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Lawmakers need better ideas for raising revenue

For decades, Alabama voters have watched as Georgia dramatically improved its public schools with funding from a well-structured state lottery. Students who graduate with good grades from those improved schools have long been able to attend college on a HOPE scholarship.

Meanwhile, the cost of instate tuition at the University of Alabama has nearly doubled in the past 10 years. One of the main reasons for rising tuition is because the state doesn't have the revenues to increase state funding for higher education.

"If you look at the straight facts, our expenses have increased because of other funding that the state has taken away from us and the fact that the state has not had the money to give us," Trustee James Wilson III said last week, explaining why the board of trustees was moving to raise tuition in the University of Alabama System 3 to 4 percent for the second straight year.

Many in Alabama remain opposed to the lottery. Some say it is unfair to the poor. Gambling and the promise of a quick and easy windfall have always tempted those who are most desperate. Many others oppose the lottery for religious reasons.

It stands to reason many of those same voters are similarly conservative when the issue comes to drugs. Many believe marijuana is a "gateway" drug, and leads to other bad decisions. That's why they strongly oppose the measures other states have made to legalize and tax its use. But alcohol is also a drug, and a very powerful one at that. It has destroyed many lives. Alabama is one of 15 states that maintain, by law, a monopoly on the sale of liquor.

Last week, the state decided to increase the state's markup on liquor sales from 30 to 35 percent. The increase is expected to generate $8.2 million for the state's General Fund. The new revenue will go to fund courts and district attorneys.

The state has a vested interest in increasing alcohol sales. The Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control Board website even has "game-day" cocktail suggestions.

And there's a grasp for more. Last September, the ABC board passed a rule that initially would have required local craft breweries to collect the name, address, date of birth and phone number of anyone who purchased beer to go. It eventually decided names and addresses were enough. At the end of the last legislative session, Gov. Kay Ivey signed a bill that killed the effort.

The overreach was fueled by a cash-strapped state making every effort to keep a hold on whatever revenue sources it has. We get that. But the hypocrisy in how we are governing ourselves is remarkable. It is past time for our lawmakers to take a hard look at who is and who isn't paying their fair share, and for some real leadership to emerge with creative ideas on how to move this state forward financially. Stop-gap measures aren't cutting it and two-faced pandering isn't moving us forward.
ACT Aspire is out in Alabama

Scantron tests to be used for 2017-18 school year

Trisha Powell Crain
tcrain@al.com

Teachers in Alabama's public schools will prepare students for a new standardized test next year.

After only four years of testing students, but following months of discussion of concerns with the ACT Aspire, the Alabama state board of education voted unanimously on Wednesday to ditch the test.

State superintendent Michael Sentance told the board that the U.S. Department of Education is working with Alabama education officials to find a way to use a different assessment. Federal officials recently rejected a request for an assessment waiver and now say a waiver may not be necessary, Sentance said.

Sentance did not have a replacement plan to present, but said plans for now are to use the Scantron, previously known as GlobalScholar, series of assessments for the 2017-18 school year.

Scantron has been available to all schools statewide, Sentance said. Approximately 65 percent of schools currently use Scantron tests.

Board members expressed concern about classroom teachers being ready to use the assessments, but assurances were given that teachers will be trained.

Results from the spring 2017 ACT Aspire testing were first promised to schools at the end of May, but were delayed until June 12. Sentance said those June 12 results came back with bad data, convincing him that Alabama was not a priority for those at ACT Aspire.

Sentance said he is pleased with the board's decision. Both the ACT, given to high school juniors, and ACT WorkKeys, given to seniors, will continue to be used.
Pillars of community to be recognized

Eight people to be honored Thursday

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

The 2017 class for the Community Foundation of West Alabama's Pillars of West Alabama includes business and community leaders, civil rights champions and hall of fame coaches who changed the community by going "over and above."

The annual award presentation will follow a 6 p.m. dinner Thursday at the Indian Hills Country Club in Tuscaloosa.

The 2017 class includes Stephen R. Barnette Jr. of Greensboro, Ruth Eaton Cummings Bolden, Babe Ruth Barger McAbee, Thomas W. Moore, Gary Nichols, former University of Alabama gymnastics coach Sarah Patterson, Morris Seymour Sokol and William Andrew Tate. Bolden, McAbee, Sokol and Tate are being posthumously recognized.

• Barnette Jr., who helped form the Greensboro Area Business and Tourism Association, is being recognized for his work in the city and Hale County including involvement with the Hale County Animal Shelter, Oakwood Cemetery Association, and other historic and civic organizations.

• Bolden, one of the namesakes of the Weaver-Bolden Branch of the Tuscaloosa Public Library, is being posthumously recognized for her work to bring a library to West Tuscaloosa and role as a civil rights worker.

• McAbee, who helped co-found McAbee Construction with her husband, Leroy, is being posthumously recognized for her involvement and generosity in Tuscaloosa including helping to found the Homer Roy and Harold McAbee Cancer Fund to help improve the care of cancer patients undergoing treatment.

• Moore, who served as president of Pritchett-Moore Inc. for 30 years and founded the Pritchett-Moore Invitational Tennis Tournament, is being recognized for his role as a business and civic leader in Tuscaloosa.

• Nichols, president of McAbee Construction, is

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PILLARS

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being recognized for his involvement and support of community organizations including the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, Adopt-A-School, United Way and March of Dimes.

• Patterson, who led the UA gymnastics program from 1974-2014, is being recognized for her hall of fame career and community work including the co-creation of the Alabama Gymnastics DCH Breast Cancer Fund and Power of Pink Initiative to raise money and awareness about breast cancer.

• Sokol, who opened Sokol's Furniture store in Tuscaloosa, is being posthumously recognized for his philanthropy and devotion to the Tuscaloosa community and the way in which he inspired others.

• Tate, who ran an accounting firm in Tuscaloosa, is being posthumously recognized for his passionate advocacy and service in the community and involvement with organizations including the Tuscaloosa Symphony Orchestra and the Community Foundation of West Alabama.

It's the 14th year for the annual awards program. The foundation's board considers and votes on nominees in January. Cynthia Johnson, director of development for the foundation, said nominees who go unselected remain on the list as possible selections in future years.

The awards recognize community members who see a need and pursue fulfilling it. Almost every one of the charities that works with the foundation can be tracked back to someone's passion, board of directors member Pam Parker said.

“These pillars of the community are those who go over and above,” Community Foundation President Glenn Taylor said.

Taylor also hopes the example of the pillars inspires others.

“I have grandkids and I want Tuscaloosa to still be a good place,” Taylor said.

While the pillars awards might be the most visible of the foundation's events, the tax-exempt charitable organization works in a nine-county area in West Alabama providing support for charities and donors, including philanthropic advice, grant pay outs, and other assistance.

“We have a lot of avenues for things we pursue,” Parker said.

In 18 years, the foundation has paid out about $16 million, Taylor said.

“We are that mechanism, that conduit to get it back into the community,” he said.

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Student apartment plan rejected

Developer to appeal to City Council

By Jason Morton
Staff Writer

Tuscaloosa developer Stan Pate is facing another difficult path in his quest to rezone a vacant 7.28-acre tract off Rice Mine Road.

His latest request to rezone the property located south of 1050 McFarland Blvd. NE between Rice Mine Road Loop and McFarland Boulevard Northeast was met Monday with an 8-0 vote by the Planning and Zoning Commission recommending against rezoning the tract.

Pate can now urge the Tuscaloosa City Council to go against the planning commission’s recommendation, something the longtime developer said he intends to do.

"I'm a property owner rights guy," Pate said. "They (the Planning and Zoning Commission) don't deter me from working toward a landowner's rights."

The latest rezoning request is to convert the land, now zoned highway-related commercial (BH), to multifamily residential (RMF-1), to accommodate a student-based apartment complex.

According to documents compiled by City Hall, the size

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of the lot would allow for the development of up to 181 apartment units under the RMF-1 zoning.

