



# THE **new** ESTABLISHMENT

BY AMANDA BROADFOOT, BETH GRIBAS, ERICA SPIVEY AND CHERYL WITHROW

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY NIKKI RITCHER



Bay County is on the cusp of a new era – in business, the arts, politics and education. Wise leaders in each of these categories, making thoughtful, reasoned decisions, have brought us to the brink of new opportunity. To those who helped establish this environment of growth, we owe a debt of gratitude. Who will inherit their legacy? Who will face a whole new array of challenges and opportunities?

The New Establishment. **This issue salutes the best of Bay County's bright young leaders.** You'll find in this group business men and women whose influence is felt beyond the borders of our region; political leaders, activists and communicators who give voice to Bay's hard-working citizens; artists and visionaries who help to build a culture of opportunity for our children and grandchildren.

## NEWS QUEEN KRISTEN BERSET



“Being a community leader means having the ability to initiate change and helping someone in need.”

**Did you know that** Miss Florida USA 2004 anchors WJHG's 5 o'clock news? Well, now you do. Kristen Berset was crowned after competing in pageants for only two years.

“I won the title of Miss Florida USA the first time I competed at a state pageant, so it was totally unexpected,” she said. “I had graduated from college just two months before.”

Competing in pageants taught Berset a lot about who she is and the person she is capable of becoming.

“The pageants taught me to never give up on your dreams, no matter how tough it can be at times,” she said.

For Berset, one of the greatest things about holding the title was the opportunity to voice and influence positive thinking in young people.

“I traveled the state promoting my platform, ‘Get Fit Florida,’ teaching children about physical health and fitness,” she said.

Berset sees a bright future for the area.

“Bay County has changed so much since I moved here just four months ago,” she said. “I look forward to seeing how the area will grow in the next few years. I am grateful for the opportunity to work in such a beautiful city, and I think others will begin to see Bay County as more than just a vacation city and start to see it for the opportunities the area can provide.”

As a community leader, Berset accepts the challenge to influence young people in a positive manner.

“I have the opportunity to be a positive role model for young women both professionally and personally,” she said. “To me, being a community leader means having the ability to initiate change and helping someone in need.”

– Cheryl Withrow

MO-  
GUL  
MOM  
LIZ BENNETT



“Everyone can learn to lead, because every one of us has the power to make a difference.”

**Liz Bennett is one half of** Liz and Jane Clothes of Panama City Beach. Liz and Jane Bennett started the business in their garage in 1989 as a way to pass the time. Their clothing line is available locally and in major department stores such as Macy’s and Nordstrom.

“I use my company as a means to enrich community events: donations, fashion shows and fundraisers,” Liz Bennett said. “I am only a phone call away ... Everyone can learn to lead, because every one of us has the power to make a difference.”

Bennett was born in Gainesville, Fla., raised in St. Augustine, and graduated from Leon High School in Tallahassee. When she graduated from Florida State University with a degree in elementary education, she added her name to a waiting list of teachers after moving to Panama City Beach. It was during this time that she met fellow FSU graduate Jane, who was to become her sister-in-law and business partner.

Liz’s husband, Mike Bennett, serves as business manager for the clothing store, and they are the proud parents of three daughters: Rylee, 12; Kia, 11; and Isabel, 7. The family dog, Luca, 17, serves as morale control at Liz and Jane Clothes.

“I would like to see Bay County continue to offer more jobs for all different levels of education and income, and to develop in a way that will encourage our young graduates to remain in the area and become a part of the growth,” said Bennett, who has lived in the county for 18 years. “I look forward to Bay County offering more art and cultural experiences.”

– Beth Gribas

CRE-  
ATIVE  
CHIC  
JANE BENNETT



“While most decisions in the business world are black and white, mine are in living color.”

**Jane Bennett, the other half of** Liz and Jane Clothes, was between design jobs in 1989 when she met Liz Bennett. A Marianna native, Jane had graduated from Florida State University with a degree in interior design and was looking for a challenge.

