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INSIDE

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Rec center to be named for former director



The Pickens Recreation Center on Sangamo Road in Pickens will soon be renamed the Cheri Terrapin Anthony Recreation Center in honor of longtime Pickens rec director Cheri Anthony.

City names new administrator



By Jason Evans
Staff Reporter
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EASLEY — Easley officials have announced the name of the man who will serve as the city's new administrator.

During its Nov. 8 meeting, council unanimously passed a resolution appointing Shannon Baldwin as city administrator.

Baldwin is currently the

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Man charged with exploiting minor

By Jason Evans
Staff Reporter
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EASLEY — An Easley man is charged with multiple counts of sexual exploitation of a minor.

Christopher William Vaughn, 39, of Easley was arrested Nov. 8 and charged with 10 counts of second-degree sexual exploitation of a minor, South Carolina Attorney General Alan Wilson said in a release. Vaughn was later released from the Pickens County Detention Center on a



VAUGHN

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COVID numbers still improving

COLUMBIA — Pickens County continues to see some improvement in the battle against COVID-19, according to the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), with falling case numbers and seven reported deaths this week.

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By Jason Evans
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PICKENS — The Pickens Recreation Center will soon bear the name of a woman who worked for the recreation department for more than 25 years.

During a special called meeting Monday night, Pickens City Council voted unanimously in favor of a resolution renaming the center the Cheri Terrapin

Anthony Recreation Center.

Anthony retired as Pickens Recreation Department director earlier this year.

A 1983 graduate of Limestone College, Anthony began working at the Pickens Recreation Department in 1995 and became director in 1998.

In 2018, Anthony

won the S.C. Athletic Programs

Branch Professional of the Year award. In 2019, the South Carolina Recreation and Parks Association named Anthony its state merit award winner.

City administrator

Philip Trotter said the city's recreation committee will establish a three-person subcommittee that will oversee creation of the center's new sign,

including size and location, "identifying the Pickens Recreation Center under its new name."

The rec committee will select a contractor to build the new sign, based upon the recommendations of the subcommittee, he said.

Serving as home court to countless youth athletes on successful rec sports squads in Pickens since its opening in 2005, the Pickens Recreation Center is located at 545 Sangamo Road.



ANTHONY



Country Santa ready for another season

It all started with a little girl named Mary Ann. Mary Ann was getting ready to start first grade at Ambler Elementary School, and she had a big problem. An embarrassing, sad problem. She had no shoes.

Buddy Cox, a Pumkintown resident with a soft heart for needy children, heard about it, and he went out and bought her a pair.

When he went to the school to deliver the shoes, he learned from her teacher that the previous year, in kinder-

Mountain Rhythms

RON BARNETT • STAFF REPORTER

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garten, Mary Ann had brought her Christmas present to school and it

"looked like it had come out of a trash can or something."

It was a raggedy doll. She was proud of it because her daddy had given it to her. But

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File photos

Country Santa's Buddy Cox speaks to a group of children volunteering their time with the program in 2011. The program has been going strong for more than 40 years.

Program volunteer count scaled back again this year

By Ron Barnett
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PICKENS — Because of COVID-19, the Country Santa program, like last year, has been scaled back to limit the number of volunteers this year.

While in years prior to 2020, they've been able to have as many as 35 people at a time in the Country Santa building, they will limit capacity to about 10 this year. Anyone with a cough or recent exposure to someone with COVID should not enter.

They have put in air purifiers and they sanitize the building between shifts. Everybody gets their temperature

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Santa

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Buddy knew that when she got a little older, she might realize that other children's Christmas gifts were a lot nicer than hers.

He didn't want her to feel less loved or less important than anybody.

"That broke my heart. I just said 'That's not going to happen,'" Buddy said.

So he went out to the stores and found the biggest boxed doll he could find.

On Christmas Eve that year, he drove his red Jeep truck down a bumpy dirt driveway off Ambler School Road to a cabin that looked like it was "about to fall in."

"She was out there and met me on the porch. She had no idea," he said. "It was my first year, first trip, first delivery. But I made sure that doll was in that bag."

Thus was born the legend of Country Santa, a down-home, down-South version of the magical old fellow from the North Pole.

Every year since then — for 44 years now — Country Santa and his helpers have been spreading the love of Jesus to children of the Upstate who otherwise might have had nothing under the Christmas tree, if they had a tree.

Mary Ann took that great big doll to school with her after Christmas that year and introduced all her friends to it. She sat it in her desk beside her and beamed with joy.

"The teacher said that kid changed," Buddy said. "She was happy and interactive then."

The joy and transformation Buddy saw in Mary Ann sparked a movement that in the decades since has touched the lives of untold thousands of children in five counties and brought probably almost an equal amount of joy to the thousands of volunteers who have taken part in the Country Santa program each year since then.

Count

From page 1A

checked before entering. Face coverings are recommended, but not required.

