CHARLOTTESVILLE CARDINALS
OVERCOMING BARRIERS
Curio, a magazine highlighting Harrisonburg and its surrounding communities, is published each spring by students in the Media Arts & Design program at James Madison University. Curio is a non-profit organization supported by the College of Arts and Letters and the School of Media Arts & Design. Subscriptions are not available.

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Dear readers,

Curio was created to highlight the stories of our diverse, interesting Valley. Although made by James Madison University students, this year we strived to go beyond Harrisonburg and find interesting people and businesses all over the Valley to write about for our readers. The Shenandoah Valley is such a beautiful and cultural place, and we wanted to make sure it got the recognition that it deserves.

We wanted to know more about the face behind the wizard at Foamhenge, the chip factory going green and a family that wants to bring students into their home to learn more about Orthodox Judaism. But more than that, we wanted to make sure the Valley knew about them. Which is why starting this year, Curio will be made available in multiple locations in the Valley, and for that, we’d like to thank the businesses supporting our publication.

We bring you this issue after months of hard work and dedication not only from us, but from our wonderful staff, without whom this issue wouldn’t have been possible. We would like to thank those staff members who went above and beyond to help make this magazine what it has become. It was a great experience to watch it grow from deadlines on a Google Doc to what you see today, and we hope you love it as much as we loved working on it!

If you like what you see, like us on Facebook and check out our website for past stories.

As always, thanks for reading.

Anne Elsea
Beth Wertz

Anne Elsea
Beth Wertz

ON THE COVER

James Cook, a senior at Virginia Tech, practices his shooting at a Charlottesville Cardinals practice.
Photo by Michelle Lee
Mary Kim - Art Director
Mary is a fifth-year media arts & design and writing, rhetoric and technical communication double major from Centreville, Va. She has a love for design and hopes to pursue a lifelong design career. She has a passion for outdoor activities such as hiking with her dog. A food lover and wannabe traveler, she is making her dreams come true by traveling across the country after graduation before settling down into a job in Virginia.

Jenna Danzig - Assistant Art Director
Jenna is a senior media arts & design and communication sciences and disorders double major from Winchester, Va. She has written several features for on-campus publications and volunteers in her free time. After graduation, she hopes to go to graduate school for speech-language pathology and make her own graphics using her SMAD skills for her future clients.

Mary Kate White - Articles Editor
Mary Kate White is a senior media arts & design major concentrating in journalism. Born in Waynesboro, Va. to a military family, she spent the first two decades of her life moving around the world before settling back down in the Shenandoah Valley in 2010. After graduating from JMU in May, she hopes to work in journalism or public relations in Beijing or Shanghai.

Alana Scharlop - Assistant Articles Editor
Alana is a senior media arts & design major and criminal justice studies minor from Fairfield, Conn. She has worked as a news editor for The Breeze and contributed to Port & Main Magazine. She has interned with Vogue as well as Iredale Mineral Cosmetics and hopes to pursue a career in advertising after graduation.

Taylor Hudson - Copy Chief
Taylor is a senior media arts & design and writing, rhetoric and technical communication double major, from Bethany Beach, Del. She is writing tutor for the University Writing Center and a writer for JMU’s Office of Technology and Design. Her passions include feature writing, creative writing, art and her faith. After JMU, she hopes to combine her passions by pursuing travel writing, non-profit communication and missionary work.

Michelle Lee - Executive Photo Editor
Michelle is a junior media arts & design major with a concentration in journalism and a studio art minor from Centreville, Va. She is a photographer for JMU’s Office of Technology and Design and was an international multimedia reporter for the 2012 Urbino Project in Italy. As a writer and artist, Michelle loves all things creative. She hopes to find a career in documentary film, photojournalism or any form of visual storytelling.

Cynthia Carson - Senior Photo Editor
Cynthia is a senior media arts & design major with a concentration in journalism and a minor in British communication and media. She was born and raised in Arlington, Va. She's worked for The Breeze, JMU Sports Marketing Photography and Offsides, a sports photography agency in London. She loves all things photography and cycling, as well as, design and writing. After she walks across the stage in May, she plans on moving to San Diego to pursue a job in the cycling media and journalism industry and riding her bike every day!

Raven-Taylor Beaty - Writer
Raven is a senior media arts & design major with a concentration in journalism from Fredericksburg, Va. She has written multiple for JMU's newspaper The Breeze. She enjoys relaxing and is passionate about reading a good book. After graduating from JMU, she hopes to find a career in public relations or any related field.

Will Rosenkranz - Writer
Will is a senior media arts & design major with a concentration in journalism from Alexandria, Va. He has a huge passion for all things sports, watching everything from football to golf. He also is passionate about food and trying new things. He hopes to find a job in a related field following his graduation.

Alexandra Mitchell - Writer
Alexandra is a senior media arts & design major with a concentration in journalism and a minor in Spanish from Williamsburg, Va. She enjoys spending time with her family, running and staying fit. After graduation, she hopes to find a career within the journalism field and move to a big city to further pursue her dreams.
When you think about a small town, you might think of "Pleasantville" or "The Andy Griffith Show": Neighbors waving at each other from across the street, gossip spreading like wildfire and children attending the same schools for 18 years. When you think of a tiny town, you should think of Madison, Va.

Madison is the county seat of Madison County. While the county is home to more than 13,000 Virginians, the town of Madison has a population of just 226, according to the 2012 census. The town is barely 0.2 square miles, about 128 acres in total. It is little more than a single road running through a quaint and aging main drag.
of restaurants and antique stores.

While Madison County was originally settled by German immigrants in 1725, the town of Madison was founded in 1800 and its iconic courthouse built in 1830. The website for the Madison Historical Society features an epic timeline breaking down military, political and religious movements involving the land and people of the county for almost 300 years. The list encompasses nearby battles, a smallpox epidemic in 1850 and the establishment of Shenandoah National Park in 1926.

The quaintness and history surrounding Madison County and its seat are probably the town's greatest assets. Despite the town being so small, Madison County offers all the Virginia day-trip essentials: the largest acreage of Shenandoah National Park of any county in Virginia, Old Rag and White Oak Canyon hiking trails, E.A. Clore Sons, Inc. fine furniture makers and local wineries such as the Early Mountain Vineyards and Neala Estate Vineyards and Cellars. Because of all the nearby attractions, the town of Madison has become a common pit-stop on travelers' trips. But it is rarely a destination.

"We're a 29 bypass, so people have to want to come into town," Chamber of Commerce Coordinator Tracey W. Gardner says. "We're one of the few towns that's both the county seat and a scenic byway, so unless you're actually trying to get on 231, it's kind of hard to get people to want to come in."
It's a town tiny enough that anyone driving from Charlottesville to Culpeper might even wonder what they're passing — an impressive courthouse, a monument to fallen Confederate soldiers and a few aging businesses such as Pig and Steak.