The two women were “sisters at heart” and later became sisters-in-law as well as business partners. They started out selling unique tie-dyed clothes on the artist circuit and evolved their styles into the classy and comfortable clothing that has found its way into stores around the country.

While Jane Bennett still is a partner in the clothing business, she currently designs interiors for model homes that both women’s husbands are building. She is married to Neel Bennett and is mother to Mallory, 15, a freshman at Mosley High School, and Sam, 12, a sixth-grader at Holy Nativity. The family lives in Panama City Beach.

Active at Woodlawn United Methodist Church, Bennett serves as a Sunday school teacher, Envisioning Team member and member of several boards. She said her idea of a leader is “to guide or influence decisions that best describe what it is we are trying to create. Whether it be clothing, designing homes or interior design, passion drives design. While most decisions in the business world are black and white, mine are in living color.

“With all the growth that we are experiencing (in Bay County), I would like to see a similar growth in the arts,” Bennett said. “From plays to festivals to concerts, a city with diversity of events truly defines a community.”

– Beth Gribas

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**MAR-  
KETING  
GURU**  
CRYSTAL  
CARPENTER  
BULLOCK



“Being a leader means you are secure enough with yourself and your abilities that you are willing to help others make their way to the top with you.”

**A third-generation native** of Bay County, Crystal Bullock speaks with authority when she says, “I think Bay County is the ideal place to live and raise a family, which is why I’ll continue to call it home.”

As the marketing coordinator for People’s First Community Bank, Bullock works at the corporate headquarters in Panama City. She is responsible for managing the coordination of the marketing efforts of the bank’s eight Bay County branches, in addition to its 32 statewide branches.

Bullock started her career in communications at the age of 14 when she worked as a board operator at Talk Radio 101.1.

“I got to be around broadcasting, advertising and radio personalities,” she said. “That’s when I realized the field of communications is where I would focus my studies.”

After graduating from the University of Florida, Bullock worked in Georgia for a while before returning home to work at Gulf Coast Community College, Florida State University – Panama City and, finally, People’s First.

“I would like to see Bay County become a place where young adults relocate to get higher-paying jobs,” she said of her hometown’s future. “Right now, it seems many of our talented natives are moving to other areas to find jobs that pay better salaries, and I wish it were the other way around.”

Bullock currently serves on the communications committee for the United Way of Northwest Florida, as well as the Philharmonic of Northwest Florida. She also is actively involved in the Gulf Coast Media and Marketing Association and volunteers at the Kaleidoscope Theatre.

“I think being a leader means you are secure enough with yourself and your abilities that you are willing to help others make their way to the top with you,” she said.

Bullock now is embarking on a new phase of her life. Crystal Carpenter became Mrs. Brian Bullock in December 2006.

– Beth Gribas

**MR.  
PER-  
SON-  
ALITY**  
SHANE COLLINS



“This community, which has given me a career, has taught me not to be afraid to say yes.”

**At the ripe old age of 14**, Shane Collins began his career in radio.

“Mom drove me to the radio station, WTXT, weekends at midnight so I could do overnights,” he said.

Collins, a Tuscaloosa, Ala., native, has never looked back. Following stints in Alabama, Georgia and North Carolina, Dr. Shane, as he is known to radio listeners, landed the morning show at WPAP in Panama City. With no formal training in broadcasting, he credits his faith for his success.

“The Lord’s hand has been on me since I drew my first breath,” Collins said.

In broadcasting, his role models include Johnny Carson – “I remember propping my eyelids open with toothpicks so I could steal a few jokes from him” – and Bob Kingsley, host of “American Country Countdown.”

“What a voice,” Collins said.

Speaking of voice, much like the country singers he promotes, Collins can belt out a tune or two in his own right. But “it’s just a hobby,” he said. “You’ll never see me on ‘American Idol,’ except in the audience.”

Bay County seems to reinvent itself on an almost daily basis, and Collins can’t believe how the area has changed since he first came here eight years ago.

“Bay County will continue to grow – more jobs, more families,” he said. “We’re on the brink of a brand new airport, which will certainly spur economic growth. I can’t imagine what the next eight years will bring.”

