



The Quest Begins



Superintendent's Message

Dr. David Daigneault

It took more than four years to conceive, plan and build. Then finally, on February 1, 2023, Grenada School District opened Balloon Quest to the public.

How to describe Balloon Quest? It's a science learning center that transports kids out of the classroom, places them in immersive environments, and uses science lessons to guide them through one of the most unique school learning experiences you've ever seen. It's part interactive museum, part science lab, and part escape room.

And our students are loving it!

My wife Gail, who has served as Director of Communications for the district, dreamed up this project several years ago, and slowly but surely, she enlisted the help of our talented faculty, staff, and students to help realize the concept.

The goal was to improve science scores and reading comprehension in our district. We wanted to engage kids in such a way that they don't even realize they're learning. Our hunch was that their retention of standardized science concepts would improve, and their critical-thinking skills would be sharpened by this novel approach to education.

Grenada has built a tradition of innovative, hands-on learning, beginning in 1995 with the Kidzeum at Grenada Elementary's PreK-3 building. From there it spread to the 4-5 building with the Discovery Lab in 2000, and more recently, the Project Lead the Way program has infiltrated all schools with its project-based, real-world science and technology lessons.

We've seen the results of hands-on, experiential learning with higher test scores and graduation rates. With Balloon Quest, we're upping the ante.

We studied and adapted several innovative learning techniques to increase the effectiveness of our science lessons. We've tried to increase student retention of information by using unique, challenging, and fun experiences that will tie the science objectives to indelible memories.

To navigate the Quest, students assume the character of science apprentices for one of six professional teams — Aeronautical Engineers, Architects, Biologists, Cartographers, Chemists, and Geologists. Teams receive video communications from their team leader and written correspondence to help solve challenges specific to each discipline and ecosystem.

This story-driven approach activates student imaginations. It adds a sense of play to their problem solving, and instead of working individually to find the answer, they're able to collaborate as a team. Research has shown that team discussion inspires students to become emotionally invested in their lessons, which aids in retention.

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Balloon Quest Opens at Grenada School District



Photo by Michael Sanford

GSD Superintendent Dr. David Daigneault presided over the grand opening of Balloon Quest, the new interactive science museum housed in the National Guard Armory. Modeled on an escape room, the quest invites students to use their science knowledge to advance through six simulated ecosystems, including (photos below, top) the Grand Canyon and (bottom) Chakchiuma Swamp. Daigneault said no school in America has a learning facility quite like Balloon Quest.

By Jamie Kornegay
GSD Reporter

School administrators, teachers, students, staff, and members of the community helped celebrate the launch of Grenada School District's Balloon Quest on Wednesday, February 1. The new hands-on learning facility is a science-based, escape-room-style museum that elevates the district's commitment to innovative learning.

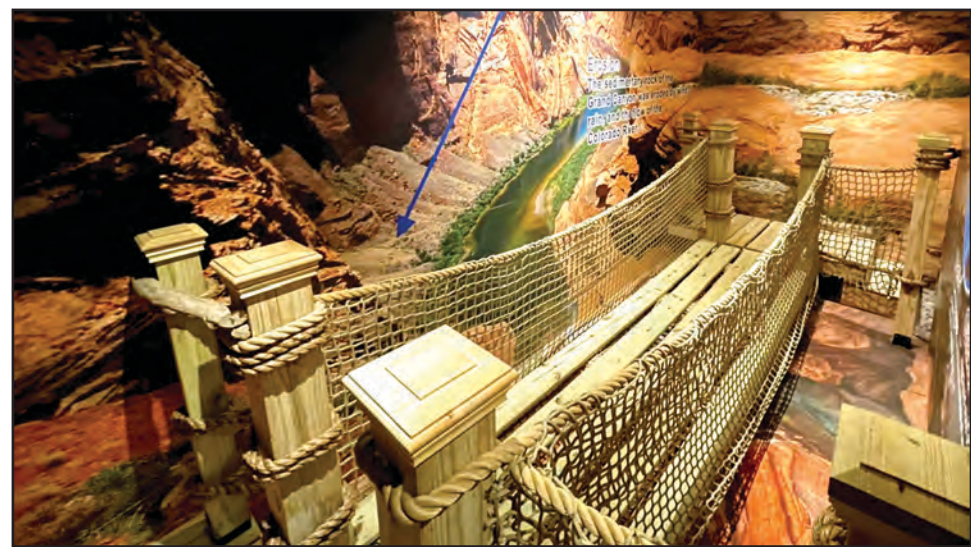
GSD Superintendent Dr. David Daigneault welcomed the crowd of approximately 75 guests to the grand opening event at the National Guard Armory, located on the Grenada High School campus. He described the museum's concept, a story-driven exhibit that simulates a hot-air balloon journey across six different rooms, or "ecosystems." Students divide into six teams to explore each room and solve a series of academic challenges to advance through the museum.

