

PA CONNECTIONS

REAL NEWS • REAL COMMUNITIES • OCTOBER 2023



PHOTO: SHANE POTTER/BUTLER EAGLE

Across the commonwealth, Pennsylvania newspapers tell the stories that matter most.



PHOTO: BILL UHRICH/READING EAGLE



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In print and digital. Always local.

*National Newspaper Week celebrates communities,
and journalism they cannot get anywhere else*

Welcome to the fifth annual edition of PA Connections: Real News, Real Communities, a statewide newspaper showcasing the local journalism vital to the everyday lives of Pennsylvanians. Reporting essential local news and information unique to the places we call home has been the business of community newspapers for generations.

During National Newspaper Week, Oct. 1-7, the newspaper industry and its news media organizations are recognized not only for the local news that fills the pages of print newspapers, but also for the information they provide to newsfeeds on smartphones and laptops.

Newspapers are important to the local economy, and to the community. They hire Pennsylvanians. They pay taxes. They and their employees contribute money and volunteer hours within the boroughs, cities and townships they serve. Newspapers are government watchdogs. They are also trusted neighbors.

Pennsylvanians agree.

In an August 2022 survey, 85% of Pennsylvania registered voters said they have the most trust in local newspapers, print and online; this high level of trust surpasses that given to other news media outlets. Additionally, the survey of Pennsylvania registered voters conducted for Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association by Public Opinion Strategies in Alexandria, Virginia, found:

- 87% believed local newspapers are key to an informed community because they cover local issues such as business, politics and public safety.
- 87% also said local newspapers help keep people connected to their communities.
- 92% overwhelmingly favor state law requiring public notices to be published in print editions of local newspapers to alert citizens about important local issues – like zoning changes, school closures, and environmental proposals that impact health and property – before government takes action.



William Cotter
President & CEO
Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association

Nearly 7 in 10 Pennsylvania adults read a print or digital newspaper or visited a newspaper website in the past week, according to the 2023 Release 1 Nielsen Scarborough Report. They expect to find local news coverage that will help them make informed decisions and enhance the quality of their lives.

In the pages that follow, more than 100 Pennsylvania newsrooms – large and small, print and/or digital – meet that expectation as shown in local news coverage that takes readers from downtowns to dairy farms statewide. Reporting topics include:

- Broadband deficiencies affecting daily life in Butler County.
- Soaring flood insurance premiums in Lackawanna, Luzerne, Lycoming, Schuylkill, Susquehanna and Wayne counties.
- Dangerous chemicals on the old Veterans Stadium turf and whether they were linked to the cancer deaths of six Philadelphia Phillies.
- Rosie's restaurant, a beloved Tioga eatery that serves much more than strawberry shortcake and coconut cream pie.
- The statewide struggle to address homelessness and affordable housing.
- The Bath American Legion, which for one day in March, transforms into a Cinderella's Closet of donated prom dresses to help teens create a night to remember.
- The lives and reflections of Black men in Harrisburg who survived gun violence.
- Erie's East Side Renaissance.

The Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association is proud to bring you the largest edition of PA Connections. We hope it will inform you as it inspires you.



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WHO WE ARE:

The Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association is the official trade organization representing print, digital and news media-related members across the commonwealth. PNA advocates for its members, provides educational services, and acts as an information clearinghouse. PNA's mission is to advance the business interests of Pennsylvania news media organizations and to promote a free and independent press.

The articles on the following pages are provided by news media organizations in Pennsylvania.

Allied News <i>Grove City</i>	Herald-Standard <i>Uniontown</i>	Observer-Reporter <i>Washington</i>
The Almanac <i>Washington</i>	The Home News <i>Walnutport</i>	Off the Bluff <i>Duquesne University</i>
Altoona Mirror	Indiana Gazette	One United Lancaster
Bedford Gazette	Juniata Sentinel <i>Mifflintown</i>	Parkland Press <i>Allentown</i>
The Bradford Era	The Kane Republican	PennLive/The Patriot-News <i>Harrisburg</i>
Bucks County Courier Times <i>Levittown</i>	Knightly News <i>Central Penn College</i>	Pennsylvania Capital-Star <i>Harrisburg</i>
Bucks County Herald <i>Doylestown</i>	Lancaster Farming <i>Ephrata</i>	Philadelphia Gay News
TheBurg <i>Harrisburg</i>	Latrobe Bulletin	The Philadelphia Inquirer
Butler Eagle	Leader Times <i>Kittanning</i>	Philadelphia Jewish Exponent
Central Penn Business Journal	Lebanon Daily News	Philadelphia Neighborhoods
<i>Harrisburg</i>	Lehigh Valley Business	<i>Temple University</i>
The Centre County Gazette <i>State College</i>	lehighvalleylive.com/The Express-	Pittsburgh Independent
Centre Daily Times <i>State College</i>	Times <i>Easton</i>	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Chesapeake Bay Journal <i>Mayo, Md.</i>	The Ligonier Echo	Press Enterprise <i>Bloomsburg</i>
Chester County Press <i>Kelton</i>	The Lion's Roar <i>Pennsylvania State University</i>	Print. <i>Pittsburgh</i>
Chestnut Hill Local <i>Philadelphia</i>	<i>Bellisario College of Communications</i>	The Progress <i>Clearfield</i>
The Citizens' Voice <i>Wilkes-Barre</i>	The Lititz Record Express	PublicSource <i>Pittsburgh</i>
Courier Express/Tri-County Weekend	LNP LancasterOnline	Reading Eagle
<i>DuBois</i>	The Mainliner <i>Cresson</i>	Republican Herald <i>Pottsville</i>
Cranberry Eagle	The Meadville Tribune	The Ridgway Record
Daily Collegian <i>Pennsylvania State University</i>	The Mercersburg Journal	The Sentinel <i>Carlisle</i>
The Daily Courier <i>Connellsville</i>	The Mercury <i>Pottstown</i>	Standard-Speaker <i>Hazleton</i>
The Daily Item/Sunday Item <i>Sunbury</i>	The Montgazette <i>Montgomery County</i>	The Star-Courier <i>Ebensburg</i>
The Daily News <i>Huntingdon</i>	<i>Community College</i>	The Sun <i>Hummelstown</i>
Dillsburg Banner	The Morning Call <i>Allentown</i>	The Times Herald <i>Norristown</i>
The Dispatch <i>Ebensburg</i>	Morrisons Cove Herald <i>Martinsburg</i>	Times Leader <i>Wilkes-Barre</i>
The Ephrata Review	Mountain Home <i>Wellsboro</i>	Times News <i>Lehighton</i>
Erie Reader	The Mountaineer-Journal <i>Ebensburg</i>	The Times-Tribune <i>Scranton</i>
Erie Times-News/GoErie	NeuPress <i>Neumann University</i>	Town and Country <i>Pennsburg</i>
Full 360 <i>Delaware Valley University</i>	New Castle News	The Triangle <i>Drexel University</i>
The GA-ZETTE <i>Penn State Greater Allegheny</i>	New Pittsburgh Courier	The Tribune-Democrat <i>Johnstown</i>
Gettysburg Times	The News-Item <i>Shamokin</i>	Tribune-Review TribLIVE.com <i>Tarentum</i>
The Gettysburgian <i>Gettysburg College</i>	NorthcentralPA.com <i>Williamsport</i>	Williamsport Sun-Gazette
The Globe <i>Point Park University</i>	Northeast Times <i>Philadelphia</i>	WITF <i>Harrisburg</i>
HAKOL Lehigh Valley <i>Allentown</i>	The Northside Chronicle <i>Pittsburgh</i>	York Daily Record
Harrisburg Magazine	Northwestern Press <i>Allentown</i>	York Dispatch
The Herald <i>Sharon</i>		

Here comes the sun power in Scranton

Solar farm to produce electricity in Electric City

By **Jim Lockwood**
Staff Writer

SCRANTON — The Electric City could soon get its first solar farm that generates electricity.

A Massachusetts-based company, ECA Solar, plans to build a large-scale solar array with 12,000 panels on a 73-acre tract on West Mountain.

Solar farms generally consist of many solar panels situated in sets of rows that convert the sun's rays into electricity.

ECA Solar seeks city zoning approval to construct the array on land in the rear 800 block of North Keyser Avenue off Graham Street, according to a public notice in The Times-Tribune. The zoning board hearing will be held Dec. 14 at 6 p.m. at City Hall.

While some residents in Scranton have installed solar panels on their homes, the ECA Solar project would be the first commercial solar venture in the city, City Planner Don King said.

The project called Electric City Solar Initiative would cost nearly \$9 million to construct and produce 4.35 megawatts of electricity a year, according to plans submitted to the city.

Other details of the proposal include:

- The array would contain three sections of panels situated on 36 acres of the 73-acre tract and within buffer areas of woods.
- The solar farm would contain 12,064 black or dark blue solar panels, each about the size of a door, fixed in place and tilted upward at a 25-degree angle.
- Capacity of 4.35 megawatts a year is equivalent to powering about 600 to 700 homes.
- There would be three, 10-foot-by-20-foot concrete pads for electrical equipment, 10 utility poles and an 8-foot-tall fence around the array and equipment areas. The fence would be knot-wire, similar to those used on orchards and agricultural farms that allow for small wildlife passage but keep people out.
- A driveway to access the site would be constructed from the end of Graham Street.
- PPL would purchase the power generated. ECA also "is working with several (unspecified) businesses and academic institutions to serve as offtakers (consumers) of the power," the application says.
- The firm also needs to obtain a permit from the state Department of Environmental Protection regarding stormwater and erosion controls.

The power of public notice

Jim Lockwood is the 2023 winner of the Public Notice Resource Center Michael Kramer Public Notice Journalism Award. The national honor recognizes reporting that uses public notice as a primary source of information. Each of the 14 articles in his



submission is based in whole or in part on a notice. Here, Lockwood found news in a public notice for a zoning board hearing on what would be Scranton's first solar farm. From that, he produced an article on the proposal with details about nearby solar initiatives and the growth of solar power in the state. Rather than wait to report on the hearing, he turned out a preview article to provide more information to the public before the meeting.

- The firm would construct solar panels on raised tables that allow grass to grow underneath. The fenced-in area would be planted with a grass mix and meadow-type pollinators, and mowed once or twice a year.
 - The impervious surfaces would total 1.1 acres, while the solar panel array area would comprise 8 acres.
 - Traffic would be minimal, including for quarterly checks and lawn and buffer maintenance of no more than one-to-two vehicles at a time.
- Meanwhile, ECA Solar also plans to construct solar farms in two other locations in Lackawanna County, including on the Eynon Jermyn Road in Archbald and on Chapman Lake Road in Scott Twp.
- The firm has received all necessary approvals in Scott Twp. but has not yet presented plans in Archbald, said ECA Solar Development Manager Martha Diezemann.

ECA's consumer clients for these two solar arrays include Valley View School District for the Archbald project and Lakeland School District for the Scott Twp. facility, Diezemann said. The clients expect to see savings on electricity over their 25-30 year contracts.

Electricity in the Electric City

Electric City Solar Initiative of Massachusetts-based ECA Solar proposes the first commercial solar farm in Scranton.

Number of solar panels: 12,064 in three arrays

Production capacity: 4.35 megawatts a year, equivalent to powering 600-700 homes

Cost estimate: \$9 million



KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

"We find properties near (electrical) substations that we're confident have the capacity to host a solar array of the size that we want," Diezemann said.

In Scranton's case, the 73-acre tract was near PPL facilities on West Mountain and went up for sale, and ECA Solar bought the land for \$135,000 in September 2021.

"It was a win-win" situation, she said.

The firm hopes to start construction on each of the solar farms in Archbald, Scott Twp. and Scranton in the spring and complete each one in about six months, Diezemann said.

"That's the goal," she said.

The solar farm ventures also reflect growth in the solar industry in the state.

Through the third quarter of 2022, 0.43% of Pennsylvania's electricity came from the sun, with a total of 955 megawatts of solar generation installed — enough to power 115,177 homes, all up from the prior quarter, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association, a national trade organization for the solar industry.

Pennsylvania ranks 23rd in solar power in the country, up from 28th in 2021, according to the SEIA. It also projects a 430% increase in total megawatts of solar generation over the next five years.

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Forever wounded

Shootings didn't end these Harrisburg men's lives, but they'll never be the same

By Jenna Wise • jwise@pennlive.com | Photos by Sean Simmers



Cal Hollman, photographed where he was shot at 5th and Peffer Streets in Harrisburg in 1991. He collapsed about half a block away outside a woman's home. She saw him bleeding on her sidewalk and came outside carrying a Christmas gift - a blanket that she then wrapped around him.

Cal Hollman lives in constant pain and fear of the bullet lodged in his back.

Doctors saved the use of his legs after he was shot 30 years ago, but nerve damage nearly cost him his foot years later. He worries every day that the bullet will shift and he'll suddenly lose control of his lower body.

He still becomes emotional talking about the day in 1991 the bullet entered his body, and what he's endured since.

"I'm always in pain with it," he said. "It's a matter of pain you learn to deal with."

Hollman is among hundreds of people in Harrisburg wounded by gun violence who are quietly dealing with the physical, emotional and financial toll as they navigate the rest of their lives.

Harrisburg, which has the highest rate of violent crime in central Pennsylvania, experienced more than 800 non-fatal shootings over the past 10 years. Most receive little lasting attention from the public. Police solve only about 10% of non-fatal shootings, devoting most of their resources to investigating homicides.

Black men are the most common victims of gun violence in Harrisburg, mirroring national statistics. Black Americans are 18 times more likely to be victims of gun assaults than white Americans, according to Everytown, a nonprofit organization focused on gun violence prevention. Women and children get shot in Harrisburg as well, often not as the intended targets but victims of stray bullets.

After the shootings, survivors face physical and emotional trauma.

First, their focus is on survival.

"I don't want to die. I want my mother."

Dr. Dale Dangleben, a surgeon and the trauma director at Holy Spirit Medical Center, said he's heard those words from many shooting victims.

People who are shot multiple times are usually in agony

— sweating, bleeding profusely, many of them unable to talk, Dangleben said.

Some are belligerent and angry and want to immediately leave the hospital to seek revenge, he said.

Once the immediate danger passes, a new reality sets in: weeks or even months in the hospital and thousands of dollars in medical bills. Post-traumatic stress disorder can send people into a downward spiral of mental health issues that can take years to resolve.

"Folks that are victims of violence, any kind of violence, there's a lot of secondary effects. There's a lot of fear. Along with that comes depression, inability to function," said Dr. John Oh, a trauma surgeon at Penn State Health Hershey Medical Center.

The effects extend far beyond the survivors. Some don't have health insurance. Family members often must take time off work to help them recover, and provide financial, emotional and other support.

"If their mental health concerns aren't addressed properly it can lead to substance abuse," Oh said. "They can't work, they can't make an income, they can't support their families and it may even spiral to homelessness. They may turn to suicide. It may prolong the cycle of poverty."

The human cost from shootings is the most devastating, but shootings also create steep economic costs across society. The medical treatment, unpaid hospital bills, police response, foregone earnings and criminal justice process cost the United States roughly \$557 billion every year, according to Everytown.

Just one person getting shot and wounded costs Pennsylvania nearly \$500,000, between survivors, their families, employers, the government and the "broader community," according to Everytown's calculations. Taxpayers on average pay more than \$40,000 of those costs.

Continued on next page

'You don't realize the effects it has on you when the bullet is in you'

Calvin Hollman

It was two days before Christmas in 1991, and Calvin "Cal" Hollman was running for his life.

Hollman, then 28, had just gotten into a heated argument with a friend over drugs. The friend left to get his gun, and Hollman initially stood his ground. But when the friend returned, Hollman realized he was going to be shot. He turned and started sprinting.

Hollman was jumping over a fence at Fifth and Peffer streets when the bullet hit him in his lower back and lodged in his spine.

He collapsed about half a block away outside a woman's home. She saw him bleeding on her sidewalk and came outside carrying a Christmas gift. The last thing Hollman remembered before everything went black was the woman unwrapping the gift, pulling out a blanket and wrapping it around him.

If she hadn't, Hollman believes he would have died on the sidewalk from blood loss.

"I was like, 'Wow, what did I do to deserve this?' Then I realized the game that I was in ... this was it. This is part of the game," Hollman said. "I always knew that drugs are either jail, death or you end up in some crazy institution because you done lost your mind.

There's no such thing as a successful drug dealer. You always die, or you end up in jail."

It took Hollman two years to learn to walk again. Angry, depressed and bound to a hospital bed, he took his hostility out on the doctors and nurses trying to help him. Thirty years later, Hollman chokes up while recalling that time.

"There's a lot of stuff I can't do. I could walk out here, fall and be paralyzed today. The bullet is still in my spine. That's just the way it is," Hollman said. "You're shooting people, people [are] getting shot ... you don't realize the effects it has on you when the bullet is in you or is in and out of you."

Eighteen years ago, Hollman was eating lunch in his car while on break from his job driving a forklift. When he tried to stand, he couldn't feel his legs anymore. Emergency responders took him to the hospital, where doctors unsuccessfully tried for the fourth time to remove the bullet.

Later, he had surgery to repair nerve damage and inadequate blood flow to his legs and feet, a long-term consequence of being shot close to his spine.

Before surgery, doctors told Hollman's fiancée they might have to amputate his right foot. They saved the foot, but he said he is in constant pain and struggles to walk.

"Now I got all these screws and rods in there. I can hardly feel sometimes, but on the days I do, it's cold because of the metal in [my foot]," Hollman said. "I'm always in pain with it. It's a matter of pain you learn to deal with."

Hollman's fiancée is related to the man who shot him, and although the men have talked in the years since the shooting, they have not come face-to-face. The shooter, Hollman said, is serving prison time on unrelated charges.



John "JT" Robinson is 25 and living in a nursing home because someone shot him in the head five years ago. Robinson's days are spent lying in bed, texting and calling friends and family and eating meals served to him on hospital trays. His roommate, a man decades older than him, sleeps in a bed on the other side of a curtain.

Hollman didn't tell police who shot him.

