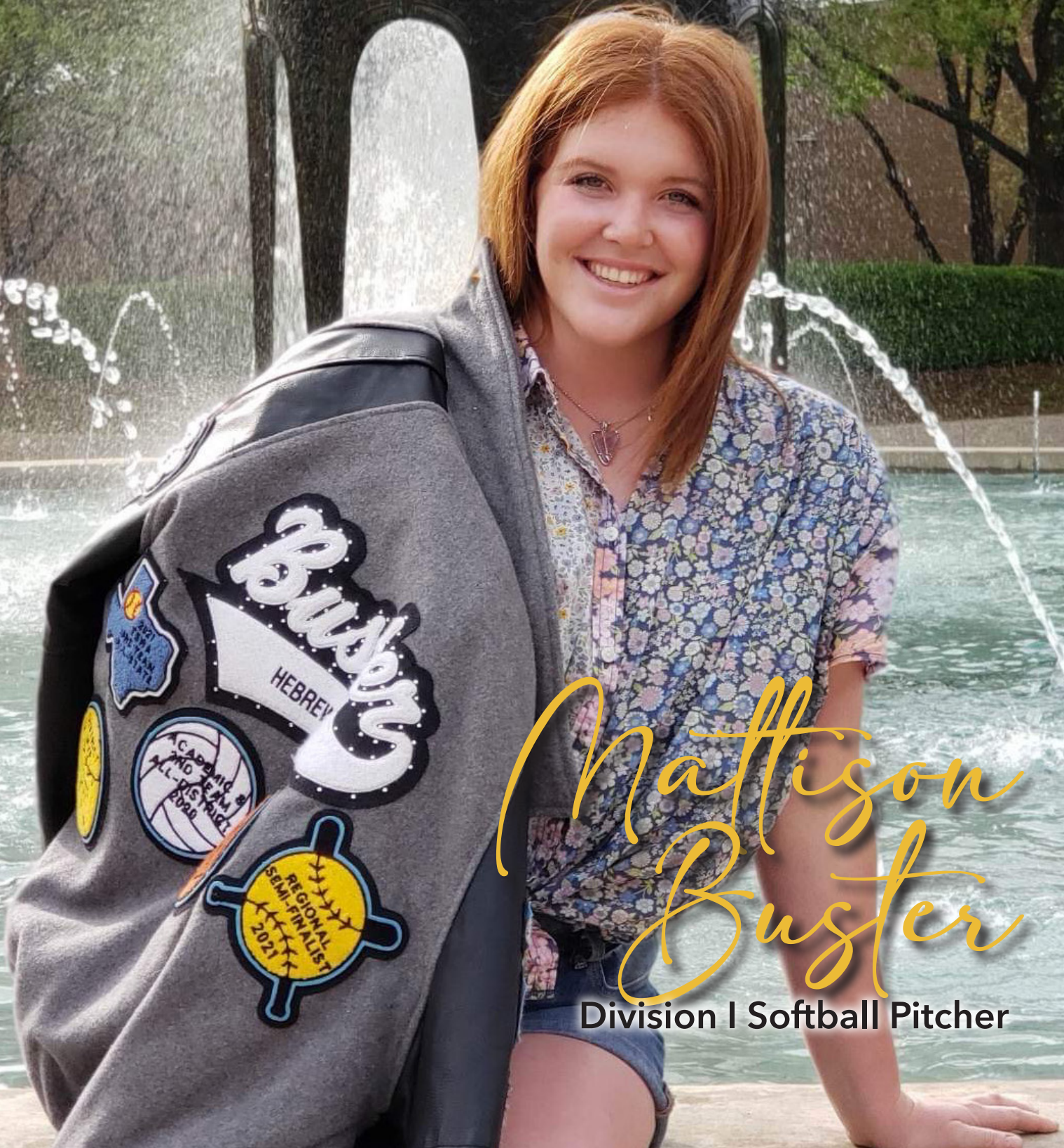


# DOWN HOME

Summer 2023

east Texas



Nattison  
Buster

Division I Softball Pitcher



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## ON THE COVER



**Mattison Buster**

See page 8

# DOWN HOME

*east texas*

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## Publisher's Letter

Welcome everyone to another issue of Down Home East Texas Magazine. This quarterly magazine is something that we are incredibly proud to publish. It's the most beautiful and widely read magazine in Hopkins County. Our staff here at the Sulphur Springs News-Telegram and our contributing writers are as excited as ever to bring you this latest issue.

I feel like I say this all the time, but I honestly can't believe it's already the end of May. Maybe I'm just getting old, but time really is flying by. We all need to stop and try to enjoy each day we have on this Earth. Tomorrow is never promised, so live every day to the fullest and tell those you love how you feel.

Summertime in Hopkins County is right around the corner and we have the most beautiful downtown square in all of Texas. Get out and enjoy all of the events and activities we are blessed to have here.

Thank you again for picking up a copy of Down Home East Texas magazine. We hope you have an amazing summer and we hope you pick up our next issue in September.

We couldn't do what we do without our advertisers and our readers. We sincerely thank all of you.

**Dave Shabaz,**  
*dave@ssnewstelegram.com*







TEXAS MODERN  
GASTROENTEROLOGY

Introducing Gastroenterologist,

# Dr. Mena Milad



I have been honored to serve the Sulphur Springs community for the past four years. I am very excited to continue serving Hopkins County and the surrounding community with Texas Modern Gastroenterology. I love spending time with everyone who walks through my clinic door, and really try to understand any concerns they may have. My goal is to get to know you and figure out how my clinic staff and I can serve you to get you feeling your very best (and prevent you from ever having to deal with colon cancer). I love taking the time to make sure you are well informed about all aspects of your symptoms. I also make sure to explain everything that is being done so that you understand your treatment plan.

My parents were my role models growing up, but my dad, who was a physician himself, put the love of medicine in my heart. I spent the first eight years of my childhood living in Cairo, Egypt. Hoping to provide quality care for his community, my dad started a practice in an underserved area of Cairo. He was the one that taught me that what doctors do is a calling from God to serve as Christ has served. We moved to America in the mid-90's. One day, when my dad was on-call in the hospital, he felt sick. He went to go see a doctor, and the tests showed that he had stomach cancer. Over the next few months, I saw first-hand how important a doctor is during some of the most difficult times of our lives. Afterwards, I felt the calling to be a doctor who not only helps treat disease, but also tries to prevent cancer so that no one will have to go through what my family went through.

So what is a gastroenterologist and why do you need to see one? We help treat all kinds of gut issues as well as liver disease. Other things we treat include heartburn, difficulty swallowing, constipation, diarrhea, belly pain, hemorrhoids, as well as hepatitis C.

One of the most important procedures that we do is the 'screening colonoscopy'. Colon cancer is very common and it has no symptoms until it is very advanced. It is also one of the only truly preventable cancers. On top of that, it is so common that the guidelines were just updated to start screening for colon cancer starting at age 45 (you used to not have to worry about it until age 50). That's why we physicians push so hard to get a colonoscopy which is the by far BEST way to prevent colon cancer.

Texas Modern Gastroenterology is located at 1402 Medical Drive, Sulphur Springs, Texas, directly behind Sulphur Springs Imaging Center. We accept all major commercial insurances and Medicare. You can request your appointment online or by calling our office. Our phone number is 903-558-2222 and our fax number is 903-558-2225. You can also visit our website at [www.txmoderngi.com](http://www.txmoderngi.com) to learn more about us.

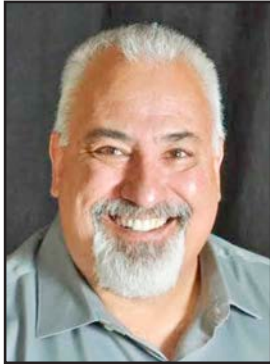


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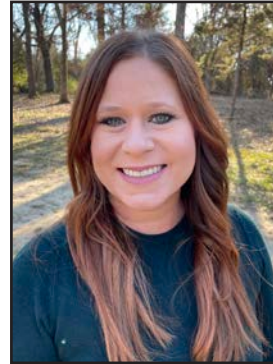
## Down Home Magazine's *Staff*



**Dave Shabaz**  
Publisher



**Faith Huffman**  
Assistant Managing Editor



**Faith Whittle**  
Graphic Designer



**DJ Spencer**  
Sports Editor



**Enola Gay Mathews**  
Community Liaison

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## *Contributing Writers*

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*Carey Gable*

*Whitney Vaughan*



*Lainey Whittle*





# upcoming

## E V E N T S

### **Nature Walk & Talk**

**Thursday, June 1, 11 a.m. - 12 p.m.**  
420 West Park St., Sulphur Springs

### **Dairy Festival Hot Air Balloon**

#### **Rally & Glow**

**Friday, June 9-10, 5:30 - 9:00 a.m.**  
Shannon Oaks Church, 1113 Shannon Rd East,  
Sulphur Springs

### **Dairy Festival Coronation Pageant**

**Saturday, June 17, 6 p.m. - 9 p.m.**  
Hopkins County Regional Civic Center,  
1200 Houston St., Sulphur Springs

### **Ink Masters Tattoo Expo**

**Friday, July 14, 1 - 11 p.m.**  
Saturday, July 15, 11 a.m. - 11 p.m.  
Sunday, July 16, 11 a.m. - 9 p.m.  
Hopkins County Regional Civic Center,  
1200 Houston St., Sulphur Springs

### **Mary McDonald Piano Concert**

**Sunday, Aug. 27, 2023, 6 - 8 p.m.**  
FBC Sulphur Springs, 116 Oak Ave,  
Sulphur Springs

### **Northeast Texas Walk Like M.A.D.D.**

**Saturday, Sept. 16, 2023**  
Buford Park, Sulphur Springs

### **2023 LSHQG Annual Quilt Show**

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# Mattison Buster



By DJ Spencer

**Como-Pickton's Division I Softball Pitcher**





COMO — Mattison Buster has been an athlete for almost all of her life. She has participated in many sports. But, of all the sports she plays, softball has been the one she has dedicated most of her time to.