"When a student journeys through the quest in all six teams, almost 60 percent of science objectives from the state curriculum in grades K-8 are covered," Daigneault said. "That was the goal. To sneak up on them and not let kids know that we're teaching them."

Director Taylor Buchanan added, "Balloon Quest allows students the experience of traveling beyond Grenada County and aids in the expansion of knowledge and understanding outside of a traditional classroom setting."

The six quests take place in immersive environments that range from the local (Grenada Lake and Chakchiuma Swamp) to the exotic (Hawaii and the Grand Canyon).

Along the way, students use a variety of technological tools to increase their science understanding, reading comprehension, problem-solving capabilities,



and technological literacy.

Grenada Middle School Principal Marshall Whittemore portrays the team leader of the architects on a series of videos that students access in the Hawaii room. He attended the grand opening and said the best thing about the museum is the extent of useful information the students will receive. "I think that middle school kids will get a lot out of it," Whittemore said. "I think it will take them several trips going through to see everything because you see something new every time."

Daigneault told visitors they would be "amazed" by the construction of the museum and the attention to detail. He praised the school district staff members who collaborated on the project.

See "Balloon"
Continued on page 2



AmeriCorps Collects Food

Though AmeriCorps' main mandate is to tutor students in grades K-8 at Grenada School District, members actively serve at school and community events. Last year, members helped with community food drives. AmeriCorps member Chandra Burl (pictured), along with Amber and Willie Forrest, collected 10 boxes of non-perishable items donated by customers at Grocery Basket. They delivered the boxes to Barbara Benson at the Grenada Soup Kitchen while several other members helped pack holiday meals that were distributed to families in need. AmeriCorps is a federal grant program that is administered through Volunteer Mississippi in Jackson.



Photo by Pam Hubbard

“Balloon”

Continued from page 1

“We hired no outside consultants in this process,” Daigneault said. “All the way from the murals to the construction of the exhibits to the technology, everything was done by Grenada School District employees.”

In attendance were members of the maintenance team, which built the lavish ecosystems; the communications department, which created the videos that guide students through the museum; the technology department, which facilitated the interactive features and animatronics; and a committee of teachers and specialists who helped in curriculum content creation. The project also involved actors, musicians, graphic designers, and a sculptor who created select features of the exhibit.

Daigneault credited his wife, Gail Daigneault, with conceiving the idea and spearheading the project. “This was something that she worked on for years,” Daigneault said. “She can tell you, it took a real village to do this project.”

Daigneault encouraged community groups and even outside school districts to make reservations to see the museum and partake in the adventure.

“There is no other like it in the United States,” Daigneault said. “It’s a big deal, and I anticipate that people visiting from all over will want to come and see this.”

