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# re·sil·ience

/rəˈzɪliəns(t)s/

noun

1. the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties.

# WE ARE RESILIENT

**Resilience** is often praised without being examined. It is offered as a compliment after disruption, a shorthand acknowledgment when people continue functioning despite conditions that should have required more care, more protection, or more accountability. In those moments, the word stands in for something deeper that rarely gets named.

Resilience does not emerge in ease. It develops where stability is unreliable and expectations do not adjust. It is shaped through repetition—through having to adapt again and again while remaining credible, useful, and composed. Over time, this kind of adaptation leaves a mark. It influences how people move through rooms, how they measure risk, and how much of themselves they reveal. It becomes less about strength and more about calibration.

Those shaped by persistent uncertainty tend to become the ones others depend on. They remember what was tried before. They anticipate breakdowns. They translate disorder into continuity. This ability is valuable, but it is not neutral. It is learned under conditions that required containment rather than choice. What is often missed is the cost of that learning.

When resilience is assumed rather than acknowledged, it becomes an expectation. People who adapt well are asked to keep adapting. Stability is drawn from them without being reinforced around them. Over time, the role hardens: dependable, capable, steady. Useful, but rarely protected.

This issue examines what happens when endurance shapes identity—and what changes when discernment begins to



replace reflex. Discernment is not disengagement. It is awareness. It is the moment when people begin to evaluate what they are sustaining, who benefits from that sustainability, and whether continuation is still appropriate. This shift matters.

Discernment introduces boundaries where endurance once filled gaps. It replaces automatic response with intention. It recognizes that not everything functional is healthy, and not everything that continues deserves to. In this space, responsibility is clarified and authorship is reclaimed.

The work we publish is rooted in this distinction. We are less interested in spectacle than in continuity with integrity. Storytelling, documentation, and structure are not tools of exposure here; they are tools of preservation. They exist to keep meaning intact when effort is overlooked and systems rely on quiet labor to hold. Resilience, stripped of sentiment, is not about withstanding more. It is about deciding with precision what remains. This publication is for those decisions.

Gerrian Hawes  
Founder, Publisher & Editor-in-Chief

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BUSINESS  
SHOULD  
BE  
HERE.

## Contributors

Our contributors are writers, photographers, artists, historians, educators, and community members who understand this place because they live inside it. Their work is shaped by proximity, responsibility, and lived experience—not distance or assumption. They observe closely, document carefully, question honestly, and preserve what matters, often without recognition and always with intention.

Each voice brings a distinct point of view, discipline, and creative lens, yet all share a common commitment to truth, craft, and care for Clayton County. Together, they help ensure that the stories told here are accurate, grounded, and worthy of the people they represent. We Are Clayton exists because of their willingness to pay attention, to do the work well, and to tell the story clearly.

### WRITERS

Sabrina Gilmore  
Melissa Calamore  
Amanda White  
Clifford Goddard  
Jackson Parks  
Steven Bowen



#### Michael Booth, Senior Writer

A proud Jonesboro resident and longtime friend of *We Are Clayton Magazine*, Michael Booth has been part of our story since the very beginning—nearly 15 years ago. As both a writer and supporter, his presence has helped shape the voice of *WACM*, carrying forward the mission of keeping Clayton County's stories alive. His online feature, *"Heritage of Hate; How the Confederate Flag Divides Us,"* remains one of the magazine's most widely read pieces, reaching more than 15,000 readers and prompting sustained community dialogue. In this issue, he returns with the opinion essay *"I Am an Immigrant. You Are an Immigrant, Too,"* continuing his practice of engaging history, identity, and belonging with clarity and conviction.



#### Ja'Don Hawes, Photographer

An emerging visual storyteller with deep roots in Clayton County, much of this issue of *We Are Clayton Magazine* is shaped through his lens, as he photographed the majority of the features and portraits included here. His work reflects a careful eye for detail, composition, and presence—capturing people and places as they are, without performance or distortion.

Working with patience and intention, Ja'Don approaches photography as a form of observation rather than interruption. His images honor everyday dignity, allowing subjects to be seen clearly and honestly within their own environments. As a developing voice in local photography, his work contributes meaningfully to the visual record of this moment in Clayton County, offering a perspective rooted in familiarity, respect, and lived connection.

## Hey Y'all

*This is your space to talk back. Share how We Are Clayton Magazine makes you think, laugh, or feel—and let your note become part of the conversation we're building together.*

Dear Editor,  
The We Are Rooted issue reminded me why I fell in love with this magazine in the first place. Gerrian's publisher's note felt like a prayer for endurance—real, unpolished, and honest. As someone who grew up here and thought our stories had gone silent, seeing them bloom again meant a lot. Please keep those first-person reflections coming. They help us remember that Clayton County's heartbeat is human, not just headlines.

— Alyce M., Jonesboro

Dear We Are Clayton Team,  
The feature "Murals That Speak" made me drive to Lovejoy just to see Nature's Revival for myself. I stood there longer than I expected—it truly felt like the community painted itself back into visibility. Could future issues include a walking map of public art around the county? I'd love to spend Saturdays exploring the creative walls that tell our collective story.

— Eric P., Lovejoy

Dear Editor,  
Your story on Latto: Still Clayton, Always Global hit home. I teach at Lovejoy High, and my students' faces lit up seeing someone from their own halls celebrated with such depth. It wasn't about fame—it was about roots. Maybe next issue you could highlight other graduates doing big things beyond the county? Representation truly matters for our kids.

— Tanya R., Lovejoy

To the Editor,  
I was deeply moved by "An Educated Life: Pam Adamson." Her decades of service remind us that leadership starts in the classroom. I'd love to see a rotating "Legacy Educator" profile—one retired teacher each issue whose influence still echoes through former students. It's history you can feel.

— Melvin D., Forest Park

Dear We Are Clayton Magazine,  
The piece on Rep. Rhonda Burnough's trip to Senegal was powerful. Seeing our leaders reconnect with African heritage shows that Clayton's story stretches far beyond county lines. Maybe consider a photo essay following students or community members on similar international exchanges? Those bridges are what being rooted and respected looks like.

— Sierra K., Riverdale

Dear Editor,  
"The War That Never Ended" stopped me mid-page. That letter from the red clay read like something my grandfather might have written. Please consider compiling all the original fiction you've published into an annual "Clayton Voices Anthology." Stories like that deserve a shelf of their own.

— Darryl L., Morrow

Dear We Are Clayton,  
After reading "Building a Legacy at First Baptist Jonesboro," I realized how many faith communities quietly serve our neighbors every day. Could future issues include a small "Churches of Clayton" column—quick snapshots of congregations doing hands-on work in food drives, mentoring, or youth arts? Faith, when shown through service, is part of what keeps us rooted.

— Eunice B., Ellenwood

Dear Editor,  
Your Rooted in Business section was both informative and inspiring. The "Steps to Plant Your Business in Clayton County" sidebar is now taped above my desk! Maybe next time add a QR link to mentorship programs or a spotlight on first-year entrepreneurs who took those steps. Real-world follow-ups help folks like me keep dreaming practical.

— Carlos G., Riverdale



## We Asked, Y'all Answered

### Quick Question...

#### Describe Clayton County in five words...

"Creative, bold, and growing."  
— Aaliyah R., College Park

"Home that lets you breathe."  
— Malik S., Jonesboro

"Different voices, one vibe."  
— Nyla T., Morrow

"History with new energy."  
— Jordan K., Lovejoy

"Where ideas actually happen."  
— Zariah P., Forest Park

"Still here. Still rising."  
— Cameron L., Hampton

"Culture you can feel."  
— Brianna W., Lovejoy

"Room to become more."  
— DeShawn N., Riverdale

"Grounded, creative, and real."  
— Imani J., Jonesboro



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ART THAT MOVES US, CULTURE THAT SHAPES US

# ART & CULTURE

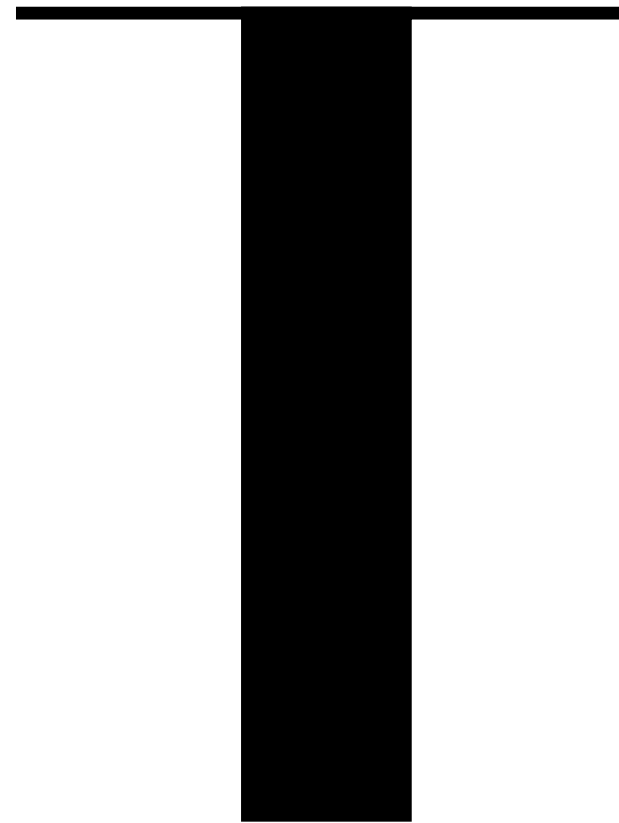
ART SCENE

## Steering the Ship:

*How Kaysie Lazzaro Is Rebuilding Arts Clayton as a Community Engine*

By Gerrian Hawes

Arts Clayton has been here before—full rooms, busy calendars, kids rotating through classes, artists selling work off the walls, and families returning because the building felt like theirs. Founded in 1987, the organization has long served as a creative anchor in Clayton County. But when the pandemic hit, the arts were forced into survival mode. Buildings stayed closed. Programs paused. Revenue tightened. And the slow drain of “little things” became an existential threat.



trip. That desire to build what she couldn’t immediately find is a thread that runs through everything she does.

Before Arts Clayton, she was already working in the community—trying to “build community,” as she puts it—through creative thinking and development conversations tied to a separate effort: Harvest Village, a community development concept emerging around land off Walt Stephens Road. Her role leaned creative: imagining woodworking, glassblowing, knitting, pottery—ways a place could become a hub for making, learning, and gathering.

Around that same time, Arts Clayton was looking for an interim director. Board leaders Dr. Tim Hines and Dr. Donna Jackson reached out with a practical ask: would Kaysie consider stepping in for 90 days while the organization continued its search? Kaysie said yes. That was about a year and a half ago.

### From interim to institution-builder

The interim role didn’t stay interim for long. For Kaysie, what changed wasn’t ambition—it was evidence. She describes the first months as a steady stream of residents walking in and reacting emotionally to the reopening. “Do you want to know how many people came in those first six months and just cried that it was coming back?” she said. “That it wasn’t just shuttered.”

Today, Arts Clayton is rebuilding with intention. At the center of that effort is Kaysie Lazzaro, the organization’s Executive Director—first brought in as a short-term solution, now leading a long-term reinvention designed to outlast any one person.

“I always say I’m just a steward,” she said. “It’s been around since 1987. My role now is to make sure the little things that eat away at it aren’t a big problem—and that we have people and processes in place for checks and balances before it ever gets to that again.”

### A New Orleans upbringing, a Clayton County calling

Kaysie is from New Orleans—born and raised. When she moved to Clayton County, the adjustment was real. She describes it as culture shock: fewer walkable activities, fewer obvious “third places” where families naturally gather. She didn’t immediately know where she fit. “I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what my role was going to be in this new environment,” she said.

What she did know was that her family loved the arts. Her husband is a makeup artist in TV and film. They met working in the film industry. Their daughters attend the Kay Pace School of the Arts—at an age where they’re already choosing art majors, a detail Kaysie calls both adorable and telling. She wanted opportunities that were local—close enough to be part of everyday life rather than a special

That response reframed the work. This wasn’t only a gallery. It was memory. Tradition. A community marker. A place people associated with the best parts of living here—classes, events, holiday markets, and the kind of shared experience that doesn’t translate through a screen.

She began reading older documents and learning the depth of what Arts Clayton used to be: a well-oiled machine through the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. The question wasn’t whether to rebuild. The question was how.

Her answer is consistent: restore what worked, modernize what didn’t, and build a system that can hold under pressure. “I don’t even want it to revolve around me,” she said. “I want it to revolve around the building—what it does and what it becomes. Because if something happens with me, I don’t want the gallery to have to start over from scratch.”

### What Arts Clayton does now

Arts Clayton operates as both a gallery and a program engine. It hosts roughly a show a month—twelve exhibitions a year—plus artist support, classes, youth programming, and partnerships with schools. One of the programs Kaysie pushed hard to restore

“  
*It takes a whole crew,” she said. I’m behind the wheel steering the ship*  
”

is the artist-in-residence model that places working artists in schools. That pipeline was disrupted after the pandemic: new principals, changed connections, a new reality. Reestablishing it meant rebuilding trust and access from scratch.

“We took the blueprint of what it was,” she said, “digested what was good to keep, what we needed to wait to expand on, and what had to be rebuilt.” There’s also a focus on professionalizing local artists—helping them price their work, understand value, and move beyond a mindset that treats art as sentimental storage.

“We realized early on that a lot of our artists have their art in their attic or spare room,” she said. “Most of them keep it because of sentimental reasons. We wanted to help them break free of that...that they can create as much as they want, that they don’t have to hold on to all of it. It’s in them.”

The model is accessible: artists can become members for \$50 a year, which includes at least one show entry and opens the door to exhibiting and selling in the gallery.

And the building itself isn’t just for art on walls. Arts Clayton also rents event space—because it has to. Rentals help pay the basics: lights, water, staffing, the practical costs that keep a nonprofit alive between grants and donations. Funding, Kaysie says plainly, is the largest ongoing challenge. “Everyone loves the arts,” she said. “Everyone appreciates them. But nobody wants to pay us.”

### The artist who didn’t claim the title

Kaysie speaks fluently about creativity—so fluently that people often assume she’s always been an artist. That’s part of what makes her next admission land. “If I ask how long you’ve been an artist...?” she repeated during the interview, pausing. “I technically only consider myself an artist for about four months now,” she said.

For years, she saw herself as the organizer—the note taker, the schedule keeper, the one behind the scenes. Her background in film reinforced that: she worked as a production assistant, building days toward the Directors Guild of America track, before choosing not to pursue directing.