Years after he was shot, Hollman met the woman who wrapped him in the blanket at a barbecue. It was an emotional experience for both. He visited the woman for years after that until she died.

Hollman, now 59, said people who haven't been shot cannot understand the way those memories play back in your head, day after day, for years.

He uses his grief as a cautionary tale while mentoring at Harrisburg's Allison Hill community center. Every week, Hollman meets with men ages 18 to 25 who are struggling with many of the situations he was in decades ago.

He tells whomever will listen that getting shot is a trauma that will stick with them for the rest of their lives.

"After all these years, you see how emotional I still get talking about it in-depth. It gets to you because you're playing it out. Every day since it happened I'm playing it out," Hollman said. "I find the good part in life but deep inside that's what goes down."

'A lot of people suffer. It's not just the victim of the shooting'

John Robinson

John "JT" Robinson is 25 and living in a nursing home.

Robinson's days are spent lying in bed, texting and calling friends and family and eating meals served to him on hospital trays. His roommate, a man decades older than him, sleeps in a bed on the other side of a curtain.

When someone tells him they're sorry for what he has gone through, Robinson simply says, "It's OK."

But the bullet that broke Robinson's skull in April 2017 shattered his future.

He cannot and may never be able to walk again. He's

unable to control the left side of his body. His conversational responses are delayed and often short.

"My head hurts all the time," he said.

Despite this, he has an infectious laugh that seems to bubble up from inside.

He wasn't always able to find joy. At the time of his shooter's sentencing hearing, Robinson's family told a Dauphin County judge that Robinson wanted to die.

Dante Thompson, 20, said his gun accidentally went off when he hit Robinson in the head with it on Elm Street in Penbrook. He was sentenced to 56 months to 10 years in prison for aggravated assault and conspiracy.

It's not known why he attacked Robinson. During sentencing, he told the judge, "I was a boy and I behaved as a boy and acted as a child would."

"This was an intentional act," Johnny Baer, a former Dauphin County assistant district attorney, said in court at the time. "He struck this young man with a loaded gun with his finger on the trigger. The decision to do so caused irrevocable consequences."

Five years later, Robinson's mom, Traci Swingly, said he still struggles with his short-term memory. Minutes after a meal, he'll say he's hungry. He sometimes can't remember a phone call he just took. Swingly sat in on Robinson's interview with PennLive to help him answer questions.

Swingly was at work the day he was shot. Her phone kept ringing, but she was in a meeting and didn't answer. When someone texted the news, she raced to Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center.

Robinson remained at Hershey for the next six months.

Physical therapy helped him learn to swallow and talk again. Lowe's and Home Depot donated supplies for a

Continued on next page

wheelchair ramp at his family's home. Community members offered time and home-cooked meals.

The bulk of his medical costs were paid through Pennsylvania's Victim Compensation Assistance Program.

For the first few years, Robinson lived at home and was cared for by his parents and a personal aide. But at-home aides became scarce during the coronavirus pandemic, and Swingly said she could not juggle caring for her adult son and an underage son and working full-time.

She made the agonizing decision to move Robinson into a nursing home, at least temporarily.

The reality of Robinson's injuries and what they mean for his future has sunk in over the past several years, Swingly said. The mental toll now feels heavier than it did right after he was shot.

What happened to Robinson is particularly disheartening because he never got caught up in street drama or illegal activity, his mother said.

"Gun violence doesn't benefit anyone – not the victim, not the shooter, not the victim's family, not the shooter's family," Swingly said. "A lot of people suffer. It's not just the victim of the shooting. It doesn't just last for the time it happened. It pretty much lasts forever."

Long-term plans for Robinson are unclear. Swingly hopes he'll eventually be able to live on his own. He has designed logos for T-shirts and sweatshirts, and wants to develop skills as a fashion designer.

"I just want him to continue to have goals and work toward them, even if they're small goals," Swingly said. "He has a long time ahead of him to accomplish big things if he wants. If he could take baby steps, that'd be great."

'You don't know what I went through. You don't know what made me this way' *Jawon Chisholm*

Jawon Chisholm was 10 when he saw a man shot to death outside his Jefferson Street home.

It started as a fender-bender. The drivers argued, and one pulled a gun and fired it three times, then ran as the other driver crumpled onto the pavement.

Chisholm watched the whole thing from behind his screen door.

It traumatized him. For a long time, he refused to sleep in his own bed, fearing the shooter would come back.

When he was 15, Chisholm faced a gunman again. But this time, he wasn't watching from the safety of his home.

He'd been hanging with some high school football teammates in April 2005 at a friend's home on Hoerner Street, in the city's Allison Hill neighborhood. He wanted to walk to a nearby convenience store for a lemonade, but when he stepped outside, a man was pointing a shotgun at him.

Boom.

Chisholm's eardrums felt like they were blown out. For 3 to 5 seconds he froze in confusion. When he realized he'd been shot in the left leg, he hobbled back inside.



Jawon Chisholm, photographed where he was shot at 131 Hoerner Street in Harrisburg. When he was 15, someone pointed a shotgun at him on Hoerner Street in the city's Allison Hill neighborhood. When it fired, Chisholm said his eardrums felt like they were blown out. Then he realized he'd been shot in the leg.

At the hospital, doctors said they would have to amputate his left foot at the ankle.

"You're not cutting [expletive] off," Chisholm's dad said.

Two doctors saved his foot, but told him his football days were over.

"The first thing I said to the guy who [shot me] was, 'You messed my career up,'" Chisholm said.

Like the many Harrisburg survivors, Chisholm did not turn in the gunman. He would not go into detail about who shot him or say why he didn't cooperate with police. He said he did not know his shooter.

Chisholm said he lost 30 pounds during the nearly three weeks he was in the hospital. Half of his stay was spent in a fusing room — an 80- or 90-degree chamber that helped fuse the bones in his foot together.

The recovery process was brutal, he said.

"My foot was like a jigsaw puzzle when it happened because it was a shotgun blast. No water, no liquids, no food, all medicines. My lips are cracking, I'm using the bathroom through a catheter, I'm constipated," Chisholm said. "To endure that as a 15-year-old kid is kind of what makes me [who I am] today."

He spent his sophomore year rehabilitating his leg and trying to catch up academically.

With his hopes of a football career dashed, Chisholm said he started dealing drugs. He said he's not proud of it, but at the time he felt he had few other ways to be successful.

"In Harrisburg for some reason, we're always trying to keep up a persona. Always trying to keep up with the Joneses. You see the big cars with the wheels. You see the girls.

You see the streets and how the girls flock to the guys,"

Chisholm said. "As a younger person, who doesn't want that? I can't get that by sports [anymore], so how else can I get that? I'll try to sell some drugs.

"But you start to see a lot of things change. A lot of people go to jail. Friends go to jail, friends die."

Chisholm said he kept selling drugs even after he managed to get back onto the Harrisburg football team. But the pace was grueling. He said he regularly stayed out until 2 a.m. or later before Saturday morning games.

"Most people don't even know what you're going through. I know I was getting judged professionally. He's arrogant, he's cocky ... you don't know what I went through. You don't know what made me this way," Chisholm said.

He said he gave up drug dealing after he was offered a football scholarship to the University of Akron. He had a successful college football career before he retired from the game and moved home.

Chisholm, 31, said he still deals with effects of the shooting. He has to wear special shoes and can't move three toes on his left foot. He developed depression and anxiety. His mental health issues hit a breaking point during the pandemic. Chisholm barely left his house and gained a lot of weight, which he's since lost.

Now he hopes to share his story with others — particularly younger people, whom Chisholm wants to mentor.

"I asked God for the last five years, 'What's my purpose?' I'm finding my purpose," he said. "God sets you up to be where you are today. Right now you're catching me still on a journey."



Joseph Cole, photographed at 18th and Bellevue streets where he was shot.

'I value life and I understand what it is to be a father, to live'

Joseph Cole

Revenge.

That was the only thing on Joseph Cole's mind, moments after he was shot in the foot and chest.

It was Feb. 1, 2008, and Cole had just finished an eight-year stint in prison. He said the man who shot him in the area of 18th and Bellevue streets mistakenly believed Cole had punched his sister.

"My thinking was, 'I want to kill him.' That's what I kept thinking," Cole said. "In my mind, I said I was gonna murder him. Then after that, the reality of what happened set in."

An ambulance rushed Cole to the hospital and into surgery. His doctors needed more than 300 sponges to soak up blood during the initial surgery and later removed part of his right lung. Cole spent two days in a coma and was sent home Feb. 5, 2008 — his 25th birthday.

"When I woke up I had tubes everywhere and I didn't know where I was. The pain was unbelievable," Cole said.

And constant. It didn't relent for weeks, and he said he still feels occasional pains in his torso that sometimes make it tough to breathe.

Cole grew up in Hall Manor, which had its good and bad

aspects, he said. Neighborhood children were raised by "one tribe," he said, but Hall Manor in the 1980s was plagued by the same criminal activity as low-income communities across the country.

"What goes on in the projects is the same thing — drug dealing, shootings, robberies, violence, parties, fun, but also a lot of violence," Cole said. "That's what pruned me to become what I was. I was bullied when I was a child. Little heavy-set, bullied, and my mother was getting high. With those two things, it manifested in me to become a protector of myself and those around me."

His physical wounds eventually healed. Cole said his mental wounds did not.

His emotional state further deteriorated when his mother died six years ago. Things only started to look up in the last few years, with the birth of his youngest son. "I got shot, almost died, [and] now I'm just a different person.

"I value life and I understand what it is to be a father, to live," Cole said, holding his 15-month-old son on his lap. "As far as my children go, I'm an example for them of what not to do. I've shot people, I've been shot. I've shot at people, I've been shot at. I've done everything you possibly can do except for putting a person under the ground."

"I believe in God and that's who helps me get through what I go through in life, and then my children. I just had a son, so that's where I'm at in life. Peace, positivity, and love."

'I was scarred, and to this day I'm still scarred'

Tone Cook

Growing up, Tone Cook's best friend was his little brother Mike.

Tone and Mike were the oldest of six boys in the Cook family. They lived in Hall Manor's Hoverter Homes.

It was the 1980s and the crack epidemic hit the Black Harrisburg community hard, Cook said. Their father was often absent, and their mother struggled with addiction, so the brothers looked to the older boys in the neighborhood as role models.

Tone Cook was 17 and in jail on drug charges when he learned Mike had been killed in late 1997. Mike and a friend had been playing with a gun when it went off by accident.

The loss of his brother — and not being able to grieve with his family — gutted Tone. When he was released from prison in the ensuing months, he said he returned to the south side of Harrisburg with hate in his heart.

"I felt as though everybody in my way had to pay and everybody in my way was going to feel the same pain that I felt. Everybody was going to pay for it," he said. "I was angry.

I didn't know how to talk or release it. If you were from a different part of the city, I was going to make you feel the pain that I felt, and it was wrong."

Tone was at a neighborhood gathering in Hall Manor, a short walk from where Mike was killed, one day in the summer of 1998. Some kids were goofing off and

squirting passing cars with water guns. As one car rolled by, somebody inside pulled out a real gun, Tone said. He pulled out his own gun.

The shooting began.

Tone was shot in his left hand. He wrapped the hand himself and never went to the hospital.

"It gave me pain for a long time," he said. "Even to this day I still get pain from it, so it's like the pain never goes away. Sometimes the feeling comes in, [then] the feeling goes out of my hand."

His hand is still swollen and scarred 25 years later. He can use it, but is at risk of early arthritis.

Tone, 42, still thinks about his brother Mike every day, but now he channels his grief into positive action. He founded the Harrisburg community group "Michael's Memory" and routinely hosts street clean-ups, holiday celebrations and other events he said Mike would have enjoyed. Tone also welcomed a baby boy in September.

"I was scarred, and to this day I'm still scarred," he said. "Now we're able to do certain things and give back to the community in my brother's name. [But] emotionally, the pain never goes away."

'Mentally, emotionally is what affected me the most'

Mike Betsill

"Big Mike" Betsill stepped in to defuse a brewing fight between his friend and a very intoxicated man at a house party in uptown Harrisburg in 2013.

The drunken man pointed a gun at Betsill's face. Betsill turned and ran.

He made it out of the house and had just reached the sidewalk when gunshots rang out. A bullet tore through his leg and blew out his knee.

Betsill, now 30, remembers crawling under a car to get away from the barrage of bullets. Blood covered his clothing, but he wasn't sure at the time where he had been hit.

He was rushed into surgery at Hershey Medical Center. His shattered femur required a second surgery a couple of hours later.

Today, Betsill has a titanium rod in his leg from hip to shin. Because the rod is not able to permanently support his large frame, he'll have to get it replaced in two to four years. That will require 6–8 months of rehabilitation.

His original recovery process was strenuous, requiring daily workouts, he said. "Even to this day I'm rehabbing it, trying to figure out different ways to [heal]."

Betsill said he's as emotionally fragile now as he was just after the shooting. These are wounds he doesn't believe will ever heal.

"I think mentally, emotionally is what affected me the most. Just kind of being more paranoid, being on edge," he said. "I can't sit here and lie — things that probably wouldn't have gotten me upset or angry [before], they do [now]. I have a lot shorter of a temper than I ever had."

Continued on next page

He said he chooses to focus his energy on the things that uplift him — DJing at events across the country, and raising his 7-year-old daughter.

“Being a dad has probably been one of the most rewarding things for me. I got engaged last year,” he said. “Everything that’s been going on lately has been amazing. Life is a lot better than where it was.”

‘To this day I don’t trust nobody’

Antione Yeiser

Life had already been hard for Antione Yeiser before he was shot nine times in 2017.

Yeiser, 32, was shuttled back and forth from Harrisburg to Philadelphia while growing up with two sisters and three brothers. Yeiser’s parents were heavily involved in the Harrisburg street life. When his father was absent and out of work, Yeiser said, his mother managed the household alone.

Sometimes the family would go days without a meal, Yeiser said. “When I was growing up, it was real hard,” he said. “I had to learn everything from the streets. It was the same old thing – bad habits. It was just messy.”

Yeiser followed his parents into the streets. It’s what he knew.

He was with a group of people when a fist fight erupted one night in February 2017 in the 600 block of Camp Street. Guns were pulled, and nearly 40 bullets fired. Nine hit Yeiser. He said he does not know who shot him.

“Where I’m from, you can’t think. Eventually something is going to happen. If you fight somebody you’re going to get shot, if you don’t fight somebody you’re going to get shot,” Yeiser said. “All I can remember [thinking] is ‘damn, I’m going to die.’”

Bullets went into his legs, one foot, a hand, his stomach and chest.

Yeiser’s brother put him in the back of an SUV and sped to Harrisburg Hospital. Yeiser underwent four surgeries, four blood transfusions and at one point was on a ventilator.

He was bedridden for a month before he was able to begin physical therapy. After two months, Yeiser could finally start putting weight on the injured leg again.

He also needed physical therapy to regain use of his hand. One of his fingers was shot off and had to be reattached, he said.

He was still recovering when his father Ricardo Yeiser was shot and killed in November 2017 at 21st and Boas streets in Susquehanna Township. No one was charged in his death.

Yeiser is thankful he was given a second chance.

“I work out every day, I play basketball. I can do everything you can do. It’s a miracle,” he said.

The wounds healed, but mentally and emotionally Yeiser said he is not the person he was before he was shot.

“I don’t hang around people no more. I don’t get in nobody’s drama,” he said. “I feel like every day when I



Preston Dent photographed where he was shot in 1992 at Crescent and Berryhill streets in Harrisburg.

wake up, on any given day somebody could kill me. I look at things different. It’s like PTSD in my head. To this day I don’t trust nobody.”

Yeiser said he now spends more time with his three children and focuses on business opportunities. He jumped into real estate, and makes music and flips houses.

‘That’s what I want my kids to be – 10 times better than me’

Preston Dent

Preston Dent was 13 when he made his first drug sale, to his father’s best friend.

It was 1993, and Dent was growing up on Crescent Street in Allison Hill at the height of the crack epidemic.

“I was young, I was in an area that was predominantly drugs, violence,” he said. “It was just kids that were bad.”

The neighborhood was steeped in poverty and desperation. The Dent family’s next-door neighbors at one point broke into their home and stole their silverware.

Dent began carrying a handgun. He’d give it to his best friend each day before going home, so his parents wouldn’t find it.

One day, he and his friend got into an argument. Dent’s friend shot him with his own gun near the Crescent and Berryhill Street intersection. “It was wintertime, so it was

real cold. When I got shot it was like a bolt of lava went inside my body,” Dent said. “Before I passed out all I [knew] was that I was heating up and I was laying in the snow.”

Dent said he does not know why his friend fired the gun. He never turned him in to police.

The bullet went into Dent’s chest, nicked his lung and traveled into his stomach.

When he woke after surgery, Dent said the doctors told him in 10 or 20 years, he’d have severe asthma, wouldn’t be able to play sports, and would suffer “eternal” complications from the lung, as well as stomach problems.

His prolonged medical care also led to more immediate problems. Using a catheter for too long led to digestive issues. He still cannot drink anything besides water, because the acidity in other drinks creates a burning sensation when he uses the bathroom.

Aside from the digestive issues, Dent emerged from the shooting as a mostly healthy teenager. But he worried about the problems his doctors warned could develop later. “From the time I was 13 all the way up to 32, I thought I was living [on] spare time. I had this doctor’s voice in my head, like ‘You might just die.’ Your life could change at any moment,” Dent said.

“That just made me feel more wild, like what I got to live for? What am I here for? It made me feel like if I’m on short time, I need to get everything done, and that’s what made me hungry.”

He became more reckless.

Dent spent less than a year in prison in his 20s on drug charges. His cellmate, serving a life sentence, saw Dent writing rap lyrics and encouraged him to pursue music.

That spurred Dent to write, record and start performing his music in the Harrisburg community. The writing skills he used on raps helped him to write books. He’s since written and self-published five books.

That led Dent to connect with a cameraman and write, direct and film his own movies, including titles like “Alcoholic Bruce” and “Champion.” He said these films were posted on YouTube or shown in local theaters.

