



MISSISSIPPI
MAGAZINE

Golden Magnolias

Southern belles may be demure, but never underestimate the level of their talents and their passion for achieving great things.

WHAT IS A GOLDEN MAGNOLIA?

Well, she is solid in her beliefs, yet has a soft heart. She may be delicate, but she's hardy with a heart of gold. And her perseverance helps her bloom where she is planted. There are so many women in Mississippi who are setting the bar high. Through innovations, dedication, vision, and so much more, the marks they are leaving on the Magnolia State are indelible. Their impacts on our state loom large, and it's our delight to share a closer look at six of these amazing women.

writer SANDRA MASSEY BUCKLEY



Natasha Trethewey

*Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author,
Former Poet Laureate of the United States
and the State of Mississippi*

Mississippi native Natasha Trethewey is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and author who also served two terms as Poet Laureate of the United States and as Poet Laureate of the State of Mississippi.

While Trethewey currently serves as Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois, she spent the first six years of her life in Gulfport. After her parents divorced, she moved with her mother to Atlanta.

Trethewey says she has always loved words—reading, writing, uncovering their origins and being creative with them. However, it was not until graduate school that she discovered her connection and ease with poetry. “When writing, I was thinking at first it would be stories—but they turned into poetry,” she shares.

While she naturally excelled at prose and poetry, she understood that it was a gift. “My father was a poet,” she adds, recalling how she adored listening to him recite his own poems as well as others.

Having achieved incredible success in her field and received numerous prestigious awards, it all culminates as a representation of the broad spectrum of experiences and emotions that shaped her life over the years—especially her mother’s death—making the recognition all the more meaningful. “It means everything to me,” she says. “My

whole project as a writer has made me reconcile with the past, memorialize what has been lost. My work has allowed me to memorialize my mother for her significant role and honor her memory.”

Trethewey’s continued dedication to education and literature serves as a platform for her encouragement of others to embrace the world of words. “Read, read, read!” she says. “Fall in love with books. Fall in love with words. Spend time looking at the Oxford English Dictionary, and learn the history of words.”

Trethewey, who often visited family in Gulfport after moving away, cherishes many of her Mississippi memories and credits them with who she is today. “Mississippi absolutely made me,” she says. “I have never truly left Mississippi, permanently.”

Her home now looks out over the Chicago River, where she and her husband love to take long walks. While it may not be Mississippi, she says the view is a tender reminder of her beloved home state. “I love being here,” she adds. “I love the coastal feel, like Gulfport.”

natashatrethewey.com



Dr. Gerry Ann Houston

*Founder and Medical Director of
Hospice Ministries*



Since she was a child growing up on a dairy farm in Baldwin, Dr. Gerry Ann Houston knew that she wanted to be a physician. “The physicians in my small town were loved, respected, and always available to help,” she says. “I wanted to be like that.”

Houston now lives in Ridgeland and practiced medicine for 25 years, during which time she also founded Hospice Ministries. “When I first started practice as a medical oncologist, I saw many people who were not receiving the special end-of-life care they so desperately needed,” she explains. “I partnered with a local businessman and started the first home hospice in central Mississippi, admitting our first patient in 1989. Hospice Ministries continues to serve patients today in our Inpatient Hospice Facility in Ridgeland as well as serving patients at their homes through our Ridgeland and Brookhaven offices.”

Houston, who retired from private practice about 15 years ago and serves as medical director of Hospice Ministries, thoughtfully planned the business to operate as a not-for-profit. “We do not want anyone, regardless of their financial situation, to die without the care they deserve,” she says.

Since its inception, Hospice Ministries has compassionately served and cared for thousands of Mississippi patients and their families. “We care for patients in their home, our facility, in hospitals, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, or wherever they may call home; we are there to provide whatever is necessary to make their final days as comfortable as possible,” Houston shares. “It is rewarding to be able to meet the physical, social, and spiritual needs of patients who are told that they have a limited time to live. Caring for patients and families at the end of life is my ministry.”

