

MY QUEST FOR MY (SOUTHERN) VOICE IN NARRATIVE WRITING

A project that connects reporting with soul-searching and storytelling

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DEDICATION

To Melissa, for moving here with me. And for continuing to move me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I called Jacqui Banaszynski three years ago and told her I was thinking about leaving a tenure-track faculty job to become a journalist. At the time, I had no formal journalism training or experience. She didn't laugh at me. Instead, she recommended several schools I should consider. She set aside time to talk to me during her winter break. A year later I sat in her Intermediate Writing class and unlearned, relearned how to write. She continues to teach me, champion me and humble me. She's my mentor. Thanks, Jacqui.

Greg Bowers and I argued about Southern culture and college football from Day 1. He told me my writing sucked ... but that it would get better. He hired me to work on his sports desk. He let me cover the most coveted sports beat at the paper. He pushed me to be creative and told me to never be boring. He taught me about the words I knew, those I thought I knew and those I didn't know. I've learned to stick to the words I know. Greg kept me around so he could give me hell. Like friends do.

Scott Swafford taught the very first class I took at Mizzou. He was patient with a couple dozen rookies who came into his Boot Camp from all sorts of backgrounds. He served as my initial advisor and was always accessible. He made sure I was on the right track. And he taught me the basics. Thanks for the foundation, Scott.

Martha Pickens is an invaluable asset to the Missouri School of Journalism. She is the god and the glue: She knows all the quick fixes and makes sure her students don't fall apart. She's the one that got me here. Thanks, Martha.

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INTRODUCTION

When you mention the word “storytelling” around some journalists, they bristle. I don’t. I think storytelling is misunderstood: Some folks might view a storyteller as someone who just wants to be A Writer, and they might think storytelling gets in the way of the news. Well, those things can be true. But they don’t have to be. Storytelling — narrative nonfiction — is a powerful voice.

Narrative nonfiction can help readers consume the news. A well-crafted news story that balances descriptive writing with exposition — and which incorporates character development and plot and tension and just the right structure — can make the news come alive. As a reader, you’re there in the courtroom with a victim’s family as the defendant is sentenced. You’re at the pride parade with a gay couple who had to leave their home state to get married. You’re standing in the mud with a family as they watch the creek jump its banks and flood their home. Narrative nonfiction puts you there and asks you to care.

As a Southerner, narrative nonfiction resonates with me because I grew up around storytellers. Yes, that notion sounds cliché and stereotypical to me, too, but maybe there’s some truth to it. I’m at least inclined to believe it’s true for some Southerners, in their own minds: I spoke with several narrative nonfiction writers from the South during the summer of 2015, and all of them talked about growing up around storytellers. What’s more, some of them implied that growing up around storytellers is a Southern thing. But those same folks might say, *No, there are storytellers everywhere*, and they’d be right. *But maybe there’s just a different kind of storyteller in the South ...*

Back when I was a tenure-track professor specializing in qualitative research, I would've told you that searching for a distinctive Southern storytelling voice would be a tall task, an impossible quest. And yet I found myself doing exactly that as I worked on this professional project during the summer of 2015, two years after I'd left academia to become a journalist.

I left academia because I never felt like I belonged in the Ivory Tower. But let's back up: I got into academia in the first place because I was a professor's son and my mother had worked several jobs in the academy. My parents made pretty good money and had a lot of time to devote to raising their kids. It seemed like a pretty good life, and it was. Is — my dad's still teaching. Academia was good to me, too, but while I loved the energy of college campuses, I never felt fulfilled in my work.

Looking back now, I think it's because I never felt like I had a voice, or the right (academic) voice. Sure, there were the politics that went along with being a junior tenure-track professor, but I never felt disenfranchised or anything. It was more about the subject matter: I wasn't passionate about higher education administration, the discipline in which I earned my doctorate. And I certainly wasn't passionate about writing about it, especially the way I felt forced to write about it.

You've likely read 30-page academic journal articles that are full of jargon and theory. And hard to read. I'm not belittling academic writing: It serves a purpose within the academy, and some folks are really good at it. It never felt right to me, though — I was trying to be a scholar when I really wanted to be a storyteller. I realized this in 2013, when I reflected on the 200-plus-page dissertation I authored

in 2009. I interviewed 15 student veterans about their experiences coming back to college after deployments and quoted them heavily throughout the tome. Their voices are present in my dissertation, but their stories are not.

For the average reader, there's nothing in that dissertation that helps you make a personal connection with those student veterans. Their stories — which would give a reader context for their experiences and make them come alive as people — are missing. There wasn't much in that dissertation that would make a wider audience care.

If I'm honest, I've always wanted my voice to be heard by a wider audience, and I've wanted that audience to care about what I'm saying. For someone who writes better than he talks, writing has always been my preferred medium. But for me, that medium — when wrapped in academic-speak and rendered in 30-page journal articles — became tedious. I found myself trying to sound like all the other scholars. I saw in front of me the promise of tenure, a comfortable life. And I got scared that I'd lose myself — my voice — if I pursued it. So, I made a change.

The past two years have been freeing for me. At 34 years old, I'm almost positive I now know what I want to do with my life. I discovered narrative nonfiction when I put down the academic journals and opened up the newspapers and magazines, and more fully when I took Jacqui Banaszynski's Intermediate Writing class. She and others taught me the techniques I'm learning to harness, the skills that come together to give a journalist his voice.

That's where this professional project lives, at the intersection of craft and culture. I was lucky to find a newspaper — the Charleston Gazette, now the Gazette-

Mail — that let me write narrative nonfiction on day-turn, week-turn and long-term assignments. From a craft perspective, this was an opportunity to hone a writing voice. From a cultural perspective, I spoke with accomplished narrative nonfiction writers from the South and learned how they think and work, and how their Southern roots influence their reporting and writing. This was an attempt to find *the* (Southern) writing voice.

Now, as I'm attempting to tie all these experiences together, I realize I'm ultimately searching for *my* voice. I haven't found it yet. So, I'll keep trying. And thinking. And reporting. And writing. And telling stories.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND WEEKLY FIELD NOTES

I divided my time among four activities during the course of my project.

General assignment reporting

I specifically sought out an internship that would challenge me and help me grow as a reporter and writer. Keep in mind I had no general assignment reporting experience before I worked at the Charleston Gazette: My goal was to change that. I averaged three to four stories a week at the newspaper, and I covered the following things: festivals and events; cops and courts; local business; local government. I also wrote briefs and made cop calls, and I reported and wrote a couple of obituaries. I even took photos on a couple of occasions. During the summer the paper began to use me as more of a general assignment feature writer. I had a good mix of day-turn, week-turn and long-term stories to work on, and I learned to keep a personal story budget and manage multiple assignments from week to week.

Narrative writing

I made the general assignment reporting internship my own by writing narratives on day-turn and week-turn assignments. I went into each assignment looking for a way to tell a story, one that was interesting and informative. Two early breakthroughs, I believe, showed my editors that I had a different writing voice and storytelling style and that they could trust me to follow my instincts. The first was my piece on the Vandalia Gathering festival. It was a scene-driven piece that focused on one central character to tell the tale of the event. The second was the broken narrative I wrote about Willy Shuman, a young man who died just four days before he was to ship off to the Air Force Academy, where he had committed to play tennis.

I found this story after I was handed a press release about an upcoming annual charity event named in honor of Willy. Instead of doing a standard event preview, I dug deeper and found a compelling story that I used as a vehicle to introduce readers to Willy's life and legacy.

Basically, I tried to approach most of my stories — when appropriate — with a narrative storyteller's eye. And I discovered that I could write narratives on day-turn, deadline stories.

Deeply reported, immersive narrative projects

Several stories I wrote allowed me time to do in-depth interviewing and research, and to write longer pieces. Chief among these was the piece I wrote about Larry Morris, a local Marine who traveled back to Cuba in July to help reopen the U.S. Embassy in Havana, Cuba — the same embassy he'd helped evacuate in 1961. I spent over a month conducting interviews and doing research for this piece, and I developed good rapport with Morris. I approached my stories on HealthNet 5 — an air medevac base — and Ronnie Hamrick — a Clay County man who penned a World War II reference book — the same way. I balanced these long-term projects with my daily assignments; I showed my editors that I manage my time effectively and juggle shifting priorities.

Interviewing accomplished Southern narrative writers

During the summer I interviewed four Southern writers who are known for their narrative nonfiction. These interviews served two purposes. First, they allowed me to explore Southern writing and whether a Southern writing voice exists. Second, and most germane to my writing at the Gazette, the interviews

served as mini craft workshops. I learned about their processes and approaches to writing, and I tried to use what they taught me in my own work.

A practical example of this is the piece I wrote about Brandon Mooney's funeral. Mooney, a firefighter, died in an automobile accident. When I covered his funeral, I wrote a scene-driven piece built around descriptive writing. I used simple language to convey a deeper meaning, and I tried to strip my writing of any flourishes or melodrama. To do this, I kept in mind a lesson Wright Thompson taught me in our interview. To paraphrase, Thompson said he tries to strip away all the pyrotechnics — simile, metaphor, alliteration, etc. — from his writing. He said that the best stories have a deeper meaning. And he criticized instances where writers overwrote, stories where it's apparent to the reader that there's someone sitting in a room typing on a laptop. So, I tried to be measured with my words and invisible to my readers.

Weekly Memo No. 1 — May 25

Howdy, y'all, and here's wishing you a happy Memorial Day.

I'll begin by telling you that I live in a basement. Not a basement apartment or a room within a basement — just the basement. I have no door to lock. My lights work on surge protectors that dangle from the crossbeams above my head. (There are four tiny banks of miniature studio lights that surround a square-ish-shaped strand of LED lights woven through the beams above my bed, and when they're all turned on, they resemble an alien landing from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.) I do have my own bathroom, although the shower door and the water temperature knob were installed backwards. Oh, there's no door to the bathroom, either — a green fitted sheet has been tacked onto the brick above the entryway. (Late at night, after I've stumbled down the stairs into the basement and turned left toward the bathroom, having managed to find the surge protector and hit the switch, the bathroom light — a hanging work lamp you'd use to examine the underbelly of a car — flickers a few times before giving off a greenish-yellow glow from behind the sheet. For someone with an active imagination, it's terrifying.) The toilet's new, though, and landlord Rita supplies free T.P.

I love living here. I'm in a part of the city that's not been reclaimed by hipsters or the wealthy. The diverse neighborhood is just a couple of blocks from the State Capitol and, in the opposite direction, a little over a mile away from the Gazette. McClung Street is a collection of old coal miners' homes, according to Charles, one of my four roommates. He's a 63-year-old Vietnam veteran from South

Charleston, and I bug him for story ideas while we watch the fellas on the corner lots deal drugs. “They got a lot of five-minute friends,” Charles says.

I’ll tell you more about my roommates in next week’s installment — that’ll give you something to look forward to — but I’m betting you want to know more about my professional project experience thus far.

I had a good first week at the Gazette. I’ve learned a new content management system (Citrix), worked in InCopy for the first time and, in general, learned how the paper works.

Some firsts for me this week:

I made the “cop calls” Friday night, checking in with around 30 agencies — from Putnam County to Homeland Security — to see if there was anything going on. There wasn’t, which was kind of a bummer; I was hoping to get that first-ever crime story in.

I covered a festival. Greg: It was like doing a walk-around story. Thank you. (Quit smirking.)

I covered a news conference and wrote a fairly standard inverted pyramid type news story.

I had the centerpiece story on 1A, on a Sunday.

I wrote three stories this week:

HealthNet Helicopter/ATV safety: This was my first Gazette byline — the news conference I covered at Yeager Airport. The gist: ATV deaths and injuries are a big problem in West Virginia, and area hospitals and ATV enthusiasts have

partnered with HealthNet to promote ATV safety.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150520/GZ01/150529898/1101>)

Charli Fulton's quilt: Fulton is a former state assistant attorney general who happens to be a big-time quilter. She's won a few prizes for her most recent project, "Vandalia Album," but it's not really her favorite quilt. She almost seems ... unhappy with it. (<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150522/GZ01/150529676>)

Loomyladi Weaver: Jane Gilchrist can trace her Mountain State roots back to the 1760s. One of her great-grandfathers was a weaver. She was at the Vandalia Gathering festival Saturday teaching the trade to a new generation.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150523/GZ01/150529635>)

Upcoming:

I've been working on a story about Willy Shuman, a young man who was killed six years ago in a car accident. The driver was drunk. Shuman was a passenger; he wasn't wearing his seatbelt. He was supposed to ship off to the Air Force Academy four days later, where he was to play tennis for the Falcons. His legacy lives on in a foundation his folks have started in his name and, without being too cliché, in a young man who happened to play tennis with Shuman on June 19, 2009 — hours before he died.

City editor Greg Moore wants me to do a story about a historical marker that the state just placed to mark the last hanging in the U.S. That's an ongoing project, though, and we'll talk about it more this week.

Updates:

I'll be meeting with Rob Byers this week to discuss the two or three immersive, deeply-reported narrative pieces we might do. He's been very good about coming by my desk and asking me how I'm doing, and he's been accessible anytime I've needed him. Two prospective stories: An in-depth look at an Air National Guard C-130 unit that flies global supply missions out of the area; and ride-along story with the HealthNet team as they go on trauma flights. (NOTE: That last idea was pitched to me by HealthNet CEO Clinton Burley. He offered me full access if I wanted to go along for the ride. I told my editors about our conversation and they seemed interested.)

Accolades:

Caryn Gresham, the director of the state's Cultural and Historical Division, sent me a nice email thanking me for the festival coverage.

Charli Fulton, the quilter, sent me a note of thanks as well. She said that her sister and her sister-in-law read the story, and both commented that I nailed Fulton's personality and temperament.

Rob Byers edited the Charli Fulton story, and he let me sit beside him while he did so. Honestly, it wasn't my favorite story, but Byers really liked it. He commended me for using descriptive writing and developing scenes, and he said he's tried to get other reporters to use those techniques. He told me I had "the gift," which made me blush. And then, without knowing about my Southern-oriented project, he brought up Rick Bragg.

He said he'd heard Bragg speak at a conference years ago and that something Bragg said stuck with him. Apparently Bragg was talking about how journalists have to invade people's privacy and peer into their past to unearth meaningful stories. He said that, since we have to do that — which can be uncomfortable — we should at least “play pretty.”

My dad used to say that to me when I was a kid, when I was being a brat or being unfair or, generally, just not caring as much as I should about something.

Even though it wasn't my best work, I'm glad Byers could see that I cared.

Weekly Memo No. 2 — May 31

Howdy, y'all.

I'll begin with some stories about my roommates. I have four.

Dave is a junior at West Virginia University who likes to ride his bike and eat lettuce out of a bag. He's the most normal of the bunch. So there's that.

Bob works at one of the local TV stations. He's a videographer. He's also in a jazz fusion band of sorts. I haven't heard him play. He's a tall man in his 50s with a soul patch under his bottom lip. Nice dude. We've bonded over beverages.

Jon manages a few pay-to-park lots in the tri-state area (West Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio). He stays with us two nights a week. He commutes from Columbus, Ohio. Of course he's a Buckeyes fan. He's some kind of body builder too — squat with the type of arms that can't help but stick out from his side, like someone shoved a couple of wedges under his armpits. He kind of looks like WWW wrestler Brock Lesner, but with a goatee. A sleeve tattoo. Likes to wear those pointy men's dress shoes with jeans.

Charles is in his sixties, a Vietnam vet who worked on F-111s in Thailand. He likes Budweisers and Marlboro Reds. And Hooters. He usually lives in Chile with his wife, who's from there, but he's up here recovering from back surgery. He works part-time with our landlord at her nursery stand at the Capitol Market. He can't lift much. He doesn't know much about plants. He's noticed that sales are down.

Charles tells me stories about growing up in South Charleston. He and his friends used to ride their bikes behind the mosquito-fogger truck that came through their neighborhood.

He's a regal-looking man, even in jean shorts and a teal tank top. He's balding on top, but his silver hair is long, almost to his shoulders. Sometimes he'll make a small ponytail with a rubber band. His moustache and goatee are neatly trimmed. With the right hat and uniform, he'd look just right sitting atop a horse with sabre drawn, leading a Civil War charge.

Charles' wife is coming to visit West Virginia for the first time in June. "I haven't painted a real good picture of the state for her," he says. He'll also have to give up the booze and, most likely, the cigarettes. I worry that June will be an unhappy time on McClung Street.

I had a good second week at the paper. Still haven't gotten as much daily stuff as I'd like, but I'm promised it's coming. Picked up a lot of stories, though, and I'll talk about them below.

Some firsts for me this week:

I learned how to break into the newsroom. I came in early Tuesday to get ahead on some work. Apparently I was too early. So, I walked around in search of a coffee shop. A fruitless effort. Later in the day, a fellow reporter taught me how to use my keycard (for the parking garage) to jimmy the main door to the newsroom.

I worked on a developing news situation involving some water main repairs. (Turned out to be more of a non-story, though I still wrote something up.)

I wrote three stories (and a brief) this week:

Willy Shuman and his legacy: I think I told you about this last week, but this was a story about a young man who was killed just days before he was to go to the Air Force Academy to play tennis. His mother has kept his memory alive through a

seat-belt awareness foundation and, somewhat reluctantly, through tennis. And Willy played tennis one last time before he died — and he may have inspired his playing partner to step up his game.

<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150526/GZ01/150529590>)

West Virginia American Water: A sinkhole opened up downtown on May 18, and the water company has been trying to fix a leaky main ever since. On Wednesday morning, WVAW issued a statement alerting customers to scheduled repairs that might impact water color during the next two days. They also asked all of their customers in the Kanawha River Valley to voluntarily limit non-essential water usage. Then, around Noon, we heard rumors that the scheduled repairs wouldn't happen. It was a lot of back and forth with the company's PR person until we finally got confirmation in the early evening — one minute before deadline. I wrote what I could.

<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150527/GZ01/150529418>)

Kanawha Players yard sale: Our community theater — the second-oldest, continuously running community company in the country — is on hard times. As it always is. One of the editors asked me for an update on this, and to tie in said update with a yard sale the group hosted Saturday. I looked back through our archives and found about a decade's worth of the same story. So, I tried to take a different angle.

<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150530/GZ01/150539939/1419>)

Upcoming:

The upcoming week will be busy.

I'm covering a story about a local business that's trying to sell — or close. That will be my first attempt at business reporting. (I guess I can call it that.)

I'll be writing a piece about a family of adrenaline junkies who have volunteered to play "victims" in an upcoming disaster drill.

I'm continuing to report a historical narrative piece that centers around the last public hanging in West Virginia. Don't have a firm deadline for this yet.

I'm working on an article about a Clay County gentleman who, for the past seven years, has been putting together a reference book of all the county's World War Two vets. He's got over 700 pages and 1500-plus entries. Again, no firm deadline for this project.

Updates:

I've scheduled the first two visits for one of my deeply reported, immersive narrative pieces. I'll be spending Friday, June 12 at HealthNet to see how the company's crews are trained, how the communications center runs and, potentially, spend some time in a simulator. And I'll be doing my first 24-hour flight shift with a crew in Beckley, West Virginia, beginning Monday, June 15. The CEO says he's giving me complete access and that, as long as I embed with the same crew, I'm welcome to come back for follow-up visits. (FYI: I learned last week that the CEO himself was a former flight paramedic for 17 years.)

I was handed a couple of other smaller stories with deadlines a month or so out. I'll begin pre-reporting those soon.

Accolades:

The Shuman piece seemed to go over really well. The executive editor tweeted it out and mentioned me by name in his post. I got a nice email from a former Gazette reporter who said he's been reading my stuff; he offered to buy me a beer. A veteran staff reporter came by my desk — which is actually his desk (he's based at the Capitol) — and introduced himself. He said my stuff reads different — in a good way — and he offered to hook me up with some places (including some in North Carolina) that would allow me to write narratives with voice. And Jane Shuman sent me a very nice email. Among other things, she said: "You took so much time with me to try to get the essence of Willy, and you did it well."

Following last weekend's Vandalia Gathering coverage, a reader wrote a note to our paper that was published in our "Readers' Voice" section. It read: "I don't know writer Wade Livingston and photographer Sam Owens came from, but hold onto them. The words-and-photos portrait they painted of the Vandalia Festival was the epitome of excellent, descriptive writing and artful photography."

Finally, another of my editors came by my desk this week and, after dropping several of the aforementioned rolling-deadline stories on me, said that folks had taken notice of my writing style and that they wanted to take advantage of it while I'm here. Again, he promised that the daily stuff would continue to roll in, and I'm going to see if that holds true next week.

I'll say it again: I'm really enjoying my experience here. I miss Melissa and Chevy (our dog) terribly, but I look forward to going to work everyday. Haven't felt

that way in a long while, and it's a good feeling to have. Here's hoping it's not just the honeymoon phase.

I sometimes think my editors are giving me throwaway stories that others don't want, and I suppose that's par for the course for rookie reporters and interns. That said, I feel like I'm making chicken salad out of chicken sh*t. I think my editors have noticed. Y'all have taught me that stories are everywhere, you just have to look. Here's to diggin'.

Weekly Memo No. 3 — June 8

Hello, hello — hope this note finds you doing all right.

At the Blue Parrot on Friday night, I saw a bassist with a dirty, stringy mop of gray hair, a diabetic support sock and the general appearance of the spawn that Rob Zombie and The Crypt Keeper (the host of Tales from the Crypt) never had try to drunkenly mount the stage and resume missing every third note.

He made it up on the fourth try, but he couldn't find his guitar. He looked from side to side, slightly swaying as some semblance of classic rock screamed from the speakers. His band mates kept playing.

In fact, they'd been playing without him for a couple of songs, having seized the opportunity when he didn't come back after he'd gone ... somewhere. Earlier, on a smoke break outside the Parrot, they'd jokingly — I think — plotted to kill him.

The music was loud, and it was bad. It shook you like an earthquake, one that wasn't horrific enough to kill you, but one that was worse — it left you dazed and damaged ... and with the memory of the aftermath. Yes, that's melodramatic, hyperbolic, etc. But it's the first thing that came to mind as the pressure built in my left eardrum and it threatened to pop. The bourbon I'd ordered offered no relief.

Don't know what happened to the bassist. Didn't see him at night's end.

Some firsts for me this week:

Well, I wrote a business story, covered a plea hearing for a murder case and reported on a city council meeting.

So, what did I learn? Well, for starters, I've really learned the value of thorough pre-reporting. I was able to provide a little more context for the South

Hills/Bridge Road area in the business piece, and I was able to get some color from South Charleston mayor Frank Mullens ahead of his election — all because I'd taken the time to do some reading before I went out. Same thing with the plea hearing. I read our past articles, and I talked to one of our veteran court reporters (who couldn't cover the case because her father was the defense attorney). Long story short, the work on the front end pays off on the back end.

I had one of those experiences where I made the extra calls and got a better story. You'll see the write-up I did after the school-bus-safety-camera presser — I was able to talk to the someone in the West Virginia education department and a police officer, which made for a much deeper day-turn story.

In terms of narrative writing, I had two breakthroughs this week. First, I managed to get some dialogue and mood-writing into the plea hearing piece. I remembered what Tom Lake said when he called into Greg's sports journalism class: Even when he was covering cops and courts, he tried to look for spots to write scenes and tell an engaging story. I think I was able to do that with this piece — especially with the bit of color at the end of the story. (Side note: While I did write a good piece on deadline, I needed a bit of help from one of my editors in terms of simplifying the lead and taking a bit of the jargon out in spots. A good learning moment.)

The second breakthrough was the piece I wrote on deadline after the Rainbow Pride of West Virginia Festival. I think it's the best story I've written on deadline. Ever. Why? A couple of reasons. First, I was able to take a breath and make an outline. (I've really been trying to do this and write toward an ending, and it's

been helping.) Second, I took some time to think about what this story meant. For me, it was a story about assumptions. So, I even tried to structure it in a way that the reader would assume something and, in the end, have that assumption challenged. I think I pulled it off, but you can be the judge.

And, finally, I got my own profile page at the paper:
<http://www.wvgazette.com/section/staff&template=staffProfilePages&StaffID=g069>

I wrote six stories (and two briefs) this week:

South Hills business looking for buyer.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150602/GZ01/150609823>)

Man sentenced to 20 years in death of St. Albans man.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150604/GZ01/150609621>)

Towering Inferno drill entices 'thrill-seeking' WV family to serve.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150604/GZ01/150609612>)

South Charleston city council talks budget, police staffing.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150604/GZ01/150609561>)

Kanawha schools using cameras to catch motorists who pass buses.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150605/GZ01/150609474>)

Pride festival a marriage of new happenings, old traditions.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150607/GZ01/150609422>)

Upcoming:

Still working on the historical narrative for the last public hanging in West Virginia.

Still working on the piece about the man in Clay County who's compiling the WWII records.

I start my first big in-depth piece this week. On Friday I go to HealthNet for the day. The following Monday is my first 24-hour shift with the medevac flight crew.

Professional analysis:

I had a really nice talk with Wright Thompson last week (and I've attached the transcript with audio for your reference — Greg said he missed my Southern accent).

The highlights:

- He can't think of anyone ever asking him about his voice. Voice just happens. "Voicey writers" are something that teachers/editors talk about, not their writers themselves.
- Trying to write in a certain voice might be gimmicky. He's always striven for authenticity in his voice.
- As a Southerner — and a Mississippian — the sense of place is something he's noticed has impacted his writing. He thinks the South has a unique sense of place, maybe a stronger sense than other parts of the countries. But it's just a feeling. Still, he looks for the sense of place in every story he writes.
- Does the South have a voice? Maybe not. But some folks who might sound Southern might sound ... poor. Maybe it's writing about poverty, writing like a poor person. (There might a tie here to what Rick Bragg talks about in *All Over but the Shoutin'*: He writes that his family talks poor and doesn't manufacture a drawl like rich Alabamians do.)

- Stories should always have a deeper meaning. Wright said, when he started to edit the upcoming Best Sports Writing in America book, he threw out any story that was just two-dimensional — maybe it had great detail but nothing to anchor it to universal themes.

Pate McMichael is up next; I'll talk to him this week.

I've reached out to Rick Bragg and Chuck Reece — no response yet. I'll try them again this week, and see if I can find phone numbers for them.

Haven't had much luck finding a good way to get ahold of Howell Raines. Then again, I haven't looked that hard.

If y'all have a better way of reaching folks, I'm all ears — and I'd appreciate any nudges you could give people.

Weekly Memo No. 4 — June 14

Howdy, y'all.

A boring memo this week, but a short one. A bit busy at the moment. A good thing.

Some firsts for me this week:

I covered the Charleston Urban Renewal Authority meeting Wednesday morning and wrote a 42-inch monster that was quickly cut to 20. And thank god. It was boring. Why did I write so much? Well, two reasons. The first is because I didn't know what folks would find interesting; in other words, I struggled to prioritize what information was pertinent. The second reason: I had inferred that one of my editors had placed more importance on this story than was actually the case. The silver lining: I'm learning to read one of my editors, and what he feels is important.

Scott: You'll see the CURA story below, and you might think the lede is a bit bland. I think it is. I initially had a line in there about drugs, rats and human feces, but that didn't fly. I'm having to learn how to negotiate with my editors on bringing a reader into the hard-news stories I'm writing. Know this, though: I tried to heed your advice re: last week's S. Charleston city council meeting and the less-than-engaging lede I managed.

I wrote another business story (local, homegrown furniture business), which I guess isn't a first. That said, this was a little more involved than the last day-turn piece. I'm not really happy with it. I didn't get a lot of stats — or much context — into it. Not a very robust piece. I could blame it on being busy with ongoing features

and other pieces this week — and that would be true — but I could have done better.

I covered a bike rally, a tame one. That said, the event/festival coverage seems to be where I'm doing (in my opinion, at least) some of my better writing. I think I managed to pull off a little narrative and go a little deeper with the meaning of the story. I wrote that piece in about two hours, faster than the previous week's WV Pride piece. I can thank Mr. Bowers for all those walk-around stories he had us do during football season — great practice for efficiently finding a story and writing it up.

I wrote three stories (and one brief) this week:

CURA to acquire property on Quarrier Street.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150610/GZ01/150619930>)

Local furniture business sees opportunity to grow.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150613/GZ03/150619705>)

This year's Biker Bash quieter ... for a cause.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150613/GZ01/150619668>)

Upcoming:

Still working on the historical narrative for the last public hanging in West Virginia. Think that will publish this weekend.

Still working on the piece about the man in Clay County who's compiling the WWII records. Visited him this past week, and I want to talk to him some more. My editors aren't rushing me on this, so that's good.

Went to HealthNet on Friday and spent about nine hours at their HQ, training facilities and maintenance hanger. Also saw the medical command communication post in the hospital. A good orientation. I go to Beckley, West Virginia, bright and early tomorrow morning for my first 24-hour shift.

I've picked up a piece on the "cell phone police" for the upcoming Greenbrier Classic golf tournament.

And my assigning editor has sent me several more stories to turn this week. It will be a hectic few days.

Professional analysis:

No updates this week. Will try to schedule Pate McMichael soon. We've been in touch, just need to nail down a time.

That said, I've been thinking about something Wright Thompson said. He talked about stripping all the excess out of his writing, so the writer would appear invisible to the reader. I thought about that when I covered the Pride parade and this week's bike rally, and I tried to write in such a manner.

And I've been trying to use two narrative techniques when I write. The first is something that Roy Peter Clark talked about — writing toward an ending. I think I told you that I've been trying to outline my stories. Well, that's true, but usually my piece of paper has two things on it: lede and ending. Once I figure out that ending, it's easier to get started. I used to think I was a bit like Justin Heckert, who needs to nail that first sentence to get going. I still think I'm like that, but knowing where the story will end helps me craft the lede.

Something that I feel complements the above idea: building suspense and trying to leave the reader with a gold coin. Clark write about this in one of is books, and I've been working to hook a reader with the lead, have an anecdote that draws him in and allude to a surprise that might come toward the end. Y'all will have to tell me if I've been successful with this.

Weekly Memo No. 5 — June 21

Howdy, howdy – hope y’all are doing fine.

Some firsts for me this week:

I flew in a helicopter. Twice. And used night vision goggles. At night.

Monday marked the first time I can say that I’ve spent the night with my sources. I slept on a collapsible camping cot and managed about three hours of sleep. I had a blast.

I’ve now had the experience of being awakened for a helo call in the middle of the night and seeing how everything begins and how it ends. An interesting detail: At HealthNet, neither the pilot nor the flight medical crew knows what they’re responding to until they get in the air. The reason, you ask? It’s a safeguard designed to limit the pressure put on the pilot — pressure that could lead to an unsafe decision to fly. (In other words, I, as the pilot, might feel pressured to fly in bad weather and at the limit of my range if I know a two-year old is bleeding out on the highway.)

The big thing I’m learning about this project — and that I experienced a bit when I wrote “Teachers with Guns” — is that I’m having to make folks feel comfortable with me. Before I really started interviewing my sources, I told them what I was looking to do — embed with them and tell a character-driven, narrative story. (Of course, I didn’t explain it in a jargon-laden manner.) And they’ve never really had anybody get this close to them before; once, they had a local TV crew take one flight with them (and it was staged).

I've been working this week to ensure they know that I'm trying to work with them and include them in process. In other words, I'm not trying to surprise them. I've actually sent them some links to a couple of my articles so they can get a sense of how I write and what I try to do with stories. (I think I've got good rapport with the flight medical crew and two of the pilots, and I'm getting the rest of them to trust and warm up to me.)

I published two stories (and an extended brief) this week:

Science camp attracts intellectual capital to state.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150618/GZ01/150619266>)

Marshmallow Man, Ghostbuster unite for charity at FestivALL.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150620/GZ01/150629916>)

I also finished two stories this week:

The last public hanging in West Virginia (a historical narrative, which they're holding for a weekend edition)

Greenbrier Classic cell phone police (an upcoming sports mini-feature that will run in a package ahead of the tournament)

Upcoming:

Still working on the piece about the man in Clay County who's compiling the WWII records.

I'm scheduled to go back to Beckley on Tuesday for another shift with HealthNet Crew at Base No. 5.

I picked up a story on a local banker that a former reporter — one who just left for another job — didn't do. I'll turn that next week.

I'm working on a story about Cedar Lakes, a West Virginia center for artisans that is about to run out of funding. I'll submit that next week.

I picked up a story about Fr. Olaf Scott, a longtime priest who's retiring. (He used to be a nuclear engineer before becoming a holy man.) I'll start working on that next week.

Professional analysis:

Talked with Pate McMichael, author of the new book "Klandestine," which is about the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He's also written for Atlanta Magazine and St. Louis magazine.

Similar to Wright Thompson, McMichael talked about shying away from thinking about voice and channeling a Southern voice. Thompson talked about it coming across gimmicky or disingenuous. McMichael talked about it from the standpoint of ego. Think too much about it (your style, maybe, instead of the mechanics) and you might start talking yourself out of stories. To paraphrase: I can't do X story because it doesn't fit with my voice. And don't worry too much about what your voice is and where it comes from.

For McMichael, the nature of the story helps to dictate the voice of the piece. (It reminded me a bit of what Greg talked to us about in Sports Journalism, where the content/context of a story might dictate its form.)

Interestingly enough, McMichael said that when he left Mizzou, his first thought was to return to the South and be a "great Southern writer." He talked about the desire to get back to the land and write in the region. And, later on, he talked

about letting life experience and the reporting bring out the Southern voice. In other words, journalists get better — report better, write better, tell more nuanced stories — as they experience the world around them. The “Southernness” is already there; the life experience will bring it out.

And, toward the end of our conversation, he made some points similar to Thompson, about not trying to sound Southern. “If you really are from the South,” he said, “and you don’t try to fake that ... I don’t think you need to worry about it. I think it’s gonna come out. ... And your writing will probably have that energy, emotion and talent that a lot of Southern writing has.”

Weekly Memo No. 6 — June 29

Short brief this week, y'all.

Some firsts for me this week:

I turned two news stories in the same day, and I even shot pictures for one of them. (The pictures were pretty bad.)

I covered my first shooting — and beat the other newspaper and TV folks to the scene. We got the news out first. (I also shot the photo for this.)

I published six stories (and the shooting brief, for which I didn't take a byline) this week:

Project aims to capture oral history of Charlestonians.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150623/GZ01/150629664>)

Argentines arrive at science camp after visa glitch.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150623/GZ01/150629676>)

Spina bifida camp celebrates 30 years of being 'home'.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150625/GZ01/150629350>)

Ahead of art fair, Cedar Lakes in transition.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150628/GZ01/150629278>)

Top O Rock design contest envisions building as arts center.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150628/GZ01/150629241>)

Two shot near Campbells Creek.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150627/GZ01/150629257>)

*At Greenbrier, think before you shoot ... photos with your phone.

(This piece ran in a special print insert we put together for the upcoming week's tournament.)

Upcoming:

I'm heading to the Greenbrier tomorrow for a story. I don't know what that story is at the moment. My editor said, "We're trusting you to find something. Your instincts have been good so just do what you've been doing."

I'll pub the piece about the man in Clay County who's compiling the WWII records this week.

I'll pub the story on the local banker this week.

I picked up a story about Fr. Olaf Scott, a longtime priest who's retiring. (He used to be a nuclear engineer before becoming a holy man.) I'll start working on that next week.

Professional analysis:

No update this week.

Weekly Memo Nos. 7-8 — July 13

So many firsts during the past two weeks, y'all.

I covered a funeral. I covered a flood. I localized an international news story. And I, by myself, broke news and did some more reporting that led to even more breaking news.

The funeral was sad. Of course it was. It was a good lesson in feeling uncomfortable — maybe even repulsed — by having to be there but still being able to do the job. I remember being mad as I watched one of the local TV stations show up and circle the parking lot like a vulture, waiting for folks to come out of the high school where the visitation occurred. Of course I was doing the same. At least I stayed longer than 15 minutes. Actually I stayed for over three hours. And I learned — rather, continued to witness — that folks want to talk to someone in the aftermath of a tragedy.

They'll talk during one, too. The flooding in Kanawha and Clay counties was not the worst folks have ever seen, but it certainly happened quickly. Flash floods caused by a burst of showers early Saturday morning sent creeks over their banks, and the Elk River continued to crest through the afternoon. Brian Ferguson (a photog) and I drove up and down U.S. Highway 119 talking to anyone who'd give us the time of day. My boots were pretty muddy by the end of it all. And while a lot of basements were flooding, most folks' houses survived.

Wednesday morning, my editor came up to me and asked me to do a day-turn story that localized Greece's economic crisis. We knew a guy who owned a pizza joint, so I started there. He was out of town. In Greece. Couldn't reach him. So I

called a local Greek Orthodox Church. Fr. Matthew contacting his congregation. Meanwhile, I found a story about a local restaurant owner in our archives. I called him and he was willing to talk. And he led me another guy, who owned a body shop. I had also reached out to local travel agents, since tourism is such a part of the Greek economy. And finally, one of Fr. Matthew's parishioners came through; he'd just gotten back from Athens, and I was able to squeeze him in and lead with him. It was a fast and furious 6 hours worth of work. And it was a great exercise in the evolution of a story — and the usefulness in always making that one extra phone call.

You might remember that story about the Kanawha Players community theater group — they had a yard sale ahead of their move, which was sort of hush-hush. Well, I think I made some friends with the way I covered it. They promised me I'd be the first to know when they sold their building. And they kept their word. The president called me around noon. I went to lunch with her. We had a reporter at the courthouse who was able to check the records and confirm the sale. I had some leverage with that info and was able to get the selling price. And I got in touch with the buyer's attorney, who was able to get me in touch with his client. Turns out his client is Egyptian, and the theater building — which is an old church — will be reverting to a place of worship. The first Orthodox Christian Coptic church in West Virginia will be setting up shop. So, I broke news that led to more breaking news.

Oh, forgot to mention this: I did my first obituary. (Didn't take a byline for it, but it's included below.)

I published nine stories and the obit over the past two weeks:

Longtime Greenbrier resident, golf fan recalls Sam Snead

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150630/GZ01/150639939>)

Kanawha Players drop curtain on theater with sale to Coptic church

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150702/GZ01/150709830>)

Hundreds mourn fallen WV firefighter

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150703/GZ01/150709738>)

Copa del Calvario honors fallen footballer

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150704/GZ01/150709705>)

Ripley historic marker remembers hanging, speaks to much more

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150705/GZ01/150709829>)

Local Greeks reflect on Greece's financial crisis

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150708/GZ01/150709323>)

Late boater's charity celebrates Christmas in July

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150710/GZ01/150719913>)

Strong winds, heavy rain cause flooding, power outages in Southern WV

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150711/GZ01/150719896>)

A banking tradition lives on

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150712/GZ03/150719949>)

Obit/life story: Doran Frame

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150707/GZ01/150709443>)

Upcoming:

The Ronnie Hamrick/Clay County WWII book will publish this week.

I've picked up a story about a Marine who may have been the last person to take down the American Flag from the embassy in Cuba, and who may be going back there to raise it when diplomatic relations formally resume.

I'm doing a profile/feature on a retiring minister. That will likely publish this week.

I've got a couple of stories that aren't time sensitive hanging out there.

And, thankfully, I think I'll be going back to HealthNet for the first time in almost a month. They've finally got new staffers trained and their sister base open, so things have calmed down enough to resume the story.

Professional analysis:

No update this week.

Miscellaneous:

I received three emails after my story about the firefighter's funeral.

Email No. 1:

"Your story was so well written I read it to my wife as I was reading it.

You painted a clear and concise picture of the event with respect for the firefighter and his family.

THANK YOU.

Ken Boudreau

Firefighter, Simsbury Fire Company

Simsbury, CT"

Email No. 2:

“Wade:

For many reasons I didn't expect to go beyond the first paragraph of this piece. But I was pulled in by the human heart on the page and the poetic turn of words. Good going Wade and hurray for the Gazette.

James Thibeault”

Email No. 3:

“Wade:I just wanted to say I thought you did a fine job writing this story. I liked how you let all the small and sad details of the day tell the story. I felt like I was there, right to the last lonely moment with the custodian. Please keep up the great work!

Best wishes,

Sheila McEntee(former editor of Wonderful West Virginia magazine)”

Weekly Memo Nos. 9-10 — July 28

Two things about the past two weeks: One, I was on vacation for a bit; two, the paper ... changed ... while I was away.

By "changed" I mean that the Gazette merged with the Daily Mail. Charleston is now a one newspaper town. (Greg sent me a Facebook message asking if this was my doing. Actually, he insinuated that I "ruined a 2 newspaper town." I did not.)

Long story short, a 5-year department of justice agreement -- designed to keep Charleston a two-newspaper town, with both liberal and conservative outlets - - expired July 19, meaning that the owner was able to merge the two papers. The official message is something along the lines of "this is not one paper gobbling up another," but a few years back, that's exactly what our owner tried to do. It sounds like she'll eliminate about 10-15 positions -- no word yet on what the future structure of the newsroom will look like. Everyone -- everyone -- is having to reapply for their jobs. Hiring decisions will be made about a week after I leave.

My last day here is Aug. 15. And I have a lot to do before then. So, here's an update.

After talking with Jacqui — and since the weather in West Virginia has improved dramatically — I've been able to pick up my HealthNet medevac story. I hung out with them about a week and a half ago, before I joined my family at the lake in Kentucky for three days of vacation. I'll try to get out with them one more time -- and hopefully pick up a scene flight -- before I have to write it. (NOTE: I've flown twice now, both times being inter-facility transports. One of our photogs got to go up, so we at least have passable art.)

