FIGHTING FIRE IN THE VALLEY

THE AMERICAN HOTEL
THE STORY OF STAUNTON'S ONLY SURVIVING CIVIL WAR ERA HOTEL

THE ATLANTIC COAST PIPELINE
PROPOSED NATURAL GAS PIPELINE HAS MADE SOME COMMUNITIES UNHAPPY

THE PARKERS
PARENTS OF SLAIN JOURNALIST ALISON PARKER WORK TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE NAME OF THEIR DAUGHTER
Dear readers,

The Valley is such a unique place to live, and we think we’ve captured that in this issue of Curio Magazine. Nestled at the bottom of the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains and speckled with interesting, small towns, the Valley has a lot to offer.

This issue of Curio is a little more hard-hitting than past issues have been. We spent some time with the parents of Alison Parker, a JMU alumna murdered in August, to see how they’ve dealt with her loss, we drove down Route 151 to the Atlantic Coast Pipeline protests, and we’ve brought you a look into the life of an immigrant in the Valley.

Putting together this issue has been a pleasure this semester. I would like to think my staff, who have worked so hard to bring quality work to the table, as well as Brad Jenkins, who has been a voice of reason in the chaos.

I hope that you find that the Valley is a wonderful place to discover new things.

ABOUT CURIO

Curio, a magazine highlighting Harrisonburg and its surrounding communities, is published by students in the Media Arts & Design program at James Madison University. Curio is a non-profit organization that was founded by Dr. David Wendelken in 1978 and is supported by the College of Arts and Letters and the School of Media Arts & Design. Subscriptions are not available.

ON THE COVER

FRONT Hose Co. 4 by Erin Williams
BACK Radical Roots by Tia DeVincenzo
Special thanks to contributors Wayne Epps Jr. and Holly Warfield and to our adviser, Brad Jenkins.
Pieces of artwork hang in the open space in the 292 N. Gallery, which is displayed at The Church of Incarnation.
Faith and Art

A Downtown Church Is Exploring the Connection Between Religion and Art

If you are sitting in downtown Harrisonburg’s historic L&S Diner, you will look out to the view of a cross towering above its surrounding buildings. What was once a beaten down auto-body shop has been transformed into The Church of Incarnation. This place of worship is already unique architecturally from your stereotypical church, but its interior design isn’t the only thing that stands out. Within the church is 292 N. Gallery, an art gallery that not only lines the walls but is within them.

“We are kind of reviving an older thought on faith and art. They aren’t separate,” Levi Fuller, the director of the arts council for the gallery, says. 292 N. Gallery began as a small project within the church as its members placed their works of art along the walls. Over the past four years it has progressed by building up its social media presence and expanding its artists from inside the church to any artist who wants their work on display. Fuller came into the director’s position in September of 2015 and took charge the gallery. He jokingly says his biggest contribution is “slapping a sign” on the front door.

The arts council of The Church of The Incarnation consists of seven artists. Possessing a variety of skills, these artists have an age range from 20 to 70. Within the arts council are photographers, award winning water colorists, sculptors and more. There is one artist who stood out among the rest: Zeke Trainum.

Trainum is one of the founding members of 292 N. Gallery. He works with wood and metal, and has embedded his own artwork into the gallery by creating the expansive wooden doors that make up the entryway and the baptismal font in the center of the church.

“We built the gallery right into the church. We are half church, half art gallery,” Trainum says. 292 N. Gallery welcomes any artists to submit work by contacting them. The arts council wants the coordination of the church and gallery to be a reminder of how the church has historically been a patron of the arts, especially during biblical times. The church supported the arts from the beginning by having stained glass windows and intricate designs within the architecture, and The Church of Incarnation is bringing this vision back into the public eye. The gallery does not focus primarily on a religious calendar, but does try to incorporate religious works into their exhibits from November to May.

Most recently there was an exhibition created by JMU students revolving around Lent. It was entitled “Exploring Lent in Black and White.” Through photography, jewelry design, painting and abstract art, 13 students from JMU ranging from freshmen to seniors displayed their work during Lent, a time of reflection and repentance in some Christian traditions.

“We only ask that you tell us your name and show us your work,” Fuller says. “We don’t shy away from art that’s real.”

The arts council curates the gallery for the artists, giving their artwork an opening night. Exhibits normally last for a month. The gallery is free and open on Tuesdays and Thursday evenings as well as First Fridays in downtown Harrisonburg.

The arts council considers itself a family. Members enjoy meals together, discuss articles regarding the arts and welcome artists from all around to join them. 292 N. Gallery’s main goal is to connect with other artists and the greater Harrisonburg community.

“We hope to see a city that is growing and thriving and we jump on that however we can through art,” Fuller says.
HISTORY THROUGH THE LENS

THE ONLY FREE CAMERA MUSEUM IN THE UNITED STATES RESIDES IN STAUNTON

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIN WILLIAMS
Entering through the double glass doors, visitors are welcomed by towers of cameras dating back to the beginning of the 19th century. Glass cases line the walls and shelves are packed with lenses of all different makes and models. Early explorer Jacques Cousteau’s camera sits just feet away from daguerreotype prints, the first type of photographs.

“Hello,” a friendly voice calls from behind the desk at the back of the store. “The tour starts here and it goes all the way around. I’d be happy to answer any of your questions.”

Standing at the far corner of Augusta and Beverly streets in Staunton, the Camera Heritage Museum is the only free camera museum open to the public in the United States.

The museum is the work of David Schwartz, who started his private collection 47 years ago. The museum was originally just a camera and photo printing shop, where Schwartz worked and found his love for photography.

The museum started out with 2,200 cameras, but has since doubled its collection. Not all of its current 5,000 cameras even fit in the museum, with many packed away in the attic due to the lack of space on the shelves for new additions.

“Now and again we get a really exceptional one and then we gotta make room for it,” Schwartz says. “It just gets a little tighter in here.”

Cameras and different items given to the museum as donations come from all around the world. Seeing large, brown boxes outside the glass doors of the museum always makes for an exciting day because Schwartz says he never knows what’s inside.

The museum attracts visitors of all ages from across the country, averaging from 80 to 300 visitors a week. Virginia Beach residents Anne and Erhard Kostler chanced upon the museum while taking a vacation through Virginia.

Erhard says that his visit to the museum was “a trip back through life through different cameras.”

“To see them again was like seeing old friends,” Erhard says of the cameras that were similar to his first — a Leica.

The museum’s collection is made up of many different styles and brands of cameras. There are Leicas, Canons, Nikons, Brownies, Hasselblads, Kodaks — one could name a brand of camera and the museum is likely to have it. But one camera in particular stands out.

On Dec. 7, 1941, the Japanese surprised the U.S. with an attack on Pearl Harbor. Three cameras were used in the mission — one was shot down into the water and two remained intact. One of those two sits on a top shelf at the Camera Heritage Museum. The Japanese pilot who flew over Pearl Harbor donated it. His granddaughter went to Mary Baldwin College, just blocks from the museum.

“He was walking down the street and came in and saw the collection. This was way before we became a museum but he felt I should have the camera,” Schwartz says.

“Do you know what cameras these are?” Schwartz asks, pointing to a tower of small boxy black cameras; Anne and Erhard look over his shoulder.

“Oh, they’re Brownies! My first camera was a Brownie,” Anne says. “I still have photos that I took with it.”

The museum is filled to the brim with cameras, darkroom timers, lenses and photographs. In hopes of creating a better museum, Schwartz is raising money to purchase the P. Buckley Moss Museum in Waynesboro. The building is owned by the Virginia Tech Foundation but has recently been put up for sale.

The museum has to raise $6.4 million to purchase the building. Schwartz wouldn’t disclose the amount of money currently raised, but he hopes that through donations from visitors and supporters of the museum, the new building will soon be within reach.

What once started as a private collection and a small-town camera shop has since developed into a flourishing museum overflowing with the history of film. Schwartz says film isn’t a dying art but a timeless, permanent medium that will last for years to come.

“With photo film, that negative that was shot maybe 100 years ago, I can print it today,” Schwartz says. “We got to know where we came from to know where we’re going.”

The Camera Heritage Museum has a collection of cameras from multiple different eras that have been donated to the museum from all across the world.
A RICH HISTORY

Once a Confederate Army Hospital, the hotel now serves as a spot for businesses and weddings.
Like many of the buildings located in the Wharf Historic District in Staunton, The American Hotel has a rich history. The hotel, Staunton’s only surviving hotel from the Civil War era, is nestled on South Augusta Street across from the Staunton Amtrak station. Its history is undeniably tied to the train station. The American Hotel was built in 1855 by the Virginia Central Railroad, one year after the railroad reached Staunton, accomplishing its goal of a strategic route between the Shenandoah Valley and the state capitol at Richmond. At the time, The American Hotel was a favorite among travelers who’d spent a long day on the railroad.

The American Hotel saw much of the Civil War action that took place in Staunton. By 1863, it was being used almost exclusively as a Confederate Army hospital. When the Staunton Train Station burned down in 1864 during Union occupation, The American Hotel was spared, most likely because the owner of the hotel had formed a quick friendship with a Union officer, who was using the hotel as his quarters.

In the first year of former Union General Ulysses S. Grant’s presidency, he spent a night at The American Hotel. Hearing news of his arrival, the Stonewall Brigade Band, which had formerly served as Confederate Stonewall Jackson’s headquarters band, assembled to play for him. Grant appeared on the hotel balcony and raised his hat to acknowledge the band. This small gesture served as one of the first public acts of reconciliation after the war.

The hotel was subsequently converted into a produce warehouse that specialized in the handling of cigars, tobacco, teas and spices. These goods were superior to that of other distributors in the area. The hotel also served for a short time as a shoe factory and later as a railway express office.

Through the years and the hotel’s various uses, The American Hotel started to deteriorate. The hotel was added to the Virginia Historic Landmark registry, but it was rapidly falling apart. Parts of the building started to collapse and the future of the hotel looked bleak until Georgia businessman Vic Meinert bought the building.

