



SPECIAL REPORT **RULEVILLE**





Where Community Involvement Makes it All Happen

Small town continues to thrive

By Greta Sharp • Photography by Loyd McDowell

Don't let Ruleville's size fool you. This small Delta town displays more enthusiasm than cities five times its size. Residents are committed to Ruleville, supporting community projects and funding initiatives to ensure its growth and success. This is a town of doers, involved citizens determined to see Ruleville prosper.

With the Highway 8 four-lane project complete, Alderman-At-Large and Executive Director of North Sunflower Medical Center Billy Marlow says the benefits to Ruleville are numerous. As approximately half of the medical center's 650 employees live in Cleveland, the drive is much more pleasant now, he says.

It's also a boost to the region's economy. "Our payroll is \$30,000,000 annually, and when dollars are spent in a particular area, it turns over three to five times before it leaves the area," Marlow explains.

He also expects at least one strip mall to be built this summer, thanks to interest from outside retail sources, as well as new residential construction.

The economic powerhouse that is North Sunflower Medical Center recently named a new CEO. Sam Miller joined the hospital staff 15 years ago as a part-time employee, drawn by the feeling of welcome.

"The priority this year is to continue the mission of being a

strong community health system with appropriate amounts of new technology and a deep commitment to maintaining a well-trained customer service-oriented team," says Miller. "We have added several new primary care physicians to our team and will support their efforts with additional technology and specialty physician services, allowing patients an opportunity to stay in the Delta."

Director of Community Relations Robyn Marlow says the leaders at the medical center have worked to grow specialist and outpatient services over the last ten years. "North Sunflower Medical Center's goal is to become the health care hub of the Mississippi Delta," she adds.

Ruleville and the medical center have grown together, offering jobs, new business opportunities, housing and family activities, such as The Great Ruleville Roast & Run. "We have welcomed eight medical buildings to downtown Ruleville, along with a new restaurant, additions to Planters Bank & Trust Company and improvements to Rule Park,"

Marlow notes.

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The Sunflower Rural Health Clinic recently welcomed two newly-graduated doctors to its team. The clinic added 5,000 square feet to accommodate the new doctors, as well as the anticipated increase in patients. The remodeling of the main lobby will also help handle the increased patient count. "This will also provide additional privacy, and improve the patient flow throughout the clinic," says Practice Manager Lena Miller Graves.





The clinic welcomes pediatrician Dr. Sallyann Ganpot in April. “This is a brand new opportunity for North Sunflower, to offer pediatric services to our community and the surrounding areas,” says Graves. She expects to see 20 to 30 children a day in the clinic, in addition to the 100 to 150

adult patients on weekdays.

Dr. Ganpot, who most recently saw patients at the Delta Health Center in Mound Bayou, was drawn to the spirit of community at the clinic. “The employees are always smiling; they are happy,” she says. “Even though they work hard, they

are not stressed.”

For Dr. Ganpot, the focus is on education, specifically educating patients how to take care of themselves, what the problem is and what caused it: “Educate your community, educate your parents, educate your kids about what is going on with

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them, what's happening with their bodies.” Ruleville's spirit of community is evident in the Ruleville Roast, the main project of the Ruleville Chamber of Commerce. The event supports downtown improvements and the historic train depot, which is owned by the chamber, as well as downtown median landscaping. Proceeds from last year's Ruleville Roast allowed the chamber to purchase new banners for the downtown area, says Chamber President Katherine Carver.

This year's Ruleville Roast is Sept. 23 and 24 in Rule Park with a theme of Red, White & BBQ. When the event started 11 years ago, there were six teams and one category: patio-style. Last year's event welcomed 35 teams. Several years ago, a second category was added, the challenger division, and 2016 brings a third category, pro level. "It takes us to the top level of barbeque competition," says Carver. "We would never be able to do this without our barbeque chair, Elise Jenkins."

Attendance is estimated at several thousand throughout the two-day event, and profits range from \$10,000 to \$20,000. "We spend a lot of our budget just making it a super weekend for everybody," says Carver. As the event grows, the chamber invests profits back into downtown improvement such as water, electricity and improvements to the existing facilities. "Those are big needs when you bring in that many people," says Carver.

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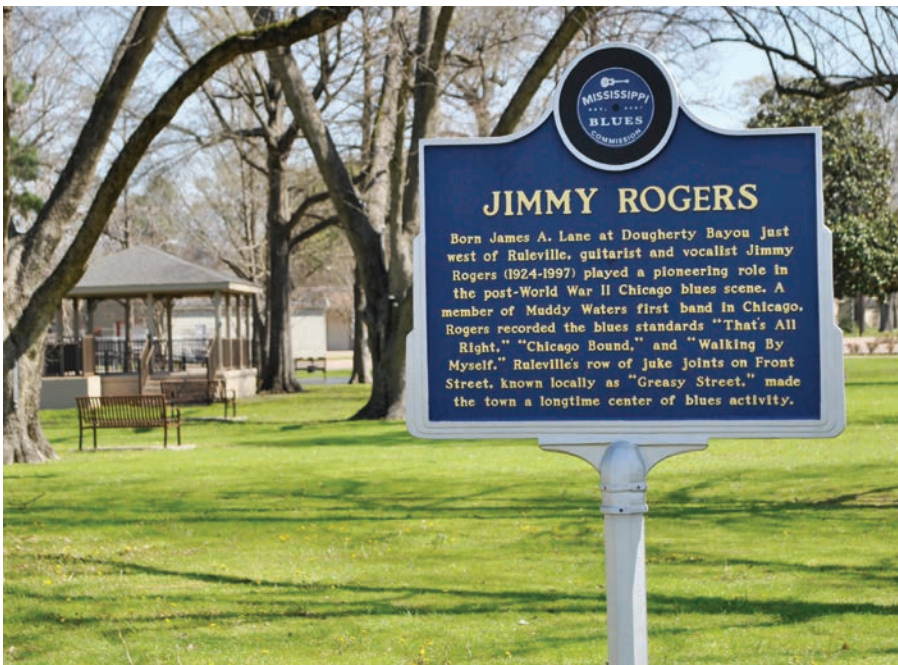


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its main fundraiser, an annual pancake breakfast, on the Saturday of the Ruleville Roast. Proceeds help provide one to two annual scholarships to North Sunflower Academy, says President Carmen Oguz, as well as sends two high school juniors to the Rotary youth leadership camp.

