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Heavy hitters tapped for Alabama Business Hall of Fame

By: Ty West

Several business leaders with ties to Birmingham have been tapped for induction into the Alabama Business Hall of Fame.

Culverhouse College of Commerce has unveiled the following individuals as the 2016 inductees: Joel R. Anderson, of Florence; Paul W. Bryant Jr., of Tuscaloosa; Samuel A. Di Piazza Jr., of New York; Beverly C. Phifer, of Tuscaloosa; William H. Stender, of Huntsville; and Dr. Robert E. Witt, of Tuscaloosa.

Anderson is chairman and director of Anderson Cos., which includes Birmingham-based Books-A-Million, as well as TNT Fireworks and Anderson Media Corp.

Bryant is president of the Greene Group, as well as chairman and founder of Bryant Bank. He was a longtime member of the University of Alabama System Board of Trustees.

Di Piazza retired in 2009 as CEO of PricewaterhouseCoopers and is chairman of the Mayo Clinic Board of Trustees and a board member of AT&T.

Phifer is CEO of Phifer Inc. in Tuscaloosa, where she led a major expansion of the company.

Stender formed CAS Inc., which specializes in weapons systems analysis in Huntsville, and served as CEO and chairman until it was sold in 2006.

Witt served as president of the University of Alabama for nine years before becoming chancellor of the University of Alabama System in 2012.
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

System chancellor, former trustee among business hall of fame inductees

Staff report

Former University of Alabama System Trustee Paul Bryant Jr. and system Chancellor Robert Witt are among the 2016 inductees to the Culverhouse College of Commerce’s Alabama Business Hall of Fame.

Bryant and Witt will be inducted Nov. 17 along with Beverly C. Phifer of Tuscaloosa, Joel R. Anderson of Florence, Samuel A. Di Piazza Jr. of New York and William H. Stender of Huntsville.

The six will be honored during the Alabama Business Hall of Fame induction ceremony Nov. 17 at the Hyatt Regency at the Riverchase Galleria in Birmingham.

Anderson, a University of North Alabama alumnus and trustee, serves as chairman and director of Anderson Cos. Anderson Media Corp., the country’s largest distributor of pre-recorded music and a major distributor of books.

Bryant, a UA alumnus who served for 15 years as a UA trustee, is the president of Greene Group, a privately held holding company, and founder and chairman of Tuscaloosa-based Bryant Bank.

Di Piazza, a UA alumnus, retired in 2009 as CEO of PricewaterhouseCoopers. Di Piazza is on the USA Foundation Board of the World Economic Forum, the Mayo Clinic Board of Trustees, and a member of the Board of AT&T.

Phifer, a UA alumna, is CEO of Phifer Inc. in Tuscaloosa. She is an inductee of the Tuscaloosa County Civic Hall of Fame and the Alabama Academy of Honor. She is a member of the UA President’s Cabinet and the Culverhouse College of Commerce Board of Visitors.

Stender, a Georgia Tech, University of Texas at El Paso alumnus and U.S. Army veteran, formed CAS Inc., a company specializing in weapons systems analysis, in 1879 in Huntsville. He was CEO and chairman until the company was sold in 2006.

Witt, a former president of UA, has served as the system chancellor since 2012 and plans to retire in the fall. Witt is chairman of the Alabama Council of College and University Presidents.

The Alabama Business Hall of Fame recognizes individuals who have brought lasting fame to the state of Alabama. Candidates must be retired for a minimum of three years or, if still working, be 65 or older prior to induction.
IN BRIEF

Phelps confirmed as UA trustee

The Alabama Senate confirmed the appointment of a Tuscaloosa businessman Scott Phelps as the newest member of the University of Alabama System board of trustees.

The Senate on Thursday also confirmed the re-appointment of four other UA trustees.

Phelps holds the 4th Congressional District seat that was vacated by Paul Bryant Jr., who reached the mandatory trustee retirement age last year. Confirmed as reappointed trustees were James Wilson III, Ronald Gray, Harris V. Morrisette and Karen Brooks.

Phelps, Wilson, Gray, Morrisette and Brooks were elected by the board of trustees, which self-nominates its members, in November.

New trustees are allowed to immediately sit on the board, though they must still be confirmed by the Alabama Senate. Trustees may serve up to three consecutive six-year terms or until the age of 70.
Judge delays Hubbard's ethics trial

By Kim Chandler
The Associated Press

OPELIKA — A judge on Thursday pushed back the ethics trial of Alabama House Speaker Mike Hubbard for two weeks until mid-April.

Lee County Circuit Judge Jacob Walker ruled Thursday that he will delay the start date of the trial from March 28 to April 11 as the defense appeals some of his pre-trial decisions to the Alabama Supreme Court.

The ruling sets the date for the high-profile corruption case involving one of the state's most influential Republicans.

However, defense lawyer Bill Baxley indicated the defense will keep pushing for a postponement, noting the number of outstanding motions and appeals in the case.

Baxley, who joined the case in January, said the new defense team needed more time to prepare.

SEE HUBBARD, B3
"I don't know if I've ever been in a case where there's such a mass of documents," Baxley said.

Walker had said previously that he would grant a trial delay if the sides seek appellate review of pretrial decisions.

The Court of Criminal Appeals last week declined to hear Hubbard's appeal seeking to dismiss the case. Baxley said that the defense will appeal to the Alabama Supreme Court.

The April 11 trial date, if it stands, will coincide with the ongoing legislative session that could last until mid-May. Asked about the overlap, Hubbard declined to comment Thursday citing his lawyer's advice not to talk about the case.

Hubbard faces 23 ethics charges of using his political offices to benefit his businesses through legislative action, lobbying the governor’s office or soliciting new clients and investments. He has maintained his innocence and said the transactions were proper.

A brief delay was a victory for prosecutors. A grand jury indicted Hubbard in October of 2014.

Walker said he will rule soon on a defense motion to dismiss the case over allegations of prosecutorial misconduct. Defense lawyers said prosecutor Matt Hart had numerous conversations with a political consultant Baron Coleman, who was involved with the campaign of Hubbard’s primary opponent.

Baxley said they believed prosecutors violated grand jury secrecy law and a law prohibiting using your public office to influence the outcome of an election.

Prosecutors have argued that Coleman was a confidential informant and the conversations were proper. Coleman recorded some of the conversations with Hart. Walker is listening to the recordings after Coleman turned over the tapes to the court. Prosecutors have asked Walker for a protective order to prevent them from being publicly released.

The judge at times seemed skeptical about a blanket order to keep the information under wraps.

"Are you saying he can't testify at all?" Walker asked prosecutors.

Prosecutor Michael Duffy said while Coleman is known to be a source in the Hubbard case, releasing the conversations could disclose if he provided information on other cases. He did not elaborate.

Walker said he will hold a pretrial hearing on March 28.
State is proud of its literary luminaries

Shelly Haskins  shaskins@al.com

A couple of weeks ago, after the death of Harper Lee, I wrote a column about other authors who have done our state proud.

It wasn’t intended to be an exhaustive list, but readers pointed out some omissions.

Let me right my wrong. If you’re from Alabama and you haven’t read anything by Rick Bragg, a former Pulitzer Prize winner at the New York Times who is now a journalism professor at the University of Alabama, do yourself a favor and grab a copy of “All Over But The Shoutin’” or “Ava’s Man.”

I actually had the privilege of working alongside Bragg for a couple of days 21 years ago.

I was a young reporter working in Spartanburg, S.C., one of several assigned to cover the saga and trial of Susan Smith, a young mother who drowned her children by strapping them in the car and letting them roll into John D. Long Lake in nearby Union.

Our newspaper, the Spartanburg Herald Journal, was a New York Times property, and The Times sent Bragg to cover the trial.

Not really knowing who he was at the time, I was expecting a stuffy, stuck-up, suit-wearing New Yorker. The man I met was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, a two-day stubble and had that Alabama twang in his speech.

His stories from the trial went far beyond the testimony in the courtroom, weaving in so much observation and emotion and insight that I wondered if we were covering the same trial.

On a lunch break, we ate together at a meat-and-three called the Midway, and compared notes on our Alabama upbringing, his in Possum Trot and Jacksonville, and my less interesting roots in The Shoals.

Fresh off writing about the orphans of Haiti, he was, he told me. The Times’ designated “misery writer,” and I know why. He had, and has, an incredible talent for getting inside the mind and soul of his subjects and taking the reader there with him.

He had, and has, an incredible talent for getting inside the mind and soul of his subjects and taking the reader there with him.

It was clear that he was fiercely proud of his Alabama upbringing, despite the family turmoil that was the inspiration for the books he would soon write.

“It’s good to be back in the South where they put sugar in tea like God intended,” he told me.

It’s good to have Rick Bragg back in Alabama like God intended, and he definitely is one of the authors that make us ‘Alabama Proud.’ Reader Tom Croft’s email included this story: “As an English instructor on a technical college campus for nearly 20 years, I required my students to read “All Over but the Shoutin’.” While most of them detested English, me, and the thought of reading a book, they invariably enjoyed Bragg’s biography, and a few even said, “He told my life story.”

I’m sure I’ll get more emails about Alabama authors I left off this list, but let me single out a few more nominated by readers:

› Eugene B. Sledge, a former Marine who was born in Mobile and died in Montevallo in 2001, whose memoir “With The Old Breed: At Peléliu and Okinawa,” was written from notes he kept in his small Bible since he wasn’t allowed to keep a diary for fear it would fall into the hands of the Japanese. Ken Burns used it as source material for his documentary, “The War.” Thanks to Ivey Jackson of Mountain Brook for pointing me to his work.

› Andy Andrews from Orange Beach wrote “The Noticer” and “The Traveller’s Gift” and is a highly sought after motivational speaker who has spoken at The White House in four of the last six administrations, said reader Richard Howard.

› Mark Childress of Monroeville author of “Crazy in Alabama,” which became a hit movie starring Melanie Griffith.

› Wayne Flynt, the Auburn historian and close friend of Harper Lee, who is now working on her biography.

› Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner E.O. Wilson of Birmingham a biologist and naturalist known as “the father of sociobiology.”

› The late William Otha Hopper of Sprott, near Tuscaloosa, who was a fiction writer for the Saturday Evening Post.

› The late Anne George of Montgomery, author of “Murder on a Girl’s Night Out” and other “Southern Sisters” mysteries.

Haskins takes a weekly look at points of pride statewide. Email your suggestions to shaskins@al.com, or tweet them to @Shelly_Haskins using #AlabamaProud
Inmates say prisons are powder kegs

By: John Archibald

Prisoners across Alabama – not just at riot-torn Holman Prison in Atmore, but across the state – saw it coming for weeks.

Alabama's prisons are swollen and simmering and just about to boil.

"It's a can of gas and all it needs is one match," one inmate said from a contraband cell phone in a high security prison. "I'm just worried about where that match comes from."

It came this weekend at Holman, where an officer and warden were stabbed and rioting inmates set fire inside the prison. Another stabbing at Holman Monday rocked the prison world far beyond Atmore.

"There's more to come," an inmate said. "Donaldson (prison) is close. St. Clair is close. All it would take is one really good mistake by somebody in blue or somebody in white and this place will blow up."

I've heard it for weeks now. For months.

Of assaults and stabbings that may or may not have made it into official reports. I was told of overworked and underpaid correctional officers. Those in blue who, even on a good day often have to travel far to face an impossible task in an inhospitable environment.

I'm told of inmates at St. Clair and Holman who brazenly defy officers and wardens on matters as small as tucking in shirttails to issues as incomprehensibly large as sleeping in their own assigned cells.

I've been warned of prisons where inmates can get any drug they want any time they want it. Inmates and workers alike describe prisons where exercise has been limited because of violence and circumstance, and how the lack of exercise in turn leads to violence.

I was told. I was warned – in letters smuggled out by friends and family of inmates and by calls on those secreted cells. Surely prison officials had warning, too.

It's unclear whether guards at Holman called in sick because they knew trouble was coming Friday night, or if trouble came because those guards called in sick. But if I was warned of imminent trouble it stands to reason those in the prison knew the score.

Times are always hard in prisons. Whether violence is rising this year – as inmates and frequent prison visitors believe – is unclear because complete statistics are not readily available.
But the prison system last year reported twice as many assaults as the year before. Twice as many inmate-on-inmate assaults with serious injuries, and twice as many assaults where no one was badly hurt.

In December, just after a guard was stabbed at St. Clair Correctional Facility and an inmate was killed in a separate incident, assaults did seem to tick up across the state. A third of the prison system's inmate-on-inmate assaults for 2015 took place in December, according to the most recent records available from the Alabama Department of Corrections.

Alabama Department of Corrections spokesman Bob Horton said the stabbing happened earlier today, and was inmate on inmate. No reports of officers involved, injured but the Corrections Emergency Response Team is en route to the latest disturbance.

Inmates insist there is far more that goes unreported. But it is clear there has been escalation. There were almost a third more assaults with serious injuries in 2015 in Alabama prisons than the year before. There were, by the DOC's own count, more than twice as many such assaults last year than in 2010.

Prison has never been easy. It is not supposed to be.

But Alabama's prison are a mess. And it is very clearly not all about brick and mortar. It can't all be fixed by Gov. Robert Bentley's $800 million bond issue and the construction of three of the largest prisons in America.

Correctional officers really are underpaid and many of Alabama's prisons truly are in bad shape. Legislators are eager to criminalize, but slow to rehabilitate.

Building new prisons is a part of the solution. It is not the only one.

We have been warned.
Maddock: No interest in position

By: Jason Morton

Tuscaloosa Mayor Walter Maddox on Monday said he had no intention to seek the position of executive director of the Alabama Education Association.

His statement came after a recent online media report linked him to the job that was held for more than four decades the highly influential Paul Hubbert.

Hubbert's title was executive secretary-treasurer when he headed the professional teacher's association from 1969-2011. The AEA changed the name of the position late last year.

Maddock said he declined when Hubbert, who died in October 2014 at the age of 78, approached him about taking over as head of the organization before his Dec. 31, 2011 retirement.