“I wanted to enjoy my family and enjoy my life,” she said, noting the instability of the industry—strikes, negotiations, and now a growing tension around technology and AI. Her turning point came in an unexpected place: building a set for a local Vacation Bible School. The work came naturally. People praised what she made. They called her an artist—over and over—until the label finally stuck.

Her husband pressed the point. “You make things,” he told her. “You work with artists. You help them price their stuff and find their worth. Why don’t you see yours?” That moment mirrors her broader work at Arts Clayton: helping people claim what they are, then giving them structure to live it.

### Culinary arts, agriculture, and a bigger definition of “creative”

During the pandemic, Kaysie and her husband discovered they’re tinkerers. A rare pepper gift became fermentation experiments. Experiments became hot sauces. Hot sauces became demand. Demand became a pepper and sauce business producing roughly 750 to 1,000 pounds of peppers a year.

As with most grassroots ventures, the idea hit a wall where passion meets regulation. Georgia’s rules around high-acid foods require production, processing, and storage to be housed in the same facility—an expensive barrier for small businesses trying to move from cottage-level sales to commercial scale. Co-packers weren’t an easy solution either; margins and supply chains complicate partnerships when the producer controls the key ingredient.

Instead of shrinking, Kaysie’s response is to think in infrastructure: creating a facility that supports multiple makers—not just her own business. A building that allows production, processing, storage, and distribution under one roof.

It ties back to her work in the arts because she doesn’t separate creativity from survival. “Culinary arts,” she said, naming it directly.

“We work with schools with gardening programs and cooking programs.”

Her examples aren’t theoretical. She described a program at Kay Pace where students learned to make pasta from scratch—then ate what they made. She talked about teaching kids to extract oils from herbs like rosemary or calendula—skills that connect to products like lotions, candles, and tinctures. “If they can learn how to make goods they can sell,” she said, “we’re teaching a whole generation how to be self-sufficient.”

### A bridge across the county

Ask Kaysie what she’s building, and she returns to community—specifically, community that connects across difference. She describes juried shows where people of different races, religions, ages, and backgrounds share space without having to perform sameness. They talk. They compare work. They compliment each other. They see each other.

She also talks about the power of beautification—how murals and public art can shift how a place feels, and how people behave inside it. “Just by giving people something beautiful to look at in their space,” she said, “it changes the feel. Our goal at Arts Clayton is to beautify Clayton County in every way that we can.”

### The legacy: building something that can surpass her

When the conversation turns to legacy, Kaysie doesn’t describe a personal brand. She describes resilience. “I guess my legacy would be building this to where it could surpass me and not need me.”

It’s a sober kind of love—less about being known and more about making sure the doors stay open. It’s also a practical philosophy for a community institution: build systems, not dependency; build leadership pipelines, not single points of failure.

Arts Clayton is still a nonprofit. It still needs funding. It still relies on memberships, rentals, sponsors, and donations. But what Kaysie is doing is bigger than keeping the lights on. She’s rebuilding trust, reactivating programs, and restoring a civic space where creativity isn’t decoration—it’s a public service.

And she’s doing it with the mindset of someone steering a ship: not alone, but responsible for direction.

“It takes a whole crew,” she said. “I’m behind the wheel steering the ship—but there are so many people behind the scenes. If it wasn’t for the people who love this community, I don’t think any of it would be possible.” ☒



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CULTURE

# Birders Are Quietly Flocking to Clayton County

*An Ecological Shift Is  
Putting Clayton County  
on the Birding Map*

By Sabrina Gilmore

Clayton County is not known as a birding destination in the way coastal marshes or mountain ridges are. There are no billboards announcing rare sightings. No tourism campaigns built around binoculars and field guides. And yet, over the past year, a quiet pattern has begun to take shape—one that has drawn birders from across Georgia and beyond into the county’s wetlands, reservoirs, and protected natural areas.

What has brought them here is not a single sighting, but repetition. Anomalous birds appearing more than once. Returning. Lingering. Being recorded, photographed, and logged. In birding terms, that matters. It suggests not an accident, but a shift.

**A Pattern, Not a Fluke**

Birders are careful about language. “Rare” does not simply mean uncommon or hard to spot. It means a species appearing outside its typical geographic range, outside its expected season, or in a place where it has very few documented records. When that happens repeatedly in the same area, it becomes a pattern worth watching.

Much of this tracking happens through platforms like eBird, a global database used by amateur birders and professional ornithologists alike. Sightings logged there feed into broader research on migration, habitat use, and environmental change. When a

county begins to show repeated entries for the same unusual species, word travels quickly—quietly, but efficiently. That is what has been happening in Clayton County.

**The Bird Drawing Attention**

Among the most discussed sightings has been the **\*\*Limpkin\*\***, a tall, brown, long-legged wading bird more commonly associated with South Florida and tropical regions of the Americas. Limpkins are highly specialized, feeding primarily on apple snails and relying on freshwater wetlands to survive.

Georgia has relatively few historical records of Limpkins, and metro Atlanta even fewer. Their appearance in Clayton County—documented multiple times—has therefore raised eyebrows among birders. Not because the bird itself is flashy, but because it does not arrive casually. When a Limpkin shows up and stays, it suggests the presence of food, suitable water levels, and relative habitat stability. In other words, conditions are right.

**Why Clayton County?**

Clayton County’s geography quietly explains much of what birders are seeing. The county sits along inland movement corridors used by migratory birds traveling between coastal and interior ecosystems. Its landscape includes reservoirs, managed wetlands, forest edges, and protected green spaces—elements that matter far more to birds than proximity to city centers.

Places like the Newman Wetlands Center offer exactly the kind of layered habitat many species need: shallow water, dense vegetation, and limited disturbance. Reservoir systems and retention ponds provide additional feeding and resting opportunities, particularly during periods of migration or weather disruption.

These environments did not appear overnight. They are the result of land-use decisions, conservation planning, and long-term stewardship—often unnoticed by residents, but immediately legible to wildlife.

**Shifting Migration, Shifting Maps**

Birds respond to environmental change faster than humans do. As temperatures fluctuate, rainfall patterns change, and food availability shifts, migration routes adjust accordingly. Species that once followed predictable north-south paths are increasingly testing new routes, stopping in new places, and—sometimes—staying.

Clayton County’s recent sightings fit within that broader context. The county is not an outlier; it is a data point. A place where evolving patterns are becoming visible earlier than expected. For researchers and serious birders, those data points matter. They help redraw maps that were once considered settled.



Photos envato.com

Importantly, this is not about spectacle. There are no mass flocks or viral moments. The significance lies in accumulation: one checklist, then another, then confirmation from a second observer. Over time, those records tell a story.

**Who the Birders Are—and Why They Come**

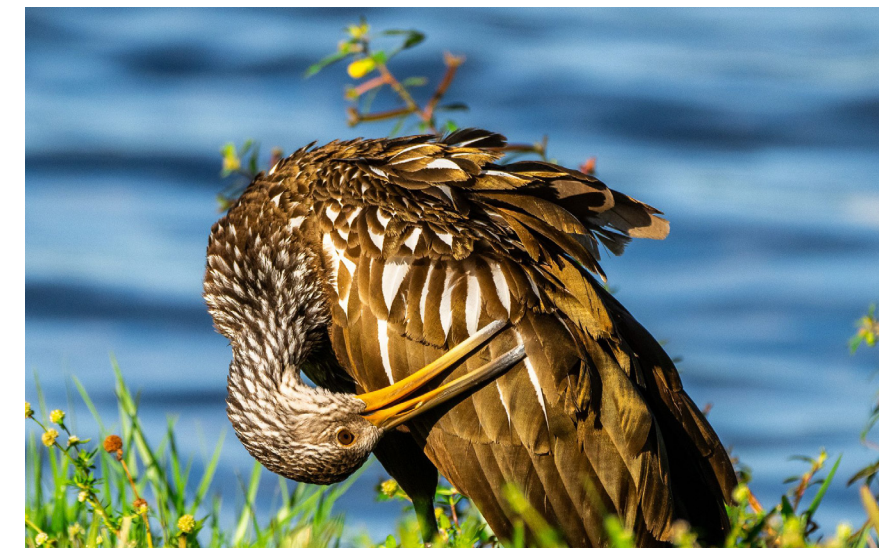
The birders visiting Clayton County are not tourists in the traditional sense. They are early risers, methodical observers, and careful documentarians. Some are photographers. Others are retirees with decades of field experience. Many are local residents who now realize they do not need to travel far to witness something meaningful.

Their presence brings quiet benefits. Increased awareness of local parks. More attention paid to wetland preservation. Greater appreciation for spaces that are often overlooked in conversations about development and growth. Birders tend to be respectful visitors, motivated less by access and more by protection.

**What This Says About Clayton County**

The rare bird pattern unfolding in Clayton County is not about branding or promotion. It is about recognition. The county is proving itself to be ecologically relevant in ways that are not immediately visible but deeply consequential.

Clayton County is not chasing attention. It is being noticed because it sustains life—quietly, consistently, and without

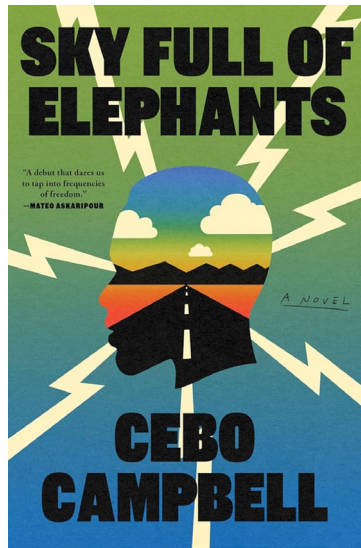


fanfare. That matters. Not just to birders, but to residents who benefit from cleaner water, preserved green space, and landscapes resilient enough to adapt alongside a changing world.

**A County Worth Watching**

Patterns are easy to dismiss when they unfold slowly. But in birding, patience is part of the discipline. Clayton County’s wetlands are telling a story for those paying attention. It is a story about place, about adaptation, and about the quiet importance of environments that continue to function even when no one is looking.

For now, birders will keep coming. They will log their sightings, compare notes, and move on. But the record remains. And Clayton County, whether it intends to or not, has become part of a larger map—one worth watching. 🇺🇸



BOOK NOOK

## Cebo Campbell's *Sky Full of Elephants* Rewrites the American Aftermath

By Carla Lovett

Some novels arrive loudly, announcing their intent with spectacle and shock. *Sky Full of Elephants* does something more unsettling. It opens with an impossible event—every white person in America walking into water and dying—but refuses to let that event do the work for us. What follows is not a fantasy of reversal or triumph. It is a quiet examination of what remains when a dominant presence disappears and the consequences are left behind.

Cebo Campbell is not interested in revenge narratives or moral shortcuts. The disappearance is not framed as justice. It is framed as disruption. The novel follows Charlie Brunton, released from prison after the event, and his estranged daughter Sidney as they move through a country that no

longer looks the same but does not feel new either. Their journey is less about travel than it is about reckoning—personal, historical, and unresolved.

Charlie is a man shaped by systems that no longer exist in visible form but still live inside him. Prison did not end with release. Estrangement did not end with reunion. His relationship with Sidney carries years of absence and unanswered questions, and Campbell does not rush their repair. He allows their connection to remain uneven, resisting the urge to offer reconciliation as a reward for endurance.

What gives the novel its weight is its refusal to imagine a clean slate. The country may be emptied of one group, but memory, behavior, and inherited power dynamics remain. Communities reorganize, but not seamlessly. Campbell understands that history does not require witnesses to continue shaping lives—it only requires inheritance.

The pacing reflects this understanding. There are no sweeping explanations of how the new world functions. Instead, Campbell offers fragments: conversations, silences, moments of unease. The absence of detailed world-building may frustrate some readers, but it feels deliberate. This is not a story about rebuilding systems. It is a story about people left holding what systems produced.

For a community-centered publication like *We Are Clayton*, *Sky Full of Elephants* resonates because it insists that progress is not automatic and harm does not disappear just because a chapter ends. The novel leaves readers with a demanding question: when the old story collapses, do we know how to live without it?

Campbell does not answer that question. He leaves it with us—and that restraint is the novel's quiet power.

**Cebo Campbell** is a writer, creative director, and cultural thinker whose work sits at the intersection of narrative, identity, and speculative imagination. With a background in creative leadership and storytelling across media, Campbell approaches fiction with an eye for structure, symbolism, and social consequence rather than escapism. His writing often interrogates how history, power, and inherited systems shape individual lives long after their visible forms disappear.

Rather than offering utopian fantasy or simple inversion, Campbell uses speculative disruption to explore emotional, familial, and cultural reckoning. His work is distinguished by restraint, moral seriousness, and a refusal to offer easy resolution—positioning him as a writer concerned less with answers than with the questions societies avoid asking once familiar narratives collapse.

***Sky Full of Elephants***

Publication Year: 2024  
Genre: Speculative Fiction  
Form: Novel  
Length: ~300 pages

**Core Themes:**

Race and moral inheritance  
Identity after structural collapse  
Family estrangement  
Family responsibility  
Power without a visible oppressor

**Best For:**

Readers interested in speculative fiction that prioritizes social consequence over world-building mechanics.



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# POET'S PLACE



A setting for poems to stand in full, accompanied by a brief reflection naming the emotional truth they carry—language, voice, and lived experience left intact.

**: for god so loved the world...**

u.i.

dear god,  
 why did my grandmother die?  
 you know that forced my mom to cry.  
 why didn't you make it so that I was there?  
 to wipe away my mother's tears?  
 I fear...that maybe...you're not really there.  
 I fear...that you are the type to rather watch than act.  
 as a matter of fact, you just sit there and stare.  
 a voyeur to all that happens down here.

but I thought that you loved the world?  
 at least that's what your book says.  
 are you the god of us all?  
 or only a god to the ones that promise  
 to offer you their best?  
 your anointed ones, they're also down here.  
 saying with their whole chest, that "this is all a test."

if that's the case...what's the passing score?  
 what grade does a child starving to death...  
 what grade are they meant to get?  
 if that's the case...you don't know the score.  
 cause those starving children; they're  
 dying more and more.  
 and what for?  
 and to be honest, I'm sick of it.  
 if you exist and claim to love the world...  
 then come down and fix this shit.

you can hear everything that I can't  
 you can see everything that I can't  
 you can be everywhere that I am not  
 so if you so loved the world...then  
 why have you left it to rot?  
 how can you be omni-everything  
 and yet you do nothing?  
 cause clearly you're off the clock.  
 cause clearly we're not your flock.  
 it's clear that you've lost the plot.

you're not real.  
 we were never your chosen.  
 your followers are lost, they're suffering from psychosis.  
 you've played in our faces, right under our noses.  
 it's funny how your power stops as  
 soon as the book closes.

