

# Everyday Hero: Teen's hygienic aids help women in need, A9

# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

It's Worth Knowing What's Really Going On.

LOCAL IN-DEPTH HELPING HAND

## Atlanta's oldest church ministers to the streets



Immaculate Conception offers daily meals, pantry, shelter to the homeless and needy.

By Shaddi Abusaid | shaddi.abusaid@ajc.com

It was 8 a.m. on a chilly December day when scores of needy Atlantans, many of whom spent the night in sleeping bags, in alleys and under highway overpasses, lined up outside the city's oldest church, seeking a hot cup of coffee and a couple of sandwiches to help get them through the day.

Bundled up in coats, scarves and hats, some had already been waiting outside the Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception since 5 a.m. By 9 o'clock, a full hour before volunteers hand out ham and turkey sandwiches, the line stretched up the block.

Volunteers show up early every weekday morning, eager to feed

their neighbors and share some human warmth amid the bitter cold. Many view their work as a calling, a way to help the less fortunate and practice the teachings espoused in the Bible.

Others, like Frederick Price, see themselves in the faces of Atlanta's

Church continued on A6

**Above:** Angela Fairman, who is homeless, reacts with gratitude after receiving a cup of coffee and a bag of sandwiches Dec. 14 outside Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception church. PHOTOS BY MIGUEL MARTINEZ /MIGUEL MARTINEZ/JIMENEZ @AJC.COM



**'They come in and they shop themselves. It's sort of like a miniature grocery store.'** Volunteer Janice St. Hilaire (left) says of the church food pantry

CONTINUING COVERAGE ELECTION

## GOP activists plot to purge candidates

In two counties, they're out to block 'deceptive' politicians from ballot.

By Greg Bluestein | gbluestein@ajc.com

When Buddy Hill ran his first campaign for solicitor general in Chattooga County, local officials did a double-take as he lined up to qualify for office as a Republican. Back then, the county's lead-

ership was dominated by conservative Democrats, and Hill's 2012 victory became a watershed moment for local Republicans. It was the first time in recent memory a GOP contender had won a countywide race in Chattooga.

As Hill prepares to compete for another term, though, he's ready to wage a legal battle against the local Republican Party that once feted him, outraged at new rules that govern which candidates can run on the ballot with an "R" by

their name.

"If they decide I'm not Republican enough and they try to disqualify me from running, I'll fight it. It's just not right," Hill said. "It denies the voters their power to elect who they want."

It's not an idle concern. GOP committees in Chattooga County and nearby Pickens County have adopted rules that give party leaders the final say on whether

Chattooga continued on A6

TOP LOCAL STORY FIRE

## 'We are alive ... no matter about things' after fire

Apartment blaze leaves residents displaced, but grateful to be alive.

By Cassidy Alexander | cassidy.alexander@ajc.com

Ofelia Lara woke up around 4 a.m. on Christmas morning to a nightmare.

She heard fire alarms, heard someone in the apartment next to hers running downstairs – and when she opened her front door, she saw flames coming out of a nearby window.

She grabbed her three kids, ages 12, 16, and 18, and got out of there. They were crying, she said, and she just kept telling them it was going to be OK.

"We are alive," she told them, "no matter about the things."

The family's unit is one of four at the Balfour Chastain Apartments on Roswell Road that was damaged from smoke and water as firefighters worked to put out the early-morning blaze. Sixteen



Ofelia Lara stands at the door of her apartment on Christmas morning. A fire overnight displaced her and more than a dozen residents. CASSIDY ALEXANDER / CASSIDY.ALEXANDER@AJC.COM

people were displaced. The fire appears to have started in the bedroom of a unit that had been sublet without the knowledge of management, Sandy Springs Mayor Rusty Paul told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution Monday. "The leaseholder has been iden-

Fire continued on A10

INSIDE

## Zoo Atlanta celebrates a Christmas delivery



A Christmas miracle has arrived at Zoo Atlanta in the form of a southern white rhinoceros calf. Mother Kiazi delivered her newborn on Christmas Day and both are doing well, the zoo reported.

The Animal Care and Veterinary Teams at Zoo Atlanta first detected Kiazi's pregnancy in the spring.

"The Zoo Atlanta family is beyond excited about the birth of Kiazi's calf. This birth has been long-awaited news for many months," Raymond B. King, president and CEO, said in a news release Monday. **SEE FULL STORY ON A3**

FROM THE COAST BOOK DEBATE

## 'Obscene' book debate moves from schools to libraries

Effingham County is drawn into culture war over LGBTQ themes.

By Adam Van Brimmer | Adam.VanBrimmer@ajc.com

SPRINGFIELD — The most popular area of this library branch is the children's section. Toddlers crowd a corner for story time. New and developing readers sit at tables and flip through "big kid books" and choose-your-own-adventure novels. Teens browse the stacks for research material for school projects.