I finally got a hold of my Marine who served as a U.S. Embassy guard in Cuba in 1961. Man, he's got some stories. This story is turning into a more immersive piece as I've got more time than I initially thought to work with him. Getting this gentleman to even meet me was challenging -- he's under tight orders from Washington to not let anything (regarding the embassy reopening) leak before Aug. 14. But I kept after him, and he complimented me on my "detective work." We've talked for about three hours face-to-face, and I'm heading back to hang out with him tomorrow. He said something about getting a beer at the VFW.

I literally just finished my story on Ronnie Hamrick, the gentleman from Clay County who's working on a homegrown WWII reference book. I think I like it -- it'll pub this weekend or next. (I hate it when people use the word "literally.")

Did another obit/life story recently, and tried my hand at some more flood coverage.

It was nice to get a few days off last week, and it's nice to see the sunshine here in Charleston. Folks around the area were really hurting from all that rain.

I published four stories and the obit over the past two weeks:

Girl Scout Jamboree trades Thin Mints for tomahawks

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150725/GZ01/150729612>)

Teubert Program for blind children tours local radio museum

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150723/GZ01/150729716>)

After decades, local orthodox priest will retire

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150718/GZ01/150719272>)

Fallout from latest storm affects Putnam Fair, St. Albans area

(<http://www.wvgazetteemail.com/article/20150714/GZ01/150719643>)

Obit/life story: Alex "Tiny" Parsons

(<http://www.wvgazetteemail.com/article/20150718/GZ01/150719267>)

Upcoming:

The Ronnie Hamrick/Clay County WWII book will publish this week.

I'll get up with HealthNet either this week or next. (And that should be my last visit to the Beckley base.)

I'll continue to meet with the Marine until he heads to Cuba.

I'll write a profile on the Kanawha Valley YMCA "Spirit of the Valley" award winner. (That will pub after I leave.)

Professional analysis:

No update this week.

Weekly Memo No. 11 — Aug. 4

My story on the Marine is turning into quite the little immersive reporting piece. (I'm actually leaving here in a few to go spend another afternoon with him.)

That's a good thing -- I think this is a story I'll be able to write the heck out of. But man, I'm going to be busy for the next couple of weeks, my last at the paper.

The Marine story and the piece on HealthNet are going to take the bulk of my time, and I've got to turn another profile or two -- plus whatever dailies pop up -- in the meantime. I feel like I've got a good plan in place, though, and it's nice to feel confident in my ability to juggle the day-turns with the longer-term stuff. In short, my hair might be on fire, but I don't think I'll be sweatin' it.

Honestly, I kind of miss the weeks where I was turning a story a day. Haven't had one of those since I left for vacation -- when the papers merged. There are a lot more reporters right now, so the assignments seem to be spread much thinner. Coupled with that is the print space: The higher-ups are still figuring out how to jam in all the content. I'm sure the impending cuts will make that job easier come late August.

What's new this week? Well, I've made couple of good friends in the newsroom, and we talk about writing. Andy Brown, whom y'all might remember from Mizzou, is a bulldog of a business reporter here, and we've kicked around a few ideas about co-reporting and writing some pieces. He likes the way I write, and I like the way he reports. We figure we can both learn something from each other. And another buddy, Anna Patrick, is a young features writer who's trying to get better.

She likes to hear me tell stories about all the stuff I've learned from y'all, and how I've tried to put those things into practice. We've been trying to do a better job of talking to each other about stories as we're reporting and writing them.

All this to say that it reminds me of something that I've heard Greg talk about, how it's important to have a physical newsroom where folks can pick on each other and talk through ideas. (Side note: I don't know that we have that kind of environment in the Gazette-Mail newsroom -- most folks kind of keep to themselves. Not a lot of discussion.) I think Greg is right on: It's good to have colleagues that you can goof off with, because goofing off is actually work. (I'll let Greg explain his theory.) From my vantage, I've seen the goofing off and spoofing and what not lead to productive work discussions about craft.

I published two stories last week:

Huntington museum, Smithsonian Affiliate, host Hatfield-McCoy event

(<http://www.wvgazettemail.com/article/20150801/GZ01/150809935>)

Community-supported agriculture produces satisfied customers

(<http://www.wvgazettemail.com/article/20150728/GZ01/150729485>)

Upcoming:

I've picked up a story about a tree trimmer named Dick Johnson. I'll talk to him this week and do a little day-turn, if there's a story there.

The Ronnie Hamrick/Clay County WWII book story was held -- again, it's about space and when to use it. I'm suspecting it will run soon.

I'll get up with HealthNet either this week or next. (And that should be my last visit to the Beckley base.)

I'll continue to meet with the Marine until he heads to Cuba.

I'll write a profile on the Kanawha Valley YMCA "Spirit of the Valley" award winner. (That will pub after I leave.)

Professional analysis:

At this point, I think I'm going to wait to track down my final two interviews when I get back to Missouri. After talking to Jacqui, I still feel like I can talk to folks, type up the analysis piece and finish the entire project writeup in time for December commencement. Per Jacqui's instructions, I'll find out from Martha the deadline for project submission for graduation, and I'll back up my defense date by 3-4 weeks.

Weekly Memos Nos. 12-13 — Aug. 25

Well, I've arrived back in Columbia after 13 weeks in the Mountain State. It's good to be back home, but I miss my work at the Gazette/Gazette-Mail. This summer was affirming, especially since I made a drastic career change just two years ago. I enjoyed the reporting and the writing, and I appreciate the Gazette letting me try some different things.

I'm sad to report that I'm late yet again with these last two memos. And that my alcoholic, 63-year-old Vietnam vet roommate was too drunk to meet up one last time. I'll see him on Facebook, I suppose.

Let's start with my Marine, Larry Morris, who returned to Cuba to help raise the flag when the U.S. Embassy in Havana reopened.

I spent at least 10 hours face-to-face with Morris, and we did some deep-dive interviews. I also kept in contact with him during the week leading up to his flight to Havana. We had to keep our communication under the radar. Washington didn't want Morris, Jim Tracy and Mike East — the three Marine embassy guards who took down the flag on Jan. 4, 1961 — to talk to anyone ahead of the embassy's reopening. (I found this out when I finally got a hold of Tracy, and when East blew me off over the course of 10 days.)

I worked around this by talking to another of Morris' colleagues, John Burns, who was in Havana right before America and Cuba broke relations. Between Morris, Burns, blog posts that Tracy published, newspaper articles, AP and Getty photos from January 1961 and a little reading and research, I was able to put together what I think is a pretty coherent picture of Morris' time in Havana.

Morris called me on Aug. 17 as I neared St. Louis. He said I did well and that I got it right. He called me the next day and read me an ad for a feature writer position at the Huntington Herald-Dispatch, and he told me I should apply. I mailed him and his family a few copies of the paper, and I'm going to try to send him a 6-pack of Hatuey beer. (Apparently it's brewed in the U.S. now, as a Bacardi subsidiary. Another weird example of how two countries had these cultural connections even though their governments weren't speaking.)

Luckily I'd done a lot of pre-writing on Morris' story, because we had to publish it a day sooner than we'd expected. (We found a NYT article online that named all three Marines and showed their pictures. And the State Department went ahead and released a documentary — that's what we'd promised not preempt. It was the only way Morris would talk to us.)

The week leading up Morris' return to Cuba, my editors kept my plate pretty clear. They wanted me to focus on that story, they said. I took it as a sign that I'd earned their trust on some of the deeper, more narrative pieces I'd earlier written. That said, I still managed to turn two weekend features and finish up a profile on this year's Spirit of the Valley award winner. And I worked on a day-turn that didn't go anywhere — even after I stood in the rain for two hours and asked moviegoers if they felt safe going to see a flick, after what happened in Tennessee. (I talked to a national safety expert too, but we couldn't get any of our local theaters to comment. So, the editors decided to spike it.)

I published four stories during my final two weeks:

Rand backpack giveaway aims for “Unity in the Community”

(<http://www.wvgazetteemail.com/article/20150808/GZ01/150809516>)

54 years later, WV Marine returns to Havana to reopen embassy

(<http://www.wvgazetteemail.com/article/20150813/GZ01/150819723>)

Spirit of the Valley campaign raises \$300K, will honor John Elliot at luncheon

(<http://www.wvgazetteemail.com/article/20150815/GZ01/150819624>)

Early school start slams WV State Fair on 1st weekend

(<http://www.wvgazetteemail.com/article/20150815/GZ01/150819617>)

Upcoming:

My story on WWII reference book writer/Clay County historian Ronnie Hamrick will publish at some point. It’s through editing. They’re just waiting for the best time to run it.

My HealthNet story will be finished today or tomorrow and submitted to my editors. I talked with two of the crewmembers today and just gave them a rundown of the article. They said I got it right. Brandi McMullen, a flight nurse who is one of my primary characters, said that a local TV crew had spent a day with them last year. Their story was superficial, she said. They didn’t get a quarter of what you got, she said.

Professional analysis:

No update on this yet. I’ll start working on getting my final two interview done here in the next couple of weeks. And then I’ll start writing, writing, writing. I will be able to finish the entire project writeup in time for December

commencement. Per Jacqui's instructions, I'll find out from Martha the deadline for project submission for graduation, and I'll back up my defense date by 3-4 weeks.

Addendum: Memo No. 15 — Sept. 9

Just wanted to share links to the last two stories that the Gazette-Mail published.

"HealthNet 5" was the centerpiece on the front of Sunday's paper. The story wasn't my favorite. Loved reporting it, didn't love writing it. I produced a true story, but I don't know how compelling it is. Y'all will have to be judges of that.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150906/GZ01/150909731>)

Ronnie Hamrick and his Clay County WWII book published this morning. I was much happier with this story. I feel like I tried to tap into a universal theme (remembrance) in this piece. Greg might read this one and think it overwrought — and Greg, let me know. That said, Ronnie was an emotional guy — I tried to show that. He was very sincere, almost as sad and maybe a tad crazy. Lonely for sure.

(<http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150907/GZ01/150909609>)

At the end of my professional project, I've written 44 articles. And that's not counting the briefs and handful of obits I did.

Southern Writing Memo No. 1 — Sept. 21

After squeaking out a victory on the road in Louisville on Thursday night, Clemson finds itself 3-0 and holding on to the No. 11 spot in the AP poll heading into a bye week. No. 6 Notre Dame comes to Death Valley on Oct. 3, and, man, do I wish I could get down to Clemson, South Carolina, for the game. That's a long drive, though, and I've got a good seat in front of my TV.

I read an essay by Stuart Stevens last week in *The Atlantic* about southern college football. Really, about Ole Miss football. Truly, about the South. Long story short, Stevens describes seeing Ole Miss' traditions change, and what that felt like. Rebel fans don't yell "The South will rise again!" in the middle of the song, Dixie, like they used to. (At least they're not supposed to.) But the Ole Miss marching band still strikes up the song. Stevens has come to realize it's a sad tune.

"It sounded sad because it was sad," Stevens writes. "It made you want to cry because loss was sad and defeat painful. The South was part of that brotherhood of cultures which learn to erect such beautiful homages to loss that it was easy to forget that they were still about loss and suffering."

Stevens' essay reminds me of the contradictions Wright Thompson writes about in "Ghosts of Mississippi." Thompson would "cringe" when fans in Vaught-Hemingway Stadium bellowed "The South will rise again" during Dixie. A beautiful song, a rousing sentiment — but sad, and dangerous, that many of us Southerners haven't thought more deeply about The Real Meaning.

When I re-listened to my interviews with Thompson and Pate McMichael, the first apparent theme was: Try to sound like a Southern writer and you'll end up

writing like a hack. After reading Stevens' essay and reflecting on Thompson's writing and McMichael's interview, maybe I've found something else: a desire to make amends and challenge the vestiges of the Old South.

McMichael talks about finding his voice when he's pissed off. He simmers on an issue and then writes about it, knowing he'll likely offend friends and family. Offensive topics included the treatment of immigrants and racism; experiencing these things firsthand drove him to write about them.

McMichael worries that he's not "smart enough" to be a writer, but he knows he's a good researcher. He talks about "conquering the ignorance": personally, understanding his subject to write clearly; more broadly, realizing the issues he should be writing about. His book *Klandestine*, he says, was motivated by anger: He wanted to stick it to the Ku Klux Klan and to show George Wallace's role in the events following Martin Luther King's assassination. (Some Southerners have tended to forgive, if not forget, Wallace's racist stances in the 1960s since he repented later in life, following an assassination attempt.)

While Thompson did not specifically talk about challenging Old South assumptions, one of his most popular pieces — "Ghosts of Mississippi" — does exactly that. He goes so far as to question the legitimacy of Ole Miss' 1962 football championship.

"There's such a blurry line between and fiction about 1962," Thompson writes, "that nobody seems to mind that the university has rewritten history." (Keep in mind that he lives in Oxford.)

And he laments the college students in the stands who think the same as their parents, because thoughts “are handed down like monogrammed cuff links and engraved shotguns.” Those are folks won’t pause to ponder Dixie, who won’t cringe at the hollers of “The South will rise again!”

Patterson Hood, an Alabamian and member of the band, Drive-By Truckers, wrote an op-ed for the New York Times following the murders of nine black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina. He talked about his songwriting, how one song in particular was meant to challenge the contradictions of Southern identity.

“The Southern Thing,” the song is titled. Some lyrics:

“Ain’t about no foolish pride, ain’t about no flag

Hate’s the only thing that my truck would want to drag

You think I’m dumb, maybe not too bright

You wonder how I sleep at night

Proud of the glory, stare down the shame

Duality of the Southern Thing.”

“Instead, people were treating it (the song) as a rallying cry,” Hood writes, explaining that Confederate flags started showing up at their concerts and were brandished during the song. “I’m still grappling with how easily it was misinterpreted — and we rarely play it today for that reason.”

All of this to say that maybe Southern writers might be motivated to explore and challenge The South. And maybe they write with a chip on their shoulder ... and in their voice.

Updates:

I've secured an interview with Tommy Tomlinson on Oct. 13. I'll record/transcribe and send to you.

Pate McMichael has hooked me up with a gentleman who should be able to get me on Chuck Reece's radar. Hoping to schedule an interview with Reece soon.

FYI:

I may need to reschedule my project defense as I have jury duty the week of Nov. 9. (Jacqui: Would you prefer to do the defense the week before or the week after my jury duty?)

Look for another memo as I reflect on all things Southern and continue to grapple with what I'm reading and hearing.

Southern Writing Memo No. 2 — Sept. 28

Chuck Reece, editor of *The Bitter Southerner*: “Some of the worst shit I get, in terms of submissions, is stuff that’s just so self-consciously Southern. You know, that like uses shit that people *think* we say, instead of what we actually say.

“The best writers about the South, their Southern voice comes through in the way they write. It doesn’t come through in, like, the words they say. And I will say this: I am guilty sometimes of perhaps overusing the word “y’all.” Part of that, man, is the branding side of this equation.”

Reece said the above when I asked him Friday if there was such a thing as a distinctive Southern writing voice. Before he answered, he read the opening lines of “Absalom, Absalom!” and “A Good Man is Hard to Find” to me. He did that to juxtapose William Faulkner’s and Flannery O’Connor’s writing voices, to underscore that there’s not a single Southern voice. And he did it to set up what I believe was his main point: People expect Southerners to sound a certain way, and every now and then we can pleasantly surprise them.

Like Wright Thompson and Pate McMichael, Reece named “authenticity” as one of the defining elements of his writing voice. And like the other two men, Reece initially had trouble describing his writing voice. (That’s another theme that continues to surface: the aversion to talking about one’s own voice. The question is either strange or off-putting to my subjects.)

In last week’s memo I talked about a Southern voice with a chip on its shoulder. Some of that came through in my conversation with Reece. Really, he said, it’s less about how you write as opposed to what you write — and why you write.

Voice, he said, comes from a writer's ability to have a point of view and courage to make it known.

And that's where our conversation came full circle. Reece talked about a New York Times critic who'd recently praised *The Bitter Southerner* for its "vivid" and "off-centered" pieces. If the work is vivid and off-centered, Reece said, hopefully it's because it addressed the South from a different (or surprising) point of view. And that's the goal of his outlet: to be proud of the stuff that's worthy and to question unflinchingly the stuff that's not.

Updates:

Tommy Tomlinson and I are talking at Noon on Oct. 13.

EVALUATION

My goals for my professional project were to gain experience as a general assignment reporter, hone my narrative writing skills and complete two or three immersive, deeply reported narrative projects. I'll assess each of these goals separately below. And I'll offer an explanation of the value of newspaper work, how working my way through the daily grind made me a better writer.

General assignment reporting

Rounding out my reporting experience was a critical goal of my professional project and one that I accomplished. I covered things I'd never before covered: festivals and events, city council meetings, a murder trial, a shooting, local business and flooding. The summer of 2015 was my first time covering "news," and I was able to write deadline pieces from breaking news situations and turn daily and weekly stories. I truly broke news for the first time with a story I did about the Kanawha Players' theater sell. Because of the rapport I'd built with the troupe, the Players came to me first to break the news of the sale, and they gave me a tip that led me to the person who purchased the building. That led me to another piece of news: the establishment of a Coptic church in Charleston.

While I grew as a reporter, I didn't get to cover as much breaking news as I would have liked. Because I approached many stories with a narrative focus, I basically wrote myself into a pseudo feature-writing job. While those types of stories align more with my skills, I would've appreciated the chance to cover more of the day-to-day stuff: city council meetings, court hearings, crime and other things.

I wrote a 42-inch story from an urban planning meeting, which was probably my most embarrassing effort of the summer. Yes, it was accurate and contextualized, but it was too much. Luckily I had an editor who helped me realize that it's OK to just write a 12-inch piece that hits the high points without all the overwriting and scene-setting. It was a valuable lesson in learning to pick and choose what I put my writing energy into, and it's one that will stick with me.

Narrative writing

I approached many of my stories from a narrative storytelling perspective, and I learned to write narratives on deadline. My editors (and readers) realized this with some of my event coverage early in the summer. The style and voice of my pieces were different, and my supervisors gave me freedom to look for stories within stories, and to tell them in distinctive ways.

As I mentioned earlier, I learned when and when not to pursue a narrative story. Not every piece calls for the narrative treatment. In fact, for breaking news and local government pieces, too much narrative can get in the way of the news. I also realized — after a couple of conversations with Jacqui Banasynski — that I need to work on getting some semblance of a nutgraf (or at least some foreshadowing) up high in my pieces. Sometimes the narrative itself is not compelling enough to carry a reader through the story. You have to give readers a hint as to why they should care about the story, and sometimes you can build in foreshadowing to make them want to see the piece through to its resolution.

Still, the professional project experience was affirming. I learned that I have good storytelling instincts and that I can report for detail and nuance. And I learned

to talk to my editors before writing a piece, to give them a heads up as to how I was thinking about structuring the story.

It was refreshing to see a paper that was open to narrative writing, even on day-turn stories. Sometimes certain assignments that are given to interns might be considered throw-away stories. I showed my editors an ability to find compelling human-interest stories in my daily assignments and to report and write in ways that made people more likely to consume the news.

Immersive narrative storytelling

I was able to pitch a long-term feature about HealthNet 5, a medevac helicopter base where I imbedded on a couple of occasions. I strapped into an EC-130 Eurocopter and logged flights with the base's crew. And I spent a 24-hour shift at the base, where I slept on a foldout cot. I interviewed my central characters deeply on numerous occasions, and I fact-checked my writing with them to ensure I was focusing on the pertinent details of their work. I kept in touch with the base's commander and helped the Gazette's photographers schedule opportunities to shoot pictures. It was a two-month-long exercise in logistical management — and a reminder that some things are out of my control. The weather was the main culprit that kept me from flying with HealthNet as much as I would've liked.

Other long-term projects were assigned to me. I reported a piece about a historical marker in Ripley, West Virginia, that turned into a historical narrative. I searched through the Gazette's and Daily Mail's microfilm archives to find stories about West Virginia's last public hanging, and I checked out books from the library to triangulate my archival research with the many interviews I conducted for the

piece. I was able to break an interesting bit of news: The marker was turned the wrong way when it was erected. I turned this into a metaphor.

I wrote a story about Ronnie Hamrick, a Clay County man who was close to finishing a homegrown, local reference book that tracked the area's World War II veterans. When my editor gave me this assignment, he didn't know if there was really a story to be told. The book itself was compelling, but I ended up with a human-interest story that used the book as a hook. I spent a few hours with Hamrick at his home and watched him work. And I interviewed him deeply several times along the way. The story turned into a piece about memory — how a man kept alive the memories of those he cared for, and how he hoped to be remembered by doing so. Perhaps I came close to touching on a universal theme.

The piece I wrote about Larry Morris, a former Marine Embassy Guard who helped evacuate the U.S. Embassy in Cuba, was the most challenging to report and craft. The Gazette received a tip that Morris would be traveling to Havana with Secretary of State John Kerry in July to reopen the embassy he'd been forced to leave in 1961. But when we got the story tip, we didn't have Morris' name — all we knew was a man who lived in Huntington, West Virginia, might be heading down to Cuba.

I did some deep Internet searches and found a blog post by a former Marine Embassy Guard named Jim Tracy, which led me to a newspaper article that interviewed Tracy about his time in Cuba. In the article, Tracy mentioned "Larry Morris" and "Mike East" as the other men who'd helped him lower the American flag in 1961 as the embassy was being evacuated. I was able to search local veterans associations' websites and found a Larry Morris from Huntington. I gave him a call.

From there, I struggled to build rapport with Morris. He was under strict orders not to talk to the media ahead of his return to Cuba. At one point he cut off communication with me. I was finally able to visit him in his home, and my editors and I were able to reach an agreement with him that would allow us to break the news of his return in a way that wouldn't violate his no-media-contact instructions from the State Department.

Instead of focusing on his return to Cuba and the details (which seemed to always change) of the July embassy reopening, I deeply interviewed him about his time in Cuba. I called Jim Tracy and Mike East to attempt to confirm Morris' upcoming trip and that Morris was who he said he was. Neither would speak with me. So, I called John Burns, another Marine Embassy Guard who was in Cuba with Morris. I fact-checked Morris' story with him (and Tracy's blog posts and articles) and started doing research on Cuba.

Morris and I kept talking for more than a month. I met his wife, one of his sons and one of his grandchildren. When he traveled to Washington ahead of the embassy reopening, he kept me updated as to when he'd be on the ground in Cuba, and when the flag raising ceremony would be televised.

Long story short, we published one of the first articles about Morris (and Tracy and East, who accompanied him down to Cuba) ahead of the actual ceremony. While it previewed the embassy reopening, the story was more about a man who all of a sudden had to contemplate his return to place he thought he'd never see again. And it was a story about a man finally getting some closure — but in the twilight of his life.

These long-term, deeply reported, immersive projects taught me how to cultivate relationships with sources and manage the logistics of scheduling interviews, site visits and working with photographers and editors. These projects confirmed that I can balance daily assignments with stories that have less defined deadlines. They taught me that some things were out of my control: Good time management and planning skills don't matter when the weather is too poor to fly or new pilots who are still learning the airspace won't allow an extra passenger.

These projects taught me the value of constantly interrogating the narratives that emerged as I reported. There were exercises in fact-checking and verification. And, from a craft perspective, they were adventures in story structure, character development, descriptive writing, dialogue and many other things. They helped me develop better processes for organizing my notes and collecting my thoughts. And they helped me understand that sometimes you have to write 1,000 crappy words and scrap them — so you can write 250 decent ones. These projects were lessons in what leave in and what to leave out.

The value of newspaper work for a writer

“What do you want to do?” I've always had trouble answering that question. Still do. As a rookie journalist, it's quite a struggle.

That question asks you to look at your future with some semblance of a plan. Well, I'm not the best at making plans, and as someone who's still learning about his new profession, I wish I knew more so I could draft better ones. I can tell you this, though: My work at newspapers has made me a better writer, and that will serve me well wherever I end up.

If forced to answer the What-do-you-want-to-do? question, I'd tell you that, right now, I want to be a freelance magazine writer. I know, I know: The work can be inconsistent and the pay irregular. And the glamorous notion of being your own boss probably wears off when you're negotiating your own contracts — and investing time and money in the reporting on the front end while waiting for the payoff (of the story and to your bank account). But that's assuming you can find work in the first place.

To find work, you've got to develop relationships with editors and make your journalism rise above the din of The Media. That means developing a collection of clips that show your range as a journalist; that means developing your brand. A big part of your brand is your ability to report thoroughly and write creatively. And that's what I've learned how to do at newspapers, over and over again.

Among the many pearls of wisdom Columbia Missourian sports editor Greg Bowers will dish out is this one: "In newspapers, sometimes good enough is good." I started working for Bowers in fall 2013, and at first his statement bothered me. *Good enough is never good enough, right? Shouldn't we always strive to be the best?* But I was missing the point. Bowers wasn't giving me license to be lazy or apathetic. He was telling me that the nature of newspaper work — the ultra-tight deadlines, the constant grind — means that, inevitably, I won't always be able to do my best work. Sometimes there's just not enough time. Sometimes I will fail. And that's OK.

I've failed over and over again as a sports and news writer. I covered a high school football game and focused on a Chihuahua that accompanied the marching band onto the field at halftime; it was a creative way to interest readers in the story,

and it might have worked if I'd actually written a little more about the game. As it were, it turned into a strange profile of the dog with a whisper of gridiron action. A swing and a miss.

As a 2015 summer intern at the then-Charleston (West Virginia) Gazette, I covered an urban planning meeting ... and wrote 42 inches about it. Oops. Even the Motley Crue reference I squeezed in at the bottom of the article couldn't save it— no one in his right mind would have read that far down. Luckily I'd done a good reporting job, and a patient editor helped me rework it. It was easily the most embarrassing news story I've ever written. But it was good practice.

Writers — especially young and new writers — need practice, and, to me, that's what Bowers implies with his good-enough-is-good newspaper wisdom. You practice trying to be creative. You practice trying to make stories interesting. You practice news judgment. You practice doing these things — and, most importantly, reporting — on the tightest of recurrent deadlines. You learn how to be resourceful and efficient. You learn how to cope with failure. And at a newspaper, you learn how to get up the next day and do it all over again. There are endless opportunities to practice. And every story is a chance for redemption.

This past summer, when I was at the Gazette, I called Jacqui Banaszynski — a journalism professor at Mizzou who was chairing my master's committee — with a concern. As a first-time news reporter who was trying to inject some narrative writing into my stories, I worried I wasn't getting enough hands-on editing. The side-by-side editing sessions I'd grown accustomed to at the *Missourian* weren't the

norm at the Gazette. I feared I might be making mistakes, forming bad habits. But Banaszynski urged me to see things differently.

Not all papers have the time and staff resources to dedicate to heavy editing, she said, but that gives reporters the opportunity to learn how to be their own editors. She was right. The Gazette editors were always available to help me when I had a big story or was struggling with an assignment. But they also trusted me to do my job, which meant I had more creative freedom. And that freedom came with a lot of responsibility.

I learned to be an even better reporter because most of the onus to “get it right” was on me. I had to determine when it was appropriate to write a narrative, and when I should pump the brakes on the creative writing for the sake of quick news communication. I had to write even quicker to have more time to read my stories and do more self-editing. Most importantly I had to trust my gut with my reporting and writing, to take the story where I wanted it to go. My summer newspaper internship gave me the confidence to work independently and take creative risks, over and over again.

I’ve interned at a magazine, and I continue to freelance for it. It’s been a great experience — good practice. But right now, for me as a reporter and a writer, I can tell that I’m benefitting most from the constant repetition of the daily newspaper grind. There’s a reason football players do technique drills and hitters take batting practice. They learn the basics. They develop muscle memory. They gain competence and confidence through the constant repetition.

Yes, I like to think about becoming a freelance magazine writer. And maybe that will happen one day. If it does, I'm sure the folks I write for will appreciate all the practice I've had at newspapers. But right now, I need more practice. I want to keep working on the daily paper grind. Seems like a good plan.

ABUNDANT PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

In this section you'll find all of the 46 articles I wrote for the Charleston Gazette/Charleston Gazette-Mail for my professional project during summer 2015. The clips are ordered chronologically, as they appear in my weekly memos.

A letter from my site supervisor, Gazette-Mail City Editor Greg Moore, is also included and leads off this section.

the ^{Charleston} Gazette

The State Newspaper

1001 Virginia St. E.
Charleston, WV 25301

Oct. 12, 2015

To whom it may concern:

As a graduate student whose main experience was in longer feature stories, Wade Livingston wasn't our usual summer intern at The Charleston Gazette. But his willingness to learn nuts-and-bolts journalism ended up giving us the best of both worlds.

We expect interns to cover stories on every beat as needed, fill in for reporters on summer vacation, and work evening and weekend shifts. Wade was eager to fulfill those basic duties and gain some experience, which he did throughout the summer.

But he also gave us several well-reported long features, which we don't normally see from our interns. He wrote about our emergency medical helicopter teams, and covered any number of summer festivals and events in an unusual level of detail.

The highlight of Wade's summer was the connection he made with a crusty old Marine who lowered the flag at the U.S. Embassy in Cuba after Fidel Castro's revolution, and headed back to Havana a half-century later to help raise the flag again.

With about a month left in Wade's internship, the Gazette merged with our local competition, leaving reporters on both newspapers in a state of constant worry about their futures. We relied on Wade even more during that tumultuous time, and he did not disappoint us.

I hope he rejoins us at some point, and I would recommend him highly for any journalism job.

Sincerely,
Greg Moore
City editor, Charleston Gazette-Mail

Wednesday, May 20, 2015

HealthNet helicopter to promote ATV safety

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

It's not the newest of helicopters, but it's got a fresh paint job, one with a message: "Ride ready, ride safe."

On Wednesday at Yeager Airport, HealthNet Aeromedical Services unveiled a Eurocopter EC-130 — a flying trauma ambulance — adorned with a new fuselage-wrapped graphic designed to promote all-terrain vehicle safety.

ATV deaths and injuries border on "an epidemic in this state," HealthNet President and CEO Clinton Burley said Wednesday. "And it's preventable. . . . We have to look for new ways to try to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries that occur from all-terrain vehicle accidents."

In 2013, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reported that, from 2007 to 2011, the state's rate of ATV deaths was the nation's highest. During that time, 96 people died in ATV accidents on West Virginia public roads.

The state Department of Health and Human Resources says there have been 467 deaths in vehicles "designed primarily for off-road use" from 1999 to 2014 (although data from 2013 and 2014 are incomplete).

"Cabell-Huntington Hospital, since 2013, has taken care of over 400 ATV traumas," Dr. Jillian McCagg, a critical-care surgeon at Cabell Huntington Hospital, said Wednesday. Of those, she said, 83 were children — and 75 percent of those children weren't wearing a helmet.

A helmet can go a long way in preventing serious injuries like traumatic brain injury, which Dr. Alison Wilson said Wednesday was the "No. 1 cause of fatal injuries" on ATVs. Wilson, director of the Jon Michael Morgan Trauma Center in Morgantown, added that "for our children, the numbers continue to rise."

IHS spokeswoman Kim Stewart said that riders must be aware they won't be as protected in the event of an ATV crash as they would in a car. Riders shouldn't "test the limits of the vehicle," Stewart said, and they shouldn't use alcohol and ride. They should always wear a helmet, and they should stay off of paved roads.

While West Virginia ATV riders are permitted to quickly cross paved roads, state law bans them from operating their ATVs on "any road or highway with a center line or more than two lanes."

Charleston Area Medical Center, WVU Healthcare and the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System (a series of ATV trails in nine southern West Virginia counties), partnered with HealthNet to decorate the "ATV Safety Awareness aircraft" as part of a yearlong campaign. The graphic wraps around the helicopter's fuselage and sports a helmeted ATV rider and the campaign's message: "Ride ready, ride safe."

In addition to the spruced-up helicopter, HealthNet's "ATV Safety Initiative" will include speaking engagements, safety fairs, community visits and educational sessions at HealthNet member hospitals.

The helicopter is actually a spare, according to CAMC spokesman Dale Witte. It will rotate among HealthNet's nine bases, seven of which are in the Mountain State, to temporarily replace helicopters that are brought in for scheduled, routine maintenance. The helicopter will start service tomorrow, Burley said, in Parkersburg, Ky.

The French-built Eurocopter is jet-powered and capable of cruising speeds around 140 miles per hour, Burley said. It has a crew of three — a flight nurse, flight paramedic and pilot — and can transport one patient.

Burley said it is the only “injury-prevention themed” helicopter flying in the country, but advocates know that won't mean much if no one pays attention.

“I think it's gonna take a neighborhood, a community, to recognize that this is a preventable injury,” CAMC's Dr. Frank Lucente said.

“This is about West Virginia culture. ... a community-based safety program, getting awareness out there — making mommas know what can happen to their babies if they go out and ride ATVs.”

Reach Wade Livingston at wade.livingston@wvgazette.com, 304-348-5100 or follow @WadeGLivingston on Twitter.

Friday, May 22, 2015

Former WV assistant AG's quilt hangs in Culture Center

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

It's not Charli Fulton's favorite quilt, but it's a winner.

“Vandalia Album,” her most recent quilt, a collection of West Virginia wildflowers, is hanging in the Culture Center at the state Capitol Complex, on display during this weekend's Vandalia Gathering. It's the culmination of a decade's worth of work and, by her estimate, about 1,700 yards of quilting thread.

And it just won first place.

Her fellow quilters will tell you that Fulton is a masterful sewist with a unique technique. She'll tell you that she got into quilting while she was in college but that what really excites her is playing with color. Quilting is a stress-relieving hobby, Fulton said, one that helped her cope with the demands of her former job — an assistant attorney general for the Mountain State. There might even be some similarities between quilting and practicing law, Fulton said — both can be creative endeavors.

The quilting room is on the second level of Fulton's Charleston-area home, up a narrow spiral staircase with a low overhang that prompts her to tell you to watch your head. On Thursday, Fulton glided up the stairs, pumping her arms like a power-walker, excited to show off her wares. The skylit room was once the guest bedroom, she said, but she realized that she quilted there more often than she hosted company. Guests now sleep in the space that adjoins her husband's upstairs wood shop.

There's a collection of CDs in one corner of the room — Bob Dylan and The Beatles, among others — but when Fulton quilts, usually in the morning, she listens to jazz or classical or opera. She said she just got back into opera. Some of her prize ribbons, at least a dozen of them, hang near the door frame, greeting you as you walk in. And, on the wall opposite her desk, you might find her current project: on this day, the beginnings of a trippy rendition of a Wurlitzer jukebox.

Of course, there are quilts and other finished products in the room . . . and there are her project books, works of art themselves. The books are part diary, part blueprints and part art drawings, detailed and immaculate. Neat handwriting spells out mistakes she's made and lessons she's learned, and textured drawings of images and patterns look like something you'd find in an art textbook — but a cool one. Most folks don't make their own project books to plan, execute and document their quits, Nell Griffin, one of Fulton's close friends and fellow quilter, said. “Her quilting is so exact,” Griffin added. “Mine's not.”

Kay Phelps remembers Fulton sitting in the backseat of the car as it wound its way up the highway to Athens, Ohio. They were heading to the Studio Art Quilters Associates Inc.'s annual gathering. Fulton was sewing.

“She's the only person I know who can hand-quilt in the back of a car on the way the Athens,” Phelps said. “It made me sick.”

Fulton sews every part of her quilts. Some people will just sew the tops, Phelps said, and get somebody to insert the batting and install the backing, stitching the whole thing together. Not Fulton. And she does it all

by hand, although she has used a sewing machine. Once. It was a quilt she made for a graduating high schooler. No need to put in all that time when it might fall victim to a college beer spill.

When she was a literature major at Middlebury College in 1968, Fulton attempted her first quilt. She didn't initially finish it, and it sat in her closet. But she knew she wanted to do something with her hands. Her mother was a knitter, her father worked with wood. And she remembers the braided rugs her grandmother used to make in Lowell, Massachusetts, at a textile mill. She resumed her quilt in 1986, and she's been quilting ever since.

During her first year of law school at Northeastern University, sitting through back-to-back classes from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., she rewarded herself with a student membership to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Each day, she allowed herself 30 minutes in the museum on her way home. She saw a lot of art that year, more than she's seen since.

Law and quilting have some things in common, according to Fulton. Both require attention to detail and perseverance — there's a point in every quilting project where you might want to give up, Fulton said. And both can be approached creatively.

“There's nearly always more than one way to accomplish a legal goal or a quilting goal,” Fulton said. “Considering all the various options and choosing the best one is a key skill.”

Despite her accomplishments, Fulton said she still has much to learn.

“I could really benefit from a basic art class,” said Fulton, whose winning quilts, when stacked atop each other, might just bend a bed frame. She flipped through a project book, stopping every once in a while to point out a pattern she didn't like or note how changing the background on a quilt rendered a different color effect.

“I just love working with color,” Fulton, wearing a bright blue sweater with matching earrings, said. “I went to this thing about women designers, and it had this quote by Sonia Delaunay: 'Color is the skin of the world.'”

While “Vandalia Album's” wildflowers pop with color, the quilt “doesn't hold a truly special place” in Fulton's heart. Her favorite quilt is a bed quilt, her first project to earn a prize. It wasn't money, like the \$750 she'll receive for her first-place finish in the Appliqué Quilts category at this year's Vandalia Gathering.

“I got a special award for the playful use of color,” Fulton said. “When I found out, I jumped up and down. It was my birthday, and the Hale-Bopp Comet was out in the sky that night, and I got an award for color. And as a lawyer, to get some recognition for something non-law, it was such a big deal. And that quilt still makes me happy.”

“Vandalia Album,” which recently placed third at the American Quilter's Society QuiltWeek, in Paducah, Kentucky, also won a Purchase Award at the Vandalia Gathering, according to the West Virginia Division of Culture and History. That means it will become part of the state museum's quilt collection. “It was the first quilt I ever designed totally from scratch,” Fulton said,

But her favorite quilt, her first prize-winner, the colorful quilt called “Caribbean Waves,” which sports vibrant golden fish, sits on the bed — in the guest bedroom.

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Saturday, May 23, 2015

Weaver brings a new twist to Vandalia Gathering

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

Wearing a gray, pink and blue Hello Kitty T-shirt, 6-year-old Natalie Jones sat on a wooden bench and worked the table loom.

Her short hair, almost a bob, recoiled when she snatched back her hand, away from the beater that rejoined with a jolt to the loom's frame. A crisp snap, another successful weave. Her feet didn't even reach the ground but, time and again, she made successful passes with the shuttle, guiding the fabric through multicolored threads like a skier snaking through a slalom. It was her first time on the loom.

Nearby, Jane Gilchrist wove her way through two rows of 10 looms — most of them Purringtons, made in Scott Depot — stopping every so often to coach Natalie, her peers and their folks on the finer points of weaving. It was Gilchrist's first time, as a weaver, being invited to The Vandalia Gathering.

This year's 39th annual gathering (which, as of 2 p.m. Saturday, had seen almost 1,100 visitors stop by the West Virginia Culture Center) features all the good food and impromptu jam sessions and folk dancing that festival-goers have come to expect.

There are still bands, music competitions, corn on the cob and the Liars Contest, but there are some new things for kids, designed to get them and their parents to slow down and take time to connect with West Virginia culture — and each other.

The golden dome of the Capitol peaked through trees on the east side of the Capitol Complex, near the West Virginia Veterans Memorial, where a green banner that read “Young'uns” welcomed curious kids of all ages. On straw bales, teenagers sat next to tykes and made checkerboard pot holders. At a nearby station, people dug through dirt in plastic bins, looking for time-worn treasures — a simulated archaeological dig, one of the new offerings at Vandalia. But Gilchrist's looms seemed to be the big draw.

Most folks put their cellphones down as they neared her tent. Those who at first didn't, eventually did. Parents shared benches with their children. Grandkids sat on laps. And as Gilchrist buzzed about, coaching her rookie weavers, her students collaborated and conversed.

“This is creating a dialogue between the generations,” Gilchrist said, peering over her glasses to stress her point. “These folks are working together.”

Her big personality complements her frame, as she slides around tables and people like a Detroit muscle car on a race track. A self-described “country fat kid,” she grew up in Ohio with a pack of brothers. She was 12 and needed a friend, when she got to know Chris, a woman with spina bifida, a quadriplegic with limited use of her upper body, who taught Gilchrist how to weave.

Chris' hands were crippled, so Gilchrist had to wrap the fabric around the shuttle. Sometimes, when Chris would weave the shuttle through the thread, she'd drop it. Gilchrist would pick it up. She didn't know it at the time, but she'd discovered what she wanted to do with her life.

Some time ago, she'd tracked down Chris, only to learn that the woman had died.

“She never knew what an influence she was on me,” Gilchrist said.

Today, Gilchrist is passing on the lessons she learned from Chris to a new generation. She runs Loomyladi Handwovens, in Hurricane, and she's an educator specializing in heritage demonstrations, candle dripping and weaving.

“You know why they call me the Loomy Lady?” she said to a kid as she reached across the table to help him with his technique. “Because I'm crazy about weaving!”

It might sound crazy, she said, but she considers weaving a life skill — folks need to learn where stuff comes from, that “it doesn't just magically appear.” She'll tell you not to expect to make much money as a weaver, and she'll joke about the hemp shirts she used to make for “the hippies,” but, above all else, she'll remind you of her West Virginia roots.

Yes, she was raised in Ohio, she'll admit — reluctantly — but she returned to the Mountain State 10 years ago and has been here ever since. And she can trace her family back to western Virginia in the 1760s, a century before West Virginia was even a state.

“My family were some of the first folks to come over those mountains,” she said. Her “sixth great-grandfather” was John Hacker, of Hackers Creek, one of West Virginia's earliest pioneer settlements. And, on the other side of the family, one of her great-grandfathers was a weaver.

At times, there were about 40 people lining the perimeter of the tent, watching Gilchrist work.