*"think, then speak" is a poem about learning how to use voice and how that voice changes over time. You don't need to analyze poetry to understand it. The poem reads like a voice reflecting honestly on growth—on how speech, confidence, and intention develop with experience.*

*The poem compares words to feet, an image that is easy to follow. At first, the words are hesitant—on their knees. Then they stand. Later, they walk and run. This progression shows how the voice within the poem gains confidence gradually. Like learning to walk, finding a voice does not happen all at once.*

*One of the clearest moments comes with the advice: "stand tall, my child / you must resemble trees." There is no need to decode this line. Trees endure storms and cold nights. Here, the poem encourages steadiness—remaining upright without shrinking or bending simply because conditions are difficult.*

*The poem also looks back. The voice recalls a time when its words were "meek"—quiet, unsure, held back. In contrast, the present voice is louder and more confident. Not loud for attention, but firm because it has learned to speak honestly. The poem does not apologize for that growth.*

*By the end, there is no regret. The voice within the poem states that its words have brought "joy and peace." That is the take-away. Speaking with thought—but not fear—has led to something better.*

*This poem is not about ornate language or hidden meaning. It is about thinking before speaking, learning from experience, and allowing voice to mature over time. It reminds us that voice grows when it is allowed to stand, take steps, and move forward.*

review by Jackson Parks

**Break-Dancing**

MnikesaWhitaker-Haaheimer

heartbreak is audible  
 in the ears of angels.  
 see,  
 their spirits run  
 to catch the pieces.  
 and, inevitably,  
 there are pieces  
 because living is not  
 peace-full  
 so bodies  
 and loves  
 constantly collide  
 with each other  
 with sicknesses  
 of heart, mind and flesh.  
 they crash  
 into pieces  
 and  
 we cringe  
 at the fallout.  
 we cry out  
 for a different story.

but there is a b-boy beat  
 in the break of a heart...  
 a style and a rhythm  
 that defies the cynicism  
 that tells you

pain is  
 permanent

No....i saw a crowd  
 of angel heads  
 as they snapped  
 at the claps  
 of the Underground--

the mad crazy breaks  
 of hearts as they throw down  
 when they break  
 like b-boys.

like the freshest kids  
 in uptowns popping and locking  
 and breaking.  
 a beating heart  
 is a bloody dancer when it breaks.  
 and even the angels tower ready with  
 standing ovations  
 at the inspired innovations

of how broke-down heart-  
 pieces still dance in  
 the pain...  
 finding that bougie down soul  
 to fall down  
 and  
 Get up  
 again.

*At its core, Break-Dancing holds the tension between damage and movement. It acknowledges heartbreak as unavoidable—something that fractures bodies, minds, and love itself—while refusing to treat that breakage as an ending. Through rhythm and motion, the poem resists both cynicism and spiritual passivity, rejecting the idea that suffering should be merely observed or endured in silence. Angels appear not as rescuers, but as witnesses to motion, recognizing the force it takes to keep moving inside pain. What breaks does not disappear; it finds cadence. The heart becomes something that stumbles, bleeds, and still rises. This poem holds the insistence that survival is not stillness or waiting, but continued movement—getting up again, even while broken.*

*The poem also holds a cultural memory, drawing from the language of breaking as an art form rooted in resistance, style, and bodily knowledge. Break-dancing is not graceful because it avoids impact; it is expressive because it survives it. In this framing, pain does not erase dignity—it sharpens it. The heart, like the dancer, learns how to fall without surrendering its ability to rise. What remains after the break is not purity or peace, but rhythm—proof of life still insisting on itself.*

review by Jackson Parks



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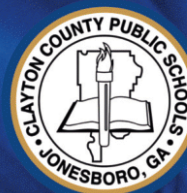
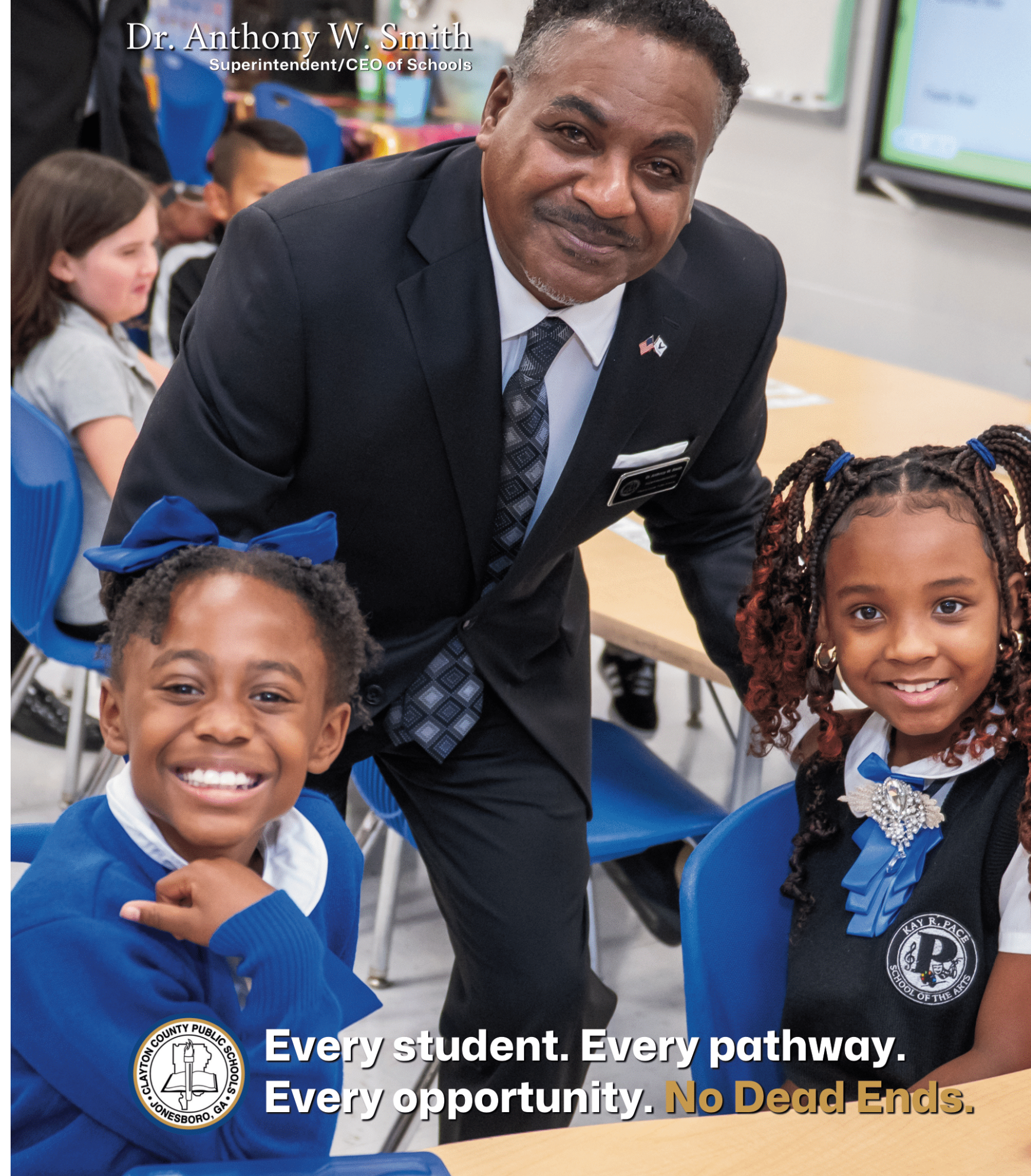
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WHERE ROOTS GIVE RISE TO RESPECT

# ROOTED & RESPECTED

Rooted & Respected honors the people, institutions, and traditions that have earned their place in this community through time, service, and integrity. This section highlights legacy builders—those whose work is anchored in history and whose impact continues to shape Clayton County today.

These stories recognize long-standing leadership, cultural stewardship, and quiet consistency. They document how respect is built: through presence, accountability, and a sustained commitment to the people being served. Here, resilience is not performative—it is proven.

NOTEWORTHY

# A Steady Hand in Clayton County: The Life, Leadership, and Legacy of First Gentleman

# STEVEN HENRY

BY GERRIAN HAWES PHOTO BY JA'DON HAWES

Leadership is often measured by visibility—by titles held, moments captured, and credit received. But some forms of leadership are quieter, practiced in consistency rather than ceremony. This story is about that kind of leadership. It traces the life of Steven Henry Sr., a man whose influence has been shaped not by public ambition, but by service learned early, lived daily, and sustained across family, faith, entrepreneurship, and community. As the first First Gentleman in Clayton County’s history, his role is unprecedented—but the values guiding him are anything but new.

Steven Henry Sr. did not grow up in a quiet house. He grew up in Mississippi—one of nine children, raised with six, of those nine, by a father who believed that service was not something you performed in the community, but something you lived inside your home. His father, born into a family of sixteen, carried the belief that children should work, respect their elders, show up for their neighbors, and learn to use their hands.

“We didn’t know what he was doing,” Steven remembers. “We were just living. But my father was teaching

leadership before we ever knew that word. He taught us how to clean the church, serve the church, serve the community—and serve each other.”

The Henry children were raised inside structure. There was church—Bible study, Sunday school, fellowship. There was work—cleaning, cooking, fixing what needed fixing.

There was accountability—from neighbors, parents, and community alike. And there was love. Not soft or indulgent, but steady—built on presence, discipline, and showing up.

*Steven Henry, photographed in Brolo—his own clothing brand.*



“Our relationship is rooted in God, I’m here to support her, not overshadow her. She can’t be bought—she owes nobody but God.”

If something needed building, he built it. If something needed fixing, he fixed it. Even his home in Decatur reflects that legacy—repairs, remodels, sheetrock done by hand, often with his brothers beside him.

“I hear my dad all the time,” Steven says. “Keep your hands in God’s hands. And whatever you do, stay humble.”

That humility is felt the moment someone walks into his barbershop. It’s also felt when they see him standing beside his wife.

**Becoming the First Gentleman of Clayton County**

When Dr. Alieka Anderson Henry became the first female Chair of the Clayton County Board of Commissioners, Steven stepped into a role no man had held before. He did not chase visibility. He did not need a title. He stood beside his wife—supporting, protecting, grounding.

“Our relationship is rooted in God,” he says. “I’m here to support her, not overshadow her. She can’t be bought—she owes nobody but God.” Public leadership is demanding. Criticism is constant. Expectations are heavy—especially for women.

He guards her peace. He shields her from noise. He brings steadiness where the world demands strength. “Resilience in marriage,” he says, “is love in action—especially when the world is watching.”

**Faith as Compass**

Steven is grounded because he knows where he stands—and Who he stands with. “My mother always says, ‘Stay humble.’ My father said, ‘Stay where God can use you.’”

Faith centers him when public life grows loud. Family anchors him when schedules stretch thin. Music—especially gospel—sets the tone.

At the barbershop, the day doesn’t begin until the music does. “For somebody,” he says, “that might be the song they needed all day.”

**The Foundation: Serving Clayton County’s Families**

Today, Steven serves through the Dr. Alieka Anderson Henry Foundation, focused on removing barriers for children and families across Clayton County. **His vision is direct:** “Break down whatever holds families back—and replace it with access, opportunity, and hope.”

When parents say thank you. When children believe again. He is reminded this work is not symbolic. “Legacy is who you lift as you rise,” he says. “I want young men to remember I lived with integrity, humility, and purpose.”

**A Life That Comes Full Circle**

Steven Henry is many things: barber, mentor, entrepreneur, father, First Gentleman. But at the core, he is a man shaped by steady strength.

Leadership learned in church, not classrooms. Wisdom formed in barbershops, not boardrooms. Purpose rooted in presence. “My journey is proof that humble beginnings can lead to powerful purpose when God is guiding the path.”

That foundation shaped every chapter of Steven’s life: barber, entrepreneur, mentor, and eventually, the first First Gentleman in Clayton County history.

**From Mississippi to Atlanta: The Making of a Mentor**

After graduation, Steven carried his father’s lessons with him to Atlanta, joining his brother Jesse and enrolling in barber school.

The clippers became more than a trade. “As a kid, I saw how a barber could make somebody feel seen again,” he says. “In that chair, you learn to listen deeply, respect people, and build trust.”

His barbershop quickly became an unofficial mentoring space. Young boys wandered in—curious, restless, looking for belonging. Steven gave them small responsibilities: sweeping floors, showing up on time, learning respect.

“Those small things turn into big things,” he says. “A broom teaches respect. Showing up teaches responsibility. And a man telling a young man, ‘I love you,’ teaches something a lot of boys don’t get at home.”

The model was inherited, not invented—an echo of a father who raised six children with consistency, care, and expectation.

**An Entrepreneur Who Never Stopped Building**

Barbering was only the beginning. Steven opened his own shop, then a convenience store. He partnered with his sister on community initiatives. He rode with Ironbred MC. He helped launch a clothing line, BRO-LO.



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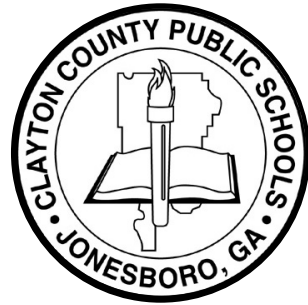
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LIVING LEGEND



# A Life in Teaching, Dr. Jessie Goree has Influenced Thousands of People in Her Five Decades of Education

BY MICHAEL BOOTH PHOTO BY JA'DON HAWES

**A**s with many of those who chose to become an educator, Doctor Jessie Goree was profoundly influenced by her first teacher, a Miss Reader, who taught first grade. After more than five decades of service to her community as a teacher and school board member, Goree can't forget the woman who defined her career.

"She was the meanest, evilest person I think I ever met in my life," Goree said in her office overflowing with photographs of her grandkids and awards she has collected over the years. "I just said, you know, when I grow up, I want to become a teacher but I don't want to be like her. It was an inner goal to become an educator because I feel like without teachers no one really achieves anything."

Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, there were not a lot of occupations open to women, especially minority women, Goree explained. "Maybe you're going to be a preacher or maybe a teacher," she said. Fortuitously, her teacher in high school, Miss Lauderdale, taught her the right way to teach using structure and understanding. Goree actually patterned her teaching style on this teacher, to the

benefit of her many students over the years.

The current Chair of the Clayton County Board of Education, serving her fourth and final term, said that teaching is only the second most important occupation after parenting. "Because I feel like I make a difference in people's lives," she said. In addition to the students she has touched, Goree has left a legacy of attempting to make her students' lives a lot better. She annually hosts and sponsors such events as College Fair, the Girls Conference, and the Male Involvement and Teen Summit. She came up with the idea for the Early Learning Center in Riverdale, a literacy program that is trying to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and literacy.