Under a standard one-, two- and three-bedroom configuration, this would allow the development to exceed the 200-bedroom cap imposed by the City Council based on recommendations by the mayor's Student Rental Housing Task Force in 2013.

Adopted by the City Council in early 2014, the policy urges city officials to reject any rezoning request that would accommodate a student-based housing project of 200 bedrooms or more.

And that, according to Planning and Zoning Commissioner Steven Rumsey, is why the commission voted against recommending the site be rezoned.

"If we vote to rezone his property for a student mega-complex, it's in direct contradiction to the (Student Rental Housing) Task Force and the City Council," Rumsey said. "It wasn't personal."

Pate, however, disagrees and argues that the Planning and Zoning Commission's approach to regulating what landowners can and cannot do on their own property violates the rights of property owners like him.

"This is just an execution on eliminating free markets and controlling the supply side, which is not the role of government," Pate said. "It's the role of investors who take risks and the role of bankers who fund these projects."

Pate also argued that Rumsey, who also owns and manages student-based rental property, had an ethical obligation not to vote on Pate's rezoning request.

But Rumsey, who points to his own voting record regarding potential competitors to his own business, said that was not the case.

Rumsey said the most recent audit of his voting record showed he had considered 39 applications involving multi-family projects and voted in support of 30 of them during his two terms on the commission.

"It's not like I was up there voting against every multi-family project that comes up," Rumsey said. "I will vote in line with the (200 bedroom) policy until the policy is changed."

Pate last sought to rezone the tract in 2014 to build a condominium project.

Though it was not expressly designed to accommodate college students, the condo project also would have exceeded 200 bedrooms. This prompted the Planning and Zoning Commission to again follow the recommendation of the City Council and Student Rental Housing Task Force to vote it down.

At the time, Pate was again seeking a change to the RMF-1 zone from BH, a zoning designation he successfully persuaded the City Council to impose in 2007 for a hotel project on the site.

But with the collapse of the economic market the following year, this development never got off the ground.

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Sullivan to run for state Legislature

Northport council member seeks House 61 seat

By Stephen Dethrage
Staff Writer

Northport City Councilman Rodney Sullivan will run to represent Tuscaloosa County in Alabama's House District 61 when its seat becomes available in 2018.

The seat is now held by three-term Rep. Alan Harper, who announced last month that he will not seek re-election.

Sullivan is seven months into his second term on the Northport City Council, where he serves as president pro tempore, and said his candidacy for the seat will not immediately interfere with work in that role.

"I want to make it very, very clear: This will not have an effect on my job as your District 3 representative," Sullivan said Monday night during a council meeting.

"I'm very fortunate to have a very strong team of people behind me who are already in place to help me continue to do this job."

Sullivan will run as a Republican, but didn't say much more Monday night about his plan to win the legislative office, electing to leave that for a later date.

"I'm not really going to go into my platform or anything like that. We're still a year away from primaries, and tonight was really for me to let (my constituents) know," Sullivan said. "It's a blessing to know I will have the opportunity to serve all of you guys on a much larger level."

Sullivan said he loves his work as a councilman, but decided if he didn't run for the Alabama Legislature now, he never would.

He fought tears during his announcement as he recalled the bonds he's developed with Mayor Donna Aaron and the other members of the council, including District 1's Dennis Hambright, who died last month.

"I'm excited for Northport, for you and your family, and we wish you well," Aaron told Sullivan. "I know you'll keep us at the top of your list when you get there."

Sullivan is 32 years old and manages his father's lumber mill when he's not at City Hall. He lives in Northport with his wife Lacey and their young songs, Parker and Patton.

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Council approves impact fees

Rules will affect some development

By Jason Morton
Staff Writer

After years of discussion and recent months of intense debate, the Tuscaloosa City Council on Tuesday shifted some of the costs of maintaining its ever-expanding water and sewer network to developers. The council was unanimous in its adoption of service, or impact, fees, that will apply to all new multi-family and commercial developments in Tuscaloosa starting Aug. 1. There are provisions to allow any project that has gained City Hall’s approval as a planned unit development or has been cleared for construction within the Downtown Riverfront Overlay District or the Riverfront Development District to be exempt from these fees.

But once in effect, impact fee rules will:
• Impose the minimum size fee on every unit in any attached, multi-family residential development. This means any apartment complex — from a duplex to multi-story student housing — would have to pay about $2,100 per unit.
• Impose a meter-based impact fee on commercial developments. This fee structure increases based on the size of the water meter needed to serve the project.
• Leave out single-family, residential townhouse and duplexes planned as part of single-family residential neighborhoods from having to pay impact fees of any kind. The fees also will not apply to city-required meters for irrigation or fire suppression systems.
• Apply an impact fee for water service only to multi-family or commercial developments outside the city limits that tie on to the city’s water service.

The mayor annually will recommend a slate of projects to be funded by the fees. The City Council will then give its final blessing on the allocation of the impact fees collected each year.

The adopted policy lays out a due process procedure for developers or property owners to appeal the fees. The appeal will begin with city staff before moving to the full City Council, should the appellant so desire. This appeals process will be available to any development that’s subject to the fees — including projects built by the University of Alabama, the Tuscaloosa Housing Authority or applicable projects constructed by City Hall itself.

“Of course, the fees must be applied toward resolving those strains, whether it be expanding, improving and maintaining the city’s water and sewer system or expanding its public safety capabilities. Adopting these fees was recommended by the mayor’s Student Rental Housing Task Force, which urged the City Council in 2013 to adopt the fees as a way to pay for the infrastructure repairs and improvements that large, multifamily developments demand. This led to a $49,500 review by Raftelis Financial Consultants Inc. in 2016 that examined several ways the city could impose impact fees on new developments.

From this, Moore and a team of city employees developed a mathematical model by which to impose these costs across a wide spectrum of services.

Unveiled in April, the first impact fee proposal would have imposed fees for costs associated with police and fire protection, road maintenance and quality-of-life investments in addition to water and sewer infrastructure.

In the weeks since, city leaders met with business leaders, developers and the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama to refine the policy in line with City Council suggestions.

Eventually, the fees were reduced to cover water and sewer infrastructure only while first excluding — but then adding in — commercial projects.

No one appeared before the City Council on Tuesday to launch a final protest against the fees.

City attorneys said they were confident that the policy could be defended against a legal challenge. And Moore, after highlighting the number of meetings hosted by City Hall to gain builder and business leader input, said he was aware of no outstanding concerns.

“Developers,” Moore said, “were very comfortable with the process that we have outlined.”

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complex — from a duplex to multi-story student housing — would have to pay about $2,100 per unit.

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“There are no entities that are expressly excluded from (the service fee policy),” said Brendan Moore, executive director of the city’s Department of Urban Development. “In theory, anything can be appealed.”

Also, developers building on sites where water meters currently exist — and have been in use within at least the past two years — can receive a discount toward their overall service fee requirement.

Impact fees are commonly assessed by governments across the nation to offset the burden that new developments impose on existing city resources. By law, these fees must be applied toward resolving those strains, whether it be expanding, improving and maintaining the city’s water and sewer system or expanding its public safety capabilities.

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Alabama baseball coach to earn $265,000

By Ben Jones
Sports Writer

New University of Alabama baseball coach Brad Bohannon's base salary will be identical to that of his predecessor.

Bohannon's salary will be $265,000. The Tuscaloosa News obtained the information through an open records request. That does not include a talent fee, other compensation or bonuses which should be included in the final contract once it is approved.

That works out to $22,083.34 per month.

Previous head coach Greg Goff’s total compensation was $450,000 annually, with a $265,000 salary and $185,000 talent fee. Goff will be paid the remaining four years of his base salary, worth $1.06 million in total, as part of his buyout if he does not take another job in baseball.

Bohannon’s full contract is expected to be confirmed at the next meeting of the University of Alabama board of trustees. His hiring was announced on June 1.