Stu Smith, resident of Powhatan, Va., was raised in Madison County just as his father was. They even had the same high school football coach.

"I started kindergarten with a lot of the people I graduated with," Smith says. "I'd only been exposed to 140 different people from the same place my whole life."

Indeed, adjusting to life at college at James Madison University, with a student body approaching 20,000, was rough. As he says, there are more people at JMU than all of Madison County.

"I went home often. I lived with one guy from Madison my sophomore through senior year, and then lived with two people from Madison and then three people from Madison," Smith says.

Despite the shock of Harrisonburg's "big city livin'" and its relatively high population, Smith went on to live in Richmond (population 210,309, as of 2012) and Greensboro, N.C. (population 277,080, as of 2012) after graduation.

Some people have gone through the opposite change. Tom Kees is the manager of Madison Drug, one of the oldest drug stores in the country. Kees moved to a massive, secluded property in Madison County 14 years ago after working as a pharmacist in Charlottesville's Walmart for 10 years.

"The stress level was way down, that was the big thing," Kees says. "It's very rare that someone [in Madison Drug] be upset with you. They might just not have the same expectations. In Walmart, people are always upset and complaining about something."

Kees is a quiet man who "enjoys his solitude," and looked forward to the peaceful quiet of downtown Madison. Expecting to replace the former pharmacy manager quietly, he was surprised by the warm reception he received from regulars at the store.

"I thought there were only a couple of people that knew, but people knew I was coming to work already and I was like, 'How did these people find out?'" Kees says. "Some of the people who work here know everybody, and they always know what's going on."

Kees enjoys his work at the tiny, picturesque drug store that still sells 22-cent Cherry Cokes. If there is ever an issue at the store, the owner is just a phone call away, unlike Walmart where "everybody is just following someone else's orders."

Residents of Madison come and go. Many do both, going away for college but eventually returning to the quiet little town. What draws them back? Is there something special in Madison? Or, is it just special that there is nothing in Madison?

"As a teenager, like most teenagers around here, I couldn't wait to get out of town," Gardner says. "I ended up going to [northern Virginia] and Richmond and quickly realized what I had. It's just a lot more peaceful."
Left: Nippn'Nick's is one of several small, locally owned businesses in downtown Madison.
Bottom Left: One of many antique stores in Madison County faces the town square.
Bottom: A monument to fallen Confederate soldiers during the Civil War stands outside the Madison County General District Courthouse.

I'd only been exposed to 140 different people from the same place my whole life.
- Stu Smith, raised in Madison, Va.
High notes in the mountains

Welcome to Singers Glen

"Birthplace of Sacred Music in the South"
Singers Glen has a history of gospel music that transcends beyond the Valley.

By RAVEN-TAYLOR BEATY | Photos by ALEXANDRA MITCHELL

Singers Glen welcomes travelers with a sign that proclaims itself as the "Birthplace of Sacred Music in the South." It is the publication site of the United States' oldest continually published hymnal, Harmonia Sacra. It was originally named "Genuine Church Music" and was published in 1832.

Today, several church congregations throughout the Shenandoah Valley use the "Harmonia Sacra." Resident historian Dale MacAllister, of the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Historical Society, is familiar with the history of sacred music in the Valley and has written about the sacred music traditions of Rockingham County.

According to MacAllister, Joseph Funk and his "Harmonia Sacra" influenced the singing school movement in the South. Funk and other German Anabaptists first settled in Singers Glen about 1809.

His first song book, "Choral-Music," was printed in Harrisonburg in 1816.

"It was a small book, all in German," MacAllister says. "Choral-Music" contained shape notes. Each shape represented the four tones of fa, sol, la and mi. Fa was represented by a right triangle; sol, a circle or oval; la, a rectangle; and mi, a diamond.

"Shape note music books were used up into the early 20th century," MacAllister says. Funk used shape notes to educate those who did not have formal music training. Funk started a singing school in Singers Glen and taught young men of "high moral character."

"By that time, he realized the German language was on the outs," MacAllister says. Therefore, Funk wrote Genuine Church Music entirely in English.
Funk compiled “Harmonia Sacra” from several different sources. Most, according to MacAllister, came from Lutheran, German Reformists and Mennonites.

“Harmonia Sacra” eventually used seven shape notes to represent the tones of do, re, mi, fa, sol, la and si.

More than 80,000 copies of the hymnal have been printed since 1942. The Rev. Jim Radford of Donovan Memorial United Methodist Church is familiar with the history behind “Harmonia Sacra” and has his own copy.

“A lot of people here in the area still bring their tattered copies of “Harmonia Sacra” to the sings,” Radford says.

There are 10 annual “Harmonia Sacra” singings at various churches in the Valley, typically on the first Sunday of the month. Sam Showalter is responsible for organizing most of these singings. The most popular singing takes place on New Year’s Day at Weavers Mennonite Church.

“We usually have around 300 people or so. They come from many different states to come and sing together,” Showalter says.

Another well-known singing takes place at Old Hamburg Church, near Luray, Va.

“That’s an all-day singing where you start singing at 10 a.m. and then have lunch out under the trees on the picnic tables, and then sing again until 3 p.m.,” Showalter says.

The turnout is about 200 people, which is more than the little log church was built to handle. "Physically it's not that comfortable, but the music is great," he says.

The other events around the Valley have anywhere between 30 to 100 people in attendance.

The people of Weavers Mennonite Church are...
Showalter and his wife, Jan, consider the singings to be of a family tradition, dating back to their childhoods. Both their grandparents and parents were singers. Jan’s father, Daniel Suter, taught singing schools with lessons centered around shape notes.

When it comes to Showalter and his wife coordinating the majority of these singings, Showalter says it “just kinda fell into our laps.”

Shape-note music in the Valley is sung differently than in other parts of the country or the world. In the Valley, the shape notes are sung in a church congregation fashion where the tones blend together. The tones do, re, and mi are usually not sung.

Elsewhere, Sacred harp singers are arranged in a square with each of the four parts in their designated section, surrounding the leader in the middle. They tend to sing the do, re, mi tones in a more boisterous and vigorous manner.

Shape note music has influenced other methods of transcribing music. “They have what they now call the Nashville number system,” Radford says.

The Nashville charts use numbers, instead of shapes, to represent the different notes. Neal Matthews, a famous vocalist, came up with the idea by substituting numbers for shape notes.

Regardless of its reach, shape note music will continue to have its roots deep in the Valley.

“I think we have something that’s very unique and very beautiful,” Showalter says.
ROUTE 11

A tasty and crunchy delight turns guilt free with waste-free production.

Story and Photos by CYNTHIA CARSON

Route 11 recycles everything, “even the dirt off of the potatoes,” says Route 11 Chip president Sarah Cohen.