Being a Kentucky native, the game of basketball is a spiritual journey as well as a sport for Goree. So when she graduated college and looked for a teaching job, she only wanted to be in a city with an NBA team. At least the Atlanta Hawks, unknowingly, have contributed to the community by recruiting her to teach in the region for the next 31 years. Goree had several stops in the Atlanta Public School system, teaching math in both elementary and middle schools, before she decided to move to Clayton in 1999. "So I evaded the Atlanta teachers' scandal," she said with a sigh of relief.



Little did she know that another educational indignity would await her in Clayton County. She taught 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and became an instructional lead teacher for the next decade but then disaster struck. In 2008, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) revoked Clayton County schools' accreditation citing general unethical behavior from the school board. Governor Sonny Perdue removed four board members and ordered a special election.

After the SACS decision, a photo of Goree sobbing next to Georgia State Representative Mike Glanton went viral. "Reporters from all over the world were on the property and they took pictures of it. I had someone from New York call me. He told me it even was in the newspaper in Hong Kong," she said.

Because her son was set to graduate from North Clayton High School, Goree could not stand by and allow her son to have an unaccredited diploma. She ran for District 3 and won. Clayton County regained accreditation on probation in 2009 and worked to meet SACS's demands.

"It took a lot of intensive board training. I would say like six months of just going here for a week and then we go there for a week," she said of the work the board members were undertaking. "We were like under the microscope of the state and the national level." The accreditation would be restored in 2016.

Goree believes the whole thing was politically motivated. Besides, she said, "Nobody even realizes that what accreditation is really just our paying money." When the accreditation crisis was over, the first graduation was Riverdale High School where Goree. "cried the whole the whole time. I'm just sitting up there just crying and then my sons right away said, 'I just want you to know I am so proud of the people that stuck with us because we lost a lot of kids because a lot of parents withdrew their children.'"

Just before this election time for the school board, Goree underwent a routine mammogram that revealed an early stage of breast cancer. She endured both chemo and radiation. In the midst of her treatment it was time for her to run for office again. The Teachers' Union put up another candidate for Goree's seat.

"I was probably at my physically weakened weakest point in my life. And I was out trying to campaign. I was very strong because so many times when you get a diagnosis like that you just say 'I'm not gonna make it' or whatever. I was totally the opposite," she said. "It was my last day or the next the last day of radiation. I'm out there with my sign in the sun someplace I'm not supposed to be campaigning. But I ended up winning. It makes me appreciate every sunrise that I see every day."

Nearing her end of almost 50 years in education, Goree is very happy that she is not coming up as a new teacher, whose salaries are so low they cannot afford to qualify to buy or even rent a decent place to live. In addition, students and parents today are much different than when she was a young teacher.

“  
*We don't collectively understand the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child.*  
”

"I must say the great thing was that I was able to teach then because if it were now, I don't think I would be in the classroom," she said. "I'm just amazed that some of the problems that some of our kids have, and they're just kids. They haven't paid any bills yet. It's really hard really hard being a child."

With the literacy rate falling nationwide, Goree said today's students are failing in the simplest ways. For example, when talking to supposedly well-informed students, Goree asked what the average body temperature is. None of them knew. One of them tried to Google the answer, and he was a kinesiology student at Clayton State.

At the monthly Board of Education meetings, when students are present, they are asked to do the Pledge of Allegiance. "They really don't know the Pledge of Allegiance. They add words or it sounds like the star spangled banner," she said. "It just seems like we lost a lot of the personal skills. I'm disappointed in the way that we are doing our children." Goree is also concerned about parents and how they affect their kids. Many parents, who do show up for teacher-parent conferences, arrive in pajamas and bathrobes, with an extreme attitude. "That's kind of like a normal. When my daughter was in school, I told her, if you act up and I have to come up to that school, I'm going to have my pink rollers in my hair. But now that type of stuff that would embarrass her, nowadays that's how they come."

Violence in the schools has been on the increase in recent years, she said. "It's really sometimes not even safe to be in the classroom. Teachers are getting attacked." Despite the setbacks, the disappointments, and the struggles, Goree is thankful for the years she spent teaching the adults of today. She still is in contact with many of them. She said they would reminisce about the classroom years. Her heart sings when she hears a former student say they remember how she cared and how she was patient with them. This is her last tenure on the Board. She wants to see her two granddaughters graduate before her term expires in 2028. Her solution to the present state of education her in Clayton County and the nation is very simple:



*Learning isn't easy. That's why it's so fun.*



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CIVIC DUTY



# When a Politician is *Not* A Politician: Lovejoy Mayor Marci Fluellin Breaks the Mold as a Local Office Holder

BY MICHAEL BOOTH PHOTO BY JA'DON HAWES

Lovejoy Mayor Marci Fluellin bristles when the word “politician” is thrown at her. “From day one I have told people I am not a politician, I am a public servant,” she said recently in her office dominated by fish tanks and green plants. “I am here to serve the citizens of Lovejoy. I am here speak for them,

advocate for them, and make sure that their dreams and hopes for this city come to fruition.”

Being a politician or a public servant was not on Fluellin’s mind when she and her family would stop at the Dairy Queen in Lovejoy on their frequent trips to the Atlanta region from their

home in Barnwell. The city’s name itself was a lure for her. Yet, beyond the surface there was something else tugging at her heart.

“I just fell in love with the city,” she remembers. “And then I saw the city’s name and I’m like love joy. Oh, my goodness!”

Thirty years ago she packed up and moved her family, three kids, and settled into the Fleming Cove neighborhood. She worked hard for a large company handling strategic planning and purchasing while her three children graduated from Lovejoy High School.

Her entry into city politics happened when many of her neighbors approached her about convincing the council to change an unused building into a community center. “Marci,” they said, “you don’t mind speaking up.” With her due diligence on researching the opportunity, Fluellin stood up at the city council meeting and presented her case, complete with financial information and a timeline. The council not only approved the development but they appointed Fluellin to the project committee tasked with completing the community center.

“Not only did we complete it ahead of schedule but we also completed it under budget,” she said.

Bobby Cartwright, a council member and future mayor, was impressed by her presentation. “I like you, your energy, your charisma, your ability to speak in public, your personality. Everything about you says you should become a council member,” Cartwright told her. When she replied that she was not interested in politics, Cartwright said that it was more about taking care of people than politics. Go forward a year and a half to 2007. A council member moved leaving a vacant seat. Cartwright insisted that Fluellin accept the responsibility of serving her city. She agreed and the council voted her in to the council where she has served for almost two decades.

During that time, Fluellin has served as Mayor Pro Tem three times. What did she learn? “There’s never a dull day in City Hall,” she said with a chuckle. Before the 2003 city elections, Cartwright told Fluellin that her time to run the city had arrived. “You represent your city like no

other and you have a love for this city like I do. What do you think about becoming the mayor?” And so she did.

Her career handling \$20 million budgets gave her the groundwork for being mayor and taught her the importance of collaboration.

“It definitely prepares you for accountability because all of your decisions matter,” she said. “And it also prepares you for collaboration because when I was in corporate, I was responsible for eight different manufacturing locations and all of them were not in the United states. So collaboration was something that I spent many years honing my skills on being able to come to a table, hear everyone’s opinion, then work together to make sure everyone has a voice. And when the project is completed, that everyone can see something of themselves in the completed project.”

Lovejoy is one of the increasing number of municipalities being run exclusively by women, with the mayor and the entire council filled by females. She says all the duties of running a household as a wife, mother, or single mom requires the wearing of many hats. With all the duties required, most women become nurturers, and that gets transferred to their dealings in public.

“We’re expected to get it done and so we have to find a way to bring whatever it is across the finish line,” said Fluellin. “We all come together very well. We hear each other, we make room for each other, we support each other, we celebrate each other’s wins and we work very well together to make sure that we represent the city to its best. “So we pride ourselves in bringing excellence to the game.”

Fluellin is proud to say that she comes from a family of prayer warriors, a group of women who are serious about their relationships with the Lord. They encouraged young Marci to find her own footing and lean on God’s understanding rather than

“Lovejoy has been rated one of the fastest growing cities in Georgia by Business View magazine, where it ranks within the top 10 statewide for residential growth.”

her own understanding because most people are just as ignorant and blind as you are, they said.

“They gave me confidence being a young black female in the state of Georgia. Sometimes what’s very difficult to do is to walk into a room with confidence. Walk in there knowing that you belong there, to have a purpose for being there, and will make the impact in the room that you’re in,” said Fluellin.

Lovejoy has been rated one of the fastest-growing cities in Georgia by *Business View* magazine, where it ranks within the top 10 statewide for residential growth. Homes.com reported that the city has undergone a dramatic rise in population, going from under 3,000 residents in 2010 to more than 15,000 today. During the period of 2022 to 2023, Data USA reported that Lovejoy had a 5.16% population increase in just that amount of time.

When Fluellin became mayor, she realized that she had to work hard to grow the number of homes being built in the city and have the right mix of housing. She didn’t plan for today or tomorrow, she planned for 15 years down the road. “We didn’t have enough households in Lovejoy,” she said. “So we spent years on our residential development. Now it’s time for economic development. It’s time to bring in the retail, the commercial, the entertainment, the restaurants. It’s time for us to keep our coin in the Lovejoy community as much as possible.”

The city already has a roster of public events, events started by Fluellin when she first joined the city council. She had an idea for a fall festival and convinced the council to back the event. For the first three or four years, Fluellin ran the event by herself until it was established. Today, many outside contractors work on the event, which has spawned a number of other things happening in the city.

This year the monthly lineup of events kicked off in January with the Golden Kisses Luncheon and will end with the traditional Christmas in Lovejoy on December 4. In between, residents and visitors have enjoyed the Fishing Rodeo in June, Youth Basketball Camp in July, the Fall Fest, several community cleanup and shred days, a couple of Coffee With a Cop days, a 5k Run/Walk, and more.

“It brings the community together,” she said. “It gives them a reason to celebrate. It gives us networking. It shows them the best that their city has to offer.” Lovejoy’s image is very important, Fluellin said, because for the metro Atlanta area and Clayton County, Lovejoy is the first city encountered for those traveling north, and the last city for those traveling south.

“*Just let them know for the next two to three years, hold on to your hats, baby, because it’s go time!*”

“We hold down the south side, said Fluellin, “We are collaboratively working together with Clayton leadership to buff that diamond so that it shines brightly. Clayton County can no longer be underestimated. We’re the underdog but we’re a big dog and we’re barking loud and letting them know Clayton County is here to stay. Clayton County has a lot to offer not only for the residents that are here but for anyone who’s interested in moving here.”

Fluellin claims to be mayor 24/7, and her staff backs up that claim. Even on her rare vacation days, the mayor can still be found sending out emails at 2 a.m. “I see something and I’m like this will be great in our city. What do you think about this? My staff laughs at me.”

Her office is dominated by a huge 80 gallon fish tank and two smaller tanks filled with African cichlids, white ghost Tetra angelfish, discus guppies and blue mollies. The guppies live in a small tank, barely bigger than a lemon seed. In another tank, a green leafy vine grows from the water where mature African cichlid babies frolic. But this is nothing compared to her home where she estimates there are another 20 tanks, although the largest one is only 75 gallons.

At home, she has fancy tail guppies with big flowing fancy tails decorated with colorful patterns and all the patterns that go in them and all the different colors that show up on their bodies.

Fluellin has so many fish that she can’t name them all. Some, however, get christened by her staff. And she does have one with a bright orange tail that she calls Flash. Other than her love of freshwater fish, her home is almost as green as a forest there are so many plants. She says walking into her bedroom is like walking into a jungle.

Her focus remains the city she fell in love with some 30 years ago. Fluellin says the city is working hard to start making agreements to bring in new restaurants and other venues. You might think that a politician – pardon me – a public servant in Lovejoy City Government for almost two decades would be cruising along and not doing anything new or different. The feedback she receives from Lovejoy residents is overwhelmingly positive at the monthly city council meetings that are almost always packed. So what has she got planned next?

“Just let them know for the next two to three years, hold on to your hats, baby, because it’s go time!”

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# BUSINESS & INNOVATION

## Claycoin + Synergy:

Growing Opportunities in Clayton County



# From Bonds to Blockchain:

*How Clayton County Is Building a Community-Owned Tech Future*

BY CARLA LOVETT PHOTOS COURTESY OF LE'VAR NORSWORTHY

**CLAYTON COUNTY** is no longer waiting for innovation to arrive from somewhere else. It is building it—intentionally, locally, and with residents at the center of the equation.

September 2025, the county stepped into the national conversation on digital currency and tech-enabled economies with the launch of Claycoin + Synergy, a first-of-its-kind pilot that blends cryptocurrency rewards, a digital community card, and a Roblox-powered economic simulator. The initiative is designed not as a novelty, but as an accessible on-ramp into the future of local economic participation.

The timing is deliberate. Just weeks earlier, voters approved a nearly \$1 billion bond package, setting in motion construction of Clayton County's first hyperscale data center. Together, the data center and Claycoin + Synergy signal something larger than a single

program or investment. They represent a coordinated strategy—one that positions Clayton County as a tech-forward hub while ensuring residents are not spectators to growth, but beneficiaries of it.

## Infrastructure First, Innovation Second

For years, communities across the country have chased innovation without the infrastructure to sustain it. Clayton County has taken a different approach. The bond-backed data center provides the physical backbone required for advanced digital systems, data-intensive businesses, and long-term tech investment.

## Claycoin + Synergy sits on top of that foundation.

Rather than treating technology as an abstract future-state, the county is integrating it into everyday life—local shopping, youth education, and civic participation. The message is clear: digital economies are not reserved for Silicon Valley or global financial centers. They can be built, tested, and scaled at the county level.

## What Is Claycoin + Synergy?

At its core, Claycoin + Synergy is a community rewards ecosystem. Residents earn digital rewards—Claycoin—by supporting participating local businesses. The system is accessed through a digital community card that tracks engagement and incentives, making the experience familiar to anyone who has used a loyalty program.

What sets the initiative apart is its educational layer. A Roblox-powered simulator allows young people to explore how digital economies work in a low-risk, interactive environment. Concepts like spending, saving, circulation, and value creation are no longer abstract lessons—they are experienced in real time.

By combining currency, gamification, and

education into a single platform, Claycoin + Synergy turns economic participation into something tangible. Residents don't need to understand blockchain mechanics to benefit. They only need to participate in their own community.

## Putting Value Back Into Residents' Hands

The philosophy behind Claycoin + Synergy is straightforward: economic activity should circulate locally before it leaks outward.

When residents shop locally, rewards stay in the system. When youth learn financial literacy early, they gain tools that compound over time. When public and private sectors collaborate, everyday transactions become building blocks for long-term prosperity.