Additionally, the club provides and de-

livers dictionaries to all third-graders in the northern half of Sunflower County, to students at North Sunflower Academy, A.W. James Elementary in Drew and Ruleville Central Elementary, for a total of 135 dictionaries. "We also hand out Christmas dinners to families who might be financially less fortunate," says Oguz.

With such a strong commitment to the community, Oguz says the club is slated to receive a presidential citation this year.

Young people in Ruleville have a number of strong role models helping them chart their futures. Stephanie Edwards, director of respiratory care and sleep center at North Sunflower Medical Center, is involved with the Mentoring Program of Ruleville. It works with young people ages five to 18 who meet weekly at the Delmar Ave. Church of Christ.

The program works to empower youth, promote education, encourage young people to explore the world and then come back to the area, explains Edwards. Its events include everything from financial literacy to bowling to museum trips and visits to the White House.

Edwards organized a teen summit on April 2 at the church with keynote speaker Dr. Montrell Greene. She worked with local school counselors to promote the event, as well as the group, which is open to the entire community. "I just want them to know there's someone out there they can talk to," Edwards says.

For Ruleville Police Chief Ernie Scarber, the approach of summer means the



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Downtown Ruleville

Downtown Ruleville is a beautiful area to visit. Located around Rule Park downtown Ruleville offers shopping, banking, the Hollywood Museum, The Lion's Den (an African Animal Collection), three murals, a patriotic plaza and more. Downtown Ruleville is the home of Blues Trail markers for Greasy Street and Jimmy Rogers. Downtown Ruleville also offers our new walking trail complete with benches, lighting for nighttime walk/runs and well-manicured landscape.



Ruleville Roast and Run

The Great Ruleville Roast & Run is our annual fall festival organized by Ruleville Chamber of Commerce board members. The Great Ruleville Roast & Run is always held the last full weekend in September and offers live entertainment, BBQ contest kick off & fireworks Friday night & a 5K walk/run, pancake breakfast, arts/crafts, children's activities, classic car show, BBQ competition and more on Saturday. The Great Ruleville Roast & Run has grown each year and continues to be a great success for Ruleville. Come visit our small town and see why people in The Delta are saying, "Take ME To Ruleville!"



Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden

Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Garden is a wonderful place to visit. Fannie Lou Hamer was an American voting rights activist and civil rights leader. She was instrumental in organizing Mississippi Freedom Summer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and later became the Vice-Chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, attending the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in that capacity. Her plain-spoken manner and fervent belief in the Biblical righteousness of her cause gained her a reputation as an electrifying speaker and constant activist of civil rights.

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Greasy Street

Greasy Street is located downtown Ruleville and The Mississippi Blues Trail erected a marker in recognition of our historic Greasy Street. Front Street was the first commercially-developed zone in Ruleville, with its name stemming from its location fronting the railway line. The block was supposedly nicknamed "Greasy Street" because years ago café owners would throw old grease on the street to keep down the dust. Musicians would play on Saturday afternoons when the street was crowded with residents of nearby plantations who came to town to shop and relax.

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city's t-ball and baseball leagues will be starting soon. The program was revived several years ago by city leaders and interested citizens to give children some summer fun. Scarber and several of his officers assist as coaches, along with parents.

"That's how you make a better town, when you work with the community," he says. "We want to make Ruleville the best town in the Delta. We want to make our kids know there's a better future out there."

Scarber described community involvement as a cumulative effort, where better schools and less crime make an attractive community for interested businesses to locate, creating jobs for the kids growing up now. "If the community and police work together, it's a lot better for the city," he says.

Local businesses showed their support of the police department by helping purchase body cameras for officers. "That's how businesses in the community care about the department," Scarber says. "I'm so appreciative of them. Technology is so much a part of what we do on a daily basis now." Radio systems were upgraded as well. This year, Scarber hopes to add a few more officers and create an investigative department.

"We have a really great relationship with our mayor and chief of police," says Tollison Insurance owner Becky Tollison. "That's the downfall of a lot of small towns—there's not good leadership. Our little town is really special. The hospital has just blossomed.

The hospital keeps this little town going, but also the leaders." She sits on the hospital foundation board and is a chamber member.

Tollison says there's also a trend of individuals buying run-down homes, renovating and then selling them, often making very little profit, but attracting young people to Ruleville. "Everybody comes together; we just work together," she explains. "We all try to support each other, support local businesses."

Brian Street may live in Cleveland, but he's committed to Ruleville. An agent with Farm Bureau Insurance in Ruleville, he's a member of the chamber, is involved with Ruleville Roast, and is vice-president and president-elect of the rotary club.

"Most of the business owners in Ruleville would say everything they put out in effort they get back in return," Street explains. "You get that back tenfold with the loyalty of customers." In this town, Street says, people see the benefits of buying locally and keeping the money circulating in the community. "At the end of the day, that's what's keeping it going and driving our economy: continued spending in our economy."

Ruleville residents believe their involvement makes a difference. "We have always believed that Ruleville is great and can continue to be great," says Street. "It takes more than a group of people to stand around and watch. It takes people lacing up their boots and getting to work." **DBJ**



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