The Macon Melody

Friday, Feb. 14, 2025 | Bibb County's local source for community news | Vol. I, No. 34

‘We’re all Americans here’

Middle Ga. immigrant communities protest increased ICE presence

Evelyn Davidson
Melody Reporter
evelyn@maconmelody.com

Stephanie Hernandez didn’t expect more than 10 folks to show up in front of the Sabor Latino Venezuelan Restaurant in Warner Robins Saturday. But by late afternoon cars and trucks flying American and international flags — countries like Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia were all represented — filled the restaurant’s parking lot.

Nearly 200 people stood on the side of the road holding signs that read, “No human is illegal on stolen land,” “When we lose our fear they lose their power” and “Immigrants make America great everyday.”

Hernandez had never organized a protest before, but as the daughter of Honduran immigrants, she wanted to stand up for her community in the face of recent mass deportation threats and increased U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) presence in Middle Georgia.

“Nobody wants to be in fear,” she said, adding that protesters would speak up for those who were scared to do so.

Not realizing that she needed a permit to organize a protest, the location changed three times before the day of the event. The community still came together, from young folks to parents and their children.

Michel Garcia came to the protest with her sister and her kids, one of which held a sign that read “I stand with my people.”

“My kids are half Mexican,” said Garcia, who is Mex-

See ICE, Page A3

Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Protesters gather in front of Sabor Latino Venezuelan restaurant Saturday in Warner Robins during a rally against deportation and increased ICE presence. Nearly 200 people attended the event organized by a first-time protest organizer, Stephanie Hernandez, who she decided she wanted to stand up for her community.

Mercer plans to relocate medical school downtown

Caleb Slinkard
Managing Editor
caleb@maconmelody.com

Mercer University leaders want to move its medical school off campus to a new facility in downtown Macon.

Mercer President Bill Underwood announced the planned move during his presentation at the Rotary Club of Macon Monday afternoon. He said Mercer’s medical school, which was built in 1982 for 24 students, is too small and outdated for a program that will soon include more than 720 students.

“Our board of trustees... made what I think was a good decision that instead of rebuilding on our campus over on the west side of downtown, we would put the new medical school right downtown,” Underwood said. “And in doing it, we would put it in a location where there would be room for positive collateral development around it.”

Underwood said the project received a $10 million grant from the Peyton Anderson Foundation — the largest in the nonprofit’s history — as well as $25 million from the state. The Knight Foundation announced a $5 million grant for the project back in September 2023.

He noted the project would be the largest investment in Mercer's — and perhaps downtown Macon's — history. While Underwood did not disclose the project’s location, he said one of the main goals of the downtown relocation is to “catalyze” growth, with space surrounding the medical school available for development.

"I think this will supercharge the already great things that we see going on in Macon," he said.

Underwood said the Urban Development Authority is key to the project, and UDA executive director Alex Morrison told Rotary the location will be announced “pretty soon.”

Mercer has invested heavily in its medical program over the past decade, with new facilities in Savannah (built in 2016) and Columbus (2022).

Additionally, Underwood said that Mercer plans to expand its rural medical clinic program, which has six locations right now. He said the university is looking at adding 15-20 new clinics in rural communities across the state.

Macon water board seizes land for drain; NAACP claims open meetings act violations

Laura Corley
Senior Accountability Reporter
laura@maconmelody.com

Gwenette Westbrooks

The Macon Water Authority Board voted Thursday night to condemn 20 acres belonging to two families – including a south Macon farmer whose family has tilled the land for generations – so it can install a drainage pipe to help fix widespread flooding issues affecting hundreds of South Macon residents.

After a nearly five-hour meeting and a slurry of public comments, the board unanimously approved the condemnation in Nowell Estates of 3112 Avant Place, owned by James L. and Murrell Bowman, and 3222 Avant Place, owned by Helen and Russell Lipford, for a water detention facility that will alleviate decades-long flooding issues just north of the property.

Members of both families addressed the board with pleas for the authority to explore alternatives to eminent domain.

Helen Lipford said she and her husband, Russell, have lived on the farm land since 1968, more than a century after it came into family ownership.

“We understand and can empathize with the people behind us as to what’s

See MWA, Page A2

Periodical — Mail Label

7 32388 05034 5

$2.00

Photo courtesy of Victoria Krysalka

Victoria and Stephen Krysalka plan to celebrate their first Valentines Day as a married couple by going to see the movie”Wicked.”

No war zone for these newlywed Valentines

Ed Grisamore
Melody Columnist
gris@maconmelody.com

Stephen and Victoria Krysalka have been married only four months, so they are still on their proverbial honeymoon.