Route 11 Chips has been in business for more than 20 years. Along with making a quality potato chip product, they also strive to take responsibility for the waste they produce.

Cohen and vice president Michael Connelly have been diligently working to find more ways to cut down on waste and energy usage.

After the chip production process, the main byproduct is the peelings from the potatoes. They used to throw a combination of potato peelings, water and rejected chips into the dumpster. Now they are helping the environment and a local farmer, instead of throwing it all into a landfill.

“He comes out every evening like clockwork and loads them up, takes them out and feeds [the cattle],” Connelly explains. Ken and Kent Burch own a farm down the road from the production plant and they benefit from the Route 11 waste.

“The cattle liked them from day one. They just clean them up. You put them on the ground or in a feed trough and they eat them till they’re gone, they love them,” Ken Burch says.

The Route 11 cows love eating the chip byproducts.

Kent Burch says, “Sometimes we get the Mama Zumás, the real spicy ones. It was funny the first time they ever had them. They walked up to them and took a big ole bite and then they were like “chomp chomp,” they stopped, it was nothing but hot. But they just went back to eating them.”

Before Route 11 Chips found the Burch farm and their cattle, their waste management bills were around $1,300 a month and now they are down to $150. The company has successfully managed to bring down their waste to one dumpster pick-up every month.

“If we get down much lower, we are actually going to get rid of the dumpster,” Connelly says.

The potato peelings aren’t the only waste Route 11 produces. The potatoes are cooked in high-oleic sunflower oil that comes in massive plastic “bladders” surrounded on all sides by five to six layers of cardboard.

Instead of throwing the pounds and pounds of cardboard out, they give it to the local high school’s football team to recycle. The team takes it to the local county recycle center and the booster club receives half of the value.

“We could sell it back, but it’s just as easy,” Connelly says. “It’s a goodwill builder.”

Route 11 Chips has not only limited its waste, they have also found many ways to limit energy usage as well.

In 2008, when Route 11 Chips moved, Cohen and Connelly worked to make the factory as self-sufficient as possible.

“The way it’s laid out is in a straight line. That helps the motors operate more efficiently because they are not pushing things in circles,” says Cohen.

With a straight-line production process, there is little energy needed to push the product from raw, unpeeled potatoes to freshly cooked chips in a bag.

The owners have put a lot of thought into saving energy at the factory.

“We thought if we didn’t put a roof that absorbed a lot of energy from the sun that it would keep us kind of neutral,” Connelly says. The roof keeps the building cool in the summer.

The kitchen has a heat exchange that uses the hot air coming from the oil to heat the kitchen. Therefore they save energy by using the heat for more than just the oil.

“We were able to put some warm air in into the kitchen in the winter to keep it at a workable temperature without running a heater,” Connelly says.

The building has large windows to let in as much natural light as possible. The kitchen lights have a timer to come on just as the sun is setting.

“Every little thing adds up,” Cohen says.

Connelly modified a piece of the production line equipment and after six months, it now allows dirt to fall out rather than combining with the water.

“It’s just dirt. Instead of putting it in the trash can, we put it on the pile and we do use it. I’ve taken it to my house to fill in holes.”

Each member of the 32-member staff uses one paper towel after washing their hands. They recycle cans and bottles. “All the organic stuff in the kitchen gets scraped into a bucket with a sealed lid on it.”

“It’s the typical things your parents tell you around the house but we’re just trying to do it on a bigger scale.”

Route 11 has taken simple ideas and turned them into a success.

“We can’t be perfect. We can’t be a net-zero impact. But while we’re making a living and providing a lively hood and a fun product and a healthier product, we are trying to create as little damage as possible in the process,” Cohen says.

“So for me, I feel like it’s taking responsibility, we are stewards of trying to not mess things up more.”
We recycle everything. Even the dirt off of the potatoes.
- Sarah Cohen, Route 11 president
Showalter’s Orchard is mostly hidden. One can only find it after driving 20 minutes off Interstate 81 into rural Timberville, Va.: a town that offers unwavering pride in the high school football team, a constant aroma of cow manure and roller-coaster hills.

As you approach the orchard, the family business’s success is obvious. Hundreds of apple trees pepper the horizon in army-straight lines, offering 20 varieties. A 38,000-square-foot greenhouse bestows life to purple and orange mums. In the distance, a parade of school kids prance over a hill with a freshly picked apple in each of their hands, completely engrossed by the tractor that is crossing their path. And directly in the middle of the gravel parking lot sits a farm store.

Inside, an elderly woman moves slowly among the shelves — her eyes darting up and down, back and forth, carefully inspecting every item. She keeps moving past the homemade honey, past the local lavender perfume, past the homemade apple butter. She only stops when she reaches a refrigerator in the corner; her forehead wrinkles.

A young woman standing at the cash register notices the confusion, emerges from behind the counter and says, “That’s our sweet cider!”

“May I try some?” the elderly woman asks, wrinkling her forehead again. “I don’t like stuff too sweet. So I just want to try it before I go and buy it. Just a sip?”

“Of course!” says the Showalter employee, as she pours a small sample. “You know we have hard cider too!”

“Hard cider? What’s that?” the elderly woman says.

Planting the seed

Although the old hill has grown apples since the early 1930s, Joe Showalter began cultivating his dream of owning an apple orchard when he purchased the land in 1965. Since its planting 40 years ago, Showalter’s Orchard has grown into a multi-faceted business.

Hidden behind the Showalter’s farmhouse, an old barn holds the seed
to the most unique part of Showalter’s Orchard — a seed that was planted years ago and is now just coming into full bloom. From the outside, it looks like an average barn: weathered wood panels, high beams and large, creaky doors. But on the inside, stainless steel tubes line the walls and extend toward the ceiling. Mechanical arms systematically move back and forth, up and down. Conveyor belts transport hundreds of apples into an abyss of stainless steel. Meanwhile, employees shout jokes to each other over deafening clicks and clacks, as they whack a batch of stubborn apples with a stick that got stuck in a riff of a moving conveyer belt. Willy Wonka would be impressed.

This is the apple press.

In 1971, Joe decided to install a cider press on the property. Ever since, homemade sweet cider has been a customer favorite of Showalter’s orchard.

After Joe’s son, Shannon Showalter, and his wife, Sarah, purchased the farm in 2002, a new business venture was being tilled. Since its installation, the apple press sparked the Showalter’s family hobby of hard-cider making. At first, it was just a family tradition — passed on to Shannon and Sarah — and didn’t go beyond family functions or taste testing with friends.

“We are foodies,” Sarah says. “We love anything like craft beer, wine or hard cider. It’s just something we’ve always enjoyed.”

As time went on and the Showalters became more involved in their hobby, they couldn’t help but notice the growth of the hard cider industry in the region. It was then that Shannon and Sarah realized that cider could be a good addition to their orchard.

