

Desktop  
Inside Teri Bowers' office

Home  
Kitchen trends

Artists in Residence  
Vintage Wildflowers

October 2011

# TulsaPeople



Eight-year-old fiddler  
Keaton Cunningham

## FIDDLING PHENOMS

Talented young musicians  
take center stage

## CHEFS' SECRETS

Inside local tastemakers' kitchens  
+ Their favorite recipes

REAL WEDDINGS  
Tulsa brides and grooms

BEHIND the SCENES  
A look back at 25 favorite covers



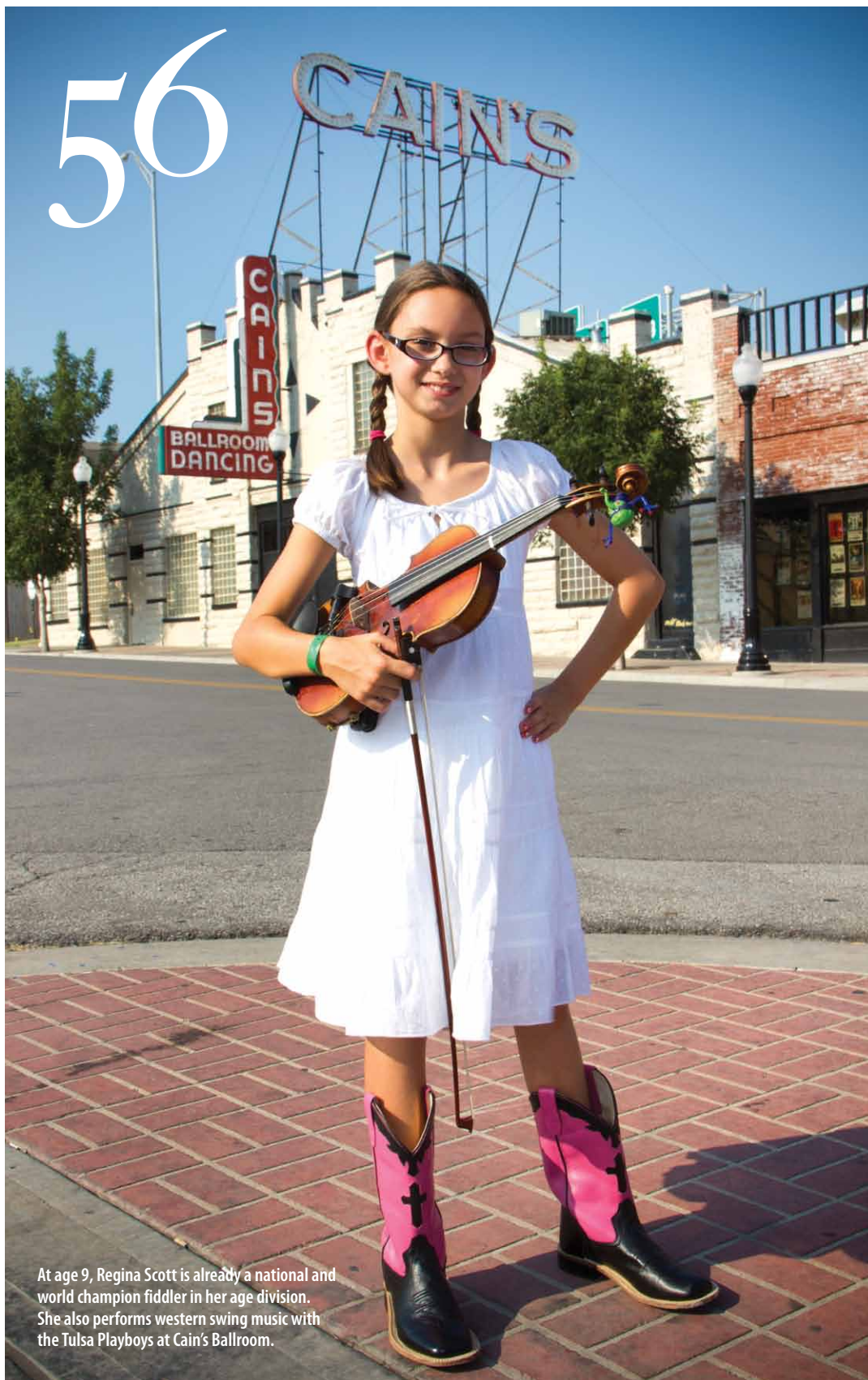
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Writer Scott Pendleton with wife Virginia and daughters Marina and Emma Jane

