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Local business defies the odds of what it means to be a baker

By Kyla Woodard
kyla@claytodayonline.com

OAKLEAF — In a society where women are predominantly the ones by the oven, two men are aiming to turn that stigma around one cookie at a time.

John Odom and Albert Walker own Tough Guys Cookies and Sweets, a bakery on Hollyberry Lane. The shop is truly a sweet spot, offering cookies, pralines, peanut brittle, milkshakes, gummy bears and more.

With tedious hands, the two work together, with a team of employees, to bake every cookie from scratch and defy the odds of an unspoken tradition.

"Everybody can bake," Odom said. "It's not just for women."

Odom said his grandmother had taught him how to bake but never thought it would become his true calling.

Working for the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, Odom said the corporate world was extremely stressful. And he needed something to relax.

Just for fun, he began baking cookies for his colleagues. But it wasn't what he expected.

"I baked them, and they came out awful," Odom said "so, I felt defeated."

He didn't let that stop him. It challenged

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Clay's future trash company fired Aug. 20 by St. Johns Board of County Commissioners

The trash collection company that will start curbside service in Clay County on Oct. 1 was fired in St. Johns County on Tuesday after receiving more than 5,000

complaints for missed pickups just 20 days into its \$28.2 million first-year contract.

The St. Johns board voted unanimously to terminate FCC Environmental and issued a state of emergency to pick up yard waste by this Sunday.

FCC Chief Executive Officer Dan Brazil asked the commissioners on Monday to give his company more time to resolve

some technology issues that caused the delays. A day later, commissioners had heard enough.

The Clay County Board of Commissioners used Facebook to assure residents that it has been working with FCC Environmental to ensure a smooth transition on Oct. 1 by posting:

"The county is working closely with

FCC Environmental to ensure the transition to the new garbage and yard waste service is done to the level we all expect. As we go through the next several weeks, we will continue to work closely with FCC to make sure all of the steps are completed within the transition plan ahead of the Oct. 1 start date."

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Clay Schools earn fifth 'A' in a row from Department of Education

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

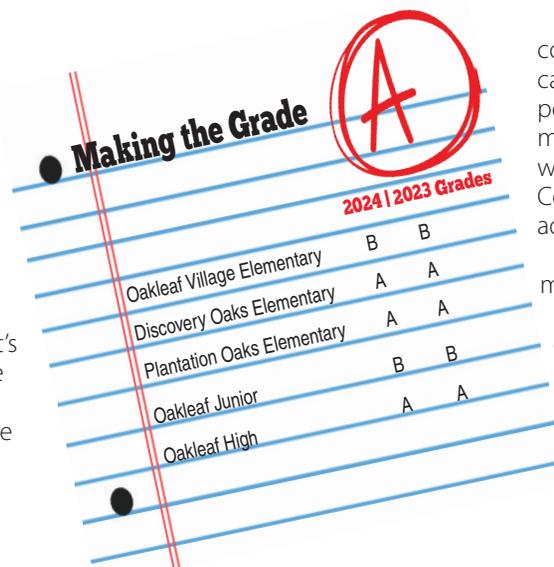
CLAY COUNTY – After receiving a 'B' grade from the Florida Department of Education for the 2016 and 2017 school years, the long-range goal for the Clay County District Schools wasn't for the students to buy into the curriculum but for the students to buy into themselves.

It was a meticulous process, one that required everyone to be involved. By tweaking the ideology, the District changed its culture and its grades. Students no longer hope to hope to achieve excellence. They demanded it.

"It takes everyone, every single person on our campus," said Lake Asbury Junior

High Principal Lydia Creel. "None of us do this in isolation – our staff, including support staff, the custodians, cafeteria workers, teachers, and coaches. It includes everyone in guidance. We're fortunate. We just try to be consistent in the messaging. The students come first, and we're making sure that we're trying to be transparent and encourage teamwork."

Creel's school was one of four in the District that received a "C" in 2016. Now, it's one of 23 from Clay County that the state graded as an 'A' school on Wednesday, July 24. The others to make the two-grade improvements were Middleburg High, S. Bryan Jennings and McRae elementary schools.



"What the data says to me is there's a commitment from a variety of people because education is a team sport," said Superintendent David Broskie. "First and foremost, it's the teachers in the classroom that work tirelessly each and every day in Clay County. But it's also the support staff, the administrators, the students

themselves, their parents and the community at large.

"I'm looking forward to even greater success. There's still more work to be done. Whenever you're not first, more work must be done. I'm excited about the challenges the future brings."

The report from FDE is the fifth consecutive time Clay schools have

SEE GRADE, 4

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Grade

from page 3

received an 'A' grade in six years. The District didn't receive a grade during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019.