Maddock had been hired by Hubbert as Tuscaloosa’s AEA’s UniServ director, which provides professional assistance to AEA members at the local level from 1996-2001.

And while he has a tremendous amount of respect for what Hubbert was able to accomplish, the mayor said he has no interest in returning to the AEA at this time.

“Public education in Alabama is in a fight to stay relevant, and I am deeply concerned that we are approaching new problems with old solutions,” Maddox said on Monday. “While I have been approached about the AEA position, I have not applied for consideration nor would I accept an offer.

“I have a tremendous amount of respect for AEA, but I believe the independent voice I enjoy as mayor of Tuscaloosa is a better platform to create new solutions than the bitter partisanship that seems unavoidable in Montgomery.”

Maddock had been linked to the position by Alabama Media Reporter editor-in-chief Bill Britt in an article he posted Friday titled “Applications for AEA Executive Director Ends Today, One Name Stands Out.”

The point of Britt’s story was that the application window for the AEA executive director position was closing on Friday and that several in Montgomery thought Maddox would be well-qualified for the position.

Britt noted Maddox’s position as AEA’s youngest UniServ director – the mayor, now 43, was 23 when first hired by Hubbert – and praised the mayor’s efforts at overseeing the city’s rebuilding efforts following the 2011 tornado.

“Many believe Maddox could bring that same tenacious caring to the wounded AEA,” Britt wrote.

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But Maddox was not, and never was, an actual candidate for the seat.

“I never said he had applied for the job or was even interested,” Britt said on Monday. “I simply stated that his name had been mentioned as a good candidate by many people I spoke with as I looked into who might be a good candidate.”

Whoever takes over as executive director of the AEA must “exercise inclusive and decisive leadership to advance the mission and vision of the AEA” and “maintain focus on the strategic goals and priorities established through systematic and strategic planning processes,” according to the job announcement placed last month in the Alabama School Journal.

The announcement said the executive director also must “champion public education in Alabama, including building collaborative relationships between AEA and external stakeholders in order to shape the highest professional standards for state and federal education policy” as well as “drive for continuous improvement utilizing data and measurement to insure effectiveness and efficiency of AEA program and services,” the announcement said.

While the deadline was listed as 5 p.m. Friday, AEA officials on Monday were saying little about the position.

The association, which is not a state agency and receives no state funding, declined to provide the list of applicants for the executive director position when asked by The Tuscaloosa News on Monday.

Amy Hubbard Marlowe, the AEA’s manager for research and information systems, also declined to say how many applicants are seeking the position and how much the prospective hire might earn.

“In order to protect the confidentiality of the applicants, AEA will not be releasing the names of the persons who applied for our executive director position,” Marlowe said. “While I certainly understand your interest, AEA will not be commenting on any of the details of the search for our new executive director.”
Judge Malone Retires

By: Stephanie Taylor

Longtime Tuscaloosa County Circuit Court Judge Chuck Malone has retired after serving on the bench for 13 years.

Malone, 62, served as a circuit judge in Tuscaloosa from 2001 until resigning in 2011, when Gov. Robert Bentley was first elected and named him chief of staff. The governor appointed him to serve as chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court later that year.

Malone ran for a full term as chief justice but was defeated by Roy Moore in the March 2012 Republican primary. Moore won the November general election and succeeded Malone in January 2013.

Bentley appointed Malone to a vacancy for a circuit judge in Tuscaloosa County later in 2013. His last day was Feb. 29.

Malone said he decided that now was the time to retire as a judge and return to private practice.

"I love what I've done for all these years, but I'm still young enough to practice law, and it's time to do something different," he said.

"It has been an honor to have served as circuit judge, chief of staff for the governor and chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. I thank my family, my friends and every person that has worked for me all these years."

Malone and Associates PC will focus on several areas of the law, including civil litigation, domestic and business cases. He may also work as a private judge, allowed by a 2012 law in which both sides in a civil or domestic relations case agree to hire a former or retired Alabama state court judge to preside and rule over their case.

Bentley will appoint Malone's successor on the circuit court.

The Tuscaloosa County Judicial Commission will submit three names to the governor on March 28, said Presiding Judge Jim Roberts, who serves as commission chairman.

The governor also appointed Roberts to succeed Malone when he left to work for Bentley in 2011.

"I had the unusual opportunity to practice before Judge Malone, succeed him on the bench and serve with him as a fellow judge," Roberts said. "As a lawyer practicing before him, I found Judge Malone to be fair and compassionate. As the judge who followed him, I benefited from his organizational skills by taking over a current and well-managed case load. As a fellow judge, he was a great leader and mentor."

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Malone said he appreciated the opportunities he had as a judge to help troubled defendants steer their lives in a better direction.

"You're sometimes a social worker in your role as a judge," he said. "You're trying to help people with their issues. Sometimes the only option is to lock them up. Having to lock up young people is something I won't miss."

Malone began work to develop the Second Chance program when he returned as judge in 2013.

The pretrial diversion program is a newly formed nonprofit corporation that required the cooperation of several entities, including the county government, the circuit judges and the University of Alabama.

It differs from other diversion programs because it's available to a broader range of offenses, including some felonies.

"The goal is to hold people accountable, having them pay their debts to society and be able to move forward without a felony on their records," he said.

Times have changed, and the program is an example of how the legal system is adapting, he said.

For instance, a college student who sells a small amount of marijuana to a friend is guilty of a felony but would have the opportunity to participate in the program and retain the rights to vote and own a gun and not have a felony conviction on his or her criminal record.

Some offenders would receive treatment; others may be directed to complete education or life skills courses.

"I'm proud we were able to get this program going; it's going to be good for a lot of people," he said.

Roberts said that Malone's service and knowledge of the law have been assets to Tuscaloosa County.

"Judge Malone has been a great servant of the people of Tuscaloosa County, and his service to our bench will be greatly missed," Roberts said.

Submissions for nominations for his replacement must be in writing and include responses to a questionnaire written by the Judicial Commission. Nominations must be submitted to Roberts by 5 p.m. March 21.

Bentley's appointee will serve the remainder of the six-year term, which ends in 2021.
The Birmingham News
Wednesday, March 16, 2016

House OKs budget at session’s midway point with major votes

Kim Chandler and Melissa Brownf Associated Press

Alabama lawmakers hit the midpoint of the 2016 legislative session this week with major votes on state budgets and other issues ahead of them.

Gambling legislation has yet to receive a floor vote with lawmakers unable to reach a consensus.

While lawmakers started the session with some Republicans more open to the idea of gambling as a revenue spending disagreement over what a lottery should look like — and a push to include casinos — have kept the bills bogged down.

"As of today the numbers are not there," said Sen. Jim McClendon, the sponsor of one of the lottery bills.

McClendon and Rep. Jeremy Harper introduced bills that would have Alabamians vote on whether to create a lottery. Lawmakers say they’re looking at adding more specifics in the hopes of getting the bills to the floor.

Harper said he wants to alter the bill to specify a revenue split with 65.1 percent going to the General Fund and the rest to the education budget.

McClendon also said he is discussing possible tweaks to the bill with the hopes to get it out of committee in the second half of the session.

"The budget crisis remains in place," McClendon, R-Springville, said. "This is one option that legislators could look at to solve that problem." 

Alabama is one of six states — along with Mississippi, Utah, Nevada, Hawaii and Alaska — that doesn’t have a state lottery.

The House voted Tuesday and approved a General Fund budget that Gov. Robert Bentley has already threatened to veto over Medicaid funding.

The spending bill would provide an additional $15 million to Medicaid instead of the $10 million, agency officials said is needed to avoid service cuts and continue a shift to managed care next year.

"There is no appetite for taxes. There is no appetite to take money from education. So I don’t see where the money is going to come from," Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said.

The session must end by May 16.

Here’s a look at where other major issues stand:

GENERAL FUND

The Alabama House of Representatives approved a General Fund budget on Tuesday. They approved a spending bill on a 65-35 vote after a five-hour filibuster by black lawmakers. Democrats harshly criticized the proposed spending plan, which is $85 million short of the amount Bentley says is needed to adequately fund Medicaid.

Montgomery Rep. John Knight says Medicaid provides medical care to 1 million vulnerable Alabamians and has few programs to trim.

Republican legislative leaders say there isn’t an appetite to raise taxes or cut other agencies for the sake of more money for Medicaid.

The governor has said the budget jeopardizes a planned transition to managed care next year.

The budget now moves back to the Alabama Senate.

PRISON CONSTRUCTION

The governor’s proposed $800 million bond issue for prison construction could see a key committee vote this week.

Bentley is seeking to build four new large prisons — three for men and one for women — and shutter most existing facilities, including Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women.

Corrections Commissioner Jeff Dunn said the new facilities will help solve the crowding and safety concerns in current facilities.

TENURE/TEACHER EVALUATIONS

A Senate committee voted out a bill that would make changes to tenure and teacher evaluations, but it faces an uncertain outlook in the second half of the session.

Marsh’s bill would extend the time to obtain tenure from three to five years. It would also create an evaluation system in which 25 percent of a teacher’s annual evaluation score would come from measures of student achievement growth using ACT Aspire or other test scores.

The Alabama Education Association spoke out against the bill saying it was unfair to link test scores to evaluations.

PAYDAY LOAN

Alabama lawmakers are debating proposed restrictions on the payday loan industry.

The Alabama Senate delayed a vote on a bill to give people at least six months to pay back the loan instead of just a few weeks. The bill would also require that people be allowed to make installment payments.

A separate House bill that is pending in committee would limit the fees charged by the short-term lenders.

TEACHER PAYRAISE

The House has approved a 4 percent raise for teachers and school employees making less than $75,000 annually.

MARRIAGE LICENSES

The Alabama Senate voted on Tuesday to do away with state-issued marriage licenses following the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that effectively legalized same-sex marriage.

Senators approved the bill 23-3. It would require couples to file a form recording their marriage rather than have county probate offices issue licenses.

Republican Sen. Greg Albritton of Range says the change would end controversy over marriage licenses while ensuring that people can marry whom they choose.

A few Alabama probate judges have stopped issuing marriage licenses altogether to avoid giving them to same-sex couples.

Rep. Patricia Todd is the only openly gay legislator in the state, and she calls the bill unnecessary. Todd says probate judges should do their job and issue licenses.

The bill now moves to the Alabama House of Representatives.

Marijuana bill in committee

A bill to reduce the penalty for marijuana possession is scheduled for a public hearing in an Alabama House committee on Wednesday.

Rep. Patricia Todd’s bill would make the first offense for having an ounce or less of marijuana punishable by a $250 fine, with no jail time and no criminal record.

Currently, second-degree marijuana possession, defined as possession for personal use only, is a Class A misdemeanor, which can draw up to a year in jail and a fine up to $50,000.

Todd said her bill would make the fine more reasonable, like a speeding ticket.

"It won’t appear on your record." Todd said. "It won’t stop you from getting a job."
Montgomery needs to end shell games

By: James Rainey

Gov. Robert Bentley is threatening a special session if the Legislature doesn’t do his bidding, and legislative leaders are saying “bring it on.”

We’ve certainly heard that tune before out of Montgomery, but the “music” has extra intensity and ramifications this year.

The Senate last month approved a $1.8 billion General Fund budget for Fiscal Year 2017. That’s a nearly 4 percent increase over last year, but it keeps the major state agencies at level funding. That includes the Alabama Medicaid Agency, which devours the most money from the General Fund (nearly 40 percent) to provide the state’s share of services for the million-plus Alabamians who use the program.

Medicaid officials sought at least a $100 million increase over this year’s $685 million budget, and claim that supposedly level funding will effectively be a $100 million cut.

They say that will mean cuts in services, which will carry additional consequences besides the impact on patients.

Alabama has been working on plans to transition Medicaid to a regional managed-care format, an idea we’ve supported at least trying given its success elsewhere. It’s counting on $700 million in federal funding to implement that plan, which is set to take effect Oct. 1.

However, that help from Washington is contingent on the state maintaining its current Medicaid program. Alabama officials fear the offer might be withdrawn if the program backslides, which could make the entire thing implode.

Bentley asked for $100 million more for Medicaid in his proposed budget. The Senate said “no.” The House will vote Tuesday on a budget that gives Medicaid $15 million more.

The governor says he’ll veto any budget that’s sans the $100 million and bring the Legislature back for a special session. Legislative leaders know he’ll do that — he did it twice last year before a General Fund budget was finalized — but are signaling it will be a waste of time.

They say there is no appetite for taxes or transferring $181 million from the Education Trust Fund to the General Fund (which Bentley’s budget proposed), or for giving Medicaid anything extra beyond the pittance in the House budget.

We’re actually a bit tired of legislative shell games, pulling dollars from one pot to plug leaks in another.

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The legislative leaders favor enacting their budget and seeing what happens — seeing what the actual impact on Medicaid is, and whether the efficiencies of managed care might make the funding concerns moot.

Theoretically, that’s not a bad approach. We doubt anyone can say with absolute certainty what’s going to happen.

It’s just hard to view people’s lives and health through a strictly theoretical prism, plus what happens if the feds do get mad and say “no money for you?”

Both sides seem dug in, and while Bentley isn’t totally unarmed and controls Alabama’s “bully pulpit,” the Legislature, if it’s determined, can impose its will on a governor.

So Medicaid might not get that extra $100 million. We just hope those who think “wait and see” is the best approach are right.

It seems as if a genie’s lamp (or some other miracle) will be necessary to fix what’s wrong with Alabama’s General Fund. One thing is for certain, the state’s politicians don’t know how to fix it and while they dither, the gap between costs and revenue just keeps getting wider.
Medicaid shortfall puts lawmakers on collision course with governor

Mike Cason mcason@al.com

The Alabama Medicaid Agency would get an additional $15 million under a General Fund budget approved by a committee last week, still well short of what the agency requested.

Medicaid Commissioner Stephanie Azar told the House Ways and Means General Fund Committee that the increase in the agency's General Fund appropriation, to $700 million, would not be enough to sustain its transformation to managed care.