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How Accusing A Powerful Man of Rape Drove A College Student To Suicide

By: Katie Baker

When an Alabama college student told the police she was sexually assaulted, she did everything she thought she was supposed to do. She ended up killing herself.

TUSCALOOSA, Alabama — Megan Rondini’s friends and family remember her as having an ironclad sense of right and wrong. Her childhood nickname was “Rules Rondini” because she was such a principled board game player. As an honors student at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Megan offered rides to drunk girls walking alone at night, even after one threw up in her backseat.

No one was there to help Megan when she found herself in that very situation one night in July 2015, except for a well-to-do businessman Megan knew only as “Sweet T.” The 34-year-old later told authorities he offered 20-year-old Megan a ride home because he and a friend saw her leaving downtown Tuscaloosa alone. Megan couldn’t remember how she ended up in Sweet T’s white Mercedes on the way to his ornate mansion, decorated with his choicest hunting conquests, from massive-tusked elephant and wide-mouthed hippo heads to taxidermied lions and leopards. But, Megan later told police, she was sober enough by the time he pointed her toward his bedroom to know she didn’t want to have sex with him — and, she said, Sweet T should’ve known it, too.

There’s no official guide to reporting rape. It’s the most underreported crime, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey, which means many victims don’t tell anyone at all. But women are generally expected to do two things if they believe they’ve been sexually assaulted: Go to the emergency room and call the police. “Was it consensual?” Megan’s friend asked her when she picked her up that night, the friend told investigators. “Like, did you want to?” No, Megan told her. She didn’t.

That’s why they went to the hospital for a forensic exam, even though it was the middle of the night and Megan had just run away from Sweet T’s mansion by climbing out of his second-story window. Afterward, instead of going to sleep, she met with law enforcement for an interview. Megan never imagined that she would soon be cast as a criminal, or that investigators would view Sweet T — really T.J. Bunn Jr., son of an influential Tuscaloosa family — as the true victim. But that’s exactly what happened.

Bunn insisted he and Megan had consensual sex. In a statement provided by his lawyer, Bunn reiterated that he was never charged with a crime and said it would be “improper to say anything further about a young woman, who was clearly troubled, that could cause pain for a family dealing with grief.” Under Alabama’s archaic rape law, victims must prove they “earnestly” resisted their attackers, and the investigator who interviewed Megan quickly decided she hadn’t fought back against Bunn — she hadn’t “kicked him or hit him,” he explained. His investigation would conclude that no rape occurred. But he didn’t stop there. Instead, he started building a case against Megan, questioning her for multiple crimes she wasn’t even aware she had committed.

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Later, when Megan tried to file a civil suit, she learned the only way to escape possible prosecution for those crimes was to drop her case. When she went to the University of Alabama for counseling, a staff therapist told Megan she knew the Bunn family and therefore couldn’t help her. Ultimately, Megan and her family decided it was no longer safe for her to stay in Tuscaloosa. She withdrew from the university before the end of fall semester.

Megan’s case was complex. Then again, most sexual assault allegations are. There are rarely witnesses, and trauma survivors often have fragmented and incomplete memories, which can cause law enforcement without specialized training to be skeptical of their accounts — especially when alcohol is involved. Most rape cases don’t make it to trial, both nationwide and in Tuscaloosa, according to data provided by law enforcement.

“She did everything that she could to protect herself and to get help,” said Megan’s father, Mike Rondini. “She should have gotten that help, and she didn’t. That is a failure on everybody’s part.”

Megan left Tuscaloosa newly diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. In the months that followed, her depression grew worse, along with her sense of betrayal.

“When all is said and done, I wonder what I could’ve accomplished if one man didn’t completely rip everything away from me,” Megan texted a friend in February 2016. Two days later, she hanged herself.

Tuscaloosa, population 95,000, revolves around the University of Alabama, the country’s fastest-growing flagship university. UA is famous for its football team, the Crimson Tide, widely considered not just the best college team in the country but of all time. Football helps UA attract elite students and millions of dollars in fundraising, but otherwise, Tuscaloosa is a “big small town” where everyone knows everyone. Most everyone has heard of the Bunns, whose 80-year-old family business, ST Bunn Construction, works on major statewide projects and claims to have paved every street in the city.

Sonny and Terry, the Bunn brothers who currently run the company, were major donors to former governor Robert J. Bentley, who recently resigned rather than face impeachment after he was accused of using state money to cover up an affair with an aide. Terry Bunn, T.J. Bunn’s father, even served on Bentley’s transition team. He’s also listed on rosters for the secretive “President’s Cabinet” at UA, an “invitation-only” alumni group that advises the president of the university. ST Bunn Construction says it helped build Tuscaloosa’s Crimson Tide practice field, and the brothers belong to the booster foundation that paid for renowned UA football coach Nick Saban’s $3.1 million home. Flight records show the Bunn’s private jet often touched down near Crimson Tide away games last fall.

Megan Rondini grew up far from Crimson Tide country, in a leafy suburb of Austin, Texas. She was a serious, studious vegetarian who “preferred horses to people,” said her mother, Cindy Rondini. Her parents were surprised when she enrolled at the University of Alabama, and even more so when she joined a sorority.
“Megan wanted to go out of her comfort zone,” Cindy said. “She viewed going to college as her fresh start.”

Megan had an honors scholarship at UA, and she studied hard, scoring a spot in a special MBA program for high achievers in STEM fields and working after class at a lab studying Alzheimer’s disease. The summer before junior year, Megan stayed in Tuscaloosa to take extra classes. On July 1, 2015, she went to the Innisfree Irish Pub for trivia night with a group of sorority sisters. She saw Bunn at the bar, as she often did — ST Bunn Construction is across the street — but they didn’t talk. She later told investigators they had spoken only once, when he introduced himself as Sweet T to her and a friend the previous November. Afterward, they had wondered aloud about the well-dressed guy who offered them beers. A stranger, overhearing, leaned over and told them: “He’s one of the wealthiest men in Tuscaloosa.”

Megan, who stood 5-foot-6 and around 130 pounds, had about five cups of beer on July 1, she would later tell investigators — not enough, in her experience, to get that drunk. But somehow, she said, she blacked out, only coming to around midnight in Bunn’s brand-new Mercedes as he and his friend drove to Bunn’s home about 20 minutes away.

Bunn has sandy brown hair, a boyish face, and a preppy wardrobe: The night he picked Megan up, he was wearing khakis and brown alligator shoes. He’s sometimes referred to as an “employee” of ST Bunn Construction, but it’s unclear what he does there. A 2012 Tuscaloosa News profile published after former governor Bentley appointed Bunn to Alabama’s Conservation Advisory Board focuses on his many hunting accomplishments — he’s even killed the African “big five” — but there’s not much other information about him available, other than records relating to a 2013 DUI arrest. They show Bunn sued the director of the Alabama Department of Public Safety after his driving privileges were taken away, claiming he would “suffer irreparable harm” if his license was suspended because he would be “unable to drive to work and will lose his job” at his family’s company. Bunn got his license back.

Megan was intimidated by Bunn, so much so that she didn’t try to stop him as he drove toward his house, she told investigators, even though “he was drunk and driving and it was concerning me.” They walked into his plantation-style mansion, past the mounted heads and tanned hides of dozens of animals, from zebras and hippos to antelopes and bears. Even a chandelier was made of antlers.

Bunn put his drunk friend to bed and told Megan to go to his room, she told investigators. She said she complied, sitting on a couch near the door, as far as possible from his bed with monogrammed “B” pillows. Bunn walked in and told her he wanted to have sex. That’s when Megan said she had to leave, while “trying to be really nice to him” because “I know he’s an influential person in Tuscaloosa.”

“I said, I really need to go, I have friends that are waiting,” she told police when they first interviewed her at the hospital. “He didn’t really take that.” Eventually, Megan said, she “felt like just letting him have sex with me was the only way he would let me go.”