In high school, she has consistently recorded double-digit strikeouts and at least one home run every single game. Those years of dedication and hard work have paid off, as she has committed to play college softball at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana.

Buster has attended school at Como-Pickton CISD for seven years, transferring in sixth grade, after attending Sulphur Springs ISD from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade. During her time at Como-Pickton, Buster has been a four-sport varsity athlete, participating in volleyball, basketball, softball, and track and field. On top of being a four-sport athlete, she has served as president of her senior class, National Honor Society and Spanish Club; and also volunteers with Read Across America and Special Olympics. “Mattison is an exceptional young lady,” said Dave Shabaz, News-Telegram Publisher. “On top of all her academic and athletic responsibilities



and achievements this past year, Mattison has also managed to write a weekly column for our Voices page, which comes out every Saturday. She is absolutely amazing and I'm so proud to have her in our newspaper."

In addition to excelling in extracurricular activities, Buster also excels in the classroom, and was announced as the Como-Pickton High School Class of 2023 valedictorian on April 20.

Buster began playing softball when she was 5 years old, and decided she wanted to become a pitcher at the age of 8. She revealed that she had to campaign to her parents just to become a pitcher.

"My dad hated the thought of me becoming a pitcher, because he wanted me to be a first or third baseman, so I wouldn't be so close to the batter," Buster said. "I had to promise him that I would work hard and dedicate myself to becoming a pitcher, and I guess he's glad I did, because it's led me to where I am today."

Growing up, Buster had four different pitching coaches, and has also played for four different travel softball teams, most recently playing for Texas Glory 18U—one of the top-ranked teams in the nation.

One way Buster is easily recognized on the field is that she wears the number 76, an unusual number to find in softball, but one that is special to her.

"I originally wore number 10, but on one of the teams I played for, another girl already wore 10, so I had come up with another number. I originally considered wearing number 89, which was my dad's high school football number, but I didn't like that idea," Buster said. "After think-

ing it over, I chose number 76, because my grandfather was a race car driver, and drove a car with the number 76. Additionally, my dad was born in 1976, so I wear 76 for both of them.

"I was lucky that when I first got to high school. We were able to pick our numbers, so I was able to continue wearing 76 in high school," Buster added.

Buster has been on the varsity softball team all four years of high school. She helped lead the Lady Eagles to many successes during those years. Buster noted how fun it has been to play for the high school softball team at Como-Pickton High School.

"Softball is different from the other sports here. The energy is higher and people around here just love softball," Buster said.

Buster explained how playing high school softball and travel softball are very different.

"Travel softball feels like a job to me. It's a job I love, but high school softball feels like a break for me," Buster said. "With high school softball, I get to enjoy myself. There's less pressure on me, and I get to play with my best friends every single day."

In addition to pitching, Buster has played multiple softball positions, including first base, second base, third base, and right field.

Before her freshman season was cut short because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lady Eagles held a 14-4 record and were on a path to becoming district champions.

"There was a lot of pressure on my shoulders that year, because everyone was saying this could be the year that we go to state, and that was tough to deal with as a freshman," Buster said. "I was so disappointed in how that year

ended, because I felt guilty for the seniors that I couldn't do more, but the season being cancelled was out of my control."

Buster's sophomore season was a very strong one, as the Lady Eagles went 31-3-1 on the season, finishing as undefeated district champions, bi-district champions, area champions, and regional semifinalists.

Buster revealed it was during this season that teams began intentionally walking her to prevent her from potentially hitting home runs on every at-bat.

"I had a stretch where I swatted eight home runs in a span of 14 games," Buster said. "After hitting at least one home run in every single district game for the first half, people started walking me, and that continued into the playoffs."

During Buster's junior year, the Lady Eagles enjoyed another stellar season. With Buster in the circle, the Lady Eagles went 31-5, once again finishing as undefeated district champions, bi-district champions, area champions and regional semifinalists. During that season, Buster finished with three no-hitters and three perfect games.

Buster's senior season has also been going well; the Lady Eagles recently capped off a 29-2 regular season and a third consecutive undefeated district championship. This season, Buster reached 1,000 high school career strikeouts in a 9-1 victory over Rivercrest. Buster noted that she didn't realize how close she was to reaching the milestone before the game started.

"Everyone did a great job of keeping the exact number a secret. I kept hearing different numbers, and I was worried the whole day about if I didn't reach 1,000 and I



had to apologize to everyone who came to watch the game for not reaching the milestone,” she said.

Buster thought she needed about 15 strikeouts to reach 1,000, but it turns out she only needed five.

“I realized I was close when I saw my mom stand up in the press box, and my dad pulled out a video camera,” Buster said. “It really hit me when Addi Monk, the catcher, came up to hug me and, then, head coach Trevor Wallace came to hug me as well. After that, my mom tearfully announced over the speakers that I reached 1,000 strikeouts.”

In December 2021, Buster committed to play college softball at Louisiana Tech University, officially signing her letter of intent on Nov. 9, 2022. She noted that Louisiana Tech had shown interest in her from very early on.

“I’ve been followed by Louisiana Tech since I was 12, but they’ve been through multiple head coaches since then,” Buster said. “All of them followed me, and the current coach, Josh Taylor, was the one who offered me a scholarship. He and his staff reminded me a lot of high school softball in the best way possible.

“I’ve been to multiple Louisiana Tech softball games at this point, and the team looks like they have fun under Taylor, and it’s a good relationship,” Buster added.

Buster also noted that other schools showed interest.

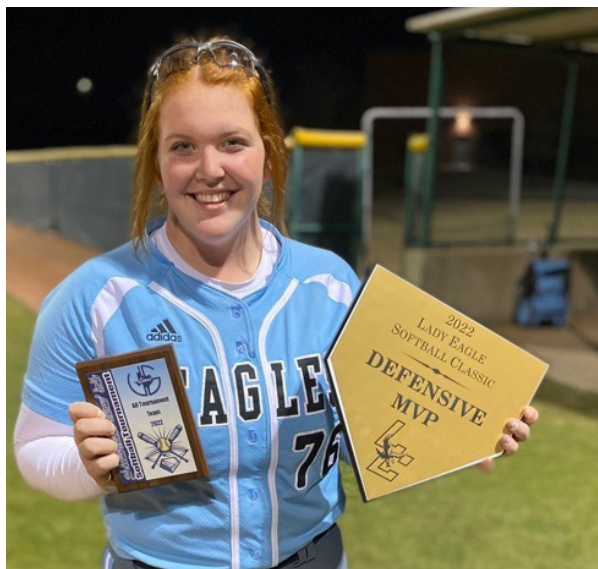
“Kansas and Texas State were other Division I schools that showed interest,” Buster said. “I’ve also drawn interest from numerous of Division II, Division III and junior colleges, but I always knew that I wanted to go Division I. I picked Louisiana Tech because they were the first school to find me and want me; and they offered me a full athletic and academic scholarship, which will help my parents a lot.”

Buster noted a pet peeve she gets a lot from being a Division I commit.

“I try to make a relationship with every player I play against, and I hate when people have the assumption that I think I’m better than everyone else because I’m committed to playing in college,” Buster said. “This year, all of the freshman thought I would be scary, but that’s not the kind of person I am.”

Buster has several goals she would like to accomplish once





she gets to Louisiana Tech.

“I want to be the best I can be for the program, develop myself as a player to the best of my potential, and maintain high grades — hopefully, high enough to become an Academic All-American,” Buster said. “I made a big name for myself in high school, and I want to make a bigger name for myself in college.”

On top of having success in softball, Buster has experienced success in other high school sports too. In volleyball, she has been a four-year letterman and made first-team all-district as a senior, and also helped the volleyball team to their first playoff appearance in a long time.

On the basketball court, she was also a four-year letterman, and helped the Lady Eagles to playoff victories during her sophomore and senior seasons. She made first-team all-district in basketball as a senior.

In track and field, she competed in the discus and shot put throws, qualifying for regionals three times in discus throw and twice in the shot put throw.

Buster had a great support system growing up, which helped her get where she is today.

“I absolutely love my home team,” Buster said. “They are a great group of people.”

Buster, additionally, noted how big of a deal it was to fulfill her dream of becoming a Division I softball player.

“I always told my dad I would be a Division I softball player,” Buster said. “At that point in my life, it didn’t matter who it was for. I also wanted to be a positive role model for my sister, Abbigale, so I could show her that you can be anything you want in life, if you put your mind to it.”

Becoming a Division I softball player is only the beginning of many great things for Buster will look to accomplish as she heads off to Louisiana Tech.