Nothing about the activity at the Springfield Library appears controversial. This branch of the Savannah-based Live Oak Public Libraries serves a largely rural part of Effingham County.

Library regulars are predominantly white, middle-class Georgians who value the branch's services and programs.

Yet for several weeks now, the library has doubled as a battleground in the culture wars being waged over LGBTQ-themed books. As has happened in communities across America over the last two years – from the Louisiana bayous to the Shenandoah Mountains and from Michigan to Montana – opponents of LGBTQ titles in Effingham have been expanding the debate over what materials are appropriate in Georgia libraries, from school media centers to public book repositories.

At stake could be the Springfield Library branch's future, as two of the county's most powerful

Books continued on A6

MORE TOP NEWS, A2

### Egypt floats proposal to end war in Gaza, gets cool reception

Plan calls for a phased hostage release and the formation of a Palestinian government of experts to administer the Gaza Strip.



MORE TOP NEWS, A3

### Christians strive to put earthly worries on hold this Christmas

Faithful around the world celebrate the birth of Jesus with an undertone of tension spread by the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.

INDEX

- Classifieds C5
- Comics C6
- Crossword C3
- Inspire C4
- Lotteries B2
- Obituaries A10
- Weather B8

Volume 75, Number 360



## FROM PAGE ONE

### Chattooga

continued from A1

candidates for county office are eligible to run as Republicans.

It's a miniature version of a failed statewide effort by hardline conservatives to enact rules that could have blocked state candidates from qualifying as Republicans if they're deemed to be insufficiently conservative.

Pickens County Republicans adopted the so-called "accountability" platform in August with little outcry. There's been far more backlash in Chattooga County, another GOP safe haven where Gov. Brian Kemp captured 84% of the vote in last year's midterm election.

Chattooga County GOP chair Jennifer Tudor said the rule requires candidates to earn the blessing of a five-member committee to run as a Republican for countywide office, though it can't reject contenders for state or federal seats from running on the party's ballot.

"Should we be forced to accept a candidate who claims to be Republican but supports abortion, gun control, big government and high taxes?" asked Tudor, who added: "Deceptive politicians should not be allowed to take advantage of poor, low-in-

formation voters."

Critics say the system disenfranchises primary voters who often decide the victors in heavily Republican counties. Among the opponents of the rule is Andy Allen, who recently announced he would challenge Blake Elsberry, the county's powerful sole commissioner.

A newcomer to politics, Allen calls himself a "true conservative Republican" but said he fears he'll be disqualified by party leaders who want to protect Elsberry and other incumbents.

"My concern is that a panel of five people would have influence over who is elected in a county of 25,000 people," said Allen, who is considering taking legal action to oppose the rule. "I think that's all sorts of wrong."

#### 'A traitor'

The local overhauls echo a proposal championed by the Georgia Republican Assembly, a conservative faction that has vilified Kemp and others who rejected President Donald Trump's demands to illegally overturn his defeat in 2020.

They tried to force a vote at the Georgia GOP convention this year that would have given the state party's roughly 1,500 delegates the authority to decide who was eligible to run as a Republican in top races.

"If the candidate has shown himself to be a traitor to the principles of the party, then the party can vote to exclude him from qualifying at the next election," was how Nathaniel Darnell, a GRA leader, explained the proposal to supporters.

The plan was sidelined by a coalition of far-right activists and mainstream conservatives who issued dire warnings that it would shift significant power from voters to the state party, which has been riven by internal fissures.

Some of the most intense opposition was driven by Trump loyalists who warned the change could come back to haunt them if moderate Republicans win control of grassroots party infrastructure in the future.

"I believe in the power of the ballot box. I believe that GOP primary voters should decide who they want as their nominee," said Debbie Dooley, a former Tea Party leader. "A small group of activists shouldn't decide it."

#### 'It seems idiotic'

It's unclear if the new local party rules run afoul of state or federal law. Alex Johnson, the GRA president, said there is legal precedence for the policies, including the Wyoming GOP's decision to oust U.S. Rep. Liz Cheney from the party. Opponents say they are

bound to be rejected in court or circumvented by the Legislature.

Nor is it apparent how broadly the so-called "accountability" initiatives will spread. Georgia GOP officials, who have not taken a public stance on the local overhauls, say Chattooga and Pickens are likely the only two counties in the state that have so far adopted such rules.

Pickens County GOP Chairman Christopher Mora said local Republicans weren't out to start a trend when they voted in August to authorize a group of roughly 32 party officials to vet each candidate's eligibility to run as a Republican.

"We were concerned about having to accept just any old person willing to show up with a check and sign the oath," said Mora. "It seems idiotic."