Bunn brought her over to his bed and pulled her shorts to the side while she looked away from him, she told investigators. The incident report would later state that she “verbally informed...
Bunn that she did not want to have sex with him and that she needed to rejoin her friends at Innisfree,” but that he “ignored these statements and continued to engage in intercourse with her.” Afterward, Bunn passed out, and she felt she could leave safely, she said. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t open his door. She started texting friends around 1 a.m., begging for help.

“OMG,” she wrote to one, “I can’t get out of the room.”

Megan told police that, in a panic, she climbed through Bunn’s second-story window, jumped onto a gate and then to the dark, unfamiliar street below. When she realized she didn’t have her keys, she started frantically searching for them, even climbing back into Bunn’s room and then out again. Next, she checked Bunn’s Mercedes, where she found his wallet and a pistol. She grabbed $3 in case she had to take a cab and the gun “for safety,” she told investigators. Megan didn’t know how to handle guns, she’d later explain, and she accidentally fired it before dropping the weapon to the ground. Finally, a friend picked her up. They arrived at Tuscaloosa’s DCH Regional Medical Center around 2:40 a.m.

Contrary to what viewers of Law and Order: SVU might think, sex crimes units are still relatively new in police departments. Tuscaloosa’s doesn’t have one. Its multi-agency homicide department investigates sexual offenses, and it’s ultimately up to a grand jury to decide whether felony cases should move forward. Sexual assault cases rarely make it there, according to data provided by the homicide department on the dispositions of all sexual offenses — not just felonies — reported to it from 2011 to 2016. As of February, only 10 cases out of 98 sexual assault reports in 2016 were heard by a grand jury, and 12 out of 124 from 2015. (Those numbers don’t include a few dozen cases that are still pending.)

The county district attorney’s office couldn’t say how many sexual assault cases in Tuscaloosa led to formal charges, because it did not begin using a computerized tracking program until late last year.

“I’m ashamed to say we don’t know,” said Chief Deputy Jonathan Cross, “which is sort of a black eye in our office.”

According to Tuscaloosa Homicide Department Capt. Gary Hood, as many as 40 to 50% of all reported sexual assaults in Tuscaloosa are labeled “special inquiry,” local law enforcement’s term for cases in which “the victim does not know what or if anything happened” or the investigators don’t think the complaint meets the criteria to be a criminal charge under state law. Hood said those cases are investigated just as seriously as sexual assaults, but the examples he gave were ambiguous. For instance, he said, “A female wakes up at a friend’s house after a night of drinks. She doesn’t know if she was sexually assaulted but she files a report just to make sure.”

Special inquiries aren’t just for sexual assault claims, Hood said, providing further examples: “A person wakes up from a night of drinks to find a cut on his arm. Should this be listed as an assault or did he cut his arm stumbling into his residence?” Another, he said, might be if someone noticed a piece of jewelry missing from their home with no sign of forced entry. “Should this be theft or did a family member wear the jewelry without seeking permission first?”

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Last November, Hood told the Tuscaloosa News that 27 UA students had reported sexual assaults in 2016, but only two arrests had been made. Widely accepted research has found that the rate of false rape claims is no higher than that of any other crime. But although Hood hoped “true victims of crimes” would come forward to the department, he said there were “a lot of reasons” a college student might lie about rape.

“A lot of them are not doing well in school and hope that by doing this they can get some help from the university with their grades,” he said.

Megan’s 3.8 GPA didn’t stop police from marking her first report a “special inquiry.” She didn’t know that they already doubted her when she went to the station for a follow-up interview the same morning she was discharged from the hospital, even though she hadn’t slept. She put on an oversized T-shirt, scraped her hair into a ponytail, and brought two pages of handwritten notes she’d taken so she wouldn’t forget any details.

It took about 21 minutes for Megan to tell investigator Adam Jones her side of the story, up to finding the pocket pistol in Bunn’s car while looking for her keys. As soon as Megan mentioned the gun, Jones abruptly left the room, video of her interview shows. After that, he changed his course of questioning. For the next few hours, he came in and out of the room with questions for Megan that were about her behavior the previous night instead of her rape allegations.

For example, Jones told Megan that Bunn said he and his friend had stopped for a drink at Megan’s apartment before going to his place: Did she remember that? Not at all, Megan said— it came as a shock — but she gave him her phone to track her movements. They confirmed that Bunn, his friend, and Megan had indeed visited her apartment before going to his place. Megan insisted she didn’t remember any of it.

Studies show that trauma victims often have fragmented memories of assaults. When confronted with such gaps, police should consider the possibility of drug-facilitated sexual assault, the International Association of Chiefs of Police guidelines explain. But investigators never tested Megan’s blood or urine, according to the state department that processes toxicology reports, which found no records associated with Megan’s case. (Hood said that was because Megan “admitted to drinking alcohol on her own free will” — even though she told investigators she didn’t think she had enough to black out.) It’s unclear if the hospital even collected the blood and urine samples necessary for forensic testing when it performed a basic rape kit on Megan. A DCH spokesperson declined to comment on Megan’s case. But he did say that the hospital doesn’t employ SANEs — sexual assault nurse examiners who are specially trained to collect critical forensic evidence.

Two hours into her interview, Megan told the student advocate from the university’s women’s center who had accompanied her to the station that she could leave. Anxious and tired, Megan paced the room alone. At one point, she texted a friend about how Jones seemed upset about the gun.

“He left as soon as I said that and hasn’t come back and then told me that little kids could shoot themselves,” she wrote. “I’m about to vomit I hate this.”
“Just be completely open and honest and you’ll be okay,” her friend wrote back. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Around 2 p.m., about 12 hours after Megan had first reported the incident, Jones told her they were “close” on her case but had some other issues to discuss.

“Before I ask you any questions, you got any reasoning behind why you did what you did?” he asked Megan.

“What do you mean?” Megan said.

“I just need you to tell me, once we get into the questioning, what your reasoning was about why you did these things,” he said.

Megan stared at Jones as he read her Miranda rights before asking her why she took Bunn’s gun. He didn’t tell Megan that, although she had entered the room an alleged victim, she was now a suspect as well.

“I was never going to hurt anybody with it,” Megan said, crying. “I got it just to protect myself but I don’t eat meat, I could never kill anything, even if it came to that point I wouldn’t have been able to use it on a person.”

Eventually, Jones returned to Megan’s rape allegations. “Based on your statements to me, you said that you never resisted him,” he said.

“I did resist him,” Megan said, listing the ways she did, from repeatedly telling Bunn she wanted to leave to turning away when he kissed her. “I wanted to go home,” she said. “He didn’t take me home.”

“Look at it from my side,” Jones replied calmly. “You never kicked him or hit him or tried to resist him.”

A few minutes later, Megan said she didn’t know if she wanted to press charges after all.

“I want to be done,” she said. “I just want to move on.”

Jones offered to give her a “refusal to prosecute” form to sign.

More than 40% of people who reported sexual assault in Tuscaloosa from 2011 to 2016 officially dropped their charges by signing such forms, according to a BuzzFeed News analysis of the homicide department’s data. There are many reasons why someone might not want to pursue a case, Hood said: “I know for instance in many cases people are mad at someone initially, then change their mind.” But the IACP tells police not to pressure victims to make any decisions about prosecution during the initial stages of an investigation. Doing so is “poor practice” and “potentially damaging to an agency,” its guidelines state.

Megan then told Jones she didn’t want to drop the case. She wanted there to be a public record of her allegations, she said.

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"I’m just worried that if someone else is in this situation again, and it’s him again…” Megan said, trailing off.

Bunn, dressed in khakis and a button-down, brought his lawyer when he came in for his interview with law enforcement the following Monday. Both men had just returned from a weekend fishing trip.

“I’ll get y’all out of here,” investigator Josh Hastings assured them as they convened in the small room. After some high-spirited small talk about fishing — the snappers were biting — Hastings began his questioning. No, Bunn hadn’t seen Megan at Innisfree that night before picking her up as she walked home alone. Yes, he had been drinking, but not too much. Megan had invited him and his friend into her place, made them drinks, and then chose to go to his place, where, Bunn said, “we both decided to have consensual sex.” He fell asleep afterward. The next thing he knew, police were ringing his doorbell. Later, he said, he realized someone had shot his pistol — he wasn’t sure whether it had hit anything — and gone through his wallet.

