miss Texas Teen USA 2020 will claim a prize package that includes jewelry, travel, wardrobe and the honor of representing the Lone Star State in Miss Teen USA.

While Ella would love to win it all, she’s more concerned about how she represents the city she loves.

“She has a lot of spirit and love for this school district and town,” Allison said. “She loves that feeling of community and wants to bring everybody together.”

To reach out for potential sponsorship opportunities or donations, email her at encarsey@gmail.com.
By Amanda Smoke of Lee College

Future innovators had a chance to sharpen their technical and creative abilities this summer at the sixth annual Lee College Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) camp. Students from area high schools spent a week engineering, experimenting and coding with experts from ExxonMobil, Lamar University, and Lee College.

“Our main goal is to increase the number and diversity of students pursuing degrees and certificates in STEM–related fields,” said Daisy Aramburo, Recruitment and Outreach director for the Lee College STEM Center.

During the week, hands-on activities taught students critical thinking skills and how to work as a team to solve complicated problems. They also learned about the daily operations of a chemical plant, challenges in engineering, instrumentation basics, AutoCAD, and robotics.

Prentiss McGary, machinery engineer at ExxonMobil, was this year’s lead industry coordinator for STEM camp.

He believes the weeklong event has the potential to make a lifelong impact on students.

“I was their age once,” said McGary. “Having someone mentor me and show me the opportunities that were available pushed me to pursue my career in engineering.”

“It’s been great working together with Lee College at STEM camp; you can tell there’s a lot of energy,” he said. “These students have been able to use creativity to work in a team environment. That is extremely important in any field.”

Lee College offers more than 30 STEM-related degrees and certificates to prepare students for a variety of in-demand careers. The grant-funded STEM Center was established on the Lee College main campus in 2013. Since then, Lee College has hosted annual STEM camps for students in the Baytown area to increase awareness of the types of careers available in these fields.
Through The Baytown Project, David Berkowitz shines a light on everyday people in the greater Baytown area. Follow along at thebaytownproject.com, or on Facebook and Instagram.

“I’m 82, going on 83. And I don’t have any intentions of learning how to operate or even turn on a computer. I don’t want nothing to do except fish, be around my daughter, my grandkids and stuff like that. When you get to be my age, a lot of things that mattered years ago don’t count anymore. Family is number one. Always.

“I’m from Tarpon Springs, Florida. It’s a little fishing village about 30 miles east of Tampa. I come here for two months during the summer to be with my family. And I come for Christmas and New Year’s, then I go back to Florida. I’m satisfied with my life, all the way around. I’m blessed with a good daughter, good grandkids. What else could you want?

“I had my daughter with my first wife when I was 26-27 years old. The Greeks like to have boys so they can carry on the last name. When the doctor came down the hallway and said, ‘Mr. Kouskoutis, I want you to know that you are the proud father of an 8-pound, 9-ounce baby girl,’ I lit up like a Christmas tree. I said, ‘When can I see her?’ He said, ‘They’re cleaning her up now.’

“So I went over there, and they had her upside-down, cleaning her. She was crying, and I was banging on the window, saying, ‘What are you doing?’ At that age, I didn’t know from anything. When they took her and put her with my wife, I went up and saw her. And I tell you, at that moment and every day since, I would not have changed my daughter for 100 boys. That’s the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me in my life.”

Family is the most important thing to John Kouskoutis.
Andrea Alvarado

“It’s kind of hard to say. What happened to me when I was a little kid, when I was 7 … I got molested by my neighbors. Ever since, it sparked a fear of men.

“Growing up, when your parents are strict — not mean, but strict — you think, oh, I must have done something bad. So you don’t want to say anything or tell anybody. And you don’t. You just go on thinking, what did I do wrong? Why did that happen? Why was that necessary? Who’s someone safe to talk to and who isn’t? It took a long time for me to finally realize that it wasn’t my fault. Sadly, it took me until very recently.

“And it doesn’t matter how safe you feel that you are, because it happened to me again. You try to be safe. You try to be careful. You calculate and you calculate. But when that moment happens, you’re at a loss. All this stuff that you wrote down in your mind goes out your ear, rolls down your shoulder and onto the floor. And you’re just kind of stuck.