Reservations can be made by calling Taylor Buchanan at 662-307-4546 or emailing balloonquest2022@gmail.com

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4:00 1st Pitch Damien Winkles
1st Pitch Aiden Pounds
-Middle School Game Following-

5:00 1st Pitch JaDarius Nance
-JV Game Following-

6:00 Call Out & Walk of Champions
1st Pitch Rowan Golding
-Varsity Game Following-

Organ Donation Awareness Softball Game

February 28, 2023
Lady Charger Stadium

GMS game - 4:00 p.m.
1st Pitch- Bishop Tim Herrington
Balloon Release

JV game - 5:00 p.m.
1st Pitch- Rylee Murphree

Varsity game - 6:00 p.m.
Recognition of Living Donors, Donor Families, & Organ Recipients
1st Pitch- Devo Lancaster



Grenada Chargers vs. Cleveland Wolves

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New Chargers Football Coach Announced



Michael Fair was announced as the new head high school football coach for the Grenada Chargers at the school district's January board meeting. Fair, who leaves Lafayette High School with a winning record after seven seasons as head coach, will be joined in Grenada by his wife and three children.

By Jamie Kornegay
GSD Reporter

Michael Fair was announced as the new head high school football coach for the Grenada Chargers at the school

district's board meeting on January 17, 2023.

Fair replaces Ashley Kuhn, who retired as head of Grenada's football program after 12 years leading the program.

"We hired the right guy," said Lyle

Williams, Athletic Director for Grenada School District. “When we talked with administrators and coaches across the state, Michael Fair’s name continued to surface as ‘The Guy.’ He has a great reputation throughout the state.”

Coach Fair has served as head football coach at Lafayette High School in Oxford since 2016. He coached the team to a 58-29 record over the past seven seasons, including a 4A North State Championship and a State Championship in his first season as head coach.

sive run from 2001-2007 when the team earned five regional titles and four state championships.

At a press conference on Jan. 18, GSD Superintendent Dr. David Daigneault introduced Fair to the community. “When I talked to other superintendents and other people about Michael Fair, what they said was this guy is a great coach, but that’s not the best thing about him,” Daigneault said. “The best thing is, he is a great man and a great role model for our kids.”

Coach Fair, who met with the football team on his first official visit, said his in-

“The best thing is, he is a great man and a great role model for our kids.”

—Dr. David Daigneault

Before arriving at Lafayette, Fair coached two seasons at Senatobia (2014-15), turning a one-win season into ten wins by his second year. He also coached six seasons in Greenwood, where he led the Mustangs to the MAIS 3A Division II state championships in 2010.

After turning in an All-SEC performance on the field as a college athlete at Mississippi State, Fair started his coaching career as offensive line coach and then offensive coordinator at South Panola. He presided during an impres-

tentions are to get the players involved in the community and on campus, teaching them how to be role models for up-and-coming players.

“We’re gonna do all those things, but the one thing we’re gonna do is put out great husbands and great fathers,” Fair said. “That’s what gets me up in the morning. I’m excited because I get to use the game of football to teach a boy how to become a man. And if we do those things and do them like we’re supposed to, we’re gonna win some games along the way.”

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**SHUNTA NOEL
FROM GRENADA, MISS.**
*UM-Grenada Class of 2020
First grade teacher
at Grenada Elementary*

State Pre-K Collaboratives Mark 10 Years



(Photo left)
Four-year-old students in Grenada Elementary's Pre-K program (l to r) Penelope Harris, Cohen Spencer, Aubrey Brewer, and Owen Dukes participated in an art installation project to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of Mississippi's Early Learning Collaborative Act. The state-sponsored legislation, passed in 2013, helped establish Grenada's Learning Blocks program by funding a local community partnership between Grenada School District and Head Start. Each butterfly placed in the installation represents a student currently being served by Grenada's collaborative, including 100 at GES and 75 in Head Start.

By Jamie Kornegay
GSD Reporter

On January 24, public education advocacy group Mississippi First, along with 35 early learning collaboratives, pre-K champions, government officials, and the Mississippi Department of Education, celebrated 10 years of transformative high-quality pre-K in Mississippi.