As you enter the hotel, a small staircase leads down into the banquet hall. Soft yellow lights fill the room, illuminating the exposed brick walls and gleaming hardwood floors. A staircase leads up to a balcony overhead, where guests can watch the action from above or get away for a quieter conversation. The American Hotel’s banquet hall is reminiscent of the hotel’s former life, redone in its original 1850s style by retired psychiatrist Philip Sansone from Emerald City, L.P., which is now renamed The American Hotel, LLC. Sansone is responsible for the current condition of the hotel, having bought it in 2003 and restored it, turning it into the successful business it is today.

"Here was a building that was 150 to 160 years old, roughly, and it was sitting there not being utilized in any way," Charles Caldwell, the manager for The American Hotel, says. "It was just sort of sad to see something that is such an antiquity to sort of go unused and be falling apart.”

Initially, the company had plans to transform the hotel into a restaurant, but having bought the hotel in the midst of the
recession, they soon realized that they needed to come up with an alternate plan in the economy they were facing. Caldwell and Sansone decided instead to create a banquet hall for weddings and parties. They also added office, retail and restaurant space that would be available for rent. In 2003, renovation began.

The renovation was not easy. Because the hotel was built in the late 1800s, it required extensive revamping to bring it up to modern day safety codes and standards of living, which was expensive.

“When this project went forth, essentially the building was gutted except for the floors and the ceilings. Everything was put in essentially brand new,” Caldwell says.

Part of bringing the building up to code included adding fire safety features like fire escapes and a sprinkler system. They added elevators and a parking garage, and the bathrooms were remodeled.

Perhaps one of the most notable changes is that the hotel is no longer a hotel, at least in the normal sense of the word. When the building was remodeled, all rooms were taken out and converted to spaces for businesses. Caldwell says he often gets calls late at night from people hoping to get a hotel room. Despite the confusion, The American Hotel has kept its original name to help preserve the history of the building.

While people no longer travel to The American Hotel for a hotel room, they come for another: the banquet room. Now often used for weddings, the banquet room’s first wedding was in 2010, a wedding that Caldwell recalls as one of his favorite moments of working at the hotel. He says the culmination of seeing their plan and hard work pay off was extremely gratifying.

“Little did we know, we’re so much different than that first day,” Caldwell says.

He describes the learning curve he and his co-workers faced as the biggest challenge in the banquet room’s early days.

“It was sort of funny, how do you do all these things when that’s not our area of expertise?” Caldwell says. “I used to be a hospital administrator for an outpatient facility. It was very different.”

They acquired the knowledge to run a successful wedding venue through a lot of research, conversations with people, and of course, through trial-and-error. Caldwell emphasizes how much reading he and his team did about the wedding industry to make up for their initial lack of expertise.

“Brides invite us into an intimate part of their lives,” Caldwell says. “We just want to do the best we can for them.”

Caldwell is now more involved with the administrative side of the business, but proudly reflects on the progress he’s helped make at his time with The American Hotel. He often runs into people in town that remark on their positive experiences at his venue. Even one of Caldwell’s family members, who lives in Washington, D.C., received a wedding invitation recently for a wedding that was to be held at The American Hotel.

“When you’re starting to hear those kind of things,” Caldwell says, “it makes you feel like, well you know, maybe we’re doing something right.”
Small white signs alternating with pictures of apples and pumpkins dot the side of the road. Red, yellow and orange leaves paint the side of the mountain. The peaceful scene takes a turn as a traffic-control officer stands in the road, and an electronic sign reads “47” in red lights. That’s how many minutes until drivers reach Carter Mountain Orchard.

Crisp weekends bring crowds of families and students from places up to four hours away, all wanting the pick-your-own experience.

“Three or four days of the year we hit capacity,” Cynthia Chiles, owner of Carter Mountain Orchard, located in Charlottesville, says.

The peak-crowd season doesn’t begin again until fall, but visitors can start picking April 15th, at which point the orchard opens for daily operations after its winter hiatus.

With no guard rail, the drive is accompanied by a sharp drop-off just inches away from the passenger’s side. But there haven’t been any accidents so far, says Chiles, whose family started operating the orchard over 40 years ago.

As you reach the top of the road, rows of apple trees extend in every direction. A brick-red barn overlooking all of Charlottesville sits right in the middle of acres of trees and grapevines.

Each section is labeled with one of 17 apple varieties: Fuji, Ginger Gold, Gala, Virginia Gold, Golden Delicious, Red Delicious, Granny Smith, Pink Lady, Lodi, Rome, Winesap, Stayman, Crispin, York, Albemarle Pippin, Jonagold and Jonathan.

So, which variety is best?

“Depends on what each person wants to do with their apples,” says Chiles, who most enjoys the “simple stuff,” like applesauce.

Fuji and Pink Lady are among the most popular because of their sweet flavor, but Chiles says apple-pie fans should go for a more tart apple, such as Jonathan or Rome.

The apples range in cost depending on variety, and while the prices parallel those at the supermarket, the taste is superior, visitors say.

Kendall Drake, a James Madison University student from Portsmouth, spends a Sunday apple-picking for the first time.

“I’m in search of the perfect apple, but I don’t know how
to get to it because they don’t have ladders,” Drake says.

Visitors are expected to pick only what they can reach,
as no tools are provided for assistance to ensure visitor safety.

All of the exemplary apples hang high overhead at the
tip-tops of the trees, while the rejects cover the red clay ground.
The gleam of a perfect red apple catches Drake’s eye.

Looking over, she sees a young boy with a bright idea.

“I’m about to climb a tree like that kid.”

After approaching the tree from every angle and
fighting through branches, she realizes that there are none
sturdy enough to help her up.

“I don’t know if I’m going to be able to swing that
one,” she laughs.

Employees practice a superior technique when picking
the best apples, using a “real gentle twist,” Chiles says. “If you
have to yank it, it’s probably not ripe.”

The orchard uses the “Brix meter” to determine the
sugar content in apples before deciding if they’re at peak
ripeness. This process measures the amount that light bends
when it passes through a liquid. A refractometer takes fruit sap
from “whatever part you eat” and places the fruit’s density on
a scale to determine ripeness, otherwise known as its Brix.

Jennifer Huynh, a JMU student from Annandale, heads
for her favorite, Fujis, along with her roommate Caroline Crane,
a senior justice studies major from Annapolis. An employee
stops them, explaining that many areas were already picked out,
so they need to continue up the path after reaching the terrace.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Huynh says as they
make their way up.

Their eagerness fades as they pass a sign reading, “Keep
on going up the road...almost there,” along with a smiley face.

Reaching the very top of the hill, Crane and Huynh dart
into the trees to begin their search, but a few seconds in, they
still see no sign of apples. They keep walking, their pace getting
quicker, until finally, apples start to appear on every tree.

They suspect that apple hoarders were to blame for
the clear-out in the areas closer to the main path. The number
of visitors attracted to Carter Mountain isn’t as obvious
when wandering through the trees, though. Instead, it’s the
prepackaged products that call for their own lines.

People swarm the barn area to buy products such as
apple pie and butter, and cider slushies. Visitors can also try Bold
Rock, a local hard cider in which 90 percent of the apples used
come from Carter Mountain Orchard.

A sweet-smelling warmth surrounds the concessions
stand, which usually has to be manned by about five cashiers
and some additional helpers. Behind the counter, clear plastic containers of their award-winning hot cider doughnuts fly off the shelves. Carter Mountain staff restock as fast as they can in an attempt to meet the high demand.

“They’re so simple [to make], it’s not even funny,” Chiles says. “We make them all by hand.”

Simply substituting apple cider for water in the normal doughnut recipe leads to a hit, selling thousands of doughnuts on a typical fall day.

“I’ve probably waited over half an hour before,” Huynh says. She explains that the doughnuts are worth every minute. “They melt in your mouth.”

“It’s impossible to smell them and not buy at least a dozen,” Crane says. She immediately pries open her plastic container of donuts.

Drake orders a hot cider, and of course, an apple-cider donut. Her first impression?

“Look at this little rinky-dink donut.”

These sugar-coated donuts aren’t much bigger than a hockey puck, but they deliver in flavor.

“It was heaven-sent — not too sweet and just the right amount of apple cider flavor.”

What’s next for the apples she’s bringing home? Drake has big preparation plans.

“I’ll slice ‘em up and put some peanut butter on them,” she says. ✿
If you’re looking for a cool hangout spot with strong coffee, head to Black Sheep Coffee. Located in the Ice House in Downtown Harrisonburg, this mid-priced cafe offers breakfast items including our favorite: bacon, egg and cheese on a flaky biscuit.

When you need more than just a cup of coffee for your afternoon slump, head to the By & By in Downtown Staunton for a tasty selection of sandwiches and Paninis. We enjoyed the Italian Panini, which tasted great with our iced coffees.
Need a quick coffee fix? Stop by Court Square Coffee on the corner of East Market and South Main Street to grab some caffeine to go. This small, to-go coffee shop is full service, offering all of your favorite coffee drinks. Customers can text or call in their order and have it waiting for them when they pull up curbside.

While the only coffee they serve is drip coffee, we couldn’t leave Heritage Bakery in Harrisonburg off our list of favorites. This mother-daughter duo bakes their pastries fresh daily, alternating different sweets throughout the week that are sure to turn you into a Heritage Bakery regular.

Staunton Coffee & Tea is a cozy cafe that you could easily spend hours in. The large windows give you a view of South New Street and life in downtown Staunton. We recommend a warm apple Danish or a toffee nut flavored latte to go with the view.
The sun rises over the Shenandoah Mountains, warming the earth and waking the sleeping plants and animals. A ray slides through the window onto Isaiah’s face. He jumps out of his bed and heads straight toward the backyard. He and his little sister have to check on their garden.

Lee O’Neill watches through the window as her kids hoe their garden. They designed it themselves and keep up with it on their own. The kids aren’t forced to participate in any part of the bigger farm the O’Neills live on, but they like to. Miranda, who’s 9, has been able to pick out the ripe mulberries from the trees since she was 4, and 10-year-old Isaiah has a name for every chicken. For Lee, integrating the family into the farm has been one of the best parts of the experience.