“This is something...I’m gonna ask the question...it’s gotta be asked,” Hastings said, fumbling a bit. When police arrived at Bunn’s house early Thursday morning, how come Bunn said no one had been at his house the night before?

“At that time, to be honest with you, I didn’t recall,” Bunn said.

“Scared?” Hastings asked.

“Of course, yeah, sure,” Bunn said. “Still scared.”

“You ended up collecting your thoughts, and coming around, and that’s when you remembered you had her over there?” Hastings said.

“Right,” Bunn said.

A few moments later, Bunn was once again able to recall that Megan was “a very willing participant.”

When Hastings left the room for a moment, Bunn told his lawyer in a whisper that he’d drop the charges against Megan if she dropped hers.

“I won’t pursue her if she doesn’t pursue me, but I will play hardball if she does,” he said.

Before he left, Bunn asked about the status of Megan’s rape claim.

“We’re still kinda waiting to hear back from her,” Hastings said. “Obviously, we’ve got a couple issues we’re dealing with,” he said, mentioning the car “broken into,” the money “stolen” — Bunn claimed he was missing more than the $3 Megan said she grabbed for the cab — and “now even the possibility of a round that struck an occupied residence.”

“We are dealing on that end of things with her, just kind of waiting to see how far she’s going to push this,” he said.

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“I appreciate y'all's professionalism,” Bunn said.

“No one wants someone showing up on their doorstep early in the morning,” Hastings said. “The way I look at, man, if it was me on the other side of it, I would want you to do the same for me.”

In late July, Mike Rondini said, the district attorney called to let him know Megan’s case didn’t meet the legal definition of sexual assault and wouldn’t be brought to a grand jury. Two weeks later, Megan got a letter confirming her case was closed. She wasn’t ready to give up. In August, she hired a lawyer to file a civil suit. Megan told a therapist that fall that she was suing Bunn “due to the fear that she is not the first person he has assaulted or the last.”

But Megan was also terrified. She stopped going out after she saw Bunn crossing the street. She dropped a Habitat for Humanity–related honors class because ST Bunn Construction was a sponsor.

“His influence and wealth is the reason I can’t press charges,” she texted a friend. “He’s the charming nice one and I’m the bitch face victim.”

In the fall, a therapist diagnosed Megan with post-traumatic stress disorder, noting that she had no previous reported history of mental health issues.

“She continues to focus on ‘losing everything’ having no power as a women that was assaulted,” the therapist wrote in her notes. Beyond the alleged assault, the therapist wrote, Megan was “even more frustrated and upset” because she thought investigators “just ignored the case” due to Bunn “being from a very prominent Tuscaloosa family.” Megan wanted to return to UA “because she has worked so hard,” the therapist wrote, “but since being back she cannot stop crying, scared at night, having to get up and leave classrooms due to her feeling overwhelmed with anxiety and fear.”

Megan assumed the University of Alabama would support her and help her figure out how to move on, even if she couldn’t take Bunn to court. Instead, the institution she loved made her feel even more alone. (UA declined to discuss the situation, citing the “interest of protecting the deceased student’s privacy.”)

The university’s Women and Gender Resource Center was first notified of Megan’s case the July night she reported she was sexually assaulted. A staff therapist named Kathy Echols wrote up an incident report, which listed the alleged perpetrator as “TJ Bunn.” When Megan returned to campus nearly two months later, Echols was the therapist who met her for a counseling session. That’s when Echols told Megan she knew the Bunn family and therefore had to recuse herself from the case, medical records show. (Echols’ own notes, obtained by BuzzFeed News, say she “recognized the family name.”)

“I’m so fucking done I can’t even find a therapist in this town because everyone is ‘really great family friends’” with Bunn, Megan texted one friend afterward.

She had no idea that investigators were also updating the university about the concerns law enforcement had with her allegations. First, they alerted the Title IX coordinator that there were
“issues” with Megan’s case because she’d “admitted she took Bunn’s money” — the $3 — “and a gun out of his car.”

“She also admitted to shooting the gun and we think it hit his house,” Lt. Kip Hart wrote in an email to UA three days after investigators interviewed Bunn.

Before law enforcement sent Megan the letter formally closing her case, Hart once again emailed the Title IX coordinator to update her, saying the case would “probably be closed as unfounded.”

But although Megan and her family were told her criminal case wouldn’t move forward, the district attorney’s office eventually decided to present it to a grand jury after all. There was a catch. In a package deal, the grand jury would also rule on felony charges against Megan for breaking into Bunn’s car and stealing his gun. Internal documents from September 2015 imply authorities didn’t intend to fight too hard on Megan’s behalf: Investigators noted they found “no sexual assault occurred.”

The Rondinis learned the criminal case was back on the table only after they hired an attorney for a potential civil suit. Once they heard Megan might face felony charges, they decided it was best for Megan to drop the civil case, withdraw early from school, and go home to Texas. Megan left so quickly that she didn’t even say goodbye to some of her closest friends. Her depression and anxiety grew worse as her isolation deepened.

“I have no idea who else he knows and has influence over in the system,” Megan wrote to one friend. “The only reason I wanted to press charges in the first place is because I don’t want this to happen to anyone else.”

There are reforms that make it easier to report sexual assault. For example, many states have changed their legal definition of rape so that victims don’t have to prove they “earnestly” fought their rapists, as they do in Alabama. These laws are better designed for sexual assault cases; a recent study found that many rape victims experience “involuntary paralysis” that prevents them from resisting.

Tuscaloosa’s hospital is overdue for the SANE forensic nursing program that’s recommended by Department of Justice and leading national medical organizations. An external review of the Tuscaloosa Homicide Unit’s policies and practices around investigating sexual assault might be in order, as well as an inquiry into how and when prosecutors decide to move rape cases forward. The University of Alabama could strengthen its counseling services; earlier this year, the Rondinis filed a federal complaint against the university for not following up with Megan after Echols recused herself. (The university told BuzzFeed News it would never “refuse treatment or resources to an individual” on the grounds described in the complaint.)

There’s no way of knowing how any of these changes might have affected Megan, who never got her day in court. (The Rondinis have hired the Birmingham-based Maxwell law firm for potential legal action against UA, the Tuscaloosa County Sheriff’s Office, and Bunn himself.) What is clear is that the more she tried to get help, the more afraid and alienated she became. It’s hard not to wonder if, by the end, she wished she had never reported at all.

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In emails to BuzzFeed News, Capt. Hood outlined the holes he saw in Megan’s story, many of which had to do with what he said was her “lack of earnest resistance.” Even though she said she blacked out for part of the night, she “admitted to being coherent.” Even though she claimed she repeatedly told Bunn she wanted to leave, she never said “No.” Even though she went to the hospital and interviewed with police within hours, she didn’t yell for help or call 911, and she never “made any statement or took any action” that convinced investigators she “was not a willing participant in the sexual act.”

The authorities weren’t just required to follow Alabama rape law, Hood said — they were “legally obligated” to investigate the felonies Megan admitted to committing during her interview. Her mental state at the time didn’t matter. Nor, apparently, did the fact that she soon after went to the hospital and told her story to police.

“Although she did not ‘realize’ she committed a crime does not negate the fact that she ‘did’ commit the crimes,” Hood said.

Of course, Megan was never actually found guilty of any crimes: The case against her never made it to a grand jury. But the case against Bunn did — a few weeks after Megan died. The grand jury decided not to prosecute him.

Megan would have graduated this summer. Instead, she transferred to Southern Methodist University in Texas, and she didn’t get better. She missed her best friends, her sorority, and the life she’d left behind. Still, when people asked, she said she was going to therapy and trying to move on. Megan “never wanted any of her friends to worry about her, so nobody really realized how unhappy she was until it was too late,” one of her sorority sisters told BuzzFeed News.