To Collins, the role of community leader has a specific responsibility with many components.

“It means dedication, lending your time and talents, going above and beyond,” he said. “This community, which has given me a career, has taught me not to be afraid to say yes.”

– Cheryl Withrow

## THE- ATRIC FLAIR CARMEN GOMEZ



“Being a leader, a trailblazer, means facing those mistakes and going on, never giving up.”

“It hasn’t always been easy being a woman doing what is usually considered a man’s job – scene construction, lighting and working with power tools,” said Carmen Gomez, a professor in the visual and performing-arts department at Gulf Coast Community College.

Gomez hopes that the inroads she has made in her profession will make it easier for the young women who follow.

“I make mistakes; we all do,” she said. “Being a leader, a trailblazer, means facing those mistakes and going on, never giving up. My mother has served as an excellent role model. She was a single mother of five, and she never quit.”

Gomez met her husband, Chuck Clay, while she was pursuing an M.F.A. at Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas. She chose to keep her maiden name after they were wed because “it was a big part of who I was. I wanted to retain some independence, a sense of self.”

The couple moved to Bay County in August 2003. Gomez secured a job at Gulf Coast Community College while Clay began teaching theater at Bay High School.

They wanted “to see Bay County grow artistically” and started a free summer theater program called “Shakespeare in the Park” in the summer of 2004, using some of their own money to fund it. Kaleidoscope Theater in Lynn Haven has donated the use of costumes the past couple of years.

“Shakespeare in the Park,” performed at Oaks by the Bay Park, continues to grow in popularity each year, operating on a not-for-profit, all-volunteer basis. Actors double as crew; Clay directs the productions and plays bit parts while Gomez focuses on the scene design and construction, as well as the business side of the organization. This summer’s production will be “Hamlet.”

– Beth Gribas

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## THE SINGER AMY HENDERSON



“You have to always stand up for what you believe in, and never be afraid to stand out.”

**Growing up in Panama City,** Amy Henderson has always dreamed of being able to balance her life as her father, performer Calvin Gann, has done for so many years.

“My whole life, I have watched my dad balance his family, career and ministry so well, and I always aspired to be like that,” Henderson said.

After graduating from college at Florida State University, Henderson said she felt an urgency to pursue a career in the music industry.

“There was a defining moment when I knew I was being called to join the ministry,” she said.

Henderson grew up singing solos in the church, and her dream and vision to develop a CD blossomed over time. She recently released her music-ministry debut album, “Letting Go.”

“I was humbled and honored to win the 2006 Emerald Coast Southern Gospel Music Association artist of the year,” Henderson said. Now a full-time teacher, she plans to integrate performing into her life as much as possible. She currently is scheduling performances in North Florida, Georgia and Alabama.

Henderson named three key ingredients that have contributed to her success in music: “my dad’s knowledge in the studio, having parents who are my biggest fans and an incredibly supportive husband.” Being a young leader in the industry, “you have to always stand up for what you believe in, and never be afraid to stand out,” she said.

Henderson said that her vision is eventually to become involved in more events aimed at young people.

“It is important for me to be a leader to the youth,” she said.

– Erica Spivey

**GUID-  
ING  
LIGHT**  
JENNIFER  
JONES



“I am still learning what it means to be a leader. I think that, in itself, is part of it – the still learning.”

**The Bay Arts Alliance** is a phenomenal asset to Bay County, thanks in large part to its executive director, Jennifer Jones.

“I am still learning what it means to be a leader,” she said. “I think that, in itself, is part of it – the still learning. If you are leading, you are going somewhere. Your goal is fixed and the landscape changes as you meet it, so you are learning what you can do to change tactics with the resources at hand or employ new resources.”

Her mother served as a significant role model in her life, Jones said.

“I admire and respect my mother a great deal, and to even come close to being the woman she is would be an admirable goal,” she said.

To further her personal growth, Jones added that she seeks the counsel and mentoring of family friends and work associates who model character traits that she admires.