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# Big Adventures for a Small-Town Girl

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By **Lainey Whittle**

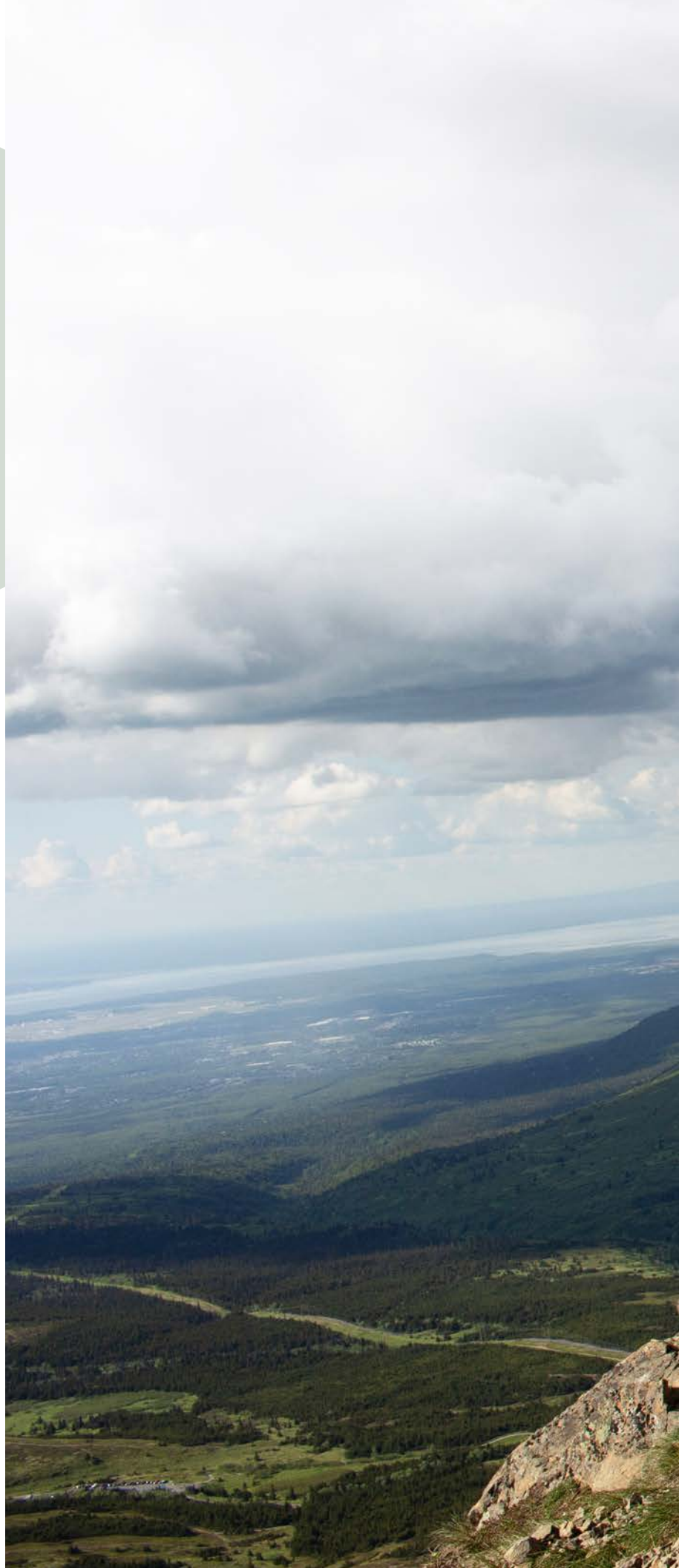
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As high school graduation approaches and many contemplate where to go for their graduation trips to celebrate the end of an era, I've started to reminisce about my own graduation trip.

My boyfriend and I traveled to Alaska, all alone, with no help, for seven days. Yes, you read that right. Two 18-year-olds, who had been dating for just the tiniest bit over a year, vacationed to Alaska all by ourselves. You may be asking yourselves, "Why Alaska?" Many seniors want to go to warm and sunny beaches, while we set out to hike mountains that were still capped with snow.

Well, you see, I was born in Alaska, which was a miraculous feat because basically my whole family — Mom and Dad's side — were both born and raised here. I was born in Alaska (on a military base). I then was shipped back to Sulphur Springs, Texas, six months after and have resided here ever since.

My boyfriend and I were sitting in his truck, when I mused that I'd like to visit Alaska some day. It was a passing thought, with no intent of action behind it. But, he stopped, looked me dead in the eye, shrugged, and said, "I'll take you."











I stared. “What do you mean? Like eventually?”

“No, like soon,” he said. “What about for our graduation?”

“You’re joking.”

“No. I’ll pay for it, if you’ll plan it.”

And, that was that. He gave me a budget and I planned the whole trip. I was terrified that my parents would say no, unless we could prove that we had it under control. I wanted everything to be done and decided when we asked them, so they would know we were serious. I had never planned a trip before. I actually made an itinerary and, when I showed it to my boyfriend, he looked at me like I was crazy. Maybe, at that moment, I felt a little crazy.

When we got around to asking for permission, my mom freaked out, wouldn’t give me a yes or no and told me to ask my dad. I’m pretty sure she was expecting him to freak out as well and, to be honest, so did I.

However, when I asked him, he was all shrugs, easy smiles, and gave an easy yes.

My mind was blown, but I wasn’t going to question it. My boyfriend’s parents paid for the plane tickets as our graduation present and we were off.

Let’s take a minute to pause here. My boyfriend and I were both 18, so we couldn’t rent a hotel or a car. We had never traveled together, not even with each other on family vacations. We

had also never even slept a full night in the same bed. And, we had decided to travel across the country together. Any couple who has taken a trip together knows that, at some point during the trip, the strength of the relationship will be tested.

On the first night there, boy, was it tested.

We Ubered, all giddy and excited, to the place where we were staying. On the website, the place looked nice and cozy; the room was affordable and had good ratings and reviews. Trust me, I left no stone unturned during the planning process.

We arrived in front of a worn down tiny building, where I would not be surprised at all if many drug deals went down. There was instant panic. The panic didn’t subside as we checked in. The room was big enough for the bed and that was it. There was a communal bathroom I didn’t even want to wash my hands in, much less take a shower.

There was no air conditioning and my boyfriend refused to crack open the window, because he was genuinely worried someone may try to come into our room.

Yeah, I cried that night and my boyfriend didn’t get a second of sleep. Thanks to my amazing planning skills, we were set to take a 6 a.m., two-hour-long bus ride to a nearby small town the very next day.

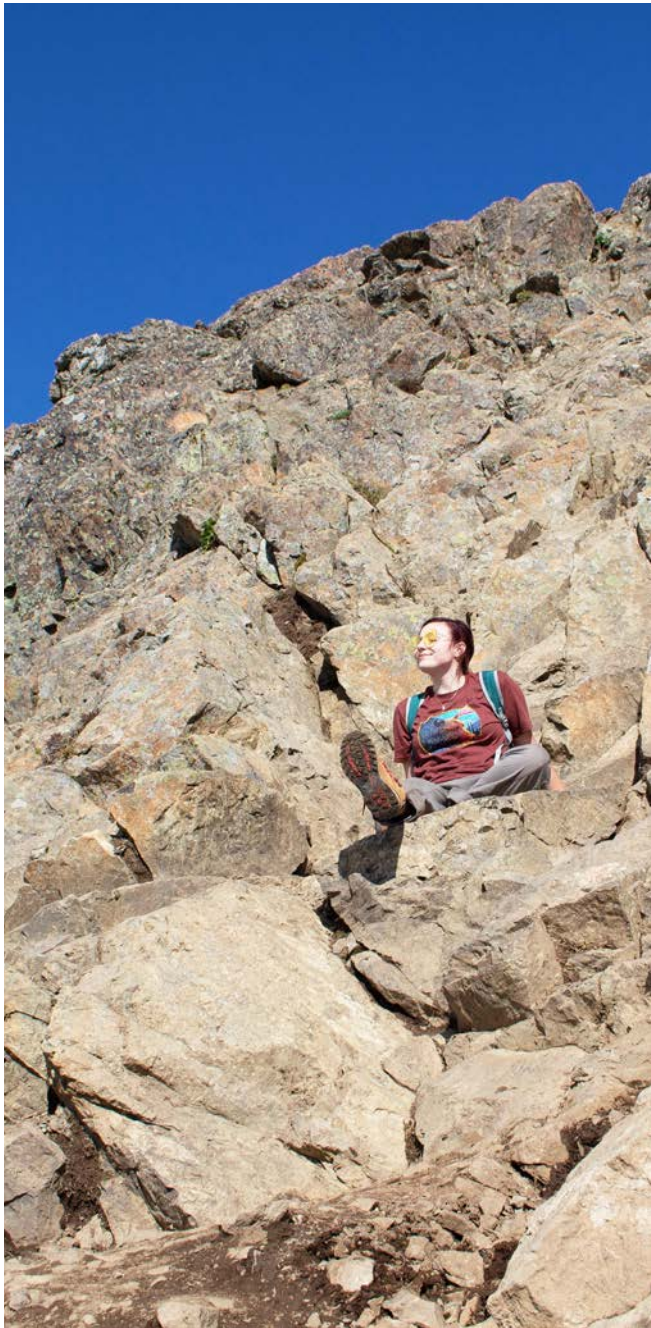
Bright and early, I was determined to remain optimistic. That optimism is hard to maintain though, I will admit, when you watch two couples have a screaming fight outside of a child protective services building at six in the morning. I had to laugh at the absurdity of it all, but my boyfriend, who was sleep deprived and prone to paranoia, did not find this funny.