Dent also explored other business opportunities. He created and sells his own shampoo and conditioner. When he’s not doing any of that, he’s buying and selling real estate, and breeding German shepherds.

“If I see somebody making money in a legal way, if I see someone making money and it’s working, Imma follow suit,” he said. “That Range Rover you got, I want one too. This got you that Benz? Well listen, I see how you did it. Next year I’m going to be in that same business as you.”

Dent, now 40, uses the fast life he led as a kid as a teaching tool for his own four children, who are growing up in Harrisburg’s suburbs.

“They’re all respectful kids. They’re all good kids,” he said. “They’re not living fast. They’ve never been in the streets in their life. And that’s what I want my kids to be – 10 times better than me. If I have children and I allow the community to raise them, I allow the streets to be their advocate, then I failed as a father.”

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The Philadelphia Inquirer



JAMES J. CRAIG / FILE PHOTO

Grounds crew take up the AstroTurf at third base in Veterans Stadium to convert the field from football to baseball on Aug. 1, 1981.

FIELD OF DREAD

Six former Phillies died from the same brain cancer.
We tested the Vet's turf and found dangerous chemicals.

By **Barbara Laker** and **David Gambacorta**

As the clock inched toward 11:30 p.m., 65,838 people rose to their feet inside cavernous Veterans Stadium. It was Oct. 21, 1980, and Game 6 of the World Series between the Philadelphia Phillies and Kansas City Royals had reached the top of the ninth inning.

All that stood between the Phillies and the franchise's first championship was one strike.

On the mound was closer Tug McGraw, 36 — "Tuggles" to his friends. McGraw, famous for his unshakable optimism, had loaded the bases, jeopardizing the Phillies' 4-1 lead. "This is a helluva show," he told himself. "I better

not ruin it." Among the anxious faces in the Phillies' dugout was John Vukovich, 33, a light-hitting infielder who was considered one of the team's fiercest competitors.

Across the field, the Royals waited in anticipation, including Ken Brett, 32, a former Phillie who was once the youngest pitcher to appear in a World Series game, and Dan Quisenberry, 27, a witty reliever who dabbled in poetry.

City officials had fantasized about such a moment nearly a decade earlier, when the Vet first opened. The stadium, built on 74 acres of marshland in South Philly, had been over budget, tainted by a bribery scandal, dogged by construction mishaps and delays. But it did boast a million-dollar, state-of-the-art playing surface: AstroTurf.

McGraw sneaked a fastball past Willie Wilson, a Royals outfielder.

Strike three.

Fans screamed and howled and cried, and Phillies players and coaches celebrated atop blades of artificial grass that had been pioneered by a Missouri chemical company called Monsanto.

The company marketed its turf to professional sports teams, high schools, and colleges as a cheaper, more durable alternative to natural grass.

Decades after the final out of the 1980 World Series was

Continued on next page

recorded, McGraw, Vukovich, Brett, and Quisenberry had all died from brain cancer.

They weren't the only ones: In all, six former Phillies have reportedly been felled by glioblastoma — a particularly aggressive and deadly form of brain cancer — including catcher Darren Daulton, catcher Johnny Oates, and relief pitcher David West, who died in 2022.

The rate of brain cancer among Phillies who played at the Vet between 1971 and 2003 is about three times the average rate among adult men.

After West's death, at age 57, The Inquirer decided to test the Vet's turf. Athletes had dreaded playing on the surface, which was notorious for causing serious knee and ankle injuries. Through eBay, the newspaper purchased four souvenir samples of the fake grass that had blanketed the stadium's field from 1977 to 1981. The team gave away the green keepsakes to thousands of fans in 1982, in 4-by-4-inch sealed plastic bags labeled "Official Turf of Champions."

Tests run on two of the samples by Eurofins Lancaster Laboratories Environmental Testing found the turf contained 16 different types of PFAS, or per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances — so-called "forever chemicals," which the EPA has said cause "adverse health effects that can devastate families."

Researchers at the University of Notre Dame tested two other samples, and also found PFAS.

The lab findings come at a time of rising alarm across the United States about the pervasiveness of forever chemicals in an array of products, from turf and nonstick cookware to firefighting gear and food packaging. Few of the estimated 12,000 PFAS have been extensively studied. Since experts have only been aware since 2019 that PFAS was in artificial turf, no studies have yet been done to determine whether athletes' exposure could be linked to cancer.

In January, Pennsylvania put limits on two per-and polyfluoroalkyl substances in the state's 3,117 drinking water systems. That action came a few months after Mayor Jim Kenney's administration sued 3M, DuPont, and other chemical companies over PFAS contamination in the city's water supply.

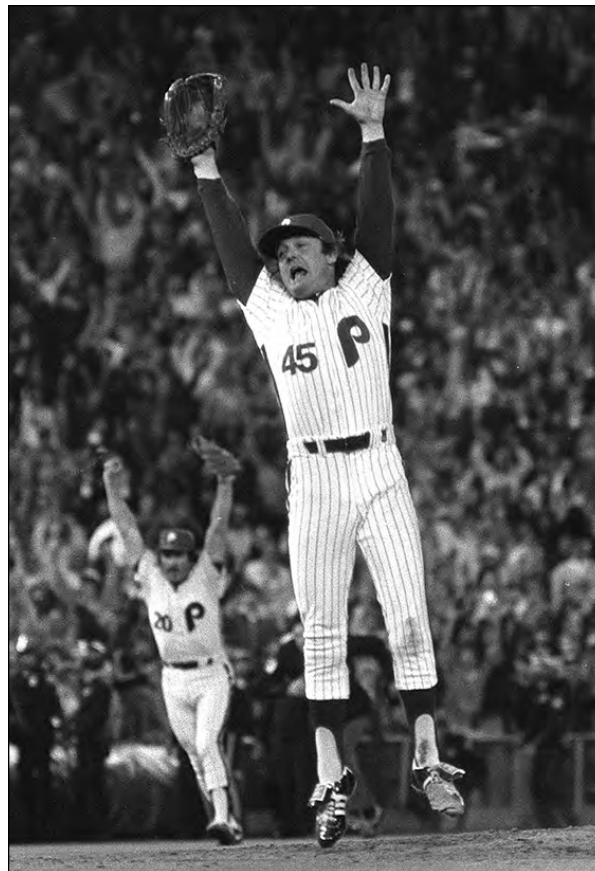
Although the dangers of drinking PFAS-contaminated water has been established, experts say that there isn't sufficient data to fully understand the potential risks of inhaling forever chemicals or getting them on the skin from repeated contact with playing surfaces.

"We don't have a good sense of the amount that was actually ingested, or what amount of exposure is relevant to cancer risk," said Timothy Rebbeck, an epidemiologist who researches the causes of cancer at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and a professor of medical oncology at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

"We're never going to have a good measure of what the Phillies players were exposed to."

Still, some experts call the toxins that Eurofins found in the Vet's AstroTurf concerning.

"Once PFAS gets into [a person's] blood, they circulate through all the organs," said Graham Peaslee, a physicist at the University of Notre Dame who has spent years studying PFAS compounds.



BRIAN HORTON / AP FILE PHOTO

"We know that the liver is affected. We know that the kidneys are affected. We know that the testicles are affected. But nobody's ever done the study to see if the brain is affected, because glioblastoma is such a rare disease."

Other than some kinds of cancers, the chemicals are also associated with decreased fertility and immunity to fight infections, and increased risks of asthma and thyroid disease.

Philadelphia officials acknowledge that PFAS products "pose grave environmental and human health risks. Professional athletes being exposed to PFAS via AstroTurf is only one example of the risks," said Joy Huertas, Mayor Kenney's spokesperson. "Adverse health effects due to PFAS exposure are a concern for everyone."

The turf industry, meanwhile, insists its products are safe.

"The materials used in synthetic turf have been thoroughly reviewed by both federal and state government agencies and are considered to be nonhazardous," Melanie Taylor, the president and CEO of the Synthetic Turf Council, wrote in an email.

"Going forward, our members will continue to pay close attention to evolving regulations and standards to ensure the highest safety of our products," Taylor wrote.

In a statement, the Phillies said the organization shares "the frustration and sadness of losing six members of our baseball family to brain cancer."

The team said it consulted several brain cancer experts



PHOTO: JESSICA GRIFFIN / STAFF

ABOVE: AstroTurf samples from Veterans Stadium submitted by Philadelphia Inquirer reporters at the University of Notre Dame to be tested for PFAS, in Indiana, Feb. 9, 2023.

LEFT: Tug McGraw and Mike Schmidt leap for joy as the Phillies close out the 1980 World Series in Game 6 at Veterans Stadium.

who told the organization that there is no evidence of a link between artificial turf and the disease.

Other experts, however, referred reporters to recent international studies, including two from researchers in China that found PFAS chemicals in brain tumor tissue, and another from researchers in Italy who, based on autopsies, found that PFAS accumulated in the brains of people who drank PFAS-contaminated water.

Some former players are unsure what to think. Larry Bowa was the Phillies' shortstop in 1980, and throughout the team's first decade at the Vet. He was close to both Vukovich and McGraw.

"To get that disease at such a young age, you sort of scratch your head, 'Something might be going on,'" said Bowa, now 77, and a Phillies senior adviser.

The rise of AstroTurf

The Monsanto Company was long headquartered in a small city outside of St. Louis, Creve Coeur. In French, the city's name translates to a phrase that might seem fitting, given the waves of illnesses and death that have been connected to the company's products: broken heart.

In the mid-1960s, Monsanto manufactured Agent Orange, which was used by U.S. soldiers to deforest portions of Vietnam. After the war, tens of thousands of veterans believed that chemicals in Agent Orange were to blame for an array of diseases they developed: Parkinson's,

Continued on next page

lymphoma, bladder and prostate cancers. (As part of a legal settlement, 52,000 veterans began receiving payments in 1988 that would total \$197 million.)

While war raged in Vietnam, the philanthropic Ford Foundation tasked Monsanto and one of its subsidiary companies with creating an artificial surface that children could play on, one that would withstand outdoor elements.

Monsanto developed a product called ChemGrass and installed it at a school in Rhode Island.

In 1966, the Houston Astros became the first professional baseball team to use Monsanto's green carpet, installing it at their year-old stadium, the Astrodome. Monsanto renamed its product AstroTurf — and sensed an enormous opportunity.

One Monsanto official bragged to the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that the company believed its product could be a fit for 40 professional sports stadiums; 2,000 high schools; 575 universities; 175 municipal facilities; and could even replace the lawns and backyards in people's homes.

In Philadelphia, city officials and Phillies executives were mired in a yearslong attempt to replace crumbling Connie Mack Stadium in North Philly. The city settled on building a new ballpark in South Philly, on an expanse of marshland that stretched south from Packer Avenue to Pattison Avenue, east from Broad Street to 10th, an area that local residents referred to as "the valley."

From the start, the project was a boondoggle. City officials disagreed over how much the stadium should cost (the budget soared from \$25 million to \$50 million) and what to call it. A grand jury indicted the manager of the project for accepting a \$10,000 bribe from a potential contractor. Cracks were found in concrete panels at the top of the stadium before it even opened.

But the playing field didn't figure to be much of a problem. Phillies and Eagles executives agreed that artificial turf made the most sense, because the field would have to withstand both baseball and football games.

The city awarded Monsanto a \$1.5 million contract to install its AstroTurf on Veterans Stadium's field, along with a drainage system below. The company contended that the turf would save money for the city, which spent at least \$125,000 a year maintaining Connie Mack's grass field.

In April 1971, the Vet finally opened.

The artificial turf presented challenges. When rain fell, enormous puddles gathered on the field and had to be mopped up by a Zamboni. Balls hit into the outfield bounced off the turf and over the walls for ground-rule doubles so often that the Phillies had to raise the fences four feet. Underneath the fake grass was just a thin layer of padding, then blacktop.

"It was like playing on concrete," recalled Bob Boone, a Phillies catcher from 1972 to 1981.

And unlike grass, the artificial carpet trapped heat, especially during summer day games. The blades of plastic grass were practically cooking; temperature gauges recorded figures that regularly soared above 100 degrees,



PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER & DAILY NEWS ARCHIVE

Vet Stadium dedication, April 10, 1971.

and sometimes reached 165 degrees, releasing toxic vapors that could be inhaled.

As a catcher, Boone spent most of the game crouched over dirt, which was cooler. He remembers outfielders and infielders, though, whose metal cleats burned while they were on the field at the Vet.

"In the dugout, the team put boxes with ice on the stairs leading up to the clubhouse," Boone said. "I'd come in and see guys standing with their feet in the boxes. I used to spend my day laughing at them: 'Getting hot out there?'"

Artificial turf carpeted other multipurpose municipal stadiums, similar to the Vet, that were built in the '60s and '70s in St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh.

Bowa remembers watching someone crack an egg on the turf in St. Louis' Busch Memorial Stadium before a Sunday afternoon game in the 1970s.

"The egg," he said, "fried on the turf."

"You could see it from the stands, the heat coming off from the turf," said Bobby Brett, who watched his brothers, George and Ken, play for the Royals in Kansas City's Kauffman Stadium, which also used artificial turf.

Baseball players, meanwhile, complained of back, knee, and foot injuries that they developed from spending so much time on the unforgiving surface. Some discovered wounds on their arms after they dove for a ball. Turf burns, Bowa called them.

Management of the Vet fell to the city's Department of

Recreation. Annual reports from the 1970s, reviewed by The Inquirer, show the department was primarily focused on the stadium's financial performance. No references were made to the publicized complaints by Phillies players and others across the National League about the condition of the field.

The fake grass did not prove to be as cheap or durable as initially advertised. The city spent roughly \$8 million to have the Vet's turf replaced five times during its 33-year history; nearly \$4 million went to Monsanto alone.

In 2018, Bayer, the German pharmaceutical giant, purchased Monsanto for \$63 billion. Bayer did not respond to a request for comment.

'Superman doesn't get hurt'

The headaches first started to bother John Vukovich during spring training in 2001. He was 53, coaching third base for the Phillies, working for Bowa, who was in his first season as the team's manager.

Vukovich had a reputation for being tough on everyone — players, coaches, himself. He didn't want to take time off to investigate the headaches. But Bowa noticed that Vukovich was struggling.

"You sure you're OK?" Bowa asked one day.

"Yeah, yeah," Vukovich said.

By that May, the ongoing discomfort compelled him to

Continued on next page

visit Thomas Jefferson University Hospital. Doctors discovered a tumor, 3 centimeters by 4 centimeters, in Vukovich's left occipital lobe, the area of the brain that controls vital cognitive functions like vision, memory, and reading.

A surgeon removed a grape-sized portion of the tumor. Tests would determine if it was cancerous.

Born in Sacramento, Calif., Vukovich had been selected by the Phillies in the 1966 amateur draft. He made his professional debut with the team in 1970. Though just a lifetime .161 hitter, he was considered a critical ingredient in the 1980 club's chemistry, a guy who volunteered to be the emergency catcher and wasn't afraid to confront teammates who didn't play the right way.

"He never told you what you wanted to hear," Bowa said. "He'd tell you the truth. It didn't matter if you were making \$10 million or the bare minimum. He had one goal: to win."

Bowa, a fellow Sacramento native, first met Vukovich on a baseball diamond in California when they were teenagers. "He was running his mouth," Vukovich told the Daily News. "We were about 16 years old and he was chirping."

The two grew up together in the Phillies organization, going to the World Series as players in 1980, and then again as coaches on the Phillies' wild 1993 team.

They often joked about their shared intensity; they could scream at each other at the ballpark one day, then be happy to see each other the next.

"All the guys you play with are your friends," Bowa said, "but he literally was my best friend."

The test results on Vukovich's tumor came back with hopeful news: The tumor was benign. There was a cautious but attached to the diagnosis; it could still become cancerous. Phillies players and coaches, emotional over Vukovich's sudden illness, displayed his No. 18 jersey in their dugout while he spent a month recovering.

"It was devastating," Bowa said.

Gus Hoefling, a former Phillies strength and conditioning coach, occasionally hunted deer with Vukovich in South Carolina. Surgery and radiation treatments took a toll on Vukovich.

"He was just moody, sometimes irrational," Hoefling said. "It changed his personality."

In 2006, Vukovich's tumor grew malignant. By March 2007, he'd fallen gravely ill at Jefferson, but forbade his old pals from visiting. Bowa appealed to Vukovich's wife, Bonnie.

"Can I see him?" Bowa asked.

"Bo," she said, "he doesn't want to see anybody."

Bowa considered sneaking into the hospital, just to peek at his friend one last time, but decided against it. Vukovich, a father of two, died on March 8 at age 59.

In 1999, another former teammate of Bowa's, Ken Brett, noticed that his pinkie finger felt numb when he jogged. A small nuisance, really, especially for a 6-foot former professional ballplayer who'd been known in El Segundo, Calif., as the strongest, most-talented athlete in a brood of



MICHAEL PEREZ / STAFF FILE PHOTO

William Cleary, from Givnish Family Funeral Home, carries a portrait of John Vukovich at the end of his memorial service.

four brothers, one of whom — George Brett — ended up in the baseball Hall of Fame.

Ken Brett mentioned the tingling to his doctor. An MRI revealed the problem: a brain tumor.

Brett assured his daughter, Sheridan, and son, Casey, that he would get surgery and fight the disease.

"He was this larger than life person," said Sheridan, 34. "He was always strong. I was 11 when he got sick, and he did whatever he could to make me feel safe."

Brett was selected by the Boston Red Sox with the fourth overall pick of the 1966 draft; a year later, at age 18, he pitched in the World Series against the St. Louis Cardinals.

He played for 10 different teams — including the Phillies in 1973 and Royals in 1980 — and then became a professional announcer who competed, in his spare time, in triathlons.

"This guy was like Superman," said Bobby Brett. "Superman doesn't get hurt."

Like Vukovich, Ken Brett endured surgery and cancer treatments, hoping he could beat the disease. "For a while, it seemed like everything was fine," Bobby said. "Then it came back, more aggressive."