## Extras galore!

Check out this month's feature on the rise of fiddlers in Oklahoma ("Go With the Bow," p. 56), then visit TulsaPeople.com for an exclusive video featuring Scott Pendleton and his family band. We also have extended photo galleries to accompany several of this month's stories — featuring beautiful butterflies, Tulsa's oldest firehouse and enough baseball memorabilia to open a museum.

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SPURRED BY ITS WESTERN SWING LEGACY, TULSA HAS BECOME A TALENT FACTORY FOR A NEW GENERATION OF FIDDLING PHENOMS WHOSE GIFTS WILL BE DISPLAYED AT THIS MONTH'S OKLAHOMA STATE PICKING AND FIDDLING CHAMPIONSHIPS AT THE TULSA STATE FAIR.

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# BY SCOTT PENDLETON

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**"HAS FRANK KILLED HIS FATHER YET?"** It's our standard question when entering the back door of the Tulsa Spotlight Theatre on a Saturday night.

The response\* from cast member **Larry Stockard** means that in minutes we will kick off "The Olio," the variety show that\* follows the evening's melodrama, "The Drunkard."

The Pendleton Family Fiddlers — teenage sisters **Emma Jane** and **Marina**, backed by parents **Virginia** and me — take our places behind the curtain.

Out front, emcee **Priscilla Mayfield** reels off our credits for the audience: National TV appearances. Local TV regulars. On stage with **Lyle**



**The Rockin' Acoustic Circus:**  
**Zac Hardin, Eric Dysart, Rick**  
**Morton, Emma Hardin and**  
**Sterling Abernathy**



Photo courtesy of Rockin' Acoustic Circus

**Lovett.** Shows with **Jana Jae.** Entertainers at galas honoring **Garth Brooks, Toby Keith** and **Vince Gill.** Fiddle championships in four states. An original recording on iTunes, "Wild Rivers Flow."

Although we've been a family band for eight years, my day-job mind is still boggled by our unforeseen musical ride. How did all this happen to us?

The short answer is: Tulsa. And it's not just happening to us but to many area youth — "it" being prize money, trophies, high-paying gigs, guesting with professional bands, television spots and about anywhere else red carpets may lead.



The performance opportunities for young fiddlers exceed those for all other instruments combined. Learn one fiddle tune and someone will push you on stage.

When it comes to fiddling, Tulsa has all the components of a talent factory. As a result, the city is becoming known nationally as much for producing fiddle phenoms as for aircraft windshields and Bama pies.

Not so elsewhere. For example, when they laid siege to the Kansas State Fiddling and Picking Championship a few years ago, "the Oklahoma kids just knocked our socks off," organizer **Gayle Sigurdson** marveled at the Sooner rout that unfolded.

If you get out of the house much, you've surely seen some preposterously young fiddler step up to a microphone he or she can barely reach. Perhaps it was 8-year-old **Keaton Cunningham** performing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a local rodeo. Or **Regina Scott**, 9, a national and world champion in her age division, performing with the Tulsa Playboys at Cain's Ballroom. Maybe you caught teenager **Jake Duncan** and the A-Bar Bunkhouse Band at the Fort Worth Stock Show. Or **Evan Alexander** opening for the Round Up Boys at the Nowata Opry. Maybe

you saw **Douglas** and **Michael Thompson** of the band Oklahoma Stomp.