So, we went on our merry way. A few blocks after that, we were convinced a homeless man was attempting to chase us with a knife. I have to admit, this is when the paranoia sunk in for me, too.

We, thankfully, made it to the bus in one piece, and my boyfriend was able to nap. Although through the entirety of the nap, he had my hand in a death grip, so I’m unsure how relaxed he was. The bad luck of Anchorage was left behind us and we had a wonderful time in a beautiful tourist town called Talkeetna. We went zip-lining, took pictures, and ate great food.

When we returned to Anchorage, so did the bad luck. We had decided to walk over to the convenience store across the street in a hopeless search of flip-flops so we could shower. At this point, you aren’t going to believe me. But, just as we’re leaving, a van screeched into the parking lot with two men — both had hoodies, masks (not the COVID kind), and huge sunglasses on. As I reflect back now, it’s entirely





possible that these respectable gentlemen had just come from skiing or some other winter sport. At that moment though? We feared for our lives.

Once back in the room, a decision that changed the course of our night was made. My boyfriend and I were slightly on the desperate side to get out of this place **AS SOON AS POSSIBLE**.

We packed our bags, we settled things with the manager, and our Uber picked us up. He laughed at us for staying at a place that the native's call, "An Alaskan Delicacy". We were prepared to pay anything to stay anywhere else. But remember: We're eighteen. We can't rent a hotel. This is the part of the story that I reveal to you that we did not know this information.

By the time we arrived at the hotel, it's around 8:30 p.m. We were kicked out of the hotel at approximately 8:35 p.m. Panic had once again set in. We rushed to call all of the local motels and hotels, to no avail. We took the longest long shot of our lives and called the owner of an airbnb around 9 p.m. By the sheer grace of God, the owner picked up and listened to our sob story. He took our money, sent us the code, and we Ubered straight over.

FINALLY, we had a little bit of good luck in Anchorage. The place, which was like a little apartment, was very nice. We stayed there a couple of days. We hiked to the top of a mountain, where we could have followed the trails, but my boyfriend thought it would be fun to make our own path. He skipped like a gazelle up the mountain, and I'm pretty sure I was crawling on my hands and knees at one point. I will admit though, that if I wasn't already completely out of breath, the view when we got to the top would have stolen it.

We also stayed in Sewer for several days, which is a quaint port city. It was there that we took a four hour long boat tour. It was also there that we found out we both became sea sick after not too long. In the middle of the tour, we stopped at Fox Island, where we ate a huge feast.

We also ate the best meal of the whole trip on the floor in the living room of the place where we were staying. We had had enough beer battered fish to last us our whole lives. But, it was the grocery store deli fried chicken that really boosted the morale of the team.

In the end, there was one other activity I had signed up for in my crazed enthusiasm that we mutually agreed to call and cancel. We relaxed on our last day and, then, headed home.

In the midst of the craziness, we made a lot of great memories and, we've yet to have a bad trip together since, five years later.

I've traveled to other places as well, and enjoyed every minute of it, but more about that next time.





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# PULLED PORK SANDWICH *with slaw*

## INGREDIENTS:

1.5 LB PORK TENDERLOIN

1/2 CUP STUBB'S ORIGINAL BBQ SAUCE

1 PKG SARA LEE SWEET HAWAIIAN BUNS

## SLAW:

1/2 BAG (180G) COLESLAW

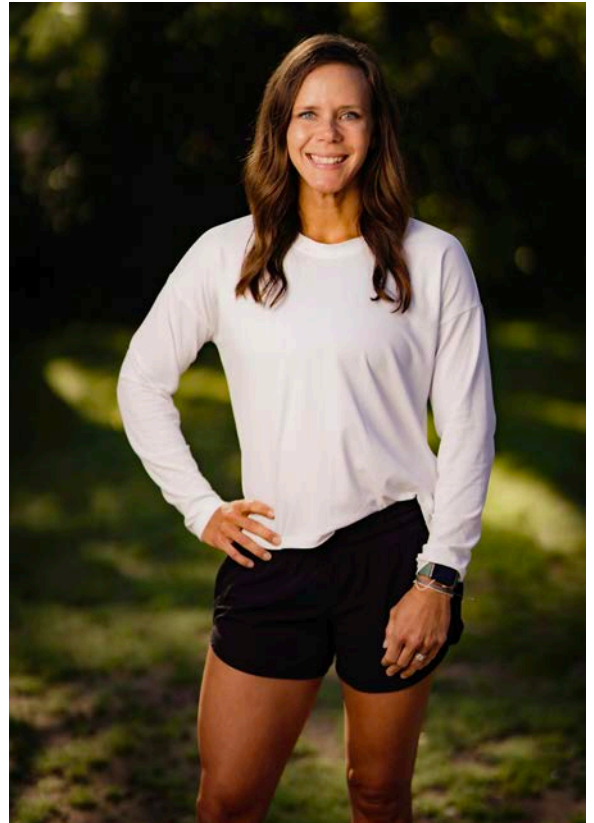
## DRESSING:

1/2 CUP DUKE'S MAYO

2 TBSP SUGAR

1 TBSP APPLE CIDER VINEGAR

1/2 SQUEEZED LEMON



Recipe provided by Whitney Vaughan

1. Add the tenderloin and 1/2 cup barbecue sauce to a slow cooker. Cover and set to cook for 4-5 hours on low.
2. Whisk all the ingredients for the coleslaw dressing together.
3. In a medium bowl, mix the coleslaw mix and coleslaw dressing together. Stir until slaw is evenly coated. Cover and let rest in the fridge. As the coleslaw sits, it will become more liquidey.
4. When the tenderloin is finished, you may want to scrap off any excess fat and leave in the slow cooker. Transfer the meat to a bowl or dish where you can shred the meat.

If you're counting macros and want to enjoy this meal with your family while also staying on track by logging your meal, I've also provided the macros for the exact sandwich from the recipe: 25P/20F/43C



# McKay Law is **TEXAS TOUGH**



## **What if I get in a wreck and I don't think I am very hurt?**

I always tell people they are not a Doctor who specializes in trauma injury and you cannot see a bruise on your brain or a herniated disc in your back. Expert reports would show you that in most cases once you have been involved in a motor vehicle collision, the natural degenerative aging process has been accelerated by 10 years.

I call the back and spine the "science of millimeters" because it does not take much for a herniation or nerve damage issue to have major impact long term and pain is not always felt immediately.

The head is serious because if you suffer a head injury that is often undiagnosed and later hit your head a second or third time it can be even more serious or catastrophic.

**Well, I went to the ER and they sent me home and told me I was fine. Does that mean I'm not hurt?**

The emergency Room knows a little about a lot but not a lot about any one thing. In

other words, for the purpose of the ER, you did not need to be admitted to the hospital or undergo emergency surgery. However, for the purpose of a Dr. who specializes in pain management or trauma injury, that diagnosis can be very different.

## **What if the ER even took X-rays and images and said everything looked ok?**

The images in the ER are usually limited to a CT Scan or X-Ray. The MRI image is the best form of imaging as it will tell the story of your injuries – herniations, annular tears, disc bulge, and is usually ordered by a pain management doctor or specialist – not at the ER. If someone came into your house and with a baseball bat, they smashed your TV. Are you going to be okay with a smaller replacement or a TV that has no volume? No! you expect the same TV to be replaced and I'm sure you will inspect to make sure it works just as it should. The same goes for your body after a collision. Get checked out!

**You are a Christian, do you think it is biblical to sue people?**

First, we are not necessarily suing individuals. We are pursuing cases that have an avenue of collectability which is typically through the insurance coverage the individual has paid through the policy. The insurance company hires lawyers and handles the case and the individual at fault usually has little involvement in the process. That is the duty of good faith and fair dealing all insurance carriers owe their insureds.

Second, not every wreck requires a lawsuit. In fact, most car wrecks do not require a lawsuit at all. For the cases that do require a lawsuit, only a handful go to trial. However, we handle every client and prepare every case as if it were going to trial from day one.

Third, and most important, considering the staggering statistics of roadway dangers in Texas, I am interested in making a difference to keep our families safer on the road. The only way to force distracted drivers to take safer measures when operating a motor vehicle or commercial truck is to hold those accountable when they are negligent.



I am really impressed with how parents, teachers and coaches take a hands-on approach to teach and discipline children in our community. When a child misbehaves, there are consequences.

Similarly, every case we file and every insurance claim we pursue we are one step closer to making our roads and highways safer for my family and for yours. I consider it our duty to hold negligent drivers and unsafe companies accountable.

#### **When are you most frustrated as a lawyer?**

It is always a victory when there is plenty of insurance available to cover my client's damages and injuries. However, the most frustrating is when there is NOT enough insurance available. The minimum car insurance policy in Texas is \$30,000. That is not very much when you are injured from a wreck but certainly better than California which is a minimum of \$15,000. Commercial Trucks or 18-wheelers on the other hand have to carry a minimum of \$750,000 of insurance but usually have more coverage.