The deliveries this year will be limited to about 1,500 to 1,700 children in Pickens County families rather than reaching the five-county area the program usually does.

For more information, go to countrysanta.org or call (864) 878-1131.

THE COUNTRY SANTA BOOK

It's a story that has touched hearts all across America, and even beyond. My friend and former colleague Lyn Riddle wrote a piece for the New York Times in 1992 that got picked up by the newswires and was run by newspapers across the country.

And now, the story has been retold in detail with a sensitivity that only one who lived it could bring to it. Buddy's wife, Nelle Cox, a recently retired English teacher, has written a book, just released, titled "With Love from Jesus and Country Santa."

It's available on Amazon in hardcover, paperback and Kindle. With artwork by a Cox granddaughter.

The first part of the book tells about Buddy growing up in the 1950s in rural Laurens County — and in a family situation that taught him about helping those in need, while living in meager circumstances himself.

There are stories like how he would trap a possum for a family who couldn't afford meat from the grocery store. And how, growing up without a father from age 10, he went to work when he was 12 or 13 at a grocery store, working 12 hours a day for 50 cents a day to help his mom provide for the family.

Nelle said she thought it was important for the book to show how his childhood developed him into the man he became.

"What I mainly wanted to do was to tell the truth," she said. "He said 'Make sure you don't make me too shiny or glorify me.'"

Buddy wasn't all that keen on Nelle writing a book, because despite his legendary role each Christmas, he prefers to keep a low profile. He even tries to disguise himself when he goes out shopping, he said, to avoid attention.

Most of the credit for Country Santa's incredible success, both Nelle and Buddy say, goes to the numerous supporters and volunteers who have helped over the years.

"I've got the greatest band of brothers and sisters in this program that you could pull together," Buddy said.

And if you've been a regular participant in the annual exercise in extravagant gener-

osity that the Country Santa program has become, you could be in the book.

EVER FAITHFUL 'ELVES'

Nelle tells about many of the stalwart volunteers who do most of the work: buying loads of gifts; transporting gifts from drop boxes to the Country Santa building on the Coxes' property near Pumpkintown; bagging up those gifts for the various families on the list for delivery; and who, on Christmas Eve, line up in cars and trucks all the way down the 1,000-foot driveway — some of them arriving hours before daybreak to be in front of the line — to deliver the packages of Christmas cheer.

For example, there's Tim Scully, a retiree who worked tirelessly, down on his arthritic knees, for about eight hours a day and, despite being hard of hearing, joyfully interacted with all the "elves" who helped Country Santa each year.

His death during the past year is what, in part, prompted Nelle to write the book now. She wanted to give some of the "aging elves" their due while they're still around to enjoy it.

Some of the volunteers have been faithfully giving up a big chunk of their holiday season each year for decades.

Like Bob Spalding, a 38-year veteran of the program whose main job is the continuous hauling of bags of toys from the Country Santa building to a shed that serves as the distribution point.

Then there's Tandy Collier, who buys toys by the carload for distribution and works in the Country Santa building checking bags, stocking toys and numerous other chores, even when she had a broken foot one year.

There are too many stories of dedicated volunteers to relate here — and even too many for just one book, according to Nelle. She's already writing a second one, to be titled, "Share a Smile with a Child: More Stories of Country Santa."

SNEAK PREVIEW

Here's one story Nelle told me that might give you a sneak peek into the second book.

One year, after People magazine ran a story about Country Santa, a man who was

in jail in California wrote a letter to Buddy asking if Country Santa could deliver some Christmas gifts to his two girls.

Buddy gets a lot of mail and hadn't had a chance to read that one until Christmas Eve, after all the elves had gone on their way to make their deliveries.

Even though it was about dark in South Carolina, it was still afternoon in California, so Buddy decided to take a crack at fulfilling this man's request.

He went down to the Pickens Police Department and got the dispatcher to patch him through to the jail in California. He got through to the jailer and made arrangements for a delivery to the man's house, via police officers.

That's the kind of Christmas magic Country Santa is known for.

"There's no greater gift than to give," Buddy said.

Yogi Berra couldn't have said it better.

"And faith without works is dead," he added. "That's scripture."

Amen to that.

There's also more in the first Country Santa book to the story about Mary Ann, the little girl who inspired the whole thing, but I'm not going to give it away. For that, you'll have to read the book.

44 AND COUNTING...

After 44 years, it's hard to say how many more there will be for Country Santa. Nelle said she's not sure it would be the same if it was headquartered anywhere besides the Santa Building, watched over by angels on the Coxes' hallowed property off Miracle Hill Road.

"This whole land area was prayed for, prayed over and blessed. And God has continued to bless it. So that's why it works where it is," she said. "And if we get to a point where we can't do it anymore, and it had to move, I'm not sure it could work in the same way."

"So we may see a time when it can't happen again. But until that time, we're going to enjoy doing it."

Here's hoping Country Santa will keep on doing it for many more Christmases — at least for as long as there's a Mary Ann out there who needs him.