But those who know their backgrounds — Victoria was born in Russia and Stephen is a fourth-generation Ukrainian — are tempted to pose the obvious question.

“They ask us: ‘Do y’all fight like they do?”’ Victoria said. “We get that all the time. We just say we are proof that the Russians and Ukrainians can get along.”

February marks the 11th year since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Three years ago this month, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine escalated into Europe’s biggest armed conflict since World War II.

It’s difficult to imagine the Macon newlyweds, who are both 31, ever quarreling. They are quite the lovebirds. Who knows? They could even be used to broker a peace deal between the two countries.

“We just pray they can work it out and come to love each other like she and I do,” Stephen said.

Victoria was living in an orphanage in southwest Russia when Michael and Jerilyn Leverett adopted her on her sixth birthday and swept her away to a new life in America.

That was 25 years ago this year. She arrived in the U.S., appropriately enough, on the Fourth of July in 2000.

Victoria was born with a birth defect that left her with two toes on her right foot, four on her left foot and four fingers on each hand. As a child, she under-

See LOVEBIRDS, Page A2

Lovebirds, from A1:

went multiple surgeries, and she now uses a service dog, a German shepherd named Buddy, to help with her balance.

Her parents were high school sweethearts and married in 1992. Jerilyn has a form of muscular dystrophy and has endured a lifetime of surgeries, braces, casts and wheelchairs.

She was uncertain she would be able to bear children. Because she and her husband both had careers working with disabled people, they were devoted to adopting a disabled child.

Michael is the executive director of Disability Connections, a nonprofit in Macon that assists people with a wide range of disabilities by offering community resources and opportunities. Jerilyn has been a mainstay at Disability Connections, and Victoria has been working there with her parents since 2016.

Stephen has been a mechanic at Walsh Honda for the past two years. His mother, Myra, died when he was 6, and his father, Stephen Jr., died in 2015.

His grandfather, the Rev. Stephen Krysalka Sr., was a first-generation American whose parents emigrated from Ukraine and settled in Pittsburgh. Krysalka and his wife, Juanita, proudly flew the Ukrainian flag at their Macon home on Riverview Road and were active in the Slovic Association of Middle Georgia and the Ukrainian Association of Georgia. The Krysalka family also was instrumental in bringing the Ukrainian swim team to train in Macon in July 1996 for two weeks before the Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

Victoria met Stephen when they were students at Macon's Woodfield Academy. She was 11. He was six months younger. In those days, everyone called him by his middle name — Roger — because his father and grandfather both went by Stephen.

"I always had a crush on Victoria," Stephen said. "I thought she was sweet and beautiful. She was very kind. I chased her around on the playground."

He never caught her.

"I knew he liked me," Victoria said. "He was always smiling when he was around me. He gave me a Valentine. But he was my best friend, and I didn't want to ruin that. So we were just friends."

Although they never dated, they stayed in touch, even after Victoria left Woodfield and was homeschooled. Two years ago, she reached out to ask if he could help her with one of her clients at Disability Connections.

After almost 20 years, Cupid's arrows finally began to find their mark.

Their first date was Oct. 12, 2023. They went to the Georgia National Fair in Perry. A week later, he asked if she would attend a Halloween office party with him.

"I was looking for someone who was devoted to God," Victoria said. "I knew he had a heart of gold. He had been a caregiver to his grandparents."

Stephen checked all the boxes. His grandparents were a huge influence on his life. Stephen Krysalka Sr. had come from a Catholic family before his parents began attending the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Pittsburgh, and his mother had hoped he would become a priest.

During World War II, he was sent to Camp Wheeler in Macon, where he met Juanita. After the war, he became a Baptist preacher, serving more than a half-century in the ministry. He was ordained in 1950 at East Side Baptist on Church Street in Macon. Juanita was a pastor's wife for 53 years, teaching Sunday School and singing in the choir. She died in 2014. Her husband was 101 when he passed away in 2019.

Victoria had strong church ties, too. Her uncle, Macon-native Mo Leverett, founded Desire Street Ministries in New Orleans. Her maternal grandfather, the late Tommy Jones, was pastor at Vineville Baptist for 17 years and Wesleyan Drive Baptist for 11 years. He also served as president of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Her grandmother, Barbara Jones, has a family farm in Monroe County and Victoria said it is her "favorite place in the world."

It is also where her future husband proposed on the front steps of the house last May. They married five months later at her grandfather's former church, Wesleyan Drive Baptist.