Perhaps you took in the Rockin' Acoustic Circus' recent show at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center, featuring fiddler **Eric Dysart** and mandolin slinger **Sterling Abernathy.**

An annual opportunity to see these and Tulsa's many other already-risen fiddle stars is almost upon us. All paths cross Oct. 7-9 at the Tulsa State Fair, host of the Oklahoma State Picking and Fiddling Championships.

Novices are warmly welcomed, too, and get plenty of encouragement. Every kid fiddler (age 16 and younger) wins at least \$10, on the theory that finishing 15th doesn't sting when you can still show off your 10-spot to your classmates. It's all about motivation.

"Come and do it. See what it feels like," urges Bartlesville ninth-grader **Paige Victoria Park**, the current junior champion.



The thriving local fiddle scene, of which the Tulsa State Fair is a key element, has its roots in the music of **Bob Wills.**

Oh, the stories Oklahoma's older folks tell: How they sold chickens to the grocery store to earn the price of a Texas Playboys ticket. How they collected drip gas from oil wellheads to fuel the trip from the farm to the Tulsa show, or else misused the ration cards that Uncle Sam intended

for rural America's (believe it or not) gas-powered washing machines. And then, how they would stand 10-deep at the Cain's Ballroom stage to watch the charismatic Wills fiddle "Don't Let the Deal Go Down."

Wills' individual acts of generosity, both with his money and his time, will never be matched by an artist of his stature. That spirit flowed through Wills' music and soothed the hard times for millions of devotees.

In 1975, two weeks after Saigon fell and mere months before **Bruce Springsteen** released "Born to Run," Wills turned in his fiddle for a harp and wings.

Times and styles had changed radically, and the King of Western Swing was gone. Yet the kingdom remained intact. Those who had taken comfort from fiddling through the Depression and World War II years joined to nurture and preserve that music, incorporating as the Oklahoma State Fiddlers in 1975.

Chapters opened around the state. Tulsa's chapter took responsibility for holding a fiddle championship. Then-chapter President **Ed Richmond**

**Current interest in fiddling has its roots in the western swing legacy of Bob Wills, a frequent performer at Cain's Ballroom.**





(whose keyboardist son, **Walt**, is touring with **Eric Clapton**) gained the support of the Tulsa State Fair right from the start. University of Tulsa professors **Guy Logsdon** and **Glenn Godsey** were also instrumental in creating the Oklahoma State Picking and Fiddling Championships. In the 1980s, **Bob Fjeldsted**, guitarist in a '50s doo-wop band who nonetheless admired Wills and his music, relocated from Los Angeles and joined on. Fjeldsted has led the chapter and run the contest — sometimes aided only by his wife, **Vicki** — for the last 22 years.

“It has opened huge doors for kids,” Fjeldsted says of the contest. “The fiddle players can show their wares.”

With an event organized by Wills’ fans, and performance space and prize money courtesy of the Tulsa State Fair, the next need was to interest kids.



As elsewhere, T-Town’s youth had gone with the flow: rock, disco, grunge, synth pop. There were white-tablecloth Tulsans who preferred the highbrow arts their mothers enjoyed back East and brought with them when their oil-speculator husbands moved to this roughneck city. Never fans of hard-drinking, cigar-chomping Wills, they steered their children into classical music.

Enter the “First Lady of Country Fiddle”: **Jana Jae**. A national fiddle champion who



**Keaton Cunningham, 8**, is already a seasoned performer, playing the National Anthem at local rodeos. As to her future in fiddling, Keaton says, “I think I would like to be a musician. That would be very, very awesome and cool.”

Around the same time, Guthrie fiddle great **Byron Berline** started the Oklahoma International Bluegrass Festival in Guthrie. Every year, the 501(c)3 raises thousands of dollars to support youth through music scholarships and continuing music education opportunities. The impact of Berline and Jae is seen in the sizzling picking and fiddling contests at the Tulsa State Fair.