Bonnie Walker, a regular Vandalia attendee from Sissonville, watched as Natalie and her parents wove a mug rug — a countrified drink coaster. In an age of cellphones and computers and modern technology that makes everything so darn fast, Walker said, it was nice to watch families slow down and work together on something.

Wearing a red, heart-adorned T-shirt and a blue fanny pack, Walker gestured to the tent. No one does apprenticeships anymore, she said, as she squinted against the sun.

“They've lost the art of teaching kids this stuff,” Walker said. “This is free to these kids, and that's what's amazing about it.”

Natalie had made a necklace earlier in the day, her mother, Jennifer Collins, said, adding that her daughter liked to draw cats. But weaving, Natalie said, was more fun.

She and her father, Mark Jones, neared completion of the blue and white mug rug. He bent down, close to the loom, and watched her pull the fabric-laden shuttle through the threads.

“Remember to pull it all the way through,” he said. “You don't want to have too much [loose fabric] on the end.”

Natalie complied and tightened the weave and pulled the beater back toward her to compress the fabric.

“There you go,” her father said. “Now we're mug-ruggin' it!”

She pushed the beater away from her, and it jolted back against the loom's frame. She snatched her hand back.

She pulled two levers to separate the thread so she could start her next pass. As she started guiding the shuttle, her dad said, “Wait, that’s the wrong way.”

Natalie froze and looked at her father, who looked at her, then at the loom.

“Nevermind,” he said. “I think you’re right.”

She was.

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Tuesday, May 26, 2015

Late teen's legacy lives on in seat-belt crusade

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — On a recent visit to Charleston Tennis Club's indoor tennis facility, Jane Shuman kicked a tennis ball into the wall. She was upset.

Shuman typically avoids tennis. It brings up memories. All the mother-son trips she chaperoned to tournaments across the United States. The images of an aggressive baseliner — her son, William A. Shuman, “Willy” — who had powerful groundstrokes and a heavy topspin forehand and, his mother remembers, “a little crooked smile that just lit up the room.”

Tennis is a reminder of a life cut short.

Willy Shuman was just four days from shipping off to the U.S. Air Force Academy when he was killed in the predawn hours of June 20, 2009. It was not an accident, Jane Shuman will remind you. Accidents happen. No, this was a crash — something preventable. The driver of the 2002 Chrysler Sebring, which slammed into a rock wall on Oakhurst Drive and tumbled into Davis Creek, was drunk. Willy, a passenger, was not wearing his seat belt. “He's forever 19,” Shuman said, adding that it's tough to watch Willy's friends, now in their mid-20s, going to medical school and getting married and having babies. That's the hardest thing, the source of the frustration: “He doesn't get to live his life.”

Willy got to see his newborn nephew days before the crash. He took one last picture with his parents, on their anniversary. And on June 19, 2009, he walked onto a tennis court for the last time — just hours before his death.

His hitting partner that day was a rising eighth-grader, to whom he gave a piece of paper. Ryan Massinople would later return the paper to Jane Shuman. And Shuman would later take note of Massinople.

A future forever on hold

“It's the only time I can really be around tennis,” Shuman said, referring to the round-robin tennis tournament that's part of the annual Willy Shuman Family Fun Night. This year's edition — the sixth — will be held June 5 from 5 to 8 p.m. at the Charleston Tennis Club and will raise money for The Willy Foundation, the nonprofit formed by the Shumans that funds local educational initiatives and emphasizes positive decision making and seat belt use.

You might have seen the decals and signs — often near schools — that look like blue tennis balls with silver lettering. “WAS,” they read. “Wear A Seatbelt.” Willy A. Shuman. The foundation's logo. The Air Force Academy's colors.

The academy recruited Willy to play tennis, and he wanted to go to law school and serve as a JAG officer in the Air Force.

Retired Army Col. Monty Warner, who's taught at George Washington High School the past seven years and whose daughter was close with Willy, said Willy's acceptance into the Air Force Academy was “the exclamation point on his high school career.”

The Shumans still sometimes fly the Air Force Academy flag at their Charleston-area home.

And Willy was wearing his trucker-style Air Force baseball cap when he played tennis for the last time, slapping shots back and forth and sliding around on the greenish-gray clay on Court No. 5 with Massinople.

Tennis goals carried on

“It's what he would've wanted in his last full day, out there sweating, working,” Massinople said.

Late afternoon June 19, 2009, was hot and sticky on Court No. 5, which sits on a hill at Edgewood Country Club. Massinople, then 13 years old, and Willy hit for more than two hours. Willy was “light-years ahead of my game,” Massinople said, the kind of player who would move you around on the baseline and force you out of position, then come in to put the point away.

“He was the classic American juniors player,” Massinople said. Not a “Spanish grinder,” a player who tries to outlast his opponent. Willy wanted to win points. And he could ditch the topspin and hit a flat flamer of a forehand to do so.

Willy was good, really good, and Massinople doubted he'd ever match him. But Willy encouraged him. During a changeover, as the sun began to set, he shared a piece of paper with Massinople. On it were Willy's long- and short-term tennis goals — he encouraged Massinople to make his own.

“Of course I tried to match them,” Massinople said.

Some of Willy's short-term goals were already checked off.

“Win districts.” Check.

“Win more matches at Nationals.” Check.

And the ultimate goal, “Play college tennis.” Check.

The lesson sinks in

Jane Shuman used to tell Willy that everything happens for a reason.

Willy quoted his mom when he addressed his classmates at George Washington's graduation ceremony. He'd started elementary school a year late, so he was a bit older, he reminded his classmates. But, he said, that meant that he got to graduate with the best class ever — everything happens for a reason.

Shuman is still trying to understand why Willy was killed. And she sometimes worries her son will be forgotten.

Through her work with The Willy Foundation, Shuman travels to local schools and, alongside law enforcement officers, educates kids on the dangers of drunken driving and not wearing a seat belt. She's even addressed classes that convicted drunken drivers have to take as part of their sentences.

A student from one of those classes later emailed her. During the class, Shuman had given him a business card adorned with the “WAS” tennis ball logo. He told Shuman that he always puts his keys on top of that card at the end of the day — it's the last thing he sees at night, he wrote, and the first thing he sees in the morning.

More recently, a stranger left a note on her car. The purple sticky note read: “I think what you are doing is wonderful!! I am so sorry for your loss.”

On June 20, 2009, later in the day, Massinople and his father were hitting tennis balls at Charleston Tennis Club when someone approached the court and whispered something to Massinople's father through the fence. The practice session stopped. Massinople's father drove him home, where the youngster's parents sat him down and broke the news.

Shortly after Willy's death, Massinople returned Willy's goal list to the Shumans. And he wrote them a note.

“Dear Mr. and Mrs. Shuman,” it read. “I was so lucky to be able to play tennis with Willy on Friday evening. We played for over two hours. In that ... session, Willy gave me a piece of paper. This paper contained Willy's ... goals. I hope that your family cherishes this piece of paper. May God be with you in this challenging time.”

Last June, Jane Shuman was near the courts at Charleston Tennis Club when she noticed a hotshot junior player putting on a show.

She's not one to linger around the game, she said, especially if it's a match involving a boy in his late teens.

“It's hardest to watch the kids play,” she said.

But something made her pause. The boy was good, really good, and she asked who he was. It was Ryan Massinople.

Doors to the past and future

“Probably if it wasn't for the foundation, I'd be in bed,” Shuman said. “I'm doing something in his name.”

Organizers of the Willy Shuman Family Fun Night hope to top last year's fundraising effort, which brought in nearly \$33,000. Since August 2009, The Willy Foundation has raised around \$180,000, according to Shuman.

And this year, for the first time, the foundation has given out six \$1,000 college scholarships to students who matriculated through the Willy Shuman Leadership Club as eighth-graders at John Adams Middle School and who went on to spend four years in George Washington's JROTC program.

Willy's room in his parents' house is in almost the same condition today as it was in June 2009. Since he was going to the Air Force Academy and couldn't take much stuff, he'd made giveaway piles, intended for his friends. The piles are still there. The door stays shut.

Jane Shuman might open that door twice a year. She stays away from places he liked to frequent — Five Guys and Taco Bell and Dick's Sporting Goods. She doesn't watch professional tennis on TV. But she's able to be around the courts on Family Fun Night.

“I can't imagine what I'd be doing” without the Willy Foundation, she said. “He's continuing to make a difference.”

Massinople remembers watching Willy hit with one of the tennis pros at Charleston Tennis Club and being awed by his talent.

“Willy was the inspiration. ... He was more than just a friend. He was a model for me in what I wanted to be in my tennis career, and as a person,” Massinople said over the phone, calling from Greenville, South Carolina, where he's a rising sophomore at Furman University — where he plays Division I college tennis.

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Wednesday, May 27, 2015

Water company delays repairs, retracts request to limit water use

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

West Virginia American Water had to delay repairs to a 36-inch water main Wednesday after issuing a statement asking Kanawha Valley residents to limit water usage on Thursday and Friday. Repairs to the main at the intersection of Florida Street and Third Avenue, pictured above, are scheduled to resume early next week.

West Virginia American Water has retracted a request it issued Wednesday morning asking its customers in the Kanawha Valley “to limit non-essential water use from noon Thursday to noon Friday.” The repairs to the water transmission main at the intersection of Florida Street and Third Avenue on Charleston's West Side — where a sinkhole appeared May 18 — have been rescheduled for next week.

Residents are no longer being asked to voluntarily conserve water Thursday and Friday. The intersection will remain closed until repairs are completed.

“West Virginia American Water crews have been operating valves in the area today to isolate a section of the 36-inch main in order to safely make a tap and install a manway for access to make repairs,” the company said in a statement issued Wednesday afternoon. “The project requires pipeline experts to make repairs from inside the pipe, which requires extensive planning, dewatering of a 7,000-foot section of pipe and additional contingencies.”

When repairs do resume, customers will be asked to “voluntarily limit non-essential water use” during a 24-hour period to “alleviate demand on the system while the transmission main is briefly taken out of service.” The company said it will make an announcement to confirm the time frame associated with those specific repairs. As of now, they are scheduled for Monday and Tuesday of next week.

Customers “should not see any impact to their water service,” the company said, and “no customer action is needed.”

Earlier this month, West Virginia American asked the state Public Service Commission for a 28 percent rate increase. The main factor for the increase request, the company said, is past and planned work from 2012 through February 2017, which totals more than \$200 million. If approved, customers would see their monthly water bills increase by almost \$12.

On May 5, the Kanawha County Commission voted to intervene in the company's rate increase request, a \$35.5 million ask. The commission noted that West Virginia American has received several rate increases over since 2007 that have totaled more than \$23 million.

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Saturday, May 30, 2015

Kanawha Players find hope for future in rediscovered past

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

“The fabled red book,” the Kanawha Players call it. Their “bible” — missing since at least 2012.

The Players’ copy of Virginia Pomeroy Gray’s 1973 dissertation — “A History of the Kanawha Players of Charleston, West Virginia from 1922-1972” — had become a legend within the community theater company.

Some thought it had been pocketed by a former member. Others guessed it might have been donated to an archive somewhere. Or, had it been lost in March’s flood, “The Titanic flood,” which filled the basement of the Players’ theater on 309 Beauregard St. with several feet of water after the building’s pipes froze and burst? (The gas had been turned off; there was no money to heat the theater. Some of the water had flowed from the front doors of the former church and formed a trail of ice as it ran toward the sidewalk.)

In early April, volunteers and Players board members were doing some spring cleaning in the theater. It was time to get organized, and it was time to prepare to vacate their space in Charleston’s East End. The building had come to be known as “the albatross,” Vaughan said in a Virginia Tidewater accent. No air conditioning. No heat. Not much incentive to see a production there.

As they cleaned a room with boxes stacked two- and three-deep, they made their way to the corner. They found play books from the 1920s and playbills from the 1930s. They found old newspaper clippings and posters. And on the floor, under a notebook and a box, they found an inch-thick book with a red cover that was clinging to the binding with the help of four tired pieces of tape. “The holy grail,” Vaughan said.

Gray’s dissertation chronicles 50 years of the Players, the second-oldest continuously operating community theater company in the United States. More important, it analyzes how the company survived when so many others failed. And it contains recommendations for how the Players can sustain their organization for the future.

At their yard sale Saturday, the Players talked about the significance of the book and the state of their organization. They’re in a time of transition, and they’re hopeful for the future. Yes, the red book was a big find.

As of 10:30 a.m. Saturday, not many folks had shown up to the Players’ yard sale. There were a few sales, though: a barefoot boy in a Chicago Bulls jersey bought a dress for his mother, and a lady and her costumed toy dog purchased several items of beaded clothing. Still, the Players had hoped for a better turnout. (They planned to pull out some of the nicer items later in the day, they said, and they plan to hold another yard sale next weekend and, depending on how that one goes, another the week after.)

Despite the turnout, the group’s mood is much different than it was nearly a year ago, when it hosted the “Save the Kanawha Players Fundraiser.” Yes, the group — now in its 94th year — is still in financial dire straits, like it was during last year’s fundraiser; like it was in 2009 when it was sued by a construction company that claimed it hadn’t been paid for its work; and like it was in the early 2000s when its bank accounts dried up, unpaid bills piled up and the number of productions declined.

“I don’t want to speculate,” Players vice president Carrie Kirk said, “but last year, if we hadn’t met our [financial] goals [with the fundraiser], we would have closed.”

That sense of urgency was missing from Saturday’s yard sale.

While proceeds from the sale will go toward paying off utility bills and funding future goals, the mission of the yard sales, as Vaughan said Friday, is to downsize — in hopes of getting out from under the theater on Beauregard Street. The group purchased the building in 2005 for \$390,000. Today, as Players treasurer Tracy Hunt joked, the building eats up “110 percent” of the group’s money.

The question of whether to stay in the building has been an issue within the group. Vaughan, who was elected president in December at an “emergency meeting” — during which the Players board was rebuilt following the early departure of its then-president — is more concerned about the vitality of the group and less focused on maintaining an expensive theater.

“So many people think that the Kanawha Players is the building,” Vaughan said, “but it’s the organization. ... People think that because we’re leaving this building that the organization has shut down, but that’s not the case.”

Gray’s analysis in the red book seems to support Vaughan’s viewpoint. “Despite the lack of a permanent theater,” Gray writes, “the members have shown extraordinary resourcefulness in adapting to the facilities available to them.”

As the Players sat in front of the theater they’re destined to vacate, they talked about the significance of the red book. It’s a reminder that the organization has endured fires and recessions and the Great Depression. In an odd way, it’s comforting to know that the group has faced hard times before. Most important, perhaps, is that the book underscores why the Players put on plays in the first place.

“The most apparent reason for the remarkable success ... of this group stems from the fact they met a real need in the community,” Gray writes. “The members represented the most basic and fundamental reason for a community theater group. That is, it was the coming together of persons who simply wanted to do a play.”

The book has a few water damage spots, some bent corners and smells like old carpet and stale cardboard. But it “proves you can move forward,” Players volunteer Sean McCracken said. “That you’ve got a solid foundation to build on.”

The Players have conducted their past two performances at South Charleston’s LaBelle Theatre, Vaughan said, and the group is looking to transition to that location in the near future. They are seeking cast members for the comedy “Dearly Departed.” Interested participants can drop by the lobby at Charleston Newspapers on Virginia Street from 2-4 p.m. on June 6-7 and June 13-14 for auditions.

And Vaughan said to be on the lookout for “Jekyll and Hyde” around Halloween. Around Christmas, she hinted, Charlestonians might see something with Elvis.

“I do have a dedicated board,” Vaughan said. “And I have a helluva team.”

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Tuesday, June 2, 2015

South Hills business looking for buyer

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

Any day now -- any minute -- Harriet Nelson will become a first-time grandmother.

“Harriet’s gonna have a grandchild any minute,” Kathy Stansfield said.

“Literally any minute,” Ann Adkins added.

The three women — friends and business partners — sat outside their Bridge Road store, Geraniums, on Tuesday and discussed plans for the next phases of their lives. Those plans include selling their colorful, upscale women’s boutique that’s been a South Hills staple since June 1992.

“We haven’t advertised [the sale],” Stansfield said. “This is our coming-out party.”

The women said they’d been thinking of selling the store for a while, prompted by new grandchildren, upcoming retirements and the need for more flexibility. And while they don’t have a timeline for securing a buyer, they plan to keep the store open until they find one. They have fond memories of their time in South Hills — they outfitted a local wedding that Jennifer Garner was in and they tried to sell Toms shoes before they were even popular. Above all else, they say the Bridge Road shopping district continues to thrive.

Around Christmas, the women — and their fourth business partner, Lesley Burriss -- realized their lives were changing. Nelson’s daughter was pregnant, and her husband was looking to retire. Stansfield was about to be a first-time grandmother herself. And Adkins, who has two grandchildren in Charleston, hinted that some family members give her a good-natured hard time about continuing to work.

“My daughter calls and says, ‘Mom, you’re the only mother who’s not retired,’” Adkins said. “And I’m like, ‘Well, help me!’”

The women, fashionably garbed in the bright colors their store is known for, laughed.

“We were just standing there one day, literally just back in this room,” Stansfield said, pointing to the back room of her store. “And one of us — I don’t know who said it — said, ‘Is it time?’ ... And we all just said, ‘Yeah, well, maybe it is.’”

“All our lives were changing,” Nelson said.

There’s been a lot of change on Bridge Road lately. A couple of weeks ago, the owners of Cornucopia announced they were retiring and looking for someone to buy their store. That business is 28 years old. In April 2014, The Art Store relocated from South Hills to downtown Charleston. Other stores, such as Kelley’s Mens Shop and The Pilates Bar, have opened stores in the shopping district.

“If something goes, something always replaces it,” Nelson said.

“You know how you go to some towns and it’s just like everything has dropped off — I mean, one [store] closes and they just continually close?” Adkins said. “But that’s not what happens up here. Not so far.”

The Bridge Road shops look out for each other, the women said. It's not unusual for them to sell an outfit to a customer and then point her in the direction of Yarid's Shoes. And, as a couple of patrons crisscrossed the breezeway between Geraniums and neighboring gift boutique Eggplant, the women explained how the close-knit community merchants know each other's wares and where to send shoppers to maximize their experience.

That experience at Geraniums is highly personalized, the business partners said. When they "go to market" to pick out new items for the store, they ask themselves what their loyal customers would wear. And while the bulk of their customers are from outside of South Hills, Geraniums has plenty of regulars.

"At three o'clock, I can tell you who's gonna come in the door," Adkins said, explaining that one woman likes to get out of the house before supper is served.

"They're here for a lot of reasons," Stansfield said, "and a lot of what we do all day long is listen to people and try to help figure out their needs."

"It becomes more than clothing ... and fashion," Nelson said. "It becomes your personal relationships with your clients."

Geraniums, which has around a dozen part-time employees and has carried Lilly Pulitzer products for over two decades, plans to keep its doors open while they search for a buyer. They recently met with someone — "a family of entrepreneurs," according to Stansfield — who've expressed interest in the store. But the interested party is still "in the decision-making process," Stansfield said.

Regardless, the shelves will stay stocked at Geraniums.

"We've already been to market for fall," Adkins said.

"That's our plan," Stansfield said, explaining that they intend for the store to stay open until someone buys it — even if it takes a while. "Plans can change — never say never — but that's the plan."

If the store does sell, a couple of the current owners would like to stay involved with it.

"I will say if it does sell, I want to continue consulting," Adkins said.

"Me too," Nelson added.

Nelson and her business partners don't know how long it will take to find a buyer, but odds are the store won't sell before she becomes a first-time grandmother — when she'll learn the sex of her grandchild. Her daughter's chosen to let that be a surprise.

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Thursday, June 4, 2015

Man sentenced to 20 years in death of St. Albans man

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

A Charleston man will spend 20 years in prison for the 2014 death of a St. Albans man.

Michael Benbow Jr., 25, pleaded guilty to felony voluntary manslaughter Thursday for the September shooting death of Micah Burdette.

Benbow was originally charged in September with first-degree murder, but his attorney, David White, and state prosecutors reached a plea agreement that reduced the charges to voluntary manslaughter — which carried a judge-determined sentence of anywhere from three to 15 years.

Because he is a second-time offender, Judge Duke Bloom was able to add five consecutive years to Benbow's sentence. Benbow, nicknamed "Smooov," was convicted in 2009 of felony wanton endangerment involving a firearm.

And as part of the plea arrangement, the state dropped a marijuana charge.

Micah Burdette was killed Sept. 9, 2014 — his body was found in St. Albans Park. He had been shot once in the head. On Thursday, prosecutors said the state's evidence suggested that a drug deal had been set up that night, when the shooting occurred.

Police were able to tie Benbow to the crime after they examined Burdette's cell phone and found messages they later discovered were from Benbow. Phone records indicated that a phone — which police believed belonged to Benbow — was in the area of St. Albans Park around the time of the killing. And a confidential informant told police that Benbow told him that he'd shot Burdette.

Teresa Sanders, mother of Micah Burdette, had to compose herself before addressing the court prior to Benbow being sentenced. Several of her friends or family members whispered "Yes!" when Bloom sentenced the defendant. But while Benbow received the maximum sentence, Bloom, during the hearing, confirmed with prosecutors that Benbow would "be eligible for parole consideration in a little less than seven years."

"Oh my god," a person, who was sitting near Sanders, said in disbelief.

Sanders, to whom prosecutors gave a box of tissues prior to the start of the hearing, addressed the court for around eight minutes, most of that time in a shaky voice.

"Every time I try to do something to resume a normal life, there's a heaviness, sadness, that constantly lives in my chest," Sanders said. "I have, literally, physical pain."

Her son wasn't perfect, Sanders said, but "he was one of the best kids." She remembered Burdette for helping her through an illness, and for his smile. She said her child wasn't "street smart," and expressed confusion as to why he was killed.

“And I just don’t understand why someone would have a loaded gun and put it to my son’s head, whether it was intended or not,” she said.

“It was intended,” someone in the back of the court whispered.

Benbow, who told Bloom he has two small children, read a letter he wrote to the court and Burdette’s family.

“Your honor, I’m very sorry for what happened here. I know the Burdette family has suffered a tragic loss,” he said. “... What happened was unfortunate. [I] had a gun, there was a struggle, and he was shot. I am accepting responsibility for his death. I also don’t want to tarnish a mother’s memory of her beloved and deceased son. There is no one to blame but myself. ...

“This is something that I will have to carry with [me] the rest of my life,” he said. “... Burdette family, I ask you to remember your son for all the great things that he’s done, and I also pray that you and your family and friends can find it in your heart to forgive me. I’m sorry.”

Burdette was born in South Charleston and graduated from St. Albans High School in 2013. He played football and baseball there — his mother referenced his pitching skills at Thursday’s hearing — and played baseball at Capital High School before transferring schools.

His girlfriend, Kristen Wikle, hugged Teresa Sanders outside the courtroom after the hearing. The two embraced for a long time. When Saunders removed her arms from Wikle’s neck, a tattoo was visible underneath the black strap of the younger woman’s dress. The ink, at the top and off to one side of her back, is in memory of Burdette, she said. She got the tattoo in March. She had it placed over her heart.

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Thursday, June 4, 2015

‘Towering Inferno’ drill entices thrill-seeking WV family to serve

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

When he couldn’t touch the bottom with his feet — no matter how hard he swam toward shore — Tommy Cooper knew he and his family were in trouble.

He and his wife, Kerri, and their children — twins Gavin and Gillian, and their older brother, Jordan — watched the beach at Oak Island, North Carolina, recede into the distance. They’d been on the ocean for a while, having paddled out to deeper water to catch the bigger waves. Over time, the current had carried them even farther out. They hadn’t noticed. Now, they were caught in a rip tide — and they were scared.

The Coopers, of Yawkey, have been known to kayak for “miles and miles and miles” on West Virginia rivers. They ski. They off-road in ATVs. During Halloween, they dress up and scare folks at The Haunted Barn, in Charleston. And Gillian, when she was just a tyke, learned to walk the beams atop swing sets and monkey bars, just like her father — an ironworker who walked the beams on a Corridor H bridge hundreds of feet above the valley.

But two years ago, the family of self-described thrill seekers found themselves adrift in the Atlantic, together but ultimately alone — there were no lifeguards on duty, Jordan remembers. At first, they didn’t know what to do.

‘My family is big on adrenaline’

The Coopers don’t know what to expect this weekend. The twins, 14, had to have their parents’ signatures on a waiver. They all must wear closed-toe shoes.

And everyone has to bring a watch — so they can synchronize the timing of the mock disaster.

On Saturday, the Coopers will join more than 100 volunteers participating in the Towering Inferno Drill at the NiSource Building, 1700 MacCorkle Ave., Kanawha City, according to Gina Namay of Volunteer West Virginia.

The drill, which is being facilitated by the Kanawha Putnam Emergency Planning Committee, is designed to simulate a high-rise fire. More than 20 agencies — city, county, state, federal, a handful of private sector groups — will be involved in the scenario. The Coopers and fellow volunteers will play the roles of victims. It’s the family’s first time participating in such an exercise.

“My family is big on adrenaline,” Kerri Cooper said, “and this seemed like an easy fix. . . . And free.”

The chance for cheap thrills was just one reason the family signed up for the Towering Inferno Drill, though. The Coopers are “suckers for being volunteers,” Kerri deadpanned. Really, they care deeply about West Virginia and its reputation, and they see the drill as a chance to learn a thing or two.

A ‘family moment’ at sea

The crowded beach house they were sharing with some relatives had prompted the Coopers to head for deeper water — their kin, some of them little kids, wouldn’t go out that far. So, the Coopers took two boogie boards and paddled through the surf. When they realized their predicament — after an hour and a half in the midday sun — the family was already tired.

“The current started getting stronger and stronger,” Jordan said, “and at that point . . . they [his family members] started to panic. Gillian was exhausted.”

“It kept taking us further and further out, too,” Tommy added.

“Yeah, we kept on going,” Jordan said. “Gillian got exhausted. Gavin was distraught, just like they [his parents] were.”

It was a close call, Jordan said. The “family moment” in the ocean became a team effort to survive. The two boogie boards offered something to float on, but they were of little comfort.

An educational opportunity

Of the Cooper clan, Kerri is the one who startles the easiest. She’s curious about what Saturday’s Towering Inferno Drill will entail, but she hasn’t given much thought as to whether the experience will be scary. She’s used to the fake gore — faux blood and painted-on bruises — that some of the role-playing victims will wear. Kerri does her family’s makeup at Halloween, but she doesn’t actually participate in The Haunted Barn.

“Yeah, when it gets dark, she’s gone,” Jordan said.

But Saturday’s promised theatrical smoke and noise and simulated medical transports didn’t give her any pause when she received the call for role players from Volunteer West Virginia. Kerri, an alumna AmeriCorps volunteer who’s spent four years as a mentor and tutor and currently works with the LifeBridge AmeriCorps program, saw it as a chance to give back to the Mountain State.

“When it comes to giving back, I’ll do anything for my state,” Kerri said. “Especially if it helps first responders.”

“When I got the emails, I thought, ‘Well, I have four more bodies at my house.’ It’s not negotiable,” she said, joking that her family didn’t have a choice in the matter.

Kerri said volunteer activities like these offer a way to put West Virginia in a positive light and make the state a better place for future generations.

She said she realizes her kids might need to leave West Virginia to pursue their goals, but she wants them to have a better state to come home to.

“And you will come home,” Kerri said as she locked eyes with her children. They grinned back at her.

From Tommy’s perspective, Saturday’s drill is an educational opportunity.

“We’re not from downtown Charleston,” he said, guessing that emergencies might unfold differently in the city. You never can tell, he said, when doing something like the Towering Inferno Drill could come in handy.

How to escape a riptide

As the family fought fatigue and struggled against the ocean current, Tommy thought about how he could use the boogie boards to save his family. He wasn’t optimistic.

“The only thing that kept going in my head was ‘I can’t swim that [to the shore and back] three times,’” he said. “‘There’s no possible way that I can take one of them and come back and get the other ones — I can’t make that three times.’”

“Which meant I was screwed,” Kerri interjected, deadpanning. “In case you missed that.”

“Well, I’m just being honest here,” Tommy said.

The family laughed.

“That’s the only time I can ever remember being afraid,” Tommy said.

Jordan, though, had seen a “goofy” TV ad about how to escape a riptide, and he remembered it at the right time. The family stopped trying to swim against the current. They turned the opposite way, using the current to take them away from the riptide’s path, where they were able to then swim to the side to escape it.

“When we got out of the water, we just died there on the beach,” Jordan said.

But the Coopers didn’t let the scare linger over their vacation.

“We went further out [in the ocean] than what we probably should have the day after,” Kerri said. “You fall off the horse, you have to get back on. We didn’t stay out of the water. We went right back at it.”

“We’re always doing something together,” said Jordan, a sophomore at Marshall University.

He’s a criminal justice major who considering a career as a state trooper or a lawyer. And he’s currently serving as an AmeriCorps Vista volunteer.

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Thursday, June 4, 2015

South Charleston city council talks budget, police staffing

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The South Charleston City Council acted on a revision to the city's budget and discussed police staffing at Thursday evening's meeting. And they even brought up a little Mountaineers basketball.

The council unanimously passed a resolution for a budget revision that "balances the books," according to South Charleston Mayor Frank Mullins.

"It's an every-year thing," Mullins said. "It's just a budget revision at the end of the fiscal year."

Mullins explained that the city is "mandated by law to have a balanced budget at the end of the fiscal year," and said that Thursday's approved revision accomplishes that goal ahead of the new fiscal year, which begins July 1.

"Our revenues came in a lot higher than we predicted," he said, "which is a good thing."

Also at the meeting, South Charleston Police Chief Brad Rinehart updated the council on the police department's search to fill two vacancies on its force.

"The amount of applications we have picked up weren't as large as in the past," Rinehart said.

His department has taken in "some 70 applications," and he said that seven of those were from certified police officers, meaning "that they have already been to the academy."

"If one of [the certified applicants] would score high [on the departmental test] and check out," Rinehart said, "that'd be a quicker fix. We could insert them 16 weeks sooner than we could somebody who has to go to the academy."

The chief flashed an index-card-size flyer that he's been passing out around the city. The mini flyers advertise for the opportunity to test for the position of probationary police officer. All applications must be submitted by Monday, Rinehart said.

"We're hoping to get a lot more applicants," Rinehart said.

South Charleston Recreation Director Arnett Hoston reminded the council about next week's basketball camp at South Charleston High School. Two West Virginia University players, Jevon Carter and Devin Williams, will be guests at the camp, according to Hoston.

As the meeting drew to a close, someone reminded the mayor of one final, important event.

"We do have elections Saturday," Mullins said with a grin. The polls open at 6:30 a.m. and close at 7 p.m.

After the meeting, Mullins (R) expressed optimism about this weekend's election, in which he'll be challenged by former South Charleston Mayor Richie Robb (D). For the past several months, Robb has

been in a battle with the city as he's sued to obtain financial records that he says will show that Mullins unfairly sends construction projects to friends of City Manager Carlton Lee. Mullins has denied the allegations. Heading into the weekend, he feels voter turnout will be key.

"I feel good, I really do," Mullins said. "I'm not going to sit here and pretend I know how elections will turn out, but I can just tell by the responses I get from people when I'm out and about ... and I think my responses have been well."

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Friday, June 5, 2015

Kanawha Schools using cameras to catch motorists who pass buses

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

At first, Teresa Cochran didn't see the speeding car coming up behind her stopped school bus. She noticed it, though, when it moved to pass her. On the right. As Capital High School students were exiting the bus.

Cochran, a veteran bus driver, had the "STOP" arm extended. The bus' lights were flashing. The crossing arm was deployed.

"Everything was in place," Cochran, now the transportation supervisor at East Bank Bus Terminal, said. But the car kept coming.

"He was able to stop his vehicle within a foot of hitting my students."

Cochran, parked near the corner of Randolph Street and Ohio Avenue, made sure her students were OK and tried to have a "conversation" with the car's driver. He sped away. Three "good Samaritans" took off after him. And, in the bus, some of the kids jotted down his license plate number.

Close calls — such as the one Cochran had on Charleston's West Side — have prompted Kanawha County Schools to install hi-definition camera systems on their buses. Ideally, the cameras would hold accountable drivers who illegally pass school buses. They are able to capture license plate numbers and, in some cases, law-breaking drivers' faces. Not all counties, though, can afford camera systems such as those used by Kanawha County. A different, more affordable camera system — one that's being tested locally — could provide an alternative. But a big question remains: How can offending motorists be held accountable?

Illegal "drive-bys" happen "every single school day," Keith Vittoe, director of security at Kanawha County Schools, said Friday. "It'd be impossible to determine exactly how many. One [survey] was conducted back in April [and] showed 90 in one day, just here in Kanawha County alone. That's just one county. You consider that with every district in the state; it's a pretty pervasive problem."

Vittoe stood next to a Kanawha County school bus equipped with an eight-camera AngelTrax system — which the county currently uses — and a new, less expensive four-camera system that it's testing. The new cameras looked a bit like fish eyes, and three of them were visible on the driver's side of the bus. Two were mounted toward the front of the bus, underneath the driver's window, and faced different directions. A third camera perched high on the bus' body, near the back of the vehicle, to provide "overwatch" — a bird's-eye view.

The bus to Vittoe's right is the only one in Kanawha County equipped with the new four-camera system. Jerry Young, electronic crew leader at Kanawha County Schools, said he expects to have video from the new cameras next week, after a "firmware upgrade" happens. At that point, Kanawha County Schools' officials and the state Department of Education will be able to compare the capabilities of current camera systems with the new one, the manufacturer of which Young would not specify.

"We're trying other systems as well," Young said. "We're looking for the best system to accomplish what we need to do to [ensure] the safety of the children."

The retired law enforcement officer said that, from his experience, people illegally pass stopped school buses because they're in a hurry.

"It takes time to load and unload children, so they get impatient," Vititoe said. "And they go ahead and drive around a school bus. They think they have the opportunity."

Vititoe described the scenario of a kid crossing in front of the bus, dropping something and turning around to pick it up — only to be hit by a motorist who, sitting behind the bus, couldn't see the child. He said that motorists might think twice and keep their impatience in check if they knew they were being monitored.

Michael Pickens, executive director of the Office of School Facilities at the Department of Education, said the state is always looking for things that might address illegal-school-bus passing. The department is interested in the data that Kanawha County will get, he said, and he called the county's safety initiatives "proactive."

But Pickens said the department doesn't have the funds to incentivize bus camera installation across the state. While future incentives of this kind are "not out of the question," he said, right now, "there's nothing in place." Schools have to get creative with their funding at the county level, he said.

The big question, though, in terms of addressing illegal passing, is how to hold motorists accountable.

"I understand that law enforcement doesn't have the time to run around and do a full investigation of every traffic violation," Vititoe said. "It's just not possible. But if we are in a position to provide basically everything to them on a silver platter, then that would decrease the investigation time. And, hopefully, we'll have more charges filed — and more convictions."

But, according to Capt. Aaron James, bureau chief of Community Policing for the Charleston Police Department, that may not be the case.

Even videos showing a driver's face can be disputed, James said. Glares off windshields can make it tough to identify drivers. And even some high-definition images of a person's face can be questionable.

Moreover, James said it would be difficult to cite the owner of a vehicle based solely on a tag number picked up by a camera. "The owner may not be the violator," he said. And what if the vehicle was jointly owned — whom do you cite?

In James' mind, education needs to precede enforcement. Some motorists might be confused, he said, on where it was legal to pass a stopped school bus. He cited MacCorkle Avenue in Kanawha City as a prime example. The question is what constitutes a controlled-access highway — the only place it's legal to pass a stopped school bus in the opposite direction. The only controlled-access highways in the Charleston area, James said, are the interstates — I-64, I-77, I-79 — and Corridor G. On roads like MacCorkle, even where there's more than just a painted median, oncoming traffic on the opposite side of the road must halt for a stopped school bus.

James said that he and his department welcomed the opportunity to sit down with Kanawha City Schools — and other partners — to talk about safety solutions.

Teresa Cochran said that, in her 11 years of driving buses, most drivers who illegally pass stopped school buses aren't caught. Aside from the safety issue, she views it as lost money. But on that day at the corner of Randolph Street and Ohio Avenue, she wasn't thinking about ticket revenues.

Cochran's kids had gotten the license plate number. She called it in. And the three Samaritans caught up with the driver.

“And I was able to actually identify the driver,” Cochran said. “I spent about four hours between the police department and the magistrate for court that evening, but when I left around 10:30, I was told he was fined the maximum.”

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Sunday, June 7, 2015

Pride festival a marriage of new happenings, old traditions

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The 2014 polar vortex complicated the Holstein's wedding.

Rachel was almost late to the ceremony. Sierra had to settle for snow boots over dress shoes. And there was no reception dinner, just a meal with close friends at a Famous Dave's — the only place they could find that was open.

They got married on Rachel's birthday. They survived snowy roads and frigid temperatures. Rachel survived an allergic reaction and an unintentional Benadryl overdose — she fell asleep at Famous Dave's. The couple laughs about it now, how they didn't read the warning label on the back of the Benadryl cream package — do not use if you've already taken Benadryl orally, which Rachel had — before Sierra rubbed it on her spouse.

It's a good story, they say. There are reminders of it on their right arms, just above their elbows: matching tattoos of a line of Roman numerals. Their wedding date.

Gay marriage wasn't legal at last year's Rainbow Pride of West Virginia Festival. At this year's festival — the 19th edition — the Holsteins sat on the stone ledge on Kanawha Boulevard on Saturday, and watched the drag queens and the rainbow flags and the supportive religious organizations pass by. Things were a little different with this year's event, they said. It was slow at first, but it picked up. And for the second straight year, they didn't see any anti-gay protesters. There have been some changes in West Virginia, but both women talked about the stereotypes they still encounter — and the progress that needs to be made.

"I think there's less people here (this year)," Sierra said, as she waited for the parade to start. Rachel nodded her head in agreement.

"But there's that Ribfest going on," Sierra said, referring to the festival in South Charleston.

It was the first time the Rainbow Pride Festival was held on a Saturday, according to Katrina Foxx, of West Virginia Pride, the organization that plans and sponsors the event. The switch to Saturday was made in hopes of drawing a bigger crowd, Foxx said, but at 12:30 p.m. that didn't appear to the Holsteins to be the case.

Rachel and Sierra have been coming to the festival for five years now. They've been together for more than three years, and they were best friends for three years before that. Sierra, a self-described "lipstick" — a woman whose appearance causes most folks to assume she's straight — said she met Rachel at the mall in American Eagle, where they both worked. Their first date was a trip to the casino followed by supper at McDonald's and a Redbox movie and, to end the night, a Duke Blue Devils basketball game on TV.

Rachel is a Blue Devils fan. Her hair is much shorter than her spouse's dark wavy mane, and she prefers khaki shorts and Converse All-Stars sneakers to Rachel's long, black dress and Roman-style sandals.

"West Virginia is the only state where people call me 'sir,'" Rachel said. She explained how a customer — one she's waited on before — might come into her workplace and call her "sir."

You can tell I'm a woman, she said. And she's right.

People make other assumptions, Sierra said. She wears her wedding band on her left ring finger and folks ask her how long she's been with her husband. When she and Rachel dine out, servers sometimes assume they're on separate checks.

"It doesn't really bother me," Sierra said. "But it gets to Rachel — she's more sensitive to that kind of thing."

Rachel remembers anti-gay protesters gathering near the mall parking garage in years past, before other renditions of the Rainbow Pride Festival. They taunted her on one occasion, and she responded. She couldn't repeat the words she used. The protesters responded in kind and held their signs — "God hates f---."

The women were surprised when West Virginia [legalized gay marriage in October](#), following a decision by the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Virginia.

"Just because something's legal," Rachel said, "doesn't mean it's accepted."

The couple's Italian greyhound, Fern, ran around in a small half circle on her leash.

Sierra said that they'd decided not to enter Fern in Saturday's Big Gay Dog Show, which took place at noon. They didn't want to force her into a gay dog show if she's straight, they joked.

(Best in show, by the way, went to Chihuahua-mix Taylor Ann, who wore a wedding dress and rode in a baby stroller with her dog partner, Lulu Ann. On the back of the stroller was a little banner: "Just married.")

The parade started around 1:30 p.m., and the crowd picked up. A church group walked by and shouted, "We support gay marriage!" Drag queens sat in convertibles sporting rainbow flags streaming from the trunks. Someone dressed as a character from a Nintendo game strolled by with a small sign: "Link supports gay marriage."

Earlier in the day, before a faux, rainbow-flag-waving Dolly Parton lip-synced "God Bless the USA" with a full backup choir in the Haddad Riverfront Park amphitheater, Rachel sat on the ledge with her partner. She remembered how she felt last fall, when she learned gay marriage had become legal in West Virginia.

"I was excited, but upset," she said.

Rachel, from Boone County, and Sierra, from Charleston's West Side, didn't think — in January 2014 — that the state would ever legalize gay marriage. So, they'd made an appointment in Washington, D.C., to get married. In March 2014, they rode into the polar vortex, weather so bad that the drive to Washington took a day. But they made it.

"People love people," Rachel said. "It's not that I love her because she's a woman — I love her because she's her."

Sierra smiled, and the breeze flipped up the brim on her wide-brim floppy hat.

On March 4, the couple celebrated one year of marriage. They indulged themselves with lemonade, a frozen pizza and a show on Netflix.

“We talked about getting remarried in West Virginia, but we decided not to,” Rachel said.

“Weddings are stressful,” Sierra added.

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Wednesday, June 10, 2015

CURA to take possession of vacant Charleston building

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The Charleston Urban Renewal Authority Board will likely take possession of 1212 Quarrier Street, a vacant Charleston building neighbors call an eyesore. CURA on Wednesday voted to accept the donation of the building, pending legal review and approval.