Victoria said they wanted to have a small wedding. The attendance somewhat took care of itself after they selected Oct. 19 as their wedding day, bucking the time-honored Southern taboo of getting married during football season.

"It was the night of the Georgia-Texas game," Victoria said, laughing. "Some people were not happy about that."

They now live in the house next to her parents and just down the street from Ingleside Baptist, where they attend church.

Their friends are welcome to bring up the unique Russian-Ukrainian nuptials, but the newlyweds figure their marriage already has been battle-tested.

After all, they bought their house and have been renovating it together.

"That's one way to build a relationship," she said. "It needed a lot of work. We had to do the floors four times. But we got through it, and that's what matters."

Mercer provost dies from apparent heart attack

Casey Choung
Melody Reporter

Mercer University Provost Scott Davis died Sunday evening from an apparent heart attack, according to a note sent out to university staff Monday.

Davis, 61, the university's provost since 2012, oversaw the opening of Mercer's health services school and record enrollment and research funding.

"Scott was the finest provost with whom I have had the privilege to serve," President Bill Underwood wrote to staff. "In addition to a brilliant mind, Scott was determined to make Mercer the best it could be. He loved Mercer. When there were tough things that needed to be done, I could always count on Scott."

The university is waiting for further details on Davis' passing before releasing a statement, a spokesperson told The Melody.

Davis received his doctorate from Emory University and completed his postdoctoral research appointment at the University of Illinois.

Davis started at Mercer in 1991 as an assistant chemistry professor before becoming the department's chair in 2000 and later the dean of graduate studies and senior vice provost for research in 2006.

Photo courtesy of Mercer University
Scott Davis, 61, became provost in 2012. He began at Mercer in 1991 as an assistant professor of chemistry before becoming department chair in 2000.

MWA, from A1:

going on, but at the same time, we don't feel like so much of our land should be taken for what the water authority is asking to do with it," Lipford said. "Please don't take any more of our land. We want to keep it for our family and our descendants."

Kevin Lipford urged the authority to explore other options.

"There's not been enough research into other methods to handle the storm water that's flooding behind the property," he said. "I just ask you to rethink that and perhaps we can work together with the Macon Water Authority to come up with other options."

The flooding issues in South Bibb have wreaked havoc on homes and families for decades, including James Chevalley's house on Frances Drive off Rice Mill Road just north of the family's farm.

"I get all the water," Chevalley, who bought his home 40 years ago, said. "My house has been flooded several times. ... I understand these people's point. It's their land. I don't want nobody taking my land either, but my thing is: something needs to be done. This thing needs to be looked at as a crisis that needs to be fixed. ... Figure something out, OK? Just figure it out. Quit sitting on your hands."

Newly elected Macon Water Authority Commissioner Elaine Lucas, whose district includes the county's east side and part of its south side, told The Melody it is "time for us to do something and to go ahead and fix it, not just put a patch on it."

"Elected officials have to weigh all sides and make tough decisions," she said. "Nobody wants to put the needle in and take somebody's property, but if you work with them and try to reach an agreement and can't, then you have to use that distasteful method the government has to require that people work with you."

In other business Thursday, Macon Water Authority Chief Executive Officer Ron Shipman said January's revenue and income were 8.7% over budget. Even so, AT&T notified the authority of a 35% increase to the authority's phone bill in 2025. Other costs are rising too, including chemicals used to clean water.

"We used to be able to buy a one-ton cylinder of chlorine for $800. It now costs us $4,000," Shipman said. "We put on eight to 10 at a time and it takes us two weeks to use those ... for the month, it's going to be $30,000."

NAACP alleges open meetings violation

The structure of Macon Water Authority meetings is peculiar compared to other government agencies in Bibb County.

The authority advertises a three-hour monthly meeting that starts at 2 p.m. with the pledge of allegiance and a prayer. But the pledge often does not start until 4:30 or 5 p.m. because the board's committees meet first to discuss business items listed on the main meeting agenda.

That means working people wishing to address the board with complaints are left waiting for hours sometimes until the committee meetings are finished and the board meeting is called to order.

This issue was a grievance brought up during the public comment period by Macon NAACP Director Gwenette Westbrooks, who urged the board to set a designated time for public speaking.

"If it's not done then I'm going to have to file a complaint because people should not have to sit here from 2 to 5 o'clock," Westbrooks said. "You say your regular meetings start from 2 to 5 – that's not true ... There needs to be a specific time that this board meeting starts."

Other boards such as the Macon-Bibb County Hospital Authority board and the Bibb County school board have set times for committee meetings and regular board meetings.