This approach reframes economic development. Instead of focusing solely on attracting outside dollars, Clayton County is strengthening internal value exchange—making the local economy more resilient, adaptive, and inclusive.

## A Strategist's Vision Made Practical

The architect behind Claycoin + Synergy is Le'Var Norsworthy, a Clayton County native whose career has focused on making complex ideas understandable—and actionable—for everyday people.

Norsworthy is nationally recognized for his work in branding and economic storytelling. His campaigns for Clayton County Public Schools, the Sheriff's Office, and the Development Authority have earned multiple Telly Awards, not just for creative execution, but for changing how communities see themselves.

For him, Claycoin + Synergy answers a persistent question: How do you make impact tangible?



"Innovation doesn't have to wait for Silicon Valley," Norsworthy said. "Inclusive, tech-driven growth can start at the neighborhood level and scale upward."

By translating emerging economic systems into tools residents can see, touch, and use, the initiative bridges the gap between policy and daily life. It is not about speculation or hype—it is about participation.

## Part of a National Movement—with a Local Difference

Clayton County is not alone in exploring digital assets. Cities like Miami and Austin have tested municipal tokens. Major corporations, from Starbucks to Nike, are experimenting with blockchain-based loyalty systems. Deloitte analysts estimate that community-focused digital-asset ecosystems could reach \$10 billion in value by 2030.

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## Business & Innovation

### **What differentiates Claycoin + Synergy is integration.**

Most initiatives focus on a single function—currency, rewards, or education. Clayton’s model brings all three together, anchored by local government support and aligned with physical infrastructure investment. The result is a platform that belongs to the community rather than sitting adjacent to it.

This integration matters. It lowers barriers to entry, builds trust, and ensures the system grows with—not ahead of—the people it serves.

### **What Comes Next**

Clayton County officials are already planning the next phase. Small-business incentives are being explored to increase participation and circulation. Youth-focused financial literacy programs will expand, using the simulator as a teaching tool rather than a standalone feature.

Other municipalities are watching closely. Several have expressed interest in adoption, with discussions underway around seeding circulation and signaling government backing in their own jurisdictions.

If those conversations lead to replication, Clayton County will have done more than launch a pilot. It will have established a blueprint.

### **A Matter of Timing—and Ownership**

The convergence of the data center and Claycoin + Synergy is not accidental. Infrastructure attracts opportunity. Platforms determine who benefits from it.

As Clayton County positions itself as a rising tech hub, Claycoin + Synergy

“  
This isn’t just about  
technology, It’s about  
transformation.  
”

gives residents a direct way to participate in—and feel—the impact of that growth. The initiative connects macro-level investment to micro-level experience, ensuring innovation is not something that happens to the community, but with it.

“This isn’t just about technology,” Norsworthy emphasized. “It’s about transformation.”

### **A Blueprint for Community-Led Innovation**

Clayton County’s approach challenges a long-standing assumption: that meaningful innovation must be imported. Instead, the county is demonstrating that local leadership, paired with strategic infrastructure and accessible tools, can produce systems that are both advanced and inclusive.

Claycoin + Synergy is not a finish line. It is a signal—one that says communities do not have to wait their turn in the global innovation economy. They can design their own entry point.

In doing so, Clayton County is rewriting the playbook for community-driven growth—one transaction, one lesson, and one resident at a time.

And in an era defined by rapid change, that kind of intentional ownership may be the most resilient strategy of all.

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Inside the Momentum 500 classroom. Participants engage in hands-on learning led by Dr. Mario Norman and Dr. Stacy Reynolds, focusing on business structure, financial literacy, and sustainable decision-making.



# Inside the Momentum 500 Program: Why Readiness Comes Before Funding

BY CARLA LOVETT PHOTOS COURTESY OF GERRIAN HAWES

**IN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SMALL BUSINESS** growth, funding is often treated as the beginning of the story. Capital is positioned as the missing piece—the thing that, once secured, will solve long-standing challenges and unlock momentum. The Momentum 500 program takes a different view. It begins not with money, but with readiness.

Developed through a partnership involving the Clayton County Development Authority and Clayton State University’s Continuing Education division, the Momentum 500 class is designed to prepare business owners before investment ever enters the equation. Its premise is simple but firm: funding works best when it follows structure, not the other way around.

That philosophy is reflected not only in the curriculum, but in the instructors who lead it.

## The Expertise Behind the Program

Dr. Mario Norman and Dr. Stacy Reynolds bring decades of real-world experience to the Momentum 500 classroom—experience

rooted not only in academia, but in entrepreneurship itself.

Dr. Norman traces his entrepreneurial beginnings back to necessity. When his grandfather fell ill, he and his cousin were suddenly responsible for selling truckloads of watermelon before they spoiled. “We had a finite time to sell it,” he recalled. “Otherwise, it would all go bad.” That early lesson in urgency and operations stayed with him.

Later, entrepreneurship became deeply personal when his wife opened a dental practice. Despite clinical excellence, the business side proved challenging. “Nobody taught them how to run the business,” he said. “You assume that if you’re a dentist, people will come and you’ll make money—but we didn’t understand how much money was going out the door.” The lessons came after the fact, often painfully, but they shaped how he now teaches business owners to anticipate problems rather than react to them.

Dr. Reynolds’ path was similarly shaped by lived experience. With more than 35 years in business, she started

early—launching ventures while still in undergraduate school and later working in large corporate environments. Over time, she noticed a recurring pattern. “People aren’t able to thrive. They’re spending a lot of time surviving,” she said. “They’re doing the hard stuff, but not some of the little stuff that could make their businesses more profitable and sustainable.”

That realization led her from corporate leadership and family business into academia, with a clear purpose: to help entrepreneurs build enterprises that last.

## What the Momentum 500 Class Teaches

The Momentum 500 program centers on capacity building. Participants are guided through financial readiness, strategic planning, and operational execution—areas that are often glossed over in traditional grant narratives.

Financial literacy is a cornerstone. Business owners are encouraged to examine cash flow, pricing, and cost structures honestly. As Dr. Norman noted, even well-intentioned businesses can struggle when values and viability collide. In the dental practice he and his wife built, generosity sometimes came at the expense of sustainability. “We gave away a lot of services,” he explained. “It went against her values to turn people away, but the business still had to survive.”

Strategy follows closely behind. Rather than pushing rapid growth, the program asks participants to define what sustainable growth actually looks like for their business. It challenges assumptions and replaces them with planning grounded in reality.

Execution is where these ideas are tested. Systems, documentation, and follow-through are treated as essential—not optional. The program emphasizes that good intentions do not replace operational discipline.

## What the Instructors Expect From Participants

Momentum 500 is not a passive experience. From the outset, participants are expected to show up, engage, and apply what they are learning.

Dr. Reynolds was candid about her expectations. “You showed up. And you were fully present,” she said of the cohort. “You allowed us the opportunity to bring you new

tools—and actually work with them.”

That openness mattered, particularly given the diversity of experience in the room. Some participants had been in business for years and arrived with understandable skepticism. “Often, when people have been in business a long time, they feel like they already know,” Dr. Norman acknowledged. “They’re ready to get back to their business and make money.” The willingness to pause, listen, and engage became one of the program’s most meaningful outcomes.

## Why Education Before Investment Matters

A central theme of Momentum 500 is that preparation reduces risk—for businesses and for funders. By emphasizing education first, the program helps prevent premature scaling, mismanaged funds, and burnout.

It also reframes grants as tools rather than solutions. Funding does not replace structure; it amplifies it. When businesses are prepared, capital becomes a lever instead of a lifeline.

Dr. Norman described the reward succinctly: “Seeing the light bulbs go off. If we can share information so you don’t have to fight the same battles, and you become more profitable, that benefits the entire community.”

Dr. Reynolds echoed that sentiment. “We’ve been tested through business and academia. If we can connect those dots and make it better for someone else, then it was worthwhile. It breathes life into entrepreneurs—and into our communities.”

## From Classroom to Application

The Momentum 500 program does not end when the class concludes. Its value lies in what participants carry forward: clearer financial practices, stronger systems, and a more realistic understanding of what growth requires.

In a landscape where funding is often emphasized without context, Momentum 500 offers a necessary correction. Readiness is not secondary. It is fundamental.

For small businesses committed to longevity, that lesson may be the most enduring return on investment of all.



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## COLUMN



## *Resilience Is a Business Skill, Not a Personality Trait*

BY STEVEN BOWEN

### RESILIENCE, IN SMALL BUSINESS, IS RARELY DRAMATIC.

It does not look like viral growth, overnight success, or a comeback story wrapped in applause. Most of the time, it looks like a business owner sitting at a desk long after everyone else has gone quiet, recalculating—not just numbers, but belief.

As a business coach, I've seen resilience show up in very specific ways.

It's the owner who launches with confidence, only to realize six months in that the model doesn't actually work. Not because they failed, but because the market told the truth faster than expected. Resilience is not pretending that truth doesn't hurt. It's having the discipline to listen, adjust, and rebuild without internalizing the setback as personal inadequacy.

It's the small business that survives a slow quarter—not by panic discounting or frantic rebranding—but by tightening operations, protecting cash flow, and making decisions that favor longevity over ego.

Resilience here is restraint. It's choosing sustainability over appearance.

It's the entrepreneur who realizes they have outgrown their original role. The thing that once made them great—doing everything themselves—has become the very thing limiting growth. Resilience is learning how to let go of control, even when delegation feels risky, uncomfortable, or slower at first.

From the outside, people often call this “grit.” I don't.

Grit implies brute force. Resilience, in business, is intelligence under pressure.

It's knowing when to push and when to pause. When to invest and when to conserve. When to stand firm in your pricing, and when to refine your offer because the value isn't landing clearly enough.

Resilient business owners don't avoid hardship. They integrate it.

They learn how to read patterns instead of reacting emotionally. They stop asking, “Why is this happening to me?” and start asking, “What is this showing me about my systems, my positioning, or my capacity?”

Most importantly, resilience shows up in how a business owner relates to themselves.

The ones who last are not the loudest or the fastest. They are the ones who stop tying their worth to weekly performance metrics. They separate identity from outcome. That separation is not weakness—it's the foundation that allows clear thinking during uncertainty.

If you're running a small business and it feels harder than you expected, that doesn't mean you're doing it wrong. It means you're in the part most people don't talk about.

Resilience isn't the absence of strain.

It's the skill of staying operational, strategic, and self-trusting while strain exists.

And that skill—quiet, learned, and earned—is what actually builds businesses that last.



CTL+ALT+DEL

## The Age of Human-in-the-Loop Technology

BY CLIFFORD GODDARD

*Every major technology shift promises efficiency. Fewer steps. Faster results. Lower costs. What it rarely promises—at least not out loud—is clarity.*

Right now, the most consequential shift in business technology is not automation itself. It's something quieter and more demanding: human-in-the-loop systems. Technology designed not to replace judgment, but to require it.

This matters because we are past the novelty phase of “smart” tools. Artificial intelligence can now draft emails, summarize meetings, generate images, forecast trends, and automate customer interactions. The capability is no longer the question. The question is who remains accountable when decisions are accelerated beyond human pacing. Human-in-the-loop technology answers that by design.

In these systems, machines process scale, speed, and pattern recognition. Humans retain authority over context, ethics, and final decisions. The loop is intentional. It forces a pause. A review. A moment where responsibility cannot be delegated to code. For small businesses, this is not a philosophical debate. It's operational. Automation without oversight feels productive—until it isn't. A pricing algorithm discounts too aggressive-

ly. A chatbot responds without nuance. A scheduling system optimizes efficiency at the expense of customer trust. None of these failures are dramatic. They are slow leaks. Reputation erosion. Quiet friction. Human-in-the-loop tools are built to prevent that.

They flag anomalies instead of acting blindly. They require approval before execution. They elevate judgment rather than bypass it. In practice, this means technology that supports thinking instead of replacing it.

What makes this shift especially important for small businesses is scale asymmetry. Large corporations can absorb mistakes through volume. Small businesses cannot. One misfired automation can undo years of relationship-based trust. That's why the next competitive advantage is not “using AI,” but using AI with restraint.

Human-in-the-loop systems reward owners who understand their business deeply enough to supervise technology intelligently. They demand clarity around values, tone, boundaries, and risk tolerance. They expose gaps in decision-making rather than hiding them behind speed. This is uncomfortable for some leaders.

Automation is seductive because it offers relief. Relief from decision fatigue. Relief from responsibility. Relief from being the final authority. Human-in-the-loop systems remove that illusion. They make it clear: technology can assist, but it cannot own the outcome.

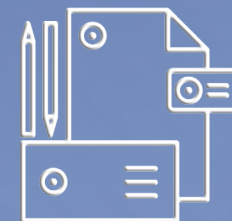
That ownership still belongs to the human. From a resilience standpoint, this is critical. Businesses that survive volatility are not the fastest adopters. They are the most discerning ones. They ask not only can this be automated? but should it be? And if so, under what conditions?

The future of small business tech is not fully autonomous systems running in the background. It is augmented judgment—tools that sharpen decision-making rather than replace it. That may not sound revolutionary. It is.

Because it reasserts something many leaders quietly lost during the race toward efficiency: agency. Human-in-the-loop technology does exactly that. It reminds us that the most valuable operating system in any business is still human discernment—supported by machines, not surrendered to them.

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## What Keeps Small Businesses Recognizable

There's a basket of lemons on the counter because someone uses them. They're there because they get reached for regularly, not because they're decorative. No one expects them to do everything. They just need to be there when needed.

### LOCAL ADVERTISING WORKS THE SAME WAY.

Most small businesses don't have a visibility problem because they're bad at what they do. They have a visibility problem because people don't think of them at the right moment. That's not solved by one ad or a short campaign. It's solved by showing up in the same place, over time, where people already pay attention.

In Clayton County, people make decisions based on familiarity. They choose what they recognize. They trust what feels established. Local advertising supports that by putting a business in front of the same audience again and again, in a context that already feels credible.

Advertising in *We Are Clayton Magazine* isn't about interruption. Readers are here on purpose. They're reading about their county, their neighbors, their institutions. When a business appears in that space consistently, it becomes part of that mental map. The name doesn't feel new every time. It starts to feel known.

### THAT'S WHERE ADVERTISING EARNS ITS VALUE.

A good advertorial doesn't exaggerate or persuade aggressively. It explains what a business does and why it exists here. It lets readers decide for themselves. Over time, that clarity matters more than volume.

Local advertising isn't about being everywhere. It's about being present in the places that last.

Like the lemons on the counter, it works because it's visible, useful, and dependable. That recognition is not accidental. It's the result of showing up in the same place, again and again.