That means the state would lose up to $747 million in federal funds to help with the transformation under a five-year project, Azar said.

Medicaid requested $785 million from the General Fund for next year, a $100 million increase from this year.

Gov. Robert Bentley included that amount in the budget he proposed to lawmakers last month.

But Bentley's plan depended on taking money from education, and lawmakers have balked at that.

Bentley said Tuesday he would veto a General Fund budget that left Medicaid $100 million short of its request. The newest version would be $85 million short.

Last week's approval by Ways and Means puts the budget in line for a vote in the House of Representatives.

The new version of the budget calls for spending $1.85 billion from the General Fund, an increase of $91 million, 5 percent, over this year.

The committee raised spending from the General Fund by $26 million over the plan that passed the Senate two weeks ago.

Besides adding $15 million for Medicaid over what the Senate had appropriated, the committee added $9 million for the Department of Corrections and $2.5 million for state employees' health insurance, Chairman Steve Clouse said.

Clouse said the legislature has still not faced up to tough questions about how to pay for the rising costs of Medicaid without crippling other key services.

"I think it's time that we don't cannibalize the rest of the General Fund budget," Clouse said. "The other agencies, they're not jumping for joy, but they're breathing a sigh of relief."

"It's now time to have the debate on Medicaid and what we're going to do here."

Last year, the Legislature increased the state tax on cigarettes by 25 cents a pack and moved some use tax revenue from education to the General Fund.

In all, Clouse said lawmakers approved about $165 million in annual recurring revenues for the General Fund.

"But we needed at least twice that much, maybe more," Clouse said.

Azar said she was appreciative of the additional $15 million in the budget, but said cuts would be required at the $700 million level.

She said that would include reducing payments to providers, which she said could cause some doctors to leave the state and rural hospitals to close.

The agency has also said it would have to eliminate all optional programs, including hospice, eyeglasses for adults, outpatient dialysis and PACE, a managed care program intended to keep elderly at-risk people out of nursing homes.

The commissioner said she would continue making her case to legislators.

"I'm going to keep on fighting and I think they're going to keep on listening," Azar said.

About one million Alabamians receive services through Medicaid.
Byrne wins big, looks ahead

John Sharp  jssharp@al.com

U.S. Rep. Bradley Byrne, cruising to re-election, pledged to quickly roll up his sleeves and return to work in Congress.

"We'll have fun tonight," he told supporters Tuesday evening. "Tomorrow morning, I get back on the airplane and go back to Washington."

Byrne, R-Fairhope, collected 59 percent of the vote in beating Dean Young in the GOP primary. It was stronger showing than during their 2013 GOP runoff battle, when Byrne beat Young by a $2.5-47.5 margin.

"I am extremely grateful to the people of southwest Alabama to give me two more years to do this job," Byrne said.

Byrne faces no Democratic opposition in November.

Young had criticized Byrne as being an "establishment Republican" who was out of step with 1st Congressional District voters.

Byrne said that the victory showed that voters appreciate having a congressman who's a "principled conservative." Byrne said he plans to keep fighting for Austal USA shipbuilding contracts, an expanded red snapper season, and the construction of an Interstate 10 bridge over the Mobile River.

He said, "Look at all the great things happening here. From Austal to Airbus to the great things happening at the University of South Alabama Mitchell Cancer Center. ... The people of this district like what we are doing."

Young, in an interview with a local TV news station, said, "We did all we could do. We had a grassroots army and a TV campaign. I'm proud of what people can do. We got the message out."

Byrne, who was making his first bid for re-election, garnered key endorsements in recent weeks from the National Rifle Association, National Farmers Association and National Right to Life. Also, Byrne scored support from U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Mobile, who said during an interview with FM Talk 106.5 that he's a "big fan" of the congressman.

Byrne did particularly well Tuesday in Eastern Shore area precincts, trouncing Young by 2,853 to 1,073 at the Fairhope Civic Center polling place, for example.
Businesses adjust during break

Some restaurants close or reduce hours of operation

By Stephen Dethrage
Staff Writer

The 37,000 students enrolled at the University of Alabama are the main patrons of the restaurants and stores on the Strip. So when spring break comes and most students leave campus, businesses there react in different ways.

Several shops and eateries shortened their business hours this week. Signs on the doors of establishments including Moe’s Southwest Grill, Little Italy Pizzeria and Palm Beach Tan alerted customers to early closings and other operational changes until classes resume next week.

Other business owners choose to counteract the spring break sales slump by closing for a few days. For some business owners, that means it’s time for a sabbatical or vacation.

Heath Wyatt, who co-owns the seafood staple Steamers on the Strip, said the student exodus is an opportunity to enhance the restaurant and do something that rarely occurs at a business that’s open 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

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BUSINESSES
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“We actually use it to our advantage, to freshen the place up with new paint and some deep cleaning,” Wyatt said. “It definitely hurts business, but down here I think you learn how to deal with it and live with it.”

Wyatt and his twin brother Keith opened Steamers on the Strip in September 2013 as a student-friendly expansion of their restaurant and oyster bar that was on southern McFarland Boulevard.

The primary location was destroyed in a fire just two months later. Now, the Strip has their only eatery, and students make up the majority of their clientele so the business has adjusted, Wyatt said.

“It’s just the nature of the beast,” he said. “We try to take advantage of the downtime and be ready for when everyone gets back to town, ready to come out and eat.”

Steamers reopened their restaurant and seafood market Thursday afternoon after four days of being closed for the makeover.

Larger chain restaurants generally conduct business as usual, which is harder for locally owned businesses, but not impossible. Phil Weaver, who owns and operates Buffalo Phil’s Pub and Cafe, said he is able to keep his restaurant open because he’s been around long enough to draw customers who aren’t students.

“We’ve been open 35 years, and in that time, we’ve built a customer base that is very loyal to us, that loves our products,” he said.

When the restaurant first opened, Weaver would close down during campus holidays. Now, he said, locals who love Phil’s look forward to Spring Break, when more parking spots are available, March Madness is in full swing and St. Patrick’s Day rolls around.

“Sales are off because all the students leave town, there’s a noticeable drop, but we still do a good bit of business,” Weaver said. “It’s worth it to us to stay open because of our name recognition and the customer loyalty we’ve gotten over the years.”

Weaver said stores and restaurants that choose to shut down this week aren’t making the wrong choice, they’re just in a different situation than he is.

“Being able to stay open is a testament to 35 years of building a business,” he said. “It doesn’t happen in a day.”
Alabama must do more to ensure open government

It was a 20-year-old cub reporter at The Birmingham News, but I was prepared. On every assignment I carried in my purse a copy of the state of Alabama open records and meeting laws. It shocked me how often I came across desk clerks that did not know what was public record and what wasn't. I would explain the law to them and they would usually have to go get a supervisor. I may or may not have left with what I needed. Sometimes it took weeks to get the information.

Later, when I got kicked out of meetings that shouldn't have been secret, that piece of paper didn't help me. It's that way for many journalists, who, like me, have spent countless hours sitting outside in the hallways, intently listening through closed doors as elected and appointed officials hide truth from reporters, and in doing so, the public.

I would like to say a lot has changed in my beloved home state of Alabama and the almost 25 years since, but it hasn't. In fact, in many ways it has gotten worse. Alabama needs help.

This week is Sunshine Week, a time when journalists everywhere will be perceived by the public as complaining about things we don't have. But here is why this matters to everyone, not just journalists: An informed society is a better, more democratic society. Without all of the information, how can we make the best decisions?

It's time for Alabama to operate in the sunshine and not in the shadows.

Reporters are here to serve the public. Journalism should give voice to the voiceless and tell stories that would otherwise remain untold. Wanting better open records laws is not idle curiosity. These laws allow citizens and journalists to access things like public safety records, criminal documents and matters that pose a threat to our communities.

At the scene of a crime reporters are often told to wait to talk to the public information officer and are pressured not to interview detectives on the scene. And, according to our state's severely-lacking open meetings laws, financial information from public bodies may or may not be open. These examples don't even begin to cover what some public servants hide.

Messages and information are becoming so managed that the public really doesn't get the full story without some tenacious digging by reporters. Even with that push for transparency, reporters often come up short because of poor laws and red tape so thick it would make passing a budget in Congress seem like a birthday party.

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press compiles a guide for journalists regarding each state's open government laws. The guide for Alabama is 56 pages. It takes 56 pages to explain what our state lawmakers have decided the public has the right to know. The truth would take far fewer words.

By any measure, that's extreme. Do better, Alabama.

—Meredith Cummings is a journalism instructor at the University of Alabama and president of the Alabama Professional Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. Readers can email her at mccummings1@ua.edu.

The Tuscaloosa News
Thursday, March 17, 2016
Saban helps shine light on dark topic

It seems these days there is little that remains taboo. It wasn’t that long ago when people spoke only in hushed tones and innuendo when the topic of sexual orientation came up. Now, gay marriage, lesbian adoptions and transgender transformations are daily news.

A week ago, the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination made a crude remark during a nationally televised debate — something about the size of body parts — that preceding generations would have found appalling, enough even to sink a candidacy.

Drug use of any kind was something people hid behind closed doors. Now, it seems almost inevitable that marijuana will be legalized in a majority of states in a couple of years.

Social media makes it so that anything that happens in anyone else’s life is shared instantaneously with the world.

But there’s still one topic that many people don’t want to talk about, don’t want to hear about and pray they never have to confront. And like most bad things, when it is kept in the shadows, it grows.

Few people in this state have a spotlight that burns as bright as Nick Saban’s. We’re grateful he chose this week to turn that spotlight onto those shadows and bring light to the deep, dark, depressing subject of suicide.

For a variety of reasons, the vast majority of media do not report suicides unless the death involves a public figure or the act itself takes place in a very public manner.

Most often, people shy away from openly discussing suicide and what preceded it. One of the side effects, though, is that unexplored topics can be full of speculation and misinformation.

And usually, when it is discussed it is after it has occurred and the discussion of what could have been done to prevent it is often too painful to thoroughly consider through the skewed prism of hindsight.

Saban came out in strong support of a bill introduced this week by state Sen. Gerald Allen, R-Cottondale. The bill, known as the Jason Flatt Act, would make suicide awareness and prevention training mandatory for all certified public school personnel.

Saban first became involved in the effort to raise awareness of suicide prevention in 2001, when he was head football coach at Louisiana State University. He’s remained involved in the effort and has seen similar bills passed in 17 other states. Now, he’s the driving force behind getting the bill passed in Alabama.

There have been an unusually high number of suicides at the University of Alabama as of late.

Kudos to Saban and those who dare drag this topic into the daylight. It is so much more important than Bruce Jenner’s dress or Donald Trump’s juvenile bragadocio. It deserves more attention. Mental and emotional health should not have the shroud of secrecy. The fact is some people need help and they shouldn’t be ashamed to ask for it. And, despite what else changes in the world, a drop of prevention is still worth more than an ocean of regret.
Saban takes rare step, weighs in on legislation that will save lives

Stephen J. Katsinas for AL.com

It is rare that Coach Nick Saban weighs in on issues outside of football, but weight he did on the Jason Platt Act being considered by the 2016 Alabama Legislature: “This is not a political thing for me, all right? This is all about how can we help our youth have a better opportunity with our help and assistance, that we can see warning signs of something that is very, very preventable.”

Jason Platt was a very average 16-year-old. According to his father, Jason was a “5’10” student who loved sports, especially football, and was active in his youth group. He had many friends, his father Clark said, noting that “Jason was the one who was always up for going places and trying new things. From all appearances, my son loved life.”

But on July 16, 1997, Clark Platt said, Jason became a statistic of the “silent epidemic” of youth suicide. “Since then, Platt has worked tirelessly through the Jason Platt Foundation to encourage awareness about teenage suicide.

The problem is very real here in Alabama, as statistics from the Alabama Department of Public Health shows:

- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death among Americans of all ages, and the third leading cause of death among Americans ages 10 to 24.
- America experiences about 100 suicides each day, or one suicide every 10 minutes.
- The suicide rate in Alabama is rising. It was 13.3 percent per 100,000 people in 2000, rising to 14.9 percent per 100,000 people in 2013.
- Alabama has had higher rates than the U.S. average each year since 1990.
- In 2013, more Alabamians died in suicides (719) than homicides (420). Of the 719 deaths, 84 were people between 10 and 24 years old, and nine in 10 were male.

Behind each statistic is a personal tragedy of a life cut short, grieving families and friends. These were some of the facts that influenced Saban to reach out to Governor Robert Bentley and Tuscaloosa Senator Gerald Allen to introduce and support the Jason Platt Act. Sixteen states to date, including Mississippi and Arkansas, have enacted legislation requiring annual suicide awareness prevention education training for their certificated public K-12 school personnel.

The Jason Platt Act has been unanimously approved by the Alabama Senate Health Committee. As Coach Saban said in an Associated Press story, “We’ve been very, very fortunate through the years to have very few players suffer issues and problems when we were coaching them,” he said. “But we have had some. And it’s one of the most devasting things that you have to go through, even as a coach.” Suicide is preventable. And once passed, the Jason Platt Act will build upon existing efforts by caring Alabamians who are already stepping up. For example, Birmingham’s Crisis Center has served Central Alabama since 1970. Crisis intervention volunteers who help staff the hotline receive 30 hours of extensive training, and participate in three four-hour sit-in sessions where trainees monitor actual calls received in real time by experienced volunteers. I am proud to personally know caring, committed University of Alabama students who drive from Tuscaloosa to Birmingham for their weekly volunteer shifts.

America as a nation has a long way to go on mental health issues. We won’t be where we need to be until the day comes when the obtaining mental health services is the same as treating a broken leg or arm.

Clearly, the state will need to adequately fund suicide prevention training for our 66,000 certificated public school personnel. That said, Coach Saban is right. Training for suicide prevention is a step in the right direction. As Clark Platt, Jason’s father, said, “It will save young lives.”