In exchange, CURA will reimburse MATO Investments, Inc., which holds the building's deed, for cost the company has incurred since it purchased the property at a tax sale in 2011. That's in the \$30,000-\$40,000 range, CURA Executive Director Jim Edwards estimates.

Arlington Court resident Angela Vance, along with another half dozen Arlington Court residents, attended the meeting and reminded board members of the poor conditions she's seen at the boarded-up property. She hoped CURA could reach a deal with the building's owner, Bob Johns, to acquire the "eyesore."

"We're not looking at hanging on to [1212 Quarrier St.]," Johns said after he emerged from a closed-door discussion with the board. "That's why the discussions, with CURA."

Johns had earlier approached CURA about selling the property to the organization, Edwards said.

"It was offered to us to purchase," Edwards said. "But we didn't feel like ... it was appropriate to purchase it. But reimbursing for expenses, we thought, was a reasonable approach to resolving the problem for the neighborhood."

Those expenses are mostly taxes, he said, and some costs associated with boarding up the property. "But they have to demonstrate, they have to show us the receipts," he said. "We're not just gonna take their word."

When she addressed the board Wednesday morning, Vance said she and her neighbors were concerned that the adjacent boarded-up building was harming the property values of the 22 home-owners in Arlington Court.

"I mean, it was boarded up when we got it," Johns said, after leaving the closed-door session. "It hasn't changed since we got it. I mean, it was the same condition then as it is now. We maintain it. We try to keep people out of it. We cut the grass. We do everything we can do."

The property at 1212 Quarrier will qualify for a 10 percent historical property tax credit, according to Edwards. A backside addition was added to the original home some time ago; it would cost \$52,000 to remove it. And it would cost an additional \$16,000 for asbestos abatement.

The property is outside of CURA's district, Edwards said, but said that the organization's legal counsel doesn't see that as an issue.

"Since it's our mission to improve areas in our community," Edwards said after the meeting, "we have the authority to go outside of our district."

Also Wednesday, Charleston City Manager David Molgaard and Dave Gilmore, of GAI Consultants, showed off designs for a flexible-use, pedestrian-friendly walkway and green space intended to connect downtown's historic district, at Capitol Street, to its entertainment district and to its retail district, at Court Street and Town Center.

"You can see it's essentially the entire heart of downtown Charleston," Gilmore said of the project, called John Slack Green and Brawley Walkway.

John Slack Green would be a large, open green space between Summers Street and Laidley Street and would be designed to entice food trucks and other vendors to its perimeter while keeping open space in the middle of the park.

"This project will be done in phases," Molgaard said. "We have approximately \$650,000 left on, for construction, a grant that we already have. The pieces of that have been designed for the Brawley Walkway. The first streets that we'll be starting will be from Court Street to Laidley Street...The timetable for that particular piece is that the tenants there have until Aug. 1 to vacate that property. And then we'll get in there and see what we need to do in terms of remodeling."

After the meeting, Edwards said CURA had reached an agreement to buy the property at 1609 East Washington St. for \$75,000. That building is connected to property — 1601-1607 East Washington St. — that CURA already owns.

The board also unanimously adopted its budget for the 2016 fiscal year, which Edwards said is pretty similar to this year's budget.

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Saturday, June 13, 2015

W.Va. furniture retailers optimistic about improving business

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The drywall was just going up. Construction lamps dotted the old machine shop. And it was cold.

With just weeks until the grand opening of Wells Home Furnishings' Morgantown location — the company's second store — on April 30, store manager Jason Wells looked at his mother and said, "Well, we got a little bit of work to do."

At 27, Jason Wells been preceded by four generations of furniture businesspeople, including his father, John Wells III, owner of Wells Home Furnishings, and his late grandfather, John Wells Jr. And both of those men can trace their business roots back to the R.H. Kyle Furniture Co.

"I was really excited, but curious," Jason said, recalling the moment his father asked him if he'd like to manage the new store.

"I just already went into the mode of 'How can I make this store do half as good as they [his father and grandfather] do?'"

As the grand opening neared, Jason had to paint walls and arrange the showroom floor. His personal office wasn't even finished, and it couldn't be a priority. But it was all those furniture boxes — which needed unpacking — that seemed daunting to the new manager in his first-ever furniture store.

Like many industries, the furniture business took a hit in 2008 and during the subsequent recession. But an industry expert says it has shown signs of recovery. And while it can be difficult to apply national trends to local business, homegrown Charleston-area furniture retailers say they're doing well. They might have different sales strategies, but there's one consistent variable for furniture retailers: repeat customers.

Poised for growth?

Jim Moore, owner of Dunbar Furniture, remembers all the Berkline Furniture boxes sitting in his store. The maker of recliners and couches went bankrupt in 2011, and now Moore had dozens of pieces with no extra parts and no warranties. It was 20 percent of his inventory at the time, and he had to sell it off at cut-rate prices.

Moore, whose father started the business in 1963, also saw the maker of big-name furniture brands like Lane and Broyhill file for bankruptcy a couple of years later. But his store survived.

Consumer credit was crippled, and the housing market collapsed during the recession, and both of those factors affected the furniture business, said Bill McLaughlin, editor-in-chief of Furniture Today.

But, McLaughlin said, the industry has shown signs of recovery in recent years. And it might be poised for growth. The recent fourth quarter was one of the best in recent years, McLaughlin said. Plus, the housing market is rebounding, and the "millennial generation" — ages 18-34 and consisting of 73 million people, according to the U.S. Census Bureau — is forming households.

The furniture industry is a “fairly slow-growth industry,” McLaughlin said, adding that, historically, it’s not been prone to big peaks or valleys.

Local furniture markets are affected by regional factors and influenced by the demographics of their customer base, McLaughlin said. And the Internet has changed the shopping experience: Customers can get their furniture quicker, and the shopping process often starts online — even if it doesn’t end there.

Game plans

John Wells III wants your shopping experience to end at his store, but along the way he might bring it to your home.

About 10 years ago, Wells Home Furnishings hired Janet Maloney, a private consultant and a 30-year veteran of the furniture industry, who brought to Wells’ company a “holistic,” in-home sales approach that centers around a game plan.

“If they’re planning to buy, they should buy with a plan,” Maloney said. “A good doctor’s gonna want to know what’s going on with in all areas to make a proper diagnosis.”

A furniture diagnosis might start with an in-home visit during which a designers get to know clients. Designers will ask questions about furniture pieces and fabric and colors and patterns, but they also want know about factors such as kids and pets and, generally, how clients intend the room to function. So, clients help designers create a vision for the space; designers will take a week or so to develop ideas for the space; and, finally, they will present customers with a master plan for the room. At that point customers can choose to buy as much or as little of the furniture as they want.

“The customer today doesn’t have the time to design a room,” John said, adding that some customers can become “paralyzed” when faced with too many decisions. “Complete room packages,” John said, can alleviate that stress.

From her vantage, Maloney has seen two trends impact the industry. The first is customization: People used to be OK with buying a matched set of furniture off the showroom floor, she said, but not anymore. And the internet has enabled customers to become savvier in terms of designs, products and prices.

‘Eye-candy retail’

“A lot of people price shop,” Moore said. “It’s a pricing war, and I don’t like to lose those.”

The Internet has actually helped him, he said, because his business model is predicated on offering the lowest price for quality brands like Flexsteel.

“I probably close 70 percent of all my customers,” Moore said, adding that he can sell you a long-lasting Flexsteel sofa for \$899 — and that’s including the various pattern and fabric customizations.

Moore said he’s able to offer lower prices because his business has low overhead. He owns the building his store is in, and he doesn’t spend a lot on advertising.

“We’re bare-bones,” he said. “We want to win the price battle.”

Moore, who estimates that 90 percent of his sales are custom orders, said he’s not going to get a lot of the kids who are first-time homebuyers. But folks aged 40-60, that’s where his sales are. And while income tax

refund season might be a big time for some retailers, Moore says its not for him — most of his customers are having to pay taxes.

The month of May was good for him, he said, even though people told him it wouldn't be. (His sales would be down, they said, because of the rough winter: People wanted to get out, not sit around on furniture.)

Dunbar Furniture — which Moore says is “as mom-and-pops as it gets” — benefits from name recognition. Moore estimates it took his family three decades “for people to know about us.” But, he said, the time it took to build a client base has paid off — with repeat customers.

And despite the availability of furniture for sale online at sites like Amazon, Overstock and Wayfair, Moore said that customers like to see products with their own eyes, in the store.

“This is a decorator-oriented, eye-candy type of retail,” he said. You can tell them about products until “you're blue in the face,” he said, “but most customers hear with their eyes.”

‘Family business’

“Sure, you can buy a sofa online,” Jason Wells said, acknowledging that “it can be tricky to compete” with online merchants.

“But if you really want to buy some quality, well-made furniture, you're going to want to touch it, sit in it, feel the upholstery.”

He, like Moore, knows the importance of building a clientele.

“If you don't have a returning customer,” Jason said, “you're not gonna survive.”

Wells Home Furnishings has expanded its Charleston store twice in the past 15 years.

“If you're not growing,” John Wells III said, “then obviously you're going the other way.”

He said he'd been looking to expand to Morgantown for the past couple of years. He was enticed by all the homes being built in the area, and he found the old machine shop at the Westover exit, at a spot that's visible from the interstate.

“My grandfather and father always envisioned a store in Morgantown,” Jason Wells said, “to serve the northern part of the state.”

Maloney said that when any business expands, it can be challenging. It takes twice the energy to run it, she said, and some merchants run the risk of being spread thin.

“But for Johnny, it's a family-owned business,” Maloney said, “so I don't think that's going to be much of a challenge.”

Before the Morgantown grand opening, in the unfinished store with the barren showroom, Jason Wells looked at all the unassembled pieces of furniture encased in their boxes. His dad would end up driving from Charleston to help with the assembly. The two men have been working together for almost two decades, ever since Jason — when he was 8 or 9 — would beg his father to take him to the furniture store. On Saturdays.

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Saturday, June 13, 2015

Capitol City Biker Bash a bit quieter this year, but still backed a good cause

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

Tim Adkins has witnessed some riders on certain brands of bikes refuse to wave as they pass, much less invite you to ride — they don't care for your mount.

The president of the Red Knights Motorcycle Club, West Virginia, Chapter II — serving Jackson, Kanawha and Putnam counties — Adkins has been riding for close to 50 years. From his black boots to his black collar — the leather vest signifying his club membership — you might mistake him for a Harley-Davidson snob. He's got the pins and patches on his vest. His hands look like they've been fiddling around

in a bike's innards.

And smoke from a Pall Mall seeps through his lips — framed by a handlebar mustache.

Adkins has had a couple of Harleys. And he's had a Honda. And a Kawasaki. And a Yamaha. And a Suzuki — one that folks often mistook for a Hog.

“It said ‘Suzuki’ on it,” he said Saturday, as rain pelted the Red Knights' pop-up tent, “but people'd still ask me if it was a Harley.”

For Adkins and two fellow Red Knights, Mike Miller and Keith Mitchell, it's less about what you're riding than *why* you're riding. The crew sat under their leaky tent at the Capitol City Biker Bash and talked about “two-wheel therapy” and community service. Their club is always looking for new members, and events like the Biker Bash offer good visibility. On Saturday, though, volunteerism was the reason these men were sitting in the rain. It might have been quieter than in years past on Kanawha Boulevard, but the weather wasn't the only reason.

The fourth installment of Biker Bash was devoid of the rows of bikes and the rumble of engines early Saturday afternoon. Booms of thunder supplied the noise. The noon storm hit first. Then, around 2 p.m., a man walked around to all the tents and food trucks, telling them high winds were on the way. The 30 vendors — about 10 more than last year, according to Biker Bash treasurer Vicki Hayes — made their preparations. Pop-up tents were weighted down, to keep them from blowing away, and some folks lowered their awnings.

Earlier in the day, a gaggle of 60-plus bikes had departed for Delbarton, where they met up with more bikers and continued their charity ride for HospiceCare West Virginia. The riders were scheduled to return to the Hubbard Hospice House, in Charleston, later in the afternoon. Jeff Sikorovsky, a HospiceCare spokesman, said that, over the past two years, the Biker Bash has raised roughly \$30,000 for his organization.

Adkins and the Red Knights have been volunteering for Biker Bash since the event started in 2012. They were going to provide security for Saturday night's Molly Hatchet concert. They planned on enjoying the show — they didn't expect trouble.

“I ain’t too sure about Sturgis,” Adkins said, referring to the famous — or infamous, depending on your mindset — annual bike rally that takes place in South Dakota. “You hear those stories about people running around naked.”

“We like tame stuff around here,” Miller said.

“Family-oriented,” Mitchell added.

Biker Bash is family-friendly and a good place to people-watch, the men said. And unlike recent news headlines out of Waco, Texas, and TV shows like “Sons of Anarchy,” it’s a positive image of motorcycling.

The lightning flashed outside the Red Knights’ tent, which had been lowered to avoid the high winds — which never really arrived. Across the street, a shirtless man who’d been cooking all day stood in the rain and hosed himself off.

“He’s still got his [cell] phone [on him],” one of the Red Knights said.

Moments later, Adkins’s cellphone rang — rather, it sounded. The wail of a fire engine’s siren.

The Red Knights are a different kind of motorcycle club. There’s no alcohol at their events. They don’t limit membership to riders of a certain brand of bike. And they sometimes serve as funeral escorts when a firefighter dies in the line of duty.

Supporting firefighters is at the core of the Red Knights’ mission. Adkins is a 30-year veteran of the Pinch Volunteer Fire Department. He’s also got a pair of U.S. Army jump wings.

“28 jumps,” he said, referring to the number of times he’s parachuted from a plane.

Some of his chapter mates are firefighters themselves, and others have served in the Air National Guard. The 13 members of Adkins’ chapter strive to “promote motorcycle safety, project a positive image of motorcycling [and] enjoy the community of firefighters,” according to their mission statement. They organize poker runs and other events to support their charity of choice, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

The important thing, they’ll remind you, is that you don’t have to be a full-time firefighter to join. You can be a volunteer firefighter or you can just be a supporter of firefighters. People can get hung up on what kind of firefighter you are, they said, just like some riders might look down their nose at your bike because of its brand.

The crew has seen Biker Bash evolve over the past four years. The event is attracting bigger-name bands, and there are more vendors, but the biggest change, they said, was to this year’s charity ride for HospiceCare.

In the past, the charity ride has been somewhat disjointed, with different motorcycle clubs doing their own thing. This year, the clubs pulled together — and there were a lot more bikes out on the road and a lot fewer sitting on Kanawha Boulevard.

“Instead of the Blue Knights having their run, and the Red Knights having theirs, they focused on the one,” Mitchell said. “There’s a lot more riders that way.”

Sikorovsky, of HospiceCare, estimated that about 200 riders would make their way to the Hubbard House. When the charity ride first started a few years ago, there were 10 bikers.

So, yes, it was a little quieter on Kanawha Boulevard than in years past.

Adkins guessed it was because of the rain.

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Thursday, June 18, 2015

National science camp attracts intellectual capital to West Virginia

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

Sarah Clifford tucked her legs into her chair and crossed her arms as she listened to the lecture.

Near her, Appalachian Power President Charles Patton discussed the complexities of the energy industry.

In front of Patton, Clifford and about 100 of her fellow campers — some of the brightest young minds in the country — sat at a dozen or so round tables that dotted the black-and-white checkerboard ballroom floor. The campers, recent high school graduates who were handpicked to attend the 2015 National Youth Science Camp, listened intently to Patton's speech at the University of Charleston. And they waited for their turn to ask questions.

Patton's speech at Thursday's Sixth Annual Martha Wehrle Opening Lecture marked the beginning of this year's camp, which is organized by the National Youth Science Foundation. The campers later loaded up and headed to Camp Pocahontas, near Bartow, for several weeks of STEM-related learning opportunities and outdoor recreation.

Before Patton's speech, the talk at Clifford's table was about college. The half dozen soon-to-be freshmen from states such as Delaware, Iowa, New Jersey, New Hampshire and Hawaii talked about their plans to attend Bowdoin College and Cornell University and Clemson University. Some campers will be staying in their home states, bound for the University of Delaware or Iowa State. Others, like Clifford, are heading out of state.

Clifford was valedictorian at Charleston's Capital High School, where she enjoyed her Advanced Placement Spanish course and was president of the Key Club and captain of the cross country team. She'll be heading to Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, where she'll enroll as an undecided student. She's lived in West Virginia since she was 2 years old, but she doesn't know if she'll come back.

"The economy's not so great in West Virginia," she said, "because everyone gets what they can from West Virginia and then they're out."

As Patton addressed the audience, a row of fluorescent lights behind him flickered. He talked about the advances he's seen in energy and the emergent technologies of the future. And he said he'd like to roll out some of those technologies.

"But, in deploying those technologies, it takes one very important element," Patton said. "And that's money. And the people who pay that money are our customers. And while I may want to advance certain technologies, ... I always have to keep in mind the ... capacity of my customers to pay for that technology. For me to deploy that technology, I have to raise rates."

And that's especially complicated, Patton said, "in a state where you have the level of poverty that you have in West Virginia."

John Giroir, director of the National Youth Science Camp, is mindful of the bad rap that West Virginia gets. But he's also aware of the attractive power of his camp. Giroir, formerly of Louisiana, relocated to the Mountain State, a move he credits to his experience as a science camper.

"These students may never have had any other reason to come to this state," he said, adding that the West Virginia's concentration of natural beauty and diverse geology and biology make it an attractive destination.

"I guarantee all these kids, at the end of this program, will call West Virginia their second home."

Patton continued his frank discussion of the business side of managing an electric company. At one point, a camper asked him where Appalachian Power — which serves around a million customers in Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia — gets its coal. Much of it, "50 percent," comes from Southern West Virginia, Patton replied.

"Of course," Clifford whispered under her breath.

Like some of the energy that's shipped out of state, Clifford and her brainpower will be leaving — temporarily, at least — the Mountain State. But for the next few weeks, she and her fellow campers will get to take advantage of the state's beauty and, as Giroir noted, the cutting edge research and technology.

"You personally have to find something here that you like," Clifford said.

"It's not a destination," she said. "It can be a pit stop, and then you realize it's someplace you want to stay."

If West Virginia gave you something, she said, you might find yourself wanting to give back.

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Saturday, June 20, 2015

Ghostbusters, Marshmallow Man unite for FestivALL

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The sudden gust of wind knocked Slimer over and sent him sliding toward the parking lot.

Beside the green ghost, the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man tilted forward, threatening to follow suit. The Ghostbusters reacted.

They didn't throw out their black and yellow Ghost Traps, and they'd already ditched their Proton Packs. No, on Saturday the team grabbed onto a few ropes and tried to arrest the Marshmallow Man's fall — before the 30-foot-tall inflatable was impaled by the metal fence at Capitol Market. The overgrown airbag's shadow grew larger — even in the noon sun — as it inched toward the barbs and hovered over the Ghostbusters' Ecto-1 (really, a Dodge Caliber).

“Move the car!” someone said.

A couple hours earlier, members of the Ghostbusters — West Virginia Division (GWVD) had joined the dance troupes, performers and Shriners — who buzzed around in their mini cars — in the 2015 FestivALL Art Parade. The GWVD couldn't bring the Marshmallow Man — too big, too heavy. The group, though, was able to set up its newest toy at Capitol Market. Its pop-culture clout attracted some attention for a good cause, but the winds didn't want to cooperate.

FestivALL, now in its 12 year, is known for concerts, wiener-dog races and chili cookoff (which raises between \$6,000 and \$8,000 annually for HospiceCare West Virginia, according to a spokesman at the organization). The GWVD, founded in September 2013, is fairly new to the event. The Marshmallow Man is even newer.

You could see the inflatable — seemingly the enlarged spawn of the Michelin Man and the Pillsbury Doughboy — from the interstate. At the market, curious folks approached the Marshmallow Man and found 10 or so Ghostbusters who were happy to pose for pictures and let kids try on their Proton Packs. Some of those Proton Packs cost several hundred dollars, and they looked as . . . realistic . . . as some of their movie-inspired jumpsuits.

The GWVD is a fan club dedicated to the 1984 Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd classic, but it's also a philanthropic organization. Kevin Pauley, the club's founder, works for the American Heart Association. Dave Humphreys, the club's first member, works for the Children's Home Society of West Virginia. So far, the GWVD has raised roughly \$7,500 for the two organizations, including \$5,000 worth of new toys that went to Children's Home kids last Christmas. Typically, the GWVD splits its donations down the middle, but it focuses its efforts on children around the holidays, Pauley said.

“People ask us all the time,” Pauley said, gesturing to his tan jumpsuit, ““Do you really hunt ghosts? Do you really believe in ghosts?” ”

Pauley's son, dressed in a mini tan jumpsuit, talked to visitors and played near the Marshmallow Man, at one point walking through the giant's legs.

“The hospital visits — it’s awesome, dude,” Pauley said. “I’m always surprised — everywhere we go, people know who we are.”

One time, Pauley was coming out of Buffalo Wild Wings, when a man — who might’ve had a few — stopped to admire his Ghostbusters getup. Pauley told the man about the GWVD and its charities. The man told him to wait a moment, and went inside. Then he came back out and handed him \$40.

“If I was on the side of the street, just asking you for money, you’d probably just pass on by,” Pauley said, “but when I’m in the costume, people are more interested in why I’m dressed that way and what I’m doing. They might ask about the GWVD and find out what the club’s about. And then, they might be more likely to give.”

“It’s kind of a fair trade,” Humphreys said. “They help our charity, and we give them something to smile about.”

Humphreys and Pauley have made appearances at kids’ birthday parties, netting \$40 or so for their time. That money goes to their charities. They’re hoping the Marshmallow Man will get them more and bigger gigs.

“That’s our cheat code, our unlock,” Pauley said, using a video gamers’ reference. He ducked under the awning at Capitol Market as a few rain drops fell. A club member slid his faux Ghost Trap under the Marshmallow Man — the closest dry spot. Later, the breeze, just strong enough, slowly eased Slimer over. The Marshmallow Man barely swayed.

“It’s a good birthday present to the state,” Humphreys said about the GWVD’s decision to bring the giant inflatable to FestivALL.

People are always leaving West Virginia because there are few opportunities or because there’s nothing to do, Humphreys said. “And you can leave. Or, you can stay here and make it better, and that’s what we’re trying to do.”

When they decided to bring the Marshmallow Man to the market, they posted pictures to their group’s Facebook page to promote it. They quickly got three Halloween gigs, Pauley said, and they’re hopeful that some car dealerships will be interested in hosting them. That’s a tax write-off for them, Pauley said.

And, he added, there’s only one other Ghostbusters fan club in the United States that has a 30-foot Marshmallow Man inflatable.

“It gives us credibility on the national Ghostbusters circuit,” Pauley said.

The brief rain shower moved on, and the breeze became a wind. Then, out of the East, came the gust. Slimer fell over again and slid toward the parking lot. As the Marshmallow Man began to fall forward, Pauley sprung into action.

“I think it might be time,” Pauley said, grabbing a rope to steady the inflatable. “It’s deflate time!”

“Bring him forward!” a club member on the front side said.

“On his back, on his back!” Pauley countered.

The crew was confused — and struggling against the wind that was buffeting the Marshmallow Man. They finally decided to let him fall forward.

“Move the car!” someone said.

The Ecto-1/Dodge Caliber was moved.

“Are we sure he’s not gonna hit those trees and that fence?” Pauley said. “Is he gonna hit the fence?!”

The GWVD’s newest toy — which a member donated and which was an “ordeal” to import from China — glided down to the pavement. It missed the fence.

“Like I said, this is our first time bringing him out,” Pauley said, “and you gotta figure out stuff like this.”

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Tuesday, June 23, 2015

Project aims to capture oral history of Charlestonians

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

She'd talked about baton twirling, which led to talking about dancing, which led to talking about her third-cousin — Blaze Starr — which led to the story about the time she went to New Orleans to watch her cousin strip.

At another point during the interview, she'd talked about vacationing in Hawaii, which led to the 1977 Williamson flood, which led to the story of her running up the hill to escape the rising waters — carrying her daughter in her hands.

“I felt like my life had meant something, surely, somewhere down the line,” Nancy Ball said Tuesday, after her interview with Eric Douglas at Emmanuel Baptist Church on Charleston's West Side.

Ball was the first participant in the FestivALL Oral History Project, which Douglas is facilitating. On Tuesday, she met with the local author and photographer and told him about the building of Capital High School, working as a tour guide at the state Capitol and the 211 circuses she'd seen as a Charleston Civic Center employee. As both Ball and Douglas said, you just don't know where a conversation will lead.

“That's one of the great things about this,” Douglas said, after interviewing Ball.

“The thrill of discovery — I don't know what I'm gonna get.”

Douglas sat at a small table in one of the church's parlors. In front of him was a Dell laptop computer, a silver microphone — which looked like a cross between Sputnik and a shuttlecock — and a stack of gold CDs.

After he interviews participants, he gives them a recording, burned to a CD.

“As older generations pass on,” Douglas said, “we lose institutional memory. This is something they can pass down to their family.”

Douglas will be interviewing about 30 people at various locations around Charleston. When he wraps up on Monday, he'll be tasked with looking for themes within the transcripts. He plans to put together a documentary of some sort — something digital, perhaps, with some multimedia bells and whistles. The documentary will hopefully be done by FestivALL Fall, he said, adding that he will donate his recordings to the state archives.

“Charleston has a lot to offer,” Ball said, “but you have to look for it. And the state, but you have to get active with it.”

Ball — dressed in matching pink shorts and T-shirt and sporting a short, silver hairstyle — joked that she'd been sitting too long. Time to go exercise, she said.

Earlier, she'd told Douglas how dancing had led to baton twirling, which had made it possible for her to go to college. She twirled at the University of Southern Mississippi before a car accident brought her back to West Virginia. She eventually resumed twirling at Concord University, in Athens, where she graduated.

"I've had people ask me," Ball said, "'Do you have a gun?' And I tell them: 'No, but I've got a baton in every room.'"

In 1977, Ball had taken a trip to Hawaii. She returned to Williamson in April. A few days later, the flood hit. She lost everything, she said, including her mementos from Hawaii. She did manage, though, to hold onto her daughter and carry her to safety.

"This [oral history] is something I can leave my daughter and my granddaughter," Ball said, adding that it was remarkable "how one thing brings up another."

After her interview, after she'd traced back the conversation she'd just had to baton twirling, Ball paused. She held up her hands. She remembered where the conversation had really started.

"The doctor told me I'd beaten my fingers to death," she said, as she flexed her fingers.

She'd developed arthritis.

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Tuesday, June 23, 2015

Argentines arrive at WV science camp after visa glitch

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Sofia Camussi was taking a siesta when her phone rang — the screen read “private number.”

The caller told her that she’d been accepted to attend the 2015 National Youth Science Camp in West Virginia. The conversation ended. She started crying.

“Finally,” Camussi, of Rosario, Argentina, remembers thinking. The prestigious STEM-focused camp she’d first heard of in 2012 — when she was too young to attend — had extended an invitation. She’d soon be in the United States.

But then, in early June, came the computer glitch that continues to affect the U.S. Department of State. Visas couldn’t be issued. Camussi, fellow Argentine Santiago Cuevas and 13 other international delegates would not be able to attend the science camp.

On Tuesday morning, Camussi and Cuevas stepped off a Delta Airlines flight that landed at Yeager Airport. Andy Blackwood, the camp’s executive director, was on hand to meet them. He said the pair had arrived just in time — a crucial point — to get the most out of camp. The Argentines look to be the last international delegates to join this year’s camp, but Blackwood said his organization is looking for ways to include those who weren’t able to make it.

As she waited to retrieve her bags Tuesday, Camussi was still in her “winter socks” — temperatures were in the 40s Tuesday morning in Buenos Aires. She joked about setting off a security alarm in an airport. And she said the food on the plane was actually pretty good.

She also talked about a cultural affairs officer back home — “she’s like our mother” — who worked hard to make sure she and Cuevas could travel to West Virginia.

There’s a very tight turnaround for science camp delegates to get their visas, Blackwood said. They often don’t get them until a couple of days before they’re supposed to travel. So, the computer glitch at the State Department was untimely.

And, Blackwood said, there are “very few workarounds that would meet the standards of Homeland Security.”

Since it’s highly unlikely that the remaining international delegates will be able to travel to the United States, Blackwood said his organization will allow them to attend next year’s camp. He’s also in the planning stages of another opportunity that could take place later this year.

He assured Camussi and Cuevas that they arrived in time to get the most out of the cultural exchange component of the camp. And he told her that there’d be a guitar at camp — she was only able to bring her ukulele.

Before they headed to Blackwood's truck to start the drive to camp in Pocahontas County, Camussi shared one more story.

When she received word that she and Cuevas would be able to travel to the States, she immediately called him.

"Yes!" Cuevas remembers thinking after hearing the news. "I was so excited."

Even though the phone call had interrupted his sleep — Cuevas was taking a siesta.

"Siestas are worth it," Casmussi said.

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Thursday, June 25, 2015

Spina bifida camp celebrates 30 years of being ‘home’

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

RIPLEY, W.Va. -- From 50 yards away, Annie Hovis could smell the burgers — a welcome reprieve from camp food, she said. Hovis is the self-proclaimed “camp clown.” She was named prom queen at Wednesday night’s “Under the Sea” themed affair. And over the years, she’s had a few camp crushes.

As she neared the lunchtime cookout at Cedar Lakes Conference Center’s Jackson Hall on Thursday, the 25-year-old Rock Cave native called Mountaineer Camp “home.”

“Home is wherever we’re all together,” camp counselor Emily Robinson said, as she walked next to Hovis. Hovis glanced up at Robinson and tugged on the tires of her wheelchair, propelling it forward.

They arrived at the Jackson Hall picnic shelter, which was packed with campers and counselors in neon yellow T-shirts. Cookout day is also T-shirt day, and this year’s Mountaineer Camp shirt sported a special note: “30 Years Strong.”

For the past three decades, Mountaineer Camp — a non-profit event designed for people with spina bifida — has given campers the chance to get outside, have some time away from their families, and make decisions for themselves. The goal, as camp facilitator Nancy Dunst says, is to give campers choices and encourage them to be independent. But it’s also a vacation of sorts — a break, really — from the outside world, where folks sometimes look at people like Hovis and see a wheelchair first and then, maybe, a person.

Earlier in the day, Hovis sat at a table in Jackson Hall and made wreaths with multicolored clothespins. Back home, she makes yarn angels that she sells for \$5. Sometimes, she said, people give her more money when they see her wheelchair. She wonders why. She also makes necklaces.

As she snapped the clothespins to the wreath’s wire frame, she still wore the crown of flowers she’d won at Wednesday’s prom. Beneath the crown, an American-flag inspired bandana peeked through. Under the bandana were Hovis’ faint freckles, mischievous brown eyes and quick grin.

The boys were trailing the girls, she said, going into this year’s Mountaineer Games, which would be held later Thursday afternoon. The girls had claimed the scavenger hunt and the silly string fight — even though some of them ran out of ammo. And they outnumbered the boys, Hovis said, which boded well for them. Wheelchair pushups and basketball, among other events, would determine the outcome later.

Hovis and her fellow campers left Jackson Hall and headed for the cabins to rendezvous with the other campers, who had chosen to fish or swim or tie-dye stuff. Some of the campers rolled their wheelchairs over Cedar Lakes’ campus. The facility is ideal for Mountaineer Camp, Dunst said, because it’s one of those rare flat spots in West Virginia. Other campers used crutches to get around — like one woman, a veteran 5K racer.

Spina bifida “is the most commonly permanently disabling birth defect in the United States,” according to the Spina Bifida Association. The term literally means “split spine” — the spinal column does not close all the way in the womb — and every day “about eight babies born in the United States” have it (or a similar

birth defect). No one knows what causes it, and there are several different types of spina bifida. Healthy people have it to, sometimes, without even knowing it.

Hovis sat on the porch outside of her cabin, waiting for hour-long break to end. The prelunch break was designed to give campers a time to rest, take their medications and take care of personal needs.

At camp, Hovis said, you have to try to do things for yourself.

“You try once,” she said. “You try twice. You try three and four times. And then, maybe, you ask for help.”

Greg Savilla, the camp’s activities leader, has been attending Mountaineer Camp for 18 years. He’s the youngest of nine children in an athletic family, he said, and he played sports growing up. He always felt he wasn’t trying hard enough.

Savilla knew he had Spina Bifida, but he could still walk and do things that “normal” kids could do — just not as well. His family encouraged him to attend the camp as a child. He did, and he was one of the only campers who could walk. In his mind, he didn’t feel like he belonged.

He felt differently when he came back several years later — as a counselor. He finally got it, he said. In his mind, he doesn’t have spina bifida; in his body, the condition’s effects are minimal; but in his heart, he feels its full force. Some of the younger campers call him “Dad.”

“The world’s not designed for them,” he said, “but they’re designed to push through.”

As Hovis and her fellow campers prepared to journey to the cookout, they talked about sunburns and heat rashes.

“Some of them,” Robinson said, “this is one week out of the year that they’re outside, doing stuff.”

She grasped the handles of Hovis’ wheelchair and eased her down the sidewalk, onto the road. The two headed toward the picnic shelter and the cookout. The 20 or so campers met up with Mountaineer Camp alums and friends and family, and they honored Bill Crosier of the West Virginia Telephone Pioneers for his volunteer work. Henceforth, the Thursday cookouts will be known as “Bill Crosier Day.”

After the cookout and the Mountaineer games, the campers will go back to their cabins and, for this year at least, spend their last night. That’s always the hardest night, Hovis said. She planned to sleep extra close to a friend tonight — one last hangout before they’d have to rely on Facebook for the rest of the year.

Earlier in the day, as she stood with her fellow counselors near the cabins, Robinson talked about the meaning of Mountaineer Camp.

“It’s a place they can come and not be judged,” she said.

“It’s the one place I can wear my AFOs,” she said, pointing at her leg braces, “and not be judged.”

Sunday, June 28, 2015

Ahead of art fair, Cedar Lakes in transition

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

RIPLEY — You can still smell the varnish in the renovated main office building at Cedar Lakes Conference Center.

The building is one of the first that greets visitors to Cedar Lakes — it's a check-in and check-out point. Soon, though, it will also serve as a café and gift shop. Newly designed T-shirts sit in honeycomb-style shelves on one wall. The shelves, too, are new.

The “Cedar Lakes Covered Bridge Café & Gift Shop” sign already hangs in the main office, and it speaks to the facility's ongoing transition.

In recent years, Cedar Lakes has weathered uncertainty about its funding, but ahead of the July Fourth holiday weekend's Mountain State Art and Craft Fair, the conference center's new general manager is optimistic about the facility's future.

Adam Canter has been general manager of Cedar Lakes since September. As he approaches a year on the job, he's seen the facility undergo several improvements, such as an overhaul of its phone lines and increased broadband Internet speed. Beds have been upgraded, and Canter recently submitted a grant that, if approved, would fund a key-card entry system.

“The future is to become a destination,” Canter said Thursday as he sat in his office. His office is down a hallway behind the main desk of the soon-to-be Covered Bridge Café and Gift Shop — formerly a stale main office space.

“We have spent next to nothing on the main office,” Canter said, highlighting the repurposed furniture and accents that have spruced up the space.

Mid-century modern lights — once dusty, discarded cafeteria lamps sitting in storage — hang from the ceiling. Guests can sit by the windows in freshly painted and re-upholstered wooden chairs, and they can enjoy the natural-wood accents that line the walls and adorn the front desk. The wood, Canter said, came from a tree that fell on the property.

“We're trying to modernize the facilities while keeping the culture and atmosphere,” he said.

Cedar Lakes can trace its roots back to Dec. 5, 1949, when the “State Board of Education . . . voted to accept the Jackson County proposal” for a state camp, according to the History of Cedar Lakes, a document on the facility's website. Construction began in earnest in the early 1950s, and “Cedar Lakes Youth Camp and Conference Center” was dedicated in 1955.

More recently, though, Cedar Lakes' future has been uncertain.

In September 2013, the state Board of Education considered “mothballing” Cedar Lakes or transferring the facility to a different government agency.

In April 2015, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin vetoed SB584, legislation that was designed to facilitate the transition of Cedar Lakes from a state agency to a nonprofit foundation. (Tomblin wrote that the reason for the veto was an “unexpected increase in separation costs.” Sen. Mike Hall — the bill’s sponsor — said the governor objected to a provision that would have allowed Cedar Lakes employees to cash in unused vacation and sick days.)

Earlier this month, the Joint Committee on Finance was still studying the funding of the proposed transfer of Cedar Lakes to a nonprofit organization.

“I think the need for the state to have Cedar Lakes as an entity is greater than the need to shut the gates,” Canter said Thursday. He added that “previous assertions” about Cedar Lakes’ future have hurt business.

“I want customers to know we are open, and making improvements daily,” Canter said.

According to Canter, the facility averages 95 guests per night and hosts about 35,000 overnight guests a year. Visitors come from every county in West Virginia, 44 states and three countries, he said.

In addition to the hotel- and motel-style rooms and cabins, the facility has more than 30 meeting spaces and annually hosts about 350 “contracted groups.” Most of those groups, Canter said, are returning customers who have been coming to Cedar Lakes for decades.

The facility is known for the Mountain State Art and Craft Fair, which drew about 12,000 visitors over three days in 2014, according to Canter. This year’s fair will take place Thursday through Saturday, from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day.

Canter said to be on the lookout for new events, such as wine tasting and zip-lining. Also, Karen Facemyer, president of the fair’s board of directors, said there would be a Disney-inspired princess party and parade, an appearance and demonstration by famous fly-fisherman Curtis Fleming and a performance by the Christian Lopez Band — whose namesake and frontman was on “American Idol.”

The fair is boosted by nearby Ripley’s “Largest Small Town Independence Day Celebration,” Canter said, and he expects this year’s fair to keep growing. But, he said, he wants Cedar Lakes to be known for more than the fair.

Cedar Lakes is a place for vacationers and professionals in need of a retreat, Canter said. You can play putt-putt or Frisbee golf, go ride a bike, or just go there and walk your dog, Canter said.

Above all, he said, he wants people to know Cedar Lakes is open for business. And he’s been looking for additional revenue streams — such as the Covered Bridge Café and Gift Shop — to improve the facility.

“If the state chooses to divest itself from Cedar Lakes, then Cedar Lakes will have to start operating more like a business,” Canter said. “My plan is to try to make business decisions to help self-sustain Cedar Lakes, regardless of ownership.

“We’re still working on the long-term plan for Cedar Lakes — I’m optimistic as to what the future holds.”

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Sunday, June 28, 2015

Top-O-Rock design contest envisions building as arts center

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

ResTORe beat out six other design teams to win the Top-O-Rock Spirit of Reinvention design competition.

The winners were announced Saturday night after a live pitch-and-presentation session, during which members of the public learned about and voted on finalists' plans for reviving the famous Top-O-Rock house. Those votes factored into the overall decision, which also included scores from a panel of judges, according to West Virginia GreenWorks' Sarah Halstead, who helped facilitate the competition.

ResTORe — composed of Nikkie Bowman, Michael Corlis, Michael Mills, Juliana Lloreda, Mariah Roth, David Gilmore, Patty Folan and Ryan Seacrist — took home the top cash prize of \$2,500.

The team envisions the building as an arts and cultural center and event space, with rental income offsetting operating costs. Its plan includes a teaching kitchen and a new amphitheater to be built on the property, along with walking trails. It beat out other projects that envisioned the building as a brewpub ("Brew From the Top"), a veterans museum with on-site housing for homeless veterans and a Montessori school. For now, though, those are just ideas. And that was the purpose of the design competition, according to Halstead.

The design competition and the tour of Top-O-Rock that preceded it were FestivALL events designed to pique people's curiosity about the mid-century modern masterpiece built by architect Henry Elden in 1968. Top-O-Rock, sometimes called "The Glass House," is now in disrepair, but Halstead hopes the design competition will inspire a vision to reclaim and repurpose it. For now, though, ResTORe's winning design and others are just plans — in need of funding.

The security fence and the "No Trespassing" signs are the first things you notice when you visit Top-O-Rock. A closer look reveals pieces of plywood that fill spaces where large glass windows used to be. Look even closer — some of the windows have neither glass nor wood in their panes. Around the side and back of the house, fist-sized shards of glass hide in the undergrowth.

Toward the end of the Top-O-Rock tour, Ken Fitzwater cautioned a young man who walked up to the home's backside and ducked under an overhang to escape the rain.

"I'd be careful getting over there," Fitzwater said, "with all that broken glass."

"A lawyer's dream," another man said. He chuckled.

Property owners Mitchell and Kamilla Rashid's attorneys were not comfortable with Saturday's FestivALL tour group entering the home, Halstead said to the group earlier. But Top-O-Rock is structurally sound, she added. Fitzwater agreed.

Fitzwater, who lives in Pinch, worked in Top-O-Rock during the 1970s as a draftsman for Henry Elden. He remembers Elden watering the indoor plants with a garden hose — "Just like you would outside." There were always cats and dogs in the house, Fitzwater said. One day, "Mr. B" — a black cocker spaniel — was scratching himself on the second floor, close to the ledge. Too close. He fell. He was OK.

The home was surrounded by — no, part of — nature. It was inspiring to work in, Fitzwater said, as he looked at the graffitied edifice of the 10,000-square-foot building he calls “a statement.”

“It’s sad,” he said. “There’s no respect for it.”

Fitzwater, like Halstead, said that many of the needed updates to Top-O-Rock were general maintenance necessities. All the glass would need to be replaced, regardless of its condition. Aside from being old, it’s not insulated. The heating system also needs repair. The recent vandalism, Halstead said, hasn’t greatly affected the renovation costs.

“It’s standard knowledge that even before the vandalism occurred,” she said, “the rehabilitation expenses were estimated to run between \$1 to 2 million. The vandalism was all pretty much superficial.”