On February 21, 2016, Megan asked one friend via text whether she ever felt “like you just don’t want to deal with shit anymore.” “Like every day dude,” the friend wrote back. “What’s up with you? How do you like your new school?”

“I hate it,” Megan wrote back. “I miss how everything used to be.”

The same week, Megan filled out an intake form for SMU’s mental health center, in which she wrote that she thought she would be “better off dead” more than half the time. One question asked if there had been major losses, changes, or crises in her life. Megan wrote: “Raped, bullied by police, changed university.”

She never turned it in. Instead, on February 26, Megan killed herself.

She didn’t leave a note — but next to her bed were the intake forms.
UA student sought after major drug raid

Agents found stash of drugs, $60,000 in cash

By Stephanie Taylor
Staff Writer

Police say a college student is on the run after narcotics agents found a stash of drugs and nearly $60,000 in cash at his home near the University of Alabama campus.

UA student Kevin James Piccolo, 22, was reportedly attending a music festival in Colorado when agents tried to serve a search warrant at his home, according to court documents.

Agents confiscated nearly 5 pounds of marijuana, LSD, DMT, MDMA, Ketamine and cocaine, which they said has a street value of $18,420. Piccolo's roommate told officers he was aware of drug transactions, but "didn't know 'El Chapo' lived next door," according to the documents filed by the Tuscaloosa County District Attorney's Office.

Piccolo was reportedly attending a music festival in Colorado when agents tried to serve a search warrant at his home, according to court documents.

Agents contacted Piccolo by phone, and they reported that he claimed the drugs were for personal use. He said that the extraction equipment in his closet was to extract spearmint, mint and orange extracts, but agents didn't find any extractions other than marijuana wax and oil in the apartment, according to the District Attorney's Office.

Piccolo's roommate is facing no charges, and Piccolo told agents that he played no part in the transactions.

The office filed a forfeiture request with the Tuscaloosa County Circuit Court last week, seeking to seize the cash and turn it over to the state.

WANTF asked that anyone with information about Piccolo's location contact CrimeStoppers at 205-752-7867 or WANTF at 205-248-4770.

Reach Stephanie Taylor at stephanie.taylor@tuscaloosanews.com or 722-0210.

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high-grade marijuana valued at $17,500, 2 grams of cocaine valued at $200, a half-gram of Ketamine valued at $70, 1.5 grams of DMT valued at $250, 4 grams of MDMA in powder and pill form valued at $400, LSD, paraphernalia and $59,400 in cash.

Court documents indicate that the agents found parchment paper, on which marijuana wax and oils are stored. The officers located a locked Pelican case, which they believe was used to extract marijuana wax from green buds.

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A health care giant in Bham is retiring

One of the most influential executives in Birmingham's health care scene will retire later this year.

Dr. Edward E. Partridge, who has served as the director of the University of Alabama at Birmingham Comprehensive Cancer Center since 2007, will be retiring from the position at the end of July. UAB is conducting a national search to find his successor.

In addition to his current role, Partridge served as professor of obstetrics and gynecology at UAB, in addition to previously serving as director of the division of gynecologic oncology. He also holds the Evalina B. Spencer Endowed Chair in Oncology.

During his time as director of the Comprehensive Cancer Center, Partridge helped further cement UAB's status as a global leader in cancer care through a number of programs, partnerships and initiatives.

"Ed Partridge has embodied the role of this institution in the Deep South," said Dr. Selwyn Vickers, senior vice president for medicine and dean of the School of Medicine at UAB. "His career is marked by passion for taking care of patients with cancer, particularly GYN malignancies. He has developed a national and international reputation for health disparities and cancer care."

One of his key priorities was improving cancer care among the African-American community in the South and was principal investigator of the Deep South Network for Cancer Control.

He played a number of roles in initiatives and programs geared toward reducing health care disparities in the region – an interest he picked up after volunteering with the American chapter of the College of Surgeons and the American Cancer Society.

"That's when I first got exposed to early prevention and early detection and the importance of that," Partridge said during last week's State of the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center address.

Under Partridge's leadership, UAB established a number of key partnerships and initiatives. That includes last week's announcement of a deal with Strata that will provide tumor profiling to patients with advanced or rare cancers.

It also includes the development of a cancer navigation program that many believe could be a national model for cancer care.

"We've demonstrated that we can take lay navigators and community advisers and they can assist the nation and the world for that matter in achieving cancer health equity," Partridge said.

Over the course of his career, Partridge said he learned from mentors and colleagues that some of the primary ingredients for eliminating those disparities are creating trust, eliminating bias and sharing power.

Those were ingredients that weren't necessarily at the forefront of Partridge's life growing up in a segregated town in rural Alabama.

"I was as far away from those as you can be as an 18-year-old graduate of Demopolis High School," he said. "So, all the work I've done has had a pretty profound impact on me personally, also."

Partridge, who earned his M.D. from UAB in 1973, has spent nearly five decades focused on health care and improving cancer care. He said efforts to combat health disparities will continue under the center's new leadership.
Huntsville Chamber launches competition to advance Dream Chaser applications

By: Jerry Underwood

The Huntsville/Madison County Chamber launched an international competition with the European Space Agency (ESA) today at the Paris Air Show.

The competition is part of ESA’s Space Exploration Masters program, which seeks business innovation and technology transfer ideas that utilize space infrastructure. The Huntsville chamber has partnered with Astrosat, a Scottish aerospace company, to identify commercial applications for Sierra Nevada’s Dream Chaser beyond crew and cargo transportation.

The Dream Chaser is able to land on conventional runways, and the Huntsville International Airport is pursuing landing permits for the vehicle to build a market for Huntsville’s space payload operations assets and expertise.

Landing the Dream Chaser is part of the chamber’s strategy to capture some of the $120 billion commercial space market. Huntsville officials announced their bid to secure Dream Chaser landings at the Paris Air Show in 2015.

The Huntsville/Astrosat prize includes business mentoring, a trip to Huntsville to meet with local aerospace companies, a tour of the US Space and Rocket Center, and a year’s worth of incubation and office space from BizTech.

The winner will also benefit from ongoing networking opportunities through the Chamber and Astrosat in the aerospace community. The prize is valued at 35,000 Euros (approximately $39,000).

The competition is aimed at graduate and doctoral students, entrepreneurs, startups and small companies that would benefit from the mentoring and networking prize.

There are five competitions in all including other sponsors such at Airbus, Luxembourg, and Merk. The winners of the individual competitions will be eligible for a grand prize sponsored by ESA to be announced in November.

The winner of the Huntsville/Astrosat prize will be announced in October at the Space Tech Expo in Bremen, Germany. The chamber is leading a group to Bremen including the US Space & Rocket Center, UAH, Teledyne Brown, and the North Alabama International Trade Association.
This aquatic treadmill is making waves in UAH research

By: Christine Mitchell

The University of Alabama in Huntsville is using a state-of-the-art piece of equipment to make waves in their research. That equipment is a combination of a small, self-contained pool and a traditional treadmill, creating an aquatic treadmill.

"We allow it to use the buoyancy of the water, or basically the pressure it exerts on the body and the support, as well as combine the normal physiological benefits that you’d get from using a treadmill to provide optimal training for high-level athletes. What we’re using it for is kind of groundbreaking research on special population groups," explained Dr. Ryan Conners, an assistant professor in the Department of Kinesiology.

UAH is continuing research on pre-diabetic, Type 2 diabetes, and lower-limb amputee patients, and the benefits the aquatic treadmill can provide.

“We can monitor and change the speed of the treadmill. We can also change the height of the water," Dr. Conners said.

This uncommon equipment is beneficial in different ways for different people. From physical therapy for disabled and handicapped people, to training for professional athletes.

“Definitely a high level workout, and the wide variety of factors that we can control make it very functional," Dr. Conners said.