A strong advertorial doesn't rely on hype. It doesn't exaggerate or oversell. It presents information clearly and respects the reader's ability to decide for themselves. That approach reflects how people actually make purchasing decisions.

Local advertising isn't about reaching everyone. It's about reaching the right people, repeatedly, in a space they already engage with.

For businesses in Clayton County, advertising locally isn't a backup option. It's a foundational one. It supports long-term visibility, credibility, and connection within the community.

### THE QUESTION ISN'T WHETHER LOCAL ADVERTISING WORKS.

It's whether a business is willing to commit to it long enough for it to matter.

Learn more about advertising with *We Are Clayton Magazine* at [weareclayton.com](http://weareclayton.com) or 678.571.3307.



# Tales From Old Clayton

HOW LEGACY SOUTH CLAYTON FAMILIES  
LIVED THROUGH TUMULTUOUS TIMES



L: A marked grave in a historic burial ground, one of many sites that hold the often-overlooked personal histories of African Americans whose lives shaped the region long before their stories were formally recorded. B: Community members gather to discuss local history and preservation efforts, sharing information, memory, and responsibility across generations.

## *TIME, IT IS SAID, CHANGES EVERYTHING.*

*For a group of south Clayton County residents, the change during their lifetimes has been monumental. From a mostly rural county sprawling with cotton fields and dirt roads governed mostly by white supremacists to an 21<sup>st</sup> Century urban landscape governed in a large part by African Americans, Clayton has been transformed entirely.*

BY MICHAEL BOOTH PHOTOS BY JA'DON HAWES

On a crisp autumn morning recently, a group of lifelong residents gathered at the Shiloh Methodist Church of Lovejoy to discuss saving the church's graveyard where local black residents, including slaves, have been laid to rest for more than 100 years.

"You know, some of the families that are still living here (have relatives) ... that are buried in the graveyard," said Rev. Gail Ortega, leader of the effort to clean up and save the graveyard. "This is the southernmost part of Clayton County. Once you get near the racetrack, you're starting to enter in a whole 'nother county. So we're right at the edge.

"I mean, for our time, that's fairly recent, that we see these paved roads and lights. McDonough was just a dirt road. Panhandle was a dirt road. All this was just dirt roads."

"Wasn't no street road. And nobody never bothered us, and we didn't bother anybody else," said Betty Westmoreland, a 79 year old Lovejoy resident.

### The KKK & Moonshine

As late as the 1990s, the Ku Klux Klan held frequent rallies in Clayton County where they would march down Tara Boulevard in their white robes and pointy dunce caps.

"We saw the light. They had the torch," remembered Joyce Johnson. "They were marching and going to a house that they used to go to have meetings. We would hide in a ditch in North Joy."

"They would come out there, but they wouldn't come up in our yard. They would come at the road out there," said Westmoreland.

There was a simple reason the KKK didn't bother the family. Westmoreland's father was a part-time bootlegger. But not just any bootlegger. He was making moonshine at the behest of the county sheriff, who told the KKK to leave him alone.

"(The Sheriff) told them, 'don't mess with him,'" added Johnson. "We had a cousin come from Atlanta. He would haul it back to Atlanta, even to the police," said Westmoreland.

"It was an agreement, an understanding. And with the understanding came the sheriff's protection and the respect of the other white folks who were Klan and also drinking the bootleg," said Rev. Ortega.

### The Long Road to Education

Getting an education was quite a task because south Clayton County only had what was called the "old school," which didn't go any further than the seventh grade. "It was a two sided room. It wasn't where you could go through to the next room. You had to step out and go over into that room," said Johnson. "They used those two rooms for Ms. Evie Arnold and Ms. Evelyn Brown."

Ms. Arnold, who taught sixth grade, is descended from one of the most prominent black families in Clayton. John William Arnold, a farmer, and his wife, Sarah, campaigned to have a school built in south Clayton during the 1930s, the old school, and in 1963 J.W. Arnold Elementary School

located in Jonesboro, opened its doors to the county's African American students. The school is named in honor of John's father. It would remain segregated until Clayton County Public Schools integrated in 1968.

But getting to Jonesboro for school was still a challenge for kids in south Clayton. Many missed school because they had to help the family chop cotton. Schoolkids had to hike to the main road and catch a bus to the school. Luckily, the woman at the end of the road always let the kids into her house while waiting for the bus.

"So in order for us to get to school, even though we had a car, my parents had to go to work really early," said Lilli Calloway. "So we had to walk all the way up this road to catch the bus every day. So we could go to her house and somebody was looking out the window to see if the bus would come. And then we run across the road to catch the bus."

Westmoreland started high school after integration at Jonesboro Senior High, but she still had to take the bus to Jonesboro from the 8th through the 12th grades.

"We had to come out of that school, then catch the bus and go to Forest Park. And from Forest Park, 9th grade up until the 12th grade, that's where I went," she said.

School took a backseat to family many times. As the oldest, Betty had to mind the other seven kids. "A lot of time I had to stay out of school because I'm the oldest one. I had to take care of ... the rest of the seven. So washing and taking care of those who weren't in school yet," said Westmoreland.

Westmoreland many times had very little to feed the family except for pinto beans, a food that still brings a scowl to her face.

"Pinto beans for lunch. Pinto beans for supper. Pinto beans!" exclaimed Westmoreland. "We had a bucket that we would fill up with pinto beans and cornbread. We would bring it to the cotton field for my dad, then go back home and fix dinner for when they get off."

### The Dead Lie Uneasy

When the county finally got around to paving Panhandle Road, a sidewalk and water line were also installed. Beyond the water line, a dense wooded area with an almost impenetrable walls of weeds rests behind Lovejoy High School. For years, no one paid attention to the plot of land. Then, one morning, a local man was walking his dog down the pristine sidewalk when the pooch suddenly rushed into the thicket.

What he found would shock the Shiloh community.

"There were actual skulls," Rev. Gail Ortega said.

Apparently, the newly paved road ran over the old graveyard and construction unearthed the bones of forgotten Lovejoy residents. The church is now conducting a GoFundMe account to raise the \$10,000.00 needed for initial cleanup and around \$60,000.00 for full restoration. [Donations are accepted independently. Send to Shiloh of Lovejoy, Inc., P.O. Box 494, Lovejoy, GA 30250 or contact Rev. Gail Ortega at 650 353-6618.](#)

### The Great Migration didn't happen to all south Clayton residents

When the depression of the 1930s took place, many black families moved away from the old plantations and many went into sharecropping. Gradually, families moved for economic gains or to get away from the strangling segregation that gripped the community



for decades. A few survived and stayed in the community.

"You know, a lot of these lands move from plantations to farms. And a number of the families that have been on the plantations just migrated to the farms," said Rev. Gail Ortega.

Joyce Johnson remembered that her father refused to leave his birthplace. "A lot of them moved," she said. "Our father, he was still here when a lot of them had moved. This houses that you paid like \$25 to \$35 a month for rental. My dad ... was farming. He did a lot of farming."

Cotton was still king for much of the 20th Century in Lovejoy. It was the dominant plant for sharecropping in fields that stretched hundreds of acres towards the highway.

"When you think about a cotton field the size of what was described to me going toward the freeway, that's a lot of land," said Rev. Gail Ortega.

Private gardens, however, kept the families in fresh fruits and vegetables. Betty Westmoreland said that the families grew everything, but her favorite was watermelon that she would eat in the middle of the field.

One of the biggest, if not the biggest, south Clayton landowner after World War II was Don Hastings, of Hastings Garden fame. He had a large garden growing all kinds of vegetables that he would take into Atlanta to sell.

"My dad worked on Cheshire Bridge Road and then on another one," said Betty Westmoreland. "He would go down there to take this food and stuff down there and they would sell it."

Because there was no running water, families had to dig wells or send family members with a bucket to fetch water from a

nearby spring. Johnson remembers getting up at 4am to get water and wash two loads of clothes and hang them on the line. She would go to school and by the time she got home the clothes were dried and ready to be folded.

### Living the best life

Life may have been hard yet the families of south Clayton County but the kids didn't know any better. They were living the best life possible.

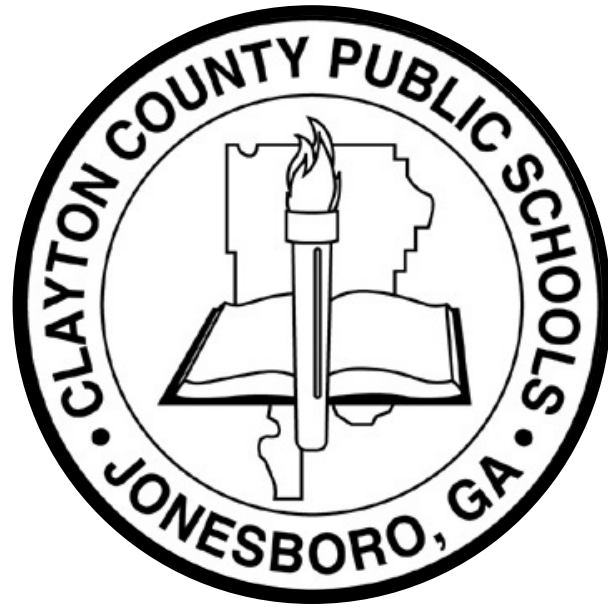
"When we ate, we ate like we was eating Sunday dinner every day of the week. That's how we used to eat," said Calloway. "We ate three meals a day, like it was dinner. Big Sunday dinner. That's how we ate."

Sunday was the only day of the week where the families could socialize and play baseball. The local nine was called the Tigers.

"Some number of years later we decided, well, they are playing baseball so we gonna play softball. And we was the Tigerettes," said Johnson. "We played through the weekend."

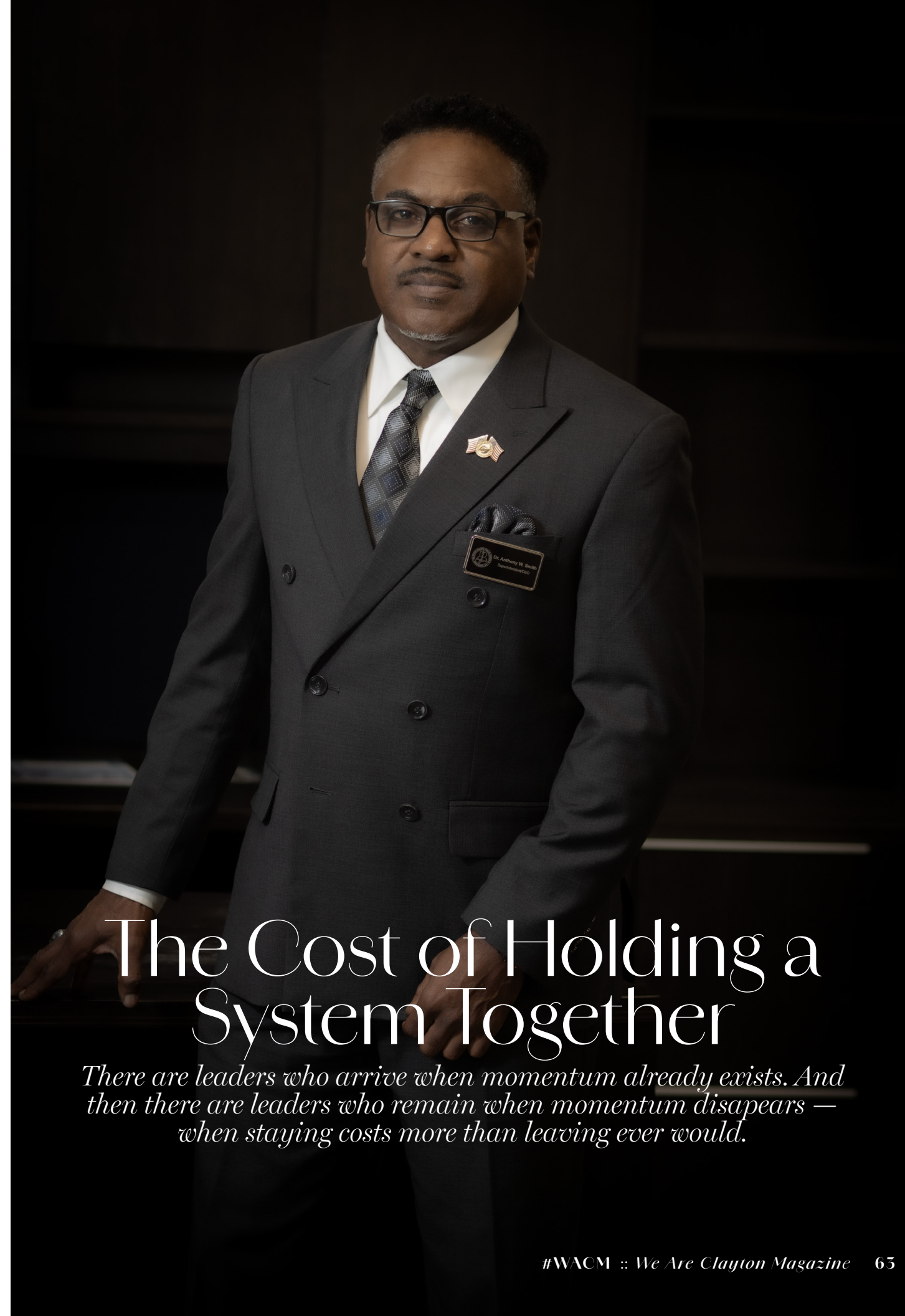
Despite the discrimination, despite the obstacles that had to be overcome, Westmoreland does not want sympathy nor does she want revenge on those who harried and harassed her and her family for many years. She ignored it then and she ignores it now.

"As I came up, there was so much going on," she said. "Because during the time when I was coming up, we, as being black people, we didn't know nothing about being poor. We thought we was just as rich as the rich people were."