Clay County schools also received 17 'B' and six 'C' grades. Eight schools improved their grades compared to 2023, including Florida Youth ChalleNge, which jumped from a 'D' to a 'B'. Four schools dropped a grade level.

Middleburg High opened in 1980. this year's 'A' was just the third in 44 years.

"But it's our second in a row," Principal Martin Aftuck said.

The only other principal to receive an 'A' grade was Broskie in 2011.

Although the county has nearly 40,000 students, Jennings Elementary Principal Elise Taylor said lesson plans contain basic core information, but they now are tailored to a student's needs. She said the cookie-cutter method of forcing students to conform to one teaching style is outdated and ineffective.

By finding a student's interests and making the work challenging, there's a greater chance to keep a child engaged.

"We're all working in the same direction, then just really committing to that and digging deep and seeing what do we need to change in terms of how we deliver our instruction, as well as what else do our students need in addition to that academic instruction," she said. "They have dug in deep and locked arms with those students

to close achievement gaps and raise proficiency levels year after year.

"We're constantly asking ourselves, 'What can we do better for our kids? How can we make them more successful? Ultimately, that's why we're here.'"

According to FDE, 64% of the schools in Florida received an 'A' or 'B' grade. In Clay, that figure was 87%. Also, Broskie said the District's seventh-grade students finished No. 1 in the state in civics and the District finished third overall in civics for all grades. Clay County also finished fourth overall in U.S. history, fourth in English and 11th in math and science. The District's eighth graders were fifth in the state in science and sixth in biology.

"Our District has scored above the state average in every grade and level," Broskie said. "The student has to be actively engaged in learning to learn."

That's been a model for success at McRae Elementary.

Despite being in one of the county's most remote and rural areas, McRae Principal Tammy Winkler's staff and her students did remarkable work. They set aside their socioeconomic status and concentrated on the building blocks that someday could enrich some of their lives.

As one of 19 Title 1 schools, the Mavericks didn't let their limited resources affect their abilities to excel in the classroom. They were one of three Title 1 schools to earn an 'A.' Moreover, it's what Winkler wants her students to expect of themselves.

"We discuss the best practices for teaching the best effective practices such as stu-



Lydia Creel

Lake Asbury Junior High Principal Lydia Creel: "It's about their social, emotional learning. Let's face it: Junior high is a time when students are trying to figure out who they're going to be and what direction they're going to take, so we want to create a very positive experience for them."

McRae Elementary Principal Tammy Winkler: "We always help at McRae. We have wonderful teachers and coaches and administrators who will help people. We refer to ourselves as the hidden gem of Clay County because of that positive energy and that family feeling."



Tammy Winkler



Elise Taylor

S. Bryan Jennings Elementary Principal Elise Taylor: "It's been kind of steady and in small increments. We're super excited about that for our kids. It was hard to be patient, and we're still nowhere near where we want to be. The growth will continue."

a question if they don't understand something. Getting a quick solution means you don't waste time being confused.

"We feel McRae is a place where our teachers and our assistants, if they don't understand something, if they don't feel confident about something, we have that type of atmosphere, that kind of environment where it's OK to go ask somebody," Winkler said. "We support each other. We help each other. We really do have fun together."

Winkler said McRae has become a school where families want their children to attend and where teachers want to be.

"We've done this for many years, and it just gets better and better," she said. "I think that we offer the best small group support, the most targeted small group support, to our students. We create lessons for small groups of students, and sometimes it goes down to individual students. So, what does that kid need? And we're intentional about that. We plan it out. So, you know, we have high expectations for everyone."

dent collaboration, graphic organizers and things like that," she said. "We are sure to ensure the task aligns with the standard and students get plenty of practice doing these things, completing these tasks and activities so they are ready to take those assessments. There are lots and lots of practice based on those grade-level standards. We're serious about what we do at McRae."

McRae has received an 'A' grade in three of the past five years. The school didn't get a score in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Winkler said there is an emphasis on reading at McRae. She said teachers and assistants meet weekly in subject groups to ensure their lesson plans are identical. Winkler said everyone is encouraged to ask

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Bake

from page 1

him to do more. Odom said he decided to take it to the next level, buying more ingredients to practice. By the end of the morning, he perfected the recipe.

The cookies were a hit at the office, and from there, his hobby became more than it was supposed to be.

2016 he began running the "Tough Guys Cookies" food truck. The name for his business came easily. He remembered a lady telling him in awe that a "little tough guy can bake." He decided to take that and run with it.

"I took offense to that," Odom said. "Yeah, I can bake."