“I think it’s important to mention what happened. I think it’s good for people to talk about this issue, to bring more awareness to it. Because a lot of times, this kind of assault is by family members, relatives. I have friends who had that happen to them by uncles and cousins. Parents need to realize that sometimes even your own family could be dangerous.

“More people need to believe their daughters and their sons when they speak up. Believe them when they say it’s their uncle. Believe them when they say it’s their neighbor who always comes out and talks to their father with this big smile and everything. Please take care of your daughters and your sons. Keep an eye on everybody. And always ask when your child is angry or too sad. Because I grew up sad.”

Singing helps Andrea Alvarado come to grips with her feelings.

Photos and stories in The Baytown Project by David Berkowitz
I’m from Kosovo. I grew up on a farm in the countryside. You had to listen to what your daddy told you. I got up early to feed the cows. I worked hard every day. When I was 18 or 19, I started working at a brick factory in Slovenia. Then I hurt my hands a little bit. The doctor said I couldn’t work. I had a friend, and I said to him, ‘You want to go to the United States?’ He said, ‘How?’ I said, ‘It’s not going to be easy. But we can try.’

I loved to watch cowboy movies on TV. They showed the United States a lot. I saw the fighting in Vietnam and things like that. All the time I had this in my head, that I wanted to come to the United States. And I did.

“I started in Chicago. I worked in a restaurant. I washed dishes and cleaned restrooms. I worked 12 hours a day. It didn’t bother me. It was my job. I did that for a year. Then I had a friend in Louisiana. He worked on an oyster boat. He said I could make more money. I said, ‘OK,’ and I went to Louisiana. I worked as a deckhand. I made good money. Then I moved to Texas. I had my own oyster boat. I ran it for almost 30 years. I had two deckhands. It was a hard job. You’re gone from home a lot, sometimes eight or nine nights. You’re out there working in the rain and the cold. But I did it for my family.

“I love this country. I appreciate the United States, a thousand times, for giving me the opportunity to enjoy this life. The way I look at it, God is number one, the United States is number two. A lot of countries hate our guts. I don’t care. They’re jealous. United States economy is number one. United States power is number one. Nobody can mess with us. United States has the best in the world. I love my country.”
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Olga Sokovets and Elina Bizinova, exchange students from Siberia, Russia spent one month in the U.S.A. with hosts from the Rotary Club of Baytown. They first stayed in the Crawford home. Sheila was delighted to be their host.

Sheila Crawford and her husband, Woody, at the 2019 Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation Gala.

Olga Sokovets and Elina Bizinova, exchange students from Siberia, Russia spent one month in the U.S.A. with hosts from the Rotary Club of Baytown. They first stayed in the Crawford home. Sheila was delighted to be their host.

Sheila is an enthusiastic Rotary Club of Baytown President, 2019-2020. She led the team effort for the club’s 10th annual Shrimp & Catfish Festival, their most successful fundraiser to date.

1. Being the daughter of a minister, our family moved frequently which resulted in my attendance at 11 schools throughout five states. So, as a child I was understandably quite shy, yet realized a love of performing at an early age. I sang hymns at the front of my second grade class.

2. After graduating from high school in Lufkin, my formal education took me back to my home state of Arkansas where I became a Razorback, in full regalia donning a plastic pig hat and chanting the Hog Call “Wooo Pig Sooie!” at football games.

3. My first job following high school was at a poultry processing plant in Arkansas. Although grading and stuffing chickens was a less-than-desirable job, it was there that I developed a strong work ethic. No job is too big, too small or undeserving of giving my best.

4. My love of theater, music and singing continued through adulthood with performances at weddings, women’s events, church programs, and occasional karaoke. I have also performed in local theater in Deer Park and look forward to a future role in a Baytown Little Theater production, maybe Mamma Mia!

5. I met my husband, Woody, 26 years ago when we worked together at Exxon BOP. Blended together, we have four amazing children and six adorable grandchildren— that I may be guilty of gushing over all too frequently.

6. Scrapbooking and creating photo books is not only a hobby, it is my way to preserve special moments with family and friends experienced during holidays, travels and daily life, so they are never forgotten.