In November 2003, at age 55, Ken died. He was the third former Royal felled by a brain tumor, joining Quisenberry, who died in 1998, and former manager Dick Howser, who died in 1987.

A year after Brett died, in December 2004, former Texas Rangers manager Johnny Oates died at age 58. He battled glioblastoma, which affects a little more than three in every 100,000 people, according to the National Institutes for Health. That rate has risen in recent years, but researchers aren't sure why. A onetime major league catcher, Oates played for the Phillies for two seasons in the 1970s.

Brett's family began to discuss whether his illness was

linked to artificial turf after reading a New York Times article in 2017 about former baseball players who'd died of glioblastoma.

"It almost adds an extra layer of pain," Sheridan said. "These are guys who took care of their bodies. They were physical for a living. Most of them didn't have health problems before they started dying in their 40s and 50s from brain cancer."

Sheridan said she thinks the issue is worth further study — "most importantly" for kids who play on artificial turf and might be exposed to PFAS.

"Those chemicals don't go away," she said. "Who is in contact with them now?"

The remaining Brett brothers own two minor league baseball teams that are based in Washington, and a third in California. Bobby, the managing partner, said all the teams have natural grass in their home ballparks.

The burden of proof

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the era of cookie cutter municipal stadiums and their ubiquitous green carpets started to draw to a close. In Philadelphia, the Phillies and Eagles each built new stadiums and emphasized that the fields would be made of natural grass.

Just five of Major League Baseball's 30 teams still play on artificial turf, along with 16 of the NFL's 32 teams. FIFA, professional soccer's international governing body, insists on natural grass fields for World Cup matches. (The Eagles' Lincoln Financial Field will be a 2026 World Cup site.)

While professional sports teams have moved away from artificial surfaces, the city still maintains five public turf fields in South, North, and Northeast Philly. An additional six artificial turf fields are managed by the School District of Philadelphia.

The city also wants its \$250 million renovation of FDR Park in South Philadelphia to include a dozen new turf fields. Some residents oppose the plan, arguing the chemicals in the fake grass could harm the environment and young athletes.

Huertas, Kenney's spokesperson, said the city is seeking turf products and infill materials that don't contain PFAS.

In the United States, the government and industry response to the risk that forever chemicals pose to human health — and what that risk means for products like artificial turf — has been slow and scattered. The chemicals remain largely unregulated.

"The burden of proof is really on the science to demonstrate that there has been harm rather than on the industry to demonstrate that the product is safe," said Jennifer Jacquet, an associate professor of environmental studies at New York University.

Several towns in Massachusetts and California have, on their own, implemented moratoriums on artificial turf. Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Vermont have bills at the state level to ban fake grass. As of January, Maine prohibited the sale of rugs, carpets, and fabric treatments that contain PFAS. Even chemical giant 3M announced in

Continued on next page

December it will no longer use PFAS by the end of 2025, citing “accelerating regulatory trends focused on reducing or eliminating the presence of PFAS.”

The EPA soon plans to enforce severe limits on two of the most widely used PFAS chemicals, PFOA (perfluorooctanoic acid) and PFOS (perfluorooctane sulfonic acid), in drinking water.

Both of those PFAS were found in the samples of Veterans Stadium turf that were tested by Eurofins, the largest group of PFAS testing labs in the country. The Notre Dame researchers found five different forever chemicals, including PFOS.

The gradual enforcement efforts in the U.S. stand in stark contrast to many European countries, which have placed the burden on chemical companies to prove their products are safe, rather than waiting for evidence that a toxic material causes even more disease than originally thought.

“In Europe, authorities have accepted that we should be cautious and therefore they are phasing it out,” said Jacob de Boer, an environmental chemist at the Free University of Amsterdam, who has studied toxic substances his entire career.

Told about six Phillies succumbing to brain cancer, he said, “That is such a high number that it is worrying ... In some cases it’s better not to wait for the 100% proof.”

Many environmentalists say PFAS has reached a “contamination crisis.”

“We’re running on a toxic treadmill. There are literally thousands of other PFAS that are coming at us,” said Erik Olson, senior strategic director for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group. “Until the EPA phases out the whole class, we’re going to be stuck on this treadmill and we’re never going to get a handle on the problem.”

Concerns about these pervasive forever chemicals aren’t limited to athletes playing on artificial turf.

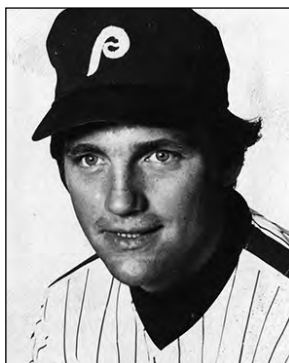
The same chemicals lurk in the turnout gear that firefighters regularly wear, and cancer has emerged as their leading cause of death, making up 75% of active-duty firefighter fatalities in 2019.

In Montgomery and Bucks Counties, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is examining the human health effects of PFAS on people who live near two military bases there, part of a national study. The bases used firefighting foam containing PFAS that leached into the water supply.

While the list of health problems linked to PFAS continues to grow, environmental advocates say that it is difficult to establish causation between exposure to forever chemicals and specific illnesses, especially among small numbers of people — like the former Phillies.

“So the question becomes what do you do? Do you say we need more studies? We need 100 more players to get brain cancer before we’ll say maybe there’s a problem?” asked Kyla Bennett, science policy director for Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

“Or do we use the precautionary principle and say we know these chemicals cause certain types of cancer?”



PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS FILE PHOTO

Former Phillies pitcher Ken Brett played for 10 teams during his career.



AP FILE PHOTO

Former Texas Rangers manager Johnny Oates, played for the Phillies in 1975 and 1976.

‘Why are all of our teammates dying?’

The glioblastoma deaths of two more former Phillies — catcher Daulton, in 2017 at age 55, and pitcher West, in 2022 at age 57 — bolstered concerns about a possible connection to Veterans Stadium’s turf.

“It was just sad all the way around to lose all those guys. To lose them that way,” said former Phillies pitcher Larry Christenson. “Then you start thinking, with Vuke, Darren Daulton — it opened a can of worms: ‘Whoa. Why are all of our teammates dying? Is there something that can narrow it down?’”

The Phillies consulted with Kyle Walsh, a Duke University associate professor in neurosurgery and pathology.

“Having six Phillies develop glioblastoma, on its face, seems higher than you would expect,” Walsh said in a recent interview. “But it’s also within that key demographic of who you’d expect to develop it.”

The disease most often strikes non-Hispanic white men, between the ages of 40 and 70. Walsh, who also serves as the director of Duke’s Division of Neuro-epidemiology, said researchers examine a variety of factors that could contribute to a person’s risk of developing brain cancer, including genetic history and diet.

He doesn’t believe, however, that PFAS could be a root cause of brain cancer.

“PFAS and other potential toxicants in blood reach the brain at 1000-fold lower levels than they do other organs, like the liver and kidneys,” Walsh said.

In a January 2023 study published in the *Journal of Hazardous Materials*, Chinese researchers say there could be a link. “Our findings suggest that exposure to PFAS might increase the probability to develop glioma,” they wrote.

Environmental advocates and scientists had long been concerned about a different aspect of artificial turf: pieces of recycled car tires that manufacturers used to make turf more cushioned and durable. The rubber contained heavy metals, including lead and other carcinogenic compounds like nickel, chromium, benzene, cadmium, and arsenic.

A 2019 EPA report on turf and recycled tire crumb rubber

concluded that while the pulverized tires contained harmful chemicals, the risks of human exposure were low. (The agency, however, noted that the report was “not a risk assessment” and is now working on a second report on artificial turf.)

Meanwhile, many turf manufacturers have replaced crumb rubber with cork, sand, and other materials.

On Sept. 28, 2003, the Phillies played their final game at the Vet, a 5-2 loss to the Atlanta Braves. During a postgame ceremony, players from past teams trickled onto the field for a bittersweet reunion.

The last player to join the fray was Tug McGraw, who emerged from a black limousine. “Number 45,” shouted announcer Harry Kalas, “Tug McGrawww!”

McGraw, smiling, decked in his old maroon uniform, knew what he was expected to do.

Earlier that year, McGraw complained to Christenson, a close friend with whom he sometimes lived, that he was experiencing terrible headaches.

Bowa invited McGraw to Clearwater, Fla., to work with the Phillies during spring training. One day, a mutual friend called Christenson and said McGraw had gotten lost — for three hours.

McGraw went to a local hospital, where doctors discovered he had a brain tumor. McGraw endured surgery and months of chemotherapy treatments.

As a young pitcher with the Mets, McGraw coined the phrase, “Ya gotta believe!” and carried a lighthearted spirit throughout his career. Weeks after his cancer surgery, he assured reporters: “I’m supposed to be alive for a long time.”

But McGraw’s prognosis was grim.

“To watch what that disease does to people ...” Christenson said, his voice trailing off.

At the Vet, McGraw tucked his right hand inside a light brown baseball glove and trudged across NeXturf, the final artificial carpet to cover the stadium’s field. He stood on the pitcher’s mound, just as he had on a late October night in 1980, when his biggest concern was whether he could sneak a fastball past Willie Wilson.

With his once-shaggy mane left short by chemotherapy, McGraw mimed his final World Series pitch and reached to the sky, triumphant.

The stadium filled with thunderous applause, and McGraw beamed. Former teammates in pinstriped jerseys wrapped him in their arms.

It was a moment of fleeting joy.

On Jan. 5, 2004, Tug McGraw died at age 59.

A little more than two months later, 3,000 pounds of explosives that had been planted inside the Vet’s soaring columns were detonated, and the old stadium crumbled in a fog of dust and debris.

This article has been updated to note that Tug McGraw struck out Willie Wilson in the top of the ninth inning in Game 6 to win the 1980 World Series.

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Tribune-Review

INVISIBLE DANGER



Most Western Pennsylvania schools don't test for radon, despite high levels in the state

By **DEB ERDLEY**
and **MEGAN TOMASIC**

As a father of four, Tim Briggs considered it common sense that schools would test for radon.

As a state lawmaker, he was appalled that every school doesn't, and he has made it his mission to do something about it.

A months-long Tribune-Review investigation found that most schools in Southwestern Pennsylvania do not regularly test for radon, the odorless, colorless, radioactive gas found here in some of the highest concentrations in the nation.

At risk is the health and safety of the state's nearly 1.7 million school children — in addition to teachers and staff — who spend upward of 1,000 hours a year in classrooms, said Briggs, a Montgomery County Democrat.

"You don't hear anything about (radon) until someone you know is affected by it," he said, "and by then it's too late."

Briggs has introduced five bills in the past decade requiring school districts to test for the gas, whose deadly effects can emerge decades later in the form of lung

cancer in some people, according to medical experts. Each time those bills failed, Briggs vowed he wouldn't give up until he sees laws on Pennsylvania's books like those in other states.

Radon is the second-leading cause of lung cancer after smoking, according to the American Lung Association. It seeps into basements through cracks in walls, foundations and other openings.

Medical experts link radon to at least 21,000 lung cancer deaths annually nationwide and more than 1,400 in Pennsylvania, which has the third-highest levels of radon in the country, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Children are particularly vulnerable.

For them, the risk of developing radon-induced cancer later in life is twice as high as adults with the same exposure because youngsters' quickly changing bodies and rapid breathing rates translate into larger doses of radiation, researchers found.

Children exposed to radon plus tobacco smoke are 20 times more likely to develop lung cancer, researchers found.

Yet testing requirements have failed to gain traction in

the General Assembly and among many school districts.

According to the Trib's investigation:

- Requests filed under the state's Right to Know Law with school districts in a four-county region of Southwestern Pennsylvania revealed that nearly 70% had not tested for radon in the past five years, the interval used by states with school radon testing laws in place and by Briggs in each of his failed bills.
- Many of the districts that had not tested are located in communities where state environmental monitoring identified dangerously high average radon levels, according to a review of state records.
- No records of radon testing at any time in the past were maintained by many of the school districts surveyed.
- Although school districts are required to report to the state Department of Education about a number of safety issues, no records regarding radon testing or repairs to mitigate high levels of radon are maintained by the department.
- Some school officials say they lack funds needed to

Continued on next page

test for radon — about \$1,500 per building — but groups offering grants to conduct testing say it's difficult to "give away" the money to districts to complete the work.

• Partisan politics and battles over who will pay for radon testing and mitigation have torpedoed attempts to pass school radon testing bills in Pennsylvania, supporters of the bills contend. Seventeen states have enacted various radon-related laws. Bills introduced in Pennsylvania have died in committee without a hearing or committee vote.

The findings

Of the 61 school districts surveyed by the Trib, those with no records of testing ranged from larger districts such as Upper St. Clair and Greater Latrobe to smaller ones such as Jeannette and Monessen.

The region's largest district — Pittsburgh Public Schools — had no record of testing in the past five years.

Others said they had not tested for anywhere from six to more than 30 years ago.

Nineteen of the 61 districts surveyed completed testing within the past five years, with many taking steps to mitigate radon found at or above the level of 4.0 picocuries per liter of air that is deemed a health hazard by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

No testing

The Yough School District is one of the districts comprising communities where the state Department of Environmental Protection reported radon well above the level deemed unsafe by federal officials.

Average basement radon levels measured 8.4 picocuries per liter of air — more than two times the acceptable level — in communities making up the school District, according to a state website recording radon levels.

But Yough has not tested for radon in the past five years, according to results of the Trib's survey. Like many other districts, radon testing has not been part of the district's safety routine.

"Radon, in my experience, hasn't been included in any air quality testing even in the previous districts where I worked," said Anthony DeMaro, newly appointed superintendent in the district. "If this is something our district needs to look at, just in anticipation of these bills (that might be introduced in the state Legislature), that is something we would take seriously."

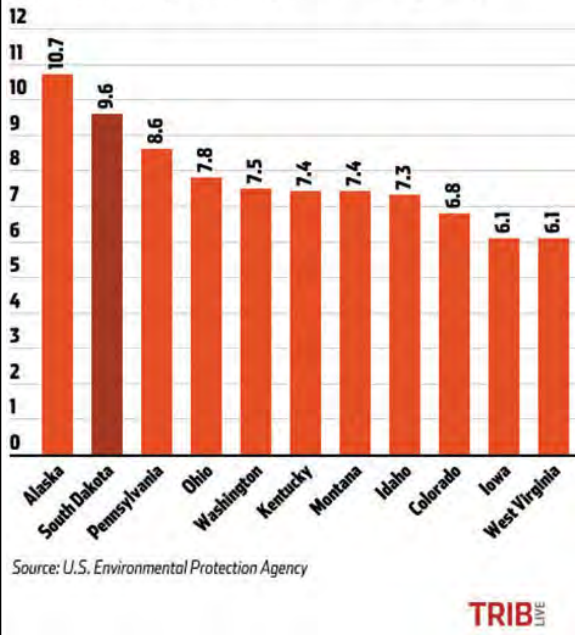
A breakdown of the state's radon monitoring program is available on a database containing results of millions of tests performed by private property owners and licensed professionals. The average results for each community are available online by ZIP code.

Experts point out that just because a building or home has high levels of radon does not indicate that every structure in that neighborhood or community will have high levels. But testing is warranted, they say.

The state also found high levels of radon in communities making up the New Kensington-Arnold School District, where tests found average basement radon levels of 5.7 picocuries per liter of air and a first-floor average of 6.0. No testing occurred in the school district in the past five years.

States with the highest average radon levels

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends action be taken to mitigate radon levels at or above 4.0 picocuries per liter of air (pCi/L).



Christopher Sefcheck, who just began his second school year as superintendent, said he is familiar with radon testing from his last position with the Bethlehem-Center School District, where testing for radon and lead in drinking water was done with a grant.

He said he would meet with the facilities and grounds director to "see what has to be done" regarding radon testing.

In some districts, radon testing has not moved beyond the discussion stages.

The state found average basement radon levels of 5.9 picocuries per liter of air and a first-floor average of 7.8 in the communities making up the Highlands School District.

Chris Reiser, buildings and grounds supervisor for the district, said there have been internal discussions about testing, but no action has been taken.

Dante Pope, who has a son in middle school and a daughter in fourth grade, said he doesn't understand why Highlands has failed to move forward.

"(Radon) is something that needs to be addressed," Pope said.

He said any investment in testing would be "minuscule" when the health and safety of children is in question, particularly when dealing with a proven cancer-causing agent such as radon.

Although lawmakers have not reached a consensus about radon, the message from the state's environmental agency is clear.

"Inaction can mean increased exposure to radon, which

in turn can increase the risk of lung cancer," DEP spokeswoman Deborah Klenotic said. "The risk of lung cancer is associated with longer-term exposures ... so the longer someone waits to test for radon, the higher the risk."

"DEP believes it's important for all schools in Pennsylvania to test all frequently occupied, ground-contact rooms during the school years and would like to see legislation that would require testing and, if necessary, remediation."

She said many states, such as neighboring West Virginia, already have this requirement.

Testing and retesting

Once a school has tested, it's important to retest, state and federal officials said.

Just because a structure produced a low test level once, that does not mean that level will remain low. And installation of a mitigation system does not mean that further testing will not be required, according to federal guidelines.

That hasn't happened in the Ligonier Valley School District, where state monitoring showed average community basement radon levels of 8.7 picocuries per liter of air, more than twice the federal action level. The first-floor average was 6.3, records show.

"All of our buildings were tested in the '90s during renovations, but we do not regularly test," said Ligonier Valley Superintendent Timothy Kantor. "We replaced our HVAC system in all of our buildings four years ago ...

"We have not had discussions specifically concerning radon testing, but I plan on researching with our building and grounds director along with consulting county superintendents of what they do in their districts concerning radon testing and mitigation."

One expert believes the invisible nature of radon and the fact its health effects are delayed for decades lead many to ignore it.

"If you don't measure it, there's nothing to fix. The health risks are delayed, which reduces the perceived risks," said R. William Field, professor emeritus of occupational and environmental health at the University of Iowa, who estimates that a half-million Americans, including a large number who have never smoked, have died of radon-induced cancer since the 1980s.