#### **What can someone do if there is not enough insurance to cover all their damages?**

I wish everyone carried UNDERINSURED/ UNINSURED Motorist "UM/UIM" Coverage. What is UM/ UIM coverage? It's insurance on YOUR policy that covers you in the case the other negligent driver does not have insurance or there is not enough for your injuries.

I just had a case that is a good example. My client is 19 and suffered a traumatic brain injury, lost her vision temporarily after she slammed her head on the dashboard from a hit-and-run that totaled her family's only vehicle. If her family had UM/UIM coverage, we would have been able to help her with her injuries, medical bills and replace their totaled vehicle even though the other driver got away, but they didn't have that coverage.

In the State of Texas, insurance companies are required to provide UM/UIM coverage to their insureds unless the insured signs a rejection. Clients often think they have "full coverage" but are disappointed to learn that

they only have liability coverage because they signed a rejection.

#### **Has it been challenging for you as a woman in your legal field?**

Yes. As a woman, the expectations among colleagues are greater, but it is rewarding to be underestimated only to gain respect. We work hard to exhibit expertise and professionalism. Not only has there been a "good old boys club" of lawyers for decades, but there are fewer female lawyers in the personal injury field. When I started McKay Law in East Texas in 2021, another male attorney, whom I have great respect, told me that I would have a harder time here because I am a female.

#### **Was your colleague correct?**

God is bigger than any of our perceived shortcomings. As a working mom, I have a lot going on, and I think it's always challenging as a woman in any profession. I also believe that our success at McKay Law is based on people being more receptive to women in the workforce than ever before. We may have to work harder and faster, but with enough hustle and grit, you can soar. I am honored that people trust us with their case as I know, given the opportunity, we do whatever it takes, and we win. I view every case and client as an opportunity to go above and beyond their expectations.

#### **What has helped make you a success in your legal specialty?**

Knowing the law and having a salient understanding of medical injuries is imperative. But I believe what separates us is our empathy for all our clients and attention to detail. We help coordinate details of life that have been turned upside down by the headache of a car wreck or tragedy. Life is challenging on its own. When someone is involved in a car or truck wreck, they are not prepared to deal with big insurance companies, steep medical bills and a wrecked car. But we are. This is what we do every day. Not only do we fight and win, but we help take the stress out of the process for our clients.

Additionally, we have the education, talent and experience from a long line of achievement. Before starting a personal injury law firm, we have participated in trials and

complex litigation all over the state of Texas, and in some cases, nation-wide.

Moving from a bigger city, McKay Law brings the competitiveness, professionalism, and the experience with the personal care of a smaller town.

#### **What are some examples of coordinating the impossible for clients?**

Think about navigating your daily life with no sleep because your back or neck pain kept you tossing and turning all night. Or what happens when husband is hurt and wife has to slop pigs, feed the cattle, mow and take out trash on top of her other duties? One of our clients was in that exact situation and they just welcomed their fourth child. Another client was not able to dance with his daughter at her wedding because he was so badly hurt by a city water truck. These are real stories. Living in pain affects everyone in your life – and it affects us at McKay Law.

We provide rides when a client is without a vehicle. We have paid for funeral expenses, covered bills for those who can't work and found babysitters when needed.

A car or truck wreck can be an opportunity for us to help in other meaningful ways. One of my clients was homeless and pregnant with twins when she was involved in a car wreck. We helped her find housing, a support group with childcare and all the supplies for her babies. We also helped those struggling with addiction get the aid they need to get sober and stay clean. In some cases, it's rewarding when we present the settlement check to the client who was otherwise spiraling and now on a healthy path. These are God's people and I am called to serve. We are smart enough to win and small enough to care!



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# 15 THINGS ABOUT NEAL BARKER



*Neal Barker is a local businessman and volunteer. Neal owns Town Country Clean at 1415 South Broadway in Sulphur Springs. Many may know it as Town & Country Cleaners, which he purchased from Bob Weaver. Neal is also the incoming President of the Sulphur Springs Rotary Club. He and his wife, Shannon, are very active in the local community and charities. Get to know Neal, his answers may surprise you.*





**1. Are you the youngest, middle or oldest child?**

Well, I grew up in a blended family, where I was the only child on my dad's side, but I have two half-sisters, one half-brother, three stepsisters and one stepbrother. The closest in age is eight years, so I was basically an only child.

**2. What is your favorite quote?**

My favorite quote has changed over the years and lately it has been "Tell the truth, or at least don't lie." This small quote speaks volumes to me on the state of affairs in modern life. I'm growing a newfound appreciation for how important our words are and, consequently, how critical it is that we honor them.

**3. What is number one on your bucket list?**

Don't succumb to mediocrity. A former favorite quote of mine was "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation," by Thoreau. It was hanging on the wall in my high school English classroom and made an indelible impression on my mind. I don't think it has to be motivation to change the world in some big way, just don't roll over and let the world wash over you.

**4. What's your biggest pet peeve?**

Non-sensical bureaucracy. It grates on my nerves when an organization, governmental or not, asks for my full name and address on multiple forms.

**5. What skill would you like to master?**

I've long wanted to be able to sit down and pick on a guitar. I'm sure a big reason I have not has been laziness, but there is also a part of me that is afraid to be judged as the guy who wanted to play guitar. I kinda wish I could just learn and play without anyone knowing.

**6. If you could trade places with anyone for a week, who would it be?**

This might be the most difficult question in the survey! Since it is only 1 week, I think it could be really interesting to be the head of the NSA and gain a better perspective of world affairs. I would ask for briefings on all sorts of classified material. I imagine I'd be very popular when I get back home!

**7. Who is your hero?**

I'd probably pick Leon Dorleans, a friend who gave up life in America with a college education to head back to his birthplace of Haiti to start a ministry in Cite Soleil, and has been steadily working at it for 35 years. Oh, that we could all be so lucky to have a clear mission.

**8. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?**

I think Shannon, the kids and I will be here in Sulphur Springs investing in our small business, and pouring energy into the community and schools and our friends' lives. It's an easy choice.

**9. What is something you've always wanted to do, but have never tried?**

Hop a train. I'm such a wimp that I wouldn't do it, but I've long had a desire to just jump on a train and see where it takes me.

**10. Would you consider yourself an introvert or an extrovert?**

I'm an introvert, but I love talking to people and learning more about them and the world as they see it.

**11. What is your proudest accomplishment?**

If I do have any accomplishments, I am certain they were the result of many other people helping me, blind luck and a touch from the man upstairs.

**12. What do you think is the most essential professional skill?**

I think the most essential professional skill is communication and the ability to successfully convey an idea, a task or feedback, and have it received successfully on the other end.

**13. If you had a warning label, what would it say?**

I have found that first impressions of me are not entirely accurate, so my warning label might read "more than meets the eye."

**14. If money was no object, what would you do all day?**

Maybe I would learn to play the guitar?

**15. If you could share a meal with four individuals, living or dead, who would they be?**

I'm assuming this is four different meals, so I'll choose Don Chaffer from the band Waterdeep, Merle Haggard, Adam Duritz of the Counting Crows and, lastly, the author Herman Hesse.



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# Berger – Celebrating 60 Years

Co-CEO sisters continue family tradition, values while steering international business – the continuation of their grandmother's dream



By Faith Huffman

Berger Horticulture this spring is celebrating the 60th anniversary of the family business which now ships its peat moss and other growing mixes across the globe while maintaining the same values established in 1963. The business is the realization of a dream by Huguette Th  berge, a woman described by her granddaughter, M  lissa Berger, as a bit of a rebel or revolutionary.

## Leadership

The Canadian-headquartered business continues to be headed by two members of the family, as has been tradition since its start. Huguette Th  berge and her husband Alcide Berger shared duties in the business, and made harmony, performance, commitment and proximity priorities. Since Huguette Th  berge's dream was realized with the creation of the business, there have always been two heads of business at Berger.

In 1980, Huguette and Alcide handed Berger over to the next generation, their sons, Claudin Berger and R  gis Berger. The brothers served as co-CEOs until Claudin's daughters, M  lissa Berger and Val  rie, were ready to assume the reins. M  lissa and Val  rie continue to serve as co-presidents and CEOs for Berger. In January, Berger was recognized in Prem  res en affaires for having one of the top women-owned businesses



Berger-Sulphur Springs Assistant Director Mark Pugh and M  lissa Berger, co-CEO with sister (not pictured)



in Quebec. Mélissa said she and her sister hope to one day be able to hand the business down to their children, who would serve as co-CEOs.

### Growth, Progress

Each successive generation of Berger has grown the family business into an international company, with nine production plants, and 11 peat bogs in North America, and more than 800 professionals in Canada, the USA and Central America, including five technical advisors and a sales team of 35 representatives, which serve customers in 20 countries across the globe. They've had a facility in Sulphur Springs since the late 1990s.

In 1963, peat was harvested manually and sold locally in the Sant-Modeste, Quebec area. In 1970, the company invested in and purchased peat moss vacuum harvesters. The peat moss was then sold to American and Canadian brokers.

In 1980, Huguette and Alcide's sons, Claudin and Régis, assumed leadership of the company.