“We want them to have this life of being connected to their food and animals,” Lee says. Miranda and Isaiah, who are homeschooled, have had lives filled with organic farming and apprentices. They don’t really know a life different from having the freedom to eat straight from their backyard: Radical Roots Community Farm.

When you plant a seed in the soil and water it, the seed coat swells. That swelling initiates germination and the plant begins to grow. The first thing to break through the seed coat is called the radical — a radical root. This brave root is the mascot for Lee and Dave O’Neill’s farm in Keezletown. What started as a hay field is now a 5-acre, USDA-certified organic farm that produces hundreds of tons of produce for thousands of people each year. The O’Neills pride themselves on leaving a green footprint on the environment through their farming practices.

Dave and Lee met at James Madison University as undergraduates but learned all they know about organic food and farming through their own apprenticeships after they graduated. Dave worked at Horton Road Organics in Blanchly, Oregon, the farm that Radical Roots’ apprenticeship program is most modeled after. Then the two worked together at Bluebird Grain Farms in Winthrop, Washington, and spent some time on
various organic farms in Baja, California and abroad in New Zealand and Australia. On those farms they were wolfing, which means spending a couple weeks to a month at one site. Their apprenticeships weren’t just about learning farming techniques for Dave and Lee, but about learning the lifestyle. “I learned more in those four years than I did in college for sure... just about who I am, who I was, and what I wanted,” Lee says. They both agreed that it was a growing experience, unlike anything they could have gotten anywhere else.

They had the benefit of learning from seasoned farmers about organic practices in place on an already-successful farm. The couple also teaches organic farming practices to a few hardworking people each season through the apprenticeship program they host, paying forward the experiences they had when they were learning about organic farming.

Dave and Lee hire a maximum of six apprentices a season and most of them live and work on the farm from March to October. “We want to be mentors,” Lee says. Watching their apprentices make the same connections about organic farming and the lifestyle that it facilitates is the reason they host the program.

While farming hasn’t always been a part of the O’Neills lives, Lee has always been connected to it in one way or another. Lee’s father was a farmer, and although the family didn’t live on the farm, she spent a lot of time on it. Their large-scale farm, which has been in the family for over 100 years, covers over 100 acres. While she rode the tractor sometimes, farming wasn’t something Lee had pictured herself doing for a living.

“When we started he was like, ‘It’s just a garden,’” Lee says about her father. Their farm grew as they learned more about the earth and organic farming, and Lee’s father now understands and respects what Dave and Lee are doing at Radical Roots. He swears that Radical Roots’ tomatoes are better than any tomatoes he’s ever had.

Looking back on her childhood, Lee has lightbulb moments when she realizes that processes they use she’d seen as a kid on her family’s farm. With Radical Roots, Lee has a new appreciation for what her father has been doing for years. Lee and her father now have conversations about farming that they couldn’t have before. “I think he will always do some part of farming,” Lee says.

Her personal connection to farming goes beyond her dad, specifically when it comes to organics. Real people work hard to make good choices to raise organic food, and this is something that Lee wants the consumers of Radical Roots products to take away.

Radical Roots sells produce at the Harrisonburg and Charlottesville farmers markets and to Whole Foods, which is also in Charlottesville. Lee especially enjoys the 80 to 100 families that are part of the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. Once a week for 18 weeks CSA members receive a half-bushel of organic, locally grown food from Radical Roots. Lee sets up at the Friendly City Food Co-op in Harrisonburg in a style like the supermarket, allowing people to pick the produce they want. If they know they’re going to eat a lot of salad that week, they can pick the biggest head of A new round of apprentices who have been living together since March now are accustomed to working together to plant the crops for the upcoming season in one of the two tents.
lettuce. If Radical Roots has ripe green tomatoes and ripe red tomatoes, they get to choose which they want. This process connects her to the consumer, and vice versa. “I see the people every week. I have known members that have been members since the beginning and I’ve watched their kids grow,” she says. These people have a face to connect to the food on their table, and they know where their food goes from the soil to their mouths. This is really important to the O’Neills about their growing process.

The farm isn’t the only part of the property that operates with a greener footprint. While they have an actual greenhouse for their produce, their home is a green-house as well. The O’Neill’s home also has a light footprint, ecologically and economically.

Dave, an I-can-do-it type of person, built the house himself, as well as the other buildings on the farm. With all the ideas they had that they wanted to implement, it took him two winters to complete, working on it in between growing seasons.

The house is passive solar and heated with a furnace. They use natural light almost exclusively, with solar panels on the roof that Dave installed to provide electricity. They have a cistern that catches rainwater as a backup water system.

“It’s been awesome. You take a hot shower and it’s all from the sun,” Lee says. “It’s part of the success of the farm … It feels so satisfying now to know that all the systems we wanted on the farm are pretty much done.”

Through the glass window that looks out on the front yard and rows of vegetables a chicken waddles by, pecking at the ground as it walks in and out of sight. “You should know that Isaiah is very into poultry,” Miranda says. “That’s everything he talks about.”

The kids are connected to the earth the way that people who eat Radical Roots’ produce feel connected to the farmers who grow the food that’s on their table. Organic farmers grow vegetables that connect them to the community and in turn, connect the community to them. It’s a web of connection. The more people who understand that farmers like Lee and Dave at Radical Roots work to ensure that the food is healthy, tasty and good for the environment, the better.
Hose Company 4 serves the greater Harrisonburg community. Its headquarters resides on 210 East Rock St. in downtown Harrisonburg. On a given Saturday, its firetruck perches like a shining marble obelisk in the driveway. The pearl white truck basks in the stark sunlight after being hosed down by the group of college-aged, volunteer firefighters surrounding it.

Founded on Oct. 7 1890, Hose Company 4 is one of the oldest fire and rescue departments in the Shenandoah Valley. Made up of volunteer firefighters and career staff, the rumor goes that James Madison University exists in Harrisonburg due to the early presence of the fire department. Or at least, that is according to Chris Butters, a lieutenant at Hose Company 4.

Butters has been a volunteer firefighter since Fall 2013 but joining three years ago was not Butters’ first interaction with the fire department. Butters’ father, Tim Butters, is a 1979 JMU alumnus and a volunteer firefighter at Harrisonburg Hose Company 1 from 1975 to 1980.

“‘My dad was a fire chief, so when I was a kid I kind of just grew up around it,’” Butters says. “I was like ‘I want to do that, I want to do that!’ and finally I was like, ‘Oh wow, I can do that.’”

Butters connection to the fire department was established through his family, but for others it was the sight of a bright red truck driving down the streets that captivated their senses, or their sense of duty.

“They planted the seed from a young age. They used to have Santa Claus come into my neighborhood on a fire engine, and it was kind of my first experience with the fire department,” Brandon Bunch, an emergency medical technician and firefighter, says. “It was something I always wanted to do. I wanted to be a career guy after college for a while. I don’t know, I’ve just always liked helping out the community.”

While some joined because of family or a sense of duty, new member at William Poole joined because
Sam Kelaher (left), Chris Butters and Emery Siegriest adjust the pressure of the water flowing out of the fire truck. The pressure must be regulated to ensure that water flows effectively.
it “seemed like fun.” Poole is going through the classes necessary for his Firefighter 1 certification, which will allow him to enter burning buildings.

The local training grounds for firefighters is a small facility off South Main Street. The site, bordering Blacks Run, holds the skeleton of a five-story building that models the bare essentials of a high-rise building. Here, firefighters can practice numerous drills with their main engine, such as clearing apartments, moving up through floors and hose work.

Butters, as lieutenant and driver of the truck, handles the mechanisms of the pumps. Butters gives orders over a walkie-talkie and ensures that the firefighters know what they’re doing. The hulking pump engine emits a roar like thunder. The ground tremors as thousands of gallons of water pulse out of the hydrant, into the firetruck and up to the Kevlar hose four stories above. Operating the dials and levers of the pump, Butters says, requires constant calculations of friction loss, gallons per minute and the pressure of water leaving the nozzle.

Butters describes pumping in the terms of electricity, when you have to pay attention to how much current is flowing the circuit and how strong the voltage is. Operating the nozzle, he is more concerned about how much water is flowing through the system than the pressure leaving the nozzle.

Atop the four-story building, Sam Kelaher, a firefighter at Hose Company 4, shoulders up to Poole as the serpentine hose blasts water at 124 pounds per square
Brandon Bunch (left), Emery Siegrist, Will Poole, Brian Zeilenga, Jake Dutton, Chris Butters and Sam Kelaher are all volunteer firefighters with Hose Company 4 as well as students at JMU. When they aren’t studying for classes, they spend their free time volunteering at the fire station.

inch of pressure out its nozzle. Kelaher says holding one of the hoses blasting water by yourself is like walking through the gale winds of a hurricane. This is especially worrisome when the firefighters are clearing floors in a cramped apartment building.

“You see the glorified versions on TV but it is like surprisingly difficult to move,” Kelaher says. “Once you get over the two and half inch diameter, you basically need something that is on a stand to keep it from not moving around.”

Though they are only going through training exercises, the crew acts out the motions as if they’re on an actual call. They soldier around wearing 50 pounds of safety gear, insulating them from the searing heat of a structure fire and keeping them from suffocating.

“It’s difficult to drag a hose through a building and search for people at the same time, when you can’t see anything, ‘Cause usually when you are in a smoky environment, you literally can’t see your hand in front of your face,” Kelaher says.

Yet the firefighters need more than gear to protect themselves in a fire — they need each other. Butters said there is a common joke that firefighters are the largest fraternity because they always have each other’s backs. Bunch knows the guys in Hose Company 4 are his brothers and will always be there to help him.