This significant milestone was celebrated at the State Capitol. The event included a proclamation from the Governor, recognition of pre-K legislative leaders, and a public art installation representing more than 26,000 four-year-olds served in Mississippi over the last 10 years.

In addition to the event at the Capitol, each of the 35 early learning collaboratives

were enlisted to celebrate the milestone with their own art installation in their communities.

Grenada School District's Learning Blocks collaborative contributed to this statewide recognition by creating an art display in front of the PreK entrance at the back of the Red Top building. Their butterfly garden contains ornamental grasses as well as craft butterflies to represent 100 students at Grenada Elementary and 75 in Head Start who are currently being served by Grenada's collaborative.

The Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013 established state-funded pre-K in Mississippi. Through this program, local community partnerships known as early learning collaboratives (ELCs) offer families a high-quality, low- or no-cost pre-K option. ELCs can include school districts, local Head Starts, child

care centers, and/or private or parochial schools. ELCs are funded through state funds and local matching funds. Over the last 10 years, the state has invested \$70.3 million in early learning collaboratives. Today, 35 communities offer the program, and by 2023, 25% of four-year-olds will be served.

Mississippi is one of five states ranked first in the nation for state pre-K program quality. Annually, children in the program are twice as likely to be ready for kindergarten as the average Mississippi child.

Grenada's Early Learning Collaborative has two sites: Grenada Elementary School and Grenada Head Start. It has served 686 four-year-olds since its founding in 2017.

"We are so thankful to be a part of the early learning collaborative," said the

district's data analyst, Kim Ezelle, who works closely with the collaborative. "Because of this investment, we have been able to expand our early childhood education program to help our students build a strong foundation for their future."

In 2013, the state legislature put in a place a tax credit to encourage businesses and individuals to support the pre-K initiative in Mississippi. Individuals or corporations who contribute to support the local matching fund of an approved early learning collaborative (ELCs) may be eligible to receive a 1:1 state tax credit for the donated amount of up to \$1 million. To learn more, contact Kim Ezelle at kezelle@grenadak12.com

"Quest"

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We've also tried to engage their senses by incorporating various media into the exhibit. We adapted popular strategies from Disney World, including interactive quest games and augmented reality exhibits, to create a sense of wonder and ensure a deeper engagement than you'd find in a typical science museum.

We even borrowed one lesser-known trick that makes Disney World such a memorable experience — using site-specific odors, such as earth and honeysuckle in the swamp room. No other sense is more directly connected to associative learning and memory than smell, which has proven to have beneficial implications for education.

While Balloon Quest is a feast for the senses and a showcase for creativity, one of the things I'm most proud of is that this museum was completely created by workers in our district. We didn't hire a design firm to build this installation. We utilized our greatest asset — our people — from the maintenance team that built it, to the communications department that wrote and filmed the story elements, to the technology department that wired it up and made it an interactive world.

We appreciate the work of teachers

and specialists who designed the curriculum and the artists who created the murals and intricate sculptures. Teachers and students acted and lended their voices to the characters to guide participants along their quest. It took a team of approximately 50 people around the district to channel their distinct talents and imagination into this project, and you can feel it every step of the way.

Now that it's complete, we're excited to share Balloon Quest with the community — those who live here and those who plan to visit. We've also encouraged our education partners around the state to bring their students. (If you have a group in mind to attend, contact Balloon Quest at 662-307-4546 or email Balloonquest2022@gmail.com)

We hope that Balloon Quest is an experience that everyone in our community can be proud of, and we'll continue to work to improve and deepen the experience. Come fly with us!