Elden was known for his loud jackets, Fitzwater said, and for being eccentric. But those jackets — and Top-O-Rock — got Elden noticed. And that’s how he got jobs, Fitzwater said, adding that Elden was a kind man, “like a father.”

For anyone who loves buildings, construction and architecture, Top-O-Rock is meaningful, Fitzwater said. He understands the home’s importance, but he knows other people might not.

“There has to be reason in life to keep things,” he said.

As he walked away from the house, he stopped at the mouth of the driveway and talked with Halstead about Top-O-Rock’s future.

“The money drives it,” Fitzwater said.

“The vision drives it,” Halstead replied. “If you have the vision, the money will come.”

The property owners don’t have to use the winning project, or any of the others. And there will surely be funding issues to work out.

“The teams didn’t have to bring their investors,” Halstead said. “This design competition is meant to bring big ideas together with people who can make them happen. The public is as important as any single investor. ... That’s one of the challenges, I think — convincing people in our community that we collectively have the power to do a lot more to make our communities places that support our health and creativity.

“We don’t think fundraising will be an issue with the right plan, and we don’t think finding a viable business plan will be an issue.”

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Saturday, June 27, 2015

Two shot near Campbells Creek

Staff reports

West Virginia State Police respond to a house off of Campbells Creek, where two men were shot Saturday following a dispute.

A scuffle inside a house in the Campbells Creek area led to two men being shot and rushed to the hospital with gunshot wounds on Saturday afternoon, emergency officials said.

Trooper Nick Manolakos, with the West Virginia State Police responded to reports of a shooting on the 3500 block of Spring Fork Drive at around 3:30 p.m.

When he arrived on the scene, Manolakos found a man lying on the ground with at least one gunshot wound to his chest.

At that point, his suspected shooter was still inside the house, Manolakos said. He then came outside, of his own accord, and surrendered himself without incident. That man also had at least one gunshot wound, to his forearm.

Both men were transported to Charleston Area Medical Center General, although there was no word on their condition.

Manolakos said that, from what he could tell, there was a scuffle inside the house and then shots were fired. Several neighbors called 911, an emergency dispatcher said.

Manolakos said that its his understanding that the Kanawha County Sheriff's Department has responded to the house in question multiple times in the past.

The State Police is investigating and no charges have been filed at this time.

Tuesday, June 30, 2015

Longtime Greenbrier resident, golf fan recalls Sam Snead

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS — Brenda Quick used to serve Sam Snead milkshakes.

“I want a chocolate milkshake with double chocolate, extra thin, filled to the brim,” Quick remembers Snead saying the first time she waited on him at the White Sulphur Springs Tastee Freez. “I’ll never forget that.”

Quick, then a high schooler working a summer job in the 1960s, would watch for “Slammin’ Sammy” to pull up in a black limo, park on the side of the road and walk up to her window to order. She’d have the shake waiting on him.

The famous golfer would give her a little smile, tip his signature short-brimmed straw cap and tip Quick with a \$10 or \$20 dollar bill. The shake was \$1.

“I knew him from the black-and-white TV days,” Quick said Tuesday, as she sat in the West Virginia Department of Tourism’s — her employer — air-conditioned box. The elevated building connected to a section of stadium seats that overlooked the green on Hole No. 17. Near the hole, spectators walked around the cart path, and PGA Tour pros hit their approach shots. Quick could name most of them.

An avid golf fan and Lewisburg resident, Quick has worked The Greenbrier Classic every year except one. The self-described “country girl” has roots in the area and at The Greenbrier. She’s been an ambassador for West Virginia to tourists who enter the state, and, during tournament week, she’s an ambassador for the game of golf. But despite her love of the game and association with Snead, Quick’s always been more of a spectator than a ball striker.

Groups of people casually walked the grounds of the Old White Course on Thursday as the pros played practice rounds and, later, chaperoned kids around the links. It was “Youth Day” at The Greenbrier, and around 1:30 p.m., PGA Tour players mentored young golfers as part of the First Tee program.

You can tell who the kids’ favorite players are, Quick said, by the outfits they wear. She’d seen a kid in a bright orange shirt and flat-brimmed hat in the morning, she said, and knew right away he was a Rickie Fowler fan.

“And who doesn’t love Rickie Fowler?” she said. “And I just love Jordan Spieth.”

Quick and her husband watched Spieth win this year’s U.S. Open, and they watched Dustin Johnson lose it. Even though she’s a Spieth fan, she was pulling for Johnson. Really, she pulls for everybody, she said. That’s the thing about golf: it’s a game of respect and camaraderie.

Most days you can find Quick working at the West Virginia I-64 West Welcome Center, where she’s worked for 20 years. She estimates she’s met about 8 million people over the years. It’s a job where you make new friends, she said, like you do when you work The Greenbrier Classic.

The tournament keeps getting better and better, Quick said. She compared it to West Virginia: Outsiders don't know what they're missing until they come to the state, kind of like PGA Tour pros enjoy The Greenbrier Classic once they've discovered it.

Quick's father caddied at The Greenbrier back in the 1960s for almost a decade. He caddied for Snead, who served as The Greenbrier's pro. And he'd sometimes help Snead on his Hot Springs, Virginia, farm. The two maintained a relationship over the years, Quick said, and sometimes Snead was a surprise guest at her birthday parties.

"I don't know why I never took a lesson from him," Quick said of Snead.

Quick managed the pro shop at the Lewisburg Elks Country Club before starting her gig with the Department of Tourism. But the avid golf fan who anticipates the announcement of each year's Greenbrier Classic player field and who, according to coworker Robin Clower, celebrates her off-weekends — because she can watch golf — has only played two rounds in her entire life.

She always worked two or three jobs, and she put her energy into raising her son. Playing golf couldn't be a priority.

One of the times Quick played — at Valley View Country Club, because an acquaintance begged her to — she did "OK." She beat her acquaintance — who'd taken golf lessons for two years — by seven strokes. She wasn't invited back.

"I like the sidelines," Quick said.

You can get involved with the players, she said, get absorbed in the game. And you can root for everybody.

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Thursday, July 2, 2015

Kanawha Players drop curtain on theater with sale to Coptic church

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The St. Mary and Archangel Gabriel Coptic Orthodox Church of West Virginia has solidified itself as the first church of its kind in the Mountain State with its purchase of the Kanawha Players' theater. The theater, located on Charleston's East End at 309 Beauregard St., is an old church.

The sale was finalized Wednesday afternoon, Kanawha Players President Randi Vaughan said, who said the buyer paid \$118,154.85 for the building.

According to Dr. Albeir Mousa, a local surgeon who was instrumental in the purchase of the property, St. Mary and Archangel Gabriel will be the first Coptic Orthodox church in West Virginia. It is the only state congregation listed on the Coptic Orthodox Church Network's online directory. According to the Coptic Network, "coptic," in modern times, refers to Egyptian Christians. A February Wall Street Journal article states that the Copts are the largest single Christian denomination in the Middle East.

The Players have been trying to get out of the building for a while now, especially after a March flood made the space virtually unusable. For St. Mary and Archangel Gabriel, the building means a more permanent home. The Players will begin transitioning to South Charleston's LaBelle Theatre, where they will be the in-house theater troupe. Both parties find themselves in times of transition — and with brighter outlooks for the future.

The Players purchased the property in 2005 for \$390,000. The building, though, has not provided the stable venue that was hoped for. The flood left the building's breaker box underwater, Vaughan said. The Players even had to cancel a performance because of the condition of the venue and because too much money was tied up in the building — there wasn't enough money to promote the show.

"I think it's a really good move for KP," Players Treasurer Tracy Hunt said. "It frees up more funds for us to improve the quality of our shows and put more resources toward community theater — because that's our real mission."

Mousa said he and other members of the St. Mary and Archangel congregation hope to have their first Mass their new home by mid-August. For the past two years, 25 or so families from Charleston, Teays Valley, Beckley and Huntington have been worshiping on Saturdays in the Basilica of the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart's Cordis Center, Mousa said. Monsignor Edward Sadie has allowed Mousa's congregation to use some of the center's space, and Mousa said Sadie has even helped him look for property over the past five years. When Mousa moved to West Virginia six years ago, the nearest Coptic churches were in Columbus, Dayton and Pittsburgh, he said.

Mousa's father was a priest in the Coptic Orthodox Church, he said, and his grandfather was involved with the church in Egypt. The Players' building was attractive because it provides a centralized location for what Mousa hopes will be a growing congregation. Moreover, the building's "Spanish mission" style is appealing, Mousa said. Most important, atop the building is the cross.

"Part of my life's mission is that I needed to buy this church," Mousa said. The building is not only a place of worship, he said, but a tangible symbol of Coptic Orthodox Church in the area.

“For us,” Mousa said, “it’s like a magnet.”

The congregation, composed mostly of Egyptians, has a “major job” ahead, Sadie said. “It’s a big leap of faith.”

Sadie remembers when his own church was founded — there were only 50 or so Catholics in a 5 1/2-county area, he said. But other congregations came together to aid Sacred Heart’s startup.

The building on Beauregard Street needs a lot of work. Mousa said they are removing asbestos from the church and they’re having to replace all the air conditioning and heating hardware.

“Everything is destroyed inside the building,” Mousa said.

After the March flood, the Players worked nights and weekends to make the move out of the building. By Monday, they’d done as much as they could, Vaughan said. She noted that they’d had to leave some things behind, such as a piano, a couple of organs and a safe. They were racing to get out of the building in hopes of selling it, rather than foreclosing.

The sale kept the Players out of foreclosure, a process they’d started almost a month and a half ago, Vaughan said. It also allowed the theater group to pay off some outstanding utilities on which it owed.

Selling the building was a major step toward getting out of debt, Vaughan said. However, she added, the Players are still working to pay off some things — like the gas bill associated with the theater they just sold.

The Players’ last couple of performances have been at South Charleston’s LaBelle Theatre, and Vaughan said the group will put on “Dearly Departed” there in August. That will conclude the Players’ 92nd season, she said. They hope to put on four shows next season — all at the LaBelle — beginning in October.

“They will be our in-house players,” said Bob Anderson, executive director of the South Charleston Convention and Visitors Bureau, which manages the LaBelle. He added that the Players would rent the theater to do their plays — just like other acts — but that they would be the sole theater troupe associated with the LaBelle.

The LaBelle just had \$100,000 of work put into it, Anderson said, and he’s trying to set aside some space for storage and a workshop for the Players. Vaughan said her group will have to adjust to the new venue and that the move will affect set production. You can’t put a hole in the floor or knock down a wall in the LaBelle, she said, like you could in the old church on Beauregard.

The sale of the building and the move to the LaBelle is “a new start,” Vaughan said. “A fresh start. A chance for us to be creative.”

The Players have always functioned better as a troupe, Vaughan said, rather than a group tied to a physical theater. They are still figuring out what theater-goers in South Charleston like, but Vaughan thinks it will give her troupe a chance to get back to its roots. “Reefer Madness” might not go over well in the LaBelle, Vaughan said — South Charlestonians might appreciate the classics more. And that might allow the Players to make a bit more money, as those types of performances are more popular.

“I’m just happy the church is not going to be bulldozed down,” she said. “It’s gonna go back to what it’s meant to be.”

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Friday, July 3, 2015

Hundreds mourn fallen WV firefighter

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The bagpiper's first note strained to escape the instrument — the high-pitched squeak drowned out the muted sobs.

On the concourse in front of Riverside High School, mourners stood in two lines across from each other, forming a path for the casket. Many wore firefighter dress uniforms. Everyone saluted.

The pallbearers placed the casket in the back of a pickup truck from the volunteer fire department in Cedar Grove, from where Brandon Mooney hailed. The 2011 Riverside graduate's casket was lifted from the truck bed up to the outstretched, white-gloved hands of six firefighters atop Engine 79 of the Glasgow Fire Department. That's the department where Mooney, 22, served until his death early Wednesday.

As the casket was positioned on the fire engine, one of Mooney's fellow firefighters — a stocky man with an earring that gleamed below his white dress cap — fought back tears.

The sky tried to rain, but it, too, held back. Even so, the flag-draped coffin was covered with plastic. The mourners released red, white and blue balloons. Some of them floated skyward; others were trapped under the concourse awning and settled on the ground.

Hundreds of people came to pay their respects to Mooney on Friday. Several fire departments helped with the visitation and funeral. Mooney, who died when the vehicle he was driving rolled over on Kellys Creek, leaves behind friends and family, including a young daughter. Friends and family remembered him fondly Saturday, and there was a steady stream of traffic and tears in the Riverside High parking lot.

Ladder trucks from the Pinch and Belle volunteer fire departments formed an arch at the mouth of Warrior Way, near the school. An American flag hung from the ladders and looked down on Riverside High School from the top of the hill. The football field, where Mooney played for the Warriors when he was in high school, was unmowed, and its yard lines were fading. The parking lot in front of the school's entrance held at least a dozen fire trucks hailing from Chesapeake, East Bank, Jefferson and Montgomery, Pinch, Belle, Cedar Grove and Glasgow.

Johnee Carter, one of Mooney's classmates, escorted her two little girls to the family's car. She knew the girls who were riding with Mooney when his vehicle flipped, she said. The girls were ejected from the vehicle and survived.

She remembers Mooney as “the life of the party” and having a “contagious smile.”

“It's just surreal,” Carter said. “I can't believe this really happened. . . . I can't imagine what she's [Danielle Grubb, Mooney's fiancée] gonna say to her daughter [Avery Mooney]. How do you tell her what happened to her dad?”

Mark Mooney, 28, of Boone County, said he didn't really know his cousin that well — they might have played together a couple of times when they were kids.

“It's crazy to see how much people care,” he said, surveying the school parking lot after he'd loaded his son into his car. “Even if you're not close, it's hard on the family. . . . They've got a little kid.”

On the concourse, young mothers and their babies stood in loose clumps, some laughing, some crying. Couples walked through the parking lot, some of them clutching handfuls of tissues. And everywhere you looked, there were firefighters.

The firefighters, most wearing dress uniforms, seemed to outnumber the others who began streaming in around 11 a.m., when the visitation began. For almost three hours, people walked through Riverside's purple-and-gold-accented cafeteria and into the auditorium. They passed easels with Mooney's pictures as they entered the theater, and right inside the door was a guest registry. By 2:30 p.m. there were roughly 300 entries in the book.

Earlier in the afternoon, the bagpiper sat alone at a cafeteria table in his kilt and dark suit jacket. One table over, a group of young mothers chatted and checked their cellphones and held their babies. The bagpiper sat motionless, staring through the windows at the concourse. He slowly stood up, picked up his instrument and left the cafeteria. The funeral procession started a half hour later.

The bagpiper found his mournful notes. The casket was secured. The stocky, earring-wearing firefighter stepped off Glasgow Fire Department Engine 79. A young woman hugged him. He cried.

Engine 79, adorned with black ribbons and, on its grill, a black wreath, pulled away from the school. On the back of the truck were a pair of boots and a firefighter's coat. "GLASGOW" was printed across the top of the coat; the bottom read "B MOONEY."

The auditorium was empty, save for some flower bouquets, pictures of Mooney and a nearly empty box of tissues. A custodian, a volunteer firefighter himself, said that Glasgow has had too many funerals lately — they also lost a firefighter a couple of weeks ago. Riverside High is a good place for firefighters' funerals, he said, because it can hold so many people.

When the motorcade was gone and no one was around, the custodian gathered all the red, white and blue balloons that hadn't found their way skyward. He popped them. And all of them were gone.

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Saturday, July 4, 2015

Copa del Calvario honors fallen footballer, connects communities

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

HURRICANE — Genoveva Magana’s son called her for the last time on March 19, before he was shot and killed. He’d called about picking up his dog.

Rodolfo “Rudy” Magana loved dogs, Genoveva said Saturday, speaking in Spanish with the help of an interpreter. And he loved Lexie, his pit bull. So did Genoveva — she’d been keeping Lexie and had become fond of her. When Rudy called, she’d joked with her son that she was going to keep the dog. Now she has to.

Lexie is a reminder of Rudy, she said as she sat in a white Cadillac Escalade parked next to Calvary Baptist Church’s soccer field. She paused and glanced at the players — mostly Latino — running up and down the pitch. She wiped her eye. Lexie, she said, is the first thing she sees every morning.

Earlier on Saturday, soccer players honored her son with a moment of silence. They were competing in a traditional Fourth of July tournament, which Calvary Baptist has hosted the past four years. The tournament — Copa del Calvario, or “The Calvary Cup” — features four teams sponsored by Putnam County Mexican restaurants, some of which Rudy once managed. Aaron Karr — Calvary Baptist’s Latino and youth pastor — facilitates the Copa. The tournament is a powerful outreach tool to Putnam County’s Latino population, Karr said. Soccer is “the international language,” he said, even if some Americans don’t speak it.

On Saturday, Karr power-walked up and down the far sideline with a bowlegged strut, unhindered by his knee brace. The pastor buzzed about, helping someone with a tent one minute, checking in at the scorer’s table the next and, in between, bellowing encouragement in Spanish to the players on the pitch.

“I don’t know anything about soccer,” Karr, who learned to speak Spanish in his 30s, said. The flecks of white in his goatee and hair complemented his soccer jersey. “PERU” — where he served for a decade as a missionary — was written in red across the front of the garment. The back of the jersey, where a player’s name usually goes, read “EL PASTOR.”

Karr has run the tournament since 2012, but workers from the Mexican restaurants had been playing pickup games on the Fourth for years before. Aside from Christmas, Independence Day is the only other holiday the restaurant workers — who hail from about 10 countries — get, Karr said. This year’s tournament was special, though. The backs of the Rio Grande team’s black jerseys had different numbers, but all bore the same name: “RUDY.”

According to the Huntington-Herald Dispatch, Rudy was gunned down just before 10:30 p.m. on Thursday, March 19, right outside of his home. He was 28 years old. He left behind a fiancée who was pregnant.

Rudy’s mother remembers Karr visiting her family after the killing. She felt like she already knew the pastor — Rudy had talked about him so much.

“I felt like I had been accepted into the Latino community,” Karr said Saturday as he reflected back on his five years in Hurricane. “Especially when they asked me to do Rudy’s funeral.”

Karr performed the service in English and Spanish. Then he drove to North Carolina, where Rudy lived before moving to West Virginia, and performed another. On Saturday, Karr choked up as he called for a moment of silence to remember his friend.

Jeff Hurst, the head pastor at Calvary Baptist, said Karr fulfills a vital role in the church. Karr hosts Sunday morning and Monday evening services for Spanish-speaking worshipers. And, Hurst said, Karr takes his constituents to the doctor and the dentist and the bank.

“I meet them where they are, when they need me,” Karr said.

Karr — who jokes he has attention deficit disorder, and who’s prone to slip between English and Spanish — said the current political climate can make it tough to be a Latino in the United States.

“The truth of the matter is,” he said, “with all this immigration stuff going on, the Latino population is not the most popular.”

Hurst said that his congregation doesn’t try to mix religion and politics, and that he preaches respect for the laws of the land. But, he said, things often get lost in translation. Imagine if you were in Mexico, he said, and you didn’t know how to talk to anyone, much less get your documentation in order. It’s much easier to be cold to people, Hurst said, when you don’t have a name or a face to go with them. You can’t avoid the political issues, but, like it says in Leviticus, we can treat “the stranger” — the foreigner, the immigrant — with kindness. It’s taking up the cause for those who don’t have a voice, he said.

Mario Magana did not want to speak about his son Saturday. Friends say he is a shy man. He sat with family on the tailgate of a white truck, his graying mustache puffing out from under a big, white cowboy hat, and watched the players run up and down the pitch. For his wife Genoveva it was the first time she’d ever been able to attend the Copa. Her mother’s birthday is July 4, and Genoveva had always stayed with her.

She and Mario would later receive medallions that Karr had specially ordered for them. On the fronts were a pair of cleats and a soccer ball. On the backs were the words: “COPA DEL CALVARIO EN MEMORIA DE RUDY MAGANA.” For Rudy’s fiancée and newborn baby, Karr had ordered a snow globe with a soccer player inside, dribbling a ball.

Rudy’s killing hasn’t been solved, Karr said. In the southwest corner of Calvary Baptist’s soccer field rests a large sign. It bears a cross. It reads: “Bienvenidos RM #11.”

The Copa is important, Genoveva Magana said, because in this country, we need to appreciate the Hispanics and Latinos who, for whatever reason, come here. She looked at the field. Here, she said, they are appreciated.

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Sunday, July 5, 2015

Ripley historic marker remembers hanging, speaks to much more

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The killings came first, then the escape and, finally, the hanging — a span of 44 days that shook Jackson County.

John F. Morgan's December 1897 execution made the national papers. By the time the rope snapped his neck and his body dangled from the gallows, thousands had gathered to watch the proceedings. It was the last legal public hanging in West Virginia.

Today, a historical marker tells of the occasion. The double-sided marker stands on the lawn of the Jackson County Courthouse, near the sidewalk along Court Street, in Ripley. It was dedicated Dec. 16, 2014, to commemorate the high-profile hanging that helped to end such gruesome spectacles. But, as you approach the marker from Court Street, you first read about the triple murder. And that's fitting, said Matt McGrew, a Ripley native who directs the historic-marker program for the West Virginia Division of Culture and History, even if it's technically a mistake.

The killings

Grass Lick Creek — today, the Fairplain community — was “about ten miles south of Ripley,” and was “a thrifty and populous neighborhood,” Okey J. Morrison wrote in his pamphlet, “The Slaughter of the Pfoost-Greene Family of Jackson County, W. VA.”

“The community was an “ideal spot, an Acadia in its rural simplicity and innocent happiness,” he wrote. “But the events of recent days have made Grass Lick a reproach in Jackson County, and the talk of the country.”

In the early morning hours of November 3, 1897, Morgan visited the Grass Lick Creek house of Chloe Greene, an elderly widow, for whom Morgan had performed odd jobs and with whom he'd sometimes resided.

Morrison, a merchant and entrepreneur who'd interviewed Morgan in jail, wrote that Morgan had spent the previous night at the Greene residence, and followed James Greene — Chloe's son — outside the next morning to feed the hogs. There, by the hog pen, Morgan struck James “with an old mattock, killed him, and then crushed his head with a stone.”

Morgan went back in the house, Morrison wrote, and the family questioned him as to James' whereabouts. Morgan was acting strange, making excuses about James' absence, and although the family thought something was off, they went about their morning routine. The widow went to a bedroom to make a bed; her daughters, Matilda and Alice, went to the kitchen to make breakfast.

Morgan ended up in the kitchen with the daughters, and he “struck Matilda on the head with a hatchet, twice, after which he turned and struck Alice on the top of the head with the same instrument, thus inflicting a frightful wound, ... a blade of the weapon having penetrated the brain.”

But Alice managed to get up and run to the porch. She saw Morgan heading to the sitting room, where Matilda had fled. It was the last time Alice would see her sister alive.

Morgan went to the bedroom where the widow was, battered down the door and attacked her with the hatchet. He followed her “in her efforts to escape through the sitting room to the porch”

Morgan left the widow “with her feet lying on the edge of the porch, and her body on the ground, with four frightful wounds on the head, and there she struggled, dying in her own blood.”

Alice managed to escape and alerted a neighbor, and a small posse overtook Morgan and captured him.

“He is caught with the money in his pocket and blood on his hands,” The Charleston Daily Gazette reported on Nov 5, 1897. The sum of \$56 dollars, from the sale of a horse — the presumed motive of the crime.

Merrilee Matheny, who’s writing a book on the murders and the hanging, said Morgan was a “troubled” man with a documented criminal history, one she thinks alludes to mental illness. But, Matheny said, that didn’t mean folks would have automatically suspected he was the killer.

“If Alice had not lived,” Matheny said, “no one would have pointed the finger at John Morgan.”

The escape

“No crime ever committed within the borders of West Virginia ever occasioned such universal horror,” the Daily Gazette reported on Nov. 8, 1897.

“Judge Blizzard passed sentence on Morgan yesterday morning and sentenced him to be hanged,” the newspaper said. “The great crowds heaved a sigh of relief The excitement is over.”

Morgan escaped from jail during the early morning hours of Dec. 3, 1897. A manhunt ensued.

Mike McGrew, a Ripley native and local historian, remembers his grandmother’s stories about Morgan’s escape and the stir it created. She was frightened, McGrew said. She “had a lot of vivid memories” from the time — kids were afraid that Morgan would bring his mattock and hatchet and “chop ’em up in the middle of the night.”

Hours before he’d escaped, Morgan had given a confession — one of several he gave before the hanging — to Morrison, who’d paid the convicted murderer \$25 for his story. (Morrison would later write up the confession and his coverage of the trial and hop a riverboat to Cincinnati, where he’d have it printed, according to Mike McGrew. And Morrison would be on a tight deadline — he had to get back before the hanging.)

Later in the evening of Dec. 2, Morgan had feigned interest in his jailers’ game of checkers while he plotted his escape, Morrison wrote. Around suppertime, Morgan told the guards he planned to retire and that he didn’t want to be disturbed for dinner. The guards, who’d become friendly with Morgan, had left his cell door unlocked. As they played their game of checkers, Morgan slipped out of his cell and climbed atop it.

It was one of those jail cells like you’d see in the movie “El Dorado,” Matt McGrew said. The walls of the cell weren’t as tall as the jail’s ceiling. And, to fool the guards, Morgan had made a crude dummy and placed a newspaper over its face — a ritual he’d been practicing for two weeks, according to Morrison.

The guards left and Morgan slipped out. He made it to Roane County before being apprehended and returned to Ripley on Dec. 5 — 59 hours after he’d escaped, according to Morrison.

Upon his return, Morgan was in good spirits, Morrison wrote. He joked about how he'd "worked" the guards. He would hang in 11 days.

The hanging

"Few crimes have been legally punished more promptly or with less cost to the State," wrote The Washington Post on Dec. 17, 1897, the day after Morgan was hanged.

"His attorney had no time to put together a trial," Matheny said. Local officials knew, one way or another, Morgan would hang, she said. There was concern, though, that the state might intervene to stall the execution, and that might have angered the thousands-large mob that had traveled the muddy roads to Ripley to see it.

The mob had a carnival-like atmosphere, said Matt McGrew, who referenced a 50-year-old interview with eyewitness Fred Carney, who was about 9 years old at the time. "There was a man here eating glass," the transcript reads, "there was a man here blowing fire." And there were people peddling pamphlets like "The Slaughter of the Pfof-Greene Family," which Morrison sold on site for a quarter.

In addition to the \$25 Morrison had paid for the confession, he'd given Morgan a new suit of clothes, Matheny said. He wore it to the gallows.

Pictures from the day show a sea of spectators gathered around the gallows. You can tell that the sun was out, Matt McGrew said, because you can see people's shadows. And it appears to have been a chilly day, based on the way folks were bundled up. In one photograph, a woman in the foreground faces away from the gallows.

"You see that one person and you want to reach out and ask her, 'Why are you here?'" Matt McGrew said. " 'It doesn't look like you want to be here.' "

In the same photograph, to the right of the gallows, there's a tree, its branches full of people.

When Morgan dropped, "the tree broke," Carney said. "And all that was hanging fell off to the ground."

The marker

"There's a formula for having a hanging," Matheny said. People would gather, there was a procession, hymns were sung and preachers preached, the condemned offered lamentations, the condemned was hanged, people drank. So, in that sense, Matheny said, the Ripley hanging wasn't extraordinary. And, Matheny said, plans were already in motion before the hanging to end public executions in West Virginia. In her mind, the context of the hanging is what makes it endure.

"This was a community that was just getting on its feet after the Civil War," Matheny said. Ripley had been a violent frontier town, she said, and Jackson County had been home to local feuds. "They were just getting civilized, and then this happened."

The community's pride was insulted, Matheny said. It couldn't believe one of its own had done this. Morgan "was a man whose roots ran deep in the pioneer stock of the town," she said.

Those 44 days in 1897 are a lesson in community, Matt McGrew said. They're a reminder not to take for granted the safety often associated with small towns, he said. And they speak to "a dark chapter in the history of the area," events that "brought the community together in a very different and dark way."

As plans were made for the historical marker, the community wanted to make sure that it in no way glorified John F. Morgan. Thus, for an extra \$150, the marker became double-sided — to include the story of Morgan’s victims. The community wanted visitors to see both sides of the story.

But on the day the marker was dedicated, 117 years to the day after Morgan was hanged, it was turned 90 degrees in the wrong direction. Technically, the marker should have been oriented so both sides are visible from the sidewalk, McGrew said. Currently, only the story of the murder is.

McGrew hopes to fix it one day. Regardless, he still thinks many visitors will get just half the story. That’s the interesting thing about double-sided markers, he said — folks often don’t see both sides.

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Wednesday, July 8, 2015

Local Greeks reflect on Greece's financial crisis

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

Dr. Dimitris Mihailidis just got back from Greece a few days ago. He saw long lines at the ATMs, but he saw his countrymen in good spirits.

He left Athens right before Greece Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' referendum on whether to accept the terms of another economic bailout was held. While he was unable to vote, his wife did. Like most of the country, she voted no — Greece rejected its creditors' proposed bailout and stunned the European Union.

Mihailidis — a radiation oncologist physicist at CAMC's new Cancer Center — and other Charleston-area Greeks have either traveled to Greece lately or have kept in touch with relatives who still live there. They and their relatives have different views and opinions about the country's faltering economy and what should be done about it. The effects of the crisis vary in different parts of the country, they'll say. But, bottom line, the Greeks are a proud people. As Mihailidis said, the sentimentality he has for his country would've made it difficult for him to vote in the referendum — but he would've picked a side.

The banks had been closed for three days when Mihailidis left Athens. And while people were able to withdraw money from ATMs, it was only 50 euros a day, he said. For a family of four living in a major metropolitan area, that's not much money, he said.

Greece currently owes 320 billion euros, according to the New York Times. The country has received two recent bailouts totaling 240 billion euros, or \$263 billion at the current exchange rate. And Greece just missed a 1.5 billion euro payment it owed to the International Monetary Fund — making the country effectively in default. On Wednesday, Greece asked for what experts guesstimate to be a 50-billion euro loan from the eurozone bailout fund. But the country has not yet presented any plans to reform its economy.

“Reforms are necessary,” Mihailidis, who's lived in South Hills for over a decade, said. “They have to happen yesterday.”

The reforms he speaks of deal with how pensions are delivered and how salaries are paid. Spyros Nicoloudakis, who owns A-1 Body Shop in Charleston, agrees.

Nicoloudakis, who moved to the U.S. from the Greek island of Crete in 1970, said that country's economy has suffered because of a low retirement age and policies and cultural norms — like afternoon siestas — that require businesses to close during the day. And, he said, Greece's tax system could use an overhaul.

Nicoloudakis pointed to a picture of Crete that hangs in his office and noted the location and discussed his cousin, who owns a prime piece of property in a historic part of the island. His cousin rents a space to Starbucks, Nicoloudakis said, and he's not charged any taxes.

Greece's current economic situation can be traced back to 2008, when Europe's debt crisis followed on the heels of Wall Street's collapse. In 2009 Greece announced it had been “understating its deficit figures for years,” according to the New York Times. That led to lenders shutting out Greece from borrowing, which started the country's slide toward bankruptcy, the newspaper reported.

Today, banks have closed their doors, pensions have been affected and, according to *The Guardian*, tourism — “the mainstay of the Greek economy and its main export earner” — has declined. The paper cited the Greek Tourism Confederation (SETE) which reported bookings were down by 40 percent during the first week of July.

Tonya Mullins, of Charleston-based National Travel, says that her “clients are understandably concerned about the situation but there has not been much of a reaction thus far.”

“It is more of a wait-and-see situation at this point,” she said. “The current economic crisis in Greece has really not affected our business. Travel to Greece is not a huge seller in this market.”

Mihailidis and Nicoloudakis said the Greek islands — where tourism is big — were experiencing the current economic crisis much differently than the mainland. The islands can rely more on tourism, Nicoloudakis said, adding that islanders were more likely to have farmland and crops to supplement their income. Mihailidis said that because of the islanders’ access to farmland, they could make their euros stretch further.

Nicoloudakis said the majority of his family still living in Greece wants to see the country abandon the euro and revert back to the drachma. His wealthier relatives were more inclined to stay in the EU and stick with the euro. But roughly “60-70 percent” of his relatives — those in the middle class — would support a move away from the euro, he said.

Michael Birurakis, a first generation Greek American and owner of Best of Crete restaurant on Charleston’s West Side, thinks the country will eventually go back to the drachma. He has cousins who live in Greece, and he still talks with them. His mother, who lives close to his restaurant, talks often with a sister that lives in Greece.

When he traveled to Greece almost a year ago, Birurakis heard his cousins talking about investing in CDs and putting their money in banks. He said that other relatives had been less inclined to put their wealth in banks — they had been worried about the future. But, he said, his family are proud Greeks. He said he’d recently asked his cousins if they needed any money. Of course they said “no.” He wonders where and how he could have sent it, what with the banks being closed.

Mihailidis said Greeks are split between their sentimentality and their heads. For him, he would have voted in opposition to his wife in the referendum. “Yes” would have been his vote. But only because he was uncertain about a future that didn’t include the euro and the EU. There are no mechanisms — financially and socially — in place for a transition from the euro back to the drachma, he said.

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Friday, July 10, 2015

Late boater's charity celebrates Christmas in July

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

They'd almost capsized in the Gulf of Mexico. The rough seas had flipped them on their side and forced them to dock the boat — the “Marooned” — south of Tallahassee, Florida, in Panacea. The trip had the feel of a Jimmy Buffett song.

That was four or five years ago, when the Karnes — Dawn and Rex — were boating with the Wazelles — Julie and Tony — on a month-long “loop trip” around the Florida peninsula. The purpose of the trip was twofold. The couples had picked up the “Marooned” — Tony's newest toy — and were taking it back to West Virginia. And the adventure was an item on Tony's bucket list.

Anthony “Tony” Wazelle died Aug. 7, 2014, after a short bout with cancer.

The 29-year veteran of the South Charleston Police Department had made friends — like the Karnes — on the water. Shortly after his cancer diagnosis, he gathered his friends for a Memorial Day 2014 cookout, and he broke the news. Before he died, he wanted to start a charity for underprivileged local kids, one that celebrated Christmas in July. Tony still had one trip left in him. And he'd planned a second trip — one he'd never make.

On Friday, Dawn and Rex Karnes stood on Haddad Riverfront Park's dock by their houseboat, the “Let's Go Crazy.” The boat looked like an aircraft carrier that had collided with a holiday-themed Walmart toy department. Christmas lights wrapped around the vessel and, lining the railings of the first and second decks, there were a few dozen kids' bicycles. On the side of boat was a banner, which read: “Tony's Kids CHRISTMAS IN JULY.” In the main cabin, on a shelf, a framed picture of Tony looked out over the bow.

“We just became a nonprofit [organization],” said Dawn Karnes, treasurer and secretary of Tony's Kids Christmas in July. Tony's Kids achieved that status in January, several months after it had organized its first toy drive, in July 2014. Last year at Haddad Riverfront Park, Mountain Mission — a local faith-based nonprofit organization — filled up two moving trucks with riding toys, balls and gloves, pogo sticks, sidewalk chalk and hula hoops that Tony's Kids had collected. The toys were distributed to 84 needy families. Tony's Kids collected more than 80 bikes. This year, the organization has already received about 70. Tony's Kids will be at Haddad Riverfont Park accepting donations until 3 p.m. Sunday, Karnes said, when Mountain Mission will once again pack its trucks with outdoor toys and bikes.

Tony himself was a biker. His grandson, Andrew Hamilton, remembers a motorcycle trip the pair took to Hawks Nest State Park as the cancer worsened. Tony's neck was weak, Hamilton said. He couldn't even hold up his head.

“He wanted to do everything he still could,” Hamilton said. “He couldn't sit still.”

Tony purposefully focused his charity on outdoor toys, Karnes said, to be distributed during the summer. As a police officer, he'd seen too many kids sit inside and become couch potatoes or, worse yet, get into trouble because they had nothing to do. Either way, they weren't socializing face to face or being active in their communities.

At the Memorial Day 2014 cookout, after he'd shared his cancer diagnosis, Tony asked his friends — many of whom were in the Kanawha River Power Squadron or the Great Kanawha River Navy — for help. In about five weeks, he wanted the local boating community to organize a toy drive. They delivered — Christmas in July.

“I can still see a carrot-top-headed little boy from last year,” Karnes said, recalling the scene at Mountain Mission Church, where the toys were distributed.

The freckle-faced 9-year-old had picked out a flame-themed bicycle with a helmet to match. He was so excited that he pedaled straight into a table full of toys. He took his new toy outside to the parking lot and did laps.

Tony loved his own toys, Karnes said. He was always doing something with a four-wheeler or a motorcycle or a boat. And he was a Jimmy Buffett fan.

Buffett was touring the United States in the summer of 2014. On July 21, he played in Cincinnati. Tony was there.

He and Julie and the Karnes boated to the Queen City on the “Let’s Go Crazy.” He taught Rex how to maneuver through the locks. He made sure Dawn knew the first mate’s duties. After all, the Karnes would soon inherit the houseboat with the stuffed parrots hanging in the main cabin.

Maintaining all of his stuff was a task, Dawn Karnes said Friday, and Tony didn’t want to burden his family. So, he started giving away his toys.

Shortly before his diagnosis, Tony purchased another boat in Florida. It was in bad shape, his grandson said, and the folks down there were just trying to unload it — it had become a money pit. Tony envisioned another loop trip — this time, a more leisurely three-month cruise — in his newest boat. So, he started fixing it up. It was almost ready to go.

When he learned of his cancer, Tony moved quickly to sell the boat. Although he’d sunk a bunch of money into it, he contacted the sellers to see if they wanted it back. When they heard his asking price and learned of the work he’d put into it, they agreed.

And so, Tony Wazelle sold the “Endless Summer” for a song.

For more information about Tony’s Kids Christmas in July, contact Karen Fitzgerald at 304-539-0191, Dawn Karnes at 304-543-4740 or visit the organization’s Facebook page.

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Saturday, July 11, 2015

Strong winds, heavy rainfall cause flooding, power outages in Southern WV

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The white and burgundy RV had slid off the road, its front end winding up in the waters of Jordan Creek near a small bridge.

Farther up Jordan Creek Road, near Clendenin in eastern Kanawha County, another bridge was washed out, said Zac Tanner, 16. The heavy rain came early Saturday. Tanner, who lives near the spot where his uncle's RV slid into the creek, said his mother got scared when she saw the family's yard flooding. She took his sisters and scrambled up the hill. Tanner started packing up the house and made plans to head for higher ground, as well.

The Tanner family's experience was typical of many folks along U.S. 119 from Mink Shoals to Queen Shoals. Heavy rain caused flash flooding, and trees fell on power lines and across roads. By late Saturday morning, many of the swollen creeks were receding. The Elk River, however, continued to rise, and the closer you got to Queen Shoals, the more noticeable was the damage.

At Queen Shoals, the Elk crested at 18.5 feet just before noon Saturday, nearly twice as high as it had been 24 hours before, and the highest its been since 2013, according to the National Weather Service.

Tanner and his cousin tossed a football — one they'd found in Jordan Creek — while his uncle, Maynard Tanner, and several other men prepared to pull the RV out of the water. The RV had sat all morning in water that covered its wheels.

The men theorized that water had gotten into the RV's drum brakes and rendered them useless. After the rain subsided, Maynard had moved the RV so he could clean up his property. He was hoping to park it on the side of the road, near the bridge, but when he tried to stop, the brakes failed and its nose slid into the creek.

"I was trying to move it, but not that far," Maynard Tanner said with a smile, adding that there was 16 inches of water in his garage.

Michael Charnick, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said Northern Kanawha County was one of the areas "that got hit the hardest, as far as rain totals." Central Clay County had 3 inches of rain in 24 hours, he added.

Farther east along the highway, at the corner of U.S. 119 and Kelly Hill Road, Calvin Hunt gripped a hoe with swollen knuckles and cleaned mud out of the culvert near his house. He'd awakened his grandson at about 2:30 a.m., when a downpour caused the neighboring creek to breach its banks. They worked quickly to move some cars out of the water's path. One, though, they didn't get to. There was still water in the floorboards around 11 a.m.

Flooding creeks and erosion seemed to be the biggest sources of damage along the highway. Closer to Clendenin, the Elk River continued to rise, starting to spill into people's backyards. At a few spots along the road, trees were down, including some that rested on power lines.

More than 10,000 homes in Western and Southern West Virginia were without power Saturday afternoon, including about 5,000 in Kanawha County. Appalachian Power was reporting outages in 13 counties, ranging from Mercer County, in the south, to as far north as Nicholas County and west to Wayne County. By Saturday evening, the number of outages was down to about 3,000.

Bobbi K. Roush said her 95-year-old mother, Thelma Rule-Bowen, had been worried earlier in the week about losing power. Her mother's lights had been flickering Thursday, and the elderly woman had called to tell her daughter that she was afraid to go to bed. Early Saturday morning, some trees had fallen down the hill across the road from Rule-Bowen's house in Queen Shoals. She was awakened at about 7 a.m. by the sound of machinery as state workers removed the trees from U.S. 119.

Some of those trees had cleared the road and ended up in Rule-Bowen's yard. It could've been worse, though, Roush said as she pointed to a single tall tree that had stood on the bank. Around it was debris from other trees that had fallen. Somehow, the long, branchless tree had managed to stand. If it hadn't, Roush said, it could've hit the house.

Between Queen Shoals and Clendenin, debris and trash collected in the Elk around trees that used to be on the riverbank. Water spilled down rock faces onto U.S. 119 and formed pools. At one point, next to a flooded boat dock, a pontoon boat sat cockeyed in the water, its nose submerged in the Elk's muddy water.