Katsinas is professor of Higher Education and Political Science and director of the Education Policy Center at The University of Alabama. Email him at katsinas@ua.edu.
Ink and immunity

By: Ed Enoch

That the immune system takes a hit when a person gets a tattoo for the first time was no surprise to a team of researchers at the University of Alabama. It’s a common reaction to stress.

Nor was it surprising that their research, recently published in the journal American Journal of Human Biology, suggested that the bodies of people who get multiple tattoos adjust over time to the repeated stress and see less immune system suppression when they get inked.

The question that interests Christopher Lynn, one of the authors and an associate professor of anthropology, is whether it is possible people with healthy immune systems are more likely to get multiple tattoos.

“Is there something special about people with tattoos? Are people with robust immune systems attracted to tattoos?” Lynn said.

The relationship between the immune system and stress was expected but it had not been studied before through the cultural variable of tattoos, said Lynn, a biocultural medical anthropologist.

“It is not an extraordinary finding, but it was one that has not been applied to tattoos,” he said.

The paper is cautious about the interpretation of the findings, noting follow-up studies including more varied demographics in different places are needed.

The project was inspired by students interested in tattoos as a research subject and Lynn's interest based on previous cross-cultural work and his own experience with tattoos.

Lynn's students did the field work in 2012, approaching 31 people at tattoo businesses in Tuscaloosa and Leeds, collecting demographic and physiologic information as well as the number of tattoos received and time involved in the tattooing procedures. The paper “Tattooing to 'Toughen up': Tattoo experience and secretory immunoglobulin A” was published online in the journal on March 4. Lynn's co-authors were former UA graduate student Johnna Dominguez, who did most of the fieldwork, and Jason DeCaro, UA associate professor of anthropology.

Saliva samples were collected before and after the participants' tattoo experiences. The researchers analyzed the samples, measuring levels of the antibody immunoglobulin A and the hormone Cortisol.

Lynn started out planning to use immunoglobulin A but added Cortisol after receiving feedback on the paper from a reviewer.

Immunoglobulin A, which is associated with acute temporary stress, lent itself to easy collection and the body continually produces it.

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"I liked it because I was looking for something that was really highly responsive to stress. You can see quick fluctuations," he said.

The antibody is found in mucus membranes such as the respiratory and gastrointestinal.

"Is it essentially a front line defense," Lynn said.

Cortisol, which suppresses the immune system, is a standard biomarker for stress, Lynn said. The body begins to release it in a delayed reaction to stress, Lynn said.

The researchers predicted an inverse relationship between immunoglobulin A and Cortisol, with less immunoglobulin A suppression among those with more tattoo experience.

Lynn likened the relationship of tattooing and the immune system to exercise. Muscles are sore and people feel wiped out as they start exercising, but their bodies re-adjust overtime to the stress as part of routine exposure and a new baseline is established.

The body gets used to the stress, in this case the tattoo process, and it moderates the response "so you don't over react," Lynn said.

The immune system suppression as a reaction to stress allows for a diversion of energy from nonessential functions as part of a flight of flight response, according to Lynn. It's an evolutionary holdover from a time when the stresses were primarily physical dangers -- Lynn used the example of fending off or fleeing hungry predators. Now, most human stress is psychosocial responses, Lynn said, but the body continues to react in a similar fashion.

"It does what it always does which is conserve energy from what is nonessential for the next 5-10 minutes," he said.

Humans have a long history of using tattoos for body decorations and cultural traditions. Lynn notes a Samoan tradition that requires sitting for a prolonged time for the application of a tattoo on the lower torso and thighs. The tattoo was a mark a cultural change that required the endurance of a painful process.

Aside from the cultural communications, tattoos may also signal underlying immunological and genetic qualities, according to the study. Tattoos that heal with no signs of ill effects may signal a strong immune system and physical health. A positive experience getting a tattoo, may encourage people to get more, Lynn said.

Lynn also hypothesizes, in a society with an advanced medical system, tattoos may allow people to "up the ante" as part of a battery of risks that show their robustness.

"It is not as simple as taking risk; it is saying I am smart enough to do things that you think are risky because I see something you don't ... They are basically advertising their qualities," he said.
Popular short talks program returns

By: Mark Hughes Cobb

One of the realizations of adulthood is appreciating, even yearning for, long-gone days when education was a primary occupation. The deeper irony: One thing students rarely learn is that study is its own reward, not just a means to a paycheck.

That might help explain the popularity of TED talks, a kind of passive continuing-education series in 18-minute or shorter recorded bites. Even after 32 years rolling out "ideas worth sharing," TED still regularly turns up dreams, inspiration, philosophy, innovation and other elucidation via videotaped lectures, with speakers from Nobel Prize winners to anthropologists, from Billy Graham to Richard Dawkins, from Bono to Bill Clinton.

The success of last year's local spinoff, TEDxTuscaloosa, called for a repeat. Journalist and educator Meredith Cummings, who's lead organizer, is an avid TED ( an acronym is for technology, entertainment and design) advocate, listening to TED talks on radio, her iPod and phone.

"I like learning," she said, "and I didn't always like learning in school."

"Some of the topics are so niche, and not going to be for everybody. But they're things that I, in my daily life, am not ever going to come across otherwise. They're ways to stretch my mind."

For 2015, the TEDx Tuscaloosa speakers ranged from broadcaster Mark Raines, who spoke on struggling to overcome an affliction that brought on a mysterious stutter; to University of Alabama instructional designer and entrepreneur Josh Sahib, who talked about how a "side hustle" should be more than just Plan B; to Dr. Alan Blum, the Wallace Endowed Chair in Family Medicine at UA, who used humorous tales to illustrate the monetary muscle behind the continually thriving tobacco industry. Each of last year's eight TEDxTuscaloosa talks is available for viewing on the website www.tedx tuscaloosa.com.

That's also where potential speakers for this year's event can apply. The event will be from 5:30-7:30 p.m. April 30 in the upstairs bar at Mellow Mushroom, 2230 University Blvd.. The deadline for applications is March 21. The website will also be the spot for ticket applications, when that process opens.

Andrew Richardson, director of advancement and alumni relations at UA's College of Community Health Sciences, secured the first TEDxTuscaloosa license last year, inspired in part by Raines' story. With a 2-year-old to handle at home, he brought Cummings on board to be lead coordinator for 2016, though he's still involved.

"I told her, 'I don't want this to go away, but I don't have time to do it this year,'" he said. Last year's success was solid, though they found a few tweaks: There will be six speakers instead of eight, and rather than have a break halfway through, this year's talks will run straight ahead, with a reception planned for the end.

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"We want people to stay and ask questions after; we're hoping to encourage conversations," Cummings said. "Mellow Mushroom has been super accommodating, to let us get in there and practice beforehand," because the TED license requires certain video and audio recording standards. "The upstairs space has a stage, good acoustics, and it's the right size. It's not going to feel too big or too small (the license limits the size of an audience: TEDxTuscaloosa can have no more than 100 attendees), and the food and drink are built in."

Otherwise, this year's much the same.

"Each speaker will still have 18 minutes, and there'll still be a wide range of content," Richardson said. "The goal is to mix it up so it's not all hard science, not all pie-in-the-sky motivational."

Again, The Speaking Studio at UA is a partner; all TEDxTuscaloosa talkers will work with the professional communicators to hone talks into finest form.

Applicants will also need to shoot a short video, somewhere from 30 seconds to three minutes, giving an outline of their ideas. The purpose is to let the organizers hear the speakers' actual voices, rather than writing voice, to help them choose the best lineup.

"It doesn't have to be fancy," Cummings said. "It can just be on the phone."

"In a written application, we may not get all the inflection or excitement."

While no one's excluded, TEDxTuscaloosa seeks largely local, West Alabama-based stories and speakers.

"But it can be in any realm, about anything. We don't like to limit it," Cummings said. "We encourage anyone with any topic ideas to apply, even if they seem improbable. TED talks are about dreaming; it doesn't have to be concrete."
How a ‘stealth organization’ in Alabama is quietly solving the world’s hardest problems

By: Dana Beyerle

It’s October 1941. Alabama headlines follow the war in Europe and Asia. On Oct. 11, less than two months from U.S. entry into the World War II, the Alabama Research Institute is formed in Birmingham with the challenge to produce innovative research for the South.

An early contract is with the National Peanut Council to develop a way to homogenize peanut butter. But as fate would have it, the war halts everything until 1944 when ARI begins its work in earnest.

Today Business Council of Alabama member Southern Research, as ARI is now known, is celebrating its Diamond Anniversary as a heralded scientific and engineering research organization involved in pre-clinical drug discovery and development, energy and environment initiatives, and engineering research including sensor systems and advanced materials – think space vehicle reentry heat shields.

Southern Research works with clients and partners in the pharmaceutical, biotechnological, defense, environmental, energy, and aerospace industries from its Birmingham headquarters, with additional Alabama facilities in Huntsville and Wilsonville, and laboratories in Frederick, Maryland, Durham, North Carolina, Houston, Texas, and Cartersville, Georgia.

“We’re a broad organization,” said Art Tipton, Ph.D., Southern Research’s president and CEO since 2013.

From its original focus on metallurgy and textiles that were prevalent in Alabama, Southern Research grew as it explored. Probably the best known is Southern Research’s history in cancer drug research and development.

“We had strong chemists in textiles, and they took their skills and developed novel drugs,” Tipton said in a recent interview. “We developed a strong history in the ‘40s and ‘50s just after World War II, as people started to understand the biology of cancer, and that led to the discovery of cancer drugs that help Alabama and people across the world.”

Southern Research has developed 20 drugs to combat forms of cancer, ALS, Alzheimer’s, diabetes, kidney disease, Parkinson’s, and tuberculosis, including seven FDA-approved cancer drugs.

Although they’re not household names, those seeking protection against chemotherapy damage during treatment and those with childhood and adult leukemia, brain tumors, Hodgkin’s disease, skin cancers, and sarcomas are familiar with them – Amifostine, Carmustine, Clorfarabine, Dacarbazine, Fludarabine, Pralatrexate, and Lomustine.

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“What we’re looking for is to prolong human life,” Tipton said. “Obviously with some of the drugs and combination therapies that are innovative, some people do get cured of cancer. But there’s not a single cure for all cancer, and obviously, there won’t be for several decades.”

Southern Research isn’t entirely focused on cancer. It’s active in studying HIV that causes AIDS, which so far has eluded a cure.

“We’re going at it a little differently helping researchers around the world understand the AIDS virus and how it interacts, making drugs available, and getting information to other researchers,” Tipton said. “We look at how the AIDS virus often gets into cells in latent form, and we develop tools to understand that.”

Southern Research has been involved with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and space exploration since Day 1.

“We have a very active history with NASA and manned space flight, initially primarily material science,” Tipton said. “We’ve been an organization that developed materials as man started to break free of Earth’s atmosphere, materials that were not developed until the 1950s and 1960s. We’re still very actively involved with NASA as it looks to reactivate manned space flight vis-a-vis the Space Launch System.”

Southern Research developed material that enables manned rockets to fly safely, but it took on an additional role after the Feb. 1, 2003, fatal breakup of the Space Shuttle Columbia when it reentered Earth’s atmosphere. The shuttle’s destruction was caused by heat shields being knocked off during takeoff, which allowed heat from reentry to destroy the shuttle.

NASA came to Southern Research seeking a way to capture real-time video during shuttle launches. Southern Research responded with the Airborne Imaging and Recording System turrets on WB-57 aircraft that can videotape launches as far away as 20 miles and well past booster separation at 146,000 feet.

“Southern Research also has a business-minded outlook as a major employer, with 500 scientists and engineers working in its four divisions, and believes job development is good for Birmingham and the entire state,” said BCA President and CEO William J. Canary.

Tipton’s pharmaceutical and biotech background is business startups and growth. He has created companies and has dozens of issued patents. The year he became Southern Research’s president and CEO, he was inducted as a fellow into the National Academy of Inventors.

Tipton is on the board of directors of the Economic Development Partnership Association Foundation, the Governor’s Workforce Development Council, and “anything we can do to help companies locate in Birmingham.”

“We need coordination in workforce development, creating meaningful jobs and venture capital for young startups,” Tipton said.
Serving on the BCA board is Southern Research Director of External Affairs Watson Donald.

Even as Southern Research continues its space exploration role, it stays with its original intent of aiding southern economic development.

Southern Research helps the Alabama Department of Commerce review applications for innovation funds and responds when called upon by the economic development arm of Alabama Power Co., which actually started Alabama Research Institute.

Alabama Power's president in 1941, Tom Martin, realized that if Alabama and the South were going to grow its industrial base, companies would need science and engineering done, Tipton said.

"There just wasn't a base here," Tipton said. "We started Southern Research to help grow the economic development of the region and the South."

Southern Research's energy and environmental research led to the technology and procedures to reduce coal combustion. Southern Research has a carbon capture center in Wilsonville.

In addition to NASA, Southern Research works on behalf of the National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Energy, hospitals, major aerospace firms, utility companies, and other private and government organizations to solve tough problems.

Tipton admits that Southern Research hasn't tooted its own horn, but it does plan several events to celebrate its 75th anniversary.

"We're pretty much a stealth organization and haven't shined light on ourselves," Tipton said. "We're kind of like a public library, no one is disappointed in what we're doing and we're not a controversial organization. But we need to get out and tell our story more."

Look for a book this summer written by Southern Research folks who were involved in specific areas. Southern Research also is planning public and private events later this year for employees, some of whom have been with Southern Research for 40 and 50 years.

In 2005, Southern Research Institute, as it was known then, was inducted into the Alabama Engineering Hall of Fame. Eleven years later, it's not resting on its laurels.

"I think we're looking at megatrends, looking to the future of the country, better drugs as the population gets older, better energy sources -- we're agnostic to what they are, nuclear, coal, or solar -- we're looking to improve those areas, looking to make us safer," Tipton said.
‘Innovation District’ in Birmingham best reflects downtown section’s future

By: Michael Tomberlin

When the Birmingham City Council voted last month to change the name of the city’s “Entrepreneurial District” to the “Innovation District,” some influential leaders applauded the move not just for branding reasons, but for the realization of what the Magic City has become and can become.