7. I love to travel. On my most recent trip to Europe (Germany, Scotland and Ireland) I kissed the fabled Blarney Stone, which according to legend, transcends the gift of eloquence.
8. In 1999, I achieved a lifelong goal of owning my own business. Gilbert Santana and I partnered to open Staffing Connection, Inc. Although still co-owner of SCI, I now work for BDI Resources as executive vice president.

9. Listening to others’ viewpoints is a very important part of my leadership training that I try to work on every day. It’s how I learn and expand my knowledge and build relationships. While listening, “a closed mouth gathers no foot.”

10. I absolutely love serving the Baytown community through my involvement in several organizations, including the Baytown Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club of Baytown. I am currently the Rotary Club President and am fully committed to driving the club’s mission “Service Above Self” among our 100-plus members.
Where are they Now?

Ronda Smith

By Alan Dale

Life has been good for Ronda Smith. Now known as Ronda Birdsong following her marriage to Todd Birdsong, the 2005 graduate from Sterling High School got to her current station in life after a long softball playing career that ended abruptly and in disappointing fashion.

But it helped get her here today.

Smith was a Texas A&M softball recruit and immediately picked things up to the point where she made an impact for the Aggies during their later Big 12 days.

“It was quite a change going from little town, Baytown, to a Division I program with big competition and playing the best of the best,” Smith, who was an outfielder, said. “It was an awesome experience. Texas A&M was great. I loved my team and everything about it. It was a great challenge and I love challenges. I wanted to compete against the best, win or lose.”

However, during her sophomore year, a dive for a ball led to a torn labrum and shoulder surgery and ultimately an effort to return to the field her junior year did not pan out.

“I tried to comeback,” she said. “I couldn’t throw the ball.”

She would finish up her studies at Lamar University, graduating in 2009.

“It was super hard, and my biggest regret was that I should have stayed,” Smith said. “Even though I didn’t play, I should have stayed for school. But you play the whole game your whole life and in two seconds it’s all over. That was the hardest part.

“That was why I came home: It was hard to be there and not be able to do what you have always done.”

It all started at Sterling when she was named district and team MVP and first team for the Houston area playing as a centerfielder with a big bat and good speed in the outfield.

“I could get a good jump on the ball,” Smith said. “I could read the ball really well.”

Recruiting of Smith came as soon as her freshman year through her exploits with her travel select team just when that became a big vehicle for college scouting.

“It was fun, and I loved meeting the people I played with,” Smith said. “My dad was my coach growing up and I loved that. We traveled all over the states so that became our family vacation times as well.”

Ultimately, she was recruited by a number of the big programs in the region such as A&M, Texas, Texas Tech, Tennessee and others.

Her father played football at A&M in the 1970s and so Smith’s familiarity with the school and its athletics resonated.

“When they offered me a ride, I absolutely took it,” Smith said.
Now she lives in League City and works as a supervisor in operation at ExxonMobil in Baytown for going on six years.

She is married to Birdsong and the couple has his two kids from a previous relationship.

Smith still gets back on the field here and there to play league softball for various teams and currently is a pickup player due to having a lot of work because she isn’t comfortable committing to a team due to working many hours.

However, it’s like she never left the diamond.

“I’ve still got it,” she said. “I give hitting lessons all the time. I definitely can’t let it go easy.”

Smith looks back fondly on her journey that saw the peaks and valleys of an athlete, but the sun shines brightly on her chapter playing the sport.

“When you are playing with the best of the best and you are hanging in there, that feeling is the biggest rush ever to me,” Smith said. “Not everybody got to experience what I experienced. I feel very appreciative.

“I still love the game and every time I am in town and pass the field, I love it. There will never be a sadness. Life goes on and you move on to the next challenge. Just in a different field, right?”
It’s almost time to get Freaky Deaky.

Or in other words, get your dancing shoes on because a plethora of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) artists will descend upon Baytown and Houston Raceway Park on Oct. 26-27. The two-day event is a newer Halloween tradition in the Houston area, only in its second year.

Top artists such as headliners Martin Garrix, Steve Aoki, Armin Van Buuren, Borgore, Jonas Blue and the Crystal Method, will make their way to Baytown while additional acts may be added to the lineup.

The event replaces the Something Wicked festival in 2018 and is produced by Disco Donnie Presents.