“You’re living with these guys, you spend the night with them,” Bunch said. “You’re sleeping in the bed next to them, waking up in the middle of the night. Like I said, it’s blood, sweat and tears.”
Alison Parker stands at the fence at the Virginia Gold Cup and watches the horse race. She and Chris Hurst, her boyfriend, had a quick and impromptu photo shoot during the race. Photo courtesy of Chris Hurst.
Barbara Parker leans against the Patrick Henry Building in Richmond, Virginia, clutching a petition to her chest, and watching her husband, Andy, give a statement to the cameras surrounding him. In a past life, Barbara would’ve been lobbying for the arts at the Virginia Commissions for the Arts building, just next door. But today, she and Andy fight in the name of their daughter, Alison.

“I’m here. Once again,” Andy says to the cameras. “Trying to do the right thing to honor his daughter’s legacy.”

The petition in Barbara’s hands holds more than 3,000 signatures opposing a measure Gov. Terry McAuliffe is planning to sign – a bill that would reverse Attorney General Mark R. Herring’s move just months before to tighten gun permit standards in Virginia. The bill started out with restrictions on gun licensure, stating that Virginia wouldn’t accept gun licenses from states that had lesser restrictions on guns. The bill ended up with voluntary background checks at gun shows and restrictions on gun rights for domestic abusers.

When the Parkers were in agreement with the governor, they enjoyed VIP spots behind McAuliffe’s shoulder in his office. Now that they’re on opposing sides, the Parkers are met outside by aides.

“We’re not on his A-list anymore,” Andy says.

An aide emerges from the Patrick Henry Building for a third time to meet the activists, and with no pomp and circumstance, quickly takes the petitions from Andy with a muttered “Thank you.” He walks back into the building.

So Andy, a former member of the Board of Supervisors in Henry County, takes his place in front of the cameras with note cards in hand, and pleads with McAuliffe to reconsider the measure one last time.

The rally, though, doesn’t move the governor. A few days later, on the six-month anniversary of the day Andy
and Barbara Parker’s daughter, Alison, was murdered on live television, the governor makes the deal official in an Executive Mansion ceremony, the first of its kind during his administration. It’s a stunning turnaround for the Parkers, who say they feel betrayed.

And how could they not? McAuliffe was one of the first to call with condolences following the August murder of budding reporter Alison, 24, and cameraman Adam Ward, 27, by a disgruntled former reporter from their Roanoke station. A few days later, McAuliffe would attend Alison’s celebration of life in Martinsville, where friends and family remembered the WDBJ reporter and James Madison University alumna (’12) who covered both breaking news and pig-kissing contests with a drive that made her popular among viewers and a rising star in TV journalism.

“Back when we were BFFs,” Barbara says.

After the shooting, the Parkers were ushered like VIPs into the governor’s office and McAuliffe appeared in Washington, D.C., for a rally, where he was photographed embracing Andy Parker, who was wearing a turquoise shirt to honor his daughter’s favorite color. In front of the lectern where the two spoke was a red sign with white writing: “Whatever It Takes.”

The Parkers are involved in several gun-responsibility groups, including Everytown for Gun Safety and Moms Demand Action. Their work has taken them across the nation, including to the White House where Andy and Barbara attended CNN’s “Guns in America” town hall meeting in January with President Obama, who had just signed several executive orders relating to gun regulations.

“Every day is a lobby day,” Barbara says. Since Alison’s death, she went from working full time as the director of programs at Piedmont Arts to barely one day a week; she recently announced her retirement at age 66. “We’ve basically just quit our jobs. We felt like this had to be our new mission.”

With Andy’s background in politics and as an actor on Broadway (the couple met in 1974 when Andy was a singing waiter working his way through University of Texas, and Barbara worked backstage at the dinner theater), Barbara’s experience advocating for the arts and the support from Chris...
Hurst, Alison’s boyfriend and fellow WDBJ anchor, the Parkers are used to the spotlight and perhaps more comfortable in the media than others who’ve been thrust into the limelight.

“We had a choice after Alison was killed,” Barbara says. “We could just curl up in a ball and do nothing, or we could get involved.”

And so they got involved, in Andy’s words, “the club that no one wants to join.”

“This isn’t a grief group,” he adds. “We’re pissed off and we’re gonna do something.”

But when they’re not out there “doing something,” in their quiet moments alone are when the anger and grief are most personal.

“It’s hard not to be bitter,” Chris says. “I am upset for myself and upset for the Parkers and the Wards, but I’m chiefly pissed off for [Alison].”

Away from the rallies, the Parkers return to their home in Collinsville, a city of 7,300 in southern Virginia, and walk through the door painted turquoise, the color Alison loved. They pass a portrait of Alison and their son, Andrew, and Alison’s Ted Yates Emmy Award, which was awarded after her death. They take off their color bar pins with the words “Whatever It Takes” written across them, and sit in the house where their children grew up.

“We focus on this thing when we’re out there with the rallies and out there with the media, but then we come home,” Barbara says. “And not only do we have grief, and feel at a loss, but we’re sitting here, staring at each other and not having things outside of that.”

Their lobbying efforts introduced them to new friends who share a common experience and a common cause. One couple who lost their daughter in an Aurora, Colorado, movie theater shooting travel the country in an RV and inspired the Parkers to buy one. It sits on the street in front of their house. They’ve yet to use it.

Their other friendships have changed.

After Alison’s death, the Parkers were on a whitewater kayaking trip when a friend and tripmate approached them to offer his condolences. But he went on to tell Andy that he didn’t agree with what they were doing on the gun issue.

“It’s like, ‘Look, man. We’re on the same page here. Nobody’s trying to come and take away your guns,’” Andy told him.

Right after the first rapid, the man hit a rock and turned his kayak over. After checking that he was OK, Andy knew exactly what had occurred.

“That’s Alison,” Andy recalls thinking. “Alison did that. She was the unseen rock.”

Even running errands in Collinsville has become a challenge.

“To have what we call the things that trigger … it’s hard to go out. Because you get recognized but the bad thing
is, especially around here, when they say, ‘I used to watch her everyday,’ it just rips your heart out again,” Andy says, shaking his head. “So you feel like you’re kind of a prisoner of the house to a degree.”

It’s those stretches when they’re not on the road and attending rallies that the Parkers are still figuring out how to navigate.

“It’s tough to get up in the mornings sometimes,” Barbara says. The first part of her routine is something that’s taught at many bootcamps: making the bed. “If you get up in the morning and you make your bed, you’ve started the day doing something right. And it can help you go on to the next step in the day, and do the next thing. So that’s part of it. It’s just getting up in the morning. That first step.”

In their house, though, they find some comfort, because it’s where so many parts of Alison still live on.

Alison’s childhood bedroom, now a guest room, remains mostly untouched from the time when she moved out for college and her career. Pictures of her 13 years of dance line the walls, with her black ballet shoes resting on a bench at the end of the bed.

On a table against the wall is a framed picture of the JMU football team raising their helmets to the jumbotron to honor the fallen journalist at last year’s opening home game, the first game after Alison’s death. Further along the table is a selfie of Alison in the WDBJ studio, making a funny face.

“She’d always take these bizarre selfies that were in the newsroom,” Barbara says, laughing.

Chris stands in the doorway of her room under a pink paisley “AP” that rests on top of the doorframe.

“It’s a comforting room,” Barbara says, looking around. “It just reminds me of her.”

In the closet, Barbara pulls out scrapbooks she made throughout Alison’s life.

“It’s like having her whole life in pictures,” she says as she flips through the pages. “She was supposed to take these someday and it would be her whole life in pictures.”

One of the albums is covered with colorful polka dots. The album has pictures from the day Alison was born through middle school. The second, with a cheetah-print cover, documents her high school years.

The last album is light purple, with the words “Alison at JMU” printed on the cover, accompanied by a picture of her...
at graduation.

The scrapbooking tradition didn’t end with Barbara. Alison picked up the craft and had begun making one for Chris, documenting the first six months of their relationship.

On their six-month anniversary, Alison gave it to him. On one of the pages, she wrote, “All these pictures are from my phone. It’s your turn to take them and upload adorable pictures on your Facebook page for the next six months.”

Another page filled with her handwriting says, “I can’t wait for more six monthaverseries” with a smiley face. There would be no more six monthaverseries.

A few months after her death, Chris posted on his Facebook page that he’d finished adding his own pictures to the album. One of the pages has pictures of the couple with the words “July was magical” written in Chris’ handwriting, next to a picture of them whitewater kayaking with Chris’ dog, Sophie. It would be their final trip together.

“I have more than a hundred pictures of us, or her, or something of our relationship together,” Chris says.

Chris has taken a cue from Alison, and has started to make a photo album with the approximately 500 letters and messages that have been sent to him since her death. He says that he’s “felt compelled to keep them all.”

“I learned, still learn, a lot from her,” Chris says. “She would be so pissed if we just turned into puddles.”

“She lit a fire under you, that’s for sure,” Barbara adds, nodding to Chris.

Andy smiles. “She was lightning in a bottle.”

Quiet moments like these always seem to end too quickly. Either Andy’s phone rings off the hook after a mass shooting as the media seek his comments or they’re called out for a rally.

For now, the Parkers are biding their time while the presidential candidates fight through the primaries, waiting for the final candidates to be chosen.

Though there’s no guarantee if any of their lobbying will pay off in the end, the Parkers find inspiration in Alison’s favorite movie, “Galaxy Quest,” a quirky parody of the sci-fi film “Star Trek.”

“It was a cliche but their tagline was like, ‘Never give up, never surrender.’ And it’s true … we’re not giving up, we’re not gonna surrender,” Andy says. “We’re gonna, for lack of a better word, reload and go after them again.”

◊

LEFT The Parkers use Alison’s room as a guest room, but it remains mainly untouched since she moved out of their house to attend JMU.

RIGHT Barbara kept scrapbooks detailing Alison’s journey through childhood and her time at JMU that now act as archives of her life.
The wail of an electric guitar cuts through a crowd above the roar of laughter and conversation. A few amber drops from a frothy glass of craft beer splash lazily onto the pavement as delicious smells pour from food vendors lining the sidewalks. Rocktown Beer and Music Festival has returned to downtown Harrisonburg.