Their impact also is seen in the younger fiddlers they have inspired.

**Mark O’Connor**, a nationally prominent fiddler and composer from Seattle, first met Berline in 1974 at a festival in Langley when O’Connor was 12. He says he not only won the fiddle contest, with Berline backing him on guitar, but he also first played on stage with a then-16-year-old **Vince Gill**.

In 1976, O’Connor won the Oklahoma State Fiddling Championship, and by 1981, he was performing at Cain’s Ballroom as part of *The Dregs*.

“I knew I was on an historic stage because the great Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys played there,” he says.

Now, O’Connor is inspiring a new generation of music students through his O’Connor Method for violin and strings.

“Some of the lessons I give in my method, and some of the tunes I feature, I learned myself throughout my travels around the country, and my Oklahoma experiences as a young player contributed to my method,” he says. “I am happy that several teachers, such as **Kathy Rad**, **Karen Harmon** and **Jody Naifeh** in Oklahoma, are certified teachers in my method, and wonderful organizations like the Tulsa Symphony have sponsored events that teach my method for strings to young people in Oklahoma.”

As to why young musicians are attracted to fiddling, Jae says, “It’s infectious.”

**Eric Dysart**, the fiddler for the *Rockin’ Acoustic Circus* and a three-time junior champ at the Tulsa State Fair, is thrilled by “definitive” improvisational techniques by fiddle icons such as **Vassar Clements**. When you hear sliding vibrato,

became the first female instrumentalist in a big-time country band, Jae went on to stardom on TV’s “Hee Haw.” Then she established herself as a national touring act and made Tulsa her home base about three decades ago.

Besides being a high-energy performer, Jae is a powerful catalyst. While living in California, she started a school violin and string orchestra program that mushroomed to 250 participants in one year. Tulsa fiddling, she realized, needed a similar boost.

She launched a festival and camp for fiddling in nearby Grove about 15 years ago. Her Grand Lake National Fiddle Fest exposes young fiddlers to some of the best players in the nation. And the *Jana Jae Fiddle Camp* over Labor Day weekend brings kids together with such fiddle greats as **Rick Morton** of *Tractors* fame; world champion fiddler **Jim “Texas Shorty” Chancellor**; and many more.

Jae says she moved to Tulsa to work with music promoter and booking agent **Jim Halsey** and because she felt at home with the city’s musical heritage.

“We have the roots here,” she says. “We’re right in the center of America.

It’s marvelous to build on all the history in this area. Bob Wills, jazz, classical — you’ve got it all. The heritage of America is right here.”



**Fiddlers Michael and Douglas Thompson** of the band *Oklahoma Stomp*



Dysart says, "you just know it was a Vassar lick."



Among adults, no one has worn the Oklahoma crown more than Oologah fiddler **Monte Gaylord** — more than a dozen times in his 34 years of participation.

"I've got the trophies at home to show you," he says.

His students do very well, too, besting even him occasionally.

Gaylord recalls the early years, when the Tulsa contest attracted top fiddlers from out of state, such as O'Connor, **Dick** and **Lisa Barrett**, **Terry Morris** and **Dale Morris Sr.**, along with national champs from Oklahoma, including **Herman Johnson** and **J.C. Broughton**.

But things changed. The contest was closed to non-Oklahomans. Participation and prize money dwindled. Fair management exiled the event from the gorgeous Pavilion building to a few other locations and eventually, around 2000, the hot, dusty Budweiser tent smack in the middle of the raucous midway.

When Fjeldsted requested a different location, fair management moved the event next to Zingo, the roller coaster at the former Bell's Amusement Park.



National and world champion fiddler **Regina Scott, 9**, performs with the **Tulsa Playboys** at **Cain's Ballroom**.