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Landmark Realty Donation



(Front row, l to r) Linda Eaton and Beth Deloach of Grenada School District’s Special Education Department accept a donation from Landmark Realty at Grenada Middle School. The agency’s donation to special education teachers is part of the company’s initiative to invest back into the local schools and community. Landmark Realty agents and school administrators on hand to offer and receive the donation included (middle row, l to r) Mckenzie Spearman, Bonnie Hankins, Pamela Hardimon, Judy Lundy, Superintendent Dr. David Daigneault, Landmark owner Kevin Jackson, Deb Spier, Janet Kinard, (back, l to r) Pam McKay, Ray Branscome, Robin Lea, and GMS Principal Marshall Whittemore.

**By GSD Reporter
Jamie Kornegay**

Real estate agents from Landmark Realty in Grenada delivered a financial gift of \$500 to the Grenada School District’s Special Education Department.

The gift, intended to supplement supplies for special education teachers across the district, was part of a new initiative set forth by the agency’s owner, Kevin Jackson.

“In June of last year, I bought Landmark Realty with one goal in mind: to immerse the company in the community,” Jackson said. “We began brainstorming for the first project, and the school district was the logical choice.”

Jackson said he earned his bachelor’s degree in education, and though he has been out of the school system for 18 years, he knows the financial hurdles that schools and teachers face.

GSD Special Education Director

Aletha Simpson said she and her teachers had met to decide how the funds would be spent. “The financial gift is nice, but to be thought of and to be recognized is huge,” Simpson said. “It shows that our teachers and our students have value and merit.”

Jackson brought nine Landmark real estate agents to visit present checks to the administration at each school.

Simpson said the agents were excited to see the school and noticed many

changes since their last visit. “Some haven’t been to the high school since the lockers were removed and the renovations were done,” Simpson said. “As a result, they asked if they could come back for a tour because they realized things have changed and improved.”

Jackson said he hopes to bring his staff back for a tour of the district and its programs for Teacher Appreciation Month in April.

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GCTC Students Advance at SkillsUSA Competition



Open and Close Team Event - 1st Place
(back, l to r) Marlee Caswell, John Wortham, Tyler Wilson, Hunter Smith, Layla Snyder, (front, l to r) Moriah Calhoun and Harlie Calder



Auto Service Technician- 3rd Place
Adam Carter



Extemporaneous Speech- 3rd Place
Ricki Montgomery



Welding - 2nd Place
Logan Hentz

By Jamie Kornegay
GSD Reporter

Athletes, musicians, and all manner of performers and creators at Grenada High School enjoy the opportunity to showcase their skills at competitive events around the state and region.

Students enrolled at the Grenada Career and Technical Center now have a stage to demonstrate what they’ve learned and compete for cash awards at the SkillsUSA Championship Competition.

SkillsUSA — a national organization that brings together students, teachers, and industry — hosts regional, state and national events to showcase the best career and technical education students in the nation. Students receive honors and prizes for their excellence.

After many years dormant at Grenada, the competition program has been recharged under the guidance of GCTC Director Barry Rogers and Work-Based Learning instructor Gerald Simmons.

Simmons, along with teachers from GCTC, took students in various disciplines to compete at the regional meet,

hosted by Northwest Community College on January 26. Grenada competed in four areas and captured first-, second- and third-place honors in the events. The teams and individuals earned a chance to compete at the state level in March.

Welding instructor David Robinson was proud of his student, Logan Hentz, who earned second place in the welding competition. Welding competitors were presented project blueprints and asked to demonstrate three different processes — wire, flux cored wire, and shielded metal arc welding.

“Welding is always very competitive,” Robinson said. “There seems to be more students competing at that than other disciplines.”

Robinson said the competition combined regions I and II this year, which made Hentz’s placement all the more impressive. “There’s twice as many kids competing there as at other regional competitions, so to even get a student to place is a feat with that much competition.”

New automotive instructor Scottie Waldo brought members of his class to compete in automotive maintenance and light repair. Students took a written test and then diagnosed an actual automobile

problem.

“There were nine contestants in automotive, and only three fixed the problem with the vehicle,” Simmons said. “Adam Carter was one of those, and he’s in our automotive program. That’s pretty awesome.”