Rocktown attracts nearly 3,000 people each year in August and April to Harrisonburg’s Turner Pavilion. Along with more than 30 craft breweries, the festival features live music from local and national acts and food from local eateries. Every downtown Harrisonburg event, including Rocktown, requires tremendous efforts behind the scenes, and nearly all those efforts are coordinated by Katie Yount. Yount serves as the director of events for Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance. From coordinating volunteers to planning events, she is the liaison for any event in Harrisonburg.

“I deal with all the logistical aspects of the events. It’s really a public and private partnership,” she says. Rocktown is the largest volunteer event that takes place in downtown Harrisonburg, using about 200 volunteers.

Volunteering can be stressful at any event, but Yount makes sure her volunteers are taken care of. First-shift volunteers get free admission to the event, five beer-tasting tickets, a T-shirt and a mug for their troubles. Since-second shift volunteers don’t get to drink at the event, they get an even better prize package: the shirt and mug plus a free growler and fill-up at Midtowne Bottle Shop.

Volunteers at other downtown events, like the Fourth of July celebration “Valley Fourth,” perform general tasks such as checking IDs, manning gateways, and general setup and cleanup. While these are all essential at Rocktown, the real burden falls on the beer-pourers.

Each regular ticket purchases five beer tickets and each ticket vouchers for one 10-ounce pour. Attendees must wear a wristband and volunteers are responsible for marking the wristband each time an attendee selects a pour. The volunteers...
are properly screened and trained for their responsibilities, so the event coordinators have no problem enforcing the rules.

“We had a big problem at first with people using Chapstick to erase the mark on their wristbands. Now if a volunteer has Chapstick on them, we’ll ask them to leave,” Yount says.

JMU doctoral student Kody Sharp and his wife, Somer, volunteered last year during Rocktown.

“Free admission for a small amount of work is great, but working with different breweries from around the country is the truly unique experience,” Sharp says.

Longtime Rocktown volunteer and Shenandoah Valley Realtor Luke Smith says volunteering at Rocktown is a great way to get involved in the local beer scene, but admits it’s a struggle “not trying any of the delicious brews while volunteering.”

The featured breweries, Pale Fire and Brothers Craft Brewing, each utilize the volunteers during the event to advertise and distribute their flagship brews to festival-goers.

Pale Fire Brewing co-founder Tim Brady says without volunteers, the festival would be impossible.

“They take a lot of the burden off of brewery representatives so that the reps can mingle with people and talk about the beers and breweries,” he says.

Brady, who founded Rocktown Beer and Music Festival in 2011 along with his friend and Jack Brown’s co-founder Aaron Ludwig and Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, says the help of more than 150 volunteers each year makes the task of setting the festival up in two hours a reality.

Among the 36 breweries featured during the event, the beer stylings of Purcellville brewery Adroit Theory will be featured for the first time.

Beer is his passion, but Brady says he’s also looking forward to music acts Sister Sparrow and The Dirty Birds, Major and The Monbacks, and Bryan Elijah Smith and The Wild Hearts.

“Every year it’s exciting to see people dancing in front of the stage to live music, especially the few children that come along with their parents,” he says. “It really makes for an amazing atmosphere.”
When Gulala Hassan moved to Harrisonburg from Kurdistan, a northern region of Iraq, in 2010, she wasn’t so sure about it.

Now, six years later, “Harrisonburg is a second home for us,” she says.

Hassan and her family moved to Harrisonburg because her husband, Osman Ahmed, was working for an American company. The U.S. also holds more opportunities than their city in Kurdistan did.

With four children ranging from ages 4 to 16 at the time they moved, Hassan came to Harrisonburg when she was 42 to join her husband who had been living in Charlottesville for a few months.

The Harrisonburg Refugee Resettlement office, a branch of Church World Service, helped Hassan and her family when they first moved to Harrisonburg.

“They provided us with financial assistance, school registration, social benefit and finding jobs,” she says. “We really appreciate CWS.”

After American troops went to Iraq in 2003, Hassan and Ahmed began working for American companies in Iraq. Ahmed worked as an administrator assistant for Fluor, an engineering construction company, in Erbil. Hassan was working with the United Nations in Erbil (UNAMI) as a human resources assistant.

“I also worked for an American NGO [non-governmental organization] named RTI,” she says. “We were teaching people what is democracy in Kurdistan. And the consequence was my husband was not safe because he worked for American companies and he was granted a special visa to immigrate to here.”

A refugee office resettled her husband in Charlottesville.

“He didn’t like the area because he couldn’t find Kurdish people, Kurdish community, there,” Hassan says. “Then when he heard about the big Kurdish community in Harrisonburg, he came here.”

According to Jim Hershberger, director of the immigration and refugee program at Church World Service in Harrisonburg, Harrisonburg is home to around 300 Kurdish families.
“The number is increasing actually,” Hassan says. “Many Kurdish families from other places in [the] states are coming here because of the community and the city—Kurdish people like the city."

Hershberger says that Kurdish people feel safe in the city.

“If you’ve been here a while, people realize that the cost of living here is relatively cheap compared to some places,” he says. “Wages, on the other hand, tend to be high compared to some places.”

Harrisonburg didn’t compare in size to the city of 2 million people Hassan and her family previously lived in. At first, they wanted to move somewhere bigger. But after seeing big cities in the United States, they decided to stay.

“We visited a few cities for vacation and were able to compare them to Harrisonburg,” Hassan says. “My kids love Harrisonburg and would not agree to go to another place. There are no reasons for them to not like other cities, they just felt that Harrisonburg is their home.”

Hassan has visited New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Canada — but Harrisonburg is her favorite by far. “We like almost everything about Harrisonburg,” she says. The “schools are great, people are friendly and welcoming, and very nice and polite. It is a small, quiet, safe place to live.”

The transition wasn’t difficult for Hassan and Ahmed because they spoke English and worked for international NGOs before moving here.

“I used to work with multi-culturally diverse communities, so it was easy,” she says. “But it was [a] little bit harder for my kids.”

Her children began studying English at school and were doing well.

“When we adjusted and when my kids started school and they were doing great at school, I was happy,” Hassan says. Hassan and her family became American citizens on Sept. 15, 2015. She describes it as “the greatest event in our life.”

Her oldest daughter, Jyar, is a student at James Madison University. Her second oldest daughter, Shad, recently graduated early from high school and is hoping to attend Eastern Mennonite University. Hassan’s youngest daughter, Rozin, is in fifth grade, and her son, Roz, is in fourth grade.

Hassan works as an interpreter for hospitals and medics in the area. Kurdish people have their own language, but Hassan also speaks English, Arabic and some Turkish and Farsi, the most widely spoken Persian language.

“I grew up with three languages spoken at home and [in the] community as my parents were trilinguals, and I learned English at school,” Hassan says. “I like interpreting. Sometimes you feel you’re doing a great job when you help people communicate.”

Hassan has found that her job expands beyond hospitals. “When I interpret for Kurdish and Arabic people, I’m involved [in the people’s lives] indirectly,” she says. “People come to my home to ask for translation.”

Hassan helps people in the community for free, but sometimes charges to translate formal documents.

“Refugees that are here create jobs here, they create business here,” Hershberger says. When Hassan isn’t interpreting, she’s working on completing her master’s degree in English as a Second Language from EMU. She’s hoping to graduate in May.

“It’s been a long journey,” she says.

Hassan’s family still lives in Kurdistan, and she has returned to visit just once. “I didn’t want to come back [to the U.S.], but my kids forced me to come back,” she says. “I just wanted to stay with my family, with my mom. But kids were like, ‘No way, we are going back.’”

Since it’s difficult to get a visa, her family in Kurdistan has not been able to visit the United States. Despite not seeing each other often, Hassan and her family keep in touch every day.

“When we came it was little bit harder [to stay in touch], but now because of social media, Viber [an instant messaging app], it’s easier,” she says.

Hassan’s favorite things about the U.S. are the education, access to special items like food and the freedom and personal independence.

Finding a second home isn’t an easy task, but Hassan was fortunate enough to do so in Harrisonburg. There must be something special about the Friendly City.
It began as a bond over health and wellness. Now, a handful of years later, that bond has spawned a new business and helped raise over $40,000 for charity.

James Madison University alumni Kevin Gibson and Alan Maynard, the founders of VA Momentum, met in 2009 while working for JMU’s Alumni Association. They shared similar tales of breaking out of unhealthy habits to establish better ones. To help maintain their focus on fitness, they went to University Recreation together during lunch breaks and on runs with each other.

“Running was the thing that we sort of latched onto, because it matched our sort of personal stories, and our personal journeys of how we got ourselves on the right path towards being a little bit more healthy,” Gibson says.

This camaraderie spilled over into various running events, too, like the Monument Avenue 10K in Richmond. Eventually, the idea of organizing a running event in Harrisonburg was born.

“It really just started out as like, ‘Let’s plan one event and let’s give all the money back to charity,’” says Gibson says.

Thus, the Fourth of July Valley 4th RUN in Harrisonburg was established in 2012 as a way to raise money for charity and also as to provide a running event that is welcoming to all skill levels. There were approximately 450 runners in the inaugural event, and people were hooked.

“People in the community were like, ‘We want more stuff like this, you guys should do more stuff,’” Gibson says. “And then, we also really enjoyed doing it, enjoyed planning it.”

About a year later, VA Momentum was officially founded, and Gibson and Maynard haven’t looked back since. What started as that first Valley 4th RUN turned into a company with 15 individual events on the docket for this year.

Through these events, thousands have been raised for local nonprofits. With VA Momentum continually growing, Gibson left his job at JMU last year to become the company’s first full-time, paid employee. Maynard will do the same and come on full-time in May.

As Gibson and Maynard have worked toward fulfilling their mission of energizing the community for good, they’ve also found their entrepreneurial passion.

“It’s been easy in that it’s the thing that I wake up thinking about in the morning, I go to bed thinking about it before I go to sleep and I’m not tired of it yet,” Gibson says. “And that is sort of the proof that it’s what we should be spending our time on.”