The committee hasn't disqualified any contender yet, though that could change when it meets in January. Those who are rejected can still run as Democratic or independent candidates, he said.

"This isn't some purity test. We're just trying to stop Democrats running as Republicans," Mora said. "The majority of the county is Republican, and we want to make sure the people that are running it are actually conservatives."

#### 'Common sense'

In nearby Chattooga, a political shift is underway. Conservative Democrats who held key county posts have either retired or joined the GOP in recent years, including four office-holders who became Republicans in 2019.

But local activists say the loyalties of the party-switchers aren't in question. Instead, they say they're more dubious of political newcomers without long track records in public office. Tudor, the county GOP chair, compared the vetting process to a job application.

"They make decisions on what happens to tax money taken from you. In many cases they have the ability to create or vote on laws that can possibly change your lives," she said. "It's really common sense."

To Allen, the commission candidate, it's a blatant power grab. He said that the sinister nature of the new rules became obvious when Tudor and other party leaders announced them just hours after he filed paperwork to challenge Elsberry. (Tudor said the timing was a coincidence.)

"I'm about as conservative as they get," said Allen. "This isn't about that. They're trying to infringe on voters' rights. They just want to protect incumbents."

### Church

continued from A1

often overlooked homeless residents, many of whom live in alleys or makeshift shelters just a short walk from City Hall.

"These people are me," said Price, an animated 56-year-old who ate at the church himself during his three years living on the street. "They're just like me."

The Shrine is part of a network of churches, nonprofits and government entities that serve Atlanta's homeless, a population that is often difficult to track. A survey conducted this year found there were at least 2,679 homeless people in Atlanta — 738 people found sleeping on the streets the night of Jan. 23 and 1,941 more living in shelters from Jan. 23 to 30.

The downtown church traces its roots to the 1840s. Though it was spared by Union forces during the Civil War, the church was badly damaged by shelling and had to be rebuilt during Reconstruction.

For decades, the church's outreach programs have been a staple for homeless residents living in the heart of Atlanta. In addition to its daily sandwich ministry, the church offers a food market for those struggling to make ends meet, a Saturday dine-in meal that feeds about 300 people and daily 12-step meetings for folks struggling with addiction.

It also operates a nearby shelter that houses 25 men a night Nov. 1-31.

Several people waiting outside said they don't know what they'd do if it weren't for the donors, church workers and volunteers who help feed them each day.

"I love them. And they love



Troy Stephens, outreach supervisor at Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, passes out hand warmers to people waiting for the church to open its doors for the weekday morning sandwich and snack ministry program Dec. 14 in Atlanta. MIGUEL MARTINEZ/MIGUEL.MARTINEZ@AJC.COM

us," said Angela Fairman, a homeless woman who has been coming to the church for the better part of three decades. "They're just so helpful. They help us with anything we need."

Fairman receives a monthly disability income but said it isn't enough to get a place of her own. Homeless on and off for decades, the 61-year-old has been living outside the past four years.

"I'm too old to be out here," she said. "I have no business being out here in the cold. Nobody with an income from the government should be living on the streets."

Originally from East Chicago, Indiana, Fairman doesn't have family in the Atlanta area. But the people who live along-

side her and the church workers who help them out have become like family over the years, she said.

Price lived across the street from the bustling Fulton County courthouse before Tilla Jones, the church's outreach coordinator, helped him get his own apartment in College Park.

He volunteered at the church every day for a year and took a job there seven months ago. Now, the Mississippi native spends his mornings greeting others while passing out meals and keeping the long line moving.

"I stayed out here for three years," Price said. "I slept on the sidewalk, I slept at the back of the church. That's where they met me, at the back of the church, back there on that ramp."

Price is grateful for the chance to turn his life around and said he'll never forget the opportunity he's been given.

Some of the volunteers say they come in several days a week because they enjoy the camaraderie and meeting new people. Those employed by the church seem to take pride in being able to help the less fortunate.

"The Shrine is a place where we live out the message of Jesus — feeding the poor, housing the homeless," said Joe Sequeira, who works at the church and has been a parishioner there since 1992. "It's a place where everybody is accepted and all of their gifts are welcome. ... You feel like you're making a difference here."

Not all of the people who

rely on the church's outreach programs are homeless. Some have recently fallen on hard times. Others represent Atlanta's working poor, those who have homes but may need an occasional boost to help feed their families.

The church's free pantry is stocked with staples such as bread, meats, coffee, milk and canned goods. Baby formula is also available for those with young children.

Dubbed the "Community Market," it's different than most food pantries in Atlanta because shoppers actually get to pick out what they need, church volunteer Janice St. Hilaire said. People with a place to store and cook their food can come by once a week, picking out up to 10 pounds of frozen food and 15 pounds of pantry items.

"They come in and they shop themselves," St. Hilaire said. "It's sort of like a miniature grocery store."