Field, one of the nation's foremost authorities about the effects of radon gas on humans, said lung cancer often remains dormant, sometimes exploding into a lethal health threat decades after exposure to radon. He added that there are currently no diagnostic tools to definitively link any one case of lung cancer to radon, but researchers have strong evidence tying it to lung cancer in nonsmokers.

A son's story

David Trent lives each day with the heartbreak of what happens years after high levels of radon are ignored.

He graduated in the spring from Pine-Richland High School without his mother, Helena Lin Trent, there to see it.

Continued on next page

A nonsmoker, she was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer in 2018. The Tai chi teacher and entrepreneur in website design and marketing died 20 months later at 47.

Trent, his father and doctors believe her cancer was linked to her childhood in China, where little attention was paid to radon testing.

Shortly after his mother's death, Trent and his friends formed a nonprofit, RnFree, to mail radon kits to homeowners across the country.

In imploring school districts and state lawmakers to act, Trent recalled the sorrow of losing his mother at such a young age.

"It really hurts to be part of the 21,000 who have witnessed this firsthand," he said.

Schools that tested

Some school districts in the region — Hempfield Area, Kiski Area, Pine-Richland and Norwin, to name a few — are taking a head-on approach to dealing with radon.

Hempfield Area conducted districtwide radon testing, its first since 1995, this past spring at a cost of about \$12,000. The tests, conducted in advance of a \$100 million renovation project, found five areas slightly above the federal trigger level.

Superintendent Tammy Wolicki said officials will take whatever action is necessary to address those issues.

Pine-Richland, Kiski Area and Norwin participated in an ongoing radon testing grant program run by Women for a Healthy Environment and the Green Building Alliance with funds from the Heinz Endowments.

When radon above the federal safe level was discovered in several Pine-Richland elementary classrooms, officials moved quickly to retest and install mitigation systems, then posted the results on the school's website.

Kiski Area facilities director James Perlik said that kind of transparency is vital.

"We qualified for the grant, so I went to the administration about it and we did it. Kiski Area's buildings, including its 100-plus-year-old elementary school building in Vandergrift, all tested well within the EPA's safe range," Perlik said.

Testing at Norwin revealed radon above the federal action level in the middle school auditorium and stage as well as several classrooms and music rooms at Hillcrest Intermediate School.

Superintendent Jeff Taylor said officials are awaiting estimates for remediation work.

"I feel like radon testing is extremely important. I'm kind of disappointed that it is not required (to do) testing for the school districts," Taylor said. "This impacts thousands of children across Pennsylvania, and it can affect adults who work in those classrooms all day as well."

Fewer than two dozen school districts applied for the grants that helped Hempfield Area, Pine-Richland, Kiski Area and Norwin complete testing.

"I think honestly it is fear of the unknown that is delaying schools from participating in the program," said Michelle Naccarati-Chapkis, executive director of Women for a



PHOTO: KRISTINA SERAFINI | TRIBUNE-REVIEW

David Trent holds a photograph of himself and his mother, Helena Lin Trent, outside his Pine home.

Healthy Environment. "We recognize that schools in the last two years have had a lot of other issues to address in terms of online learning and technology. But we've tried to make this process straightforward to ensure that it is not burdensome."

Parents react

Many parents, aware of the dangers of radon in their homes, said they assumed their school districts were testing as part of routine safety checks.

Aimee Hogg of Unity, whose daughter is a junior high student at Latrobe, was stunned to hear that officials there said they did not test for radon.

"I am furious that they do not test ... especially considering how much below ground level our high school building is," Hogg said.

Hogg wondered what she was exposed to as a student and later as a teacher for 18 years at Hempfield Area High School.

"I guess what is most concerning for me is why they're not testing. ... I know this can have some bad repercussions as far as lung cancer," said Rachele Cancilla, a nurse at UPMC and the mother of a Franklin Regional High School student, one of the districts that had not tested in the past five years.

Cancilla said she and her husband just tested for radon at

FACTS & FIGURES

- Pennsylvania has a unique geology that puts residents at higher risk for radon exposure than in other states.
- Radon is in the highest class of carcinogens — substances capable of causing cancer in humans.
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency warns Americans that there are no safe levels of radon and recommends remediation if levels are at or above 4.0 picocuries per liter of air. The agency also recommends that Americans consider remediation if levels are at or above 2.0 picocuries per liter of air.
- About 98.5% of the counties in Pennsylvania are designated in the two highest radon risk areas by federal officials. About 73% of the counties are in the top risk area, meaning their average radon levels are more than 4.0 picocuries per liter of air.
- The levels considered "safe" can vary from country to country. In Canada, any level at or above 2.0 picocuries per liter of air is considered too high and requires immediate remediation.
- A federal risk assessment of radon showed that a level of 4.0 picocuries per liter of air in a home is considered five times more likely to result in a lung cancer diagnosis when compared with the risk of dying in a car crash.
- Federal officials estimate that 1 in 5 American classrooms have a radon level at or above 4.0 picocuries per liter of air.
- Radon is the second-leading cause of lung cancer, costing the United States more than \$2 billion annually in direct and indirect health care costs.
- Radon has no immediate symptoms that will alert someone of its presence. It takes years of exposure before any problems become apparent.
- EPA guidance suggests homes be tested for radon every two years.

Sources: Women for a Healthy Environment; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; American Lung Association

home after seeing a news story about the importance of testing as people set up offices in their basements.

"If my husband's going to be working there (in their basement) four or five days a week, we obviously would want to get it taken care of," Cancilla said. "I'm definitely not concerned about the costs. I'm hoping the school district would follow the same logic."

Published Oct. 9, 2022

The Times-Tribune

Change in rating system causes premiums to soar

By **Terrie Morgan-Besecker**
Staff Writer

A projected 600% increase in flood insurance may force Johanna Yachna to make some tough decisions about her family's Duryea homestead where she has lived the past 87 years.

Her \$880 bill could skyrocket to \$5,137 in the coming years for the Chittenden Street home near the Lackawanna River bank in Luzerne County.

"I have to see if I can pay it this year," said Yachna, who lives there with her 56-year-old disabled son, James. "If not, I don't know what I'm going to do."

She is among millions of homeowners nationwide insured through the National Flood Insurance Program who face dramatic premium spikes under a revised rating system the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the program's manager, began implementing in 2021. It is the first major update to the pricing system in more than 50 years. Many are unaware of exactly how much their bills will rise, and experts worry the hikes will cause many to drop their insurance and risk costly consequences.

FEMA analyzed flood insurance costs for 2.2 million single family homes nationwide, including 21,928 in Pennsylvania, whose rates were calculated under the revised rating system as of Sept. 30. It does not include commercial properties.

The analysis projects how much average premiums will increase by state, counties and ZIP codes.

In Pennsylvania, projections show a 92% hike, from \$1,075 to \$2,060; nationwide, it's a 124% increase from \$808 to \$1,808. In Northeast Pennsylvania, the average premium more than triples in Lackawanna and Wyoming counties, more than doubles in Luzerne, Pike, Susquehanna and Wayne counties and nearly doubles in Schuylkill County.

The Noxen area, ZIP code 18636, in Wyoming County, and the Duryea area, ZIP code 18642, in Luzerne County, face the largest percentage increases statewide. Projections show the average premium in the Noxen area will skyrocket 677%, from \$750 to \$5,829, and 673% in the Duryea area, from \$705 to \$5,448. In Lackawanna, average rate projections show:

Archbald, ZIP code 18403, up 409%, from \$736 to \$3,747; The Jermyrn/Mayfield area, ZIP code 18433, up



JAKE DANNA STEVENS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Johanna Yachna, 87, of Duryea with her son James Yachna at their home on Tuesday, June 7, 2023.

376%, from \$1,036 to \$4,929; The North Scranton area, ZIP code 18508, up 335%, from \$771 to \$3,351. The Dunmore/Throop area, ZIP code 18512, up 327%, from \$845 to \$3,611. In Luzerne:

The Pittston/Jenkins Twp. area, ZIP code 18640, up 274%, from \$916 to \$3,428. The Kingston/Forty Fort/Edwardsville area, ZIP code 18704, up 120% from \$695 to \$1,532. Wilkes-Barre, ZIP code 18702, up 115%, from \$805 to \$1,731. The West Pittston/Exeter area, ZIP code 18643, up 114%, from \$969 to \$2,070. Nanticoke, ZIP code 18634, up 93% from \$1,396 to \$2,701.

It is unclear why Yachna's rate will increase so much. It may be tied to her home being so close to a river and being flooded by tropical storms - Agnes in 1972 and Lee in 2011.

Duryea built a steel wall that elevated the height of the levee behind her home after the 2011 flood. But FEMA no longer offers preferred risk policies - lower-cost flood insurance policies for properties in moderate- to low-risk areas.

Yachna doesn't want to drop her coverage because her home flooded twice, but may have no choice." It's getting tough," she said. "The gas is going up. The electric is going up. The water is going up."

Some local officials criticized FEMA's new rating system as potentially pricing out many homeowners from the market, like Yachna and those with low to moderate incomes.

"These premium increases are outrageous, and it's the people who can least afford them who are being forced to pay," U.S. Rep. Matt Cartwright said in a statement. "Flood insurance has to be affordable, even to those with low and fixed incomes."

Wyoming County Commissioner Chairman Richard Wilbur said he suspects FEMA is trying to drive people out of the market "so they don't have to pay any money out because no one could (afford to) live in a flood zone anymore."

Continued on next page

"A lot of people are going to lose their homes over it," Wilbur said. "How can you afford \$4,000 to \$5,000 for flood insurance? That's going to add \$400 a month on top of the other bills."

A FEMA spokesperson said in a statement the agency realizes the rate hikes are concerning, but it is mandated to charge actuarially sound rates and does not have the authority to consider affordability in setting those rates.

Bob Pitcavage, 67, of Eaton Twp., recently learned the flood insurance premium for his Dymond Terrace home along the Susquehanna River will jump about 52%, from \$2,673 to \$4,063. Retired, he and his wife Paula, 66, live on a fixed income. Their home flooded in 2011. He now fears they may have to drop the insurance.

"We are keeping it for as long as we can afford it, but as we get older, it's going to be more difficult every year," he said. "At some point we may just have to roll the dice because it's cost-prohibitive."

He also worries about how the new flood insurance rates will affect their chances of selling their home if they ever decide to put it on the market.

"You are basically trapped here," he said. "The bank is going to require insurance. People won't be able to afford the mortgage and flood insurance."

Here is everything you need to know about the changed rating system:

Why is my rate increasing?

The hikes stem from FEMA's new rating structure, known as Risk Rating 2.0. Premiums are now based on each property's individual flood risk, including elevation, distance from a water source, flood history, type of potential flooding and cost to rebuild the home.

Properties now are assigned a "full-risk premium" that FEMA says more accurately reflects costs associated with the risk to insure the properties.

Previously, properties were placed in a general risk category and evaluated by location within a flood zone on a Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM), occupancy type and elevation within a flood zone. That rating system did not take into account the individual flood risk or cost to rebuild, and considered just two sources of flood risk - river flooding and coastal flooding.

How much can my premium increase annually?

By law, increases for most residential properties with existing policies are capped at 18% a year and 25% for commercial properties. Premiums phase in, increasing by 18% each year (25% for commercial properties) until they reach the full-risk rate.

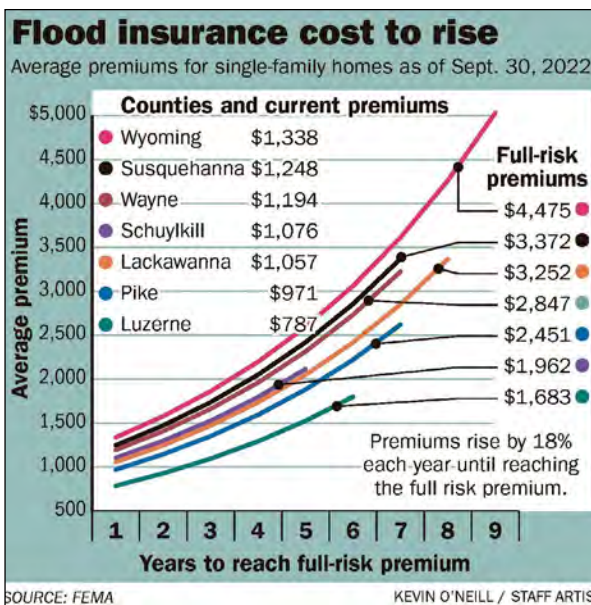
How long will it take to reach the full-risk premium?

On average, FEMA data shows Luzerne County policies will be at full risk in six years; Lackawanna, eight; Schuylkill, five; Wyoming, nine; and Pike, Susquehanna and Wayne counties, seven years. Nationwide, FEMA estimates 50% of properties will be at full risk between fiscal year 2025 and 2026, and 90% by fiscal year 2033. As of May, 34% of residential policy holders were already paying the full risk premiums.



Johanna Yachna, 87, of Duryea looks through insurance paperwork on Tuesday, June 7, 2023.

JAKE DANNA STEVENS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Flood insurance premiums

Average premiums for single-family homes as of Sept. 30, 2022.

County	Policies in force	Full-risk premium	Current premium	Percent increase
Lackawanna	537	\$3,252	\$1,057	208%
Luzerne	2,355	\$1,683	\$787	114%
Pike	140	\$2,451	\$971	152%
Schuylkill	388	\$1,962	\$1,076	82%
Susquehanna	118	\$3,372	\$1,248	170%
Wayne	114	\$2,847	\$1,194	138%
Wyoming	129	\$4,475	\$1,338	235%

Source: FEMA. KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

it is costing taxpayers who will be indebted to bail out the program time and time again."

The change also makes the system more equitable. If your home's value is less than your neighbor's, your replacement cost is less and your premium should be too, Friedlander said.

"In the past, virtually everybody in the same neighborhood paid the same - regardless of what your replacement cost was," Friedlander said. "That is not a fair system."

How exactly is my rate calculated?

That largely remains a mystery. FEMA provides general information on factors it uses, but refuses to publicly disclose the algorithm used to calculate premiums. The Louisiana-based Coalition for Sustainable Flood Insurance has called upon the agency to be more forthcoming.

How many policy holders will see an increase?

FEMA estimates premiums for about 80% policies will rise, while 20% will decrease. The reduction only applies to the first year of the policy compared to the prior year.

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What if I'm a first-time policy buyer?

First-time buyers must immediately pay the current full-risk premium rate.

Buyers seeking to purchase a property with an existing policy should consider assuming it so they qualify for the phase-in period, said Betsy Tribendis, a Realtor and president of Walters Associates, Inc., a Forty Fort insurance agency. "I tell agents to make sure you tell your clients that if the sellers have flood insurance that the buyer (needs to) takes over the policy to minimize the impact," she said.

Can I drop coverage?

It depends. Properties in high-risk flood zones with mortgages from government-backed lenders are required to have flood insurance. Many private lenders also require coverage in high-risk areas, but generally make it optional for homes in other flood zones. Property owners without a mortgage also do not have to carry flood insurance.

Experts urge existing policy holders to carefully consider the consequences of dropping coverage. Besides risking financial ruin should a flood hit, a policy holder who drops coverage and later wants to renew it would no longer qualify for the phase-in period that spreads out the full-risk premium increases annually.

Where do I find my full-risk premium?

Insurance companies that sell NFIP policies include the full-risk premium rate on the policy declaration page a policy holder receives after paying the premium.

However, the declaration page does not necessarily include an explanation of what the term means. Consumer advocates worry many people remain unaware of how much their policy will increase because of that.

"You might not even know what that full-risk rate line means and not recognize that eventually you are expected to pay that," said Peter Waggoner, a spokesman for the Coalition for Sustainable Flood Insurance.

Will the full-risk premium amount rise again?

The rates could increase further because of climate change causing more frequent and catastrophic weather events, said Carolyn Kousky, Ph.D., associate vice president for economics and policy for Environmental Defense Fund. Is anything being done to help property owners?

Legislators in several states want the federal government to offer subsidies to help low- to moderate-income property owners pay premiums.

In Pennsylvania, Cartwright introduced legislation in March that would establish a

means-tested assistance program for residential and small business policyholders. The bill would ensure premiums do not exceed 1% of the median income of the area in which the property is located. It also would allow policy holders to pay monthly installments instead of the lump sum payment now required.

Louisiana and nine other states also filed a federal lawsuit June 1 that seeks an injunction. The suit, which Pennsylvania has not joined, alleges, in part, that the rating system improperly considers hypothetical future risks.

I'm concerned about the new rating system. What can I do?

The Coalition for Sustainable Flood Insurance urges policy holders to contact state and federal legislators to express concerns about flood insurance rates. The Louisiana attorney general's office also developed an online form - at agjefflandry.com/FloodInsurance - that allows policy holders nationwide to share concerns and express interest in joining a potential class-action lawsuit.

What can I do to reduce my rate?

Ensure the information FEMA has about your property is accurate. Much of that data is highly technical, but other information, such as how many floors and the foundation type, is known.

Consider reducing the amount of coverage on the building or contents and/or increasing deductibles. Property owners not mandated by their lenders to carry flood insurance can drop contents coverage for a substantial savings.

Look into purchasing coverage from a private insurance company instead of the NFIP.

"There are more companies writing flood insurance in the market than ever before," Friedlander said. "Nobody can guarantee you will do better ... but a competitive market typically leads to better pricing."

Encourage your municipality to take steps to be included in the Community Rating System program, which offers premium discounts ranging from 5% to 45% for properties in communities that exceed NFIP flood plain requirements. Properties in Wilkes-Barre, West Pittston, Hanover Twp. and Kingston borough currently qualify for discounts ranging from 10% to 20%.

Where can I get more information?

FEMA's website: fema.gov/flood-insurance.

Tips for paying less for flood insurance: floodsmart.gov/how-can-i-pay-less.

Contact the writer: tbesecker@timeshamrock.com; 570-348-9137; @tbeseckerTT on Twitter.