If you’re a pre-diabetic, lower-limb amputee, or have Type 2 diabetes and are interested in taking part in this research, you can email Dr. Conners at ryan.conners@uah.edu or just call the UAH Department of Kinesiology at (256) 824-6007.
UAH Expert: Drones, People Could Co-exist

By: Dave Helms

Regular readers of Benchmarks may be familiar with this writer’s expectation that man and machine will eventually do cataclysmic, carbon vs. silicon, loser-leave-town battle. Imagine, then, the writer’s concern when University of Alabama in Huntsville researchers told lawmakers in Washington D.C. that the risk to humans posed by the operation of small drones buzzing overhead may have been previously overestimated.

David Arterburn, director of the Rotorcraft Systems Engineering and Simulation Center at UAH, made his report on behalf of UAH and four other universities. The remarks centered on drones that weigh less than 55 pounds and must currently be flown by operators who can follow the drone’s line of flight. Such drones can’t be flown over people who are not involved with their flight operations.

The research found that the lighter materials used to construct that class of drones — usually plastic and foam rather than metal — led to a lower injury potential in the event of crashes and collisions.

Testing showed that the injury potential arising from the kinetic energy of debris in a human-drone impact was smaller than that projected by debris casualty standards used by the national test ranges that previously were being applied to collision research for small unmanned aerial systems, Arterburn says. Debris standards used for the breakup of missiles or space vehicles isn’t appropriate for use in defining standards for smaller drones.

“The collision dynamics of these small vehicles is very different from metal objects,” Arterburn told UAH News. Small unmanned aerial system platforms “are flexible and retain much of their energy, while inelastic metal fragments or objects transfer nearly all of their energy to a person.”

The upshot of Arterburn’s report seems to be that more research is needed on how drones actually operate in flight, as opposed to rockets and missiles. So the days of drones skimming over your head like irritated blue jays are perhaps still a while off.
Always on, always pushing

Alabama commit Hannah Barber picks up Birmingham’s top honor with relentless drive

Gary Estwick  gestwick@al.com

Hannah Barber, AL.com’s 2017 Girls Athlete of the Year in the Birmingham region, is the best because she plays basketball as if her energy level lacks an off switch.

The Energizer Bunny is a fan.

Barber, a point guard, plays basketball like she doesn’t know how to stop attacking or when to slow down. Her energy inspires Homewood teammates, while aggravating opponents, the way she moves, moves, and moves around the floor — always engaged, always ready.

“I think a lot of it was instilled in me when I was a kid,” said Barber, an Alabama women’s basketball commit in the Class of 2018. “My parents emphasized that whatever you’re trying to do, whether it’s academics or athletics, it takes hard work. Without that, you’re not going to get anything.”

And Barber wants it all.

Barber ended the 2016-17 high school sports season as the best in Birmingham because she returned Homewood basketball to the top of Class 6A. After winning a state title as a freshman (2015), Barber’s team reached the 2016 title game, losing to LeFlore.

“We knew what it felt like to win one,” Barber said. “We knew what it felt like to fall short.”

No doubt, Barber knew which road Homewood wanted to repeat in the 2017 finals. She completed the journey with a 52-49 victory against Hazel Green.

Barber earned AL.com Girls Basketball Player of the Year honors after averaging 12.1 points, five assists and 2.5 rebounds. She also shot 89 percent from the free-throw line, made 68 3-pointers and logged 100 steals.

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she worked at becoming even more coachable and implementing the knowledge into her game. Sure, first-year coach Kevin Tubbs was an assistant under JoVanka Ward (now head coach at Thompson), but Barber said she had to adjust.

And she will adjust again, as she's got another season of high school basketball remaining. Tubbs left Homewood after winning the 2017 state title to enter private business in Seattle. Samford assistant coach Jazmine Powers is the new head coach at Homewood.

It's not surprising that her favorite NBA player is Kobe Bryant, who retired after the 2016 season.

"He has a killer mentality," Barber said of Bryant. "Doesn't matter who it is. He's going to go out and do whatever he can to (dominate) whoever he's playing against. Doesn't matter who you are."

Barber was the first player to commit to Alabama women's basketball's Class of 2018. Because of this, she embraces her role as a Roll Tide ambassador.

"I can take responsibility and whoever they're recruiting, try and get them to come on the boat," Barber said. "Try to get them to see what I saw in the program."

So far, so good.

Barber said she had conversations with Lauderdale County forward Allie Craig Cruce and fellow point guard Lafayette Christian (La.) Megan Abrams, a four-star recruit — each of whom are now Alabama women's basketball commits.

She's also taking the summer off. Well, kind of. For the first time in several years, Barber will not play AAU basketball. Instead, she's concentrating on workouts that she believes will prepare her for SEC basketball.

As usual, she'll be moving around. A lot.
Auburn, UAB trying to schedule matchup

John Talty  jtalty@al.com

Auburn and UAB would both like to play each other in football but the two sides haven’t found a date that works yet.

“We’ve had conversations with them,” Auburn athletic director Jay Jacobs told AL.com. “We’d love to play them again if we can work it out on the schedule, but finding a common date is often difficult to do some times.”

“I think it will happen,” UAB athletic director Mark Ingram said. “I don’t know when.”

The schools last played in 1996, a 29-0 Auburn home win. Since UAB announced its football program was returning, Jacobs has stated a desire to play the in-state Conference USA school. However, Auburn already has the majority of its non-conference schedule booked through 2020 including games against Washington in 2018 and Oregon in 2019. It scheduled a two-year series against Southern Miss (2018, 2020) and will play Kent State, Tulane and Liberty in 2019.

UAB, which will play Florida on the road this year, has two non-conference games scheduled against SEC opponents, Texas A&M in 2018 and Tennessee in 2019. It looks like 2020 could be the earliest the two sides could play against each other again.

“It’s really just a matter of both of us having a year where they are looking for a guarantee game and us also needing a game in that year,” Ingram said. “I don’t like to go too far out because I feel like philosophically we are better off waiting.”

Even if years away, Auburn still represents UAB’s best shot to face one of the state’s two SEC schools. Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne made clear at the SEC spring meetings that he wasn’t interested in adjusting the Crimson Tide’s football schedule to play any of the non-SEC in-state schools.

“I think we have a very good model that’s worked well for us and I don’t see that changing,” Byrne said.

UAB will open its 2017 season at home against Alabama A&M in its first game in nearly three years. UAB administrators disbanded the football program in Dec. 2014 only to announce in June 2015 that it would return following significant financial support. In addition to its CUSA slate, the Blazers will play the Gators, Ball State and Coastal Carolina this season.
A big year for Alabama track and field

By Ehsan Kassim
Special to The Tuscaloosa News

Jereem Richards has a spiritual method of preparing for big NCAA track-and-field races for the University of Alabama.

Richards, the junior from Point Fortin, Trinidad and Tobago wakes up on the morning of a race and prays. He prays for everything to go his way and to wake his spiritual mind to make sure he is relaxed throughout the day.

He likes to get to the track early and gets a few runs in, well before his opponents are on the track.

Before the race begins, he comes to the starting line and prays again, to make sure he is focused.

“There are three things I tell myself when I compete,” Richards said. “To stay relaxed, get out of the blocks, whatever race it is, you have to get out hard, and just finish and keep your form when finishing.”

See TRACK, C4
**TRACK**

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Richards had strong show­

ings at the NCAA outdoor

championships earlier this

month, taking third in the

200 meters and sixth in the

4x400 meter relay. Richards

was named first-team All­

American in the 200 meters

and 4x400-meter relay.

Dan Waters, the track-and­

field coach at Alabama, raved

about Richards and said he

believes there is even more

Richards can do in his future

in the sport.

“The great thing about

Jereem is that he is unlocked

potential, he is only going to

get better and better,” Waters

said. “I think that anyone that

watches him run thinks he is

probably the smoothest runner

you can imagine.”

He will be back at home

competing in the Trinidad &

Tobago national champion­

ships on June 22-24 at Hasely

Crawford Stadium in Port of

Spain, Trinidad.