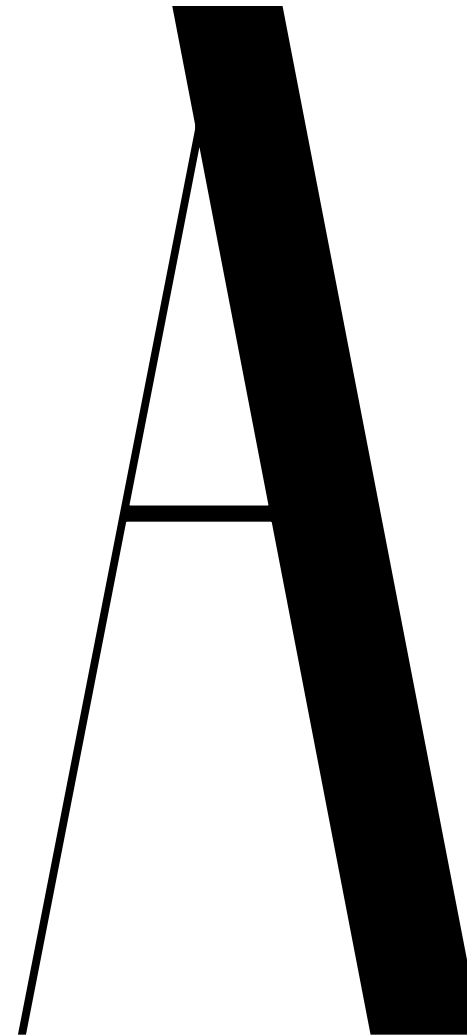
# He Stayed: The Weight of Dr. Anthony W. Smith's Service to Clayton County and Her School System

BY GERRIAN HAWES PHOTO BY JA'DON HAWES



## The Cost of Holding a System Together

*There are leaders who arrive when momentum already exists. And then there are leaders who remain when momentum disappears — when staying costs more than leaving ever would.*



**WHEN STAYING WAS THE HARDER CHOICE**  
To understand Dr. Smith's impact, you have to remember the emotional climate of Clayton County Public Schools in years past. There were seasons when confidence was thin. When families carried explanations with them. When educators left for safer ground. When students absorbed narratives about their schools that had nothing to do with their potential.

"Those were very challenging times," he said. "But my love was for the children, for the people, and for the family. I had no desire to leave or abandon them whatsoever."

That loyalty mattered—not symbolically, but structurally. Leaders who leave during crisis never have to carry its consequences. Leaders who stay do.

Dr. Smith stayed long enough to absorb the weight of decisions, rebuild trust incrementally, and demonstrate that improvement in public education is not a single act, but a sustained practice.

**A LEADER SHAPED BY PROXIMITY, NOT DISTANCE**

Dr. Smith's authority was not imported. It was earned through proximity. He taught in Clayton classrooms. He served as a principal. He worked feeder patterns that allowed him to know students and families across years, not just test cycles. He rose through central office roles before becoming superintendent.

"I have literally hit every rung on the ladder." That progression gave him lived credibility. He understood how policy landed in classrooms. He knew where systems failed under pressure. And he knew people—not as titles, but as professionals he had watched grow.

That grounding shaped how he approached partnerships across the county—municipal leaders, law enforcement, faith communities, business partners, and higher education institutions.

As he prepares to retire from Clayton County Public Schools, the significance of his service is not captured by titles or timelines. It is measured by endurance—by what it meant to hold steady through years when the district was defined less by promise and more by pressure.

For more than three decades, Dr. Smith lived inside this system. He did not orbit it. He did not step in for the easy chapters. He taught here. He led here. He stayed—through instability, scrutiny, and long stretches when improvement felt uncertain and recognition nonexistent.

"I never flinched," he said. "I had no desire to abandon the children or the families." That decision—to remain—became the quiet throughline of his leadership.

“

*What I can guarantee you is that we are going to be a respectable school system. Respect cannot be declared. It must be demonstrated—over time, without shortcuts. As the district stabilized and invested, perception followed.*

”



transformation under Dr. Smith's leadership is physical. In March 2023, voters approved a \$440 million bond referendum with 79% support. A second referendum followed, totaling \$495 million—bringing nearly \$1 billion in capital investment. “Truth be told, we had an old, raggedy infrastructure that was an embarrassment,” Dr. Smith said.

That reality shifted toward modernized campuses, athletic upgrades, and large-scale redevelopment—including the Convocation Center, opening in January 2026, ensuring Clayton families no longer leave the county to celebrate graduation. “We got our own,” he said. “It’s not a bunch of talk.”

**RESPECT WAS THE GOAL—AND THE RESULT**

Dr. Smith never promised national ranking dominance. His commitment was more grounded. “What I can guarantee you is that we are going to be a respectable school system.”

Respect cannot be declared. It must be demonstrated—over time, without shortcuts. As the district stabilized and invested, perception followed. “People know,” he said. “They’re paying attention now.”

**WHAT HIS RETIREMENT LEAVES BEHIND**

Dr. Smith's retirement marks not an ending, but a handoff. He leaves behind infrastructure, frameworks, and momentum—but more importantly, a recalibrated sense of worth. “Keep believing in Clayton County. Keep believing in our students. Keep believing in our staff. We’re on the right track.”

He believed when belief was costly. He stayed when leaving would have been easier. And he held the system long enough for others to finally see what had always been there. Dr. Anthony W. Smith did not simply lead Clayton County Public Schools.

He held it—until it could stand on its own.

“*He held it—until it could stand on its own.*”

“These folks are valuable key stakeholders. It’s in my best interest—and the school system’s best interest—to have the best possible relationships with those entities.” In a county as interconnected as Clayton, that approach strengthened schools by design.

**REFRAMING SUCCESS: THE 4E EFFECT**

Dr. Smith recognized a truth many systems resisted: not every student's future follows the same path—and pretending otherwise costs young people their confidence. Out of that recognition came the 4E framework, ensuring students graduated with a pathway tied to enrollment, enlistment, employment, or entrepreneurship.

“There’s absolutely no reason why any student graduating from Clayton County Public Schools shouldn’t have a pathway to success. Pick something. We’ll pour into you.” Culturally, the impact was as significant as the structure. It told students—especially those uncertain about college—that they were still visible inside the district’s vision. “You can start with one E and shift to another,” he said. “That’s life.”

**THE CAPITAL TURNAROUND: NEARLY \$1 BILLION AND A NEW STANDARD**

For many residents, the most undeniable

Photos Courtesy of Clayton County Public Schools and South Atlanta Media, Inc.

# THINKER:

## In the Name of Community

BY GERRIAN HAWES

When Thinker appears on a screen—breaking down doctrine, interrogating history, or calmly dismantling inherited belief systems—people stop scrolling. Not because she is loud. Not because she performs outrage. But because clarity has weight, and she carries it without apology. She does not ask for permission to think. She does not soften truth for comfort. She does not rush her audience toward conclusions. And that is why the moment she speaks, something settles. Her community recognizes it immediately. Her critics feel it instinctively. And the digital world has learned, slowly but unmistakably, what Black women have always known: Black women who think out loud are a force. But behind the research, the discipline, and the steady voice guiding thousands through religious deconstruction, there is a long human story—layered, costly, and deliberate. This is Thinker.



Photos Courtesy of Thinker

# T

“  
*My mission  
has always  
put Black  
community at  
the forefront.*  
”

Thinker did not enter social media with a blueprint for influence. “When I came onto TikTok,” she said, “I wasn’t trying to build a community. It just...became one.” What formed around her was not a fanbase. It wasn’t even an audience in the traditional sense. It was a gathering—primarily Black, deeply thoughtful, often wounded, and finally allowed to ask questions without punishment. People who had spent years silencing their doubts found language. People who had survived church trauma found context. People who thought they were alone realized they weren’t broken—they were thinking. At its core, the work was never about tearing anything down. It was about dignity. About truth. About restoring agency to people who had been taught to distrust their own minds. And that instinct—to protect Black humanity—did not originate online. “My mission has always been Black community at the forefront,” Thinker said. “The beauty. The intellect. The creativity. The excellence of who we already are.” Not who we are becoming. Who we already are.

*Thinker, pictured in motion, reflects a leadership style rooted in intention rather than display.*

Long before her name became synonymous with deconstruction, Thinker was building technology. The idea came, as many do, from real life. Her son discovered a local event through social media,

and she realized something was missing: a way for communities to easily know what was happening around them—and to decide where their attention and money should go. With early backing from a believer who saw her capacity before she fully did, Thinker built a startup tech company from the ground up. She hired developers. Built a beta. Learned the difference between vision and execution. Pivoted when markets shifted. Failed forward. Learned faster. By 2020, the platform had grown into a sizable ecosystem of businesses and users. It was accepted into an accelerator. Investors were watching. And the company evolved alongside a changing digital landscape. Today, that startup is transforming again—into an AI-powered, community-centered technology platform designed to help people make intentional choices about where their dollars go, what values they support, and how data can serve—not exploit—local communities. It is ethical technology. It is conscious economics. It is resistance through awareness. In many ways, it mirrors Thinker’s teaching: information as liberation.

When a major tech company announced a competitive six-figure grant, Thinker almost





*Thinker doesn't perform certainty. She lives inside it.*

“  
Black  
women  
who think  
out loud  
are a force.”  
”

didn't apply. "I had ten minutes before the deadline," she said. "Ten minutes. I submitted it at 11:59." She advanced. Then advanced again. Then received an email requesting further review—with one condition: she had to attend alone. She expected scrutiny. She prepared for rejection. Instead, she walked into a surprise moment of affirmation—one that had nothing to do with faith, favor, or divine theatrics. Her company won. "No angels," she said. "No scripture. Just preparation, grit, intelligence—and believing in myself." That moment marked a quiet but decisive shift. "I wasn't a believer anymore," she said. "I believed in me."

Thinker's deconstruction did not begin with rebellion. It began with a question: Why doesn't this God seem to like Black people? She didn't seek sermons for the answer. She sought history. She read. She researched. She followed the patterns back to their origins—and learned that Christianity, as it was introduced to enslaved Africans, was not

liberation. It was control. That knowledge detonated family dynamics, community ties, and internal certainty. "I believed I was talking to God," she said. "But it was me talking to myself." Leaving came with consequences: financial loss, public misunderstanding, and the painful task of rebuilding trust in her own mind. But clarity has a cost—and she paid it. "I can't cry over what I can't change."

Thinker does not romanticize healing. She practices it. She traces much of her work back to a moment at nine years old—when an adult told her she was "brown-skinned and ugly" and would need to "love extra" to be loved. Instead of suppressing the memory, she returned to it. For thirty days, she stood in the mirror, studying her face piece by piece—until she could see herself clearly again. Only then did she go back and tell that child: You can come out now. That process became her first book, *Find the Beauty in Your Now*—and the foundation of her reconstruction.

Thinker is precise about boundaries. She rejects being treated like a pastor. She shuts down attempts at idolization. She refuses to dictate belief. "Community collapses without discipline," she says. Her leadership model is not hierarchical. It is collaborative. She often compares it to a startup team—each person bringing insight, not submission. Influence without ego. Authority without domination. Clarity without control.

What many don't expect is this: Thinker is also an artist. A songwriter. A composer. A storyteller in sound. Her music—available under Thinker on Apple Music—is not a side project. It is documentation. An emotional archive of her evolution. "I've been writing since I was a little girl." Her recent body of work is raw, layered, and intentional—less about performance and more about truth. *Ahta Yadahta*—"You Already Knew"—echoes a Hebrew structure meaning: you knew. The song is a confrontation wrapped in melody. It names what religious spaces often refuse to acknowledge—the harm people cause while hiding behind belief. This isn't accusation for drama. It's clarity. It is a mirror: You knew. You

*Black B4 Anything*  
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to shrink. It sits at  
the center of her  
philosophy: before  
belief, before doctrine,  
before compliance—  
she is Black, she  
is human, she is  
whole. This song is  
not defensive. It is  
unapologetic truth.  
This is not background  
music. It is memory. It  
is mirror. It is record.

knew the impact. You knew the contradiction. You knew the harm. The song demands honesty—without raising its voice.

In *Silent Questions*, Thinker honors and critiques the Black church in a single breath. She acknowledges the survival it taught while exposing the silence it required. Every lyric honors what the church gave—and names what it took: her freedom to question.

*Silent Questions* exists at the intersection of loyalty and selfhood. The educator carries the data. The artist carries the wound.

*Feology*, named after Fe, one of her moderators, captures a form of strength that doesn't rely on volume. Fe meets hostility with clarity. She doesn't escalate. She dismantles arguments with precision. This song is a portrait of emotional intelligence—leadership defined by composure rather than performance. *L.I.E. (Lost in Ego)* documents the collapse of dialogue—the visitors who come to argue but refuse correction, the moment ego replaces reason, the moment harm replaces humility. It's not personal. It's behavioral. And Thinker names it without hesitation.

*Obsessed* explores what happens when fascination turns into fixation—especially from people who insist they "just disagree." The song studies how critics become followers, how hostility becomes attention, and how the line between love and control blurs inside religious spaces. It's not about romance. It's about obsession masquerading as righteousness. *Love Shouldn't Be Commanded* is one of the album's most direct statements. Love cannot be forced. Devotion cannot be demanded. Affection cannot be extracted through fear, doctrine, or emotional manipulation. It is a critique of systems that ask for love in exchange for belonging—while punishing any form of questioning.

*Black B4 Anything* is a declaration. A grounding. A refusal to shrink. It sits at the center of her philosophy: before belief, before doctrine, before compliance—she is Black, she is human, she is whole. This song is not defensive. It is unapologetic truth. This is not background music. It is memory. It is mirror. It is record.

Thinker's work—digital, technological, musical—is not about replacement belief systems. It is about restoring people to themselves. Her album is not entertainment. Her platform is not a pulpit. Her community is not a congregation. It is a place where people learn to trust their minds again. Where identity is not assigned—it is reclaimed. Where truth is not inherited—it is examined. And that, perhaps, is her most radical contribution: a community built on clarity, not tradition; on dignity, not doctrine; on thinking—out loud, together.



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SEIZE THE AWKWARD



GOOD FOOD, GOOD TIPS, GOOD COMPANY.

# TABLE TALK

A look at stories that surface when people slow down long enough to eat together. Through essays, profiles, and shared dishes, this section captures how food holds memory, sparks dialogue, and reflects the quiet resilience of daily life.

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DRIVE HIGH**



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**FAITH**

The Philosophy and Benefits Behind  
**Meditation Practice**

BY AMANDA WHITE

**MEDITATION** has become increasingly popular as more people look for practical ways to manage stress, improve health, and better understand their inner lives. Some approach meditation as part of a spiritual path, others as a way to relax, and many are drawn to its documented benefits for mental and physical well-being. Regardless of motivation, effective meditation is rooted in deep relaxation, allowing both mind and body to reset, recover, and function more clearly.

Practices are not random or unstructured. Most are built on underlying principles, whether explicitly taught or quietly embedded in the method itself. At its core, meditation addresses the relationship between body, mind, and the broader rhythms of life. The experience of meditation is shaped by how a person understands it. When approached with clarity and intention, meditation becomes more than a technique—it becomes a way of observing how one relates to thoughts, sensations, and experiences.

The guidelines commonly associated with meditation reflect a clear philosophy: trust in one's capacity to settle the mind and regulate the

body. This trust supports calm, focus, and emotional stability. Many people discover through meditation that they can access relaxation even during difficult circumstances. Over time, this realization can lead to tangible benefits such as emotional balance, physical resilience, mental clarity, healthier relationships, and a stronger sense of personal fulfillment.