Ripening, harvesting and cleaning
Once Shannon and Sarah officially decided to pursue hard cider production, they underwent an extensive preparation process to ensure that their new business was perfectly ripened and ready for the market.

In 2010, they created a business plan and underwent the necessary licensure processes. Although they are informally known as a cidery, they are officially classified as a “farm winery.”

Once all of the logistics were secured, the focus turned toward creating the perfect product.

Shannon is known as the “mad scientist” behind it all. In a room lined test tubes, beakers, and hydrometers, it looks as if he works in a chemistry lab — not apple orchard.

“There are infinite ways to combine the types of apples, seasonings and yeast that go into a hard cider; therefore, it is difficult to find the perfect taste,” Sarah explains.

The Showalters relied on personal
experimentation, friends and fellow business owners for advice. Shannon even took cider-making classes at Cornell University. Whenever the Showalters doubted a new flavor or simply wanted a second opinion, they gave samples to all of their friends and family.

Three flavors were initially decided on: Yesteryear, Betwixt and Cidermaker’s Barrel. Each was strategically crafted. Yesteryear is made from champagne yeast, so it is dry, fizzy and offers a classic “POP” when you open it. Heritage is similar, but creamier. It has a honey-almond under taste and pairs well with salty foods such as ham or oysters. Cidermaker’s Barrel mimics the hard cider the Showalter family made as a hobby by using the wild yeast produced from their orchard. Unlike the other two flavors, Cidermaker’s Barrel is fermented in bourbon barrels to give it an earthy and bourbon flavor.

“It’s like a perfect balance between art and science,” Sarah says.

Once they felt their plan was polished and unbruised, Showalter Orchard officially launched its new sub-business: Old Hill Cider.

Adding pressure
Starting a new business is not without risks, resulting in pressure that could rival even the cider press itself.

Up until 2010, Sarah worked as a teacher full time. But in order to fully commit to the family’s new hard cider business, Sarah decided to take a risk and quit her job.

As Sarah thinks back to the beginning stages of Old Hill Cider, she covers her face and says, “Oh my gosh, we were so scared!”

Their initial business plan was, as Sarah puts it, a combination of estimating the potential of the business and balancing the risks if it were to fail.

“We didn’t know what to do at first. We didn’t have anything to base our plan off of. We didn’t want to make too much, but we didn’t want to make too little either. It was a shot in the dark!” Sarah exclaims.

Old Hill Cider’s official launch date was in May 2012 and, almost immediately, the Showalters realized that they had seriously underestimated their business. They completely, and quickly, ran out of product in approximately five months. They look at their first launch date as a success.

Smiling, Sarah says, “Sure, we didn’t correctly estimate the quantity. But overall, the product sold and was received positively.”

After re-evaluating and updating their business plan, they re-launched Old Hill Cider in fall 2013.

Fermenting and carbonating the business
When Showalters realized their hard cider was brewing its way toward success,
they started adding more features to the cider business in an attempt to add more value.

The ultimate goal is to engage the community and introduce customers to the world of hard cider. To peak interest, they host events such as hard cider making workshops and cider tastings. There is even a “Build Your Own Picnic” option, where customers select food to put in a picnic basket — a few locally made cheeses, crackers and a bottle of cider — and then grab a blanket to enjoy a picnic among the apple trees.

**Packaging and selling**

In order to sell their cider, the Showalters had to jump right into an assembly line that is the resurging trend of hard cider.

Hard cider is not a new concept — it has existed since the American Revolution. Colonists imported and grew apple trees, not to eat but to make hard cider. Because of the poor water quality, hard cider was one of the few drinks available that was sanitary enough to consume.

Hard cider is currently the smallest facet of the alcohol industry but is growing fast. According to Sarah, it has increased over 60 percent in the last year. In fact, hard cider has become so popular that Virginia has declared an official “Cider Week” during the month of November.

Old Hill Cider is one of eight cideries in Virginia and was the first in the Shenandoah Valley. And although it is not the most recently established cidery in Virginia, it boasts the title of the “newest cidery using apples from the oldest orchard.”

According to Carl Sinnett, the sales and marketing manager, the relaunch was a success because cider’s popularity during the autumn months.

“When people think of autumn, they think of apples and cider,” Sinnett says.

Sinnett also takes a hands-on approach by going door-to-door to local businesses offering tastings. Generally, they are unfamiliar with hard cider, especially Old Hill Cider.

“Many people assume that it just tastes like our sweet cider with a kick, but we don’t put back-sweetener in our hard cider, at least not yet. So they are surprised,” Sinnett says.

But many, especially chefs, have welcomed Old Hill Cider with open arms because it is much more diverse than mainstream cider and pairs well with many foods.

“The chef at Local Chop and Grill House planned and executed an amazing five course dinner during Cider Week in November pairing each cider with a course,” explains Sarah. “It was unbelievable!”

**Repeating the process**

Just as Joe Showalter passed the business down to his son Shannon back in 2002, Shannon and Sarah desire to pass on the business to their own kids. After all of
the growth and preparation, they're hoping they can just repeat the cycle and keep Showalter's Orchard and Old Hill Cider thriving.

The couple has two children, Ava is 13 years old and Ben is 17 years old. According to Sarah, they are still young and don't have much of an idea about their future. But Sarah smiles and shrugs. "I don't know if it is something they want to do when they are older, but we hope it is. Adding value is what makes a small farm sustainable and that's what we are trying to do now, if that's what our kids decided they want to do one day."

Back in the orchard store, the elderly woman ultimately decides to just buy the regular sweet cider. But, on her way out after, she picks up the advertisement for Virginia's Hard Cider week. She stuffs it inside her Mary Poppins-esque purse, winks and says, "Oh don't worry sweetie, I'll be back. I like my apple juice with a kick."

A SAMPLING OF OLD HILL HARD CIDERS

HERITAGE
This more serious, wine-like cider has bright acidity and stone fruit character. Pair with fatty eats, mushrooms and cheeses like Brie and Camembert.

CIDERMAKER'S BARREL Most complex flavor profile. Natural yeast fermentation lends layers of flavor including vanilla and fruit sweetness. A tannic, charred-oak finish enhances this traditional Shenandoah Valley farmhouse-style cider. Pair with salty pork, Virginia ham, aged cheddars or sheep's milk cheese.

BETWIXT The "front porch sipping" cider sports aromas of apple and strawberry. This palate-friendly cider with notes of hard strawberry candy and sweet apple is a definite crowd pleaser. Pair with Asian dishes, hearty beef, vinegar-based barbeque or apple pie.