Close to 1 p.m., several men worked to clear mud from a back street in Clendenin. Like many residents along the river, some of them had been up since the predawn hours — and their work wasn't finished.

"The river's not going down," said Mike Stout, a Clendenin town councilman. "It's still rising; it's very swift."

Stout, who's in his 33rd year on the council, said he's seen worse flooding, but he added that no area of the town was spared from damage. One of the nearby workers said the rain gauge at his house read 4 inches. Town Councilman John Shelter Jr. — Clendenin's floodplain manager for the Federal Emergency Management Agency — said he'd contacted FEMA and assumed that the town would get some disaster relief. Most of the damage, he said, had been to the town's roads — personal property hadn't been as affected.

Heavy rain affected other parts of the Mountain State, as well. A rain gauge at the Summersville Dam in Nicholas County reported 2.47 inches of rain in the 24-hour period ending at 7 a.m. Saturday, the National Weather Service said. Flash flooding, the weather service's Charnick said, was "concentrated where the heavy rain was, which was all over the place."

Aside from Kanawha and Clay counties, Southern Roane and Nicholas counties were hit hard. Those four counties, Charnick said, were "the big winners, or losers, if you want to put it that way."

A Nicholas County dispatcher said Saturday afternoon they had scattered reports of high water, but no property damage. A Roane County dispatcher said water had receded since late Friday night and that there was no flooding by Saturday afternoon.

Flash-flood warnings, which the weather service issued throughout Friday and into the next morning, expired at 5:30 a.m. Saturday.

While Saturday was mostly dry after the early rainfall, Charnick said another wet pattern should be moving in today and into Monday.

Staff writer David Gutman contributed to this report.

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Sunday, July 12, 2015

A banking tradition lives on

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

In college, Lyle Smith didn't really know what he wanted to do with his future. So, he studied the past.

At Washington and Lee University in the early 1990s, Smith gravitated toward European history. It was broader, more robust, than American history. And, he thought, if he could learn from other people's mistakes, maybe he wouldn't make them.

During his senior year, Smith wound up in a couple of classes outside of the history curriculum. Economics. Finance. Two courses that were new to him — yet familiar.

One day last month, the fourth-generation financier from South Hills sat in Merrill Lynch's office on the 11th floor of Laidley Tower, which overlooks the city where his family established itself in the banking business. Smith, now 45, credits those economics and finance courses for getting him in the business. In his new role — part of a new team of financial advisors at Merrill Lynch — Smith has found an opportunity to fulfill an entrepreneurial calling while working to keep wealth in West Virginia. And while he didn't stick with history, he learned something from his studies that transcended the subject.

"My father and grandfather and great-grandfather all worked for ... Kanawha Banking & Trust," Smith said. He spoke with a hint of a Southern accent, one he might've picked up in the Carolinas, where he worked for several years after earning his MBA from the University of South Carolina in 1996.

KB&T "in the early 1980s, merged with United [Bank] — it was the local, kind of predecessor bank to United here in town," he said. "So I was really the fourth generation that had worked for the bank."

"They were all three presidents of that bank, right?" Waller Hardy — one of Smith's partners and the director of Charleston's Merrill Lynch branch — said.

"Correct," Smith said. "They were all three presidents of KB&T."

The two men sat in Hardy's office at a round table, where they might sit with clients who are looking to make investments. Smith — first vice president under Hardy and a financial advisor — is part of the Hardy, Smith, (Joshua) Cross and Associates team, which works to learn about clients' investment interests and assess their viability. It's goal-oriented financial advising based on active listening and close relationships. Understanding clients on a personal level — their goals and their values — is just as important as learning their ledgers.

"Primarily, we work with business owners," Smith said. "We also work with foundations and endowments. ... We believe, truly believe, that we are ... better suited to work with local business owners, local entrepreneurs. These are entities — people — that have created wealth in the state, and we feel like we can give them an opportunity to keep those assets here, working with a local advisory team that's better suited to ... understand their goals and aspirations. Certainly better than an out-of-state provider."

Smith — who moved back to Charleston in 1999 — transitioned from United Bank to Merrill Lynch in February. One of the catalysts, he said, was his experience working with a family to generate an investment proposal. Smith, then at United, earned half the family's business. But an out-of-state Merrill Lynch team

got the other half. The family told Smith he could've gotten it all if not for the competition's approach. That prompted Smith to "look under the hood."

Smith knew Hardy — a 30-plus-year finance veteran — and discussed the idea of forming a team, one bolstered by the investment assets of Merrill Lynch and the banking capabilities of Bank of America. The setup would allow them to run their own operation and build it locally. And, as Smith said, it gave them an opportunity to try to keep capital — monetary and intellectual — in the Mountain State.

The teaming approach is relatively new in finance, Hardy said, and it's emerged as the industry has evolved. Finance has changed from a 1980s "transaction business" — where people bought and sold stocks, and brokers made a commission — to an advisory-based business built on relationships. The deluge of information and "breadth of service delivery" brought on by the Internet has necessitated that change.

In December 2013 the Wall Street Journal reported that about 55% of Merrill Lynch's advisors were operating in teams and that the company "sees the team approach as a better way to deliver top service." Responding to the emergence of "robo-advising" through digital apps, Forbes reported in October 2014 that team-based advising is ideal for individuals who want a more "comprehensive wealth management relationship" and for people who have "significant and complicated assets."

"Some time a few years ago," Hardy said, "someone used a phrase that I thought was appropriate for the time and continues to be, I think. ... 'Investors are drowning in information and thirsting for knowledge.'"

The goal now, Hardy said, is to get away from a transaction-based business and instead foster clients' knowledge through personal relationships.

"I'm kind of analytical," Smith said, "maybe get too bogged down in statistics and the numbers. But one thing I really did learn from my dad is this business — just about any business, but especially banking and finance — is a people business."

In 1999, when Lyle Smith first moved back to Charleston as a commercial lending officer, he dealt with business owners who got their first loan from KB&T. They would tell him that his father, Ike Smith, was a people person.

"They gave him a lot of credit," Smith said. "He took the time to understand them, understand their business, so that stuck with me. He had a good intuition ... , but he wouldn't necessarily dig into the cash-flow analysis or balance-sheet analysis so much as understand the person, eyeball them and have a strong feeling that they were going to repay the loan."

Smith has deepened his roots in Charleston. He and his wife, Amy, have four children. Now, when they gather with the entire Smith clan at Thanksgiving, it takes two turkeys to feed everyone. And Smith still gets to work with his dad at their real estate and property management company, Kanawha Roxalana.

The lessons Smith learned from his father translate into his work today. As for the history coursework, there was a different kind of payoff.

"I did grow up — kind of struggled a little bit — with dyslexia," Smith said, "and so I always was a little averse about taking on a lot of reading."

The struggle was more pronounced in elementary school. In high school, he overcame the dyslexia by "facing a large amount of reading." His college coursework offered further validation that he'd "conquered" it.

“I enjoyed history,” Smith said, “but it was a little bit of a challenge to commit to taking that on, to kind of overcome what might have been a weakness. But I think it ultimately turned into a strength. I overcame that fear.

“But also, I just enjoyed history.”

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Tuesday, July 7, 2015

Longtime electric company owner, church leader dies at 95

Staff reports

Doran Hansford Frame Sr., founder of Frame Electric and longtime member of the board of trustees at St. Mark's United Methodist Church, died Sunday at the age of 95.

Frame was born Sept. 6, 1919, in Curtin. He moved to Charleston when he was 11 and later began his electrical career with Goldfarb Electric. In 1956 he formed Frame Electric Inc. and grew his business, eventually employing more than 50 electricians. He was particularly proud of his company's work on the new West Virginia American Water plant in Charleston, according to his family.

In 1975 Frame formed Daniels Electric. He served as governor of the of the West Virginia Ohio Valley Chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association; as president of the Charleston Electric League; and on the board of directors for the Charleston Chamber of Commerce.

For over 50 years, Frame served on the board of trustees at St. Mark's United Methodist Church.

"Religion was a huge part of my dad's life," Kathryn Collison said, adding that her father was the chairman of St. Mark's board for "at least 30 years."

Through his work with the church, Frame helped with the renovation of the main sanctuary, the renovation of Bennett Chapel and the rebuilding the church gymnasium. The "big brass letters on the front of the church" above the columns that spell out the church's name are also Frame's doing, Collison said. They were placed there in honor of the Frame family, she said.

"He wanted to make lasting contributions," Collison said. "Nothing cheap or chintzy."

Frame was preceded in death by his wife of 70 years, Gerry, his oldest son, Doran H. "DH" Frame II and by two grandchildren, Fred Burdette, Jr., and Sherry Ann Burdette. He is survived by children, Kay Griffith, Carolyn Bossie (Jack), Kathryn "Kathy" Collison (Bill), Sharon Kolodziej (Ed) and James "Jim" Monroe Frame (Beverly); by daughter-in-law Lisa Frame; by 12 grandchildren, 24 great-grandchildren and four great-great-grandchildren; and by siblings Gene Frame and Elanor Smith.

Services will be held at St. Mark's United Methodist Church on Thursday at 2 p.m., with visitation beginning at noon. The service of interment will take place Saturday at the church columbarium.

Stevens and Grass Funeral Home, of Malden, is in charge of arrangements. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests memorial donations in Frame's name to the St. Marks United Methodist Church Building and Grounds Trust Fund, 900 Washington St. E., Charleston, WV 25301.

Saturday, July 25, 2015

Girl Scout Jamboree trades Thin Mints for tomahawks

By Wade Livingston, Staff writer

GLEN JEAN — As the tomahawks found their targets, Pam Delgra smiled — the scene reminded her of “The Hunger Games,” she joked.

“The Hunger Games,” Suzanne Collins’ young-adult bestseller turned Hollywood blockbuster, tells of a dystopian future in which kids — boys and girls — fight each other in government-ordered, gladiatorial combat. Only one combatant is supposed to survive. But Collins’ hero, Katniss Everdeen, beats the system with her bow and arrow.

Archery — in addition to tomahawk throwing — was one of several activities available to girls and volunteers Saturday at the Girl Scout Jamboree at Fayette County’s Summit Bechtel Reserve. The event, which started Wednesday and concludes Sunday, is designed to empower girls to choose their own adventure and showcase a different side of Girl Scouting. And it’s also an opportunity for adult volunteers like Delgra to push themselves and try new things.

Delgra stood in the shade of a pop-up tent and watched members of Troop 5420 sling tomahawks at the wooden targets. The Beckely-based troop falls under the Girl Scouts of Black Diamond Council, the Charleston-based organization that sponsored this year’s Jamboree.

This is not the first Jamboree that Black Diamond has sponsored, said Beth Casey, CEO of the council. Nor, in terms of participation, is it the biggest. But it is the first time it’s been held at the Summit — and it’s the first time that Girl Scout troops have come from 12 different states.

Delgra wore a bright orange shirt with a matching cap. On the cap was a small trinket with a troop number, something she got during “SWAPS” — “Special Whatchamacallits Affectionately Pinned Somewhere.”

In the Girl Scout tradition, troops design their own trinkets and trade them back and forth. Delgra said she’d done some “SWAPS” with folks from New Jersey, Florida, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia — many of those states are outside the Black Diamond Council’s four-state, 61-county area. And Delgra even met a girl from Paris, France.

About 240 Girl Scouts and volunteers turned out to this year’s Jamboree, Casey said.

“Part of it’s just raising awareness of what Girl Scouts are doing these days,” she said.

The camping and zip-lining and paddle boarding and rock climbing might challenge people’s misconceptions about Girl Scouting, she said, acknowledging that some folks’ first thought is of Girl Scout Cookies. And that’s OK — as long as customers think about the work that went into delivering their Thin Mints while they’re enjoying them.

“These girls are entrepreneurs,” Casey said, explaining the business side of cookie sales.

It's marketing and time management and business ethics, she explained. And the kind of "soft skills" employers are looking for: a person who can shake your hand, look you in the eye and thank you, even if you didn't buy anything.

The number of Girls Scouts in the United States has dropped from about 4 million to 2.3 million, the New York Times reported in October. Casey acknowledged the decline and noted that the number of councils — like Black Diamond — has decreased by almost two-thirds. But the Girl Scouts are addressing the issue, she said, through social media and girl-focused programming.

Girl Scouts at the Jamboree choose and plan their own adventures. Abigail "Abi" Martin, 10, of Toledo, Ohio's Troop 10687, and her father, troop leader Brian Martin, had already done the zip-lining, the water course and the tree canopy tour when they showed up to the tomahawk throwing range. They brought some new friends with them — members of Summers County Troop 2917.

Brian Martin had designed a paper tag for SWAPS. He drew inspiration from a Girl Scout T-shirt he'd seen, and said the slogan was intended to counter insults such as "You throw like a girl."

"Man enough to be a Girl Scout," the tag read.

"I wish they had one that said 'Girl enough to be a Boy Scout,'" Abi said.

The Jamboree was important, Abi said, because she'd been able to make new friends and try her hand at activities she'd never attempted. Really, though, the Jamboree was special because it allowed her to be self-directive.

"It's a fun thing to be able to be independent," she said.

Casey said the Black Diamond Council hopes to continue its relationship with the Summit, which hosts the Boy Scout Jamboree every four years. While they will have to assess their year's Jamboree first, she said there might be plans in the works for a follow-up event next year.

"In this case, since we have such an amazing facility, we'd love to use it," she said. "As often as the Boy Scouts will let us."

Earlier in the day, Casey stood under the pop-up tent and watched as members of Troop 5420 started to come off the Tomahawk range. Throwing a tomahawk is about trying something new — maybe facing a fear or dealing with anxiety. It's about having the confidence to step up.

As Casey talked, Delgra walked out to the range, picked up a couple of tomahawks and started throwing. She soon connected with the target. She jumped up and down.

"And as you can see," Casey said, "it makes a difference in adults too."

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Thursday, July 23, 2015

Teubert program for blind children tours radio museum

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. — Milee Meadows whipped her head around when she heard the song.

“Hey, I wanna see that,” the 7-year old girl — who is blind — said as she pointed toward the opposite corner of the room where a late 19th-century Polyphon, a disk-playing music box, played “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.”

She followed the sound over to the old record player, her pigtailed swishing back and forth, the bells on her bracelet jingling. Charlie Cooper, a member of the West Virginia Radio Hall of Fame, explained the technology behind the Polyphon. Meadows leaned closer for a better look.

Earlier Thursday morning, Cooper had bent down to show Meadows the innards of a 1950s radio. The little girl blinked behind thick glasses as she held the unit an inch from her nose. Other campers in the Cabell-Wayne Association of the Blind Teubert Prep Program followed suit. The hands-on tour at the West Virginia Museum of Radio and Technology was a special treat.

Thursday’s tour was just one of the special events that Teubert Prep campers have enjoyed throughout the week. The weeklong day camp is designed to expose blind and visually impaired children of Cabell and Wayne counties to recreational activities and educational opportunities they might not otherwise get. It was the first time the group had traveled to the Radio and Technology Museum. As one camp staffer said, Thursday’s tour was about imagining the possibilities of communication.

“The blind have to communicate in different ways,” camp staffer Toni Walls said. “This (hands-on tour) opens their minds to all the different ways to communicate over the years.”

Walls, a certified visual rehabilitation therapist, has been working with the Teubert Prep program for 16 years.

“We’re always looking for new things for the kids to do,” she said, adding that some of her campers lead “sheltered lives” because of their visual impairments.

“Museum trips,” she said, “can be rare.”

Just more than half of this year’s 13 campers were able to attend the museum tour. Many of the children have other disabilities that required them to rest Thursday, according to camp recreation coordinator Linda Worthy. But those who were able to attend got to learn about Morse code and “ham radio.”

Ham radio, or amateur radio, is a popular hobby in the United States. According to Sean Kutzko of the American Radio Relay League, there are about 725,000 amateur radio users in the U.S. About 167,000 of those are members of the American Radio Relay League. And roughly 2,000 of those members are visually impaired.

“By and large, it’s an audio event you can get involved with,” Kutzko said. “Vision doesn’t have a lot to do with it.”

In addition to the trip to the Radio and Technology Museum, Meadows and her fellow campers have been to the farmers market and have done some cooking. They've also participated in a musical therapy session, in which they made bracelets with jingling bells.

"I played the guitar!" Meadows said as she swiped her right hand downward, imitating a rock-and-roller's motion. Again, her bells jingled.

"I've never been to a museum," she said.

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Saturday, July 18, 2015

After decades, local Orthodox priest contemplates retirement

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

He doesn't remember the details of his first sermon.

That was almost 40 years ago — 458 baptisms, 165 confirmations, 248 weddings and 369 funerals ago. Rev. Olof Scott has put together an updated count ahead of his retirement.

On July 31, Scott will officially step down as priest and dean of Charleston's St. George Orthodox Cathedral, where he has ministered his entire career. The church — and Charleston — have changed much since he arrived in the summer of 1976. The congregation has grown and diversified. The church has become a more integral part of the community.

Scott can't recall his first sermon, but he remembers afterwards telling his new parishioners about his Kanawha County roots. And while he didn't know last week what message he'll deliver Sunday during his last sermon, he knows some special members of his congregation will gather at his feet to hear it.

On Wednesday, Scott glanced at the Charleston Town Center Mall, across Court Street, through a pair of glass doors in St. George's complex. That wasn't there when he started at St. George's in 1976. Neither was the church's conference center, where Scott was walking. He was hobbled by a "trick knee" — a tight ligament that he stopped to stretch every so often — which caused him to lean heavily on a handrail when he walked down a flight of stairs. He was garbed in black from his feet to his neck, the only exceptions being a gold pen in his shirt pocket and his clerical collar. The white square peeking through the clergy shirt matched his hair.

He limped through the conference center, showing off the choir room and the banquet hall, the fellowship area and the bookstore, where his parishioners can purchase icons. St. George's "780 baptized souls" — Scott's tally — are just a few of the nearly 6 million people in the United States and roughly 225 million people worldwide who identify as Orthodox Christians, according to the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese. Orthodox Christianity can trace its roots to the Great Schism in 1054, when the Christian church split in half, east to west. While Catholicism was prominent in Rome, Orthodoxy prevailed in Eastern Europe, in present-day Turkey. As Scott jokes, Orthodox Christians are the "disenfranchised cousins" of the Catholic Church.

When Scott first arrived at St. George, some people viewed it as an "immigrant church," he said — about 70 to 80 percent" of its "400-500 baptized souls" were Lebanese.

"For a long time people would ask, 'Who gets to go to church there?'" lifelong parishioner Loretta Haddy said. "'Do you have to be of Lebanese or Syrian descent?'"

Scott had heard that question, and he had a simple response: "Does the name Olof Scott sound Lebanese to you?"

He grew up in New Jersey and was raised Presbyterian. As a young man he was fascinated by math and science, and he earned a bachelor's degree in physics and a master's from Penn State University in nuclear engineering. He worked as a nuclear engineer for almost a decade, the last half at Westinghouse. At 33 he

was making good money and had recently received a promotion. But it was a marketing gig, and he “didn’t like schmoozing.” Soon, he felt the call to the ministry.

He’d converted to Orthodoxy after he’d married his wife, Eva, who’d immigrated from Ukraine as a child. In 1976, after finishing St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, he found himself moving to Charleston.

“When he first came here, they had no retirement plan for him,” said Rev. Richard Mahan, former pastor of St. Timothy Lutheran Church. Mahan, a member of St. George before converting to Lutheranism, said he and Scott became friends — “the ministry can be lonely.” He remembers the St. George congregation of June 1976 being strong in its faith. And strongwilled.

“My gosh, they’re gonna eat you alive if you’re not careful,” Mahan remembers telling his friend. When he’d see Scott out in the community, he’d say, “Oh my gosh, you’re still alive!”

It was unusual for an Orthodox church to hire a “convert” pastor, Scott said. He wasn’t Lebanese. And he wasn’t from Charleston.

As an engineer, Scott had been a project manager. He learned how to manage and lead people — who to “stroke” and who to “poke.” That experience translated to church leadership.

“When you’re a pastor of a church, everybody who’s in the church is there voluntarily,” Rev. Scott said. “And they’re all here for different reasons. Some of them are here because they really get it. Some are here because ‘This is where my family’s gone for generations.’ ... So you have to figure out where people are and what they need to get to the next step. How do you keep ‘em here, you know? Who do you stroke, who do you poke?”

Today, because of Scott’s leadership, St. George is a more open and diverse church, its members say. In addition to the strong Lebanese contingent, there are Russians and Ukrainians and Greeks — and all sorts of Charlestonians.

“Rich, you really don’t realize how many converts we have,” Mahan said, parroting his cousins who attend St. George and have seen their congregation grow.

The church has become involved in state and community ventures such as the West Virginia Council of Churches and Charleston’s Religious Coalition for Community Renewal. St. George donates its banquet hall to local charities and groups like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. In Scott’s words, the church has gone from being located in the community to being an integral part of it.

After his first sermon — the one he can’t recall — in June 1976, Scott remembers telling his congregation about the Rutroffs, German immigrants who settled in the Kanawha Valley. His mother was a Rutroff, he told them, and his three aunts shared a house in Charleston’s East End.

“Basically, even though I was born ... in Philadelphia, I’ve had one leg in Kanawha County my entire life,” Scott said as he sat on a sofa in the skylit hallway outside of St. George’s sanctuary. He flipped through a photo book he’d been given at a retirement banquet held last month in his honor. Unbeknownst to him, his congregation had been gathering pictures for the past six months. Some of the photos showed parishioners who’d passed away. Some were pictures of weddings. Others showed baptisms.

Steve Summers’ sons were baptized by Scott. His oldest boy is now an altar server at St. George. Summers himself was an altar boy beginning in third grade. He remembers the annual altar boy trips to Cincinnati — the same hotel, the same Bob Evans, the same seats at the Reds games, the rides at the water park, where Scott would sometimes sneak away with a book and a cigar.

At the retirement banquet, everyone who'd served as an altar boy under Scott was asked to stand. Out of the nearly 400 attendees, about 60 men rose. They moved to the front of the room and posed with their priest for a photo.

On Sunday, Scott will preach for the last time in his role as priest and dean of St. George Orthodox Cathedral. He'll give the children's sermon. He doesn't know yet what he'll say.

At this stage, Scott said with a laugh, he doesn't take all week to develop a sermon.

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Tuesday, July 14, 2015

Fallout from latest storms affects Putnam fair, St. Albans area

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

ELEANOR — Mandi Smith was at the Putnam County Fairgrounds early Tuesday morning when the waters began to rise. She was one of 100 or so people who were, in effect, stranded when a nearby creek overflowed and dumped as much as 7 feet of water in some parts of the grounds.

The 15-year-old and some friends had spent Monday evening in the livestock barn waiting out the strong storms that pummeled Putnam County and much of West Virginia. They'd closed the barn doors because the rain was blowing inside, the Red House native said. With the barn shuttered, heavy winds walloped the doors, causing them to "whack" up against the barn. Loud thunder made it hard to sleep, Smith said.

She finally got to bed around midnight, only to wake up at 3 a.m. and find a small river flowing between her family's camper and their neighbors. The water rose quickly, Smith said, and the roads were flooded. There was nothing to do except wait it out.

As of late Tuesday afternoon, nearly 22,000 Appalachian Power customers remained without power in West Virginia — and after another major storm Tuesday evening, AEP once again reported outages topping 30,000.

At various points Tuesday, numerous roads in the region were closed by high water, mudslides and fallen trees.

On Browns Creek Road near St. Albans, Travas Bennett looked at his flooded yard and storage building. A mudslide that started a week ago — when two trees had slid down through the hollow near his house — came in full force on July 8, Bennett said.

"It looked like lava coming down through there," he said Tuesday as he stared at the muddy creek that was now a small river. The slide had redirected the water's path about 20 feet closer to his house. He'd taken a chainsaw to the back of his storage building and cut a small hole for the water to pass through. An attempt to relieve the pressure — an attempt to salvage something from the structure.

Around 11 a.m. Tuesday, Kanawha County floodplain manager Chuck Grishaber said he and his crews were addressing "six to eight" different "active" mudslides, including one on Davis Creek and a couple on Lynns Creek.

In Braxton County, a hillside slip severed an 8-inch water transmission line serving the town of Sutton, according to West Virginia American Water Co. Water company officials issued a boil water advisory for the area until the line can be repaired. Water company officials were bringing in a water tanker to serve the Sutton and Gassaway areas. The truck was to be staged at the Foodland on W.Va. 4 between the two communities.

In Boone County, several roads were closed by downed trees and high water. In Putnam County, W.Va. 34 was closed near the reservoir because of high water.

Elk River Road in Webster County remains closed because of high water, and W.Va. 20 was cut in numerous spots in Webster County. Hodam Creek Road in Webster County was closed after part of the road washed away.

Birch River Road remained closed in Nicholas County because of a massive landslide and rock fall. Highways officials said the road would not reopen before this evening.

Putnam County Fair organizers hoped to be up and running today, if the weather cooperates. On Tuesday, vendors were left to decide whether to remain or call it quits. Staffers organizing the livestock events hope they'll be able to make them happen.

"This is all my baby," Michael May, supervisor of the Putnam County Park in Eleanor, said Tuesday afternoon. "And I'm heartbroken."

May glanced over to the muddy parking area at the fairgrounds, where earlier about 7 feet of water had covered the expansive grass field. By 6:30 a.m. Tuesday, the parking area was under water. "The Pit," where Monday night's demolition derby had taken place, was soon filled with water. Vendors showed pictures of a bulldozer almost halfway submerged, and May said several of the old demolition cars had been left behind as the water rose.

Most of the damage had been to the ground itself, May said, not the buildings.

Shortly after noon, about two-thirds of the livestock at the fair had been moved to safety, and the rest were scheduled to be evacuated by 2 p.m. or so. "Life first, property second," May said

Doug Pierson, vice president of the Putnam County Fair, said the water levels peaked around 4:30 a.m. Technically, people were stranded for a couple of hours as water covered the entrance bridge and exit road that form the loop road that runs around the fairgrounds. No one was in danger, Pierson said, adding that local rescue squads set up a staging area near the entrance of the loop road early Tuesday morning, just in case. But the situation didn't even get close to warranting an evacuation of the of vendors, carnival workers, 4-H personnel and livestock owners who spent Monday night at the fairgrounds, he said.

As for the livestock, they were evacuated as a precaution, Pierson said. "We hope we do all this in vain," he said. "If everything goes right with no flooding [Tuesday night], we should be good to go. ... We haven't canceled anything else."

Pierson said people could check out the Putnam County Fair Facebook page for updated information.

Mike Beller, the fair's president, said he's still in a "day-to-day" mode. If the fair resumes today, attendees should know that parking will be affected, he said. And he recommended people wear boots.

Depending on the weather and the state of the grounds, some of the carnival rides might be shut down, Beller said. He also said that a musical act had to cancel. But, he said, Meghan Linsey from NBC's "The Voice" will perform in its place. Linsey is scheduled to go on at 8 p.m. Saturday.

Some vendors used tents and saw their belongings damaged.

"Yup, no face painting the rest of this week," Doran Mitchell of Angelas Abstract Face and Body Art said.

He and Angela Mitchell had lost an air compressor in Tuesday morning's flooding, and many of their tattoo stencils were covered with muddy water. The pair from St. Albans packed up their truck to leave — they didn't have the time or money to clean and replace their equipment to return for the weekend.

Kirk White, who operates Extreme Reptiles, a mobile zoo or sorts, said he was going to stay, but only because he was working the Jackson County Fair next week. The weather and the economy had hurt his business this week, he said.

As for Mandi Smith, she watched as her family pulled their camper out of the mud. The camper won't be back, she said. But she is planning to return with her feeder calf, Kawliga, who name was inspired by a Hank Williams song.

"We'll bring the animals back," she said, "if the fair's even going on tomorrow."

Late Tuesday evening, another storm front moved through the Kanwaha Valley and other parts of the state, bringing even more rain and high winds.

A car wash on Charleston's West Side saw part of its roof torn off when the stormfront moved through around 7 p.m. Later on, Metro 911 reported high water levels at numerous locations along the Coal River, including Childress Road near Alum Creek and Strawberry Road near St. Albans.

After moving through Kanawha County, the storm went on to cause damage in Fayette County. At 8 p.m., dispatchers with the Fayette County Office of Emergency Management said trees and powerlines were down everywhere.

Staff writers Rusty Marks and Jake Jarvis contributed to this report.

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Saturday, July 18, 2015

Local car dealership owner Parsons dies

Staff reports

Alex “Tiny” Parsons Jr., who grew up poor in Charleston and became the owner of several car dealerships, including Turnpike Ford and Turnpike Chevrolet, died Wednesday at age 74.

Parsons, most recently of Scott Depot, was born May 26, 1941, in Charleston. He grew up in Washington Manor, in Charleston’s Triangle District, and was raised by his mother, Nola Holstein Parsons. He opened Turnpike Ford and later bought Turnpike Chevrolet. Eventually, he owned dealerships in several states.

Family and friends remember him as a golfer and a determined businessman — and as someone who never forgot where he came from.

“Determination,” Greg Parsons said Saturday about his father’s legacy. “Success. Despite nearly overwhelming odds.”

Tiny Parsons grew up poor, his son said, adding that he remembered his father telling stories of family members who could afford to shop only at Salvation Army thrift stores. Parsons would support that charity, as well as the United Way, after he became a successful businessman.

Before he found his way into car sales, Parsons worked in the meat department at the Kanawha City A&P grocery store and, later, at the FMC ordnance plant in South Charleston. FMC, in particular, had a strong effect on Parsons, his son said. It was hard, manual labor, but Parsons realized it was important work.

Parsons’ sales career began door-to-door, selling Fuller Brush home and personal care products. In 1967, the Charleston High School graduate started working for Joe Holland Chevrolet. Parsons did well in his first year at Joe Holland.

“I made \$20,000 or so the first year and maxed out on Social Security,” Parsons told The Charleston Gazette in 1997. “Back when I started, just a handshake and a thank you sold more cars than anything else.”

As a caddy at Berry Hills Country Club, Parsons “saw the successful people and wanted to be successful,” his son said. Parsons studied at West Virginia State University. He would listen to motivational Earl Nightingale tapes in his car, and he would look up the definitions of three new words each day. He eventually made his children look up new words, too.

Parsons and his partners opened Turnpike Ford in 1974; eight years later, he opened Turnpike Chevrolet. Eventually, Parsons would have dealerships in Ohio, Kentucky, North Carolina and Colorado.

“I think [he was] a domestic guy,” his son said about his father’s preference for cars. “Made in America — that’s what he valued. He came up with that tagline [on his TV commercials]: ‘If you don’t buy Turnpike, please buy American.’ ”

His friend of two decades, Steve Callis, remembers Parsons for his pride.

“He was a proud man that really came up from nothing,” Callis said. “He became a bread-winner early in life. He was a big man with a bigger heart.”

Tiny Parsons was preceded in death by his mother. He is survived by his wife of 53 years, Cora “Sue” Parsons; his sons and their wives, Greg and Regina Parsons, and Steve and Kelly Parsons; grandchildren, Brandon, Hayley, Lukas, Peyton and Cole Parsons; and brother, David Parsons.

Snodgrass Funeral Home, in South Charleston, will host a memorial service at 1 p.m. Monday. Family and friends may visit the funeral home from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday. Entombment will be in Sunset Memorial Park, in South Charleston.

Saturday, August 1, 2015

Huntington museum, Smithsonian Affiliate, hosts Hatfield-McCoy feud

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

After the shooting stopped and they laid down their guns, members of the Hatfield and McCoy clans picked up the rope — a game of tug of war would settle this year's feud.

As they gripped the rope, both families appealed to the audience for volunteers. A little boy walked across the grass and sided with the McCoys.

"He's a good looking young man," a re-enactor dressed in 19th century attire, said as he held the rope and looked across at his friends who were dressed as Hatfields. "So you know he's a McCoy."

The crowd of a few dozen people, many of whom wore University-of-Kentucky blue, laughed. Other children left their parents' sides and took up stations with the re-enactors. Joshua Sowards, a Heritage Farm Museum and Village staff member, paced along the line of contestants and made sure they were ready. He gave the signal. Someone fired a rifle (a blank). The struggle began.

On Saturday, about 350 people traveled to Huntington's Heritage Farm for a Hatfields and McCoys "Way Back Weekend." The event, one of eight Way Back Weekends that began in May and conclude in December, celebrated the history behind two of America's most famous families. It also spotlighted Heritage Farm, where a History Channel documentary about the feud was filmed. While the documentary has attracted visitors to the farm, a more recent honor has elevated the museum's status in the Mountain State.

If you've visited Heritage Farm's website (www.heritagefarmmuseum.com) lately, you might have noticed a logo — a wavy, yellow sun inside a blue circle — near the bottom of the web page. Underneath the logo are the words "Smithsonian Affiliate."

In March, Heritage Farm became West Virginia's first museum to partner with the Smithsonian Institution through the Smithsonian Affiliations program. The program, established in 1996, according to the organization's website, "is designed to facilitate a two-way relationship" between places like Heritage Farm and the Washington-based — and world's largest — museum and research complex. Heritage Farm will be able to borrow artifacts from the Smithsonian collection and display them in Huntington. And the Smithsonian can expand its footprint — because the farm is the only Smithsonian Affiliate in the Mountain State.

"The Smithsonian can reach people who might not be able to travel to Washington, D.C.," said Audy Perry, whose parents founded Heritage Farm in 1996. Perry, who's the executive director of the Heritage Farm Foundation, added that the national museum was eager to "add the Appalachian experience to what they have to offer."

Today, Heritage Farm is a sprawling complex tucked into the side of a small mountain off of Harvey Road. A gravel footpath leads visitors to a handful of rustic buildings that house mini-museums dedicated to "Industry" and "Progress" and "Heritage." The large general store could be considered the focal point of the complex; near it is a live smithy where on Saturday, a blacksmith fired his forge and sent smoke out the

building's chimney. That complex didn't exist in 1973, when Perry's parents — Henriella and Mike Perry — bought the property and moved there.

Audy Perry was 2 when his parents relocated to the farm. They didn't buy it with the intention of starting a museum. But one day they found the remains of an old cabin, with "200-year-old, hand-hewn logs." That discovery prompted the family to invest in educating the public — through a living farm — how its Appalachian ancestors lived.

"Can you contribute to the community?" Heritage Farm staffer Major Simms said. That's the question present-day visitors to the farm should ask themselves, he explained. A long time ago, he said, people lived in communities where they helped one another out. They learned practical life skills such as broom making, blacksmithing and weaving (some of the artisan classes you can take at Heritage Farm today). They provided tangible things to their neighbors — yet they learned self-sufficiency.

On Saturday, Simms wore a sheriff's star pinned on his black jacket, which bled into his black pants. The brim of his period-specific hat blocked some of the sun that shone down on the grass field next to the smithy, where minutes before Hatfields and McCoys had engaged in mock combat. Across from the smithy was a church, made of logs, fronted by a split-rail fence. Behind the fence was a grave — "Perry," the black headstone read. Simms looked toward the grave.

"Even on his worst days — when the chemo was affecting him — when you got him talking about the Appalachian region, all that went away," Simms said, explaining how Mike Perry held on for nearly two years after doctors gave him just a fraction of that time to live.

Mike Perry died in February, before the museum he started was officially designated as a Smithsonian Affiliate. But, his son said Friday, he did learn of the honor before he passed away.

"It was a real blessing," Audy Perry said. "It was confirmation of a job well done."

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Tuesday, July 28, 2015

Community-supported agriculture produces satisfied customers

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

“You know the worst part about this?” Pam McDevitt joked Tuesday as she picked up her weekly load of produce. “The pressure to use up all this” — she gestured to the corn and cantaloupes and tomatoes — “before Sunday!”

Really, she was just half joking. She’s had to get creative with her Sunday meals. The other day she used up some peppers by adding them to her corned beef cabbage. Before that, she added zucchini to stuffed peppers — a new recipe that ensured nothing went to waste.

McDevitt, an oncology pharmacist with the CAMC Cancer Center, participates in a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program the medical center offers in conjunction with Gritt’s Farm, of Buffalo.

She and 99 other Charleston Area Medical Center employees have ordered varying shares of produce over an 11-week period, which began in late June.

Gritt’s Farm supplies the produce; customers like McDevitt make the pickups. Folks from CAMC and Gritt’s Farm will tell you it’s a mutually beneficial partnership — consumers get healthful, locally grown produce, and the farm gets a more stable revenue stream.

On Tuesday, Brad Gritt stood in the shade of a pop-up tent directly behind the open double doors of his produce truck parked in the Cancer Center parking lot. Inside, small, medium and large boxes of produce — valued between \$10 and \$30 per week but selling for less — were stacked up. Around 3:30 p.m., a steady stream of customers started picking them up.

If the weather and the crops cooperate, CSA can be a more stable revenue stream for local farmers like Gritt, whose family has owned and operated Gritt’s Farm since 1927. It’s not like selling stuff at the farmers market, where you predict — hope — customers show up and buy enough of your crop. No, the CSA model relies on a farmer’s knowledge of the growing cycle and projected crop yield to produce an agreed upon amount of food, of which customers pledge in advance to buy shares.

Gritt first encountered CSA in Salt Lake City, where he worked for six months at a bank. He got “farm sick,” as he calls it, and decided to go back to the family business. His marketing and finance coursework at Marshall University gave him some new business ideas, and he convinced his father that CSA could be profitable endeavor. Today, “30 to 35 percent” of Gritt’s Farm’s produce goes to the CSA venture. Gritt credits Buffalo High School’s Future Farmers of America chapter with thinking to approach CAMC regarding a CSA partnership.

Anna Sutton, health and wellness coordinator for CAMC, said the medical center was able to jump on board at the last minute with Gritt’s current 11-week growing cycle.

“It helps local business,” Sutton said, “and encourages healthy eating. And it’s convenient — and that’s a big struggle for folks who try to eat healthy.”

Sutton said the program has been so popular that there's a waiting list of people wanting in on the action. She hopes the size of the program will double.

"I've eaten more vegetables in the past month than I have in my entire life," Derek Hancock joked as he picked up a box of produce. Then, he grew more serious.

"I've lost 5 pounds" in the last two weeks, he said.

"The quality is better. You're helping people, farmers in your community. And you're keeping your money closer to home."

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Saturday, August 8, 2015

Rand backpack giveaway aims for ‘Unity in the Community’

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

RAND — The bikes and backpacks were hidden away inside the Rand Community Center. Give them away too early, Mack Reed joked, and all the kids would leave.

Reed, 53, calls Rand home. For the past seven years he’s organized the Back to School Jam/Unity in the Community event, where local kids get a final taste of summer and, if they draw the right raffle ticket, a new backpack or bike for the upcoming school year. On Saturday, Reed made sure the food line was moving and helped the DJs transition off the small blue and yellow stage with the bowing roof near the community center. The event is an opportunity to show the positive side of Rand, whose residents say their community makes the news — sometimes unfairly — for the wrong reasons. But Unity in the Community is also a kind of recruitment tool, one that Reed and others hope will inspire young people to volunteer and care for Rand.

“You never know when you might need one of these kids out here,” Reed, an admitted fast talker, said, rattling off his words. “Because I’m getting older.”

Reed matched from head to toe, the black and red and white of his Detroit Red Wings hat jibing with his polo shirt, black pants and shoes. Around 3 p.m., he led his guests out of the back room where the bikes and backpacks sat and stepped outside. He walked down the sidewalk past a large bouncy castle — this one for the bigger kids — and a temporary tattoo station, past the basketball courts and toward the food line, where his wife was serving up plates.

Beverly Reed, Mack’s wife of 21 years, said Unity in the Community is like a family reunion — you see people you haven’t seen in a while. People don’t socialize the way they used to, she said, explaining that cell phones and other technology might keep them from getting together face to face. She joked that some people in town call Mack “the mayor of Rand.”

Around 4:30, Mack Reed would give away a couple dozen backpacks and five bikes. The backpacks were donated by Charleston’s Christ Church United Methodist, said Lisa Martin, who was in Rand for the raffle drawing. The bikes were purchased with funds that Reed and other community members raised, according to Rand Volunteer Fire Department Chief Bill White.

White has lived in Rand for over 50 years. He’ll tell you that some locals actually call the “Rand University” 7-Eleven — highlighted in an ESPN 30 For 30 documentary about Randy Moss — the “Rand mall.” But a new Dollar General had come to town in the last six months, he said, which folks are excited about.

“Rand is one-and-one tenth mile long,” White said, adding that the town is 10 blocks long by four blocks. There are 26 businesses in the unincorporated community that he calls “a little mini large city.”

“One of the shining stars of Rand is the community center,” White said, smoking a cigarette and sitting across the table from Larry Young.

Young, who's on the community center's board of directors, smoked his own cigarette under the shade of a wooden shelter. The community center sat behind him, the "I" in "COMMUNITY" on its wall broken in half. State dollars keep the center afloat, Young said, and manpower from the Charleston Work Release programs helps.

"It (Rand) used to have a pretty bad rep," Young said. "But it's getting better."

The two men — who also jokingly call each other "the mayor of Rand" — said events like Reed's are vital to the community. But, they said, Rand can't function without volunteers.

"Rand will probably never be incorporated," White said. "In order to do things for the community, you actually have to have people to do the job."

The men talked about the importance of volunteers like themselves and Reed, how they're able to organize food programs for the elderly, hold sewing classes and begin building walking trails for older and disabled community members. But, they said, they worry that all of the volunteers are aging.

"We really, really need to incorporate some younger blood into all the functions we do," Young said. The volunteer base is "steadily getting older and older," he said, "and someone's gonna have to pick it up."

On the basketball court, just before his father gave away the bikes and backpacks, Marcus Reed tossed a football with some of his friends. The rising junior is a sports management major at Marshall University. Like his father, he hopes to go into coaching.