As the first "cookie truck" in Jacksonville, Odom said it was hard for the city to categorize him as they had never seen anything like it.

"The closest thing was the funnel cake lady. She is the first one of her kind," Odom said. "So, they mirrored me after her."

Traveling from stop to stop, Odom said he has brought his cookies to many areas. And the dream has only got bigger.

"When I got my first order, I was hooked," Odom said. "I felt like I had conquered the corporate world."

Walker said he joined Odom's team in 2019. The two friends had known each other since their high school days. After talking, the two realized they had common ground regarding the goals they



They customize in many treats, including cookies, milkshakes, pralines and peanut brittle.

wanted to reach in life.

Walker said it went from him just assisting to eventually helping to run the business as the co-owner.

"It went from a help thing to that's my partner now," Walker said.

In contrast to Odom, Walker said he had never been into baking until Tough Guys Cookies. He said he would hear Odom talking about how much of a stress reliever it was, but he didn't realize until he started doing it himself.

"You start to forget the worries of the world and your personal life," Walker said. "And you come in here, and it's just like, 'Well, I'm focused on putting some good cookies out.' And that's what you lock in with."

In 2021, the business officially moved into its brick-and-mortar location. Odom said his grandmother was able to come to witness it in person.

"For her to come and see this means a lot to me," Odom said. "Now my family knows I have a cookie store all the way to Buffalo, New York. So, it's a major accomplishment."

They said the transition was different from traveling in a food truck, but all the same with the experience they want to bring to their customers.

Being in a stable location has given them the opportunity to see many of their

customers change and grow over the years.

With the many flavors and recipes they have created, they said the strawberry and lemon cookies remain the most beloved desserts.

The bakers like to get creative and said they appreciate that the job gives them that opportunity.

"It far exceeds just cookies," Odom said. "Because I got bored. I got all these recipes for cookies. And I was like, 'OK, I got this down, so what's next?'"

The two said they have many ideas for the business's future, including possible ex-

pansion. They currently still run their food truck, cater events, deliver locally, and even ship to places all around the country.

They said there are no limits to where the business may take them.

"If you got the resources and you got life in your body — make it happen," Walker said.

But for now, their focus is on making an impact on their community and showing that the art of baking is accessible to everyone.

"We feel like if you try it at least once, we got you for life," Walker said.



STAFF PHOTOS BY KYLA WOODARD

John Odom and Albert Walker are the owners of Tough Guys Cookies and Sweets, a bakery that reimagines what it means to be a baker.

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Oakleaf season starts out tough, then gets tougher

By Randy Lefko
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JACKSONVILLE – With nearly all the high schools represented at the Baker Sports High School Football Media Day at Everbank Fields, there were small nuggets of intel available from opposing coaches that may or may not prove fruitful to the upcoming football season just 12 days to preseason games.

Oakleaf coach Chris Foy, in his second season after a 3-6 finish his rookie season, sees his team as formidable in all aspects minus “coaching”.

“We have a lot of great guys in every aspect of the game,” said Foy. “My thoughts on the weakness of our team is the coaching. That’s a joke. We lost seven seniors and this year we have everything in place.”

On the stage with Foy were playmaker Carlos Witherup, who left his junior season to go to Mandarin, but returned to finish his football at Oakleaf, a few mammoth-sized linemen in Mykel Mayo and Reggie Houston, his barrel-sized running back, Chris Foy II “Wendy’s son” as he is called, and ball hawk Jordin Pryce as well as offensive line coach Bubba Horne and Chris Jules, Foy’s unheralded entity, but, in Foy’s eyes, the “lunch pail guy” on the team.

“No matter what we ask him to do, he does it,” said Foy. “Chris doesn’t get a lot of press, but he comes to work every day with the big guys on the line.”

Foy acknowledged that it is up to his coaching staff to put the puzzle together.

“We got to keep the defenses guesses because our schedule is so well-coached,” said Foy, noting the likes of Mandarin, Bolles, Madison County and two-time state champion Hawthorne. “We have to take all three phases of the game to our advantage; there is a lot of ways we can win games.”

Foy also has a unique situation as he has two legit quarterbacks; last year’s backup to Brandon Wallace, Jayden Moreno and First Academy transfer Jack McKissock, to drive the engine.

“Both of those guys got their own

firepower; McKissock with his intelligence and Moreno with his athletic ability,” said Foy. “Both can run, too, so we will get a tremendous season from both of them with their skill sets.”

Oakleaf will open with Riverside High, a 9-3 finisher last year, which traditionally lists the likes of Raines and Ribault as key rivalries with Oakleaf recently becoming a name on that list.