SEASON'S FINISH
The ice-style dessert cider, with its deep gold color, is round and viscous. Its long, silky, smooth-mouth feel has flavors of apple, pineapple, red cherry and toast. Pair with dessert, walnuts or dried fruit.
‘The magic in all of this’

Foamhenge recreates an ancient ruin and keeps the memory of an old friend alive.
The mysterious origin of Stonehenge on England's Salisbury Plain makes it one of the most magical wonders of the ancient world. While the origin of Foamhenge, an exact replica of Stonehenge in Natural Bridge, Va., is less mysterious, it possesses some magic of its own: a wizard with the face of a dead man.

Mark Cline, a renowned local fiberglass sculptor known for his elaborate and larger-than-life April Fool's Day pranks, built the replica. In 2003, after seeking permission from property owners (though never seeking approval from any county officials) Cline set up several large statues of dinosaurs outside of businesses, in parking lots and even on the roofs of buildings in Glasgow, Va. The dinosaurs drew visitors in from all over the state. Soon these April Fool's Day surprises became a tradition.

In 2004, Cline unveiled Foamhenge just down the street from his studio in Natural Bridge. While its initial impact was huge, earning him attention from national travel publications, Foamhenge was actually a work in progress for several years. It wasn't until 2007 that the final touch was put into place: a statue of Merlin levitating the stones.

Several plaques around the site offer possible explanations of the original Stonehenge's origins: prehistoric technology like ropes and lumber, extraterrestrial intervention and lastly, Merlin's magical powers. Playing off this theory, Foamhenge has a statue of Merlin with a plaque in front of it with a photo of a rough-looking man with a long, brown beard.

The sign explains that the photo is of the man whose face was cast, after he had died, to make the face of the Merlin statue.

Jamie Jordan, the man named on the plaque, was eccentric — a trait that he and Cline bonded over while he was alive. After admiring Cline's work for years, the two finally met one night at the Pink Cadillac Diner in Natural Bridge. They talked about growing up in Waynesboro and their shared fascination with the bizarre. That night, Jordan excitedly told his daughter, Emily Jordan, about the encounter. And he remained friends with Cline for years afterward.

"My dad took me to Dinosaur Land and we went to [Cline's] studio afterward. I went in and said, 'Are you Mark Cline?' And he said, 'Depends, are you pregnant?' And my jaw just dropped," Emily Jordan says.

Jordan frequently visited Cline at his studio over the years. The two chatted about upcoming projects or people back home in Waynesboro, Va. where Jordan still lived. During one of these meetings, Jordan requested that Cline use a mold of his face for one of his pieces in the future.

"I sat Jamie down and I said, 'Jamie, I'm gonna make you into somethin' magical,'" Cline says. Magical was an adjective that Cline hadn't put much thought into, and the project wasn't discussed again until Cline received a phone call with tragic news from Emily years later.

Jamie Jordan died as a result of complications from a liver transplant on Feb. 15, 2007. His daughter was in charge of arranging the funeral and opted to have him cremated. Before the cremation, though, she called Cline.

"She called and asked me to come make a mold of his face. I had to take some pieces of my work somewhere, so I told her I could do it the next week."
Cline says, “But she said, ‘No, they’re cremating him so you need to come do it tonight.’”

Together, Cline and Emily went to McDow Funeral Home in Waynesboro and told the funeral directors their plan. What would already be considered by most to be a strange request was further complicated by Jordan’s diagnosis of Hepatitis C, a disease that is highly contagious for up to 72 hours after death. The staff of the funeral home was, for the most part, resistant to the plan.

“[Emily] did what anyone would do in that situation: She started crying,” Cline says.

Because Jordan was to be cremated, his body had not been embalmed and was therefore still highly contagious. The funeral home was unwilling to allow Cline to expose himself to such a dangerous pathogen, so a compromise was made: One of the funeral home’s staff, Jeffrey Hodge, who had been trained in protocol dealing with blood-borne pathogens, would make the mold of Jordan’s face.

“I sat Jamie down and I said, ‘Jamie, I’m gonna make you into somethin’ magical.’”

Mark Cline, creator of Foamhenge

“[It was important to him],” Hodge says, his voice taking a serious tone after laughing about the absurdity of the whole ordeal. “I personally went to the management and told them I was willing to do it, that I’d be glad to do it, to please let me do it.”

Together, Hodge, Cline and Emily went down to the basement of McDow Funeral Home to make the mold. Emily and Cline stood behind a door with a glass window, talking Hodge through the process, mixing the casting agent and handing him supplies. Within a few hours, the project was complete, and Jordan’s body was finally ready to be put to rest.

The funeral came and went, and the cast of Jordan’s face remained at Cline’s studio. Cline had told Emily that he planned to make her father’s face into a Civil War soldier riding a dinosaur. Maybe the word “magical” was ringing through his ears, though, because he had a change of heart.

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While he had originally planned to use his own face to make the statue of Merlin, Cline later decided to make the statue in the likeness of Jamie Jordan. “I cried because it was such an honor,” Emily says.

But the magic doesn’t stop there. McDow Funeral Home occupies a building that was once Waynesboro’s hospital. The room in which the mask was made was once the maternity ward.

“As this was being done, it was in the very same room he was born in,” Emily says. “That’s the real magic in all of this.”
Coach Tom Vandever helped lead the team to its 16th-place ranking in the National Wheelchair Basketball Association.
Back in the Game

The Charlottesville Cardinals don’t see their disabilities as an obstacle to their success

By RAVEN-TAYLOR BEATY
Photos by MICHELLE LEE

Clang!
You can’t help but shut your eyes when you see these players collide in wheelchairs. These athletes play with such skill and intensity, that the term disability disappears. The Charlottesville Cardinals wheelchair basketball team brings a positive recreational outlook for athletes with disabilities.

Since the team’s creation in 1980, more than 475 athletes have played for the Cardinals. The team is co-ed and open to players of all ages. The youngest player on the team is 18, and the oldest is 77.

Currently, the Cardinals are ranked 16th in the nation. This is a big accomplishment for the team, given that they had the opportunity to compete in the National Wheelchair Basketball Association National Championship.

The Cardinal team captain, Brandon Rush, 30, has been playing for the team for 16 years. Rush was born with full mobility of his lower body. He fractured the T11 vertebrae of his spine, during a mountain bike accident when he was 14.

“I woke up in the dirt. I opened my eyes and looked around. [I] did a push up, tried to get up and my lower legs didn’t move,” Rush says.

Rush knew then that he had lost mobility of his lower body.

Rush attended Kluge Children’s Rehabilitation Center, in Charlottesville, after his accident. He says he remembers his experience there as being enjoyable. Rush says that both his physical and occupational therapists took the time to shape his learning experience in a wheelchair into something new and exciting.

“They kept it fun,” Rush says.
Rush never felt like he was at a disadvantage, and the open communication he had with his therapists made him strive harder to adjust to his new lifestyle.