The race presents a unique

opportunity for him to race in

front of his family.

Also racing this weekend is

one of the more decorated ath­

letes in Alabama track history,

Quanesha Burks.

She will compete in the

United States Track & Field

(USATF) Outdoor Champi­

onships from June 22-25 at

Hornet Stadium in Sacra­

mento, Calif.

While Burks enjoys running

and competing, she wants to

also focus on her major of ele­

mentary education and having

an impact with kids.

“Track is something I do

and something I’d like to do

as long as I can, but my heart

is with the kids and making

a big impact on their lives

at a young age,” Burks said.

“I was motivated by one of

my elementary teachers and

they had a big impact on my

life. They believed in me and

encouraged me to be at where

I am right now.”

Burks capped her Alabama

track career with a champion­

ship in the 4x100-meter relay.

For Waters, replacing Burks

as an athlete is possible, but

not the intangibles she brought
to the program.

“We went out recruiting
great athletes and feel like we

might be able to replace her

points,” Waters said. “But

what she does as far as her

leadership and what she did for

the program, there will never

be another Quanesha Burks.”

Overall, 24 Alabama track

athletes received All-America

honors, including 21 first- and

second-team performers.

Along with Richards,

first-team honorees for the

men were freshman Will

Allen (4x400-meter relay),
sophomore Skyler Bowden

(4x400-meter relay), senior

Steven Gayle (400 meters,

4x400-meter relay), and

junior Ruebin Walters (110­

meter hurdles).

Along with Burks, earning

first-team recognition for the

Crimson Tide women were

freshman Symone Darius

(4x100-meter relay), sopho­

more Stacey Destin (high

jump), senior Diamond Gause

(4x100-meter relay), freshman

Takyera Roberson (4x100­

meter relay) and senior Lakan

Taylor (pole vault).
Avery Johnson excited about veteran leadership returning to Crimson Tide's 2017-18 squad

By Aaron Suttles
Sports Writer

Avery Johnson stood off the court wearing the smile of a confident man Tuesday morning amidst the chaos of 350 campers at the Coach Avery Camp inside Coleman Coliseum.

The Alabama men's basketball coach was excited about the growth of his third-annual camp, but he was also enthusiastic about his 2017-18 team.

The jubilation was equal parts a veteran core coming back, Braxton Key deciding to return and an uber-talented freshman class already on campus.

Led by Collin Sexton and John Petty, that freshman class, which also includes Alex Reese, Herb Jones and Galin Smith, enlivened an already lively Johnson.

“‘They’re young and very energetic,’” Johnson said. “‘They’re all different. It’s amazing to see all their different personalities, the way they recover from practices or weight training sessions or when we run on the track. Half of them are happy, half of them aren’t but it’s pretty cool to see how they’re picking up on things.”

The team is limited in the hours it can work together on the court (Johnson said the team is allowed two hours per week).

However, the young guys have made an early impression.

“We had one little session where we allowed — for about 30 minutes — the freshmen to play against the upperclassmen,” Johnson said. “Pretty interesting little match there. The See CAMP, C5

Of course it’s not all about the freshmen. Dazon Ingram and Braxton Key return as sophomores ready to help take the team to the next level. Throw in Riley Norris and Donta Hall and Johnson knows he’s onto something.

“I think the key part is not the freshmen; the key is our returning players,” Johnson said. “Everybody is talking about the freshmen and I’m great with that, but it’s Riley Norris and Braxton Key and Avery Johnson Jr. and Dazon Ingram and Donta Hall. It’s their responsibility and we can’t forget about those guys. They have the experience but at the same time, with the way our freshmen are picking up things, even though it’s still early, they’ll have their opportunities.”

Asked specifically about Hall, who begin to display a post game toward the end of last season, Johnson joked his big man finally took his advice.

“He started shooting his left shoulder jump hook in the SEC Tournament and I’ve been trying to get him to shoot that jump hook for two years,” Johnson said. “He waited until the last couple games of the season. I think his deal is having confidence in his body. You know, Donta came to us at 192 pounds and now he’s up to 220, 230 pounds, so just having that confidence to make moves against bigger guys was big for him.”

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An emotional homecoming for Baribeau

Rachel Baribeau has seen much of the nation in a fast-paced career as a radio host, a producer of content for numerous college football outlets, a sideline reporter for Fox broadcasts of Atlantic Coast Conference games and now, wearing yet another of her many hats, as a motivational speaker to college players.

Speaking to the University of Alabama team on Thursday as part of Nick Saban's annual series of presentations to the players on topics outside of football was something different, she says.

"It was a homecoming, sort of coming full circle," Baribeau said. "I feel like I grew up here. It was emotional walking through that building, talking to guys where I used to interview them."

Full disclosure: Baribeau worked for TideSports.com, the UA sports website of the Tuscaloosa News, from 2009-2011, reporting on everything from national championships to tornado recovery. She was the co-host for my podcast in those years, a thankless task at which she excelled.

"When I was hired, a lot of the people here viewed me as 'that Auburn girl,'" says Baribeau, an AU graduate. "But this is where I learned to be objective, to really be a reporter. I wrote a letter to Coach (Nick) Saban after I left for being tough on me sometimes, like he is with reporters. That helped me grow so much. And I had my picture taken today in front of Mal Moore's portrait, because he was always so helpful to me in my career."

One of her great inspirations, Baribeau said, was another former Alabama player, the late Kevin Turner.

"I met KT in Birmingham and it changed my life," she said. "It gave me another purpose."

See HURT, C4
HURT

Continued from C1

beyond a career. When I saw him, what struck me was how, with everything that ALS (the disease that eventually took Turner's life last year), it never owned him. That was what gave me the idea for the presentation I gave today, called Changing The Narrative."

Baribeau's speech touched on everything from dealing with the media to preventing domestic violence, in which she addressed events in her own life.

"I told them that because of television, I'm recognized but some people ask me if college football players aren't just like they see in the headlines," she said. "The headlines (about college football) were so bad last summer I wanted to cry. But instead I decided to speak to teams about how they can change that. You don't have to let it define you, just like Kevin Turner didn't let his disease define him.

"I've spoken all over, from FSU to Clemson, Ohio State to Florida International. Earlier this week, I spoke at Baylor which was also very emotional. The narrative around that program has been terrible, and I understand that, but all those coaches, players and administrators from the (sexual assault) scandal are gone, and the new coach, Todd Rhule, is doing so many good things."

"After I spoke, one of their players sent me a note and thanked me for bringing a positive message. He said 'we thought everyone had forgotten us.' So that meant a lot.

"It was the same thing today. I spoke for about 45 minutes on taking responsibility. I have black-and-white bracelets that I give to players that want that, but I tell them 'don't you dare take that bracelet unless you mean it," unless you are ready to be responsible. More than 90 percent took it.

"They had to hustle off to position meetings after I spoke, but I still had 30 or 40 players come up and hug me or thank me. One player told me that his mom is dying of cancer and he wanted to be a king for her.

"I know in any group you can't reach everyone, but if you reach just one, you can save a career, or an education, or a life. That's what makes it worth it to me."
University of Alabama red-shirt senior Robert Foster suffered lacerations that necessitated 27 stitches over the weekend, the wide receiver announced on social media.

The accident occurred in the parking lot adjacent to the Mal Moore athletic complex, TideSports.com has learned. Foster, riding a dirt bike, was struck by an automobile. Bamainsider.com first reported the news Monday morning.

Foster is poised to have a season many believed he would when he signed with the Crimson Tide out of Monaca, Pa. During the spring, UA coach Nick Saban said Foster needs to have a role on this year’s team.

“Robert Foster had a role on the team two years ago before he got hurt,” Saban said. “Certainly a guy who would be a real plus for us because of the speed that he has, the vertical ability that he gives us on the outside. I think he’s playing better than he did a year ago and hopefully he will continue to improve and have a role on the team. I think we need for him to do that.”

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