Having achieved great success in the field of science and medicine, Houston is passionate about encouraging young girls and women also to aspire to find and reach their own dreams. “In my first-year class of medical school, about 10 percent were female; now 50 percent or more of the classes are female,” she says. “Quite a change! Young women now have the same opportunities as men and can do whatever they want to do. One just needs to set a goal and work hard to achieve that goal.”

hospiceministries.org



SCIENCE & MEDICINE



Martie Kwasny

Senior Area Director of Joni and Friends of Mississippi

Martie Kwasny's journey began in Louisiana, where she grew up and pursued a degree in severe and profound special education and then obtained a master's degree in counseling. She knew early in life that she wanted to work with children and families.

In 2006, Kwasny, now of Brandon, began volunteering with Joni and Friends of Mississippi, a local branch of a global faith-based ministry that serves families impacted by disability. And over time, she knew in her heart that she had found her passion.

"This is definitely a calling," she says of her job as senior area director for Joni and Friends of Mississippi. "I see where the Lord has provided every step of my life's journey to be where I am today."

With a servant's heart, Kwasny eagerly shares the mission of Joni and Friends with churches and individuals in Mississippi and grows its philanthropic efforts, all of which make a meaningful impact on the lives of so many deserving individuals.

Through Joni and Friends, Kwasny faithfully promotes the message of God's purposeful love to all. "The broken-hearted, the disabled, those with disorders and diseases, those denied and rejected, those suffering in hardships, those often without hope," she says. "These are individuals who are living life as you and me, and yet, have to deal with the unexpected: from birth, maybe a freak accident, from an unwarranted diagnosis, a horrific intentional assault, or from stupidity. These are opportunities to 'live a life worthy of the calling we have received,' Ephesians 4:1-4.

"The Greek word for philanthropy means 'loving mankind,'" she explains, adding that loving mankind through gifting one's resources or time is essential. "You can't ever out-give! If you notice a need and God compels you to give, open your heart to give. He will only grow your passion and multiply your effort."

Through philanthropy, Kwasny brings new hope to those facing some of life's most difficult challenges. "Professionally, I could not do all that I do without the help of so many good people that come alongside me to do the work," she notes. "I truly believe that Mississippians desire to be a part of something bigger than themselves and desire to give back. There are good, down-to-earth, loving people who truly care about others and take pride in their state. Mississippians are willing to 'roll up their sleeves' and get 'messy!' I love our people!"



joniandfriends.org

PHILANTHROPY

Sarah Thomas

NFL Official

As the first female to step into the role of full-time official for the NFL, Sarah Thomas of Brandon is nothing short of a trailblazer for women in the professional world of sports. “I feel very fortunate to have found my calling as an official—even though I never set out to be the first,” she says.

Having achieved a few “firsts” for women, Thomas credits her successes to her rearing and faith. “Thanks to my upbringing, I was always told never to give up—having a ‘never give up’ mindset allows you to position yourself with friends and like-minded people,” she says. “I’ve always had a very strong faith and have always leaned into Him while in a valley or on a mountaintop, and He has always seen me through.”

Thomas grew up on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in Pascagoula. Her family, she says, was “a very blue-collared, hardworking kind of people.” It was in her youth that she discovered her passion for sports. “I went to Pascagoula High School, and that’s where I began to earn my stripes.”

Today, having risen the ranks to new heights for any woman in her field, which includes officiating a Super Bowl, Thomas is honored to serve as a role model and encourage young girls also to dream big, even if it means reaching for



a goal that seems impossible or out of the “norm.” “Don’t ever let somebody tell you that you can’t because you are a girl,” she says. “You are able, no matter what.”

Proud to be a lifelong Mississippian, Thomas wears this part of her identity as a badge of honor for the world to see. “I am Mississippi, and Mississippi is me—struggles, adversity, triumphs, soul,” she shares. “Mississippi has played a huge role in molding me into the woman I am today. Mississippi is home, and I can’t imagine raising my three kids anywhere else.”