"Somebody would be playing a pretty waltz, and then 'zoooooom — click click click click,'" recalls Morton, a judge that year.

Worse, it poured. Contestants ran to the stage hunched over their violins to keep them dry.

Thankfully, the glory years are back. The Oklahoma State Picking and Fiddling Championships are well into a renaissance that is taking the event to new heights.



The turnaround began in 2008 when **Amanda Blair**, a Jenks and University of Oklahoma grad, took the fair manager post. At her first planning meeting with the fiddlers, they laid out a vision for excellence and boldly asked for the Muscogee Creek Stage at QuikTrip Center (best known for hypnotist acts and Chinese acrobats).

To the fiddlers' amazement, Blair agreed to all requests.

"We're about making memorable experiences," Blair says. "You can't get there by saying no to someone's creative idea."

She and special events coordinator **Linda Burrows** upped the prize money and endorsed the goal of attracting new competitors from around the country. They agreed to cover the cost of out-of-state judges and to expand the picking contest to a full slate: mandolin, finger-style guitar, flatpick guitar and banjo. And this year the fair will add a separate night for a string band contest, allocating \$1,000 for prize money.

Outside sponsors are providing the contest with additional funds.

"We love getting involved with events that encourage all musicians," says **Tom Dittus**, owner of the Blue Rose Café. "But (we) particularly love to see the younger kids who are

# OKLAHOMA state & PICKING FIDDLING CHAMPIONSHIPS 2011

TULSA STATE FAIR

OCT. 7 STRING BAND  
OCT. 8 FIDDLE  
OCT. 9 MANDOLIN, GUITAR, BANJO  
VISIT [WWW.OKFIDDLECONTEST.COM](http://WWW.OKFIDDLECONTEST.COM) FOR MORE INFORMATION.

just beginning learning their chops."

Blair says the Oklahoma State Picking and Fiddling Championships, as much as corndogs and funnel cakes, are a natural fit for the fair, which, for 108 years, has brought together competitions of all types: livestock, art, photography, baking and so on.

Contest veterans, meanwhile, are ecstatic.

"It's inside!" Regina Scott says.

**Jake Duncan** appreciates the quality of judging, which he says is free of any "home cooking" bias against out-of-state contestants (think Texas).

Jae has judged the national championships three times and the Oklahoma event frequently. For 2011, she will evaluate each youngster and offer tips, not to make them better contest fiddlers but better performers.

Bowing, stage presence and how to reach an audience are among the coaching tips she'll offer, adding yet more fuel to Tulsa's star-making machinery.

An obsolete stereotype about fiddlers is that of rough-edged moonshiners — oh, wait. There's still Missouri's **Billy Ward**. You know Ward as the living room fiddler in the harrowing hillbilly thriller (and Academy Award Best Picture



nominee) “Winter’s Bone.”

Talk about born for the role. At contests from Idaho to Missouri, Ward sports a blue jean shirt with the sleeves ripped off at the shoulder, unbuttoned down to the navel and accessorized with a wad of chewing tobacco.

But one night in Kansas, Ward played a tender, heartbreaking waltz whose match I’ve yet to hear. And then I found out he wrote it. This man has my respect.

And not just mine. That disdain classical musicians hold for fiddling, which comes in styles ranging from old time to rock to blues to jazz to Celtic and many more?

“Not anymore,” says Kathy Rad, cellist and education/community engagement director for the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra. “For me, rock is up there with **Bach**.”



The embrace of “alternative styles” by the classical community represents the last piece falling into place. The product is a new breed of musicians who are both sturdy sight-readers and soaring improvisationalists — and hungry for the spotlight.

“They want to be up on stage,” says Jody Naifeh, a Tulsa Philharmonic veteran who has taught violin since the 1970s and founded the Tulsa

Honors Orchestra. “They want to be noticed.”