In 1984, the business began distributing products under the Berger label, introducing "value-added products" such as growing media for professional

horticulturalists and began exporting to other countries. In 1986, Berger acquired a peat bog in Baie-Sainte-Anne, New Brunswick, and began building a peat bagging plant. In 1988, Berger began exporting products overseas, to the United States and Japan. In 1993, a second peat processing plant was built in Bay du Vin, New Brunswick. Berger also created the Skyscraper product, and the company's management team set up a quality control system, the super-bloc format, considered a revolution in the industry, which consolidated product quality and supported work methods.

The business branched out from Canada to the United States in the 1980s, and opened its plant on State Highway 19, between Sulphur Springs and Birthright in Hopkins County in the late 1990s. Also under Claudin and Régis Berger's leadership, Berger obtained ISO 9001 certification.

Mélissa and Valérie Berger have guided Berger Horticulture Products since 2015, assuming the role of co-chief executive officers, the sisters have dedicated their energies to continued growth. Adopting innovative products based on growers' needs an unprecedented market-oriented approach,



the pair have transformed the company's image. Berger has obtained Veriflora certification, acquired Sun Land Garden Products and Beaver and Lafaille Peat Moss, and Prix Prestiges or Company of the Year by the Chamber of Commerce of Rivière-du-Loup.

Aside from the brief period a few years back, when the business had to shut down and rebuild in Sulphur Springs due to a fire, Berger has continued to operate at the Hopkins County facility since its inception in the later 1990s, mixing and shipping the peat moss and growing mix to professional agriculturalists, including those with orchards.



### Company approach

The company's customer service approach is to adapting the product to fit the customer's needs, taking into consideration climate, the crop, light and water as well as other factors which might improve productivity for the client, and helping customers optimize productivity using Berger peat moss and mixture products. The mix contains not just peat but a significant amount of bark.

The business has regional representatives responsible for ensuring just that, as well as facilities to test and develop Berger product mixes designed to positively impact the crop it is used for.

Berger supports and develops sustainable projects to promote environmental, social and economical well-being of the communities in which their facilities are located.

The business is centered around five basic values: commitment to the business, work and providing high quality products and personalized service; proximity and availability to its employees, customers and business partners by openly sharing information, actively engaging with its stakeholders and remaining accessible and available; harmony by combining attentiveness, openness, respect, humility and sincerity to create a climate of trust and a collaborative working relationship between staff, customers and partners; and performance by seeking optimal results for Berger products, employees, operations and finance, which in turn help customers strive to be their best as well.

Berger-Sulphur Springs Assistant Director Mark Pugh said he's worked



at other jobs but really loves his current position. The communication between not just management but the various departments and staff, including the CEOs and their varied locations is a huge part of the business. Each Berger production location is visited at least four times a year — once per quarter — by one of the co-CEOs. The Berger family and employees communicate more than just quarterly financials.

Mélissa Berger said it is their priority to see everyone, to have contact with the people who work for Berger, to see how things are going, to share information about each's role in the bigger picture. During COVID-19 shutdowns, the sisters still stayed in touch with their employees via Zoom or similar video-conferencing platforms.

"The transparency means a lot. They present things in a way everyone understands. Everyone here is here for the same goal," Pugh said.

They also recognize those who go above the call in their jobs. For instance, Marshall Green was recognized this spring for going the "Extra Mile," and making a difference with his "stringency," ever positive outlook, and being able to lighten the mood by making people laugh.

Green began working at Berger when he was 17, taking a summer job at the Sulphur Springs facility. He has risen through the ranks in the dozen years since, and currently serves as quality coordinator in Texas.

"Marshall is a very important asset for Berger. He is funny, caring in his work as well as with his colleagues and above all, he has the success of the Berger company at heart," Mark Pugh said.

While their approach may be different, the Berger sisters say their values remain the same as those adopted when their grandmother put her dream to action in 1963, and even follow the double leader model established when their grandfather joined her at the head of the business.

The company co-CEOs want their staff, partners and customers to know they are not in it for purely economic reasons, but social ones as well. For instance, they seek to support young families, help women position themselves in the workforce, to make the living environment around them pleasant — in essence to give back and make a difference.

## Celebrating 60 Years

While Mélissa and Valérie Berger visit the various facilities quarterly to give updates on progress, finances and future goals as well as getting to know the Berger team and facilities, their visit at the first part of 2023 was a bit different.

To kick off the 60th anniversary, the Berger sisters celebrated employees at all Berger sites from Sulphur Springs to California, their new plant in Manitoba, and facilities in New Brunswick and Quebec. The company leaders beginning in February 2023 expressed appreciation to Berger employees, business partners, customers and the community for their support. Co-CEO Mélissa Berger visited the SH 19 plant in Hopkins County for an afternoon of food and fun activities with the Berger Sulphur Springs team in celebration of the businesses' 60 years of operations, and their role in Berger's continued successes as a "worldwide leader in the production of peat moss and growing media."







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## PATIENT PAIN STORY

**Chris Langley** knew something was wrong. He tried everything he could to make the pain go away. “I was even sleeping with my knee pulled up all the way to my chest,” Langley said. “Nothing was working, I was chewing on pain meds all day, every day, to no effect.”

Thankfully, Langley found the answers to his problem, in the form of Dr. Matthew Johnson, an interventional pain management specialist for CHRISTUS Trinity Clinic and CHRISTUS Mother Frances Hospital –



Sulphur Springs.

“We reviewed his imaging and it showed he had a bulging disk,” said Dr. Johnson. “Initially, we did a series of epidural shots and, in the short term, it worked. But, his relief pattern for his pain did not last.”

Ultimately, surgery was required.

Johnson performed a procedure that removed the bulging disk, relieving the pressure on Langley’s sciatic nerve and restoring his functionality.

“I am as fully active as I want to be — everything he said it was going to be, it has been,” Langley said. “The staff I had dealings with in the day surgery, to Dr. Johnson and his staff, everything has been amazing.”

This story is not unique to Langley and is one of countless success stories that stem from Johnson’s practice.

A native of Longview and graduate of the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, he is approaching his sixth year serving both CHRISTUS Trinity Clinic and CHRISTUS Mother Frances Hospital – Sulphur Springs.

He is member of the Spine Intervention Society, North American Neuromodulation Society and American Society of Interventional Pain Physicians.

Through his clinic and at the hospital, Johnson offers the full gambit of procedures for both surgical and non-surgical pain remediation, including spinal cord stimulation, vertebral augmentation, endoscopic disc decompression, stem cell therapy, peripheral nerve stimulation, joint injections and indirect/direct spinal decompression.

Johnson said he wants the pain management program in Sulphur Springs to continue to provide the best care — care that his patients can find at home, negating the need to travel.

“When it comes to pain management care here, in Sulphur Springs, we are cutting-edge and I don’t say that just to brag,” Johnson said. “I say it because I know the level of training that I have and the number of interventions that we offer here, in relation to what is being offered in the surrounding area, and even the Dallas area.”

As for Langley, “If you are experiencing problems like this, don’t wait,” he said. “He [Dr. Johnson] is so good at what he does, and I would wholeheartedly recommend him. He was just phenomenal.”

Johnson practices at CHRISTUS Trinity Clinic, located at 113 Medical Circle, and at Mother Frances Hospital – Sulphur Springs, located at 115 Airport Road.

He sees patients based on referrals from primary care providers and from individual self-referral.



*Dr. Matthew Johnson*



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# The Fire Foot Incident

By Carey Gable

There are few truths to live by in the modern world. Even fewer truths go beyond the philosophical to the physical. The one truth that permeates all reality is thus, always wear sunscreen! In the heat of the day, sunscreen. In the cool morning airs, sunscreen. In the evening hues, sunscreen. There can be no negotiation with the sun regarding this. Protest and rebellion are futile, sunscreen is the answer.

We walked into the waterpark with an air of boastful pride. Myself, my fourteen-year-old son and his friend were determined to not only ride every ride, but boldly conquer the heat of the July day. We expected the water to cool and ease the scorching sun and, in a moment of subdued mockery, we would defeat the nasty heat of the Texas summer. Besides, this was what water parks were made for, this was why we enjoy them so.

As we entered, we scoped out the rides and made a general plan of attack, which rides would take priority on our list. As the parent, my primary task was to find a suitable, central location to form a home base of sorts. I procured a three deck chairs, rectangular in the shadow of one of the primary water slides. I marked my newly acquired space with the appropriate swim bags, filled with sunscreen and water goggles.

The diligent parent in me reminded and mandated a full reapplication of sunscreen upon my wards. No sliver of exposed skin was allowed to be missed by the spray of the SPF 50. The bottle of which boldly proclaimed, “water-proof and sweat-proof.” Ears were turned a shade of white, noses were rubbed down, shoulders received an extra layer of spray. I was confident in our ability to withstand the blazing eye of the sun for the next 30 to 60 minutes.

Upon waiting for the appropriate drying time, the boys were off to explore and seek out short lines to their favorite rides. Both were strong swimmers, so I settled myself in to relax. I applied my own sunscreen in the morning shadow of the slide. Face, neck, shoulders, thighs, arms, and torso were all sprayed and dried and sprayed again. I affixed the necessary sunglasses over my eyes and watched the boys from my well positioned locale.

I began to ease into the life of a waterpark dad. The waterpark dad is a special creature that comes in two varieties.