Jones grew up in Chipley and Wewahitchka before attending college at Gulf Coast Community College and Florida State University – Panama City, where she obtained a bachelor’s degree in music. She began her work at Bay Arts Alliance in 2000 and was promoted to executive director in 2002.

A leader, said Jones, “must have passion for their cause, a sense of accountability and a servant heart.” Actively involved in her church, First Baptist of Panama City, Jones also serves on the advisory board at Bay Regional Juvenile Detention Center and is on the Panama City Centennial Planning Committee. She is beginning to work with the Miracle League project and has served on the board of the St. Andrew Orchestra.

Moving forward, Jones would like to see Bay County “invest in its regenerative resources: people, their minds, their sense of commitment and accountability to the future and each other.”

– Beth Gribas

**THE  
SALES-  
MAN**  
CALVIN  
KILPATRICK



“As a leader, you are only as good at the people that surround you.”

**Calvin Kilpatrick vacationed** on the Emerald Coast for more than 20 years before making it his permanent home in 2001.

“The Emerald Coast has been the best-kept secret for a long time, and no one can keep a secret forever,” he said, adding that once someone visits the area, he or she is certain to return, either as a vacationer or a resident.

A 39-year-old native of Alabama, Kilpatrick graduated from the University of Memphis and the Harcourt School of Business. Now he serves as the director of sales for The Towne of Seahaven, a resort destination in Panama City.

Before taking his current position, Kilpatrick garnered more than 20 years of experience in sales and management while working with exclusive clubs and resort-style community developments.

“With my experience, The Towne of Seahaven is a perfect lifestyle fit for me,” he said. He hopes that his role in the new development will allow him to be a part of something that will change the face of Panama City Beach.

“Bay County has its share of challenges, but with the right leaders in the community that share the same ideas and vision for this area’s future – with the local residents’ best interests in mind – everyone will cross the finish line and achieve their goals,” Kilpatrick said.

“As a leader, you are only as good at the people that surround you,” he said, explaining that it is important to share and respect the history and heritage of Panama City Beach. As an ambassador of the community, Kilpatrick feels a responsibility to discover and communicate so that everyone can share the history for years to come.

– Erica Spivey

THE  
ARTIST  
CHRIS  
MERRIAM



“You must be able to take the risk and make improvements by introducing something new.”

**Thirty-two-year-old Chris Merriam** considers himself more of an inventor than an artist. Innovation is the key to being a good leader, he believes.

“You must be able to take the risk and make improvements by introducing something new,” Merriam said.

“I have always been creative, and I realized my passion for art as a young adult.”

Merriam received major recognition for his work at the age of 18 when the White House exhibited one of his paintings as the winner of the Congressional Art Show. Shortly after that, the Pratt Institute in New York sponsored him to paint with a select group of artists. After college, he began his journey as a traveling artist, making New Orleans his home for a short period before returning to Bay County, where he was born and raised.

Now the owner of the art gallery Gallery Above, Merriam has a multifaceted career. As well as Gallery Above, he also owns a successful graphic design and marketing agency, Fresh Ink.

Merriam said he doesn't feel like an artist is his job; instead, it is more of a calling.

“My goal is to educate people in the community,” he said. “Artwork is not just something beautiful to look at. It is an investment.”

It has once been said that art is something that defines a community. Merriam eventually wants to see public art in Panama City – “whether that is statues and sculptures in the park, bricks that make a foundation for something, or different creations of architecture,” he said. – *Erica Spivey*

THE  
ACTIV-  
IST  
JANICE LUCAS



“I don't believe in personal attacks, and you can't be a leader when you are butting heads with someone.”

**To those who know her best,** Janice Lucas has displayed a strong work ethic, resolve and a passion for education throughout her career. A teacher at A.D. Harris High School, she previously worked as an educator at Gulf Coast Community College for 11 years.

So what made her enter the world of politics? Personal conviction.

“When I was taking note of the candidates that were running for state representative, I realized I couldn't criticize someone that at least had the chutzpah to stand up for what they believed,” she said. That realization gave her a sense of conviction to get involved politically. She ran as a Democratic candidate for State Representative, District 6, in last year's election to replace Allan Bense.