Simmons, who recently returned to GCTC after teaching automotive here from 1988-1999, said it was heartening to see Waldo come full circle. “I was teaching here when Scott placed first in state for automotive,” Simmons said. “I remember driving him to the nationals in Kansas City.”

Simmons added that winning at the SkillsUSA Championship is about more than prestige. Top honors earn money for college tuition. “We have auto manufacturers that want to hire those kids and pay for their schooling just so they can get that talent in their businesses.”

Even the procedural portions of the meet are up for competition. The GCTC’s Opening and Closing Ceremony Team won first place in their competition. The seven members demonstrated teamwork and professional presentation skills by conducting an open meeting with Robert’s Rules of Orders. They also presented the colors and the Pledge of

Allegiance.

Simmons praised the Opening and Closing team on their excellent showing. “They had only a few rehearsals to prepare, but they pulled it together and represented Grenada very well,” he said. “They were respectful, conducted themselves well on campus, and I was very impressed.”

Finally, student Ricki Montgomery placed third in Extemporaneous Speaking. “She was given a topic on sight and had to talk for five to seven minutes on that topic,” Simmons said.

The ten students from GCTC who placed at the regional competition now move on to the state meet in Jackson March 5-7. Students who place first at state are invited to compete at the national championships in Atlanta this June.

“Our students stepped up,” said Rogers. He also commended Simmons for advising students to such a fine showing in their first competition.

“We already have kids wanting to be a part of it,” Rogers said. “It’s going to be much bigger next year.”

EMI Staffing Visits GCTC

(Photo right)

EMI Staffing representatives Latoria Dorsey (far left) and Brandi Smith (far right) visited with advanced Grenada Career and Technical Center students (middle, l to r) Jayden Willis, Jayla Myers, Moriah Calhoun, and Quaniya Willis. The EMI staffers gave students career advice. They discussed different job opportunities available in Grenada County and shared tips for filling out applications. Students learned the value of job experience, as well as involvement in school activities and clubs, and they were shown how a properly crafted resume should look.



Photo by Meg Newcomb

Exploring the Solar System in GES 4-5 Discovery Lab



(l to r) Discovery Lab Director Devonn Tipton discusses planet rotation with fourth graders Adley Franklin and Waylon Elliott during their weekly class visit to GES 4-5’s innovative hands-on science lab.

By Jamie Kornegay
GSD Reporter

Students at Grenada Elementary 4-5 are studying the solar system this semester in their science classes. Once a week, students visit the Discovery Lab and put those lessons to the test in this popular hands-on science center.

Devonn Tipton presides over the Discovery Lab. He enjoys challenging fourth and fifth graders to solve science problems and work together on projects such as modeling the phases of the moon and

building model rockets sturdy enough to launch.

Maryan Hopper’s fourth-grade class recently paid their weekly visit to the Discovery Lab, where they learned to distinguish rotation — how a planet turns on its axis — and revolution — how a planet revolves around the sun.

Tipton challenged students to use basic supplies — including construction paper, scissors, and brad paper fasteners — to create an interactive model of the sun and inner planets to demonstrate rotation and revolution.

He reviewed the concepts, which they’d studied in their science classrooms, before giving the greenlight to begin. Tipton said he gives students the goal and their building materials but purposely withholds instructions for how to complete the project.

“I want them to think through the process rather than just tell them how to do it,” Tipton said. “At first, they freak out a little, and I like to let them do that. It starts stimulating those neurons and makes them say, ‘Okay, well, how *can* I do that?’”

Tipton said, “If you just give them the answer, that eliminates critical thinking, analytical thinking, or even creativity.”

Students worked together in groups of four as Tipton walked around the lab, stopping at each table to check on progress. Many groups were initially stuck, unsure of how to build an interactive model with such limited resources.