Gibson is primarily the ideas guy, dreaming up new possibilities, while Maynard primarily backs those ideas up...
with practicality to turn them into viable events.

“Where I might lack, I think he makes up,” Maynard says. “And where he may lack, I make up.”

When creating events, Gibson and Maynard aim for the types of things that they personally would want to participate in. Maynard says that they’re typically able to pull off most of the ideas they have, albeit sometimes they’re held back. He says the craziest one they’ve made happen so far is their newest idea, Pound the Peak. This event is a roughly 2-mile run up Massanutten, and is a team event with mental challenges along the way.

“That’s a good example of an outside-the-box kind of event that we kind of came up with and talked about, and I think with both of our skill sets, were able to implement,” Maynard says.

For its events, VA Momentum partners with local businesses through sponsorships and with nonprofits as a destination for the donations. For example, the Three Miler event is sponsored by Brothers Craft Brewing and proceeds go to On the Road Collaborative, which works to empower young people to succeed in their education.

When looking for business partnerships, one of the things Gibson and Maynard aim for when it comes to their goal of supporting good causes while providing accessible running events is mission alignment. They believe that the people who participate in their events are an engaged audience that businesses want to reach.

The sponsorships are more than just a name on an event T-shirt. The relationship can extend as far as using a business’ space for event activities. For instance, Clementine Cafe is one of the sponsors of the Thanksgiving Rocktown Turkey Trot and accompanying Gobble Gobble Kid Dash. Last year, runners were required to pick up their race packets at Ruby’s, Clementine’s basement space. There were 935 runners in the event, so that meant hundreds of people funneling through Clementine. The restaurant used the opportunity to have a lunch special available for people picking up their packets.

Rocktown Turkey Trot is VA Momentum’s largest event, and the number of participants in each race varies. Last year’s New Year’s Eve Glow Run 5K had 735 runners. Then, last year’s Valley 4th RUN had approximately 700 participants. The Run, Sweat & Beers events, which are the fourth Friday of every month from March through September, draw an average of 100 people each time.

“These are the people that are spending money, doing stuff in Harrisonburg,” Gibson says. “And they can really get to them by way of sponsorship of our events.”

Jim Kelly is one runners who has participated in several of VA Momentum’s events over the past few years. He met Gibson and Maynard while working at JMU, and his team won the Pound the Peak event last year.
Though he’s leaving to take a job in Nashville, Tennessee, Kelly said he would “absolutely” come back to Harrisonburg to do another one of the company’s events if it fit into his schedule.

“I think they have amazing ideas, creative ideas that is just going to help their company and mission grow further and further,” Kelly said.

VA Momentum itself is a for-profit company, but on average, 33 to 34 percent of the money raised from events goes to charity.

“When we created VA Momentum, we decided to go the social enterprise, for-profit route because we really loved the entrepreneurial freedom that came along with that,” Gibson says. “And that was what excited us about this, was that we sort of got to take risks, test hypotheses, make decisions and sort of run it as a small business.”

Besides support from the community, VA Momentum is backed by families. Gibson and Maynard’s wives, Kristin Gibson and Emma Maynard, have been instrumental in helping VA Momentum grow.

“This thing doesn’t happen without the support of our wives, because ... it’s a hobby that went out of control,” Gibson says. “And we weren’t expecting it to be what it is now.”

Both Kristin and Emma are also JMU alumni, and both work at JMU — Kristin as the assistant director for marketing and technology at UREC and Emma as the recruiting programs coordinator for Career & Academic Planning. But, away from her job at JMU, Kristin helps out with graphic design for VA Momentum, designing logos and posters. Emma helps with event registration and check-in.

“I think what Kevin and Alan have been doing is really special, and I think they’ve been creating these new traditions for, especially families,” Kristin says. “And offering an alternative to the regular. Everything they do is not just a plain old run, there’s always some special aspect to it.”

Both Kristin and Emma also try to run in VA Momentum’s events when possible, and give input to help
“Kevin and Alan always make sure that they kind of tap into us as a resource too as far as, ‘What do you think?’ Or having us — because we want to also — participate in the events,” Emma says. “It’s a unique perspective for them to hear from someone actually doing an event and being able to provide that feedback to them.”

Aside from the money they’ve been able to donate to charity, hearing personal success stories from the event participants has been one of the most rewarding results from VA Momentum for Gibson and Maynard.

One story was from the Pound the Peak race. Maynard says, there was a team that was taking a while to finish, but one of VA Momentum’s rules is that every participant cheers on every other runner who crosses the finish line, no matter how long it takes them to finish. The team included a husband and wife, and the wife emailed VA Momentum six months later to thank it for waiting and to share their fitness journey.

The race was she and her husband’s first, and she since she had participated in 10 to 12 races and lost over 60 pounds.

“The person who crossed the finish line last, their story is really important to us and why we do what we do,” Gibson says. “So that’s really, at the end of the day, why we’re excited about it.”

As VA Momentum continues to grow, particularly with Gibson now working on it full-time, the company is generating more ideas, working to increase the participation in races and receiving more partnership proposals from other organizations. The company is also looking at expanding to areas like Roanoke and Northern Virginia.

Gibson says the community and familial backing is what has helped the company transform into what it has, not any kind of miraculous work by one individual.

“We haven’t walked two miles in the snow uphill kind of a thing to get this done,” Gibson says. “We’ve had a blast doing it.”
Virginia state Route 151 is home to numerous breweries, including the Blue Mountain Brewery. It, along with breweries such as Starr Hill Brewery, South Street Brewery and Devils Backbone Brewing Company, forms an integral part of the so-called “Brew Ridge Trail.”

When it opened in October 2007, Blue Mountain was the first brewery in Nelson County.

“We were avid homebrewers with a passion for making beer,” says co-owner Matt Nucci. “We’ve doubled the size of our Afton brewery since we opened."

All of Blue Mountain’s ales and lagers are brewed, bottled, canned and kegged either onsite in Afton or at its new barrel house in Arrington. — about 30 miles south.

This year, the brewery will craft close to 10,000 barrels — about 310,000 gallons — of beer specially made from water found deep in wells. Blue Mountain describes its beer as the “best barley malt and hops the world has to offer.” When it comes to brewing, Blue Mountain keeps it simple.

“Beers are primarily made by four brewers with just four ingredients: malted barley, water, yeast and hops,” Nucci said. “It usually takes about 21 days for full fermentation.”

In 2011, one of the brewery’s most popular seasonal beers, Blue Reserve, won the silver medal at the world’s largest beer competition: the Great American Beer Festival. The pale ale has a citrus flavor, won in the American-Belgo Ale category and was the first-ever medal for a beer hopped solely with Virginia hops. It is exclusively available from late April to late June.

Blue Mountain is also the only Virginia brewery to win back-to-back gold medals at the 2010 and 2011 Great American Beer Festivals. Its Sandy Bottom won in 2010 in the American-Style Wheat Beer category, beating out 22 other entries, and Summer Lovin’ topped 32 competitors in the English-Style Summer Ale category.

The brewery has a restaurant with a diverse menu with salads, burgers, specialty pizzas, steak tacos, pulled pork and specialty sandwiches, hot and cold. Dining options include an indoor dining space, outdoor picnic area with a spectacular view of the Blue Ridge Mountains and a screened-in porch area. The outdoor picnic space is a large patio with each table sheltered with its own umbrella, creating a sense of shade and privacy. The space has a dog-friendly section as well, which is on the grass area to the side of the patio.

Blue Mountain is also a member of the Virginia Green Program. It takes the recycling of materials, reduction of waste and treatment of the brewery and restaurant very seriously. It processes the waste steam exhausted during the brewing process through a water treatment facility before returning clean water back to the earth. ◇
One of the newest breweries on Route 151 is Wild Wolf Brewing Co., which opened in 2011. Mary Wolf and her son, Danny, renovated a 105-year-old schoolhouse, which was the original schoolhouse for Nelson County. The company opened for business on Nov. 11, 2011, at 11:11 a.m.

The brewery is home to six house beers, available year-round, and 12 seasonal beers that are on a constant rotation. Danny, who is the company’s brewmaster, favors the house beer “Primal Instinct,” an American IPA. It is the newest addition to the house beer collection and contains hops harvested from the hopyard on site at the brewery.

“Danny is the reason this place exists,” Christopher McVey, the marketing and events manager at Wild Wolf, says. “His passion and gift for making phenomenal beer is what keeps us continually growing.”

Since opening, the brewery has raised its production level from zero barrels to 4,800 barrels.

The brewery distributes to restaurants, bars and grocery stores in Virginia and Washington, D.C., but hopes to expand to more states within the next five years. Most beers on the menu take about two to three weeks to finish, but some beers, like the Quadrupel Belgian and Imperial Stout, take a full year to age before the company is ready to sell it.

Growing its own hops is one way the company tries to be environmentally sustainable. The hopyard is also home to the company’s own chickens and ducks, which fertilize the hopyard without using harmful chemicals. The company received the Green Brewery of the Year award from the Virginia Green Travel Alliance last year.

The brewery prides itself on being able to get much of its food from right here in the Valley. All of its meat comes from within a 30 miles radius and all of its bread is made in-house. The menu is filled with a variety of savory dishes so anyone will be able to find something they can enjoy. From burgers and pulled pork nachos to fish tacos, barbecue and vegetarian options, there’s something for everyone at Wild Wolf.

“Being a chef is about creating new things,” Executive Chef Chris Jack says. “Taking dishes you enjoyed your grandmother making and elevating it.”

If you’re thinking about dining at the brewery, there are four options available for visitors: the dining room, which is great for dinner with the family; the bar area, a more laid back option with TVs; the four season pavilion, which allows visitors great views of the Blue Ridge mountains year-round; and the dog-friendly Biergarten, the best option on a warm and sunny day.

While small and new, Wild Wolf has a unique story to its founding and has a passion for creating the best craft beers. It’s a can’t miss stop along 151. ◊
In the typically tranquil and scenic Nelson County, a controversy stirs. Protest signs line Route 151, petitions circulate the internet and opposition groups form. The Atlantic Coast Pipeline is proposed to run through Nelson and nearby Augusta and Highland counties. But this 550-mile natural gas pipeline has encountered heavy resistance.