Dwight Jones, an authority board member representing North Bibb, motioned for the board to attend a governance workshop with the Carl Vinson Institute. The board unanimously approved it.

Jones also called for a motion to direct the authority's lawyer to look into whether the board was in compliance with the Georgia Open Meetings Act.

"I think it would help everybody if we put it to bed one way or another," Jones said, noting the issue had been broached at several past meetings.

Desmond Brown, an authority board member who represents Central and part of Northeast Bibb, said that was unnecessary.

"I think that's a matter that this board can deal with without legal," Brown said. "Let's just set a time. ... so that we don't even go down trying to look as if we don't want the public to speak and address this board."

The board voted 4-2 with one abstention to refer the matter to legal counsel. Board member Valerie Wynn abstained, which is interpreted as a vote in favor, while Brown and Lucas voted against the measure.

Screen capture
Macon Water Authority board members during the regular monthly meeting on Feb. 6, 2025, where they discussed seized property.

Wesleyan business panel discusses international partnerships in Middle Ga.

Casey Choung
Melody Reporter

A symposium at Wesleyan College last week highlighted the importance of foreign business relationships and the roots of international connections in Macon.

The 6th Annual Global Trade and Investment Symposium brought together business people, foreign diplomats and Wesleyan students to discuss Georgia's markets for international trade.

Chris Smith, one of the event's sponsors and opening speaker, has been organizing the event since its beginning seven years ago.

The symposium serves as a platform for learning about global investments outside of a big city like Atlanta, Smith said.

Smith has also served as the honorary consul to Denmark for the past 18 years, maintaining relationships with Danish companies including defense and aerospace manufacturer Terma in Warner Robins and exhaust and emission systems manufacturer Dinex in Dublin.

There are 75 consuls from foreign countries in Georgia, Smith said, most of whom contribute to connecting with foreign companies that help generate an annual $40 billion in state exports.

"In the central part of the state, we're ripe to have these types of meetings because we can draw people from north, south, east and west," he said.

The main discussion panel included company representatives from YKK AP and Delta, a French diplomat and Stephen Adams, the Macon-Bibb County Industrial Authority's executive director.

Jason Vorhees / The Melody
Stephen Adams, executive director of the Macon-Bibb County Industrial Authority, answers a question during the 6th Annual Global Trade and Investment Symposium held at Wesleyan College on Feb. 6.

Adams said companies stick around Macon because of trust formed through long and healthy business relationships.

He added that companies contribute to Macon's culture, like with YKK's sponsored medical exchange program with Macon's sister city, Kuroko, Japan, which is also YKK's origin city.

"We have business relationships with companies that are headquartered in countries around the world, and their people are coming from those countries into our community on a regular basis," Adams said.

Because of Delta's connection to Macon and the presence of Atlanta's French consul, panelists spoke and shared a video about Delta's project to send to veterans back in Normandy, France.

Delta celebrates its 100th anniversary this year. The company was founded in 1925 as Huff Daland Dusters in Macon.

Local diplomats offer access to potential international companies, Adams said, and can help create advocates for Macon's "international community."

"What we do in our business is very much a relationship business," he said. "So any chance we get to develop those relationships, broadcast our message out there, is certainly a great opportunity for us."

ICE, from A1:

ican-born. “I'm showing them the value of standing up for your culture.”

She said she teaches her children to be proud of their heritage and not to let others instill fear.

Daniela Pacheco stood on the sidewalk wrapped in an American flag and holding a photo of her parents with the words, “I owe my privilege to their sacrifice.”

Her family has been in the U.S. since the early ‘60s and her grandmother owned the first Mexican restaurant in Warner Robins.

Pacheco wants her son to embrace his heritage, but also wears the American flag to show their appreciation for all that the country has offered them.

“It's important to remember his culture, but it's also important to show that we are part of the U.S., and we're glad for the opportunities that we have,” she said. “He needs to know that he's not any less of a human being just because of his ancestors.”

Heightened fear

Growing up, Hernandez was keenly aware of her parents’ different citizenship statuses. Her mom came to the U.S. through a relief permit and later received a work permit to stay in the country. Her father, however, was deported several times during her childhood.

“I had to grow up really fast at 14, because I saw my mom struggling,” she said, noting that her efforts are in honor of her father.

Her dad is no longer in the country, but told his daughter he wished he could attend protests and stand up for his fellow immigrants. He inspired Hernandez to mobilize her own community.

“At the end of the day, we're all Americans here,” she said. “Immigrants helped build America.”