Tipton prompted them with questions, and soon the students’ eyes began to light up. In no time they were swapping ideas and cutting out circular planets. They used the paper fasteners to create an axis, which allowed the model planets to rotate, and ultimately fixed them to a paper arm which allowed the planets to revolve around the sun like hands on a clock.

The students conversed excitedly while they worked. They seemed to get a boost of confidence and energy from figuring out the solution themselves, and they were full of praise for their teacher.

“Discovery Lab is an awesome place,” said Waylon Elliott. “It beats every other activity.”

“We like learning about space,” Savannah Dungan said. “Especially with Mr. Tipton because he makes it fun.”

“Mr. Tipton is always acting crazy and pretending like he’s somebody else,” said Skylar Gibson. “I can’t wait til fifth grade to learn more.”

Tipton recently adapted the rotation-revolution project for his fifth graders. Students were required to program small toy robots to alternately rotate and revolve around the sun on the solar system diagram patched to the floor.

“When I went around to each group and asked their planet’s name, only the robot could answer,” Tipton said. “So they would press the voice command on the robot, and the robot would repeat the name of each group. So I think that was a creative experience for them to hear the robot say their names and to use that technology for a little bit of fun and learning.”

Tipton said the unique environment makes the Discovery Lab such a popular experience. He also challenges students a little further and gives them the opportunity to talk and discuss more with one another, even debate opinions on how a project should be completed.

“I randomize where they sit so they’re not working with their best friends but maybe people they don’t often talk to,” Tipton said. “I encourage communicating and collaborating with their classmates because that’s what they’ll have to do in the real world as adults.”

He added, “Getting these kids prepared for the real world is a big reason why we have Discovery Lab.”

The approach seems to be working. The Discovery Lab repeatedly earns GES 4-5 recognition as a Project Lead the Way School of Distinction for its innovative use of science curriculum.

Miss Mississippi Visits GES PreK-3



(Photo bottom left) Emmie Perkins (right), the Hattiesburg native who was crowned Miss Mississippi in 2022, visited Grenada Elementary School PreK-3 to promote the healing power of music through her initiative, “Music is Medicine.” She spoke with students and signed autographs, including this one for Laura Felicity Wood (left).

(Photo top) Perkins aspired to reach as many children as possible with her message, and she is the first Miss Mississippi to visit all 82 counties in the state during her term.

Heart Disease Top Killer in Mississippi Smoking is Major Contributor

According to the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) Office of Vital records, in 2021 more Mississippians died of heart disease than cancer and diabetes combined. This trend has been holding steady for years. Mississippi also has some of the highest rates of smoking in the nation. Smoking cigarettes in any amount contributes to heart disease.

Amy Winter, the Director of the Office of Tobacco control at MSDH, reports that African American males are disproportionately affected by heart disease as well as tobacco use. The only tobacco flavor additive allowed by the FDA is menthol, which masks the harsh effects of tobacco. Additionally, menthol interacts with chemicals in the brain, making it more addictive. African –Americans are among the highest menthol cigarette smokers in Mississippi.

“Through the Ready. Set. Quit

program, the Office of Tobacco Control at the Mississippi State Department of Health stands ready to serve Mississippians who want to quit,” said Sue Mashburne, Director of the Mississippi Tobacco-Free Coalition of Grenada, Yalobusha, and Calhoun Counties. “We can provide you with the tools and support you need to find success. We are here to help you quit and to help you stay smoke free.”

The Office of Tobacco Control at MSDH encourages all Mississippians to engage in heart healthy behavior. Eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly, and quitting smoking will lower your risk of heart disease.

For information about the dangers of cigarettes, visit www.healthmys.com/tobacco. For help with quitting visit www.quitlinems.com, or call the Mississippi Tobacco Quitline at 1-800-QUIT-NOW.

21st Century Ukulele Lessons

By Jamie Kornegay
GSD Reporter

The robust music program at Grenada Elementary continues to expand with after-school ukulele classes offered through 21st Century skills program.