Running a clean campaign wasn't hard for Lucas. Instead, that is just who she is.

“I don't believe in personal attacks, and you can't be a leader when you are butting heads with someone,” she said. In her view, a leader is someone who is open to constructive criticism and knows how to heed advice.

“You must have an internal compass, discernment, be self-reflective and have a sense of conviction,” Lucas said.

A lifelong Democrat, she recognizes the many challenges she faces and feels confident she will continue to excel in overcoming obstacles. She has stated publicly that “she will be back.” When asked to elaborate, she responded that “I plan to run in 2008, but I haven't decided what position I am going to pursue.”

Many of Lucas's accomplishments have been recognized. Developing beneficial projects and being involved in many civic, community, charitable and professional organizations has allowed her to prepare a sound foundation and be a core leader in Bay County.

“I believe Bay County is fertile ground and ripe for the planting,” she said. “What we are can become as a community is yet to be seen.”

– *Erica Spivey*

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THE **new** ESTABLISHMENT

THE  
REPRESENTATIVE  
REP. JIMMY  
PATRONIS



“I’m trying my best to improve life for each person across the spectrum in our community.”

**Newly elected to the** Florida House of Representatives, Rep. Jimmy Patronis, R-Panama City, has set many admirable goals for himself and his constituency since he was elected last November.

“My goal is to increase the income and decrease the costs of people living in District 6,” he said. “In order to do that, I believe we need to provide current and future employers with business opportunities, which will result in a great salary and benefit package for our citizens. If our citizens’ cost of living here continues to increase with taxes and insurance, income increases will be eroded and we’ll be no better off.”

Patronis also believes that students in Bay County need guidance in order to compete in college or the workplace when they graduate.

“Regardless of which path they choose, my goal is to help equip them so they are a successful asset to our area,” he said. “Therefore, I’m trying my best to improve life for each person across the spectrum in our community.”

Patronis credits his parents as the people who most positively influenced his life.

“Probably the greatest foundation they laid was that of humility and kindness,” he said. “Their examples have molded me into someone different than what most people would expect. I hope as Katie and I have children, we can pass those lessons on to our children.”

As a member of the Legislature, Patronis sees his role as that of a sergeant-at-arms.

“My responsibility as a public servant for our district is to stand watch over regional and statewide changes that can affect or be affected by our area,” he said.

“I will consider my time well spent in Tallahassee if there are improvements in our area so that families generally feel they are more satisfied at that point than they have been previously.”

– Cheryl Withrow

THE  
SURGEON  
MICHAEL  
TAYLOR, M.D.



“I think the sky is the limit with pediatric surgery here in Bay County. We still have a lot of work to do.”

**Although he refuses the label** of leader, Dr. Michael Taylor said he feels “privileged to be the only pediatric surgeon (in the area) and have the responsibility for taking care of the surgical needs of this area’s children.”

Bay County is fortunate to have him in our midst. Licensed as a physician by the state of Florida in 2003, Taylor is board-certified in general surgery and carries certifications in pediatric advanced life support and advanced cardiac life support, among others.

Because he loves interaction with children, he initially thought he would become a pediatrician. However, during medical school, “I fell in love with surgery, and during surgery residency it became clear that my calling was in the field of pediatric surgery,” he said. “I kind of put the two together.”

Medical technology advances at a phenomenal pace, making the area’s future bright.

“I think the sky is the limit with pediatric surgery here in Bay County,” Taylor said. “We still have a lot of work to do. We need more pediatric specialists, and we need to bring in more patients from surrounding counties that right now are going to Pensacola, Birmingham, Gainesville and Jacksonville.”

Emotionally, though, dealing with children presents special challenges.

“Usually the emotional aspects of my job are very positive, because kids typically do very well with surgery and recovery,” Taylor said. “When things don’t turn out well, it is difficult, it is sad. But you learn to cope, you empathize with the parents, and you try and help any way you can.”

– Cheryl Withrow