Since that decision, leaders from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, REV Birmingham, Innovation Depot, the Birmingham Business Alliance and the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama have met with Birmingham Mayor William Bell to ensure the Innovation District will emerge in reality and not just in the changing of the signs that mark the district.

“The City Council’s action to change the formal name of the ‘Entrepreneurial District’ to the ‘Innovation District’ is a declaration of the intent of the City of Birmingham, UAB, Innovation Depot, BBA and other partners to put Birmingham’s City Center on the global map as a hotbed of innovation,” David Fleming, president of REV Birmingham, said. “It is a response to recognition by stakeholders that the goal of this area is to be a place in our city that fosters new methods, ideas and products. This area can be defined by the connection, culture and collaboration that results in an innovation economy in our city. This is critical for the growth of the Birmingham region and our competitiveness in the modern economy.”

As with the Entrepreneurial District, the Innovation District is bordered by the railroad lines to the south, Second Avenue North to the north, Interstate 65 to the west and 18th Street to the east.

At the heart of the district is Innovation Depot, a business incubator established by UAB that is home to a number of startups, many of them in innovative and emerging technology fields.

Devon Laney, CEO of Innovation Depot, said having an identified district provides a place for companies to grow in a place where they have indicated they want to be.

“Having an established Innovation District focused on the connectivity, walkability and clustered technology industries startups most desire can have a major impact on this region moving forward,” Laney said. “Innovation Depot’s member companies overwhelmingly want to remain ‘close’ or ‘adjacent’ to Innovation Depot when they graduate. Seventy-five percent of our companies indicate a preference to remaining in the downtown area, with a majority specifically citing the Innovation District. Connectivity is essential, both in terms of infrastructure and the relationships and resources the companies have developed here at Innovation Depot. This is a new model of urban economic development.”

Economic development officials agree. -

“We feel that changing the name to Innovation District better represents what’s currently happening, and will happen, in the area anchored by Innovation Depot,” Brian Hilson, president

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and CEO of the BBA, said. “This is a great way to help spread innovation throughout Birmingham’s central business district, and attract and retain more businesses in our area.”

At some point the signs that mark the “Entrepreneurial District” will come down and new ones will go up declaring it the “Innovation District.” But the real signs will be the innovation taking place by those who are already in or will come into the district, Laney said.

“The city was recently named as a ‘Tech Hire’ city by the White House, and Fast Company magazine named Birmingham as the No. 1 city in America for millennial entrepreneurs,” Laney said. “This positive focus on our city and region is driving the growth of young entrepreneurs in the technology space we see. TechBirmingham, BBA, Innovation Depot, UAB, and other partners are helping to promote and advance the technology ecosystem in our community, with a major part of that effort being the vision and development of the Innovation District.”
UAB aims to bridge northern gap with Gardendale project

Thousands of patients in metro Birmingham’s northern areas will gain improved access to health care once the University of Alabama at Birmingham Health System completes its latest big project.

That access to care for a growing populace was one of the factors driving UAB’s recent purchase of five acres of land in the heart of Gardendale for a primary care and family care facility and freestanding emergency department.

Northern Jefferson County has been a rumored project target for some of Birmingham’s largest health care providers for years, but UAB was ultimately the first to commit to a project of this scale.

Projected investments for the first phase of the project total $25 million, and ground could be broken on the first phase this summer if approved by the University of Alabama System Board of Trustees.

The primary care facility will house nine or 10 physicians, which triples the number at the UAB Medicine clinic that opened in Gardendale in 2014.

Thalia Baker, executive director of primary care and development at UAB, said the need for more physicians in the area was a big driver for the project.

“We’ve had Gardendale in our strategic plan for awhile,” she said. “Physicians are beginning to retire, so we had to prepare for an eventual shortage in north Birmingham that, if gone unmet, would have further widened the care gap we have been seeing there.”

Baker said UAB is still conducting analysis on what specialties within primary care are needed most in that area so they can bring in the right physicians to help manage that population.

Once the facilities are online, Baker said the locations will see 400 to 450 patients per day.

Will Ferniary, CEO of UAB Health System, said that will significantly reduce strains from increasing patient visits at UAB’s main campus, especially in the emergency department.

“Gardendale is growing rapidly, is underserved and in need of a medical facilities. About 25 percent of our emergency department visits come from the north metro area, and providing for these emergencies closer to home will provide better service and help improve service at UAB Hospital’s trauma center and ER,” he said.

UAB has submitted its letter of intent for a certificate of need for the freestanding emergency department, and Baker said that needs to be finalized until additional details can be released about that phase of the project.

Although UAB’s Gardendale project will be a welcome relief for one medically underserved area of Alabama, there are still many other parts of the state that need additional support, said Danne Howard, senior vice president of government relations and emergency preparedness at the Alabama Hospital Association.

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Since 2011, Alabama has lost four rural hospitals and 108 beds to closures, and Howard said constructing standalone urgent care, primary care and emergency facilities to replace the lost services are helpful, but not one option is exactly suited to a specific region.

"We need to try to develop in rural areas where hospitals are struggling. I'm not sure a freestanding emergency department is enough in some areas, and we need to look at ways of scaling back operations of struggling hospitals where it becomes more than an FED but less than an acute care, full-service hospital," Howard said. "At the same time, other areas do need the 24/7 services."

Howard said one way is for larger health systems, like UAB or the Brookwood-Baptist Health System, to partner with regional hospitals and take over some of their operations while discontinuing others so that those locations can remain open.

She said these partnerships have worked in some states, and that it helps providers easily triage patients from FEDs to outpatient clinics.

Ferniani said such partnerships are being formed in Alabama, and that UAB's continues to support regional hospitals.

"Partnerships are useful and feasible – they vary from a full partnership like Brookwood-Baptist and UAB's partnership with Medical West to more specific ways of working together. UAB supports all the hospitals in Birmingham. We have partnerships for specific services at St. Vincent's, Brookwood, Princeton Baptist Medical Center, Shelby Baptist Medical Center, and other hospitals in the state."
Metrology engineers measure up for customers worldwide

By: Aviation and Missile Command Public Affairs

The Test, Measurement and Diagnostic Equipment Activity, under the direction of Dr. Myra Gray, supports over 840,000 items of Test, Measurement and Diagnostic Equipment in the Army inventory owned and operated by Army units, depots, test centers, and R&D labs, consisting of more than 15,000 DOD and federal customers worldwide.

Approximately 560 USATA employees provide calibration support for this tremendous workload at 50 sites in 26 states and eight countries, wherever the Army has a presence. This wide range of services requires personnel with expertise in 35 different job series, in eight different career fields. Among the most important of these are the metrology engineers deployed throughout USATA. These are the USATA personnel who provide the technical expertise required to ensure that TMDE and the Army systems they support are fully operational, available for use, maintained at appropriate intervals, and calibrated with accurate measurement standards and systems.

Although the calibration services provided by USATA receive very little recognition, calibration support for Army systems and maintenance organizations is essential, since it underpins every equipment maintenance or repair action, whether performed on the battlefield or at a depot. That calibration support is founded on ensuring that measurements made with TMDE are accurate and traceable to national standards.

To ensure that measurements made with TMDE are accurate and traceable, USATA operates the Army Primary Standards Laboratory, the only lab of its kind in the Army. The APSL provides the highest level of metrology (science of measurement) support within the Army. In addition, APSL operations are accredited to the ISO 17025 international standard for metrology labs.

The foundation of the APSL’s technological excellence is provided by the 40 engineers and physicists who enable state-of-the-art metrology support in at least 58 measurement parameters in virtually every technology area. The work they do on a daily basis rarely receives any fanfare, but it is critical to the success of the Army mission.

One of these engineers is Miles Owen. As the senior mechanical engineer in the Chemical/Biological Laboratory of the Applied Physics Standards Laboratory in the APSL, Owen is one of the world’s preeminent authorities on aerosol metrology. Under his technical oversight the APSL has achieved ISO 17025 accreditation in aerosol number concentration standards. The APSL is the only laboratory in the United States with direct traceability to the National Institute of Standards for these accredited calibrations. In the vernacular of metrology, standards are the instruments and processes used to ensure that other items of TMDE are performing/measuring correctly. Utilizing the technical expertise he gained as an undergraduate at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, and the hands-on experience he obtained as a student intern in the APSL, Owen developed a “state of the art” aerosol number concentration standard in the small but impressive chem/bio lab he has built. This new concentration standard and the associated measurement technique were successfully vetted through an internal peer review at NIST by the Washington Editorial Review Board. As a result, Owen was awarded U.S. Patent

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No. 7536898 for his “Quantitative Aerosol Dilution System.” The significance of his achievement is that his efforts in support of aerosol number concentration standards have had a direct and positive impact on the accuracy of instruments used within many Army and DOD chemical and biological activities and programs. His efforts in developing highly precise and accurate instrumentation that can detect minute levels of chemical or biological materials directly support warfighter safety and mission effectiveness.

Another of USATA’s unsung engineering heroes is Dexter Shelton, a senior electronics engineer in the Microwave/Millimeter-wave Lab of the APSL. As a senior metrologist, his duties run the gamut from working on R&D projects developing new microwave standards, techniques, or software routines, to serving as a mentor for the younger members of the laboratory staff. Like most engineers, Shelton enjoys a good challenge. For example, he recently participated in the Army Engineer and Scientist Exchange Program as a guest worker at the National Physical Laboratory in London, the premier metrology laboratory of Great Britain. His one year assignment culminated in the publication of a juried paper, “Determining the High-frequency Resistivity of Slightly Lossy Coaxial Air Lines.” The results reported in the paper were of great interest to personnel working in microwave and millimeter-wave labs on very high frequency measurements supporting communications, radar, smart munitions, and security systems of many types. The ESEP work is just one example of the many contributions throughout Shelton’s career that have been invaluable in establishing improved microwave and millimeter-wave measurement capabilities within the Army in support of Army systems.

Owen and Shelton are prime examples of engineers throughout USATA who are making a difference. They are representative of the quality and proficiency of USATA’s engineering staff.

“Our organizational vision is to be a world-renowned metrology enterprise, sustaining the strength of our nation,” USATA Chief Engineer David Hargett said. “Our engineers play a key role in making that happen.”
Career tech looking to take FIRST at Huntsville regional

By: Rebecca Croomes

Usually the Limestone County Career Technical Center robotics team travels to other states to compete, but next week, they'll stay in the Tennessee Valley.

Team 34 is slated to take on dozens of schools from across the country in the inaugural FIRST Robotics Rocket City Regional at the Von Braun Center in Huntsville. The March 24-26 contest will put students' engineering abilities to the test as they compete for the most points with their robot creations.

FIRST (which means For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) challenges high school students to build machines capable of performing a certain set of tasks. How well the robot performs is arguably the most important scoring factor, but points are also given to teams based on the machine's appearance and how much spirit and effort the team put into the competition.

For the Rocket City Regional, teams will compete in “Stronghold,” a medieval-themed task in which the robot must sling “boulders” (dodgeballs) at goals to simulate hitting an enemy's castle.

“We're getting excited for the Huntsville regional,” said East Limestone High School senior Tristan Jay.

For Jay and the other seniors who've spent all four years of their high school career on Team 34, having a Huntsville regional competition — or any competition closer to home — is a long-awaited happening. As Team 34 enters its 20th year of existence, the seniors are looking to mark the anniversary and cap off their high school years with an overall win at the VBC.

Ardmore High School's Rachel Long said she believes the team will do well, because over the six-week period the students were given to build the robot, they were able to build two models — one to compete with and one to work out the bugs on.

On the team spirit front, they're covered. The machine, lovingly named “Sir Lance-a-Bot” is decked out in the team's signature red and white. Jay, the team's mascot, will add a knight's costume to his astronaut helmet and dub himself the “astro-knight.”

It's not all a game, however. The 30-plus teens on the FIRST team have spent class time, afternoons and weekends perfecting their robot's performance and their competition strategy. The time commitment can be demanding, but the teens agreed it's all been good fun.
Casey Wigginton, a tech school instructor and one of Team 34's mentors, said the kids' passion has shown through over time.

"We're always proud of the work they do," Wigginton said, adding, even if they don't take home top honors, students definitely come out on top. "It's a good opportunity to see them learn."

Trophies aside, the program helps the teens shape up their post-high school plans, Wigginton said, and education is the most important goal. Though there are some who decide to transfer out of computers and robotics after high school, many do decide to stay within a related field. Jay plans to attend the University of Alabama in Huntsville for a computer engineering degree and Long plans to attend Auburn University for a mechanical engineering degree.

The Rocket City Regional begins at 9 a.m. Thursday, March 24, at the Von Braun Civic Center, with preliminary workshops and meetings for teams. Competition starts at 8 a.m. Friday. The competition is free and open to the public.
Health-Tracking Startup Fails to Deliver on Its Ambitions

By: Rachel Metz

Building a wristband that can accurately and consistently measure activities like steps taken or biometrics like heart rate is difficult. There are all kinds of issues to take into account, like noise from arm movements, and the ways in which different skin tones or skin translucencies might impact measurements.

Perhaps no one knows this better than the founders of Quanttus. The startup spent several years and millions of venture-capital dollars trying to develop a wrist-worn device that can measure blood pressure. Last week it released its first product, which is nowhere near realizing this dream: an iPhone app for tracking blood-pressure measurements.

Called Q Heart, the free app invites users to log blood-pressure measurements (though you’ll need a blood-pressure measuring cuff), and keep an eye on how they change over time. You can also log your heart rate—unlike some apps, Q Heart won’t measure this for you, either, though—and apply labels to indicate what you were doing in the last 30 minutes (drinking alcohol and being lightly active, for instance) and what you’re doing now, as well as how you’re feeling.