“When you feel like you can talk to someone, then you feel like you want to do good for them, Rush says.

It was through a presentation at Kluge Children’s Rehabilitation Center, that Rush first heard about the Cardinals.

Rush had always enjoyed playing basketball, so he took an opportunity to see the Cardinals practice. He has been with the team ever since.

When it came to learning how to play basketball in a wheelchair, Rush was not immediately the stand-out he is on the court now.

“It was something new to get used to, the whole mechanics of actually shooting the ball,” Rush says.

He says you do not realize how much energy is generated from your legs in order to put the power behind the ball to shoot it.

Rush gradually learned about the techniques and the skill set the older, more...
experienced, players possessed. Rush rose to the
challenge to be better than the players he was
playing against.

“If you want to play you got to work hard and
get your position and get in where you you fit in,”
Rush says.

Like Kluge Children’s Rehabilitation Center, the
Cardinals also provided a positive environment for
Rush to continue to flourish after his accident.

Mentors such as the late Herman Key and Rick
Shifflett, played a pivotal role in the beginning of
Rush’s career with the Cardinals.

Shifflett helped Rush “understand certain things
that happened on the basketball court,” along with
“things that happened off the basketball court too.”

He was taught the importance that his actions
are not only a reflection of himself, but also a
reflection of the team as a whole.

Overall, Rush chooses not to focus on his
disability, but instead focuses on his current abilities
and what the Cardinals has brought to his life.

The Cardinals travel across the United States
and Canada. Rush says he travels about eight to nine
times a year.

“It all kind of blurs together after a while,” he says.

Atlanta, Alabama, D.C., New Jersey, North
Carolina, Florida and Pennsylvania are some of
the places that Rush has traveled with the team.

In between all the traveling, Rush makes sure
that he spends time with his 9-year-old son. He
makes the time to pick up his son from school
during the week.

“A lot of the times when I have my son with me,
I bring him to basketball practice,” Rush says.

Rush is genuinely well-liked by his teammates.

Rush’s teammate, James Cook, 23, is an
undergraduate at Virginia Tech studying
mechanical engineering. He has been playing with
the Cardinals for two years.

According to Cook, Rush is very friendly and a
good teammate.

“He is someone you can talk to, kinda like a
mentor almost.”

Like Rush, Cook was born with full mobility
of his lower body. Cook was involved with sports
throughout the majority of his life. He has played
lacrosse, soccer, football and both water and snow
skied. But a severe car accident caused him to lose
mobility in his lower body.

Playing for the Cardinals has allowed Cook to
continue to showcase his love for sports.

“Sports is everything, so to be able to get out
here and play sports again is just really exciting,”
Cook says.

The coach of the Cardinals, Tom Vandever, also
speaks highly of Rush.

“He is one of the spark plugs. He gives energy to
the other players,” Vandever says.

Vandever describes Rush as a very humble and
well-rounded person.

In 1982, the Cardinals formed an advocacy
group for people with disabilities called the
Independence Resource Center.

Rush works at the Independence Resource Center
as a peer advocate. He helps people with disabilities
learn how to live independently in the community.

Rush is often requested by rehabilitation centers
in the Charlottesville and Richmond area, to come
in and talk to newly injured patients.

Vandever says he gives “them a perspective of
life is far from being over”

The Charlottesville Cardinals travel to
high school and elementary schools to do
demonstrations. The students have the opportunity
to get into wheelchairs and play the team in
wheelchair basketball. They experience what it is
like to have a disability.

Vandever says that the Cardinals strive to teach
others about the emphasis on “ability opposed to
disability.”
LEFT: Brandon Rush's tattoo signifies the date of his accident, as well as his team number.

BELOW: James Cook, a senior at Virginia Tech, was a multi-sport athlete before his accident. To him, sports is "everything."
A Presidential Escape

Story and Photos by Alexandra Mitchell

When Herbert Hoover was not in the White House, he spent his days near the Valley

Among the panoramic views and deep blue skies of Virginia’s Shenandoah National Park sits the Rapidan Camp, or what was Herbert Hoover’s 1929 summer White House retreat. Its 3.6 mile marker terrain leads tourists through crystal clear waterfalls to stunning sites and the natural aurora of the woods.

According to the National Park Service, the 164-acre land spars across man-made paths to surround the white waters of the Rapidan River. It was the first complex that was specifically built for a presidential retreat. The natural setting is infused with rock gardens and other intricately designed stone structures that captivate the eye.

Only three cabins remain of the original 13 standing today which are routed by paths and bridges that make it easy for tourists to walk around and see them. The buildings are all a simple one-floor, brown-stained cabin with windows and a porch. The insides consist of bedrooms and bathrooms.

“It’s a really peaceful, natural setting, which was part of the reason why Hoover chose that site,” says park ranger Debby Smith.

In 1929, at the start of his presidency, Herbert Hoover bought the land for a summer weekend retreat. Although Congress had appropriated the funds by the state of Virginia, Hoover insisted he wanted to pay for the materials himself.

The summer White House allowed Hoover time to escape the highs and lows of the fleeting stock market system that would eventually crash and become what we all know as the Great Depression. The drive was not far and was another means of escape from Washington, D.C.’s sweltering summer heat.

“He built the house as his retreat, his solace, to get out of the city to think,” says park ranger
Lindsay Cummings.

The Hoovers used their home to entertain family, friends, Cabinet officers and other politicians. They did everything there from hiking, horseback riding, fishing to just relaxing on the porch for pleasant conversation. Besides entertainment, the house was also used as an informal place to hold meetings with other government executives and to make plans with the Cabinet.

Herbert Hoover bought the land knowing it would later become part of the park, which was already in its formal planning stages in 1926. All that he asked in return was to allow for future presidents to be able to use the camp.

The federal government didn’t own the campsite until 1932 when the final financial proceedings were settled to establish the park.

The three remaining structures are the Creel Cabin, the Brown House and the Prime Minister’s Cabin. There are markers along the path routes that point to where the other buildings once were.

According to park ranger Susan Schmidt, the park service wasn’t able to maintain care of all 13 buildings and were forced to remove all but three. Hoover came back to the camp to help advise which buildings would stay and which would go.

“Another thing about the Rapidan Camp is there’s a volunteer who lives down there to open the buildings, give tours and answer any questions,” says park ranger Susan Schmidt, who has been at Shenandoah for two years now.

Schmidt is no rookie to being a park ranger herself; she has served as one for more than 12 years. Last summer and fall, she gave tours of Rapidan Camp three times per week and gathered a lot of information about the home. Schmidt encourages tourists to take it in and appreciate the history behind the making of the summer White House.
Near Lexington, “drive-thru food” takes on a whole new meaning. This adventure doesn’t include a greasy bag of instant regret. During this drive-thru, deer, pigs, llamas, giraffes and bison surround you and stick their head in your car for a quick bite to eat.