Last year, music teacher Dianna Burt introduced ukulele to second and third graders at the Red Top as part of the 21st Century classes. She teaches 15 students after school every Tuesday, incorporating ukulele as well as cardio drumming and reinforcing musical concepts from her class during the school day.

“One reason that I really prefer ukulele as opposed to something like a recorder, is that students are able to sing and play,” Burt said. “We are able to work on multiple musical skills at once. Typically when learning a song on ukulele, we will first learn how to sing it. Once students know how to sing it, then we work on adding our chords and strumming patterns.”

Burt said she also picked ukulele because the instrument provides almost immediate reward for the player. “It’s very beginner-friendly,” she said. “Students can learn one chord and be able to play a variety of songs. This helps tremendously with a student’s confidence and motivation.”

Once students move on to fourth grade, they will have the opportunity to keep up their playing under the instruction of GES 4-5’s music teacher Amy Killebrew, who is in the midst of her second year teaching ukulele in the Green Top’s 21st Century program.

Killebrew meets with 13 students on Thursday afternoons and teaches them the basics of the instruments. “I start out teaching them how to tune the instruments, which they’re able to take home and practice,” Killebrew said. “Then we learn new chords each week. They’ve really picked up on it well.”

Killebrew also directs the Pizzazz Show Choir but says none of her ukulele students are from the group. She said there is a diverse mix of students from a variety of learning levels. None had a musical background, and there was no criteria for enrollment.

“The draw is the idea of getting to play an instrument,” Killebrew said. “Some have never held an instrument, much less learned to play one. It’s good preparation if they want to play guitar later on. The uke was designed so that it would be small enough for young fingers to play, and then they could grow into playing guitar.”

Killebrew said her group will have their first public performance this spring as part of the Pizzazz seasonal show. She is also planning a ukulele summer camp, co-sponsored with Charlie Worsham’s Follow Your Heart Arts program, which donates ukuleles from Fender.

“Follow Your Heart provides some measure of support, but the real lifting comes from those teachers,” said Sherry Worsham, a coordinator with the arts program.

Worsham likes to call the ukuleles “tiny guitars” because it’s an extension of Follow Your Heart’s after-school guitar program, which is set to kick off at Grenada Middle School this semester under



Students at Grenada Elementary enjoy afternoon ukulele lessons as part of the after-school skills classes funded by the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Center Grant. (Top photo) Grenada Elementary 4-5’s class, which is co-sponsored by Follow Your Heart Arts, includes (front row, l to r) Caylee Hemphill, Dominique Slay, Jacob Miller, Deanna Ross, (back row, l to r) Amina Lodge, Jace Hodges, Jenna Harris, instructor Amy Killebrew, Addison Money, Aliyah Covington, and Sharod Davis. A class of second and third graders at GES PreK-3 includes (bottom photo, bottom row, l to r) instructor Dianna Burt, Jaelyn Fisher, Debra Hearn, Blakely Powell, Emmalyn Moore, (middle row, l to r) Journey King, Braelyn Powell, Saphari Norman, Adrian Cox, Noah Purvis, and (top row) Chloe Cotton.



the instruction of Terry Lyon. “We just want guitars to be an option for students in this area,” Worsham said.

Burt and Killebrew both believe that musical education has the potential to help kids not only academically but personally too.

“Learning a musical instrument works several areas of the brain, which can help with memory, attention, focus, and creativity,” said Burt. “It is a great way to build friendships. It is a fantastic creative outlet and stress reliever, and it helps with self-discipline and time-management skills. Students learn to take responsibility for their playing and realize that their ability to play is a direct result of the practice and effort put in.”

Killebrew added, “Music has been known to increase test scores and helps students who may not have a talent for sports. That’s a good thing we’re doing here, giving kids another outlet, whether it’s vocal or instrumental music.”

Both teachers agreed that it was rewarding to work in a school district that recognized the importance of education

and continues to expand those opportunities for students.

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