Allison Kelly O’Hair, principal data scientist at Quanttus and leader of the company’s office in Mountain View, California (it has another one in Cambridge, Massachusetts), says the app has been in the works since last year. Quanttus sees it as a way to encourage all kinds of people to monitor their blood pressure, whether or not they have a health condition such as hypertension or hypotension.

Yet it’s far from what Quanttus had spoken about in the past: a smart-watch-like device that can continuously monitor signals like heart rate and blood pressure via ballistocardiogram, or BCG, which is a measure of the itty-bitty movements of your body as your heart pumps blood (see “This Fitness Wristband Wants to Play Doctor”).

The company had said it would do this with an optical sensor on the underside of the wristband, which shines light at the skin to measure how your tissue selectively reabsorbs light in order to measure the volumetric changes in blood vessels that take place each time your heart beats. An accelerometer, meanwhile, could track the resulting small body movements.

The company showed me photos in 2014 of a prototype it used in validation studies at Massachusetts General Hospital and Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston; it looked like a digital watch that had no face. A square circuit board covered with electronic components like a battery and green LED sat within a frosted enclosure, placed atop a watchband.

Founded in 2012, the company’s efforts are based on the graduate work of cofounder and chief scientific officer David He (one of MIT Technology Review’s 35 Innovators Under 35 in 2014). The company has reported raising $22 million in funding, $19 million of that through a series A round in February 2014 from venture-capital firms Khosla Ventures and Matrix Partners (a $3 million seed round came prior to that from Khosla founder Vinod Khosla).

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As for whether Quanttus is still working on that wristband for measuring blood pressure, and how far along it is, O’Hair says she doesn’t want to comment on where the company is with the device.

“But we are still thinking bigger than the app,” she says.

A former Quanttus employee, speaking on condition of anonymity, says it took more time than the company expected to develop the product. Quanttus isn’t the only company that has struggled to capture reliable, continuous signals at the wrist. Some Apple Watch users have complained that the device offers inaccurate pulse readings during certain exercises, and Apple itself states that activities with “irregular movements” like tennis and boxing won’t yield results as accurately as “rhythmic” ones like running or biking. Apple’s gadget only tracks heart rate continuously while you’re using its Workout app; otherwise, it tries to measure your heart rate every 10 minutes but won’t do so if you’re moving (you can also prompt it to take a measurement).

No matter who’s behind the measurements, the issue may simply be that while the wrist seems like a logical spot for a wearable device—we’re used to wearing watches, after all—it’s actually not a great place on the body to track biological signals (see "The Struggle for Accurate Measurements on Your Wrist"). The ear, for instance, seems to work much better (see “Using Your Ear to Track Your Heart”); and, in fact, He’s graduate work focused on an ear-worn BCG monitor.

Measuring biological signals at the wrist is convenient, but even just gathering heart-rate data is a “non-trivial” problem, says Emil Jovanov, an associate professor at the University of Alabama at Huntsville who studies real-time physiological monitoring. In addition to issues like sorting out the signal you want from the noise of motion artifacts, you can’t get perfect contact with the skin, and different people’s skin can change the quality of the signal that’s collected. Temperature, he says, can play a factor, too.

“You can be inside where it’s room temperature and have a good signal, and then get outside and completely lose your signal because all your blood vessels disappear, or went deeper,” he says.

Reading blood pressure accurately with a wearable on your wrist is even more difficult, he says.

O’Hair, too, agrees that tracking blood pressure in particular, and doing it continuously, is “a tricky problem.” It’s hard to alter the status quo, she says, which currently relies on the kind of arm cuff you’re used to using at your doctor’s office as the gold standard.
Huntsville high-tech startup RadioBro opens Germany office

Editorial

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama – RadioBro Corp., a start-up firm that makes miniature electronics systems for airplanes and spacecraft, has opened an office in Bremen, Germany, as it targets connections in the European aerospace industry.

Brothers Mark, Eric and Daniel Beecnel founded RadioBro in Huntsville in March 2014. The firm’s products include MiniSatCom, a lightweight spacecraft radio, and Cyclone, an instrumentation system that records data from flight tests.

Made In Alabama profiled RadioBro last year as Mark and Eric Beecnel, twins who received master’s degrees in aerospace engineering from the University of Alabama in Huntsville, traveled to the Paris Air Show for a test of the Cyclone system.

The new Germany office will enhance marketing and sales efforts to companies in Bremen such as OHB, BLG and Airbus Defense and Space. It’s located in the World Trade Center, a business incubator in Bremen that provides space and support to international companies through BremenInvest, an economic development agency.

“Bremen is hub for European aerospace and automotive industry very similar to Huntsville,” said Mark Beecnel, RadioBro’s president. “BremenInvest recognized our talent, introduced us to potential customers and helped us set up our presence. They made things very easy for us.”

‘SUCCESS STORY FOR EVERYONE’

Andreas Gerber, director of international affairs for BremenInvest, said RadioBro’s decision to open a Bremen office represents a “success story for everyone.” He added: “I look forward to seeing both Bremen and Huntsville industries benefit from RadioBro’s expansion here.”

The firm’s Bremen office will be led by Nathanial Long.

“Nathanial was employee No. 2 at RadioBro and helped us establish our Huntsville office,” Beecnel said. “He has built good relationships in Bremen while in the UAH study abroad program at the Hochschule, and we are excited to have him lead this new facility.”

Beecnel said RadioBro’s growth in the European aerospace sector has largely stemmed from the firm’s presence at major trade events last year – the Paris Air Show, the Global Space Innovation Conference (GLIC 2015) in Munich, and the Space Tech Expo in Bremen.

The firm is growing back home as well. It’s opening an office in Huntsville Research Park to become more deeply involved in the city’s aerospace design cycle. Its production team remains based at STI Electronics, a company in Madison that specializes in microelectronics assembly.

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Lucia Cape, senior vice president for economic development at the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County, said she expects continued success for the Becnel brothers’ venture.
Tornado research project deploys in state

By: John Christy

We can't really say March is the beginning of tornado season in Alabama, because tornado season in Alabama never really stops. For instance, the state saw 20 tornadoes in February, including an EF3.

What we can say is March and April usually are the peak months of the state's tornado season, which lasts year round. If you don't have a storm plan and a storm kit, now is the best time to get them. Know where to go and what to do in case of severe weather. Get a weather radio. Download weather warning phone apps.

If you live in north Alabama within about 100 miles of the Huntsville International Airport, you might also keep an eye on the highways during the next two months if severe weather threatens. UAH is the operations base for a major study of severe weather, especially how and why tornadoes form and either weaken or strengthen.

VORTEX Southeast is bringing to the state dozens of scientists and students from as far away as Oklahoma, Texas and Massachusetts to try to learn more about the differences between well-studied tornadoes in the Great Plains and less-well-studied tornadoes in the southeastern states. UAH and these other institutions will be taking their mobile research instruments (Doppler radars and such) on the road to probe storm systems as they pass over the state.

We want to know more about the science of tornadoes, such as whether the rise and fall of the local terrain can cause a tornado to get more powerful, or the effects of surface roughness, such as where a smooth lake sits next to hillsides covered in trees.

We also want to know more about how to improve the tornado warning system so people will be more likely to protect themselves and their families when a tornado warning is issued. We want to know why some people ignore warnings and don't seek shelter. This is the first time a major study of severe weather has included this kind of social science aspect.

So if you see our UAH trucks or instruments from UMass or Purdue or the National Severe Storms Lab in Oklahoma on the road from now through April, it isn't that the upcoming storm is so unique that storm chasers from around the country are flocking to north Alabama. No, it's just part of VORTEX-SE.

February would have been a good month to start this project. The state had three major storm systems move through, with statewide rainfall (according to our sample) about an inch above normal for the month.

More than 60 individual daily rainfall records were set in February, including some stations that were repeats. Three daily records were set at both the Cahaba Pump House and the Coffeeville Lock and Dam. If you look at just the days when records were set, Cahaba got 6.71 inches of rain in three days, while Coffeeville L&D got almost eight inches of rain over only three days, including 3.5" on Feb. 3.

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So keep a weather eye on the weather, make sure you and your family are prepared for whatever weather we might see, and be safe.
UAB Basketball

Disappointment lingers, but Blazers turning page to BYU

Drew Champlin  dchamplin@al.com

The pain remained all too real for UAB head coach Jerod Haase and his team Sunday.

The Blazers returned to practice after Thursday’s loss to Western Kentucky in the Conference USA Tournament and later held a get-together at Haase’s house to see where they would end up for postseason play.

It wasn’t the NCAA Tournament selection show that they had eyes on — those dreams were dashed in a quarterfinal upset to Western Kentucky. With the Conference USA regular season championship in its pocket, the Blazers did secure a spot in the National Invitation Tournament. UAB (26-6) is seeded seventh in its region and will play at second-seed BYU (23-10) on Wednesday at 9 p.m. ESPNU will televise the game.

“There’s a lot of hurt and frustration with the team, but we did try and give them a little bit of a break to recharge their batteries,” Haase said.

“We put so much time, effort and energy to that single goal. In some ways, I’m kind of glad it’s taken some time.”

Haase himself has struggled to move on. Usually, he’ll watch Conference USA basketball. He didn’t even over the weekend, but said he had North Carolina and Kansas games on, with more on in the background.

“I’ll be able to do a great job in practice and prepare the team for BYU, but there’s no question that it certainly still bothers me,” Haase said.

He did go over film from his team’s 88-77 loss to Western Kentucky. The Hilltoppers controlled the game down low, winning the rebounding battle 50-28.

“They really did a good job executing their game plan,” Haase said. “I was discouraged that I didn’t think we played our best game. The rebounding margin was too much to overcome and I didn’t think we were physical enough as a team.”

But the reality is that UAB still has a tournament it wants to win and next season to prepare for. The Blazers will return everyone off this year’s team except Robert Brown, barring further attrition.

“The primary goal is to play great, to play for UAB and the UAB fans and community,” Haase said. “There are a lot of things we need to try and get out of it. We’re trying to lay the foundation for next year but the biggest thing is that we’re trying to win a national tournament.

“We’d love to chase the dream of winning an NIT championship.”

This is UAB’s second postseason trip under Haase, following last year’s NCAA Tournament. BYU is making its 11th straight trip to the postseason.

Kyle Collinsworth, the WCC Player of the Year, averages 15.2 points per game, 8.4 rebounds per game, 7.4 assists per game and two steals per game. The 6-foot-6 senior guard started his college career in 2010, taking two years for a Mormon mission.

Chase Fischer, a 6-foot-3 senior guard, scores 17.9 points per game. He started his career at Wake Forest. Nick Emery, a freshman guard from the class of 2013 who also served a two-year Mormon mission, scores 16.2 ppg.

The Cougars average 83.6 points per game and finished third in the West Coast Conference.
UAB’s season ends with loss, despite energetic rally

Drew Champlin dchamplin@al.com

For 10 minutes, UAB played perhaps its best basketball of the season. The problem was, the Blazers started those 10 minutes down 21.

A furious second-half rally wasn’t enough as UAB lost 97-79 at BYU in the first round of the NIT Tournament.

UAB was down 51-30 at halftime and cut the lead to just four with 11:11 left, but soon enough the Cougars (24-10) extended the lead, getting it as high as 22 with four minutes to go.

“I think we thought it would be smooth and easy,” UAB head coach Jerod Haase said in the postseason radio show. “The reality of it is when you’re going to play big-time basketball in a big-time environment against a great team like that, smooth and easy isn’t going to be the recipe of the day.”

“In the second half, I was proud to be the coach of that basketball team, but in the first half and in the last game, I was awfully discouraged by some things.”

Robert Brown scored a career-high 29 points, 22 in the second half. Chris Kolkey scored 13 and Nick Williams 10.

Just like its Conference USA Tournament quarterfinal loss to Western Kentucky, UAB was dominated on the boards, losing the rebounding battle 41-37. UAB hit 13 3-pointers, but BYU hit 13.

UAB finishes at 26-7, and the Blazers ended the season with two straight losses. UAB did win a school-record 26 games and set many other records along the way.

UAB loses just one senior in Brown.

“Moving forward with this team and this program, as a coaching staff, we try to reiterate to these players that the physicality and the toughness and the rebounding and the defense, those are the things that are going to help us excel and get us where we want to get to,” Haase said on postseason radio. “Those areas failed us and as the head coach, I take full responsibility and we’re going to address those in the off-season.

“This is going to be a season we celebrate, but it hurts right now. We talk about character and the quality of the people in this program and we’ve hit it out of the park. We do have some things to address in the off-season, but this year, as a whole, we will be very proud. I do believe that the program as a whole, has become healthier and healthier. The team has put out a better product each year and I hope we can continue that next year.”

BYU will host Virginia Tech on Friday in the second round of the NIT. The Cougars’ Kyle Collinsworth had his 12th career triple-double, scoring 19 with 10 rebounds and 12 assists.
UAB offers Bessemer City’s Stanton

UAB coach Bill Clark has targeted one of the Birmingham area’s rising prep talents, offering Bessemer City junior Antonio Stanton to join the return of Blazers football in 2017.

And Stanton’s offseason workout video shows why.

Stanton is listed at 5-foot-8, 161 pounds. In a video posted at AL.com, he is shown squatting 485 pounds unassisted.

Entering his senior season, Stanton has 41 career touchdowns. He’s being recruited as an athlete.

Academically, he is a 3.75 student and has scored 20 on the ACT, according to his coach, Martez Edwards.

Bessemer City (8-5 in 2015) is preparing for the 2016 season after losing 36-13 to Benjamin Russell in the Class 6A state quarterfinals.

How special is Stanton to Bessemer City?

Well, he led the offense in receiving with 51 catches for 1,104 yards and 10 touchdowns. He then played two games at quarterback, passing for 302 yards and three scores.

And he also rushed 36 times for 401 yards and six scores.

Gary Estwick
Illinois

Former UAB coach named OC

New Illinois coach Lovie Smith confirmed Friday that Garrick McGee will be his offensive coordinator.

Smith called McGee "one of the top offensive coaches in the nation." He noted that he recruited McGee when he was an assistant coach at Arizona State.