“I heard one of my guys mention Oakleaf as a team on our radar,” said Riverside coach Antwan Nicholas. “Oakleaf was down at the FCA camp we were at, but we didn’t get a chance to see them. I know the kids all stay in the same area and they talk, but we know when that time comes, we know what time it is.”

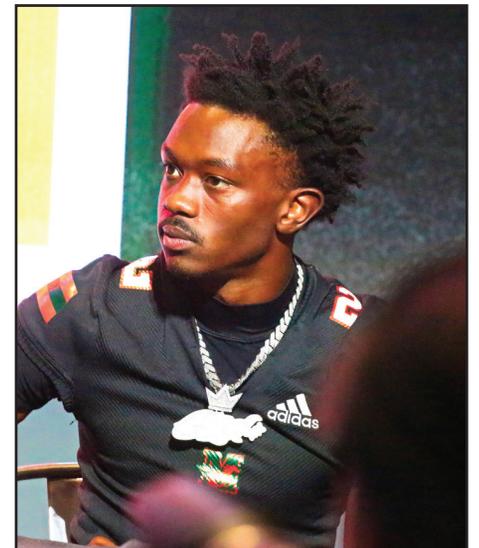
Near the end of the season, if Foy is successful and in a position to look forward to playoffs, Mandarin, the state runner-up under coach Toby Bullock last year to Miami Columbus, will be a final test for the Knights as well as a key district final game on October 25.

“We make our kids expect great expectations in and out of school and, at Mandarin, we want that senior year of football to be the best experience they can have,” said Bullock. “I don’t look at the year after a state-run as a challenge because we have coaches that have been there and know how to prepare for it.”

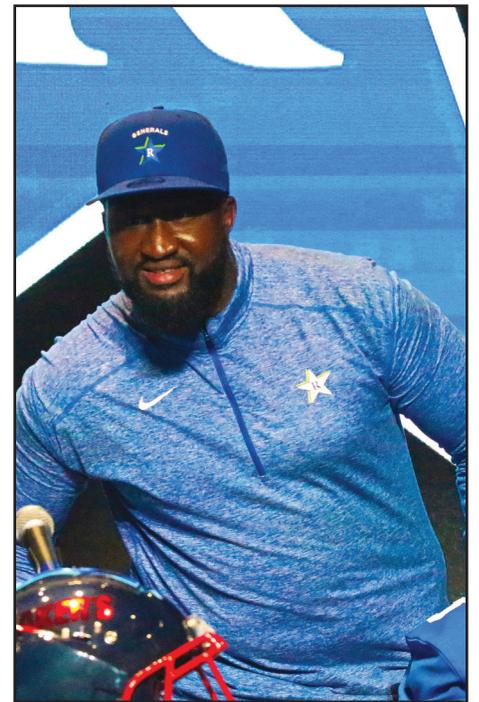
Two key players on the Mustangs squad that will surely test teams on both sides of the ball are wide receiver Jaime Ffrench, Jr, and defensive back/safety Drake Stubbs, who thrilled Oakleaf fans as a freshman as a Knight before transferring to Mandarin.

Ffrench, highly touted nationwide; interest from Texas, Tennessee, Miami, LSU, and Ohio State, and ranked as No. 4 wide receiver nationally, third in Florida, commented that having Stubbs, a University of Miami commit, opposite in practice only makes both of them better.

Bullock noted that his quarterback, Tramell Jones (3195 pass yds, 33TDs), is one of the best in state also and is slated to go to Florida State University. Mandarin fans do have the history of Georgia quar-



Two key players from district foe Mandarin High; from left Drake Stubbs (DB) and Jaime Ffrench (WR) will be on Oakleaf’ players to watch list while, below, from left, the Knights offensive line will have Chris Jules as workhorse to battle with defense of Riverside coach Antwan Nicholas in game one as first challenge for Oakleaf.



terback Carson Beck, a state champion, Mr. Football Dairy Farmers winner and an NCAA national champion, as a reminder of quarterback excellence at Mandarin.

“Tramell is exceptional,” said Bullock. “He has the secret weapon to throw to (Ffrench) and that makes him look good.”

For Ffrench and Stubbs, their on-the-field battles are a great example of practicing like you want to play, said Stubbs.

“We are out there competing every day

and sometimes it gets tough because he is a lockdown cover guy,” said Ffrench. “Sure, it makes us play hard every day, then come Friday night lights, we both excel from it.”

For Stubbs, covering Ffrench in practice has one Bullock limitation.

“It’s a little one-sided because we don’t let Drake hit anyone in practice,” said Bullock. “Don’t need him knocking teeth out of our guys.”

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