As the only drive-thru safari park in the state, the Virginia Safari Park offers visitors the unique experience of seeing animals that many people in the Valley normally wouldn’t. These animals aren’t stuck behind a cage. They are free to walk up to your car.

“They do everything they would naturally be doing out in the wild,” says Ann Graziano, the Virginia Safari Park’s guest service manager.

For some of the visitors, interacting with an animal not indigenous to this continent makes the park even more unique. “It was pretty great experience,” says John Bostic, a recent visitor. “I have never seen zebras before and to not only see them, but interact with them, was great.”

This natural experience can lead to deer fighting for the attention of a female, a llama sunbathing on the path or even watching an animal give birth.

“The baby buffalo were so cute when we were there,” Amanda Robinson, another visitor, says. “And it was really cute to see them use their tongue almost like funnels to eat.”

The slow, bumpy and unpredictable 3-mile course is filled with constant entertainment and beauty. The freedom of the animals in the park usually makes for friendly animals. But sometimes the freedom causes some animals to act less than friendly toward visitors.

“The camels were the worst,” Bostic says. “They would steal your bucket of feed and one even spit on my friend.”

But the animals are not the only beauty of this property. The path is filled with the Valley’s traditional hills that offer some...
great views of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the park itself. "The views throughout the park are beautiful, and I think that is one of the reasons I love living in the Valley," Bostic says.

In addition to the drive-thru, the park offers visitors the Village-walk-thru. The Village Walk Thru is more of the traditional zoo with fences to separate the animals for visitors. It tries to maintain a more intimate setting for visitors to view the animals while also trying to maintain the same natural experience the animals in the drive-thru experience.

"I was just surprised to see how low the fence were for the kangaroos," Robinson says. "It was really cool to get that close to an animal like that."

The village also has an aviary where visitors are allowed to enter the exhibit that contains a wide variety of birds that fly all around the exhibit. They even land on visitors hands and shoulders to enjoy the feed sticks that the park provides.

Visitors to the park are not the only ones who enjoy experiencing the park and interacting with the animals.

"It's been wonderful, it's the first job I've ever had in my life where I wake up and I don't dread going to work," Graziano says.

This passion for their work does not go unnoticed by patrons.

"The park was very laid back, clean and well run," Robinson says. "And I think the animals reflected this in how they acted."

Unlike those repetitive fast food drive-thru restaurants that make you pull to the second window, the Virginia Safari Park will give you a unique and different experience every time you visit.
Virginia Safari Park

ADDRESS: 229 Safari Lane
Natural Bridge, Va.

DIRECTIONS: From Harrisonburg:
Take I-81 South to exit 18-B, go straight across U.S. 11 and follow the safari sign.

PHONE: (540) 281-3205

CALENDAR: Hours vary, see virginiasafari.com for more information.

PRICES: Child: $10.95, General admission: $16.95;
Bucket of feed: $3.50 each.
a leap of Faith

An Orthodox Jewish family opens their home to support the Jewish community in the Valley.

By TAYLOR HUDSON
Photos by MICHELLE LEE
Being a Chabad Shliach is not a job; it's a lifestyle. A Shliach is a member of the Chabad movement who is sent out to promulgate Judaism. And it's a life that Rabbi Mordy Leimdorfer and his wife, Nomi, fully commit themselves to.

Before dedicating his life to being a Shliach, Mordy attended Yeshiva, a Jewish educational institution for men. He attended the Rabbinical College of America in Morristown, N.J., where he got his bachelor's degree in religious studies. Later, he studied at Central Chabad Lubavitch in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he got his Rabbinical ordination. Nomi attended seminary in Israel, and then worked in several Chabad houses around the world teaching the children of Chabad families and helping serve their communities.

Approximately one year ago, the couple moved to Harrisonburg from Brooklyn to start a Chabad House to serve the Jewish communities of JMU and the Shenandoah Valley. The door to their home is open to anyone.

"Unconditional love," Rabbi Mordy says. "That is what we are here for."

Although there's such a thing as conversion, Judaism doesn't look for converts.

"We are not here to proselytize," Nomi explains. "If someone wants to convert and they go through the entire conversion process according to the code of Jewish law, then they are considered just as Jewish as anyone else. But, we don't actively encourage conversions. We believe that everyone has their own mission the way G-d made them."

Chabad, although established over 250 years ago, became an international Jewish movement in the early 1940s. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson and his father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, arrived in America in 1940 after being rescued from Nazi-occupied Warsaw.

After decades spent combatting the Communist regime to keep Judaism alive in Soviet Russia, Rabbi Schneerson came to a country where he was told religion was hopelessly old fashioned, and he promptly set out to prove that "America is not different," according to Rabbi Mordy. He then started the Chabad-Lubavitch movement in America to spread Judaism and Torah to American Jews.

As a result, a large outreach effort emerged to support fellow Jews in their faith via education and encouragement. In fact, "Chabad" is an acronym for three Hebrew words — chochmah, binah and da'at — meaning wisdom, understanding and knowledge. Today, that mission has expanded to over 4,000 Chabad Houses around the world. These houses serve as a both a resource and source of support. The goal is for the Chabad Houses to empower the Jewish community to remain connected to their religion, as well as encourage the understanding of traditional practices.

Like most individuals who devote their lives to being Chabad Shliachs, the Leimdorfer family relocated from Brooklyn to an unfamiliar neighborhood — Harrisonburg. And moving to Virginia didn't come without sacrifices for the Leimdorfer family.

Mordy and Nomi have two children; a 3-year-old daughter named Geula and 1-year-old son named Eli. In an ideal situation, the Leimdorfer family would love to send their children to a Jewish school; however, the Harrisonburg area lacks such an option.

But, according to Mordy and Nomi,
they are thankful for the option of homeschooling. Since Chabad is a large international movement with thousands of Shliachs around the globe, many families don’t have access to a Jewish school due to the culture of the area in which they are located. Therefore, Chabad created an online home-schooling option to ensure children could receive a Jewish education anywhere.

Food is another issue the Leimdorfers have faced since moving to Harrisonburg. They eat only kosher foods, but local grocery stores offer very limited options. Items, such as meat and dairy products, must be shipped in from Brooklyn or Pittsburgh. The Leimdorfers have three large freezers in their basement to store their shipments of kosher food. And eating out is impossible. “No nights out for us!” Nomi laughs. They also sacrifice most, if not all, of their time. Shlichus is a full-time commitment; therefore, running the Chabad House is their full-time job. Their life is dedicated to being Chabad Shliachs, and their Chabad House relies on donations to cover all the expenses.

The Leimdorfers host weekly Shabbat dinners and services, classes, social programming, events for Jewish holidays, and interact daily with JMU students. “It’s really more than a full-time job,” Nomi says.