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MORE INFORMATION ON FLOOD INSURANCE

The National Flood Insurance Program insures 90% of properties. Coverage is for up to \$250,000 on a building and \$100,000 on contents. Deductibles for both range from \$1,250 to \$10,000. Flood insurance is separate from homeowners. People who lived in a hazard flood zone and have federally backed mortgages are required to carry. Private lenders also typically require properties be insured.

Decoding your flood insurance bill

This is a policy in Hanover Twp. that qualifies for the premium increase phase-in period. This policy will reach full-risk premium in five years.

Definitions of bill components

Building premium: Amount charged for building coverage

Contents premium: Amount charged for contents coverage

Increased cost of compliance: Additional coverage to meet building requirements a community may have to reduce the likelihood of future flood damage before a property can be repaired or rebuilt.

Mitigation discount: Discount for elevating machinery and equipment to at least the elevation of the floor above the building's first floor.

Community rating system reduction: Discount if a community exceeds the minimum requirements of the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).

Full-risk premium: The amount a property owner with an existing policy will eventually pay following the end of the phase-in period.

Annual increase cap discount: A cap that limits premium increases on existing policies to 18% a year for most residential properties and 25% a year for commercial properties.

Statutory discounts: Applied to certain pre-Flood Insurance Rate Map primary residences and newly mapped properties and those in the Emergency Program or located in the AR or A99 flood zone

Reserve fund assessment: A percentage of the premium set aside to pay future claims.

HFIAA surcharge: A flat fee applied to all policies based on the occupancy type of the insured building.

Federal policy fee: A flat charge to defray certain administrative expenses

Probation surcharge: A fee charged if FEMA placed the community where the building is located on probation for failing to meet NFIP requirements.

Annual premium: Amount charged after all discounts, fees and surcharges.

COMPONENTS OF TOTAL AMOUNT DUE	
BUILDING PREMIUM:	\$882.00
CONTENTS PREMIUM:	\$337.00
COST OF COMPLIANCE (ICC) PREMIUM:	\$23.00
MITIGATION DISCOUNT:	(\$0.00)
COMMUNITY RATING SYSTEM REDUCTION:	(\$105.00)
FULL RISK PREMIUM:	\$1,137.00
ANNUAL INCREASE CAP DISCOUNT:	(\$0.00)
STATUTORY DISCOUNTS:	(\$0.00)
DISCOUNTED PREMIUM:	\$475.00
RESERVE FUND ASSESSMENT:	\$86.00
HFIAA SURCHARGE:	\$25.00
FEDERAL POLICY FEE:	\$47.00
PROBATION SURCHARGE:	\$0.00
ANNUAL PREMIUM:	\$633.00

Eventual full-risk premium: **\$1,137**

Current premium: **\$633**

SOURCE: FEMA

KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

The Star-Courier

Prince Gallitzin State Park celebrates shoreline rehabilitation

By Kristin Baudoux
of Mainline Newspapers

Back in 2009, staff at Prince Gallitzin State Park shared concerns of shoreline erosion along Glendale Lake, which posed a threat to water quality and wildlife habitat as well as fishing and recreational opportunities to park visitors.

Flash forward 14 years and park staff, along with the thousands of visitors the park sees each year, have much to celebrate.

Prince Gallitzin State Park hosted a legislative tour Friday, Aug. 25 to highlight the work done over the past several years to restore eroded shorelines, prevent future erosion and preserve wildlife habitat within Glendale Lake. Park staff welcomed representatives from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and the Cambria County Conservation District (CCCD) among other agencies as well as local government leaders and representatives.

John Dryzal, district manager of the CCCD, said this project has been an ongoing effort between several entities to address the erosion issues at the lake.

“Through that partnership with DCNR, the staff here at Prince Gallitzin State Park [and] the Fish and Boat Commission, we came up with a plan to address the severe shoreline erosion here within the lake,” Dryzal said.

Dryzal said the projects not only helped to provide and increased habitat for fish, they also reduce the amount of sediments entering the lake.

He said based on just the projects the CCCD has been involved in, these efforts are estimated to have prevented 459,431 pounds of sediment entering the lake and ultimately, the Chesapeake Bay.

Since 2009, 16 projects have been undertaken at the lake to repair almost 2 miles of shoreline. Many of these shoreline projects included the creation of limestone rock frame deflectors and sandstone sawtooth deflectors with riparian buffers. The total value of the work done was estimated at \$1.2 million. Among the areas repaired at the lake include popular sites such as Pickerel Pond, Muskrat Beach and Turtle Cove.

Park manager Jess Lavelua, who started at Prince



Several attendees of Prince Gallitzin State Park's legislative tour, including DCNR Secretary Cindy Adams Dunn and Cambria County Commissioners Thomas Chernisky and Scott Hunt, prepare to drop porcupine cribs into Glendale Lake. The cribs provide habitat for smaller fish species in the lake.

PHOTO BY KRISTIN BAUDOUX.

Gallitzin in 2016, said that while she wasn't there for the start of these projects, she has witnessed their impact.

“I've been in awe and amazed to see the amount of work since then and the way that it changed the landscape of the lake and the park itself,” Lavelua said.

Lavelua said the shoreline projects have opened up new fishing areas at the lake, which has increased tourism to the park.

“Hopefully, we can continue [work] here on this lake and in other lakes in the area in Cambria County and throughout the commonwealth,” she said.

DCNR Secretary Cindy Adams Dunn said the work done at Prince Gallitzin has been a “model” for the commonwealth, and that outdoor recreation in Pennsylvania brings in \$14 billion to the commonwealth's gross domestic product in 2021.

“We are at heart an outdoor state,” Dunn said. “We fish,

hunt, kayak, bike, hike and we're big in the economy in outdoor recreation.”

She also highlighted the importance of working with county conservation districts to improve water quality throughout the state and beyond. For example, Glendale Lake's tributaries lead into the West Branch of the Susquehanna River.

“This project is really important in cleaning up a major branch of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania,” Dunn said.

After the project overview, those in attendance took a pontoon boat tour of the lake to see the results of the project areas. Following the tour, some in attendance also took advantage of an opportunity to place “porcupine cribs” into the lake. These wooden cribs are placed in areas of the lake to improve the habitat for smaller fish species.

Published Aug. 31, 2023

Lancaster Farming

Pennsylvania cows aren't top producers. Can that change?

By Philip Gruber

pgruber@lancasterfarming.com

Here's a paradox — Pennsylvania is a big dairy state, but its cows aren't all that productive.

The average Pennsylvania cow makes almost 21,300 pounds of milk per year.

That's 12% below the national average and 31st in the nation.

Over the past decade, the state has fallen ever farther behind its peers and now ranks last in milk per cow among the top 10 dairy producers.

Farm advisers say Pennsylvania is lagging because its dairies have stayed small and failed to adopt cutting-edge management practices to the extent seen in other states.

How much milk a cow makes is a key factor in farm efficiency and profitability.

Getting a few extra pounds from the farm's existing cows is cheaper than adding a cow to the herd.

And increasing milk per cow reduces the farm's production cost per hundredweight — a concern as milk prices recede from last year's highs.

"When I look at our lagging milk per cow, it is one of the things that's driving our cost of production higher in Pennsylvania," said Mike Hosterman, an ag business consultant for Horizon Farm Credit.

Thanks to breeding and management changes, U.S. milk yield has grown dramatically in the postwar era.

Pennsylvania's per-cow production has doubled since 1975, and for a long time, it tracked closely with the national average.

But about 20 years ago, Pennsylvania slid into a turtle pace as other states raced ahead.

"This is not just a new thing," said Joseph Bender, an assistant professor of clinical dairy production medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. "This has gone on for a while."

Understanding why Pennsylvania milk production is growing slowly could help farmers accelerate in the state, and across the Northeast.



CENTER FOR DAIRY EXCELLENCE

Cows lie on sand bedding at Furnace Hill Holsteins in Lebanon, Pa. Cow comfort improvements like sand bedding could help Pennsylvania increase its per-cow milk production, which lags other top dairy states.

New York is the only state in the region — and one of only 14 nationally — that beats the U.S. milk-per-cow average.

Size v. Skill

As with so much in Pennsylvania dairy, the discussion starts with farm size.

The average Pennsylvania dairy has 93 cows. That's a third of the national figure and one of the smallest average herd sizes in the country.

Urbanization, the Appalachian Mountains and regional

market conditions — among other factors — have limited opportunities for farms to expand.

Though bigger farms aren't necessarily the most profitable, farm size correlates strongly with milk per cow, Bender said.

Compared to small farms, large farms have clear advantages for making milk.

They can more easily afford new facilities and equipment. They can create more feed recipes for different groups of cows, providing tailored nutrition.

Continued on next page

And because they rely on hired labor, they have the best opportunity to maintain a consistent milking schedule, and to milk three times a day instead of twice.

But it's important to remember that large operations got big because they were good at dairy farming. The biology of cows is the same across farms, so management ultimately drives much of the difference in per-cow milk yield, Bender said.

"The most profitable operations aren't necessarily driven by size, but they're driven by volume of milk with strong components and a strong cost control," Hosterman said.

Learning From No. 1

A case in point is Michigan, which leads the nation in milk per cow and has been widening its lead for the better part of a decade.

The average Michigan cow annually produces 6,000 pounds of milk more than the average Pennsylvania cow — almost 30% more.

Michigan's average herd size is a bit larger than the national average, and the state's farmers expanded their herds and upgraded their buildings faster than their Pennsylvania counterparts.

But the variation in milk per cow across Michigan farms is also fairly narrow.

"Our farmers, no matter what their size, have been pushing hard," said Phil Durst, a Michigan State University Extension educator.

Hosterman said the Pennsylvania Holstein herds he's familiar with seem to have a wide range of milk production.

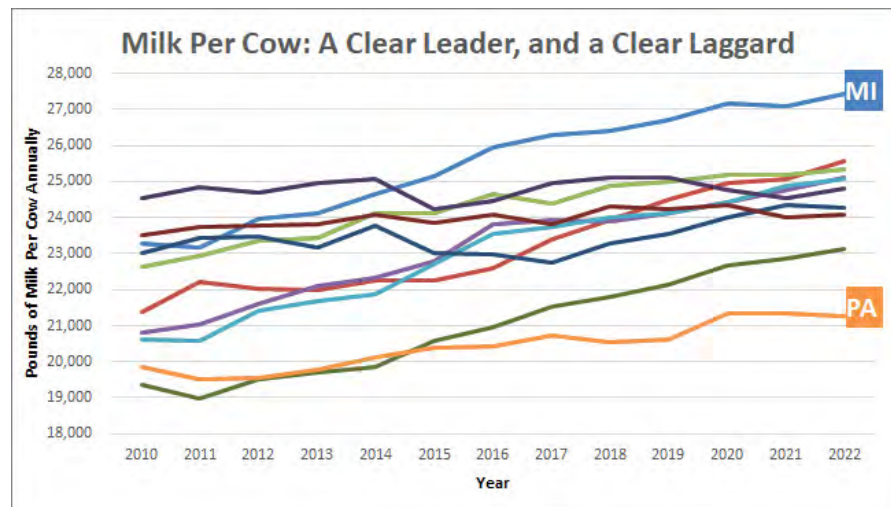
Michigan has also made the most of some unusual advantages.

The state's dairy processors disallowed the milk-promoting hormone rBST in 2008, earlier than some other states. The move was controversial, but it spurred farmers to sharpen their management, Durst said.

In the early 2000s, Michigan also became the home of some successful dairy farmers from Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands who decided they could not stay in Europe if they wanted to expand their businesses.

These innovative newcomers made an impression on the native Michiganders.

"They saw that you could do things



PHILIP GRUBER

This graph shows the pounds of milk produced by the average cow in the top 10 U.S. dairy-producing states from 2010 to 2022. Pennsylvania fell farther behind its peers than it already was, while Michigan surged ahead. Per-cow milk production affects farm efficiency and profitability.

differently and be successful, and they went after that, and so it made everybody better," Durst said.

Michigan has excelled, for example, at having low somatic cell counts. High counts can indicate udder infection — not conducive to milk production.

Michigan's somatic cell average is a cool 150,000, and Durst isn't sure which farms are keeping the average even that high.

"The farms I deal with are really working to be below 100,000," he said.

Michigan farmers also emphasize cow comfort, which contributes to cow longevity and productivity.

Sand has become a popular bedding option. In addition to being comfortable for cows, it has reduced somatic cell counts, Durst said.

Hosterman sees comfort as a place many Pennsylvania farms could improve.

"Cow comfort in an old stanchion barn is not what we see in some of our newer freestall barns," he said. "And does that drive milk production? The answer's yes. We all know that."

To be clear, facilities aren't always the issue. Bender said he's often asked to help farms where the cows are producing the same amount of milk in a new barn as they were in the old one.

What Pennsylvania Can Do

Bender thinks Pennsylvania can accelerate

its per-cow milk growth, but the gains won't come from lax dairy management.

"We'll have to do something fundamentally different than what we've done in the past," he said.

Crucially, Pennsylvania will need to boost reproductive efficiency. The state's annualized 21-day pregnancy rate, which indicates the speed at which cows get pregnant, is 16%.

That's 4 percentage points lower than the national average. Each point is worth about 2 1/2 pounds of milk per cow per day.

Below 23%, a farm is losing money on milk produced and calves born for the year, and heifers may need to be added to the herd, Bender said.

A lot of technology is available now to aid reproduction, and southeastern Pennsylvania, the state's dairy heartland, has a good number of veterinarians who can help farmers with it.

"It's getting hard to make excuses for why Pennsylvania lags behind," Bender said.

Farms can also make milk yield gains at the end of a cow's life by making smart culling decisions.

Some of the highest-producing farms Bender works with are able to remove cows based on their profitability rather than biological problems such as mastitis

or lameness.

Ideally, a dairy could keep enough animals that it wouldn't need to hold onto every heifer — including the 15% to 20% that are likely to be inferior producers.

"Those farms are few and far between," Bender said.

Feed also offers tools to improve milk production.

Many small Pennsylvania farms don't have enough land to feed their cows for high production.

Faced with the possibility of purchasing feed, farmers must decide whether it's better to limit feed costs or milk production.

A nutritionist can help the farm determine how much forage acreage is needed to get the best milk yield, Bender said.

Farms with limited land also risk abrupt shifts in forage quality, which in some cases can disrupt production for a cow's entire lactation, he said.

Some Pennsylvania farms have also been slow to shift away from alfalfa-corn silage rations to higher-energy diets with triticale, corn silage and rye.

"The quality of forage is probably the biggest gain we've seen in the last 15 years, where other states have really increased and we haven't," Bender said.

Farms may find other areas, such as transition cow management, where they can improve their procedures.

But one of the most important practices for boosting milk per cow isn't technical at all.

It's attitude.

Bender has found that improving milk per cow requires the farmer to commit to the dairy and treat it as the farm's main enterprise.

If the farmer has a diversified operation or is away from the farm a lot, making progress on milk yield will be tough, he said.

In Michigan, Durst sees a focus on productive cows as part of a state dairy mindset of growth fostering more growth.

"When there's a predominant positive attitude," Durst said, "people feed off of that and they do better."

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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette®

THE FALL OF THE CENTURY



The empty mall in a panoramic view from a drone.

PHOTO: BENJAMIN B. BRAUN/POST-GAZETTE

Once a retail shopping jewel, the mall has been left to rot

By Neena Hagen
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Century III Mall, once the third-largest shopping center in the world, was built on a slag heap in 1979 with a bold vision to revitalize West Mifflin.

The mall boasted the most prominent retailers, including a two-story Kaufmann's, the jewel of Pittsburgh department stores, and a Sears that could fit 100 houses. Plus a sprawling food court, palm trees and plush indoor carpeting.

A widely sought out destination for decades, the mall attracted millions of visitors and became a prime gathering spot for locals and tourists.

But today, the pride of West Mifflin - with its 63 acres, 6,000 parking spots and

glittering 40-year history - plays host to a crowd of none.

"I practically grew up there," said Tricia Detman, 37, recalling the halcyon days of the early 2000s. "That's where I got my first job, where me and all my friends would hang out after school."

"Now I don't even go near it."

Since closing permanently in 2019, the mall has been left to rot in the borough's center, its skeletal remains becoming a safety hazard and a magnet for crime and drugs. All roads into the parking lot - marred by foot-deep potholes - are cordoned off by concrete barriers, and the entrances once teeming with shoppers are boarded up and sprayed with graffiti.

Now a haven for mold and flaking asbestos, the mall has racked up numerous

code violations and fines while bleeding value as the structure slowly breaks down. Borough officials have scheduled a condemnation hearing for June 14, which could accelerate the building's demise.

"It's really dangerous and it's really bad," said Gregory McCulloch, West Mifflin's police chief.

Chief McCulloch, who grew up in the area, said he and his old sheepdog took one last loop through the mall the day before it closed in 2019, clinging to memories from his childhood.

He said to himself, with a sigh: "This'll be the last time I'm here."

But since then, the mall has become a second home for Chief McCulloch and his officers. In the past two years, the department has responded to nearly 70

calls involving the mall, crime data shows: break-ins, trespassing, shots fired and a steady stream of vandals smashing the property in a cascade of destruction.

This year alone, Chief McCulloch has had to dispatch an officer almost once a week, data shows.

"We got people backing up their pickup trucks, pulling doors off," he said. They bring in power tools like saws, cut holes in the plywood and climb in.

Just two weeks ago, officers caught a group of teens breaking in. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they walked in on a father and two sons throwing rocks at old store windows, creating heaps of broken glass.

Continued on next page

"Every storefront in that mall has been destroyed," said Chief McCulloch.

And the damage has only accelerated in recent months.

In April, a three-alarm fire swept through the food court, burning down ceilings and laying waste to a vast expanse of once-bustling restaurants and eateries. Dozens of fire crews raced to the mall to help extinguish the blaze, which is now being investigated as arson.

"The whole mall was pretty much filled with smoke," said Jeffrey Youkers, a volunteer fire chief in West Mifflin. Firefighters initially struggled to find the source; smoke could be seen emanating from the mall for miles.