McGee spent two seasons as an assistant at Louisville. The Cardinals were ranked eighth in the ACC last year in scoring at 28.7 points per game and fifth in total offense at 416.1 yards per game.

McGee was 5-19 in two seasons as head coach at UAB. He has also been an assistant coach for, among others, Arkansas, Northwestern, UNLV, Toledo and the Jacksonville Jaguars.
Tide needs more games

By: Cecil Hurt

Avery Johnson, optimistic and energetic enough to try selling a tuxedo to a penguin if necessary, isn't going to let go of the dream until harsh reality in the form of tonight's NCAA Tournament Selection Show forces that page to turn. His Alabama basketball team made a better run that anyone could have reasonably expected, but the late-season losses by a team that pushed hard all year long didn't enhance a resume that Johnson loves. The great wins -- Notre Dame, Texas A&M and South Carolina, among the likely tournament entries and Wichita State among the bubble-sweaters -- are still great, but almost certainly not enough.

Shortly after that, the NIT selection will be made. Alabama is more viable for that field, crowded though it might be. It would be more than preseason expectations and if it is less than February dreams, people have to understand that sometimes dreams come true but more often, you wake up to a dose of the real world.

The NIT can sometimes be an unwelcome destination for teams that, because of expectations or in-season circumstances, are ready to pull the plug. Alabama, though, needs to keep the juice flowing.

"We need to play," Johnson said Friday night in Nashville in the wake of a third 2016 loss to a Kentucky team that seems to be peaking into a postseason juggernaut. "We need games, quality games against good opposition. We have two great seniors (Retin Obasohan and Arthur Edwards) and they want to keep playing. For the rest of our players, they need more games, more games in our system.

"I think we can go into a tournament and do well. When we are playing well and doing things the right way, this can be a good basketball team as we have shown. Ultimately, the goal is what I have said since the day I took this job -- the Final Four. But we're not there yet. I'm not going to mention any teams (as a comparison) because they will use that in recruiting. But we're not at that level yet, and we need to do anything we can to keep improving."

All of Alabama's potential returnees have shown flashes of promise even in the last season slump that was brightened somewhat by a tournament win over Ole Miss. That might be particularly true of center Donta Hall and point guard Justin Coleman, who was better than expected in both tournament games when Retin Obasohan's foul trouble forced him to take the wheel of the offense, learner's permit or not.

Aside from the players, there is someone else who grows with every game on the collegiate level. That's the head coach himself. For all his NBA playoff experience, this is Johnson's first foray into the collegiate post-season. Now he knows first-hand what to expect when you play Kentucky in Nashville (a massive amount of noise, excluding the sound of a friendly whistle.) He's seen how to tap into the emotions of young players facing win-or-go-home games. There was a point in his interview after the Ole Miss game where Johnson suddenly smiled and said

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"this fits me like a glove," referring to the entire tournament atmosphere that he was soaking in. He still seemed to feel that way after the Kentucky game.

As far as the particulars of where or when an NIT game might be played, it might be in Tuscaloosa or Tulsa or Philadelphia. Depending on the seeding format used by the NIT these days, more driven by accomplishments than accountants, it's possible that the opponent could come from nearby, but no more likely than any other opponent.

Regardless of who or where, Johnson's first impression is correct. Alabama needs to play more games and continue to build on a foundation set down this year.
UA gets NIT bid

By: Cecil Hurt

TUSCALOOSA | The University of Alabama basketball season will live on this week -- against the team that ended the Crimson Tide's last NCAA Tournament run four years ago.

Alabama was selected to the 2016 NIT field on Sunday, a second straight NCAA appearance for UA and a first for new head coach Avery Johnson. The Crimson Tide was a No. 5 seed in its bracket in the 32-team tournament and will face No. 4 seed Creighton in Omaha on Tuesday night. The 8 p.m. game will be broadcast by ESPN.

The last time Alabama faced the Blue Jays, the result was disappointment. Creighton eliminated Alabama from the 2012 NCAA Tournament, winning a first-round game in Greensboro, N.C., 58-57 as Trevor Releford missed a potential game-winner at the buzzer. Current Alabama star Retin Obasohan was a part of that team but was sitting out the season as a redshirt.

Johnson, of course, had no affiliation with Alabama at that time but said he was "thrilled" to take the Crimson Tide into postseason play in his first season.

"We're excited to participate in the NIT," Johnson said in a Sunday night teleconference. "We defied the odds and played pretty good basketball all season in a tough SEC conference. Now we face a good Creighton team that has a serious home court advantage, so it will be another educational experience for us."

Johnson said he expected to get the call from the NIT once the Crimson Tide used out on an NCAA bid.

"It wasn't a surprise," he said. "From what we understood, we had a really good chance but there was a lot of different speculation. We thought we'd be in but we weren't sure where we would be playing, whether we would get a home game or not.

"We knew where we stood with the NCAA. As we got into into the end of our season, it looked like our magic number was going to be 20 wins, which would have meant two less losses. We didn't get there, but it will a great teaching tool in the off-season, showing our players some of the miscues in those games.

"Maybe with a little rest and a bad taste in our mouth about the way we played against Kentucky and some good basketball, we can have a good run in the NIT."

Creighton finished 18-14 this season, 9-9 in the Big East Conference. That record included home wins over NCAA participants Xavier and Butler and a road win at Seton Hall.

The winner of Tuesday's game will face the winner of St. Bonaventure-Wagner at a time and site to be determined.
Tide falls in first round

Michael Casagrande mcasagrande@al.com

What started with low expectations, a seat belt and a surprise February run ended Tuesday night in Nebraska.

Alabama’s sixth loss in eight games put a bow on Avery Johnson’s first season of a reenergized program. Creighton delivered the final blow with a 72-54 win in the opening round of the NIT.

The Bluejays controlled the tempo all evening as the Tide offense went long stretches without any production.

Alabama (18-15) shot a season-low 28.3 percent from the field while being outrebounded 45-32.

Johnson told a postgame radio audience he saw a lack of energy from his team Tuesday night.

“This team, I basically haven’t seen since Dayton,” Johnson said referencing an 80-48 loss in the second game of the season.

It was the final performance from Alabama’s fifth-year senior Retin Obasohan. The first-team All-SEC performer started slow to finish with 13 points on a night dominated by the hosts. He checked out with 1:01 left to hugs from teammates.

Creighton led by as many as 18 points and Alabama got no closer than 10 in the final 10 minutes.

Justin Coleman’s 18 points led all Alabama scorers followed by Obasohan’s 13 and Shannon Hale’s nine. Arthur Edwards also completed his collegiate career with a two-point game on 1-for-9 shooting.

Creighton (19-14) got 20 points from Maurice Watson Jr. and 15 from Khyri Thomas.

First-half struggles

Alabama had a slim 7-6 lead at the first TV timeout before things went south. The numbers say it all. By halftime, the Tide was shooting 24.1 percent (7-for-29). It missed nine straight at one point, going almost seven minutes without a field goal before Justin Coleman’s 3 with 3:03 left in the half. Those would be the last points before halftime. The Tide closed the period making just 1 of the last 15 attempts from the field. From 3-point range, the first half success rate was 19 percent (3-for-16). Creighton led 30-19 at halftime with 10 of the Tide points coming off the Bluejays’ nine turnovers. The 19 points were a season low for the Tide in a first half. Then in the second half, Creighton’s lead stretched to 18 when Alabama went 2-for-15 at one point.

Obasohan missing early

Alabama’s leading scorer was missing for almost seven minutes early in the game. He didn’t take his first shot until the 5:56 mark. His two free throws with 5:45 left were Obasohan’s only two points of the half. Obasohan had two points, two assists and was 0-for-3 from the field at halftime. He then scored the first basket of the second half in the opening seconds.

Justin Coleman’s moment

Not much was working for Alabama, but Coleman made a quick statement in the second half. The sophomore guard nailed three straight 3s, the last of which cut it to 11 points with 8:40 left. His two free throws immediately after gave him 11 straight Alabama points. Coleman also had a big game last week in the Ole Miss win at the SEC tournament. His 15 points included a pair of 3s.
BUCKLED TIGHT

How Avery Johnson changed the culture of Alabama basketball in Year 1

Michael Casagrande mcasagrande@al.com

Buckle up, he said.

Things were about to change, Avery Johnson promised after the private jet landed in Tuscaloosa that early-April 2015 evening. The few hundred cheering fans on the other side of the wire fence proved the rehab job had an enthusiastic start.

Nearly a year later, the first season proved worthy of Johnson's catch-phrase safety device — lending a look at the future with reminders of the hurdles left from the past.

The final 18-15 record was one win short of the 19-15 mark from Anthony Grant's final season. And the 8-10 conference mark was identical.

Similarities ended there.

Abruptly.

The path to those near-mirror image records — the intangibles of a season showed the difference an energy boost can make. Johnson's first Alabama team arguably had less talent than the 2014-15 squad, yet it accomplished things that hadn't happened in years.

To be clear, it wasn't a perfect introduction. The 72-94 NIT loss at Creighton lacked the mid-February enthusiasm that wasn't again approached. Losing six of the final eight drained some of the juice from an unexpected five-game winning streak.

There were still a few statements made along the way.

> The Nov. 27 win over Wichita State was the first Alabama victory in 21 games against ranked opponents. That losing streak covered more than three full seasons. Then, two days after beating Wichita State (and Bill Battle's first choice for the Tide basketball job), Gregg Marshall, Alabama did it again by taking out No. 1 Notre Dame, 74-73. By February, Alabama had four wins over ranked teams. That didn't include the program's first win at Florida in 21 years.

> Johnson's team was 6-3 in games decided by five points or fewer. Last year, that record was 6-5 and 3-5 the season before that. So there was better late-game management this season.

> And while slightly misleading because it counts tickets sold instead of games played, Alabama crushed the home

JOHNSON

FROM B1

attendance record this season. An average of 13,120 tickets were sold for Coleman Coliseum this season. That bettered the previous mark of 12,484 in 2011-12 — the last season Alabama made the NCAA tournament. Home crowds averaged 10,612 a year ago. So there was more enthusiasm.

Those were a few of the tangibles that improved in 2015-16. The things that can't be measured probably matter a little more.

Put simply, there was personality back in the Alabama basketball program. Johnson realized that sport doesn't sell itself in football country, so he spoke to any group who would listen. Audiences responded to the youthful enthusiasm and unrelenting smile. Perhaps as a result, there was a different feel in Coleman Coliseum for games.

Of inevitable demise hung in the cavernous building the previous winter. Few thought the program would continue on the same track. Even less hoped it would.

What could only be described as a "yeah, but..." energy emerged this season. Johnson sold the fan base on the building for the future goal of this season. The bar was lowered to that point the NCAA bubble talk briefly made Alabama a national headline.

Even when things went south, this team retained an overachiever label. The Tide was picked to finish 13th in the SEC teams in November. It then beat eventual champion Texas A&M along the way to a 10th-place finish.

So, now that the rebuilding season is officially over, the future is in full view. Replacing All-SEC guard Retin Obasohan's 17.6-point average will be easier than filling the leadership void he leaves behind.

Everyone else but Arthur Edwards is scheduled for a return. That includes Dazon Ingram, the star freshman whose season ended prematurely with a broken foot in December. Also thrown in Nick King, a Memphis transfer who drew top marks as a practice player sitting out in accordance with NCAA rules. Avery Johnson Jr., a personality as engaging as his father's, will also be eligible next year after transferring from Texas A&M.

And then there's the recruiting situation.

Back in August, momentum exploded with a commitment from five-star guard Terrance Ferguson of Dallas. Then a pledge from four-star forward Braxton Key in October and Alabama was climbing the rankings. The only issue is Key signed in the fall while Ferguson backed. His commitment to Alabama stuck until March 1 when he reopened the recruitment.

That leaves Key and Al-Mond Davis, the top JUCO priority for Johnson's staff, as Alabama's two newcomers next season. After losing to Creighton, Johnson vowed the recruiting drive wasn't over for next season's team.

So, as the NCAA tournament kicks into gear Thursday, this season seems like as good a time as any to assess the direction of Alabama's program.

It's more than fair to say a bid feels more imminent this March than it did a year ago today.

The 2015-16 season's disappointing left more optimism than the previous March 15, the day Grant was fired.

Johnson's hiring announced 23 days later set this whole thing in motion.

"Get ready," Johnson said after stepping off the jet in Tuscaloosa last April, about to coin the theme of the year to come. "Put your seatbelt on. Because what you're about to experience is something you haven't experienced before."
Hoops future looks bright for the Tide

OK, so the Alabama men’s basketball team didn’t end the season with a bang — frankly, it was with a whimper — but we remain hopeful for the future of the program.

Viewed as a snapshot, Alabama’s season under first-year head coach Avery Johnson would not be that impressive. The Crimson Tide wound up with a mediocre overall record of 15-15, placed 10th out of 14 teams in the SEC, with a record of 8-10, and was 5-8 on the road.

But from a broader perspective, the program appears to be headed in the right direction.

Johnson took a team predicted to finish next-to-last in the Southeastern Conference to a post-season berth. Yes, we know it was just the NIT, and yes, we know UA was on the verge of an NCAA Tournament bid until it faltered down the stretch, losing four of its last five regular-season games before flaming out against Creighton in the NIT on Tuesday.

We also know that Johnson’s record this season was nearly identical to his predecessor Anthony Grant’s record last season. Grant was 19-15 overall, 8-10 in the SEC and 4-8 on the road in 2014-2015.

So why the optimism? UA struggled mightily on the road in the waning years of coach Mark Gottfried’s tenure, and two years ago under Grant did not win a single road game (0-11) or at a neutral site (0-4). Although the team managed four road wins and one neutral-site win last season, none were of the marquee variety.

In his first season, Johnson netted five road and three neutral-site victories, including wins over eventual NCAA tourney teams Wichita State and Notre Dame, and, for the first time in 21 years, the Crimson Tide won at Florida. Winning games that matter in hostile environments requires mental toughness and a positive attitude, and those road wins are perhaps the surest sign that brighter days are ahead for Alabama.