Marcus said that some of Randy Moss' contributions to Rand had inspired his own father's volunteer work. The important thing about about Unity in the Community, he said, is that it brings everyone together — people who might be "doing the right things" and those who might be "doing the wrong things." It's an opportunity for people to have a positive influence on each other.

Not everyone will hear the message, Marcus said, but some will.

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Thursday, August 13, 2015

54 years later, WV Marine returns to Havana to reopen embassy

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

The trio of U.S. Marines brought down the flag and took care to fold it, despite the crowd that had converged on the embassy.

There had been a brief discussion at the flagpole, where they were surrounded by 1,000 or more Cubans. Do we have time to properly fold the flag? one Marine asked. Hell yes!

Nearby, the Atlantic Ocean battered the seawall that buttressed Havana's coastal highway, the Malecon — the northern boundary of the U.S. Embassy in Cuba. The Marines — specially trained Marine Embassy Guards — turned their backs to the sea and marched the American flag across the patio toward the embassy's front entrance. They wore white caps and gloves, khaki shirts with matching ties, white belts, blue trousers and black shoes, spit-shined. They each carried a .38-caliber pistol.

As they ascended a short flight of steps leading to the entrance, a Cuban blocked Cpl. Larry Morris' path.

"I had to get him out of my way," Morris said, sitting in his Huntington kitchen last month — 54 years after he lowered the flag when the embassy closed in January 1961, after the United States severed diplomatic ties with Cuba.

"So I just give him the shoulder block," Morris said, his words booming as if spoken through a bullhorn, from a throat filled with wet gravel. "I must've hit him pretty good," he said, with a brief look of concern.

As he told the story, he cocked his right arm 90 degrees at the elbow and thrust it upward to demonstrate the move. His bicep — that of an athlete much younger than 75 — bulged beneath tan, sun-weathered skin.

"We brought the flag in and marched it down the hallway, into the Marine office," Morris continued. "I said, 'I gotta go out there and check that guy — I know I cracked him pretty damn good.'"

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The last time Larry Morris was in Cuba, he was destroying classified material and evacuating the U.S. Embassy. He was scheduled to fly to Havana early this morning to take part in a special ceremony, where the American flag will be hoisted atop the embassy flagpole for the first time since Morris helped take it down on Jan. 4, 1961.

The ceremony will occur just over a month after President Obama announced that the United States would re-establish diplomatic relations with Cuba. Relations became official on July 20, according to the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Interests Section in Cuba — the building where Morris worked beginning in August 1960 — once again became the U.S. Embassy in Havana.

Morris, who hails from Lavalette and graduated from Buffalo High School, served as a Marine Embassy Guard from 1960 to 1962, about half of his time in the Marine Corps.

As an embassy guard, Morris' job was to protect sensitive information and police those with access to it. On an eight-hour shift, he'd check desks and garbage cans to make sure no one had left any classified papers in plain sight. Writing down safe combinations was a no-no, so he'd flip through phone books and calendars — popular hiding places — to see if anyone had gotten careless. And he'd double-check the embassy's inventory of secret keys, just in case someone had taken one home.

The embassy guards were like police officers — “junior narcs” — according to John Burns of Las Vegas, New Mexico, who served with Morris for four months in Havana.

In the event an embassy was overrun, an embassy guard was to start on the bottom floor and burn as much sensitive material as possible before making his way to the stairwell, locking the door behind him and climbing up to the next level to repeat the process.

“Our job was not to fight back,” Burns said. The idea was to make attackers fight for access to each floor, he explained, rather than fight Marines.

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“The scariest I ever was in my life,” Morris said, remembering his first duty shift in Havana. He'd come downstairs and rounded the corner to find dozens of Cubans with their noses pressed against the glass near the back door of the embassy. It was around 1 a.m. or 2 a.m. He phoned his superior.

“Gunny?” he said when the gunnery sergeant picked up. “Morris down here. There's about 80 or 90 guys outside the damn door — it scared us.”

“ ‘How many did you shoot?’ ” his sergeant asked.

“None,” Morris replied.

“ ‘Oh my god,’ ” the relieved sergeant said. “ ‘They didn't tell you about that?’ ”

“No.”

“ ‘That's the visa line forming. It'll be a block long by [the] time morning comes around.’ ”

Fidel Castro had taken control of Havana in 1959. As the calendar inched toward 1961, it became a regular occurrence to see people lining up in the dark at the back entrance of the U.S. Embassy in hopes of getting visas. Those who were successful — supporters of the previous regime, some of whose property had been confiscated by Castro's government — became the first wave of Cuban immigrants to the United States. Today, more than 1.1 million Cubans have emigrated to the United States, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

The Cuban Revolution brought Castro's communist government to power, which — according to the Council on Foreign Relations — the U.S. reluctantly recognized. A few years earlier, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had used the Central Intelligence Agency to overthrow the government in Guatemala — a regime “judged to be sailing too close to the Communist wind” — Richard Gott writes in “Cuba: A New History.” As early as June 1959, Gott notes, the State Department and CIA were making plans to support anti-Castro elements and undermine his government.

“The Marines there [in Havana] got to watch the relationships of the two countries sink very quickly,” Burns said.

Burns was in Havana as Castro seized control. He remembers the violence of the Cuban Revolution: theater bombings, assassinations and newspaper pictures that showed bodies floating in the water.

He watched the tit-for-tat — Cuba's nationalization of U.S. assets and America's embargo on Cuban exports, for instance — that caused the countries to break relations on Jan. 3, 1961 — and eventually led to the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

But the diplomatic tensions didn't keep the Marines from enjoying Havana. When they were off duty, there was time to drink Hatuey beer and gamble and chase women. And they lived in the Marine Guard House — “the best house in the neighborhood,” according to Burns — just six or seven blocks from the embassy and even closer to the ocean.

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The multicolored tile of the two-story guard house contrasted with the bland, bureaucratic facade of the six-story embassy where Larry Morris worked his shifts. A local couple managed the house, and the Marines were cared for by maids, who traveled from their shanties to work in Havana's Vedado district.

Vedado had once been a forested area, Christopher Barker writes in his Havana travel guide, a “buffer” for other parts of the city “in case of attack from the west.” In “The Other Side of Paradise,” Julia Cooke describes Vedado, with a hint of cynicism, as a place where “mansions with florid moldings” have “thick palm trees shading front yards,” apartment buildings have “porthole windows and delicate cantilevered stairs,” and “palm fronds that crinkle in salty breezes seem to whisper.”

When he was off duty — and not in Key West, Florida sucking down a few beers after helping with the weekly commissary run — Morris might be found wearing a starched-stiff guayabera shirt and driving around in his two-tone gray 1949 DeSoto, a car he'd bought from a fellow Marine whose two-year embassy guard stint was up. Morris likes to joke that he took the guy's job, bought his car and inherited his girlfriend.

“It was a good duty station,” Morris said. “There was a lot of s--- going on, and we understood.”

Morris was once detained by Cuban militia at a Halloween party, one he found with a secret, hand-drawn map he'd been given. He'd been on duty when a fellow Marine was shot after using the wrong kind of currency to pay for a drink. He saw Castro speak on a couple of occasions at the University of Havana, just over a kilometer south of the embassy, down Calle L. And he'd lingered by the wall at the Hotel Nacional as Castro and his machine-gun-armed bodyguards passed by. Morris breathed easier when they drove away.

By the time Morris got to Havana, in August 1960, the Marines could no longer wear their uniforms away from the embassy, lest they become targets for harassment. They were often followed by “Castro's gestapo,” as some Marines called them, to and from work. On one occasion, Morris said, a newspaper headline invited any Americans who were interested in overthrowing the Cuban government to meet at the embassy.

By New Year's Day 1961, Castro and Eisenhower were taking shots at each other in the newspapers. The final straw came in the predawn hours of Jan. 3, 1961, when the Cuban government demanded the U.S. reduce its number of embassy and consulate workers in Havana to 11 — and gave the Americans 48 hours to comply. At about 8:30 p.m. on Jan. 3, according to the National Archives, the United States terminated relations with Cuba.

Morris was already on the roof burning classified material, preparing to evacuate the embassy.

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“It was a hot job,” Morris said. “It was nasty.”

The embassy’s rooftop incinerator sent black smoke into the mild air above Vedado. There were no shifts, Morris remembers — the burning of classified material was “continuous.” For “four days” leading up to the evacuation, he burned state secrets alongside fellow Marine Mike East.

At breakfast in the Marine Guard House on Jan. 4, 1961, Morris volunteered to lower the flag. A few hours later, he, East and another Marine, Jim Tracy, formed up inside the embassy and made their way to the flagpole. Morris didn’t think about the danger he was in — years later, Tracy would remind him that they could’ve been shot.

After they brought the flag inside, Morris went back out to check on the man he’d hit with the shoulder block.

“Buddy, you OK?” Morris remembers saying.

“I’m OK, I’m OK,” the man replied. “Lo siento, lo siento.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Morris said, “but I had to get you out of my way.”

Morris went back inside and changed out of his uniform. As he prepared to exit the embassy, he saw another American flag near a guard station. He took it off its mount and stuffed the gold-fringed flag in his duffel bag.

He exited the embassy and walked toward his bus, down a human walkway formed by some of Castro’s female militia members — “milicianas.” Soon he was on a boat bound for Florida. They had beer on the boat, Morris remembers. He drank one and went to sleep.

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“After I volunteered [to lower the flag], I thought about what it would be like — how the flag would ever get back up,” Morris said last month as he sat in his kitchen. He paused. His lip quivered. “And this’ll be the end of the story, you know, for me.”

Ahead of his return to Cuba, Morris was unsure of what to expect. Was he excited? Yes and no. Would returning to Havana be emotional? Probably. He hoped to visit the old Marine Guard House. He joked about buying a couple of guayaberas and looking for his old DeSoto.

He’d recently watched a TV show about Cuban cars. As a retired machinist, he’d been impressed with the way Cuban mechanics were able to engineer their own parts and keep old cars on the road. And he appreciated their resourcefulness, collecting parts and hiding them away — saving them for a day when they’d be needed.

Cuba is “part of me,” Morris said, recounting a recent discussion he’d had with a neighbor who disagreed with the resumption of U.S.-Cuban relations.

“I spent my time there,” Morris said. “I can’t say anything bad about Cuba. And I won’t.”

Morris said he didn’t tell many people about lowering the flag in Havana. He wasn’t even sure if he’d told his parents before they died. He didn’t want to come across as a braggart, he said.

Today, the gold-fringed American flag Morris rescued from the embassy rests in a wooden display case in his home. His grandson bought the case after learning the flag's story.

The flag has 48 stars. Near one of them, along the flag's border, is a label that, according to Morris, tells where the flag was made. "LA CASA DE LAS BANDERAS," it reads.

"HABANA."

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Saturday, August 15, 2015

Spirit of the Valley campaign raises \$300K, will honor John Elliot at luncheon

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

John Elliot examined the paintings that rested against the wall. There were three of them, all portraits of some sort. They were rendered with black paint and speckled with dirt.

The dirt, Elliot explained, was the artist's signature style — an element that rooted the portraits' subjects to their respective homes. The technique, he said, is just as interesting to an architect — Elliot's past profession — as the art. As he spoke, his gentle voice was almost lost in the large conference room of his Capitol Street offices.

On Wednesday, Elliot will be honored with the "Spirit of the Valley" award, presented by YMCA of Kanawha Valley. Elliot owns AMFM LLC — a long-term health care provider with over a dozen facilities in West Virginia — and has been involved with local charities and civic organizations for many years. As Wednesday's award luncheon at the Charleston Civic Center nears, he finds himself in a time of transition, personally and professionally. But the soft-spoken, quiet leader is the ideal recipient, some say, of an award that honors behind-the-scenes work.

"It's a big group of volunteers supporting a super volunteer," Tom Heywood said, explaining the purpose of the Spirit of the Valley award, first given in 1985, and its accompanying campaign.

Heywood, a local attorney, is a vice chairman of the Spirit of the Valley campaign. This year's campaign has raised about \$300,000 to date, according Jason Keeling of YMCA of Kanawha Valley. That money will fund nearly 4,000 scholarships for the area's youth, Keeling said, which will pay for YMCA memberships, program participation and building rental fees and after-school and summer school child care programs.

"The (Spirit of the Valley) award is given to someone who gives quietly to make his community a better place," Heywood said. "And John (Elliot) is profoundly that."

Since moving to Charleston in 1989, John Elliot and his wife, Fonda, have made the Kanawha Valley home while maintaining connections to their Ohio roots. The couple still has Cleveland Browns season tickets, for example, and in 2013 they made a \$5 million gift to the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Kent State University, John's alma mater. Closer to home, the Elliots pledged a \$1 million gift to the University of Charleston's Russell and Martha Wehrle Innovation Center. And in 2001, as the Clay Center was preparing to open — and still in need of \$18 million — the Elliots donated \$500,000.

"My dad immigrated from Scotland at the turn of the century, and he had nothing," John Elliot said a couple of weeks ago as he sat in the AMFM conference room. "He gave us — my brother, my sister, myself — a foundation of what we are today. And it's just always been part of our fabric that you don't make it by yourself."

In addition to giving money, Elliot also gives of his time. He's the chairperson of the West Virginia Symphony Orchestra, and he's served on numerous boards, including those for YMCA, the United Way and the Buckskin Council for the Boy Scouts of America. He's also served on the executive committee for the Clay Center.

“This project with the Y is kind of my swan song,” Elliot said, referring to his work with this year’s Spirit of the Valley campaign. “I’m trying to semi-retire. ... I’ve gotta move up to the board of directors and get out of being the guy running (AMFM LLC).”

A recent health scare and the resulting open-heart surgery was a “wakeup call” for Elliot. He realized he “really didn’t have balance” in his life because of his focus on AMFM. The irony of an aging businessman with “95 percent blockage” in five arteries to his heart who managed nursing facilities for the elderly wasn’t lost on him.

But Elliot will admit that it’s hard not to get “sucked in” to running the business. He jokes that it’s like the bumper sticker — the one he used to have on his car — says: “Architects don’t die, they just fade away — like blueprints.”

Elliot follows a plan for giving. He starts out by giving his time, which enables him to see how an organization is managed. Then, if he’s really committed, he’ll give his money. Resonating with a civic organization’s techniques helps him appreciate its contributions. And he’s quiet about his giving — that’s his style.

“That sort of quiet leadership,” said Heywood, “begets more quiet leadership.”

Tickets for Wednesday’s award luncheon start at \$175, and YMCA Kanawa Valley is still accepting donations. Visit www.YMCAofKV.org/spirit or contact Jason Keeling at 304-989-3262 or jkeeling@ymcawv.org.

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Saturday, August 15, 2015

Early school start slams WV State Fair on 1st weekend

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

FAIRLEA, W.Va. — The lines reminded him of 1982, when he was working a ticket booth at the West Virginia State Fair — when Alabama came to town.

Alabama, the popular country music band, had attracted so many fairgoers that Tom Campbell's ticket booth had almost been overrun. It actually shook a little bit from the "crush of people."

On Saturday, Campbell — a member of the fair's board of directors — walked amongst the throngs of people who'd lined up to purchase tickets to the 91st West Virginia State Fair. By 1 p.m., the lines stretched from the ticket booths into the parking lot.

"We're out here learning," Campbell said, explaining that he and other staffers were trying to make adjustments to shorten the lines and decrease people's wait times.

On the state fair's opening weekend, several variables had combined to lengthen the lines in which people waited and increase the time it took them to get from their cars to the carnival rides.

Several West Virginia school systems started classes earlier this year than usual, meaning the fair saw big crowds on weekends and a relative dearth on weekdays. Pedestrian traffic was being routed through a new underpass beneath U.S. 219, and there was a new traffic-flow pattern being used in an attempt to accommodate all the motorists on the road.

Rodney Morgan and his family left their Pineville home at 8:30 a.m. Saturday — at about 1 p.m., he was still standing in the ticket line. He estimated that he been in line for about an hour and a half.

"This is ridiculous," Morgan said to another man, complaining that he usually only has to wait 15 minutes. The other man nodded his agreement and compared Saturday's lines to the crowds that had gathered at the Superdome in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

"Why would they want to change it?" Morgan said, glancing to his left at the next line he'd have to wait in — new ticketholders who were being funneled through the underpass and into the fair.

Morgan guessed that state fair traffic was up this year because of the school districts that had already started classes. His daughter, Kendra Morgan, could attest — the fourth-grader's school, Baileysville Elementary and Middle School, in Wyoming County, started classes on Aug. 10.

According to the West Virginia Department of Education's calendar, 28 of 55 county school systems resumed classes last week. Most Kanawha County schools began classes on Aug. 10, and Greenbrier County resumed instruction on Aug. 6.

"I'm gonna guess Monday through Friday [of next week] will be really easy to get in, because everyone is in school," Kelby Faulkner said as he stood off to the side while his child waited to get on the carnival ride, "Full Tilt."

Faulkner, who lives in nearby Maxwelton, said it took his family almost two hours to travel 8 miles to the fair, park, buy their tickets and gain entrance to the fairgrounds — but it could've taken even longer. He was lucky, he said, to overhear another person suggest buying tickets online, which allowed him to go straight to the admission line, at the underpass.

“If the school’s are gonna go back so early,” Sherri Faulkner, Kelby’s spouse, said, “they need to change the date of the fair.”

West Virginia State Fair CEO Kelly Collins said it’s challenging to change the date of the fair in relation to school calendars. A date change could mean overlapping with another festival or event, she said, and some state fair vendors might not be able to accommodate a different schedule. Collins, in her first year as CEO, said the fair has always started on the second Friday of August.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve seen it this crowded,” Collins said, adding that the nice weather had combined with public schools’ early start dates to drive Saturday’s attendance up.

As of 3 p.m., she didn’t have any specific attendance figures, but Collins, who’d been parking cars for three hours, said all of her parking lots were full and that staffers were creating more space to accommodate motorists. They’d only had two ticket booths open at 8 a.m., she said — by 3 p.m., they had 11, including two locations near the livestock area. And, she said, staffers were creating a cash-only ticket line to reduce wait times.

Purchasing your tickets online ahead of time is a good way to reduce your wait time, Collins said. You can buy them by visiting the State Fair of West Virginia website, www.statefairfowv.com/tickets. You can print paper copies of your tickets to take to the main gate, where the ticket barcodes will be scanned. Alternatively, you can purchase tickets with your smart phone, and state fair staffers can scan the barcode on your phone’s screen.

Collins, who’d also been handing out water to those waiting in line, said she and her staff were working to create new lesson plans to attract schools — that might continue to start early in August — to take field trips to the fair.

Campbell, who walked through the long lines talking to folks who were waiting, listened to complaints and thanked people for their patience, and he tried to remain optimistic about the large crowd.

“It’s an awesome problem to have,” he said.

The 10-day West Virginia State Fair continues through Aug. 23. For more information and a schedule of events, go to www.statefairfowv.com or follow @SFWV on Twitter.

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Sunday, September 6, 2015

‘Mission ready’: HealthNet crews never know what the day will bring

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

BEAVER — Veteran crewmembers call them “goober days.” They’re the first day on the job for new flight nurses and paramedics. It’s the day when they get used to the helicopter — and get over the coolness factor of flying in it.

On their first flight, goobers often sit up front next to the pilot in one of HealthNet Aeromedical Services’ choppers. It gives them a chance to sightsee, to get the joyride out of their systems. On their next flight, the rookies move back to the mini intensive-care unit that’s crammed into the aircraft’s fuselage. There, they observe the realities of critical patient care in hot, cramped quarters. Hopefully, they learn that their work isn’t as glamorous as their new HealthNet flight suits might make it seem.

During the past two months, the Gazette-Mail flew several times with HealthNet Base No. 5 — HealthNet 5 — at Raleigh County Memorial Airport, just outside of Beckley. Daily life on the base is dictated by the emergency calls that beep on crewmembers’ cellphones and sound throughout the base. But not every call involves a major car accident on the Turnpike. And some days there are no calls.

The flight nurses and flight paramedics at HealthNet 5 say the public might have misconceptions about their work — and their identities. They’re sometimes confused for the pilots who fly HealthNet’s gold and blue birds; sometimes people they know don’t recognize them without their flight gear. The public looks up, they say, and just sees a helicopter.

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Brandi McMullen, a flight nurse, and Jody Ratliff, a flight paramedic, joke that they fight over opportunities to perform intubations.

On a hot morning in mid-June, the duo sat in the back of their \$6.5 million Eurocopter EC-135 at HealthNet 5 and checked the aircraft’s medical equipment. They were “mission ready” in full-length, navy blue flight suits, but they’d rolled up their sleeves.

Intubation — when a tube is inserted into a patient’s throat to facilitate breathing — is a challenging procedure to perform in a jostling helicopter. It’s rare: From January to May, HealthNet 5 crews performed the procedure just eight times, and McMullen said on Aug. 26 that she’s only intubated two patients all summer. But it’s a rewarding procedure — an affirmation of competency and a chance to practice. So, when McMullen and Ratliff work together, they take turns.

Ratliff, a 40-year-old Union native and U.S. Navy veteran, has worked for HealthNet for almost eight years. He’s tall, with a shaved head above a salt-and-pepper goatee, and tattoos peek out from beneath his flight suit. McMullen, 38, hails from Summersville and is an experienced emergency room nurse. She’s tan, with shoulder-length sandy-blond hair, light-blue eyes and an athlete’s build. She’s been with the company eight years.

HealthNet began in 1986. President and CEO Clinton Burley, a former flight paramedic himself, said in June that the West Virginia State Police had once operated an air-ambulance service but its funding dried up in the mid-1980s. Mountain State hospitals saw a need and took action. Today, HealthNet is a nonprofit organization jointly operated and funded by Charleston Area Medical Center, Cabell Huntington Hospital and West Virginia University Hospitals.

The company has nine bases now, having opened its Lewisburg location in July, and during the past three decades, it's flown more than 75,000 patients, accident free. According to HealthNet, its average flight costs a patient about \$15,000.

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On the sunbaked tarmac, Ratliff and McMullen continued to prep their aircraft. Moments earlier, they had walked around the helicopter with the pilot, who was looking for any signs of damage and abnormalities. Before that, McMullen had checked the base's supply of blood.

The blood, which is used for in-flight transfusions, is a new addition to HealthNet flights, McMullen said. It's kept in a small refrigerator inside the base's hangar, where Hogan — the base mechanic's German shepherd — sits and guards his red ball.

The hangar houses maintenance supplies and the crew's flight helmets. It's also stocked with lounge chairs, cornhole boards and an exercise bike. When crewmembers aren't completing fatigue self-assessments, ordering medical supplies and filling out paperwork, there's some downtime.

Upstairs is a TV facing two recliners, in which Ratliff might relax. There's a kitchen that McMullen — the base "mom" — tries to keep clean. She's labeled all the cabinets, and she's likely to chase fruit flies around the place, killing them with a portable bug zapper that looks like a small, red tennis racket.

Downstairs, adjacent to the hangar and the pilots' operations room, are the crewmembers' bedrooms. Crews can rest if they're on the 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. shift, or if they're on a 24-hour shift. Sometimes they can sleep through the night, but a busy day — five emergency calls in 24 hours — might keep them up.

"Trauma season," the summer months between Memorial Day and Labor Day, tends to be busier. People are more apt to be on boats and ATVs and out hiking — and to have accidents. The number of "scene flights" — when their helicopter is dispatched to makeshift landing zones at accident sites — tends to increase. Other days are more routine, maybe a couple of "inter-facility transports," when a patient is airlifted from a smaller hospital to a larger one with more care capabilities.

HealthNet 5 never knows what a day will bring. It has to wait for the first call.

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McMullen, Ratliff and pilot Chris Kempler agreed to take the call, an inter-facility transport of a patient from Princeton Community Hospital to CAMC.

There were some pop-up thunderstorms in the area, typical for a mid-June afternoon, but their path south toward Princeton was clear. And since they had just come on shift at 8 a.m., their fatigue-risk levels were low enough to accept the mission. "It takes three to go and one to say no," as the company-wide saying goes, and all three crewmembers felt comfortable taking this flight.

System-wide, HealthNet crews had to refuse 1,303 flights from January to July, according to data provided by the company. In about 88 percent of those missed flights, the weather was the culprit. Of the 2,125 flights completed over the same period, roughly 70 percent were inter-facility transports.

Kempler pursed his lips in concentration as he lifted the EC-135 off its landing pad. He swung the tail left and climbed, eventually reaching 4,000 feet. In the back, McMullen and Ratliff had received more information about the patient in Princeton.

The patient was reported to have gastrointestinal bleeding.

They landed about 35 minutes later, picked up the patient and transported her without incident to CAMC. There, they waited out a thunderstorm before returning to base. When they landed at HealthNet 5, McMullen and Ratliff went upstairs and completed their post-flight paperwork.

McMullen's shift ended. Ratliff would stay on for another 12 hours. He'd be awakened in the middle of the night and don his night-vision goggles — another inter-facility transport (a man who'd had a heart attack), this time between two hospitals in Virginia.

The afternoon thunderstorms, high humidity and low winds had produced nighttime fog in most of HealthNet 5's 150-mile operating radius. With the exception of the flight to Virginia, the base's airspace was shut down.

The day ended with just two flights: about four hours of flight time — maybe two hours spent with patients.

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"If you write about the pilot, everyone will care," HealthNet 5 base manager Kay Eliason said. A sly grin appeared on her face as she rocked in one of the base's recliners on a mid-July afternoon.

The pilots and their birds are what the public finds interesting, she said. HealthNet crews joke with the pilots, call them glorified ambulance drivers. The pilots take it in stride. The patches on their flight suits read "Air Methods" — the company HealthNet contracts with for pilot services — but they're on the same team as the medical personnel.

"From the outside, it looks pretty glamorous," Eliason said. "Obviously, you're in a flight suit riding in a helo. But it's a lot of hard work."

In the adjacent room, a whiteboard hung on the wall. It listed 16 crewmembers — including Eliason, Ratliff and McMullen — and about 10 different lifesaving certifications each HealthNet employee had to maintain: Advanced Cardiovascular Life Support ("ACLS"); Pediatric Advanced Life Support ("PALS"); and Neonatal Resuscitation Program ("NRP") were among the first listed. In the same room were crewmembers' binders, which documented the outreach and education they had performed for various organizations, such as hospitals and law enforcement agencies.

"People don't know the level of critical care a patient can get," Eliason said, commenting on the number of trauma centers per square mile. There are just two Level 1 — the highest level — trauma centers (CAMC and WVU Hospitals) in the state, according to the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health. The state has about 24,230 square miles.

"You're gonna prepare half the time — minimally — to be ready to fly," Eliason said.

Earlier that morning, McMullen sat in the hangar and worked a new liner into her flight helmet. When she first learned they'd start carrying blood on flights, she said, she started a training regimen for the base. She made a batch of fruit punch and put it in the same type of clear bags. She practiced refrigerating it between 1 and 6 degrees Celsius. She rehearsed loading and unloading it on the helicopter. And she placed a sign in the aircraft's tiny intensive-care unit. "Got blood?" it reads.

Monday, September 7, 2015

Clay County man pens book on World War II veterans

By [Wade Livingston](#), Staff writer

MAYSEL — Ronnie Hamrick picked up the Dollar General bag and carefully reached inside.

“This here is a precious book,” the Clay County man said as he stood sock-footed in his kitchen. “And I’m thankful to be able to borrow it.”

He slowly removed the book, its faded navy cover clashing with the plastic shine of the yellow sack. “YOUNG AMERICAN PATRIOTS, WORLD WAR II, West Virginia,” the cover read. He rested the decades-old book on his work table, which held more reference books, a World War II atlas and 10 or so sticky notes, all neatly arranged, some at 45-degree angles.

Hamrick is using those books to complete his own, a local reference book — currently a notebook paper-filled black binder — that, on this day, was splayed open on the table. The lined pages had been run through a printer and bore an entry template filled with handwritten notes for each soldier. There were 788 pages, two soldiers per page. Its working title: “Honor Roll: World War II Veterans from Clay County West Virginia.”

Hamrick has been working on his book since 2008. Now he’s transferring it to his computer. Toward the end of October — he thinks — he’ll be ready to print it, then sell it through the Clay County Landmarks Commission and Historical Society. Truthfully, though, he doesn’t want to finish his book — he needs your help to ensure he doesn’t.

From somewhere in the kitchen, Big Band music played. Hamrick swung around the room. At one moment he was at his computer, showing a clip from an old Hollywood flick about the Bataan Death March. The next he was digging in a file, rifling through black-and-white photos and postcards of Europe that soldiers had sent home. Then, he was back at his computer, cross referencing the names in his book with those he’d listed on a separate piece of paper. Spanning the width of the paper was a skinny, dark metal bar — a piece of cold-rolled steel — which Hamrick used to mark his place.

Hamrick works on his book when he’s not filling blacksmithing orders at Tamarack, or when the weather forces him out of his tiny smithy adjacent to the house. The house was his mother’s, and he cared for her there before she died. She used to holler at him from the front porch while he worked, but sometimes he couldn’t hear her over the forge and the hammer blows. So, he installed in the smithy a small, round mirror, which gave him a clear view of the porch; she could wave at him and catch his eye. Today that mirror holds only Hamrick’s reflection — bespectacled brown eyes and a bushy mustache, planted on his face like a propeller on the nose of an airplane.

“I’ve always been interested in airplanes,” Hamrick said as he sat at his computer. “Ever since I was a kid.”

His favorite childhood book showed all the action stations — the gunners’ positions, the cockpit, the navigator and bombardier seats — in a B-17 Flying Fortress. The book was cut out in the shape of the World War II four-engine bomber. His cousin was on a similar plane — a B-24 Liberator, according to Hamrick — that was shot down over the North Sea. “Young American Patriots” has an entry for James Harold Hamrick — he’s listed as missing.

“I’ll hold my composure since we’re talking,” Hamrick said as he picked up “Young American Patriots” and reached for the yellow bag. “But these guys died. These guys died.”

His eyes watered. He eased the book into the yellow bag and gently folded the excess plastic underneath it.

Another of Hamrick’s cousins, Leon S. Paxton, is listed as missing — his name is inscribed on a tablet in the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery in Italy, where the Army Ranger fought at Anzio. Growing up, Hamrick heard stories of his cousins, and their “missing” status was a catalyst for his book. Another, which he noted in a draft of his book’s preface, was his experience as a preacher’s son.

On the walls of some of the Methodist churches his late father pastored were large wooden plaques — “Honor Roll,” they read. The plaques had brass plates engraved with soldiers’ names. Some of those plates bore stars.

“Each time I would see one of those plaques I would go and read the names,” Hamrick writes, “not realizing the sacrifice that these men had made ... The ones with the stars made the ultimate sacrifice.”

According to the National Archives (records from the Army and Army Air Corps, and separate records from the Navy, Marines and Coast Guard), West Virginians accounted for 7,160 casualties in World War II. In 1946, the Navy counted 963 persons killed in combat or prison camps, and the Army classified 3,041 deaths as “killed in action.” The Army listed 48 Clay County residents as either dead or missing. The Navy’s records did not provide a breakdown by county.

“He digs so deep ... trying to find out what happened to those guys,” said his brother, Allen Hamrick, adding that when it’s finished, the book will be a reference tool for local families and historians.

The book will include anyone from Clay County that served in World War II, whether at home or abroad, regardless of gender or military occupation, whether they are alive or dead, Ronnie Hamrick said. There are more than 20 data fields for each service man or woman that he’ll try to fill, ranging from dates of service to military qualifications, training sites to theaters of operation, awards and citations to personal stories. Piecing together all the information, he said, is like “treasure hunting.”

“As long as I’ve known him, he’s never done anything halfway,” said Jerry Stover, president of the Clay County Historical Society. “I see him as a fall-back to previous generations.”

The book has been intensely researched, Stover said, and he hopes Hamrick’s work will inspire other West Virginians to take up similar projects in their own counties.

“We are forgetting the role that these [WWII soldiers] played,” Stover said. “Anybody that looks through [Hamrick’s book] will have to take a trip back in time.”

For the most part, the kitchen in Ronnie Hamrick’s house is just as his mother kept it before she died. The living room is unchanged too. The house smells like church hymnals and Bibles, and there are several of each scattered throughout the place. Pictures of his parents hang on the walls.

On a wooden rocking chair in the living room sit two framed pictures, both of cemeteries. One of them shows a white column building fronted by white crosses — the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery, where his cousin is memorialized. Hamrick gets chills when he holds it. And his eyes water.

Hamrick never served in the military. His book, he’ll tell you, is his way of honoring those who did. When he thinks of the dead World War II veterans, he imagines them alive.

There's a place he goes in his mind when he works on his "war stuff." It's not a departure from reality, he said, and it's not like he's fighting the war. It's more like looking through a family picture album: Yes, his mother and father are gone, but as long as they're in his mind, they're still alive. As he and friends discussed during a recent Sunday school lesson, "one of the most horrible things is to be forgotten."

When his book comes out, it'll have some blank spaces. That's OK, Hamrick said. If a soldier's information is incomplete, it'll at least signal that someone cared enough to look for it in the first place. And it might prompt people to contact him, to help him fill in the blanks — to allow him to keep working.

He's already planning for future editions.

Ronnie Hamrick invites you to contact him if you have information about any service men or women from Clay County who served during World War II, at home or abroad, or with an army of occupation. Email him at clayWW2book@hotmail.com, or write to him at P.O. Box 247, Maysel, WV 25133.

PROFESSIONAL ANALYSIS ARTICLE

When I was a child, my father would sometimes bring up The Great Southern Novel he'd always wanted to write but hadn't yet managed to.

The details are fuzzy, but I remember the protagonist being a poor, small-town man who'd somehow made a go of it in politics and risen to power in South Carolina. I'm sure that character took shape from my father's life: He was raised in the town of North, South Carolina, by my grandmother — a nurse — and my grandfather — who farmed and worked at a screen-door manufacturing plant — before earning his doctorate in political science from Ole Miss. Academia was so foreign to his extended family that some relatives assumed Dr. Livingston practiced medicine.

My father never ventured into politics, and I'm not sure what became of his protagonist. But I can't forget the name he gave to the novel swirling around in his head: "A Voice in the Southern Wind."

For the better part of a year, I've thought a lot about voice and the South — from the perspective of a narrative nonfiction writer. In the spring of 2015, as a graduate student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, I set out on a quest.

I was trying to find the intersection between craft and culture: narrative nonfiction writing wrapped in a Southern voice. I talked to accomplished journalists from the South to learn how they approached writing, and to see how — if — their Southern roots influence their work. As a young journalist who strongly identifies as

a Southerner, I was trying to find my writing voice. That was the purpose of this quest.

On some levels I suppose my quest will resonate with any writer. It's an exploration of the mechanics and influences that render voice, why a person's writing sounds ... personal. On another level it was a lonely journey, one that sought a distinctive blueprint I could follow.

It was motivated by the need to belong.

The notion of belonging is a universal human condition — I think it's safe to say that.

For me, belonging means you see a larger world that exists outside yourself. It means you're not alone. It implies connection: You sacrifice individualism in return for membership, bonds with people, places and ideas. And if you truly belong, it's affirming — because you know you've been accepted. That you're worthy.

Never have I felt the need to know I'm worthy more so than during the past couple of years. In 2013 at the age of 31, I quit a tenure-track faculty job at Clemson University to go back to school to train as a journalist. I had no journalism experience. As a journalist might say, I had zero street cred.

I'd known for a while that I didn't belong in academia, though I tried several years to convince myself otherwise. Looking back now, I think it's because I felt like I didn't have a voice, or the right (academic) voice. Sure, there were the politics that went along with being a junior tenure-track professor, but I never felt disenfranchised or anything. It was more about the subject matter: I wasn't

passionate about higher education administration, the discipline in which I earned my doctorate. And I certainly wasn't passionate about writing about it, especially the way I felt forced to write about it.

You've likely read 30-page academic journal articles that are full of jargon and theory. And hard to read. I'm not belittling academic writing: It serves a purpose within the academy, and some folks are really good at it. But it tends to remain trapped in the Ivory Tower.

If I'm honest, I've always wanted my voice to be heard by a wider audience. For someone who writes better than he talks, writing has always been my preferred medium. But that medium — wrapped in academic-speak and rendered in 30-page journal articles — became tedious. I found myself trying to sound like all the other scholars. I saw in front of me the promise of tenure, a comfortable life, and I got scared that I'd lose myself — my voice — if I pursued it. So, I made a career change. It was freeing. It was intimidating — scary, even. I had to prove myself all over again.

In the spring of 2015, after about two years of reporting and writing, newspaper and magazine internships and coursework in the craft, I realized I belonged as a journalist.

But as I started conceptualizing my master's project — the final hurdle standing in the way of that Mizzou diploma — I began reflecting on my life's narrative, what it was and what I wanted it to be. I realized how deeply my identity as a Southerner affected that narrative, and how much I wanted the South to be

present in my work. I wanted to identify — belong — as A Southern Writer, and that meant I had to hone a Southern voice. Or so I thought.

But four expert guides challenged my thinking.

Pate McMichael, Chuck Reece, Wright Thompson and Tommy Tomlinson are narrative nonfiction writers from the South. They write about things I'm interested in: sports, culture, food, people, history, the South. And, like me, they're white men who've reflected on the region's beauty and blight.

They taught me a lot about narrative writing. They spoke to the South's influence on their work. And they pushed back when I asked if a distinctive Southern writing voice exists — of course it doesn't. And that's freeing.

Wright Thompson was in New Orleans when I telephoned him in June. The 38-year-old Clarksburg, Mississippi, native was in line ordering a coffee when I asked him how he defines voice. He, in turn, asked the barista.

"It's your signature," Thompson said, relaying the barista's response. We agreed it was a good answer. Coffee in hand, Thompson left the barista and contemplated the question himself.

He talked about "voiciness" (naming John Jeremiah Sullivan and Tom Junod) writers whose work you'd recognize without their byline. He said "I don't know" a couple of times. The question and its follow-up — How did you develop your voice? — seemed to irritate him. He said he doesn't actively think about the voice of the piece; he just worries whether he can do the damn story.

During the past 17 years, Thompson has written about Michael Jordan and Ted Williams, the 2014 World Cup and the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. He's authored TV pieces for ESPN, and he edited "The Best American Sports Writing 2015." He's won awards for his narrative nonfiction but, as he says, "none that matter" (meaning a Pulitzer or a National Magazine Award). He'll tell you he's written some pieces he's proud of and a lot of stories he hates.

"I struggled for a really long time to just strip away everything" — he'd later specify simile and metaphor — "and when I go back and read it now, you can just see someone at a keyboard typing," he said. "And I hate that. Where it feels like pyrotechnics for pyrotechnics sake."

"I have literally never, ever, put in a single amount of thought to developing my voice, although I do always strive for sort of an authenticity" (Authenticity, he said, is avoiding colloquialisms and "cute little jokes" and alliteration — stuff that's "hack-ish.")

As an undergraduate at the University of Missouri, Thompson took a class on 19th century American literature. The class focused on sense of place as a character in story. Sense of place is evident in his stories, he said, which makes sense as he's someone "from a place with a strong sense of place."

"Absolutely," the South has a strong sense of place, he said: "It's one of the very few places left in America where culture is defined inside-out and not outside-in." But Thompson took issue with the notion of a distinctive Southern writing voice. That's something English majors would talk about, he said, adding that they'd probably say Southern writers "write like poor people."

Which is “condescending and bullshit,” he said. And trying to write like a Southern writer? Well, that’s also “hack-ish.”

Toward the end of our phone conversation in September, Chuck Reece opened two books and read aloud the opening line of each. The first was William Faulkner’s “Absolom, Absolom!” The second was Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

The juxtaposition of Faulkner’s “florid” prose with O’Connor’s “straightforward” writing drove home Reece’s point: “There are so many different Southern voices.”

Reece, 54, is the founder and editor of *The Bitter Southerner*, an Atlanta-based digital publication that’s trying to reimagine the South. The Ellijay, Georgia, native worked himself into a sports-writing gig for his hometown paper in high school, and he wrote for the *Red & Black*, the student newspaper at the University of Georgia. He’s written for trade publications in New York and freelanced for magazines. He covered the 1990 Georgia gubernatorial race, which led to a job as Gov. Zell Miller’s press secretary. Now, he’s back writing and editing narrative nonfiction.

And he’s struggling with the word “y’all.”

In his branding of *The Bitter Southerner*, Reece said he might overuse the South’s signature pronoun — a familiar cultural marker and one that invites stereotype. Yes, there’s an appeal to the word “y’all,” and there’s also the

assumption that all Southerners use it. Reece intends his publication to challenge assumptions.

“Some of the worst shit I get, in terms of submissions, is stuff that’s just so self-consciously Southern,” Reece said. “You know, that, like, uses shit that people *think* we say, instead of what we actually say.”

For Reece, voice is less about the words that writers use and more about their points of view. Voice is rendered by the topics they select and the thoughtful way they take a reader through a piece.

Earlier in our conversation, Reece referenced a recent New York Times review, which applauded *The Bitter Southerner* for its “off-centered” and “vivid” take on the South. If people hold that view of his publication, he said, it’s because “they’re not used to people writing about the South that way.”

Here’s what I came to understand from my conversation with Reece: No, there’s not a distinctive Southern voice. But Southern writers can make their voices distinctive — by challenging whitewashed history and mythology.

“I think in the South, maybe more than other places,” Tommy Tomlinson said, “we had to invent myths and legends of things, because the South has always been on the losing end on a lot of the history of this country.”