Two days after the fire, inspectors cited the mall as an "unsafe structure," with parts of the building "likely to collapse," according to inspection records obtained by the Post-Gazette.

But the kindling had been there for years. As early as 2019, inspectors cited the property as a fire hazard, and the owner, Moonbeam Capital, never fixed the problem. The borough is now embroiled in a court battle with Moonbeam over several code violations, and the Las Vegas-based company has racked up over \$80,000 in fines - all unpaid, court records show.

Moonbeam representatives did not respond to repeated calls and emails requesting comment.

"There's a large amount of black mold throughout the whole building. There's water. There's broken glass. It's very unsafe," said Mr. Youkers, who is also a local code enforcement officer.

While firefighters were able to put out the flames, the mall soon caught fire among videographers and local mischief makers eager to catch a glimpse of the damage. One mall tour on YouTube garnered more than a million views, with dozens more raking in hundreds of thousands.

People from all over took to Facebook and other social media sites to share memories of Century III.

"I remember being there at Christmastime, and it was like it was the center of the world," said Matthew Craig, executive director of the Young Preservationists Association, which put the mall on its top 10 list of historic sites in 2021. "All the bustling shoppers, and everybody was carrying packages under their arms. And families and friends and lovers, everybody, they're all together."



PHOTO: JAMES KLINGENSMITH

Century III Mall on Dec. 1, 1981.

Young people don't share that sense of nostalgia.

Walking the perimeter around the mall's parking lot earlier this month, Julius DiSilvio, 19, eyed the barren wasteland with a mix of fascination and unease.

"I've only ever seen it abandoned," said Mr. DiSilvio, who grew up in Squirrel Hill. "There are older people I know that talk about how big a deal it was ... it's almost hard for me to believe because I wasn't around to see it like that."

He's only been around for the shattered beer bottles littering the sidewalk, smashed red lipstick staining the pavement, a rusted J.C. Penney sign, and escalators leading nowhere.

He swivels his head toward the main entrance, where "Long Live" is graffitied on the wall, and then to the boarded-up Mexican restaurant across the way, where ghosts are spray-painted on the door and a wasp's nest has claimed the underside of a lampshade.

Up the hill at Century III Plaza - a smaller, neighboring strip mall - Emily Pietrzak laments the mall's spiral into disrepair.

"I came here all the time in the '90s and I remember you couldn't find a parking spot," said Ms. Pietrzak, who attended Duquesne University 25 years ago.

Now, the "No Parking" signs throughout the lot are finally being obeyed.

Century III's descent into financial turmoil followed a tide of malls across the nation

shutting their doors in the past decade as shoppers moved online and major retailers struggled to sell products that once flew off the shelves. The country was home to 2,500 malls in the 1980s but is now down to 700, according to the Wall Street Journal.

The West Mifflin mall's grip on the public atrophied more quickly, however. At its zenith, the mall was valued at more than \$100 million. In 2013, Moonbeam bought the property for \$10.5 million. Today, according to county property assessments data, the mall is valued at \$2.5 million - a 98% drop from its peak.

"We always talk about blighted homes," said West Mifflin Councilman Dan Davis, but Century III is among "the biggest blighted properties we have in Allegheny County."

What's worse, a drop in value has meant a precipitous decline in tax revenue for the city. The mall once brought in hundreds of thousands of dollars in tax revenue every year, funding schools and other public programs. Today, that yearly sum is below \$10,000.

Efforts to sell the property have failed in recent years. Since Moonbeam purchased the property a decade ago, at least three more potential buyers have come and gone. The mall was reportedly scouted by Amazon as a distribution warehouse last year, but nothing materialized.

"A building has to earn a living," said Mr. Craig. "We can't just put something in amber and put it on the shelf just so that



PHOTO: BENJAMIN B. BRAUN/POST-GAZETTE

Weeds grow through cracks in the parking lot of the closed Century III Mall last week in West Mifflin.

we can look at it. It has to be able to serve a purpose and this purpose has to be clearly defined."

So what's the plan moving forward? Some community members and borough officials want to demolish the '70s behemoth and use the land to start anew.

"We'd like to see the mall go away," said Mr. Davis.

Others, like Mr. Craig, hope the building can be repurposed, because the mall was "so connected to people's life experiences."

He has a specific idea: a retirement village where old stores can be turned into senior housing.

"You could build a little indoor city," Mr. Craig said. It would be complete with "coffee shops, maybe little food shops, little restaurants" and medical facilities.

But that would take time and a lot of money. Unfortunately, officials say, it's tough to make anything happen when the property is privately owned. Until a buyer comes forward or Moonbeam breaks ground on a project, the property could sit there and deteriorate with no rebound in sight.

"It's been painful to watch," said Ms. Detman, who went there as a kid. "That mall was so important to so many people."

"Looking at it now, it feels like all the memories I had there were just not real."

Neena Hagen: nhagen@post-gazette.com
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TOILET TO TAP

Pennsylvania seeing feeding frenzy of sales of public water/sewer systems

Study finds average annual water bill is \$144 higher in the privately owned water systems.

A change in Pennsylvania law seven years ago has accelerated the rate of public water and sewer system sales to private companies from a slow drip into a torrent, leaving municipalities flush with cash and customers with higher bills.

The law, Act 12, was passed in 2016 and was sold as a way to put small, financially struggling water and sewer systems into the hands of private companies that could afford to fix them up and prevent environmental violations.

But instead, Wall Street — primarily American Water and Essential Utilities, known locally as Aqua — has been targeting stable, functioning public systems and offering them sky-high prices as a way to boost shareholder returns, according to public water advocates and a former state official.

The key to this trend is the unglamorous phrase “valuation,” or how “fair market value” is determined.

Law unleashes flood of sales

Before the flood of sales created by Act 12, a water or sewer system was “valued” in the usual way, with original cost less depreciation and amortization, like how a new car loses value the minute it leaves the lot. That did not make them very attractive targets for acquisition, particularly if it was a small financially unstable system with a backlog of maintenance and capital projects.

But Act 12 changed that and now the



revenues earned from the rates users pay are allowed to be rolled into the valuation equation and the system allows private companies to get bigger rewards for smaller risks.

This is due, in part, to an additional “premium” above market price, envisioned as an incentive for a private company’s riskier purchase of a troubled utility. But the premium “reward” for taking this risk isn’t restricted to “riskier systems.” Instead is it just sweetening the deal because its entire cost is being foisted onto ratepayers instead of stockholders taking on the risk, as is the case with traditional investing.

As a result, “neither the buyer nor the seller has incentive to keep the price as low as possible,” Peggy Gallos, executive director of the Association of Environmental Authorities of New Jersey, explained in the organization’s October 2021 newsletter.

Ratepayers bear risks, pay the price

“The difference between risk and reward should not be on the backs of the

ratepayer, it should be on the backs of the shareholders,” argued Andrew Place, a former vice chairman of the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission who consistently cast the sole vote against these system sales during his five years in office. “But it’s falling on the backs of the captive ratepayers who are not going to profit from better management and who have no choice,” he said.

“It’s not like if I don’t like Ford, I can go out and buy a Toyota. The ratepayers cannot shop around for sewer service. It’s a monopoly,” said Place.

The idea that privatization will allow market forces to keep prices down is a fallacy, said Mildred E. Warner, a professor of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University and one of the authors of a study released in March 2022 on the impact of private ownership of water systems.

The only time “market forces” come into play is when the system is up for sale and multiple companies can bid for it. Otherwise, publicly or privately owned, a water or sewer system, she said, “is the definition of a monopoly” — and a tempting one at that.

For the municipality, such sales look good on their face. The higher the price, the more money the municipality receives to use for things like debt relief, capital projects, balancing pensions, or other financial needs, all without having to raise taxes.

And for the buyer, the higher the price, the more the private company gets to charge ratepayers, to make its money back to cover the purchase costs, to the delight of its stockholders.

Over time, that is the kind of reliable built-in profit Wall Street investors like.

“There’s a lot of money to be made raising rates,” said Mary Grant, the Public Water for All Campaign Director at Food and Water Watch, a non-profit advocacy group.

“Act 12 turned traditional valuation on its head and removed any incentive to keep the costs down,” said Gallos. As a result, “the higher the price of the system, the higher the amount that ratepayers must subsequently cover,” Gallos explained

‘We’re collegial’

So who looks out for the ratepayers? In theory, the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission.

The PUC has oversight over the rates private companies charge and must approve the sale of every public water and sewer system to a private company.

But there seems to be little regulatory risk here for the private companies.

“The analogy I use is if the private utility company is a lion in a cage and you put a lamb in the cage, no one should be surprised that the lamb gets eaten by the lion. That’s what lions do,” Place said.

Continued on next page

Investor-owned utility companies “are in the business of acquiring assets and getting a return on those assets,” he said. “The answer to that is you need a robust regulatory body to counterbalance that and that’s where the problem lies, weakness in the commission.”

Since 2016, the Pennsylvania PUC has approved every single sale of a public water or sewer system, often over objections of public advocates, their own members and even administrative law judges.

Nils Hagen-Frederiksen, press secretary for the PUC confirmed that 22 sales of public water and/or sewer systems to private companies have been initiated since Act 12 was passed. There are currently two more under review. None have been rejected.

And there does not seem to be much which can convince the PUC to reject a sale.

In 2021, a panel of administrative law judges recommended against approving the \$276.5 million sale of the Delaware County wastewater system known as DELCORA to Aqua.

“On March 30, 2021, the PUC vacated that recommendation and remanded the matter to the administrative law judge for further proceedings,” the Delaware County Daily Times reported.

That action by the PUC was in turn stayed by a judge. But in July 2022, the PUC acted again, lifted the stay and directed the administrative law judges to promptly schedule the hearings. Those hearings were put on hold due to a bankruptcy proceeding.

“The hierarchy is always to give deference to the utility and never to the ratepayer. For the ratepayer, it’s regulatory capture. The ratepayer is invisible” in the PUC process, Place said.

“But there’s no reason for anyone to assume corruption is at play here. It’s just that the smiling, dapper-dressed, glad-handing utility folks are the people you’re seeing every day. You’re never seeing the low-income, middle-income vulnerable customers from Altoona, Pittsburgh and Erie. Their voices aren’t in the room which always deeply troubled me,” said Place.

Why would the commissioners act this way? Place believes it’s so they can keep their jobs.

“On my first day when I started, the chairman took me out to lunch and he had



PHOTO: THE MERCURY

The House Majority Policy Committee visiting the Chester Water Authority’s wastewater treatment plant.

a very direct message — “We’re collegial. Our first job is not to be critical, not to be oppositional,” Place said.

“It’s almost like the PUC has Stockholm syndrome,” Gallos said. “They spend so much time with the people they regulate.”

“The dirty laundry here is what the commissioners really care about is being re-nominated,” Place said. “Writing dissents, acting adversely to some interests can only work against you, you only lose face taking positions that are hard.”

Is it that good of a job?

“It’s one of the greatest jobs in the world. You make \$150,000, you get a nice state pension; you have a large staff that does the leg work and you only have to work a couple of days a month. Few commissioners work full-time, you only have a couple of meetings a month and you are someone, you’re important. It’s a great gig. So you don’t want to tick off senator so-and-so and maybe not have your nomination confirmed,” said Place.

By contrast, Place did write dissents, a lot of them.

“The vote was always 4-1,” he said. “I lost all of them.”

For example, when the Limerick Township sewer system in Montgomery County was sold in 2018, Place not only voted against it but issued a dissenting opinion. He warned of the coming rate hike Limerick sewer customers would face. In 2021, three years after the system was sold, Aqua sought a 90% rate hike for Limerick customers, above even the 84% hike Place had warned might be coming.

Last year, Limerick’s sewer rates went up by 47.29%, according to township manager Dan Kerr.

As he has many times since, Place argued that Limerick’s system was well-run and there was no public benefit to selling it to a private company, which would provide essentially the same service for higher rates.

He also made the point that costs for the purchase of the Limerick system would also be borne, unwittingly, by Aqua customers across the state.

“The Aqua ratepayers in Indiana Township don’t know they are paying for the purchase of the Limerick sewer system. It’s Kafka-esque,” said Place.

At the time, Limerick Township supervisors argued that in addition to the new municipal building and new firehouse

paid for by the sale of the sewer system, property taxes would also remain stable.

But higher utility rates “are just a tax under a different guise,” said Place. It’s a revenue stream borne only by customers of the sewer system and not by all taxpayers and, because municipalities pay lower interest rates than for-profit companies, it’s more expensive than it needs to be. “If you’re raising revenue by this method, you’re overpaying and you’re doing it at a higher interest rate,” Place argued.

When his term was up in 2020, Gov. Tom Wolf nominated Place for a second term, but he declined so he could return to his family and his farm outside Pittsburgh and work from home. “Besides,” he said with a chuckle, “who knows if the nomination would have been confirmed.”

‘Kind of a David and Goliath situation’

Governments continue to provide water and sewer services in most of the United States. Eighty-four percent of drinking water systems are government-owned, as are 98 percent of wastewater systems.

Continued on next page

But that is changing across the country and Pennsylvania and New Jersey are ground zero for the effort to put public services in private hands.

Act 12 “has definitely led to a feeding frenzy in Pennsylvania and New Jersey,” said Grant. “We’ve seen a huge upswing since 2016” when Act 12 was passed, she said.

“Pennsylvania and New Jersey are the epicenter of this new trend,” Gallos agreed. “Pennsylvania is like the wild west in terms of these systems going up for sale and it’s about five years ahead of where New Jersey is headed.”

And the odds are not even.

In many cases, “you have these corporate lawyers, and this is all they do and they’re up against the local town attorney whose expertise is about township ordinances. It’s kind of a David and Goliath situation,” Gallos said. “The learning curve is so steep, it’s hard to figure out what’s going on.”

Some towns look to consultants to help with that learning curve, but they are not always as impartial as one might wish.

When Upper Pottsgrove Township in Montgomery County hired a consultant to help decide whether to sell its sewer collection system, the consultant, Public Finance Management, offered to work for \$50,000 and 1.5 percent of the sale price, should the township commissioners decide to sell.

That meant PFM would receive about \$250,750 only if the township agreed to sell, and only \$7,500 if the commissioners voted against the sale. In 2020, the township’s board voted 4-1 to sell the system to Pennsylvania American for \$13.75 million in the wake of a series of public meetings run by PFM.

“It often seems like the outcome of the report is known before it’s even written,” Gallos quipped.

Two years later, the PUC approved a 39.1% sewer rate hike for Pennsylvania American, even more than it had sought, and Upper Pottsgrove sewer customers saw the promise of slowly rising rates evaporate.

Study: Private always costs more

Even before Act 12, data shows that water rates go up in Pennsylvania when a system is purchased by a private company.

According to 2014 charts put together by



“There are 1.3 million households in PA living near, at, or below the poverty line. That’s a lot of people living paycheck to paycheck and even a small increase like this can have them trip into poverty.”

Andrew Place

*a former vice chairman of the
Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission*

Food and Water Watch, rates in Coatesville had risen by 73% by 2014 after the system was purchased by American Water in 2001.

In West Chester, Aqua’s 1998 purchase of the municipal authority there was followed by a 145% rise in rates by 2014.

Unfortunately, given the patchwork of water and sewer systems in the Commonwealth, there is no centralized data table on the effect Act 12 has had on rates, although Food and Water Watch hopes to release information on the 10 biggest system sales in Pennsylvania within a few months.

Hagen-Frederiksen confirmed the PUC does not keep any kind of centralized database of rates for easy comparison by regulators, or the public.

“It’s done on a case-by-case basis and there is no over-arching analysis, which I agree, needs to be done,” said Place. “It’s not a good way to do business.”

Further evidence can be found in a study released last March and published in the Official Journal of the World Water Council which concluded: “among the largest 500 water systems in the US, private ownership results in higher water prices and less affordability, after controlling for all other factors.”

The authors wrote that “results show that the average annual water bill is \$144 higher in the privately owned water systems than in the publicly owned water systems,” according to the report’s findings. “These results hold after controlling for other factors, namely regulatory environment, water supply, age of system and community demographics that would affect water price and affordability. All private systems in our sample are regulated. However, in NJ and

PA water regulations have become more favorable to private operators than in many other states, and our model results show this leads to higher prices in those states.”

This comes as no surprise, said Warner, one of the authors of the study.

“There’s a reason it’s called a public utility,” she told MediaNews Group. “Because it represents a critical public good. People cannot live without water.”

However, “when that system is privatized the priority of that private actor is to maximize profits and the public ends up paying more for the same product,” Warner said. That’s good news for private companies and their stockholders, not so good for rate-payers. “Water is a critical public infrastructure and people will pay, they have no choice.”

One of the ways they pay is through extra fees that few customers understand, said Place.

“No one thinks a lot about the bills that have a few extra dollars here, a few extra dollars there. It’s a drip, drip, drip, like the proverbial frog in slowly heated water,” he said. “But multiply that over a few thousand people and pretty soon you’re talking about real money and eventually, the frog boils.”

“There are a lot of surcharges that get added on” to bills in the private systems, Grant added.

The ‘financialization’ of a public good

For more than 30 years, there was not much difference between public and private ownership because the technology was static, said Warner. “There was no way to squeeze more efficiencies out of providing the service.”

But what has changed is Wall Street’s entry into the picture, what Warner calls “the financialization” of these critical public utilities.

With investors to answer to and profit goals to meet, public utilities “moved from a use value, where the value is derived from their use, to their financial value, where the value is derived from what could they be sold for, how could money be made off of them,” Warner said. “Finance used to be in service to the real economy. Now the real economy exists to serve finance.”

And one of the ways Wall Street’s demands can be met, said Gallos, is to keep adding customers and the way you do that is to keep buying systems, even ones that don’t make much sense on their face.

“It’s sort of a pyramid scheme, everyone is helping to support the latest purchase,” Gallos said. “I go on shareholder calls when they’re bragging about their great performance, they always point out customer growth.”

Circling the drain

And those who get hurt the most by that growth are those who can afford it the least.