Human life operates through constant movement—breath, circulation, perception, and thought are all expressions of ongoing change. When attention flows with experience rather than resisting it, the nervous system remains more regulated. When experience is met with constant resistance, tension and stress tend to increase. Meditation trains awareness of this pattern and offers a way to respond rather than react.

Both short-term and long-term benefits of meditation have been widely observed. These may include improved sleep, reduced anxiety, lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, enhanced immune response, and decreased reliance on substances such as alcohol, nicotine, or other drugs. Over time, consistent practice supports better emotional regulation and cognitive function.

Meditation also encourages a different relationship with control. Instead of forcing outcomes, the practice highlights when effort is useful and when letting go is more effective. This awareness can make daily life feel less strained and more manageable. As attention becomes steadier, people often notice when they are resisting experiences unnecessarily—and how releasing that resistance changes their internal state.

Life naturally includes opposing experiences: ease and difficulty, joy and disappointment, success and failure. Meditation does not remove these realities, but it can change how they are experienced. By learning to release internal resistance, individuals often find a deeper sense of calm even when circumstances are challenging. This relaxation supports clearer thinking and healthier emotional responses.

Many people habitually resist discomfort, difficult emotions, or uncertainty. Meditation offers a structured way to remain present without suppression or avoidance. When relaxation is maintained during discomfort, the body and mind are less likely to become overwhelmed. In this sense, meditation is not about escaping experience, but about meeting it with steadiness and care.

Today, the term “meditation” includes a wide range of practices, each with different methods and outcomes. What they share is a focus on awareness, regulation, and clarity. When practiced consistently, meditation becomes a practical tool for supporting mental, emotional, and physical health in everyday life.

COLUMN

# I Am An IMMIGRANT, You Are An IMMIGRANT, Too

BY MICHAEL BOOTH



**NO MATTER IF YOUR ANCESTORS PAID** for passage to this country on a wooden ship or your ancestors were forced into the bowels of a slave trader's ship, we are all immigrants. Even those dubbed "Native Americans" came from a distant shore.

You being alive now is a testament to your ancestor's courage, skills, ambition, passion, and love. Your ancestors may have not had their names immortalized on a building, bridge, or highway. They built no monuments. You are their monument. You are what they built. You are a testament to their success.

My aunt, before she passed away, researched our family history that went all the way back to our original immigrant ancestor. His name was Henry Beck and he came from Herefordshire, England, in 1635. The ship he was on wrecked on the Maine coast and Henry swam ashore. He settled in what would become New Hampshire, living to be 100 years old. He was a subsistence farmer. In other words, he grew or hunted all his food.

In the years following, his children moved south, first to New Jersey and then to Pennsylvania. All the time, it seems, they were what is now known as sharecroppers. They worked the land belonging to someone else. In return, they received subsistence supplies. The

children kept moving south, first to Virginia and then to the Carolinas. An ancestor named Jeffrey Beck fought for this country in the Revolutionary War. He was given a plot of land that vanishes from our family history years later when his great-grandson moves to Lumpkin County, Georgia, and allegedly married a Cherokee Indian woman named Sarah.

I say "allegedly" because my racist family refused to admit she was not a white woman. I do not have a picture of Sarah but her granddaughter, my Aunt Ruby, had the high cheekbones and dark skin of a Cherokee. Aunt Ruby was the backbone of my family when I was young. She took my brother and I in when my single Mom was working two jobs just to pay the rent

and buy a few groceries. She famously fed anyone who sat at her table the best fried chicken and cornbread in Georgia.

Another side of my family came to Jamestown in 1657 from Germany. Thomas Christian I was also a farmer. However, he somehow bought a lot of land and grew tobacco. He didn't get rich. He did prosper enough to have 10 children and three wives. His great-great-grandson was a Revolutionary War Captain named John Christian. After the war, John moved to Georgia in Franklin County. His grandson, Thomas Christian VI, the last to have that moniker, is supposed to have been the first white man to arrive in Lumpkin County.

Your family history is probably vastly different than mine, but overall we share the same story. Your ancestors overcame adversity, prejudice, fear, perhaps poverty. You are the sum of all their hopes and dreams.

Today, we are all Americans. So what does that mean to be an "American?" What would the All-American American look like with all these waves of immigration?

First of all, the average American would be a female because this nation of 319 million people is 51 percent female or 162.7 million females. Males, at 156.3 million, are decidedly on the short end.

Our Average American female would be 19.5% Latino (54 million), 17.7% Senior Citizen (40 million), 14.4% African American (48.3 million), 8.5% disabled (27 million), 5.6% Asian (18 million). She would have 3.1% red hair (10 million), which is slightly more than the 2.8% LGBTQ (9 million) part of her. Amazingly, she would be more prone to being an Ultimate Frisbee player 1.6% (5.1 million) than a Muslim 1.1% (3.5 million).

The current move by the masked ICE agents to weed out the criminals and eaters of household pets is not working. Unofficial numbers show that more than half of the people rounded up by ICE have no records. Well, some do have records of being tax-paying, churchgoing, veterans, teachers, nurses, farmers, mothers and fathers.

One of many ICE incidents that involve children of immigrants took place back in March of 2025. A U.S. citizen, born in Queens to Pakistani immigrants, was told he didn't "look American." That was all it took. He was detained but finally released. Of course, they had towed his truck and you know who had to pay the towing fee.

In Virginia, a young Hispanic girl was grabbed by ICE and nearly taken in because she didn't look American. Despite the agents wearing combat gear and masks, her father rushed to her aid and somehow got her out of the clutches of the ICE officer. The pair drove away and spent a week inside their home fearing that every siren they heard was meant for them.

In 1967, Bob Dylan wrote a song that resonates to this day. The song is "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" and begins with the line: "I pity the poor immigrant Who wishes he would've stayed home". Neil Sedaka wrote a song called "The Immigrant" that has these lyrics:

*"Now he arrives with his hopes and his heart set on miracles Come to marry his fortune with a hand full of promises To find they've closed the door, they don't want him anymore Isn't anymore to go around Turning away he remembers he once heard*

*A legend that spoke of a mystical magical land called America There was a time when strangers were welcome here Music would play, they tell me the days were sweet and clear."*

There was a time when strangers were welcomed here. There was a time when America was made strong by its diversity, its willingness to offer opportunities, its openness, its commitment to the words on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." **Our ancestors, yours and mine.**

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

The average American would be a female because this nation of 319 million people is 51 percent female or 162.7 million females. Males, at 156.3 million, are decidedly on the short end.

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STORYTIME



# Long *the* table

BY JACKSON PARKS

*A story about a quieter, more common reckoning: what happens when the world you once occupied no longer centers you—and does not apologize for it. Through Mark and David, this piece examines aging, relevance, power, and belonging in a community that has continued to grow without pausing for those who once led it. What follows is not a fall from grace, but a study in adaptation—how dignity can be preserved not by holding on, but by learning how to re-enter differently.*

**WHEN** Mark Ellis returned to Clayton County at sixty-eight, he told himself it was practical. His wife had been gone three years. The house they raised their children in was paid for and familiar. Quiet, but manageable. He told himself he was downsizing his life, not retreating from it.

He had lived away long enough to believe he knew what coming home would feel like. He imagined comfort. Recognition. A sense of continuity waiting for him, intact. He didn't.

The roads were mostly the same, but the rhythm was not. New storefronts had replaced old ones, some unfamiliar, some confidently rooted in cultures he had once only encountered at a distance. Community meetings reflected a county that had continued shaping itself while Mark was elsewhere. The language had shifted. The priorities had shifted. The faces in leadership positions looked different. Younger. Blacker. More rooted in a present he had not fully tracked from afar.

He understood quickly—without anyone needing to say it—that he was no longer part of the majority. Not statistically. Not culturally. Not by default.

No one treated him poorly. No one pushed him out. That unsettled him more than hostility would have. Hostility, at least, would have confirmed relevance. This felt neutral. Functional. The machinery of the county moved without friction, without apology.

Meetings moved forward without waiting for his input. Decisions were made efficiently. People spoke with confidence that did not require his approval or his history as context.

Mark had spent decades being deferred to. He had chaired boards, signed off on budgets, and carried authority by default. He had never questioned whether that authority would still be there. It had always been. Like gravity.

At his first community meeting back, he

sat at a long table and waited. He listened closely, half-expecting the pause where someone would ask what he thought, or invite him to weigh in. The pause never came. The meeting ended on time. People gathered their things and left.

Mark stayed seated for a moment after the room emptied, unsettled by how quickly the space returned to neutral. The table no longer held anyone's imprint. It was just furniture again.

A week later, he ran into David Turner at a diner off Tara Boulevard. David was seventy-two, retired from a manufacturing job that had shut down years earlier. He had never left Clayton County. They had known each other casually for decades, mostly through civic work and overlapping responsibilities.

“You back for good?” David asked.

“Looks that way,” Mark said.

David stirred his coffee longer than necessary. “County's not what it used to be.”

Mark waited. He'd learned that silence often told you more than agreement.

“Used to know where you stood,” David continued. “Now it feels like you walk into a room and nobody's looking for you.”

There was no anger in his voice. Just weariness. A kind of fatigue that came from standing still while the ground shifted.

Over breakfast, David talked about stepping away from boards he once dominated. About not going to meetings anymore because it felt easier than learning a new role. About feeling unnecessary, like the skills he'd spent a lifetime sharpening no longer fit the tools being used.

“They don't need us,” David said quietly. “Not the way they used to.”

Mark thought about the meeting he'd

attended. How organized it had been. How little friction there was. How no one seemed unsure of themselves.

“I don't think that means we're not wanted,” Mark said. “I think it means we're not centered.”

David didn't answer. He looked out the window, watching cars pass, watching a county that no longer slowed down for him.

Over the next few months, their paths diverged.

Mark began showing up consistently. He volunteered where help was needed, not where recognition followed. He took notes. He asked questions. He listened before speaking. When he offered opinions, they were measured. When he disagreed, he did so plainly, without expecting the room to recalibrate around him.

He noticed something unexpected. People responded to that posture. Not with deference, but with trust. David stayed home more.

When Mark called, David sometimes didn't answer. When he did, he complained about how unfamiliar everything felt. About not recognizing the county anymore. About feeling out of place in rooms he once commanded.

One afternoon, Mark stopped into a hardware store he didn't remember from his younger years. The owner, a Black man about his age, recognized him immediately.

“You're back,” the man said. “Yes,” Mark replied. “Trying to figure out where I fit.”

The man nodded. “That's different from trying to run things. Folks notice the difference.”

Mark took that with him.

Months later, Mark and David met again at

the diner. David looked thinner. Quieter. Less certain of where to put his hands.

“You still going to those meetings?” David asked.

“Yes,” Mark said.

David hesitated. “Doesn't it bother you? Not being... what we used to be?”

Mark considered the question carefully. “It did,” he said. “Until I realized the environment isn't hostile. It's just established. It doesn't revolve around us anymore.”

David looked down at his hands. “I think I waited too long,” he said after a pause.

“Too long for what?” Mark asked.

“To stay useful,” David said. “I thought stepping back would protect my dignity. Turns out it just made me invisible.”

There was no bitterness in his voice. Just recognition.

“I miss being part of things,” David added. “I just don't know how to walk back in without feeling foolish.”

Mark didn't rush to answer. “You don't walk back in as who you were,” he said. “You walk back in as who you are now.”

David nodded slowly, unsure.

He didn't return right away.

But a few weeks later, Mark saw him at a community meeting, seated near the back. David didn't speak. He stayed until the end. He didn't leave early.

That was enough.

Months later, Mark found himself again at a long table. The conversation moved easily. Disagreements were handled without performance. Decisions were made without

# Losing primacy is not the same as losing belonging.

posturing.

He was not central. He was not invisible.

And across the room, David caught his eye and gave a small nod. Not confident. Not resolved. But present.

Mark understood then what had taken most of his life to learn.

Losing primacy is not the same as losing belonging.

The county had moved forward without waiting. And once he stopped mistaking that movement for rejection, his place became clear.

Not as an authority.

Not as a holdover.

But as a contributor.

David was still figuring it out.

Mark stayed.

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# Out & About

Faces, Places, and Moments That Matter



*Retired Superintendent Dr. Anthony Smith completed farewell visits to schools across the district, meeting with students and staff he served during his tenure. Pictured here with Pointe South Middle School students and staff.*

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**SCAN TO START EVALUATION**

**RESILIENCE** shows up in more places than headlines. It's visible in gatherings that mark progress, service, and continuity—moments where people show up for one another and for the institutions that hold a community together. Images captured across Clayton County at events that reflect that everyday presence: Tax Commissioner Daniel Smith's annual golf tournament, the Leadership Clayton graduation, the Jonesboro Waffle House employee breakfast, the Senior Gala, and the Jonesboro High School band send-off to London.

Each moment represents a different form of investment—civic leadership, workforce appreciation, lifelong learning, and youth opportunity. Together, they offer a snapshot of a county in motion, shaped not only by major milestones, but by the smaller, consistent acts that keep community life moving forward.







BECAUSE EVERY ENDING IS THE START OF ANOTHER STORY.

# THE LAST LINE

Resilience isn't loud. It doesn't announce itself when things are easy. It shows up quietly—in classrooms that keep teaching, in families that keep adjusting, in leaders who keep choosing responsibility over recognition. This issue exists because of those steady acts.

What you've just read is not a highlight reel. It's a record of people and systems holding their ground while the ground shifts beneath them. From public education to civic leadership, these pages reflect a county that absorbs pressure and keeps moving forward—not untouched, but intact.

We Are Resilient looks directly at that reality. We honor the leadership and legacy of Clayton County Public Schools under Superintendent Dr. Anthony Smith, and we spend time with Steve Henry, whose perspective offers a different angle on public service, partnership, and presence alongside Chairwoman Dr. Alieka Anderson Henry. These stories don't simplify resilience. They show its weight—and its necessity.

The Last Line is not closure. It's a moment to stand still and take inventory before continuing on. Because resilience is not something we complete. It's something we practice—again and again.

As always, this magazine is shaped by the people who read it. If something in these pages stayed with you, unsettled you, or clarified something you've been carrying, write to us. Letters to the publisher help guide what we pay attention to next—and whose stories deserve the space to be told.

We'll meet you again soon. The work continues.

  
Gerrian Hawes  
Founder, Publisher & Editor-in-Chief

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## THE NAME

When Coca-Cola retired its mascot, Sprite Boy, in 1958, it repurposed the name for its new beverage in 1961.

## THE FLAVOR

Originally marketed as “naturally tart” and not too sweet, Sprite’s lemon-lime combo fit the bill.

## THE COLOR

Green bottles help protect beverages from sunlight, but consumers also associate the color with refreshment.