A note of caution. Grant seemed always to be on the cusp of a breakthrough that would take UA to the upper echelon of the SEC and the perennial appearances in the NCAA Tournament that define success in college basketball. Yet for whatever reason he never quite got over the hump — the Crimson Tide received just one NCAA bid during his six-year tenure. We’re still not sure what happened there. He was a man of integrity who did things the right way.

Nevertheless, with his excellent personality and unbridled optimism, Johnson has brought a vigor to the basketball program that had been missing under the reserved Grant. The team was inconsistent this season, to be sure. Disheartening home losses to Mississippi State and Arkansas late in the season likely cost Alabama that March Madness bid. But his recruiting efforts are encouraging and the fan base is excited — the Crimson Tide set a school record with an average per game attendance of 13,110, which ranked 22nd in the nation.

If things keep trending in this direction, Alabama will still be playing this time next year.
Seven Tide swimmers to compete in NCAAs

By: Evan Dudley

It's spring break, and the Alabama swim team is poolside.

But the Crimson Tide swimmers are not at the company condo in Gulf Shores. They're not cracking open crab legs or beers in Panama City Beach. They're not meeting new friends in Pensacola.

No, the ladies of the UA swim team are spending spring break in Atlanta, site of the 2016 NCAA Championships.

The Crimson Tide placed seven swimmers in the event, which starts Thursday at the McAuley Aquatic Center on the campus of Georgia Tech.

Marian Yurchishin, a freshman who qualified for the 100- and 200-meter breaststroke, said the opportunity to compete is worth far more than a few extra days relaxing on the beach.

"I'm exactly where I want to be," Yurchishin said. "I'm definitely thankful because not too many freshmen get the opportunity to do what I'm doing."

The one thing the Crimson Tide does not lack is experience. Four of the seven qualifiers are making return trips to the NCAA Championships, led by senior Emma Saunders and junior Bridget Blood, who are making their third appearances.

Blood, who qualified for the 100 and 200 breaststroke, said she will use the experience of prior mistakes to help translate regular-season consistency to the championship podium.

"My past two years have been disappointing compared to how I was performing during the season," Blood said. "I've been trying to use that to focus on what I need to do to achieve my goals."

Sophomore Mia Nonnenberg is back for her second appearance in the national championships, qualifying for the 400 individual medley. Nonnenberg said her past experience will help identify the areas that she believes contribute the most toward success.

"You really need to focus on the details and touching those things up before a race," Nonnenberg said. "Diet and getting enough sleep are priorities I've been focused on leading up to this meet."

The Crimson Tide was also able to add relay swimmers for the national championships. Junior Caroline Korst and sophomores Temarie Tomley and Hannah Musser qualified for the 200 and 400 medley relays and the 800 freestyle relay. Tomley is making her second appearance at nationals, while Korst and Musser are making their first appearances.

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Alabama was unable to qualify any divers for the national championships last week at the Zone B Championships, also held in Atlanta.
UA women’s team looking solid

By: Ian Thompson

University of Alabama’s head women’s golf coach Mic Potter is pleased with the form of his team but knows there is a lot of golf to be played this spring.

“The events that really matter are the SECs, regionals and nationals, assuming we get there.”

The way his Crimson Tide team is playing, you wouldn’t bet against it.

He is getting solid scores from all five starters but is particularly pleased with the play of sophomore Nicole Morales and freshman Cheyenne Knight.

The other three starters have been former U.S. Amateur winner and NCAA individual champion Emma Talley, her fellow senior Janie Jackson of Huntsville and sophomore Lakareber Abe.

Other squad members are former State Amateur and State Stroke Play champion Northport’s Cammie Gray and Mia Landegren.

“When you have competition to make the traveling five, that’s healthy and makes everyone better,” Potter noted.

For the second time this season, Knight was last week named the Southeastern Conference Women’s Freshman Golfer of the Week. She also earned the honor on Feb. 10 following her performance at the Northrop Grumman Regional Challenge.

Knight rebounded from a tough weekend at the Allstate Sugar Bowl Championship in New Orleans by coming through with her first individual tournament victory at the Darius Rucker Intercollegiate in Hilton Head Island, S.C. The freshman from Aledo, Texas, recorded a 4-under 67 for her opening round, her lowest round of her rookie campaign, and third in the 60s this season. Knight carded an even-par 213 over the 54 holes, the only player not to finish above par, to earn medalist honors.

Alabama also claimed the team title at the Rucker, finishing seven strokes ahead of runner-up Virginia. Overall, six of the nation’s top 10 teams were in the field, including each of the top five.

Knight is certainly playing well as her 18-hole score counted toward the team’s total on all three days, as all 18 of her rounds have been counted on the season. She has now finished inside the top 10 in three events while placing inside the top 20 in two others. Knight’s scoring average of 72.50 is second on the team along with being second among all freshmen in the conference.

The Tide will be back in action April 1-3 at the Liz Murphy Collegiate Classic in Athens, Ga., before heading to Arizona State’s event, with the SEC Championship hard on its heels over the

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Legacy Course at Greystone Golf & Country Club, April 15-17. The regionals will be very special as they will be played at Shoal Creek, May 5-7.

“The rules allow us to play Shoal Creek as much as we want up until three days before the regional, so we certainly will be making that drive a number of times.”

Potter also made a note of highlighting the return to form of New York native Morales.

Admittedly, she had struggled greatly in her first three semesters, with only an occasional strong round.

“When she came back after Christmas break, we made some major swing changes and they are starting to pay off. She knows how to play golf, understands the game very well, has a great short game and strong course management skills. It was her ball striking that was lacking.”

From struggling to break 80 she has posted some key rounds at opportune times to really help the team.

“We’d been missing that fifth score. She has really made an impact since cracking the line up.”

Potter, universally respected in the women’s college game, said he was talking to Southern California’s assistant coach at the Rucker tournament, when that coach said you have to have three players capable of being your number one player to really be competitive.

“I told him I felt we had four (Talley, Jackson, Abe and Knight), with Nicole (Morales) pushing us hard, as are our other players. That’s what it takes.”

Potter, who captured the National Championship with the Tide in 2012, should know. His team was ranked No. 4 in the country before its Rucker win, so it should keep climbing the rankings.

Make a point to watch these ladies play golf when they play at Greystone and Shoal Creek later this spring. There’s every chance some of them will make it in the pro ranks.

And entry is free to both championships.
ALABAMA WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL

Tide falls in national championship game

Staff report

The University of Alabama men's wheelchair basketball team suffered a heartbreaking loss in the national championship game to the University of Wisconsin Whitewater, 73-55 in Edinboro, Pa.

The Crimson Tide could not overcome the firepower of the Warhawks, who captured their third straight national championship.

Junior DQ Robinson led the Crimson Tide with 17 points, followed closely behind by senior Jannik Blair with 12. Freshman Michael Auprince, the top scorer for the team, added 10 points.

"I am very grateful to the program and for everything that it has done for me, and I take solace in the fact that I've left it better than I found it," Blair said of his last game. "Best four years of my life."

Alabama defeated Southwest Minnesota State University 64-44 in the first round, then upset second-seed Texas-Arlington 73-54 in the semifinal. The team will return to Tuscaloosa today.

UA women take third

The Alabama women's wheelchair basketball team ended their season with a 79-31 win over the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater in the third-place game of the National Intercollegiate Wheelchair Basketball Tournament in Edinboro, Pa.

The Tide lost the first game of the tournament against the University of Texas at Arlington, 68-45. The Alabama women ended the season with a 10-14 overall record and a 5-12 conference record.

The Tide will continue to prepare for the 2016-2017 season with many of the players competing for a spot at the Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro this summer. UA has six players qualified to go.
Emerging leader

Sophomore Guerrero serves as reassuring presence for Tide

By Sean Landry
Special to The Tuscaloosa News

Moments after the University of Alabama gymnastics team's loss to LSU, coach Dana Duckworth walked over to the side of the floor and threw an arm around sophomore Nickie Guerrero's shoulders. Minutes earlier, Guerrero had completed a 9.9 balance beam routine, her fifth routine of 9.9 or better this season. The Crimson Tide had just completed its lowest scoring meet of the year, but for Guerrero, Duckworth had nothing but praise.

"This girl is a stud," Duckworth said.

As a freshman, Guerrero competed on balance beam eight times, peaking with a 9.875 in the NCAA regional. As a sophomore, Guerrero has established herself as one of the team's most vocal leaders in adverse times, always focused on the next moment and keeping the mood light.

"I feel like we get caught up in the littles things and we need to get rid of that right away so I kind of voice what I say," Guerrero said. "I've been pretty vocal lately but I feel pretty confident in what I say in focusing on us because that's what we have to do - focus on us. I just reinforce that."

Guerrero said her beam specialty contributes to her ability to lead. On an apparatus where the slightest self-doubt can lead to disaster, Guerrero has learned about resiliency.

"(I've learned) to not focus on the little things," Guerrero said. "I've always been a beam person in general and I've really embraced that this year because you can't focus on the little things on beam. That's when you start shaking and that's when you fall. When you know that you can hit, just reassuring yourself, you know you're just going to kill it. If I just keep telling myself that nothing is going to stop me, then that's what happens."

Though she's competed on floor exercise only three times this season, Guerrero's teammates have come to depend on her presence. Freshman Ari Guerra said she looks to Guerrero for reassurance before every floor routine, using Guerrero's energy to reduce her stress.

"Everyone has that one person (on the team) and if I'm that one person, I want to be there for her every step of the way," Guerrero said. "If that's looking at her saying 'You got this, just breathe,' then I want to be there for her. The fact that it works, it just makes me feel I'm really a part of the team and really, really helping every individual person and embracing the quote, 'for her.' So it just really means a lot. Yeah, I'm about to cry."

The sophomore's most audible contribution also comes on floor. Every time she gets the chance, she interjects a team chant into her teammates' routines - a 'B-A-M-A' for Aja Sims, for example, and for most, a simple 'Roll Tide.'

"I just love having fun and doing whatever in gym because it helps me stay positive and keep going through rough times," Guerrero said. "That's one way I keep my mind off of things that aren't school and mistakes I've made in practices. I've tried to get 'Roll Tide' in all the floor routines, mostly just for fun. I just like doing it for fun. I'm pretty crazy. I'm just crazy."
Tide gets back to work

By: Aaron Suttles

If you’re still basking in the afterglow of the University of Alabama football program’s national championship, bad news. Time’s up.

The Crimson Tide officially begins the preparation for the 2016 season Friday with the start of spring practice, the first of Alabama’s 15 practices that culminates with the A-Day spring game Saturday, April 16.

It’s the first practices for eight early enrollees, including offensive lineman Charles Baldwin, linebacker Christian Bell, tight end Miller Forristall, quarterback Jalen Hurts, defensive back Shawn Jennings, offensive lineman Chris Owens, wide receiver T.J. Simmons and offensive lineman Jonah Williams.

Every other player on the roster is a seasoned veteran, at least when it comes to knowing what to expect from practice, even if they aren’t the most experienced in actual games.

It’s an entirely new backfield for the offense with the departure of quarterback Jake Coker and running backs Derrick Henry and Kenyan Drake.

With four quarterbacks on the roster, the competition begins between Cooper Bateman, Blake Barnett, David Cornwell and Hurts.

Sophomore running backs Bo Scarbrough and Damien Harris will get the majority of the carries among the running backs.

It’s also the first time new assistant coaches Jeremy Pruitt (defensive coordinator) and Derrick Ansley (defensive back coach) work with new players.

Pruitt served on Nick Saban’s support staff from 2007-09 and became defensive backs coach from 2010-12. He was Florida State’s defensive coordinator in 2012 and held the same role at Georgia the last two seasons.

Ansley was a graduate assistant at UA for two seasons (2010-11).

Today’s practice is the first before the team takes a week off for spring break. Practices back up again Monday, March 21.
Tide begins spring practice

By: Aaron Suttles

The football team took the field for the beginning of spring practice Friday afternoon with a light drizzle falling from an overcast sky as Alabama underwent the first of 15 practices/scrimmages outside on the practice fields.

There was much to see and many new faces as the team worked for two hours in helmets and shorts.

The big news came in the form of who wasn’t at full strength. Three starters from a season ago will likely miss all of spring practice while they recover from various injuries.

Senior defensive end Jonathan Allen wore a black jersey as he heals from an offseason shoulder surgery. Two-year starter at left tackle Cam Robinson also wore a black jersey and is recovering from a shoulder surgery. Starting safety Eddie Jackson, who led the team with six interceptions a season ago, rode the exercise bike in a black jersey as he recovers from what UA head coach Nick Saban called a “leg issue.”

Back-up wide receiver Raheem Falkins and tight end Dakota Ball will also be out, Saban said.

“Those guys will have a difficult time to probably have a chance to participate at all in the spring,” Saban said.

Saban also explained a couple of new roles for his coaching staff.

Burton Burns, who coaches the running backs, has added special teams to his duties, and Bobby Williams, a former UA tight ends/special teams coach, now serves as a “special assistant” to Saban.

Defensive back Tony Brown was at practice, but Saban said he still faces internal discipline after being sent home from the Cotton Bowl in December.

“He is facing some suspensions,” Saban said. “When I get the final data on that I’ll definitely let you know.”

Saban also addressed the issue of complacency, something former teams have dealt with after championship seasons. The problem could be expounded when you add in the loss of leaders like Derrick Henry, Ryan Kelly, Reggie Ragland and Jake Coker, all permanent team captains last season.

“I think we want everybody that has a get-it-done type of attitude,” Saban said. “I think that everybody not only has to have a get-it-done type of attitude, but they also have to take ownership for people who aren’t getting it done, because they’re unable to do things to the standard that we want to do it.

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"I do think this is a work in progress and I do think that players have to accept roles. So far, these are things that need to continue to develop. This is kind of a work in progress. This is not something that just happens. The team chemistry last year happened over time. I think we’ll see how this team develops over time."