The issues that surround the construction of the pipeline are intricate. Dominion, which has partnered with Duke Energy, Piedmont Natural Gas and AGL Resources to build the pipeline, says the project will improve the natural gas supply in North Carolina and Virginia. The pipeline is designed to carry natural gas from the Marcellus Shale, which spans Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

Opponents of the pipeline claim the infrastructure to provide natural gas to those areas already exists. They believe the 10,200-mile Williams-Transco Pipeline that extends from South Texas to New York City is already capable of bringing natural gas to the area.

“The additional infrastructure is primarily being built so that the natural gas can be extracted as quickly as possible and sold as quickly as possible,” Ernie Reed says. Reed is the vice president of Friends of Nelson, a group devoted to stopping the construction of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

Dominion, however, says the need for natural gas is growing in North Carolina and Virginia, with demand expected to increase 165 percent by 2035.

“The urgent public need for this project is clearly demonstrated by the fact that five major public utilities in the region have signed on for 96 percent of the gas,” says Aaron Ruby, the media relations manager for Dominion Energy.

The reason there is such high demand for natural gas, explains Ruby, is that burning natural gas produces half the carbon emissions that burning coal does. He says using natural gas will result in cleaner air and lower carbon emissions all across Virginia.

Ruby says that Dominion expects to receive approval from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in early 2017. If
they receive approval within this time frame, Dominion plans on beginning construction in summer 2017 and having the pipeline in service by 2018.

Opponents of the pipeline are still critical of the environmental impacts of harvesting the natural gas, a process known as hydraulic fracturing, or more commonly, fracking. The process involves blasting water, sand and chemicals at the subsurface shale, releasing the natural gas and oil underneath.

Opponents say fracking results in a long list of environmental nightmares: contamination of groundwater, fracking-induced earthquakes, pollution and methane gas leaks. The irony is that even though natural gas releases less carbon than burning coal, the process of fracking releases high amounts of methane, the main component of natural gas, is one of the powerful greenhouse gases that could contribute to global warming.

“If this pipeline and other pipelines are built there will absolutely be no shut-off valve on all the fracking that goes on in West Virginia and Ohio, a practice which totally pollutes and destroys the communities where it happens,” Reed says. “West Virginia becomes a sacrifice zone.”

Pipeline opponents are also worried about the pipeline’s effects on the value of their properties and Nelson County. Friends of Nelson contracted with an independent economics firm, Key-Log Economics, to analyze the cost of the pipeline on Nelson County. Reed says the analysis found that if the pipeline is constructed, it would cost Nelson County $43 million a year. This includes $25 million in property values, $18 million in annual tourism losses and over a million dollars in personal income for Nelson County residents.

Dominion offers a much different outlook. They say the pipeline will contribute an estimated $1.2 million in annual tax revenue each year to Nelson County and $1.9 million to Augusta County. They also predict the pipeline will save Virginians $240 million every year in energy costs. Many residents, however, still fear the pipeline will affect tourism in Nelson County.

“Nelson County is a destination for so many people because it’s beautiful and it’s not industrial and it’s a fabulous place to be,” Reed says. “To have an industrial landscape in an area that its greatest charm has to do with its natural beauty is
The planned pipeline route was recently rerouted to avoid sensitive habitats in the national forest, but now the route runs straight through the gatehouse at Wintergreen Resort, one of the county’s top economic generators.

Ruby says there are many examples, however, both in Virginia and around the country, where tourism has not only coexisted, but thrived alongside natural gas pipelines.

“Perhaps the best example is California’s Napa Valley, where hundreds of miles of natural gas pipelines operate through one of the most successful tourist and wine-producing regions of the country,” Ruby says.

There are 2.5 times as many miles of interstate pipeline as interstate highway in Virginia. He references White Hall Vineyards in Albemarle County as a local example. A natural gas pipeline runs through the vineyard, which has been a prosperous tourist destination and has produced award-winning wine for more than 20 years. In Fluvanna County, four major pipelines have operated in the Lake Monticello area for decades.

“These communities are thriving,” says Ruby. “They are vibrant, safe and peaceful communities where people have lived and raised families alongside natural gas pipelines for many years.”

Yet in Nelson County, a community of residents are resisting the natural gas movement. Even though natural gas is surpassing coal as the top source of electricity in America, they are passionate and persistent, their love for Nelson County apparent.

“We cannot afford to lose this fight,” says Reed. “In fact, we can’t lose this fight because it’s that important.”
When’s the last time you got a glimpse of the Milky Way? Light pollution, the overuse and misuse of artificial light at night, is changing the way we experience nighttime.

“The dark is half of our lives and we have lost it,” says John Goss, president of the Astronomical League and a Shenandoah Valley resident.

But the issue goes beyond just “losing the stars,” says Paul Bogard, a James Madison University English professor who wrote the book, “The End of Night: Searching For Natural Darkness in an Age of Artificial Light.”

According to the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA), artificial light disrupts our circadian rhythm, which is the body’s natural clock. Too much exposure to unnatural light at night interferes with melatonin production, eventually leading to increased risks of depression, sleep disorders, breast cancer, obesity, diabetes and more.

Goss says the impacts of light pollution “happen so slowly that we don’t feel or see negative effects.”

While people may be on board with the idea of reducing an issue that affects human health, many are still concerned that reducing light may reduce safety and allow crime to thrive.

“It’s the most common counterargument,” says Shanil Virani, the director of the James Madison University John C. Wells Planetarium.

He argues that traditional lights actually create a glare that makes it hard to see beyond the light and creates shadows in which perpetrators could hide.

“We have this illusion that more lighting equals more safety,” Virani says.

Laura Greenleaf, the IDA Virginia chapter president, agrees, saying that people believe that “brighter is better” when it comes to lighting homes, roads, alleys and more.

“There is ample evidence that lighting is not a crime deterrent,” Greenleaf says. “Feeling safe and being safe are two different things.”

Studies have shown that more light does not necessarily prevent crime. For example, the Chicago Alley Lighting Project set out in the late ‘90s to increase lighting to decrease crime in the city, but found at the end of the project that the number of crimes in the well-lit areas had actually increased by about 20 percent.

“We’re not anti-lighting,” Greenleaf says. Most light pollution activists echo this same sentiment: They’re not advocating a banishment of all artificial light.

“People may think, ‘Oh, now they want us to turn off our lights,’ but that’s not right,” Goss says. “We want the right amount of light, directed at the light place, at the right time.”

But what does this mean?

The Gaines Group, an architecture firm based in Harrisonburg and Charlottesville, was recently awarded the title “The Best Small Architecture Firm” by the U.S. Green Building Council.

Charles Hendricks, the firm’s sustainability director and marketing director, is an advocate for environmentally
friendly lighting practices. His firm uses fixtures called “full cutoff fixtures” that direct light downward where it is needed, instead of up at the sky, where it would create unnecessary light pollution.

“If we go to dark-sky compliant lights, the fixtures don’t cost more and it gets the light where it needs to be,” he says. “It’s more economical.”

The city of Harrisonburg already has minimal lighting ordinances, and Hendricks says that the new City Hall, which opened in winter of 2015, is also not dark sky friendly.

He says City Hall has “uplighting” because the building is surrounded by spotlights that shine up into the sky, creating a night glow.

Mayor Chris Jones said by email that because the council has not taken a vote on the issue of light pollution, he cannot comment.

There are other places in the Shenandoah Valley that have taken action to reduce light pollution.

Goss says that in Botetourt County he and his wife, Genevieve, advocated for the creation of the county’s lighting ordinance. This ordinance dictates the construction of new lights, which must now use the similar full cutoff lighting techniques mentioned above.

Greenleaf has hope for the future of this issue, saying that light pollution, compared to issues such as climate change, is the “the most easily altered environmental problem.”

“A really long-range shift has to take place,” Greenleaf says. There has to be “a fundamental change in how knee-jerk and haphazardly we use lighting.”

Virani believes that now is the time to making decisions about how we move forward in lighting our world; many light fixtures are now antiquated, meaning that they could be replaced with more environmentally friendly options.

“The cost of the purchase to buy new lamps would pay for itself in less than a decade,” Virani says. “Ninety percent of an energy budget could be reduced.”

In efforts to preserve natural darkness and reduce the harmful effects of artificial light, the IDA encourages communities to create dark-sky parks. These lands, with high-quality starry nights and protected nocturnal environments, must follow IDA
guidelines to be designated as such. Right now, there are 31 dark-sky parks in the world; one of them is the Staunton River State Park.

Lora Callahan, a 15-year-old high school freshman living in Lynchburg, is working on transforming James River State Park into a certified IDA dark-sky park for her Girl Scouts project. She creates light shields using wood and nails for the lights on the cabins, and is working on putting these lights on timers and motion sensors.

“I can’t imagine living in a world where you can’t see the stars at night,” she says. “Future generations are going to be able to see less and less; so much happened because people were inspired by the night sky.”

Bogard agrees, saying that the night sky is fundamental for the human experience.

“For most of human history, walking out of your door and coming face to face with the universe inspired science, religion, philosophy, arts,” Bogard says. “It’s not really inspiring anymore.”

While standing at the summit of Reddish Knob that overlooks Harrisonburg, it’s easy to see the light pollution over the city.
STORY AND PHOTOS
BY HOLLY WARFIELD
It’s 2 a.m. on a Saturday, and the rural roads of Broadway, are silent in the early morning darkness. Four windows light up in a small bakery along Harpine Highway, signaling the start of Abbey Whetzel’s day.

By 4 a.m., the smells of cinnamon, chocolate and sourdough have found their way into each corner of the room. Twenty tier metal bakery racks are scattered around, holding sheets of warm bread, fresh out of the oven.