“We just want to be a home away from home for [Jewish] students to come to,” Nomi says. “But we are definitely here for anyone in the area as well.”

The Leimdorfers serve as an affiliate of Chabad of Virginia. And although they are technically known as Chabad Shenandoah Valley, the Leimdorfers have focused much of their attention so far on James Madison University students through what is known as JMjews Chabad. “We just want to be a home away from home for [Jewish] students to come to,” Nomi says. “But we are definitely here for anyone in the area as well.”

The events they host are Shabbat dinners. The Leimdorfers feel a sense of belonging and community, and of being connected to their roots and traditions.

“We find serenity in the Chabad house,” Mordy says. “It’s like an island in the middle of this huge university.”

They also sacrifice most, if not all, of their time. Shlichus is a full-time commitment; therefore, running the Chabad House is their full-time job. Their life is dedicated to being Chabad Shliachs, and their Chabad House relies on donations to cover all the expenses.
"I love how every Friday is so different," Waingortin says. "Shabbat is usually welcomed the same at Synagogues, but at the Chabad house at JMU there are themes such as in food, decorations and topics of conversation."

Anastassiya Chervinskaya, a JMU junior international affairs major, agrees, "I really like the feeling of being home when going to Shabbat dinners."

The events hosted by the Chabad house, such as the Shabbat dinners, as well as the welcoming attitude of the Leimdorfer family allow JMU students to find a sense of belonging and understanding in their Jewish faith in particular, and as people in general.

JMJews Chabad helped Waingortin develop her sense of self. She is originally from Argentina and moved to many different countries growing up.

"When moving abroad, it is hard to keep a stable identity," Waingortin says. "Judaism is the one characteristic that, no matter where in the world I found myself, I would always be connected to. That is the reason why I am so motivated to keep learning. JMJews provided me with the support and education about my religion while being a college student, and it has taught me that it is okay to be involved in school and balancing your traditions."

JMJews Chabad also helped Chervinskaya gain a similar sense of self-understanding.

"I find serenity in believing in G-d and I think that the 'rules' that I'm supposed to follow as a Jew is a set of rules that defines a moral way of living," Chervinskaya says. "JMU Chabad shows the Jewish traditions at their fullest and this experience really reinforces my faith."

Being Chabad Shlachts is a life-long commitment. Mordy and Nomi plan to serve the Harrisonburg and JMU community for as long as they can. They want the students to know that the Chabad House is their home away from home, and is a place to have a good time with a touch of wisdom and meaning.

"A home away from home," Nomi exclaims. Mordy nods and agrees, "Yes. A home away from home."
Stuart Mercer shares his treasures in a downtown storefront.
When you walk into Elk Run Mining Company in Harrisonburg, a small storefront hidden right off South Main Street under the parking garage, you find a hidden treasure. A wall of mining artifacts welcomes you and the small light in the back near a work station deflects you toward the real attraction — glass showcases, filled with beautifully polished gemstones ranging in earthy tones and natural shapes. A collection of something simple, yet refined.

The work of Stuart Mercer makes these pieces of one-of-a-kind art that can't be found anywhere else.

"Everything in the store is a Virginia rock or mineral, with the exception of a dozen of them that are international gems," Mercer says. "They are just too cool not to have them for sale."

Mercer, who grew up in Cape Cod, Mass., says his love for rock hunting started in his hometown, where he looked on the waterfront for the rounded and polished rocks as a young child.

“He does a totally handmade product and he is a perfectionist. He finds the beauty in rocks and minerals and gemstones that we just consider dirty rocks”
– Karen Mercer, wife of Stuart Mercer

“I think I was collecting rocks as soon as I was old enough to pick one up and put it in my mouth,” Mercer says. “I started cutting and polishing by fifth grade, silver work by sixth grade, immediately selling my stuff.”

Mercer proudly talked about his business endeavors through the years. He had his own business as a kid and continued his business as a James Madison University geology student; he then sold his work at art and craft shows, festivals, in Staunton and at OASIS in downtown Harrisonburg before he opened his own storefront this past fall.

However, he is most proud of the process he takes to get to his final product.

“I find a rock. It needs to be a rock without fractures, young enough where it is not weathered up and with an attractive design,” he says, as he shows a small diagram of the stages the stones go through during the process. “I slab it in a large saw and then I will know if I keep it or not. When I cut into it,
that's the most exciting part after finding it."

He continues the process by cutting the stone from a smaller saw and grinding around the template of the shape he has drawn. Then he polishes the back of the stones.

"At this point I have got a couple hours into the rock. Then I will mount it on a dop stick, which is a mixture of beeswax and shellac, that will hold it and give me control over what I am doing."

Then he shapes the crown using a coarse grit wheel, followed by a finer grit until it is ready for its final polish and setting. Mercer estimates that each stone receives his undivided attention for five to seven hours until it is ready to be sold. His pieces range from $25 pendants to $400 or $500 for more elaborate and rare pieces.

Karen Mercer, Stuart's wife, supports her husband's business. "He does a totally handmade product and he is a perfectionist. He finds the beauty in rocks and minerals and gemstones that we just consider dirty rocks," she says. "He brings beauty to them and then he tells you what they are and where they came from."

Stuart explained that the Blue Ridge Mountains, where he mainly collects his gemstones, are part of the oldest existing mountain range on Earth. "So it has been literally through hell," he laughs. Mercer collects his rocks from the deposits, the base of the mountains and the surrounding creek bottoms.

The rocks he works with are mostly metamorphic. "All the original mineralogy has changed with the exception of a few intrusions. From my own backyard, I get mostly bloodstones," he says. "That is a backyard rock and it is just incredible."

Stuart's trade is unique due to his specialization in Virginia minerals. However, he still greatly values the basics outside of his profession. "I don't want to be married to my store," he says.

Stuart spoke fondly of his life outside of creating jewelry. He and his wife live on a small farm in the Harrisonburg area where they raised their two daughters. He says his daughters "broke his heart" when they moved away from the countryside.

He refuses to "marry" his store because of his desire to continue mining and rock-hunting, just as he did growing up. He even entertained the idea of opening a school to teach others his art form.

He is grounded in the basics of his craft and life.
1. Stuart Mercer works at his lapidary grinder in the front of his store so that customers and passers-by can watch his process.

2. Two pendant necklaces made of amazonite, mined in Amelia County, Va., retail for $80 and $95.

3. This peach quartz crystal cluster was mined at the Plains Mill in Timberville, Va.

4. Stuart Mercer doesn’t work exclusively with Virginia-native stones — this lapis lazuli stone was imported from Afghanistan.

5. Wagon trail jasper, right and left, from Page County, Va. on the left and right, and in the center is midnight quartzite. All retail for $40.
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