Naifeh, a musician who is way, way ahead of her time, manifests that “no boundaries” spirit herself. On her 80th birthday, she played late into the night with rock group The Red Alert and the next day at the fair won the senior division fiddle championship for the second time.

Rad, meanwhile, is a member of the Tulsa Rock Quartet.

Jae also sticks up for all styles, not surprisingly, as her parents were Juilliard-trained concert violinists. Oklahoma’s most famous fiddler, it turns out, also participates in a classical quartet and quintet on the side.

“**Beethoven, Brahms, Grieg, Dvorak**,” Jae says.

With all styles of music respected, with scholarships and encouragement from every side, with opportunities and mentors and their own burning ambitions, no wonder young Tulsans are finding their way into so many spotlights.

“I’m hoping to win first place,” says Keaton Cunningham of the upcoming Tulsa State Fair. “And if I don’t, I can learn from the kids who did win.” tp

## WHO'S FIDDLING AROUND?

Fiddling comes in many flavors that **Bob Wills** wouldn't recognize but that are nonetheless delightful. Use Google, Facebook, Reverbnation or local print media to track down these area acts.

- **Jocelyn Rowland Hughes** used to front the heavy metal band Rook, featuring her awesome electric fiddle. Alas, no more. But Hughes has put together the similar-sounding Drive By Sonata. She has a strictly unplugged band, too, called Rock Bachs. You can also catch the Broken Arrow beauty playing solo every Friday at Ti Amo, 6024-A S. Sheridan Road.
- If a western swing melody is deep within your heart, go to Cain's Ballroom once a month (Oct. 18 this month) to hear the Tulsa Playboys, featuring “Tonight Show” veteran and former **Roy Clark** band member **Shelby Eicher** and **Rick Morton**. All ages dance at these gigs. In fact, free dancing lessons take place before the music and during the set breaks.
- For more western swing, the Round Up Boys play somewhere almost every night. And if a kid shows up with a fiddle in hand, bandleader **Bob Fjeldsted** is sure to put him on stage for a tune.
- Bluegrass is well represented by local favorite Klondike5, as well as the wide-traveling Rockin' Acoustic Circus.
- Different fiddle acts rotate through the Tulsa Spotlight Theatre on Saturdays, among them **Regina Scott**, **Sydney Wade** or The Pendleton Family Fiddlers. Call ahead to find out who's up.
- **Eric Ryan-Johnson** leads an Irish band and even mixes in a little reggae.
- **Karen Harmon** plays Irish fiddle in her band, Larkin, and everything from punk to rockabilly with **Pat Cook** in the Electric Rag Band.
- Some of Tulsa's symphony stars reveal their roots in the Tulsa Rock Quartet.

## WHERE TO SEE AND BE FIDDLING

On the third Sunday of each month, Tulsa fiddlers and their accompanists gather to jam. The current location is Ida Red on Brookside from 1:30-4 p.m. Mandolins, acoustic guitars and banjos are welcome, too.

Hosted by the local chapter of the Oklahoma State Fiddlers Inc., these jams are free and open to all. The usual drill is to show up, sign in and, when it's your turn, play a handful of tunes. Don't worry if you didn't bring a backup musician. You'll find

plenty on hand who are ready to play with you.

These jams are a great way for beginners — both kids and adults — to get started playing in public and playing with others. It's all support and no sweat.

If you are coming just to listen, you'll hear from Tulsa's top fiddlers as well. Primarily you'll hear old-time fiddling, with a fair bit of western swing, Irish and bluegrass as well. Yodeling, too.

These jams aren't advertised,

but well-known local virtuoso **Shelby Eicher** keeps an e-mail list. Ask to be added by writing to him at shelbyeicher@cox.net. There's talk of rotating the jam among various other locations around Tulsa. Those on Eicher's list will be those in the know.

A variety of bluegrass jams take place in our area. Visit the Green Country Bluegrass Association at [www.gcba.homestead.com](http://www.gcba.homestead.com) to find out more.