Classic rock plays from a small speaker in the corner as Whetzel makes her way in and out of a room with 10 ovens, putting in and taking out different breads flavor by flavor. Eldon Bowman, Whetzel’s father, works quickly, putting the finishing touches on each roll of warm bread. For the Cioccolatini, it’s chocolate syrup; for the Mandorlatini, a layer of powdered sugar; and for the breadsticks, a dash of salt.

At 5 o’clock, the last of the bread is ready. Bowman loads everything on two long, skinny carts that he custom designed to roll straight into the white trailer that attaches to Whetzel’s car. In two painless trips, the trailer is loaded and ready for the
Harrisonburg Farmers Market.

This has been Whetzel’s Saturday morning routine since she began selling her bread at the market nine years ago.

“I like to have work that makes me really concentrate and move quickly,” Whetzel says. “Because I’ve done it for so many years now, it feels normal to wake up that early, but my body still feels it.”

While Whetzel cleans up and gets ready for the local market, Bowman, whose truck is filled to the brim with bread and supplies, begins his hour-and-45-minute trek to another farmers market in Leesburg, Virginia. He usually watches the sunrise as he passes through Winchester.

“One of the benefits of helping is that I get to smell the stuff before everyone else does,” Bowman says.

Whetzel started the Staff Of Life Bread Company in 2006 when she began selling her products at the Broadway Farmer’s Market. Her European-style breads are unique to the area, which has allowed her company to expand throughout the Valley.

During a normal week, Whetzel works with her employee, Todd Van Patter, from about 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. On Fridays, Whetzel stays late to get the breads ready for her busy Saturday mornings. Whetzel is happy with the size of her business, but she believes it will continue to grow.

“I don’t want it to become like a slave master over me,” Whetzel says. “You know, I worked the 90- and 100-hour weeks when I was first starting it up, and I’m not interested in doing that anymore. It’s good work, and I do work about 50 to 60 hours a week.”

After watching the struggles that her father dealt with as the owner of a car-rental company, Whetzel never envisioned herself becoming a business owner.

“I saw how my dad had his business and how with a lot of employees some people don’t show up to work, they call in sick and you’re on the hook for it,” Whetzel says.

To prevent complications and overworking, she takes things slow when it comes to expanding her company. She describes herself as a cautious person. Van Patter, Whetzel’s main baker, is one of only three employees outside of the family.

“She’s made very, very few mistakes,” Bowman says. “I got too big and I wasn’t ready to manage the whole thing and I realized that I did it too fast, but she doesn’t do that, she takes her time.”

Through the ten years that she has owned Staff Of Life, Whetzel says her skills have improved, allowing her to provide
more variety to customers and to experiment with new flavors. However, taste buds aren’t the only decision makers when it comes to which recipes get the OK. How the bread gets from point A to point B plays a major role in the decision to produce a certain flavor.

“She can’t stack,” Whetzel says. “Sometimes we work on things for a long time and then we decide that it doesn’t logistically make sense for us.”

To alleviate some transportation issues, Bowman custom made 21 wooden boxes for the freshly baked bread to travel in. The boxes each have slots to easily stack trays of bread. The slots allow enough room to keep the rolls of bread from squishing each other and becoming misshapen. After drilling a total of 3,808 holes, Bowman bound together each of the boxes using leather strings, which prevents the wood from bending and snapping. The leather binding also adds a unique aesthetic look that has become a trademark for the company.

“People are always saying ‘Oh make me some boxes,’ but it would be way more than they would want to spend,” Bowman says. “It took forever.”

While Bowman and Van Patter deal with the logistics of transportation, expansion and business in general, Whetzel stays focused on what she knows best.

“The best part about this to me is making the bread,” Whetzel says. “I’m good at thinking, ‘I think people would like this.’”

The regular customers Whetzel has gathered over the years proves her ability to please a crowd with her European breads and experimental flavors.

“It’s the only bread that really feels like bread-maker bread,” says Heather Bassett, who has been buying Whetzel’s bread at the Harrisonburg Farmers Market for two years. “It’s the real thing. I feel like I’m in Italy or France.”

The Harrisonburg Farmers Market has always been a primary selling place for Whetzel.

“I’ve been there for eight years and a lot of my customers have been coming to me that whole time, so I know them by name,” Whetzel says. “Harrisonburg has very much a community atmosphere.”

As for her favorite flavor of bread? Whetzel doesn’t hesitate.

“I will never tell.”
Walking into The Bridgewater Retirement Community, the usually quiet atmosphere is interrupted by the unexpected tune of ukuleles playing. It’s 10:30 a.m. on a Wednesday and The Valley Ukulele Players are having their weekly practice in the activities room.

The sunny room, with crafts posted on the walls and the latest game of bridge still written on the whiteboard, is a perfect size for the 11-person ukulele band. Today, they’re practicing for their next gig at a fair later this month. Seven of the members sit in a circle around Sandy Cryder, a former JMU voice coach, and the The Valley Ukulele Player’s leader.

The group talks shop as they tune their instruments. Most of the conversation revolves around a band member’s granddaughter being born, and the talk spirals into more talk of grandchildren. The average age of The Valley Ukulele Players? 75 years old.

Cryder clears her throat, ending the proud grandparent remarks. “Let’s start with something upbeat. Turn to ‘Under the Boardwalk’ on page 245.”

The group flips to the page and starts. The classic doo-wop song, when played by ukuleles, transports the listener to a sunny beach on the coast of Hawaii. The group sings in harmony as they strum, tapping their feet at the same time.

Each of the members, with their own style, brings something different to the sound.

There’s Brenda Kauffman, who, when she’s not playing her ukulele, plays her harp. Then there’s Neil Palmer, who bought a brand-new bass ukulele. His strings are twice as thick as the others and brings a deep sound to the group. Next, there’s Rosemarie Palmer, who’s wearing a bright blue Hawaiian shirt today. She’s young at heart, and since she’s in charge of the group’s social media accounts, urges every newcomer to “like us on Facebook!” Then there’s Charlie Rainer, who doesn’t play ukulele, but blesses the group with a deep baritone voice that sounds like Bing Crosby. Rainer sits with his legs crossed and eyes closed as he focuses to harmonize with the other voices.

The next song is “Blue Hawaii.” As the group flips pages, Tom Enders, who’s next in the circle, claims he’s “really not the best singer.” Enders is also donning a Hawaiian shirt, complete with blue flowers and bright yellow surfboards. Harry Kellam, who’s next to Enders, agrees, and the two decide to leave the singing to the others.

The group shifts out of Hawaiian songs, and plays “You are My Sunshine.” Sitting next to Cryder, Dianne Hartley breaks out her banjo-lele, a hybrid instrument between a banjo and a ukulele. Her musically inclined fingers pick away as her soprano voice leads the group. Without Hartley, The Valley Ukulele Players wouldn’t exist.

Cryder, in a serendipitous event, ran into Hartley’s

52
husband as he was buying a new ukulele for his wife. Cryder explains, “I saw [Hartley’s husband] buying a ukulele and I went up to him and asked if he wanted to start a band,” Cryder laughs. “He looked terrified and explained that his wife was the musician, not him.”

Hartley has been playing the four stringed instrument for over 30 years. “I picked it up when I was in college,” she says. “I wanted to look like a hippie, although I definitely wasn’t one.” Hartley, originally from Montreal, taught ukulele in her children’s elementary school.

“The ukulele is the Canadian equivalent of the recorder in American schools, except much easier to master, and much less annoying,” Hartley says. Chalmers Doane, the Nova Scotia superintendent at the time, wanted kids to learn an instrument they could play for the rest of their lives. Thus, the ukulele was brought from sunny Hawaii to snowy Canada.

Ukulele isn’t Hartley’s only talent; she is a jack-of-all-trades. She grew up as a competitive ice skater, earned a psychology degree from McGill University and worked as an officer of official languages in Montreal. In 2010, she met her husband on vacation in Cancun. She retired and moved to the United States where she could focus on her true passion: music.

In total, Hartley has 13 instruments: six ukuleles, one brand new banjo-lele, one guitar, one autoharp, a pair of bongos, a drum and two dulcimers, a three-stringed instrument that sits on one’s lap and emits the distinct twang of Appalachian folk music. The dulcimers have maple leaf-shaped sound holes.

“They’re usually in the shape of hearts or birds, but I wanted something that reminded me of home,” says Hartley. Hartley doesn’t let anything stop her from playing her music, not even a broken hand. Earlier this year, while letting the dog out, she ran into the doorframe, effectively putting her right hand in a cast for four and a half months. The cast enveloped her hand, covering all but her pointer and middle finger.

“I couldn’t finger pick, but I didn’t let it stop me,” Hartley explains. “I could still strum, so I would strum!” Hartley eventually met with Cryder and the group took off: Seasoned players mixed with beginners, creating a tribe of musicians.

This past December, the group had one of their biggest shows, playing at Walkabout Outfitters during the annual Christmas parade downtown.

At Walkabout Outfitters, Hartley looks like a natural. While she sings, her face spreads into a wide smile as her healed, expert fingers play the tune.

The group played a full set of holiday songs, including “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer,” to which Raisner, while singing in his deep voice, strapped on a glowing red light bulb over his nose. Passersbys entered, intrigued by the island sounds, and were urged to sing along. The group looked
Dianne Hartley picks while harmonizing with the others.

Charlie Raison (left) and Rosemarie Palmer share a songbook.
polished and confident.

Back at Bridgewater Retirement Community, Cryder thinks they could use a little practice. “We have a long way to go to be like our Christmas concert,” she says. But to the untrained ear, they sound perfect.

The group finishes up their hour-long practice with “Back in the Saddle Again.” Written in 1937, it was a cowboy and dancehall anthem.

As the campfire tune goes on, a resident of the retirement community pokes her head in and smiles. The woman, while tapping her wrinkled feet, explains, “This was my favorite song growing up! I used to dance to this for hours!”

Soon the room is filled with spectators, singing along just like the cowboys did.

The Valley Ukulele Players are much more than a retiree band. It’s a group of people that have realized it’s never too late to find something you love. It’s a chance for these members to get back in the saddle again. ◊