On a recent Thursday morning, Wallace Goodson was one of the first shoppers in line. Homeless on and off since the 1980s, Wallace said he's been coming to the church for assistance since the early 2000s, starting with the weekend soup line.

The 58-year-old has a place of his own now, but he doesn't work and says his ration of food stamps only goes so far. He comes to the pantry every two weeks, picking up a few essentials that help get him through.

His shopping list typically includes chicken noodle soup, coffee, cereal, cold cuts and cooking oil.

"Every little bit helps, especially since rent is so high," said Goodson, a lifelong Atlantan. "They help me so much, I love 'em to death."

### Books

continued from A1

elected officials — not grassroots activists — lead the opposition.

The current drama opened Nov. 21 when Effingham County Commissioner Roger Burdette suggested defunding the library during a commission workshop. He called for steps to be taken to "protect Effingham's children" from what he considers "dangerous" books, specifically those that address gender identity.

Burdette's challenge led to a contentious special called meeting two weeks later. The session fell on the eve of a vote to renew a library operating agreement and was marked by frequent jeering from members of the public in attendance and barely constrained discourse among stakeholders.

One of the officials involved in the discussion, the mayor of an Effingham municipality, accused Burdette of seeking to "demonize" LGBTQ residents.

"This is less about the library and more about fearmongering about children in order to marginalize people who do live in this community," said Guyton Mayor Russ Deen.

Burdette eased his library funding stance the next day, presenting a motion to approve the library renewal agreement. But his objection to the library's inclusion of transgender-themed books and



The Springfield Library, a branch of the Savannah-based Live Oak Public Libraries, is a target of opponents of LGBTQ-related books and is expanding the debate over what materials are appropriate in Georgia public libraries. PHOTOS BY STEPHEN B. MORTON FOR THE AJC

promotion of them through a library reading list focused on diversity and initially branded as the "Read Woke Challenge" remains.

And Burdette has a powerful ally in the County Commission's chairman, Wesley Corbett, who has suggested that "material that goes against biology should maybe be kept under lock and key."

Corbett has suggested that public hearings about the library's collection and controls lie ahead. He did not respond to a request for comment. Reached by email, Burdette requested the interview be conducted after the new year.

Local library officials and advo-

cates fear a renewed assault in 2024. They're aware of action taken against public libraries elsewhere, such as defunding of systems in Virginia and Michigan and efforts to put library funding referendums on voter ballots in Washington and Montana, and note these reasons for concern.

#### Diversity and 'values'

Visitors to the Springfield Library and its sister Effingham branch in Rincon, the county seat, have access to more than 60,000 titles.

According to library statistics, the Effingham branches received three requests to remove LGBTQ-themed

books in the last three years.

"We get more questions about the lack of diversity in materials than we have those complaining about the diversity in our collection," Live Oak's executive director, Lola Shelton-Council, said during the Dec. 4 meeting.

The dearth of protests over Live Oak's collection bucks a national trend: Library book challenges have skyrocketed since 2021, up nearly 40%, according to the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom. The majority of those complaints involved LGBTQ-themed books.

Live Oak Libraries has increased its outreach and promotion of its diverse collection. A 2020 audit showed Live Oak lacked titles written by what Shelton-Council called "underrepresented voices," which include low-income people, Black people, Asians, women, Hispanic people and members of the LGBTQ community.

The library added books from authors in those demographics and compiled a "Read Woke Challenge" reading list of those titles accessible to the public through the system's website. Earlier this month — prior to the Dec. 4 special-called meeting in Effingham — Live Oak rebranded the list as "Read Free."

The move, according to a library spokeswoman, was made "to ensure the recent politicization of the word 'woke' did not damage the challenge's appeal or the

initiative's intent: breaking down barriers to give the community the opportunity to read books that highlight perspectives that differ from their own."

Live Oak officials cite their obligation to maintain a collection that reflects the diversity of their residents. Savannah is home to a vibrant LGBTQ community, and Shelton-Council said more than 1,500 books with LGBTQ titles have been checked out of the two branches since 2021.

"So we know people in Effingham are looking for it," she said.

Shelton-Council's position runs contrary to that of the two Effingham commissioners. Both Burdette and Corbett reference their Christian faith as a basis for their objections, and Burdette said Live Oak Libraries has embraced a "liberal agenda that is opposed to our Effingham values."

The Effingham County Commission is far from united in its dissatisfaction with the library system. Three commissioners have spoken up in support of Live Oak and said they have seen no evidence that the library is promoting political or cultural ideologies. All three expressed concerns about removing or putting controls on LGBTQ-themed literature.

"If we censor one group, where does it stop?" said Commissioner Jamie DeLoach at the Dec. 4 meeting. "Do we censor another group later on?"