Tomlinson’s words echoed those of Reece, with whom he worked at the Red & Black in college. The 51-year-old Brunswick, Georgia, native has covered a litany of topics in his 29-year career, the bulk of which has been spent at the Charlotte Observer. He’s a Pulitzer finalist who’s been featured in the “Best American Sports

Writing” and “America’s Best Newspaper Writing,” and he’s a freelancer and contributing writer for ESPN.

“In some ways our imaginations had to cover up some of the harsh realities of what Southerners faced, and some of the hands they dealt themselves,” he continued.

He’d arrived at this point after talking about the South’s stereotypically strong oral storytelling tradition, after I’d asked him how the region has influenced his writing. The theme of storytelling came up in all of my interviews, and Tomlinson answered many of my questions with stories. He was the only writer of the bunch who could describe his voice to me.

Tomlinson’s parents were sharecroppers, and they had to drop out of school to work. But they learned how to read, and when the paper thudded against the family’s door around 4 p.m. each day, Tomlinson would retrieve it, take off the green rubber band that bound it, and he and his parents would read.

When he was at the Charlotte Observer, a master’s student interned one summer with the goal of figuring out what grade level the paper’s reporters wrote at. According to the student’s analysis, Tomlinson wrote at a fifth-grade level, the lowest in the newsroom. His colleagues gave him “some shit about that.” Tomlinson, though, took it as a compliment.

His writing voice, he said, is characterized by simplicity: telling complex stories in a way anyone can understand them. The ability to clearly explain nuclear fission to his mother, he said. (Pixar movies — “WALL-E,” “The Incredibles” and

“Inside Out” — are a source of inspiration. They’re made with kids in mind, but they contain great emotion, plot twists and drama.)

And, referencing a recent article he wrote for Our State magazine, his voice is characterized by intimacy. Tomlinson had to have surgery for throat cancer, which damaged his vocal cords. He’s no longer able to shout above scrums of reporters in press conferences. Instead, he relies on observation and one-on-one conversations.

As I listened to Tomlinson, I realized the characteristics of his voice — simplicity, clarity, intimacy — didn’t stem from anything distinctively Southern.

He theorizes that as the world has become more connected — through television and the Internet — that everyone is now more alike than they are different. “A fusion of influence,” he called it. Rather than the presence of a distinctive Southern voice, he said, you might see “flavors” of the South in writing.

It’s like Southern cuisine, Tomlinson said, where chefs modify traditional dishes like fried chicken and collard greens. It’s like music, he said, how if you didn’t know R.E.M. was from Athens, Georgia, you wouldn’t think it was a Southern rock band — and even if you knew the group’s roots, you probably wouldn’t pair it with Lynyrd Skynyrd.

In 2005, Pate McMichael had just finished his master’s degree at the University of Missouri, and he was packing up to go home. The night before he left, he said this to his roommates: “I’m going home, I’m going home — I want to be a Southern writer. I want to be known as a Southern writer.”

At 34 years old, McMichael and I are the same age. The Washington, Georgia, native has been a journalist for over a decade, and he teaches journalism at Georgia College, in Milledgeville. He's written for St. Louis Magazine and Atlanta Magazine, and he was a finalist for the Livingston Award for Young Journalists in 2009. In April, he penned "Klandestine," a book about a conspiracy to cover up James Earl Ray's involvement in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

As McMichael spoke about going home to be a Southern writer, I felt a kinship over the phone on that June evening. *Finally*, I thought, *someone who's actually used that label*. But the longer we talked, the more I realized McMichael was talking about writing *in* the South, *about* the South — and about topics (such as immigration) that might upset friends and family — rather than writing *like* the South.

McMichael returned home to be "close to the land" and spend time with his father before he died. He came home armed with experience and perspective, the drive to do good journalism in a part of the world where there was a dearth of it. But he pushed back on the notion of a Southern voice.

"If you try to channel another (person's voice)," he said, "it comes out phony because, you know, you just sound like them. Voice has got to be your own voice. And I do think ... that one key to that is to pick topics that other writers don't pick, because what that does is it shows your originality"

Sitting around and trying to become the next great Southern writer "is a waste of time," he said, because it's already been done, by folks such as O'Connor and Eudora Welty.

Our conversation reminded me of an essay that John Grisham wrote in *The Oxford American* in 1992. Grisham, the Mississippi fiction writer of legal dramas, recalled sitting in a bookstore during a book-signing tour and being bothered by a TV reporter. The reporter kept asking about Faulkner, whether it was stressful for Grisham to write in the legend's shadow. Grisham reminded the reporter that he was a commercial fiction writer — and that Faulkner was dead.

So, what of this quest — what did I discover? What did I learn from my guides? My conclusion: voice is ultimately about ego and authenticity.

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines ego as "the self especially as contrasted with another self or the world." For me, there's a lot of ego in a writer's voice: It's how a writer contrasts himself with other writers and the larger writing world. It's that "signature" Thompson and the barista talked about. Maybe voice is a selfish thing for a writer to consider, and maybe that's why it was hard for some of my guides to talk about it. But selfishness isn't always a bad thing.

If a journalist hopes to rise above the din of *The Media* and have his voice heard, he has to be a bit selfish — he has to find and tap into the qualities that make him distinctive and use them to flavor his writing, his stories. It's similar to a pit master making barbecue: He knows there are hundreds of ways to make 'cue, but he wants to share the meat with you in his own way. He wants you to appreciate, recognize and remember his product. And he wants you to come back for more.

So what if there's a little ego involved in the process? To me, that means a pit master — a writer — is simply trying to make the best possible product. Reporting

is one of the most selfless occupations out there: You track down sources and listen to their stories, and you realize that those stories are rarely, if ever, about you. But you have a duty to share those stories. If you don't take the time to ask yourself why and how you're sharing those stories, you risk not sharing them at all. If you're not asking yourself what makes your writing distinctive, if you're not thinking about the flavors you bring to the craft, then maybe your stories come across ... bland. Maybe folks don't try your 'cue. And then no one gets fed. A good journalist does the work so it can be shared, so readers can learn from others' stories — for social nourishment.

A little ego, an awareness of voice, doesn't have to be egotistical. But it must be authentic. Authenticity is what allows Tomlinson to take pride in the fifth-grade writing level of his work. He's a smart man. He could flavor his writing with bigger words and more complex sentences, but that's not who he is. His writing already stands out because of its simplicity. His storytelling is complex because he understands scenes and characters and plot, even if many of his readers don't. So what? Not all readers need to know how the barbecue sauce is made to enjoy the meat and benefit from the story. And some of the best stories, like some of the best barbecue, work because the sauce is simple, applied smartly and sparingly. But that's just my opinion. Some folks like a little more sauce.

At the risk of beating this barbecue analogy to death, I know that some Southerners prefer their pork pulled rather than chopped. Still, others like ribs. And in my home state of North Carolina, sauce is a divisive subject: You might appreciate and, if you're honest, enjoy Eastern North Carolina vinegar-based sauce, but the

Piedmont's ketchup-infused "dip" is what really resonates with you. If you're from South Carolina, you might like mustard sauce. Alabama? Some folks down there use a white sauce. Hell, I like it all. And just as there's not one true Southern-style barbecue, there's not one distinctive Southern writing voice.

There are, though, distinctive Southern writers. My guides are four such examples. They remind me of my favorite barbecue places in the South. They're deeply rooted in their communities. They've been around for a while. They're products of their environment, and their products incorporate those environmental flavors. Their writing voices have developed over time, like barbecue that's been cooked "low and slow." Soul food offerings with a sense of place. But their own sense of a specific place.

It's ironic and perhaps a bit cliché that I've used barbecue to explain my findings on Southern voice. Seems a very Southern thing to do. But looking back on my quest, I think it was plagued by three problems.

The first was the term *Southern*. What does it mean to be Southern, and what is the South? Pick up a book by University of North Carolina sociologist John Shelton Reed and you'll quickly learn that the South is as much a state of mind as it is a region of the country. Read Rebecca Watts' "Contemporary Southern Identity" and reflect on her argument that the label "Southerners" often refers to white folks from the South "who proudly identify themselves as such." Or have Thompson remind you — as he reminded me back in June — that his South (Mississippi) differs from your South (in my case, Appalachian North Carolina). There are many Souths — the

Deep South, the white South, the black South, the rural South, the urban South, Florida — and they're all their own things.

Equally nebulous is the concept of voice. Poynter's Roy Peter Clark writes that voice is the sum of a writer's tools used to render the effect of speaking directly to the reader — of all writing effects, "none is more important or elusive as the quality called voice." What tools and how many? And all this stuff is elusive? Add to that that most of the folks I spoke with shied away from overt attempts to develop voice. For Thompson and McMichael, a writer's preoccupation with voice could come across gimmicky at best, pompous at worst.

The biggest problem with my quest, though, was my hope for the existence of a Southern writing voice — what I thought might be a blueprint for belonging. I have come to realize that this hope was lazy and, if I'm honest, naïve.

It's lazy in the sense that blueprints can be copied. Copying something is much easier than crafting something new. And copying something diminishes its distinctiveness. In today's media market, where everyone is his own "publisher" and everybody competes for attention, why would I want to look for a voice to copy? Yes, it's beneficial to borrow from other writers and learn from their processes, but it's counterproductive to try to sound like someone else. When you copy something, it's not your own.

It's naïve to think that one voice could even begin to characterize a region that is so diverse. It's also dangerous. The South's failings — secession and race relations, in particular — set the region apart from the rest of the country and pit its people against one another. A lot of its history is tinged with violent internal and

external disunity, meaning that many voices were silenced or drowned out. Many continue to be. So tell me, should one voice define a region that's so diverse, a region where the label "Southerner" doesn't resonate with all of its people? Even if that Southern writing voice existed, I'd have to question who it speaks to, who it speaks for and who it fails to represent.

My quest was about belonging — hoping to find Southern writers with whom I could share a Southern voice. It failed. And that's OK. I was an explorer who set out to find one thing and found another. What I found is that I needed to look inward to continue to develop and hone my writing voice. Pate McMichael told me not focus on developing a Southern voice; the South would come through naturally in my writing, he said. He's right. And the South that will come through in my writing will be my South, shaped by my personal experiences and contextualized by my understanding of them. At present, I still have much to understand.

And this is the lesson that any writer can take from my quest: Come to know yourself first before trying to emulate something else. And if you want to emulate something, ask yourself why. I was searching for belonging when I should have been seeking self-acceptance. I was trying to define myself through the South before grappling with what that might mean.

A few months ago, I asked my father, who's easing into retirement, if he planned to work on that novel. He didn't know, he said. I encouraged him to pick it back up — a good hobby in retirement, I advised. Feeling confident — overconfident — in my abilities, I offered to help him write it.

But, I said, we have to change the title. He didn't say anything. I pressed him on the matter: "A Voice in the Southern Wind" sounds too cliché, too superficial, I said. It felt like he was trying too hard to sound Southern.

He could say the same to me.

APPENDIX

Original project proposal

Rounding out my reporting and finding my voice: A southern journalist's experience

Master's project proposal

Presented to the faculty of the Graduate School at the University of Missouri-

Columbia

By Wade Livingston

Committee chair: Professor Jacqui Banaszynski

Committee members: Professor Greg Bowers

Professor Scott Swafford

May 2015

Introduction

I'm a Southerner — that's the first thing you need to know to understand why I'm doing this professional project. If you've read any history, sociology or literature about the South, you know that "Southerner" is a loaded label. For me, it's a bit more pride than shame, an appreciation of my roots and an awareness of how they might make others feel. As I age, I find myself wondering more and more what it means to be a Southerner. As a writer reborn, I ask myself what it means to write like one. That's what I'm trying to figure out — that, and why I *want* to write like one.

I grew up in the mountains of Western North Carolina, and my family's roots are in South Carolina. My childhood — my South — was a white South, the implications thereof I continue to grapple with. As Rebecca Watts (2008) notes in "Contemporary Southern Identity," the term "Southerner" often "refers to white Southerners — specifically, those white Southerners who proudly identify themselves as such" (p. 4). And you don't have to read too far into Watts' book — and others — to find discussions of Southern paternalism. As a white man, I'm a privileged product of that system.

So, I'll be talking to white men who hail from the states of the old Confederate South and who have become journalists known for their writing voices and narrative nonfiction. I want to learn how they've developed their voices and whether they identify them as southern. I hope to learn the intent behind their voices and what they think they convey. But most of all, I need to know how — if —

they've grappled with their regional identity and how that has affected their writing. We'll get there, but first, a story.

A couple of years ago I was an academic, a tenure-track, research faculty member teaching graduate students — which I mostly enjoyed — and pumping out 30-page refereed journal articles, which I did not enjoy. A few of those articles evolved from my 2009 dissertation on student veterans and their experiences with reenrolling in college following deployment. As I reflected on these articles and my dissertation, I realized that I'd missed out on the opportunity to tell a story. Writing has always been my creative outlet, and I felt that academia — at least in my former discipline — didn't allow much room for storytelling. So, I came to the Missouri School of Journalism.

I came here to learn how to report journalistically and to unlearn and relearn how to write. That led me to several faculty mentors and courses. I covered sports for two semesters at the *Missourian* on Greg Bowers' staff. While I don't consider myself a sportswriter — honestly, I'm probably too much of a fan — Bowers' beat was attractive because he pushed his writers to be creative and take chances. Sports writing was a challenge because it was a dramatic departure from academic writing.

I was fortunate to take Bowers' sports journalism course alongside Jacqui Banaszynski's intermediate writing class. The two paired nicely: both promoted narrative storytelling, crafting stories with plot, characters and rich, descriptive writing. I learned how to write scenes and look for details and dialogue that advanced a story. And I learned that narrative stories don't have to be long to be

good; rather, they should be deeply reported, expertly crafted and authoritatively written.

It was in Banaszynski's class that I found my calling to write narrative nonfiction. I made my first pitch to a magazine, revised that pitch and saw it accepted, and I drove to Holden, Missouri, several times to watch Robert Baslee build flyable World War I replica airplanes. A couple of months and 2,000 words later, I published my first profile in Missouri Life Magazine.

I interned at Missouri Life Magazine in the summer of 2014 and wrote a 6,000-word piece called "Teachers with Guns." As of now, I believe it's the best piece of journalism I've produced. It was character- and scene-driven, and it involved many of the moving parts of narrative storytelling. My editor, David Cawthon, said it was literary in some parts. It took almost three months to write and edit, and the process confirmed my desire to write narrative nonfiction. That said, there were some holes in my skillset that I needed to address.

In the spring of 2015 I began filling in those holes, enrolling in Paige Williams' advanced writing class and Mark Horvit's investigative reporting course. Williams' class has bolstered the skills I learned in Bowers' and Banaszynski's courses, and Horvit's class has taught me how data and records can add rich context to a narrative piece. The overarching lesson in all of my coursework is one I've heard repeated in the Missouriian's newsroom dozens of times: good writing is only possible through good reporting.

I know there are some reporting skills that I'm lacking, and I intend to remedy that in the summer of 2015 through my professional project with the

Charleston Gazette in Charleston, West Virginia. Basically, I'll report on things I've never covered. I'll write obituaries. I'll cover local government and help with the crime beat. I'll help out with the community beat and cover fairs and festivals. As Banaszynski told me, if I can cover these beats, I should be able to write about anything.

I've also negotiated the opportunity to write some longer, in-depth narrative pieces for the Charleston Gazette. Thus, this professional project will round out my reporting skillset and allow me to hone my narrative storytelling technique.

At Missouri I've structured my practical experiences and clips around narrative nonfiction. My goal has been to assemble a portfolio that shows my versatility and adaptability — I felt this was vital as someone who came to journalism without much prior experience. I've shown that I can write for newspapers and magazines; by the end of the summer, I will have shown that I can cover almost anything.

I can't say that I have a single dream job in mind as I near graduation. As a southerner with aging parents, I can see myself returning to the South and starting my professional career with a newspaper. There, I'd like to write features and profiles, and I'd also like to be a general assignment reporter. I know I still have a lot to learn, and a good entry-level position might help me reach the next phase of my career. When I've gained the requisite experience, I'd like to move on to a role that is feature-focused, be it at a newspaper or magazine. I'm interested in freelance writing for its versatility, if not its stability. And one day I might try my hand at book

writing. No matter what I do, I want creative storytelling to be part of my experience.

Professional Skills Component of the Professional Project

In the summer of 2015 I will work at the Charleston Gazette as a general assignment reporter, filling in for full-time staff members who will be on vacation or working on other projects. There will be two parts to this professional project. The first will help me hone my skills as a reporter as I'll cover beats — general assignment, government, crime, community — that I've never worked on before. The second part will allow me to practice my narrative nonfiction technique as I've negotiated the opportunity to write two or three deeply reported, immersive pieces.

My current qualifications will allow me to produce quality work in both areas. From a reporting standpoint, I have two semesters of experience on the sports beat at the Missourian (high school football and college football). I've shown that I can work with an editor and withstand the daily grind of beat reporting. And since I've reported and written longer magazine pieces on the side, I've shown the ability to multitask and diversify my writing. From a narrative nonfiction standpoint, I have experience deeply reporting and crafting narrative stories, and I look to improve upon my technique.

My professional project at the Gazette will begin Tuesday, May 19, and end Saturday, August 15. I will work at least 37.5 hours per week on the reporting aspect of the professional project. In addition, I will put in extra hours to report and write two or three deeply reported narrative stories.

I will publish a variety of news and feature stories in the Charleston Gazette. Stories include, but are not limited to, the following: general assignment pieces; local and city government pieces; articles on festivals and fairs; pieces for the crime beat; obituaries and life stories; and feature-length narrative stories. A thorough sample of these stories — including all of the deeply reported narrative pieces — will be included in my final professional-project document as physical evidence of my experience.

Jacqui Banaszynski is chairing my professional project, and I will keep her and committee members Greg Bowers and Scott Swafford updated with weekly memos sent via email. Those memos will detail my weekly production, any revelations I have about my work and will chronicle my progress on the professional analysis component of the project, discussed below.

Professional Analysis Component of the Professional Project

As a southerner, I'm fascinated how my regional and cultural identity affects my writing, particularly in the area of voice. As Poynter Vice President and Senior Scholar Roy Peter Clark notes in his book, "Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer:" "Of all the effects created by writers, none is more important or elusive than that quality called voice" (Clark, 2006, p. 112). Clark further explains how voice is the catchall for all strategies a writer employs, from framing to language to the use of metaphors. If voice is the all-encompassing technique of narrative nonfiction, I'm curious as to how southern narrative nonfiction writers have found and honed their writing voices.

There are two overarching questions for this professional analysis: How do southern narrative nonfiction writers describe their development of voice? And how do southern narrative nonfiction writers characterize their voice within the broad genre of narrative nonfiction? The first question is a matter of process; the second question is concerned with writers' potential self-categorization as southern writers and the potential existence of a southern writing voice.

Relevance to the profession

This professional analysis is relevant to the journalism profession in several ways. First and foremost, this analysis would be useful for writers who are working to find their own voice and want to understand the elements that might influence its development. It could force journalists to think about the groups they identify with and how those identities influence what they read, how they write, what stories they choose to tell and how they choose to tell them.

Second, it would be useful to see if southern writers feel a need to positively distinguish the South because they identify as southerners. If they do, why? If they don't, why not? How does their group identification — or lack thereof — affect the stories they choose to tell and how they choose to tell them? (A practical example of this is Wright Thompson's (2010) "Ghosts of Mississippi," in which he grapples with the story of James Meredith's struggle to integrate the university in the midst of a perfect football season, and in which Thompson wrestles with his own identity as a southerner.)

Third, interviews with several southern writers might not yield a single salient group identification. This would be important as it would illustrate the

difficulties and pitfalls of assigning writers to a certain group — and assuming that group is representative of all its members.

The analysis could offer anecdotal evidence of potential biases and stereotypes that exist among media consumers. McKinley et al. (2014) used social identity theory (which is discussed below in the “Theoretical framework” section) to examine how positive media coverage of Latinos influenced the ingroup’s (Latinos) and outgroup’s (whites) perception of Latinos. The researchers found that Latino consumers experienced increased self-esteem but white consumers’ perception of Latinos wasn’t affected. Might southern writers evince a similar feeling? (Do they feel their work is well received by fellow southerners but fails to register with a larger audience?)

Overall, I hope this analysis offers insight as to how southerners are reporting on and writing about the South. As Chuck Reece (2015), editor of *The Bitter Southerner*, explains, southern writers encounter stereotypes and struggle to explain the duality of the region. As our nation and region changes, how do we — how will we — journalistically record this evolution?

Relevance to my professional skillset

There are two direct linkages between my reporting and writing at the *Charleston Gazette* and the professional analysis component of the professional project. The first is honing my skills as a narrative nonfiction writer and storyteller. Talking to accomplished writers about their craft will benefit me practically (as I’ll learn from them and their experiences as developing writers) and professionally (by expanding my professional network of prospective colleagues). The second and

more specific linkage relates to my own development of voice as a writer. I'm still trying to understand why I write the way I do and what that means. And, admittedly, there's a large part of me that identifies as a southern writer and wants to have a southern voice. I'm interested in learning whether this was something that accomplished southern narrative nonfiction writers grappled with and, if so, how they addressed it.

Theoretical framework: Social identity theory

The theoretical framework is social identity theory, initially developed by psychologists Tajfel and Turner and advanced and critiqued by myriad scholars during the past four decades.

Social identity theory is concerned with how people identify and behave as members of groups, and how groups interact with one another; it is less concerned with how individuals view their personal identities, though there is some connection between group membership and self-awareness and self-conceptualization (Tajfel, 1982, pp. 2-3).

Turner (1996) describes Tajfel's theory as having three parts. The first part involves a person's need to belong to a group and to use group membership to advance his or her own social identity; this is done by positively distinguishing one's own group in relation to other groups. The second part is the shift from interpersonal behavior to group-level behavior; if one's own social identity is lacking in some way, he or she will seek to improve — or defend — his or her standing through collective action, which stems from shared values and beliefs. The final part looks at the interaction between the complementary processes of

psychology and societal constructs; the establishment and behavior of groups occurs within greater society. Society categorizes people into groups and defines them accordingly. Groups have evolved over time, historically, socially and otherwise. People internalize these social constructs — groups — “to define themselves subjectively” (p. 17).

Simply put, social identity is how one thinks of oneself as a group member (Abrams & Hogg, 1990, p. 2). And, it’s how individuals seek to make their group distinctive — compared to other groups — because that distinctiveness is relevant to their social identities (Turner, 1999, p. 8).

The theory’s relevance to the analysis

As my professional analysis concerns southern writers and the recognition and presence, potentially, of a southern writing voice, there are several pertinent links to social identity theory.

First, I want to learn how writers identify themselves professionally, personally and socially. In other words, I want to uncover if these writers — who were born and often work in or write about the South — identify as southerners. This is a necessary first step in gauging whether regional distinctiveness is important to them. Moreover, if writers identify as southerners — and, perhaps, as southern writers or journalists — that would offer evidence of the existence of a distinctive group. If they don’t, that’s an important discovery too. (It’s possible that some writers identify as “southern journalists” while others do not; still, others might indicate they belong to completely different social-professional groups.)

That last point is important because social identity theory explains that while individuals can choose to identify as members of a group, sometimes they are *perceived* by others to be members of a group. In other words, society will categorize individuals in a certain group regardless of how salient that identification is to them personally (Turner, 1999, 13-14).

An example of this is Janet Maslin's (2014) New York Times review of Ron Rash's newest collection of short stories. Rash is a fiction writer who, as Maslin notes, has been pegged as an Appalachian or southern writer. In effect, critics have selected Rash's group membership for him, which, as Maslin states, has led him to be overlooked as a larger contributor on the American literary scene. Does the same thing happen to southern nonfiction writers? Might they feel marginalized or overlooked?

Another connection between my professional analysis and social identity theory is found in group behavior — the need to make the group distinctive and raise its status (Turner, 1996; Turner, 1999). This could be where a southern writing voice comes in.

If southern nonfiction writers acknowledge the presence of a southern voice, how do they characterize it? If they were conscious of developing their voices, why did they develop them the way that they did? Did they hope to harness a southern voice? Did they hope to break out of a southern voice? What effect do they want their voices to have on readers?

Literature review

As this professional project examines southern narrative nonfiction writers' development of voice — and, potentially, acknowledgment of a southern writing voice — there are three pertinent aspects of the literature to consider. The first is narrative nonfiction writing, the intent and craft thereof. The second is voice itself, a tool of the narrative writer. Finally, a survey of southern identity is warranted — how such an identity may or may not define a region, its culture and its people.

Narrative nonfiction

At its most basic level, narrative nonfiction is “telling true stories,” the process of a journalist going out in the world, learning about it and making sense of it for the rest of us (Kramer & Call, 2007a, pp. xv-xvi). As Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (2007a) note in their book, “Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers’ Guide,” narrative nonfiction is known by various names: “narrative journalism, new journalism, literary journalism, creative nonfiction,” to name a few (p. xv). But no matter what the genre is labeled, its foundation is storytelling. As Jon Franklin (1986) notes in his book, “Writing for Story,” the “principal difference between the short story of old and the nonfiction short story of today is that in its modern form, the story is true” (p. 27). The reporting process is different; the craft of writing is the same.

In his book, “The New Journalism,” Tom Wolfe (1973) chronicles the rise of new journalism, a movement that shook up the literary and journalistic circles as reporters experimented with creative techniques in their writing to tell true stories. The new genre merged insightful reporting with craft techniques usually associated

with novels and short stories. Two things in particular excited Wolfe (1973): first, the potential to “write accurate stories” using fiction techniques; second — and most important — the emotional and intellectual impact that literary devices could have on the reader (p. 15).

In “The New New Journalism,” Robert Boynton (2005) notes that the new journalists experimented with a revolutionary style of “placing the author at the center of the story” and “channeling a character’s thoughts” — techniques that expanded beyond the bounds of then-standard narrative forms (p. xii). More narrative nonfiction writers — “New New Journalists” — have followed in the footsteps of their predecessors, and they continue to experiment with their reporting and writing (Boynton, 2005). However, they see these experiments as holding true to nonfiction storytelling and not “parsing the philosophical line between fact and fiction” (Boynton, 2005, p. xii).

There are mixed perceptions about the place of narrative nonfiction in contemporary journalism. Although supportive of narrative journalism, Morton (2014) cites potential ethical and epistemological snags that might emerge when there’s a cultural gap between journalists and their subjects. Harber and Broersma (2014) highlight a cultural shift — challenges to traditional notions of objectivity — which has created a conducive climate for narrative journalism; but they also note how journalists’ aims and techniques can cause readers to question the truth of their stories (p. 651). And in “Telling True Stories,” David Halberstam (2007) writes that several decades of technological advancements — which have affected the way

audiences regard information — have created an “inhospitable” climate for narrative writers (p. 10).

On the other hand, Bowden (2000) notes how the credibility of his reporting and the audience’s reading experience were simultaneously enhanced with the assistance of a digital platform. Lassila-Merisalo (2014) highlights the business potential of long-form narrative storytelling in the digital age: advanced mediums (tablets, in particular) offer revenue opportunities for outlets to invest in storytelling, and entrepreneurial journalists have the ability to start their own “microbusinesses,” like Atavist (p. 10). And Neveu (2014) suggests that narrative journalism could be wielded as a competitive advantage against the “fast” and “short and simple” news that is produced by “blogs, aggregators and short-format news sources” (p. 533).

The elements of story are what set narrative nonfiction apart from traditional newswriting. Flaherty (2009) describes those elements as the skeleton of an article, the parts that make the story move (action) and come to life (descriptive writing and scenes) — the type of prose that’s valuable to any writer. In “Writing for Story,” Jon Franklin (2007) argues that journalism in of itself “has very little to do with meaning” whereas writing a story is about meaning-making (p. 109). To make meaning, a writer has to understand the narrative, deconstruct it and rearrange it using craft techniques like characters and plot (Franklin, 2007, p. 109). Brooks, Kennedy, Moen and Ranly (2001) discuss techniques such as dialogue, foreshadowing and the use of anecdotes (pp. 137-142). In “Telling True Stories,” Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (2007b) note other components of narrative

nonfiction: controlling and bending time in a story, getting at the “deep truth” in the narrative — and “developing a compelling narrator’s voice” (p. 125).

Voice

Voice is a writing tool — really the sum of a writer’s tools — employed to render the effect of speaking directly to the reader; of all writing effects, “none is more important or elusive as the quality called voice” (Clark, 2006, pp. 112-113). In “Writing Tools,” Roy Peter Clark (2006) uses the analogy of a graphic equalizer that can tune different parts of a piece. Writers should think about framing, language and the use of metaphors, among other things, and tune these elements to render the desired effect on the reader (Clark, 2006, pp. 113-116). But voice means different things to different writers.

Rivers (1975) equates voice with point of view, meaning the writer’s decision to use first-, second- and third-person (p. 52-56). Miles and Bertolaso (1977) write that voice is composed of two elements: tone and persona (p. 221). Tone is the emotion affected by the writer and picked up by the reader; it derives from writers’ attitudes toward their subjects and audiences (Miles & Bertolaso, 1977, pp. 224-228). Persona lends insight to the writers themselves: their overarching experiences, levels of education, emotional makeups and personal beliefs (Miles & Bertolaso, 1977, pp. 221-224).

Sommers (1989) defines voice as “the personality of the writer, the life that should be audible in the writer’s words” (p. 4). For writers to develop a voice, they must be mindful of their audience, their relationship to the subject, the reason why

they're writing in the first place and their personal identities as writers (Sommers, 1989, p. 5-9).

The idea that voice might derive from one's identity — awareness of self — isn't shocking. What's more important is how writers want to sound, how they want to be heard and regarded. Philip Martin (2001), a journalist, provides an example of this in his book, "The Artificial Southerner." He recalls an email correspondence that he had with a non-southern reader who, upon learning he was from the South, professed disbelief. "You don't sound Southern," the reader remarked in the email. Martin was perplexed. He felt that his speech — his writing — did indeed sound Southern, and he wanted it to. The email exchange caused him to think; it called into question his identity as a southern writer and the existence of a southern voice. And it made him question his own and others' perception of the South as a distinctive place (Martin, 2001, pp. xiii-xxiii).

Southern identity

Hobson (1983) states that southern writers have grappled with the complexities of the South for over a century and notes that these writers — including journalists — have approached the subject emotionally and personally (pp. 3-4). Boles (1983) writes, "The southern character is too complex for easy answers, and southerners — at least the publishing kind — enjoy the perennial search for southern identity" (p. 2). Ford (2014) notes that white and black southerner literary figures used "folk tradition" and "oral storytelling" in their writing, but she poses the question of whether Southern literature is defined as such by the reader or rendered as such by writers' "southern DNA" (p. 4-5).

The latter half of Ford's question — as it pertains to southern narrative nonfiction writers — is central to this professional project. But before any attempt is made to answer it, it's necessary to look at how the South is defined — what exactly is it and who says it's so?

Reed (1993) argues that the South is as much of a shared "concept" as it is a distinctive geographical region. "It's an idea people can talk about, think about, use to orient themselves and others. People know whether they're in it or not" (Reed, 1993, p. 5). A decade later, Reed (2003) wrote that there are really three Souths: the agrarian "Old South" (Dixie); the industrial and metropolitan Southeast; and the "enduring cultural South," a region set apart by its unique mannerism and general way of life (pp. 1-3). Again, the notion is that the South is more than a geographic region of the country — it's an idea, or identity.

Watts (2008) notes that the South has historically been "ordered according to the principle of division," meaning that the southerners have intentionally set themselves apart from the rest of the country (secession, for example) and that white southerners have — through various means, many unsavory — set themselves apart from black southerners (p. 161). There has been an enduring desire for southern distinctiveness, and Watts (2008) notes that as the South and its social mores have evolved, that distinctiveness — which has often divided the region internally along racial lines — could be a point of unity. "Instead, today's southerners should look to ... discussions about their divided history as the source of their identification with one another, the source of their distinctiveness from the rest of the United States," Watts (2008, p. 161) writes.

Thompson (2007) explores southern identity through three different lenses: an “ethnic or quasi-ethnic identity;” a “stigmatized identity;” and a “racialized identity” (p. 211). She intentionally included both white and black southerners in her study, and she found that black southerners tended to have a stronger racial identity (as opposed to southern identity), but that both blacks and whites (to a greater extent) claimed an ethnic southern identity (pp. 211-217). In other words, a white person born in the South might identify as a southerner, while a black person from the South might identify first and foremost as black.

In “The Artificial Southerner,” Martin (2001) notes the difficulty of grappling with the South from a writer’s perspective. He describes living in a “post-American, post-nationalist world without meaningful cultural boundaries” and how that calls into question the concepts of southern distinctiveness and identity. But, along the lines of Boles (1983), Martin (2001) writes that he’s haunted by the region. “I have a kind of faith about the South, about my own assumed Southernness. I don’t believe people are better or worse for where they are born and live. But sometimes I think they are different, and these differences are worth talking about” (Martin, 2001, p. 205).

Methodology

The methodology of this professional analysis will consist of semi-structured in-depth interviews of southern narrative nonfiction writers. Semi-structured interviews utilize “partially prepared questions that are fully structured by the researcher/interviewer’s concerns and initial theoretical framework” (Wengraf, 2001, p. xxv). In other words, Tajfel’s (1982) theory of social identity — as well as

the concepts of voice and southern identity — will factor into the formation of interview questions, but the questions themselves will be asked in such a way as “to maintain the casual quality” of an unstructured interview, or conversation (Berger, 2011, p. 136).

A review of the literature did not yield any examinations of southern (or any other group identities) nonfiction writers’ development and identification of voice using semi-structured interviews. My committee has asked me to posit why this is the case. The short answer: I don’t know. But maybe it has to do with scholars’ preoccupation with southern literature — fiction, William Faulkner and others. Perhaps it’s a result of scholars’ — like Ford (2014) — focus on oral storytelling traditions that influence southern literature. Or maybe it’s a result of some of the themes Reed (2003) notes: the urbanization of and immigration to the South. Perhaps the region is becoming less distinctive, even as some of its long-tenured residents — like me — shudder at the thought. Or, is it too painful an endeavor to dig deep into our southern-ness and try to figure out where our voice came from? Maybe it’s just that this is so narrow a topic that no one has thought to explore it in such a way; that’s my hope, and that’s why I think this professional analysis is important.

Regardless, there are some studies and literature that, taken together, assert the validity of the methodology this professional analysis. Mistreanu (2013) used semi-structured interviews in her professional analysis to explore the fulfillment and happiness of “long-form narrative writers who cover sensitive social issues” (p. 4). Two of her interview questions in particular were process-oriented (story

selection and general technique) and pertained to the craft of narrative nonfiction (Mistreanu, 2013, p. 183). Johnston and Graham (2012) used a content analysis bolstered by semi-structured interviews to assess narrative writing styles in Australian newspapers. Duffield (2009) examined journalistic methods — semi-structured interviews being one — and their application to academic research (p. 1). He concluded that journalistic approaches to inquiry are applicable and offer a strong foundation for academic research and analysis (Duffield, 2009, pp. 13; 20-22). Perhaps an illustration of Duffield's conclusion, Boynton (2005) — asked contemporary narrative nonfiction writers how they characterized their work, what constitutes their journalistic techniques and whether they identified with new journalism.

There are two overarching questions for this professional analysis:

- Question 1: How do southern narrative nonfiction writers describe their development of voice?
- Question 2: How do southern narrative nonfiction writers characterize their voice within the broad genre of narrative nonfiction?

The first question is a matter of process; the second question is concerned with writers' potential self-categorization as southern writers and the potential existence of a southern writing voice.

To examine these overarching questions, the following interview questions will be used:

- When did you first think that you wanted to be a writer?

- What influenced you to become a writer?
- What influenced you to write narrative nonfiction?
- What are the most important techniques of narrative nonfiction?
- How do you define voice?
- Early in your career, what did you do to discover and hone your voice?
- How would you describe your writing voice to another writer?
- What qualities make your writing voice distinctive, and where did those qualities originate?
- As someone born in the South, how has the region influenced your writing?
- If someone asserted that there is a distinctive southern writing voice, how would you respond to that person?

The first several interview questions are more general and craft focused. This is intentional, helping to establish rapport and underscoring that the experience will be less formal and more conversational (Lindlof, 1995, pp. 180-182). Furthermore, aside from the first few general prompts, there is no set order to the questions; they will be thought of as an “interview guide,” a “menu of topics,” designed to lend a natural flow to the process (Lindlof, 1995, p. 185).

In addition to the interview guide, the following standard questions will be asked to generate basic information about each participant:

- What is your name?
- How old are you?

- Where were you born?
- How long have you been a practicing journalist?
- What are your major works in the genre of narrative nonfiction?
- What accolades have you received for your narrative nonfiction?

Four southern narrative nonfiction writers will be interviewed for this professional analysis. All of them must have been born in the South (defined as the states that made up the former Confederacy) and have written narrative nonfiction for a national audience. While these writers might write about southern culture on a national scale, it is important, for the purposes of this project, that their work not be confined within the South. An initial list of possible interview subjects includes: Rick Bragg, Pate McMichael, Howell Raines, Chuck Reece, Wright Thompson and Tom Wolfe.

The researcher will send query emails to prospective participants (and will utilize professional connections to garner subjects, if necessary). The emails will be succinct, explaining the gist of the project in a manner that gives participants an idea of what to expect without planting preconceived notions of the analysis in their minds.

The interviews will be conducted via phone over the summer of 2015. They will be recorded and analyzed, with highlights from each interview included in weekly field notes and in an appendix of the final project. Additionally, select passages that illustrate distinctive uses of voice will be culled from the participants' pieces to supplement and explain their musings on voice. From this analysis, the researcher will prepare a manuscript suitable for publication in magazines such as

The Oxford American, Garden and Gun and Southern Living, Nieman Storyboard might be another place for this manuscript; certain literary journals — like the Mississippi Review and the Missouri review — are other potential outlets.

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Professional Project Site Supervisor Approval Letter

April 16, 2015

To: The Masters Committee

Re: Wade G. Livingston internship

At Wade's request, I am writing this letter to describe Wade's job expectations as a summer intern at the Charleston Gazette in Charleston, West Virginia.

He will start on May 19 and finish 13 weeks later. Our workweek is 37.5 hours, and the pay is \$350 per week. He will begin on a Tuesday-through-Saturday schedule and move to Monday through Friday midway through the internship.

Our other summer reporting intern is the managing editor of the student newspaper at West Virginia University.

Each intern will have the opportunity to cover numerous stories over the summer. Stories will range from lighthearted features to crime to courts. Our interns, depending on their qualifications, are often drafted to fill in for beat reporters who are on vacation during the summer months.

I have agreed that Wade will be able to write two to three in-depth, narrative pieces that we will publish in the Gazette. He and I will brainstorm some ideas for these pieces once he arrives.

I will be Wade's overall supervisor, but he will also work closely with City Editor Greg Moore, Assistant City Editor Lori Kersey and, during Saturday shifts, David Gutman, who runs the weekend desk.

The Gazette is the largest newspaper in West Virginia – both in terms of print and online traffic – but it is still a small operation, and we depend heavily on our summer interns.

Our relationship with Missouri grads and students has been strong over the years. It is a relationship we hope to maintain.

Thank you,

Rob Byers

Executive Editor

Charleston Gazette

Charleston, West Virginia

Pitch Letter for Professional Analysis Article

November 24, 2015

Pitch: Voice, barbecue and distinctive Southern writing

To the folks at NiemanStoryboard:

About a year ago, I set out on a quest to find a distinctive Southern writing voice in narrative nonfiction. It was quite the fishing expedition. But it taught me the importance of finding and tapping into my own voice to tell stories, so people will actually read them. My journey was like a barbecue pit master's search for the right wood or sauce: The goal is to feed folks so they'll come back for more.

For my final master's project at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, I interviewed four Southern writers and asked them about voice. Wright Thompson, Chuck Reece, Pate McMichael and Tommy Tomlinson became my guides as we talked about the craft of writing and storytelling techniques. Most of them struggled (initially) to define voice, the tool that Roy Peter Clark equates to a graphic equalizer. They struggled more with defining their own voices. And they shied away from the notion of a distinctive Southern writing voice.

The South is a big part of my identity, and I talked to my guides in hopes of finding how I could tap into my Southern-ness and express it through my writing. But looking back, what I was really searching for was a way to sound distinctive, something that's so important into today's media climate. I found myself wondering, *What's different about my voice?* And I think that's a question young writers need to be asking themselves.

As journalists, we have a duty to share stories. That's a selfless task, because the stories are rarely about us. But in order to share stories — and have readers come back for more — we have to be a bit selfish in our approach to writing. That means doing some introspective thinking. For me, that meant diving down the rabbit hole to examine my past, my roots and my insecurities. Which led me to understand how much a sense of place influences my work.

I'm a barbecue snob, and my favorite haunts have a strong sense of place. Their 'cue is a product of their environments: local flavors and preferences. And while these hole-in-the-walls have a loyal local following, their apt to attract people like me who want to know how the meat is made, how they can make their own — and, perhaps, *make it their own*. That's how I'm trying to approach storytelling: consuming the best, learning how it's made and discovering my own flavors I can apply to the process.

Best,

Wade Livingston

(828) 226-4116

wade.g.livingston@gmail.com

Changes to the Original Proposal

There were two changes to my original project proposal.

The first was the addition of Tommy Tomlinson as one of my interviewees.

Tomlinson met the criteria of all the other narrative nonfiction writers I interviewed: He is from the South and is an accomplished journalist who's written for a national audience. He also penned a recent article for *Our State* (a statewide magazine that covers all things North Carolina) about voice, which I found particularly relevant to my inquiry.

The second change was the extension of my professional analysis component into the fall 2015 semester. After discussing my progress with my committee chair, we decided that I would be unable to finish my interviews and professional analysis article during the summer, while I was working at the *Charleston Gazette*. My chair and I negotiated deadlines, and I submitted all my materials on time.