Witnessing the recent uptick in anti-immigrant rhetoric under the new presidential administration, Hernandez described feeling as if others were staring at her in public and noticed fellow members of the Hispanic community weren’t going out as often.

“It's terrifying them. They want that [American] dream — they worked for it,” Hernandez said. “And now they're being told, ‘Go back home. We don't want you here.’”

People work hard to obtain their green cards or work permits, she explained, but the process is long and some don’t live to see it happen.

Understanding the immigration process

Becoming a legal permanent resident is usually a two-year process, Macon immigration attorney Britt Thames said, and citizenship can take between three and five years.

The main issue ahead of Trump’s policy changes will most likely be a backlog of cases filtering through immigration courts, according to Thames. That could slow down the process for everyone and cause an overflow of detainees, he said, especially if the courts prioritize new arrivals over existing cases and detain folks who didn’t commit any crimes.

Under the previous presidential administration, the Department of Homeland Security could choose to dismiss certain immigration cases, allowing USCIS to process cases for people with minimal to no criminal history instead of sending more cases to immigration.

Under Trump’s administration, Thames said it’s likely that anyone put into immigration custody would go through immigration court. ICE is also detaining individuals who had been set for deportation in the previous administration but were still in the country.

Even folks who entered the country legally and are in the process of obtaining citizenship through the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) are feeling panic and anxiety, he said.

Bonaire resident Gabriela Gilner echoed similar thoughts on the citizenship process.

Sometimes, what is very hard for people to understand [is] that even though you might actually be in the process, it will still feel very unsafe,” she said.

Gilner was born in Mexico and has been in the U.S. for more than 30 years. She said the fear, anxiety and misinformation has led folks in the immigrant community to cancel events and has parents on edge about their children’s safety in schools. This is especially stressful for a family with different citizenship statuses, she noted

Bibb County Schools reminded parents and students of their rights in case ICE tries to make an arrest or solicit student data.

The Trump administration repealed a 2021 memo that designated schools as spaces protected from ICE enforcement.

The district’s memo noted that student data is protected under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and schools are not required to share student data, including immigration status, to ICE without a judicial order.

ICE officials are also required to present a warrant to enter a school, and parental consent is required before ICE interviews any student.

Recent legislation also has folks in the community on edge, Gilner said.

For instance, Georgia House Bill 1105, passed in May of 2024, requires local law enforcement to work with federal immigration authorities if they have someone in custody who is not legally in the country.

ICE’s 287(g) allows local and state law enforcement agencies the authority to perform certain immigration responsibilities if they opt to participate in the program. Five Georgia counties and the Georgia Department of Corrections participate in 287(g).

Thames outlined individual’s rights when interacting with ICE. First, everyone has the right to remain silent and not to sign any paperwork, because they could have a citizen spouse or child that makes them eligible for relief in immigration court, but not if they voluntarily waive their rights. If ICE visits a home, he said, the resident is not required to answer unless the officials have a judge-signed warrant.

“Oftentimes an ICE deportation warrant is not a search warrant,” he said. “That's not a warrant signed by a judge, so they would not have to open their door.”

Thames also warned against committing additional misdemeanors, such as driving without a license which, although seemingly minor, would make encounters with ICE more likely.

Looking out for the community

Although Macon isn’t a hotbed for ICE presence and she feels “blessed” to live here, Macon resident Brenda said, “It's a reminded fear” of a scary reality that’s closer than she thought.

Brenda works for an organization that assists the Hispanic community in day-to-day tasks that present a challenge for those with a language barrier.

“There’s not a law saying we can’t help people,” she said.

The increased fears and anxiety within the community hasn’t slowed Brenda or others down.

The key to finding common ground, Victoria Torres said at the protest Saturday, is communicating and having hard conversations.

“One of the greatest tools is empathy,” she said. “There's generalized statements put out everywhere, and it's literally made to divide people.”

Casey Choung contributed to this reporting.

Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Protesters gather in Warner Robins during the rally against deportation and increased ICE presence. Folks of all ages were in attendance.

> “Nobody wants to be in fear.”
>
> *- Stephanie Hernandez*

Promote your business
FREE @maconmelody.com

The Macon Melody Classifieds
is your 100% local marketplace to
buy, sell, hire and find.

Visit www.maconmelody.com
to place your business and service directory ad
for **FREE**.

The Macon Melody

For more information:
dave@maconmelody.com | 478-200-2419

Jason Vorhees / The Melody

TOP: Supporters hold up Mexican flags while driving by the protest out front of Sabor Latino Venezuelan.
BOTTOM: Daniela Pacheco, draped in a U.S. flag, holds up a sign memorializing her parents.