No matter her professional accomplishments, it is the time spent with her family and friends that is the most meaningful and fulfilling. “Outside of my football career, I am a mom!” she adds. “No matter the accomplishments I have obtained, nothing fills my soul more than seeing my kids excel and receive recognition for their hard work at the sports they love.”



[operations.nfl.com](https://www.operations.nfl.com)



Jill Smith

Director of the Union County Heritage Museum

Jill Smith grew up on a small farm in Pontotoc County. After earning a degree from the University of Mississippi in journalism with an emphasis on history, she made her home in New Albany—where today she thrives as director of the Union County Heritage Museum.

In this role, Smith supports and shares the rich history, culture, and talent that embodies the north Mississippi region. “I feel very fortunate to have worked at the Union County Heritage Museum for the last 22 years,” Smith says. “Bringing new things to the community and telling the old stories in new ways, working with youth, and helping make our community a better place by embracing new ideas and new programming is rewarding.”

Discerning and bringing these new ideas to life for the community are ever-evolving tasks. “Everyone has a story, that goes without saying, and finding the thread of these stories and pulling them to develop an interesting tapestry is part of what I get to do,” Smith shares. “Whether it is high school students’ artwork that we purchase for the museum’s student collection, the art classes we offer in the Creative Aging classes, the oral history projects we do to capture people’s memories, or the exhibits we offer of many

different topics, bringing exhibits, lecture series, classes and programming to our community is important.”

Community, Smith shares, is “the fellowship of like-minded people—the lifelong learners. And the museum has served as a focal point and gathering place for several different kinds of communities over the years. We have the people who gather because they love fossils and some because they work in our pottery studio, some because they love our Literary Garden, others because they are writers and want to write memoirs.”

When it comes to community advancement, Smith is always prepared with words of wisdom. “Look and see what your community doesn’t have or offer that it needs and that you can help make possible,” she says. “Be positive, gather your resources, find your community of like-minded people, set your goals, make your plans, and then go do it. Where there is a will, God will help you find a way.”



usheritagemuseum.com

Mattie Rials

Retired Children's Librarian

Mattie Rials of McComb believes that education and exposure to the cultural arts can open the hearts of children and doors to a brighter future.

Affectionately known as Miss Mattie, Rials has touched many young lives, dating back almost 50 years to when she ran her own kindergarten program. Then, she went to work as the children's librarian for the Pike-Amite-Walthall Library in McComb, where she served for 42 years.

She thrived as the children's librarian, promoting reading through her Story Hour program. She led Story Hour for the entire library system, which included nine branches and spanned three counties. "This gave me a marvelous life!" Rials says. "The Lord's blessed me so richly."

Story Hour was more than a simple book reading; it was a time when Rials, with the assistance of Scooter Mouse, a book character, brought every child's imagination to life. "Scooter Mouse started with me in my kindergarten class, and I brought him to the library when I started the program there," she shares.

The Scooter Mouse character was created by local children's author Alice Rhea Mitchell, who wrote five books about Scooter. "It's been great fun," Rials says of collaborating with Mitchell and the illustrator over the years.

Thanks to Rials and Story Hour's impact on the local libraries, Scooter Mouse won the American Library Association's John Cotton Dana Award for outstanding library public relations in 1976. "This award was one of the nicest things that ever happened to me," she adds. Then in 1998,



Rials was named the first recipient of the Kaigler-Lamont Award presented by the Children's Book Festival. "Scooter has been a very big part of my life."

A visionary, Rials also started a program for the library system called Wednesday Friends more than 40 years ago that provides developmentally challenged adults with a time to enjoy fun activities together. "A marvelous group," she says. "It has also been nationally recognized as one of the longest-running programs of its kind in the country."

Having touched so many young lives over the years, a few of those who are now adults created The Miss Mattie Foundation in her honor. The nonprofit organization raises funds and awards scholarships to deserving high school seniors from Pike, Amite, and Walthall counties. "It blesses my life to help somebody," Rials says of the foundation.

While Rials may have officially retired from working a couple of years ago, she is far from slowing down. "I love my life and am so grateful for it," she adds.



pawls.org

CULTURAL ARTS