The first, the most obvious, is the toddler version. This version of the water park dad is very active and can usually be spotted at the bottom of various slides in the toddler slide area. This dad is in full parent mode and is often smiling and laughing, but with a significant hint of total



exhaustion hiding behind the large grin. Always accompanied by a small child, this dad has been featured in waterpark advertising campaigns for a generation.

Then, there is the waterpark dad to teenagers. The teens are so looking to be rid of this dad, that he is instructed to stay “out of sight” as the teens seek out excitement. This dad is no longer needed for slides or much of anything barring disciplinary issues and money provisions. Ironically, the toddler waterpark dad envies the teen waterpark dad. Conversely, the teen waterpark dad envies the toddler waterpark dad and longs for the days of toddler slides. This is the paradox of waterpark parenting.

Into a tranquil envy I settled, thrusting my back against the recline of the deck chair. I was situated at just the angle to keep a watch on the youths without them being aware. Sunglasses hiding my gaze from them, I monitored. For some time, I monitored. I settled in. I relaxed. I thought I monitored. Then, I was asleep.

It was a momentary blip, only two minutes of a doze by my watch, but it was enough to startle me. I jolted upright and looked through the bags for no particular reason. I hoped the movement would stir the blood enough to ensure my full awareness. The boys had not even moved from their position in line, not even one step up from their previous position. I settled back in to monitor. I people watched. I monitored. I settled. I relaxed. I thought I monitored. I was asleep.

Again, I bolted upright. Again, it was a three-minute doze. The boys had moved two steps in all of that time. I was struggling against a narcoleptic impulse that I could not understand. The morning coffee must have run its course. The traveling energy drink must have not hit the veins. The wave of dark rest called to me, lured me, implored me to seek it further. But I monitored instead. I watched and looked. I turned my head in fitful starts, enough to draw the attention of the others sitting near me. I settled. I monitored. I relaxed. And, I slept.

Jarred awake once again, another three minutes had passed but this one seemed like much longer than the clock would identify. Movement was around me, more people had entered the park. I watched as the boys launched themselves into the first of what would be many slides. I felt the darkness

still lurking just beyond my wakeful protests. Thus, I took the extreme measure of availing myself to the Dippin’ Dots stand and consuming the sweet flavored ice cream dots in a torrid manner.

I must have appeared as a horror show to the more socially conscious of my neighbors, as I allowed melted ice cream to run down my face and cheeks in an open display of teen waterpark dad-hood. It only briefly occurred to me that I must have resembled one of the very toddlers that I had been watching earlier as they also wore their Dippin’ Dots proudly upon their cheeks. I was the envy of the toddler dads and the pariah of all others. Momentarily, I locked eyes with a precocious two-year old boy, also devouring ice cream, and for a brief moment, we understood each other. This is the teen dad waterpark life.

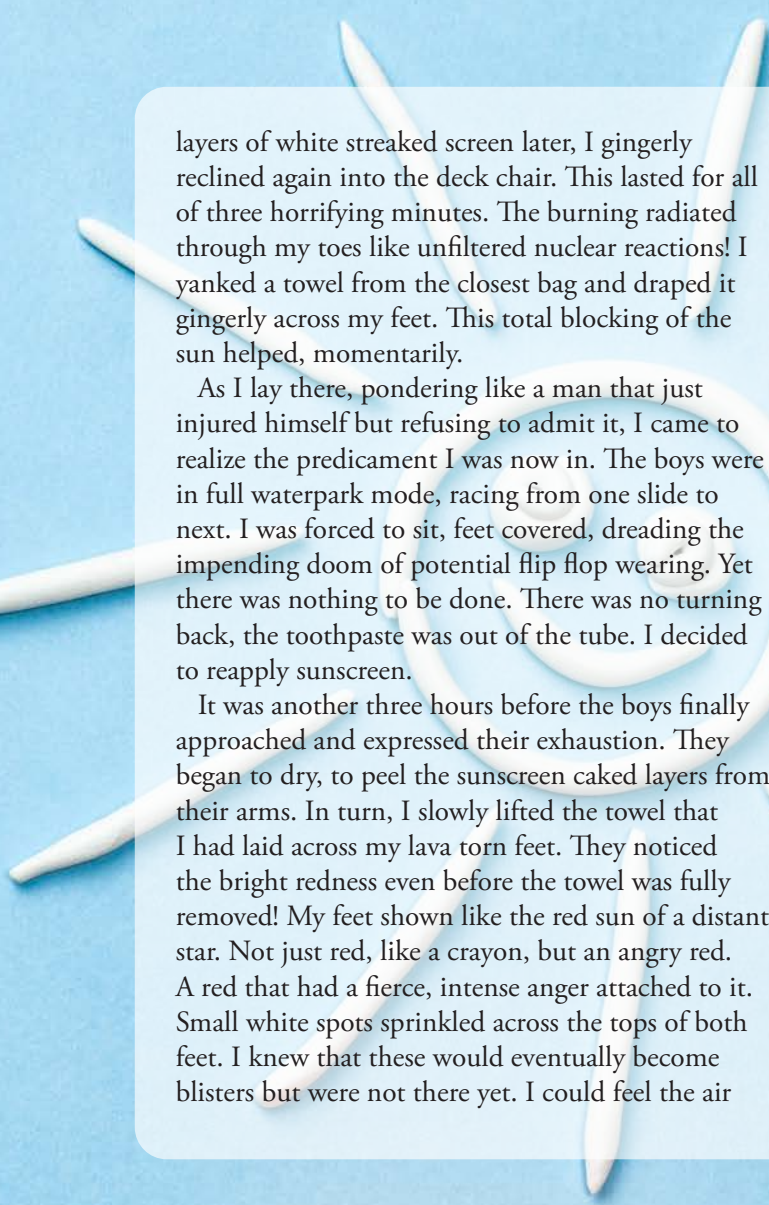
After the Dippin’ Dots debacle, I once again settled into my monitoring routine. Unfortunately, I also settled back into my narcolepsy as well. As the boys came and sat beside to consume their chili dogs, I dropped into a deeper slumber. As the boys waited for their food to settle before venturing back into the depths of the watery world, I slept. The sun made its normal route across the sky. Shadows changed, moved. No longer were we in the shade of the largest slide. By noon we were face to face with the blazing rays of the nuclear beast.

I was awakened as the boys began to stir in signal of a return to action. But, it was not the stirring that prompted my wakefulness. It was, instead, a deep fire, like a grease burn, that was radiating from the tops of my toes! I jolted in looking for the cause of the burning sensation. I enquired of the boys if they had dropped chili on me, which they both denied. Inspecting my feet, I found them to be a brilliant white, almost supernatural.

Gingerly, I probed my toes with my fingers and found them to be scalding hot to the touch and increasingly painful! And then, it finally dawned upon me, I had failed to account for my feet with the sunscreen! I had been laying all morning, hours, exposed to the dreaded heat of the passing sun. No sunscreen, just the passing shade of a slide had been my protection. My feet were on fire!

Slathering the sunscreen over the now blistering feet, I knew it to be too little, too late. Yet, I persisted in the application and reapplication. Four





layers of white streaked screen later, I gingerly reclined again into the deck chair. This lasted for all of three horrifying minutes. The burning radiated through my toes like unfiltered nuclear reactions! I yanked a towel from the closest bag and draped it gingerly across my feet. This total blocking of the sun helped, momentarily.

As I lay there, pondering like a man that just injured himself but refusing to admit it, I came to realize the predicament I was now in. The boys were in full waterpark mode, racing from one slide to next. I was forced to sit, feet covered, dreading the impending doom of potential flip flop wearing. Yet there was nothing to be done. There was no turning back, the toothpaste was out of the tube. I decided to reapply sunscreen.

It was another three hours before the boys finally approached and expressed their exhaustion. They began to dry, to peel the sunscreen caked layers from their arms. In turn, I slowly lifted the towel that I had laid across my lava torn feet. They noticed the bright redness even before the towel was fully removed! My feet shown like the red sun of a distant star. Not just red, like a crayon, but an angry red. A red that had a fierce, intense anger attached to it. Small white spots sprinkled across the tops of both feet. I knew that these would eventually become blisters but were not there yet. I could feel the air

touching the skin, knife like in its cutting.

I slung my feet to the side and boldly slipped on the flip flops I had worn to the park. As the faux leather straps touched the tops of the feet, I was bend almost double from the reactionary sharp nerves. At this, the lads showed both incredible concern and hardly contained laughter.

We stood. Taking each step as if it would be my last, we journeyed the long walk to the very back of the parking lot. Each step was a new sensation of rawness, tenderness. Each flop of the flip jarred the raw toes. This was when I learned something new, it is impossible to limp with both feet! However, I was making a grand gesture of trying.

Exiting the water park, I saw the same Dippin' Dot covered child as he sprinted past me in what had to be another sugar rush. I was infinitely jealous! Not of the youth, the parents, or anything else, just his ability to walk. All because a toddler waterpark dad remembered the sunscreen. Always remember the sunscreen!

### *Epilogue:*

*After a bottle and half of sun burn lotion, I was able to recover over the course of a week with minimal blistering or pain. It was a lesson learned and never repeated. (Applying sunscreen liberally across my brow.)*



sun  
screen



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# FINANCIAL FOCUS

## *How to be a good money manager in retirement*

If you reach retirement with a significant amount of assets, you've done a great job of saving and investing. But now comes another challenge – making that money last.