Austin Hayward, Competition Director of the park said that the raceway is more than ready to host the event.

“We are very confident and we are expecting about 20,000 per day,” Hayward said. “I know it’s a younger crowd that comes.”

The hosting of the festival will only enlighten more people to the relevance of the raceway and even Hayward acknowledges some people in Baytown have not been enlightened to its presence. EDM, also known as dance music, club music, or simply dance, is a broad range of percussive electronic music genres made largely for nightclubs, raves and festivals. It is generally produced for playback by disc jockeys who create selections of tracks, called a mix by segueing from one recording to another.

EDM producers also perform their music live in a concert or festival setting in what is sometimes called a live PA.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the emergence of raving, pirate radios and an upsurge of interest in club culture, EDM achieved widespread mainstream popularity in Europe. In the United States at that time, acceptance of dance culture was not universal; although both electro and Chicago house music were influential both in Europe and the United States, mainstream media outlets and the record industry remained openly hostile to it.

There was also a perceived association between EDM and drug culture, which led governments at state and city level to enact laws and policies intended to halt the spread of rave culture.

A two-day general admission pass is $159.95 while a single-day variation is $89.95. The two-day plus package is $179.95 and the single day versions of this are $99.95. A two-day VIP pass is $249.95 or $139.95 per day.

For more information visit freakydeakytexas.com.

By Alan Dale
Home improvement projects to add value to your home.

Whether home improvement projects are designed to improve the interior or exterior of a house, focusing on renovations that make the most financial sense can benefit homeowners in the long run. The right renovations can be assets if and when homeowners decide to sell their homes.

**Fire pit**: A fire pit is a great place to gather most months of the year. Bob Vila and CBS news report that a fire pit realizes a 78 percent return on investment, or ROI.

**Patio**: Homeowners who do not already have a patio will find that adding one can increase a home’s value. Patios help a home look neat, add usable space and may help a home to sell quickly.

**Deck**: A deck is another outdoor space that can be used for entertaining, dining and more.

First and foremost, speak to a local real estate agent who is knowledgeable about trends in the community. While a swimming pool may be something coveted in one area, it may impede sales in another.

**Outdoor kitchen**: Many buyers are looking to utilize their yards as an extension of interior living areas. Cooking, dining and even watching TV outdoors is increasingly popular. Outdoor living areas can be custom designed and built. In addition, prefabricated modular units that require a much smaller commitment of time and money are available.

**Door update**: Improve curb appeal with a new, high-end front door and garage doors. If that’s too expensive, a good cleaning and new coat of paint can make an old door look brand new. These easy fixes can improve a home’s look instantly.
HOUSTON CARDIOVASCULAR INSTITUTE
Dr. Shezhad Sami

From left, Jennifer Warden, Cameshia McCullough, Jennifer LeFever-Henry, Audrey Butler, Shehzad Sami MD, Moises Camarena, Lewis (Chip) DeBarge FNP-C
Open House hosted by Baytown Chamber of Commerce


photos by Carol Skewes
LEE COLLEGE
PRESIDENT’S CIRCLE

Once a year, the president of Lee College invites guests to a luncheon called the Lee College President’s Circle. Dr. Dennis Brown thanked significant contributors and some long-term givers to either the college and/or to the Lee College Foundation.

Melissa and Hannah Christenson with Lee College President Dr. Dennis Brown (not pictured Tim Christenson)  
Dr. Dennis Brown, Lee College Foundation Exec. Dir. Pam Warford and Baytown City Councilwoman Heather Betancourth  
Rick Davis representing the City of Baytown

Jennifer Leist of Phillips 66  
John Hopkins, representing Thompson & Horton  
Clarissa Martinez, Director of the Lee College Alliance  
Donna Zuniga, Dean of the Huntsville Center

Jay and Kay Eshbach, Gilbert and Maudene Chambers, Carol Bartz, Dr. Richard Thompson and Rose Marie Thompson  
Lee College Regent Pete Alfaro publicly recognized Dr. Brown  
Moments later, Dr. Dennis Brown received a standing ovation with his wife, Dr. Darlene Brown at his side. Also pictured at left is Lupe Alfaro.

photos by Carol Skewes
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