You might think that this task, as important as it is, won't be as hard as accumulating the money in the first place. Yet, a sizable number of people have reached a different conclusion. In fact, 36% of retirees say managing money in retirement is more confusing than saving for retirement, and 56% say they wish they had budgeted for more unexpected expenses in retirement, according to the Edward Jones/Age Wave Four Pillars of the New Retirement study.

What steps can you take to help you become an effective money manager during your retirement years? Here are a few to consider:

- Set your goals. Your money management needs will certainly depend, to some extent, on what your goals are for the coming years. Will you travel extensively? Stay close to home and pursue your hobbies? Or maybe even open a small business? Once you identify your vision for retirement, you can estimate how much it will cost, which will then dictate much of your spending and saving needs.
- Stick to a budget. If you've followed a budget throughout your working years, there's no reason to stop now – in fact, budgeting may be even more essential when you retire. Of course, you don't necessarily want to force yourself to be as frugal as possible – after all, you worked hard, saved and invested so you can enjoy a comfortable retirement lifestyle. Look for reasonable cost-cutting opportunities, such as eating out less often or eliminating streaming services you don't use.
- Don't underestimate health care costs. Even when you're on Medicare and pay for supplemental insurance, health care costs could still be one of your biggest expenses during retirement.

Initially, budgeting for \$4,500 to \$6,500 per person annually may be a good starting point for traditional health care expenses in retirement. However, depending on your health, prescription drug usage and other factors, your costs could be higher or lower. And you may also want to estimate long-term care expenses as part of your plan.

- Look for senior discounts. Once you're a senior, you may be able to find discounts on a wide range of items and activities, such as movies, transportation, groceries, gym memberships and more. By taking advantage of these discounts, you can save a surprising amount of money and ease pressure on your cash flow.
- Establish a sustainable withdrawal strategy. For decades, you've been putting money into your IRA and 401(k). But once you're retired, you will likely need to start taking withdrawals from these accounts. It's essential that you don't withdraw so much early in your retirement that you eventually run the risk of outliving your money. You may want to work with a financial professional, who can analyze your entire situation – assets, expenses, lifestyle, expected longevity, etc. – and recommend a sustainable withdrawal rate. Keep in mind that once you turn 72, you may be required to take out a certain amount each year from your 401(k) and your traditional IRA, so you'll want to incorporate these withdrawals into your overall income strategy.

Do whatever it takes to become a good money manager during retirement. You'll find that it's well worth the effort.

*Provided By*

*Frank Conrad, Financial Advisor  
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# *Bountiful Bookstore Brings Blessings*

By Enola Gay Mathews

Despite the fact that I work two doors down from her bookstore on Main Street, I almost never see Colleen Hoover in person. So, it was a thrill when she invited me to the Bookworm Box for some news about the next phase of her million-dollar charity. We share the scoop on this Hopkins County woman and her amazing writing journey for readers of the Down Home East Texas magazine and for listeners of the Down Home Today podcast by the Sulphur Springs News-Telegram.

**Enola:** Colleen, your bookstore, The Bookworm Box, has long been a bright spot on Main Street and a beehive of activity. What place does it hold in your book career?

**Colleen Hoover:** This specialty bookstore in downtown Sulphur Springs is one of the small running parts of my book business, but it's been a huge part of the plan. My sisters and I started The Bookworm Box in 2015 as a place to sell signed books, and to box and ship them as a charity subscription service. We had no idea that orders would grow as fast as they did, or that fiction-loving people would come from all over the world to visit this unique bookstore! Every book we placed on our shelves was donated to us by the authors, and when we sell them, usually 2,000 boxes per month, the money goes to our charity. Through it, we've donated over a million dollars to select non-profits like crisis centers, legal defense aid and education funds. But we've ended the shipping portion and now we're shutting the bookstore doors on Saturday, June 3, 2023, to head in a different direction. If you want to come and see me and The Bookworm Box, please come before then!

**EGM:** Tell me if this is an urban myth or what, but I hear that your artistic career actually began across the

street at the Sulphur Springs Main Street Theater, but not on stage.

**CH:** That's true! Actually, my middle child was seven at the time and had been cast in a play. We'd go to the theater for rehearsals after I got off work. So, all summer he'd rehearse, and I'd be sitting out there kind of bored. So, I started writing creatively, like 3-4 hours each night. I never expected it to turn into anything, but it did. A few months later, it became the completed novel, *Slammed* — that was my first book. Then, it became a 3-book series.

**EGM:** So, more than 10 life-changing years later, who is Colleen Hoover now? What hats does she wear?

**CH:** Well, I'm a mom, a wife, a daughter, a sister, — and all that comes first in my life! I also write, travel, and sign books; and we operate this growing charity. Another part is an enormous book-signing convention, *Book Bonanza*, held every June at the Gaylord Texan in Grapevine. I work with three different publishers, and I have five books due [she laughs] over the next two years! So, I have to get busy!

**EGM:** Do you call yourself a writer or an author?

**CH:** I'm a writer. You know, the publishing world now is crazy, with so many different ways to get your book out there. I started out my career self-publishing, and now 22 novels later, I don't feel any more or less of a writer than I did when I started. So, I think you call yourself what you want to. But 'author' sounds stuffy, so, I still say writer.

**EGM:** Being born the same year that self-publishing began with Desktop, then when Amazon opened Kindle



Direct self-publishing for writers in 2007, you never really experienced the traditional publishing-house domain, did you?

**CH:** No, I didn't. In fact, I had no idea even about self-publishing platforms until I wrote my first book in 2011; and, the reason I found out then, was that I was trying to put my first story as a Word doc onto a Kindle for my Grandmother to read! So, no, I never even tried a publishing house then. Actually, I didn't even think I'd written, you know, like a real book! I just did it for fun. My career was in social work, and that's what I was going to do for the rest of my life. I also knew I couldn't raise three kids or pay my bills as a writer, averaging something like \$10,000 a year. So, when the book actually started making money, I kept working. Even when I first hit the New York Times Bestseller list, I hadn't even quit my job. My very supportive husband said, "Hey, give it a try! If it doesn't work out, you can always go back to working for the state!" So, it's still working out. I sell about 50,000 copies a week on average. I've had consistent years on "the list" and that's been insanely amazing, but somehow, I'm still waiting for them to come and say they made a mistake or counted wrong! [laughter]

**EGM:** Let's go back to 2011. Did your identity change from 'social worker' to 'writer of saucy fiction' overnight?

**CH:** For me, it did happen very quickly. It really was overnight. I do feel like luck and timing played into it too, because if I wrote that book now, it would probably

get lost in the nether. And, I really don't have a set genre. I write whatever I'm in the mood to write. Sometimes, I'll be halfway through writing a book, and my publisher will ask what genre it is. I'll say, "I just don't know!" I'm not sure yet if I'm going to kill them all off, or if there's going to be ghosts, or what will break out! It's usually an I-have-to- finish-the-book-then- figure-out-what-I-just-wrote kind of thing.

**EGM:** Tell us about your most current book.

**CH:** "Gee, I'd have to think! I don't even know which one is considered my most current. I have some self-published books that have been re-published traditionally. My most recent book was *It Starts With Us* in October 2022, and I've not written since then. It's the sequel to my most popular book, *It Ends With Us*. I have unfinished books I've started. I've kind of been in limbo, because we're in the process of moving, and I don't really have an office right now.

**EGM:** Is it true that some writers have to sit in a specific place or space to write?

**CH:** Yeah, I'm like that. I tend to wherever I start a book, that's where I need to be to end the book. If I start one in my home office, then, that's where the mood for that book is. That's part of the reason I'm kind of stuck right now.

**EGM:** Do you want to tell us about the house? **CH:** Yeah! We're moving out to the lake, into the house that



was once my dream house. We used to live down the road from it, and I'd see it and think, oh wouldn't that be nice! And now I'm buying it!

**EGM:** Do you still do book signings? **CH:** Yes, every time I have a book release. But post-COVID, I finally put my health first, and that's been good for me and my family. I love book signings and I can't wait to get back into that. I just need to write a book first.

**EGM:** The first time I interviewed you, your first book was just out, and you seemed so wide-eyed and untouched by all that was happening. That interview is a great memory.

**CH:** Well, thank you. Yes, I was so excited that you'd want to interview me! The compliments I get saying that I haven't changed a bit make me glad. Our family is close and we're just as happy now as when we were living in our trailer at Saltillo. Success can affect people in negative ways, you know, but it hasn't for us, and I'm grateful for that. Hearing "I wasn't a reader until I picked up your books" is something that makes me smile.

**EGM:** What's on the drafting table now for Colleen Hoover?

**CH:** Getting moved. Getting back into writing again. I'm ready. I've started a thriller, and I'm excited to give that to the readers, especially Verity fans.

**EGM:** Besides writing bestseller books, what's another of your interesting idiosyncrasies?

**CH:** I have a talent for predicting the plots of movies! I've spoiled the show for some people who normally love me! But because of that, I'd also like to try my hand at screenwriting someday, like writing stories in the screenplay medium.

**EGM:** You've always been a reader. What are some of your favorite reads now?

**CH:** I like Tammara Webber, Shanora Williams' suspense novels and Kennedy Ryan's romance novels. Because the publishing industry boomed during COVID, books and reading have just blown up and become huge; and to me, that's the most wonderful happening in this decade, so far!

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