Grant said in some ways, history is reversing itself.

When most water and sewer systems were built, they were owned by private companies, “but they wouldn’t extend their systems out into the poor neighborhoods and as a result, there were cholera epidemics and these massive fires and so there was this wave of municipalities taking over these private systems,” Grant said.

Continued on next page

Now, as that wave reverses, it is the same people living on the edge who will be most negatively affected, said Place and Warner.

According to the study Warner co-authored, “in communities with privately owned water systems, low-income households spend 1.55% more of their income on their water bills.”

Place, who was the lead author of a policy paper urging the PUC to take people’s ability to pay into account, said that needs to be part of the PUC’s equation.

“There are 1.3 million households in PA living near, at, or below the poverty line,” said Place. “That’s a lot of people living paycheck to paycheck and even a small increase like this can have them trip into poverty.”

In most cases, “people making \$50,000 to \$100,000 can afford, say, a 6 percent increase. But for others, if this is what puts them over, they are circling the drain. They go into arrears and in two or three years, they eventually drop off the system. They may become homeless or move out of town and hollow out communities. And you have all of the social costs which go along with that. There is a real and absolute cost to loss of utility access,” Place said.

“In some ways, it’s doing damage to democracy,” said Gallos. “In my little township, if it seems to me like there’s too much chlorine in the water, I can go down to the town hall and complain or go to a township meeting. I don’t think I’m going to get a very satisfactory response from a corporate giant.”

To that point, since Upper Pottsgrove sold its sewer system, former customers have been showing up at the commissioners’ meetings to say their complaints to Pennsylvania American Water are going unanswered. The commissioners can only send them back to the company.

“The value in a public system is that it’s for everyone at as low a cost as possible,” Gallos said. “There’s a lot of fairness issues going on with this.”

Is Harrisburg waking up?

It seems some legislators in Harrisburg are starting to get the message.

The House Majority Policy Committee hosted a tour and roundtable on April 20 to discuss how Pennsylvania residents are negatively impacted when public water authorities are sold to for-profit companies, including rate hikes with little to no service improvements, according to a press release issued about the event.

The visit and the discussion put particular focus on the fight over the potential sale of the Chester Water Authority, which in many ways encapsulates all the issues at play in the wave of selling public utilities.

The city of Chester’s sale of CWA to Essential Utilities, which also does business as Aqua America, is currently held up in court awaiting potential arguments before the state Supreme Court. Chester City Council, which has its own financial concerns, voted unanimously in September to approve a \$410 million sale to Aqua. The CWA and residents oppose the sale and filed an appeal with the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

A request for comment from Essential Utilities’ press office went unanswered.

“The people of Chester and its surrounding communities have every right to question the potential sale of the Chester Water Authority,” said state Rep. Christina Sappey, D-158th District, who represents portions of Chester County. “Everyone is aware the city faces a sizable deficit, but the short-sighted move of selling a water utility to a for-profit company almost always ends poorly for residents — in the form of higher bills with no end in sight for price increases. The sale might solve the city’s problems today but

create new problems down the road.”

“I have gotten more calls and emails from constituents who oppose Aqua’s attempts to buy CWA than on any other local issue,” said state Rep. Leanne Krueger, D-161st District, who represents portions of Delaware County. “I stand firmly with the ratepayers who are fighting to keep our water authority in the hands of the community.”

“The sale of this public water authority is bad news for any resident of Pennsylvania who values their ability to access clean water and open green spaces,” said state Rep. Carol Kazeem, D-159th District, who hosted the event and represents portions of Delaware County — including the city of Chester.

“For the more than 200,000 paying customers of Chester Water Authority, this sale could result in skyrocketing rate hikes. People who enjoy the outdoors can also expect access to the 2,000 acres of land currently owned by Chester Water Authority to change dramatically — including access for boaters, hikers and anglers. The bottom line is the only one who benefits from this sale is the for-profit company trying to purchase Chester Water Authority.”

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RURAL DILEMMA

Holes in broadband service leave voids in daily life

By Chris Kopacz
Eagle Staff Writer *and*
Tracy Leturgey
Assignment Editor

Part-time wedding photographer Margie Mackrell needs hours to upload wedding photos at her Muddy Creek Township home, an assignment that, by contrast, takes only a half-hour from her brother's Gibsonia home.

Before upgrading to the mobile hot spot plan she now uses, each assignment took a week, she said.

She's been asking for better internet access for 24 years, she said.

Help finally could be on the way — if only her need is recognized by state and federal authorities charged with the management of at least \$100 million in federal aid for broadband expansion projects in unserved and underserved areas.

In late 2022, the Federal Communications Commission announced a national broadband map. The map allows users to navigate to any address within the country and see the availability of fixed and mobile broadband.

That map largely indicates 80% to 100% accessibility to fixed broadband and 100% accessibility to mobile broadband across Butler County — which just isn't the case according to three townships that recently made pleas to the county for broadband-related funding.

In 2022, Worth Township requested \$2 million to help with the installation of broadband from the county's American Rescue Plan Act funding, according to Shari



PHOTOS: JUSTIN GUIDO/BUTLER EAGLE

Roxanne Turner, who lives about 200 yards from her DSL, or digital subscriber line, encounters major disruption to the internet for work and daily life at her home in Worth Township on Jan. 27.

Kreuz, township secretary and treasurer.

But when the Butler County commissioners granted \$11.7 million in municipal infrastructure awards from that funding, Worth Township didn't make the cut. Neither did Muddy Creek and Lancaster townships with their broadband-related requests.

County Commissioner Leslie Osche in an earlier interview said the county set aside an additional \$500,000 from the American Rescue Plan for broadband and hoped to see efforts combine to move those projects forward.

Development Authority — formed in February 2022 — submitted bulk challenges from 35,000 locations statewide, including a number from Butler County, over the map's accuracy.

The bulk challenge could ensure Pennsylvania receives better funding to help meet its high-speed internet access needs, said Brandon Carson, the authority's executive director.

The result of those challenges remains unknown.

Routine disruptions

For those residents whose homes face routine disruptions, access problems make it hard to navigate career tasks, stay connected with friends and relatives who live at any distance from them and enjoy streaming services and other everyday comforts.

Mackrell and her late husband built their home along Stanford Road, where residents occupy 50 other homes.

"I shoot weddings for a lot of other photographers, so weddings per se don't necessarily affect me as much as regular sessions," Mackrell said, referring to photography sessions that generally require an hour or two of time. "And even a regular session is over an hour to upload 50 photos, where if I had broadband access, it would probably be 10 minutes."

"We had DSL (digital subscriber line) for a long time, which was painfully slow," Mackrell said. "It would take me a week to upload a wedding."

"We want to make sure that we're doing it almost as a single project, as opposed to three independent projects," she said.

She also anticipated additional federal funding to become available for the expansion of broadband service.

The Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, of which Osche is chairwoman, did submit a challenge on behalf of Worth Township to the FCC's National Broadband Map in January, she said. Challenges to the map were permitted through Jan. 13.

Additionally, the Pennsylvania Broadband

Continued on next page

A DSL line aims to provide internet connection using standard telephone lines. Since designed for voice signals alone, these lines come with restrictions on bandwidth and data rate.

The hot spot she now uses has improved that situation, but this requires a great deal of bandwidth, even with her unlimited data plan, Mackrell said. She has to pay additional charges because of this, contributing to a total monthly cost of \$140 plus taxes for the service, she said.

"I'm a data analyst for my day job, and I need to have high-speed internet to work with data," she said.

As with other residents in underserved locations, quality of life also suffers as a result of these problems. If she streams one movie, she receives a "nastygram" from AT&T, warning that her service is about to slow down.

"So I don't have any real streaming services here," she said. "If I want to stream anything, I have to stream it on my iPad. And what fun is that? That's not any fun at all."

Mackrell said her niece wants to watch content on Apple TV when she visits, something Mackrell would love to accommodate. But because of access problems, Mackrell can't do this.

'Doughnut holes'

Often a phenomenon called "doughnut holes" interferes with service for residents in Lancaster Township, according to township manager C. Michael Foote.

There was a time when certain locations did not have enough homes to warrant better coverage from the FCC, and people who live in those spots now find themselves slipping through the cracks, Foote said.

Generally the FCC has required 20 homes per square mile to better serve these locations, he said.

Doughnut holes do present an obstacle the service provider Armstrong must surmount, but Armstrong has managed to connect homes even when there are only 12 to 15 per square mile, said Joseph Taylor, who serves as Armstrong's vice president of regulatory affairs.

There are other factors that can complicate service though, such as whether existing utility poles afford enough space for Armstrong to attach its equipment, Taylor said.

Among those affected by doughnut holes

"Just the fact that I get better internet service when I have to travel for work and I'm in a hotel than I do in my own home is a little bit of a disappointment."

Roxanne Turner



are Megan Balint and her husband, Jonathan, of Lancaster Township, who live about five minutes from downtown Zelenople.

Yet internet providers can reach only to the top of the road on which they live, Megan Balint said.

"When you don't have broadband service you're relying on hot spots, which are very unreliable," she said. "Just day-to-day life, we always are relying on our phones, internet service, like mobile internet."

The couple cannot use the Amazon Alexa or similar Google devices that they bought when living in nearby Zelenople, and even TV streaming applications such as Netflix encounter problems, Balint said.

She said Starlink, dish-based internet service launched through the SpaceX engineering corporation, has helped bridge the gap between some of these disruptions. But accessing Starlink had required the Balints to spend more than a year on a waitlist.

Once past the waitlist, Balint found that even Starlink's dish-based mechanism often proves hit or miss, depending on the weather affecting them.

"It's very frustrating, and I do feel like it would be a deterrent for younger couples to move out this way," she added.

The Balints have two small children, both under age 2, who will need internet access to support them through school as they grow older, Megan Balint said.

Discussions with friends and neighbors, many of whom have older children and also struggle with broadband access, haven't

painted an encouraging picture of how internet will affect school, Megan said. These neighbors have been fighting for years to gain better access, and that's gone nowhere, she said.

"They're always talking about how they're just at the mercy of these hot spots, which is very unreliable, not to mention costly," Balint said. "To have a hot spot, to get the gigs of data you need, it is very costly."

Just out of reach

The more comfortable life just tantalizingly out of reach — due to an unfortunate snag in geography — parallels that of Roxanne Turner, who lives near the county line between Butler and Lawrence counties in Worth Township.

Turner, who serves as a senior vice president for health care technology company Omnicell, said she has faced routine disruptions to her work since Omnicell closed the third floor of its Cranberry office two weeks ago. Turner's office had been located on that floor, Turner said.

Since COVID-19 struck, Turner had traveled to the Cranberry office three days a week largely for the reliable internet offered there, she said. But now she relies 100% on the service that's available while she works from home — and the DSL goes bad whenever high winds blow.

"I have to basically prepare ... board meetings," she said. "It has serious consequences for me when I'm dealing with a meeting with the CEO or other senior vice presidents or the board of

directors and I can't be heard or I can't communicate because the wind's blowing."

The DSL line stops just 200 yards from Turner's home, so Turner is forced to rely on a connection with a highly unstable line, she said.

The access problems affect Turner's personal and professional life. Turner has family in New England and Florida, whom she doesn't get to see much in person, she said.

"So being able to speak to them when I want to is important, and I can't necessarily do that," she said.

FaceTime calls frequently drop during important conversations, Turner said.

"Just the fact that I get better internet service when I have to travel for work and I'm in a hotel than I do in my own home is a little bit of a disappointment," Turner said.

Turner chose to live in this rural community because she owns and cares for horses, but she also had planned to move in reach of key services such as shopping and health care, she said.

"Yes, I'm surrounded by farmers, but farmers have to rely on the internet now in order to do their business, because that's where they get pricing for the commodities and that's where they get feedback for crops and things like that," Turner said. "And just because we're rural doesn't mean we don't contribute to business and we don't contribute to society."

A community

Mackrell knows she's not alone. She's a part of a number of social media groups where others complain of the same issues.

She serves as one of the site administrators for the Facebook group "Armstrong for Stanford Road," a 20-member group that advocates for improved broadband in Muddy Creek Township.

She also is an active contributor to the Facebook group "Families of Muddy Creek Township, Prospect, Pa," a community consisting of 164 members that discusses broadband access, among other topics.

"I think we've got a good group of people on the site," Mackrell said.

She wants to see groups take it a step further.

"I'd really like us all to band together and start calling ... and writing letters," she said, "because the squeaky wheel gets the oil."

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CENTRE DAILY TIMES

www.centredaily.com

Loss after loss has Snow Shoe wondering: **‘Do we have a chance or don’t we have a chance?’**

By Bret Pallotto

Snow Shoe Township’s Hall’s Market was more than a place to buy groceries. As the only store with fresh produce or meat for miles, it became a sort of community hub for those who call the Snow Shoe area home.

You could chat with neighbors and get caught up on people’s lives, all while picking up the things you came for and some you didn’t. It was small-town living in rural Centre County.

Needed some hardware to finish up a plumbing project? True Value was right there in an adjoining building. What about a bite to eat or making a deposit at the bank? Subway and Jersey Shore State Bank were a stone’s throw away.

Until they weren’t.

A February 2020 electrical fire at the 107-year-old, family-owned business didn’t just spell the end of the store. It was the first domino to fall in a series that tore at the fabric of the tiny community.

New business is set to come to the former Hall’s — a Dollar Tree and Family Dollar applied for sign permits — more than three years later, but that’s not expected to fill the void.

Adjusting to losses

The area’s only pharmacy closed four months after the fire at Hall’s and its only medical clinic followed suit 14 months later. Rees’ Exit 22 Restaurant closed in January.

A Dollar General has helped keep the area afloat, providing an outlet for select groceries. The business has been a “lifesaver,” Snow Shoe Township board of supervisors Chairman Rodney Preslovich said.

Dollar Tree and Family Dollar (both are owned by Dollar Tree Inc. and it’s unclear which, if not both, is in the works) would give Snow Shoe’s about 2,200 residents another — albeit similar — option. No timeline has been established for the business to open, Preslovich said.



PHOTO: ABBY DREY ADREY@CENTREDAILY.COM

A look down East Olive Street in Snow Shoe Borough on Feb. 23.

“The Dollar General just isn’t the same as Hall’s was with the hardware and the service desk where people could pay the electric bill and those kinds of things. People got to see each other at least a few times a week. They would talk and exchange stories. All that’s gone now,” lifelong Snow Shoe Township resident Don Morgan said. “You don’t have the social connection that we used to have up here.”

Residents have to travel to other communities to buy nutritious food, or settle for higher-priced staples like milk and eggs from gas stations or the variety store. The

next-closest major grocery is about 17 miles away.

Even though Snow Shoe and the Bellefonte-area Weis are connected by two interstates, it still takes about 40 minutes round trip — and that’s before factoring in time to shop. Older adults and those with limited mobility are at an even greater disadvantage.

“If you need something, you better plan ahead,” Snow Shoe Borough Council President Bruce Houck said.

Continued on next page

Added Morgan, a 74-year-old Navy veteran: "It's fine for people that still work in the Bellefonte or State College area. They can stop on their way to or from work. It's created a problem for the senior citizens. ... It's changed a lot of people's lives."

The nearest doctor's office is more than 10 miles away. The closest the area has come to replacing the loss of its health care establishments is a mobile medical unit that visits once or twice a month.

Only a handful of businesses sit in the aging borough. Among them are two liquor stores, a pizza shop, a laundromat and an outdoor and sporting goods company.

"It's been a hardship on people, but I think basically we've adjusted," Houck said. "Not that we like it."

The challenge of attracting, retaining business

Snow Shoe Township supervisor Ron Bucha wondered aloud about the best way to attract investment in the area. Board Vice President John Yecina Jr. frankly said businesses won't make a fortune in Snow Shoe.

What's more likely to succeed, he said, is a mom and pop store that makes enough money for its owner to make a living.

"It's a hell of an investment for a young couple or anybody to go ahead and buy a piece of property, put a building in, then get established as a business," Yecina said. "You're talking quite a sum of money, so that's where the help is needed to get them all of that."

Among those trying to make life better in the Mountaintop Region is Ojay Guenot, who in October 2020 opened Nala May Farm & Greenhouse. It's a farmers market of sorts, one that draws customers everywhere from Punxsutawney to Snow Shoe.

It's not uncommon to see displays filled with canned goods, from honey to pickles to salsas and sauces and everything in-between. Fresh, in-season produce — tomatoes, corn, mushrooms, asparagus, sweet potatoes, and more — is another staple.

"People need something up this way," Guenot said. "They do appreciate the businesses that are here. I feel most people support it."

Nala May, 183 Walker Place Lane in Burnside Township, is scheduled to open for the season May 3. It's set to remain open through the end of October.

Guenot said he is looking to expand, but has found it difficult because distributors aren't often willing to make deliveries to the Snow Shoe area. He described it as a "go get it yourself type of deal."

"I've talked to several distributors and they just don't come out this way. They don't come to Snow Shoe. There's nothing out here. There's nothing else for them to do," Guenot said. "They could deliver to me and they got to run 45-50 minutes out of their way and nobody is willing to do that anymore."

"We cannot lose focus on the people and communities like Snow Shoe. They deserve our focus and our attention just as much as any other demographic. ... I hope that over time I'm able to demonstrate that this isn't just an election year focus. This is something that I'm really wanting to build over time."

Rep. Paul Takac
D-College Township



Where can help come from?

Any help from Pennsylvania politicians would need to come from a pair of fresh faces to the area.

Former state Senate President Pro Tempore Jake Corman retired and state Rep. Stephanie Borowicz no longer represents the area after a once-a-decade redistricting. Both are Republicans.

Enter state Sen. Cris Dush, R-Jefferson County, and freshman state Rep. Paul Takac, D-College Township, in their place.

Takac convinced enough voters during the 2022 election to win the district, but he's in a position where he'll have to win over voters from Snow Shoe.

He won only about 30% of the 1,068 votes cast at the three precincts that cover the borough and the township. His Republican challenger won about 70% of the votes. Still, Takac pledged his full support for Snow Shoe.

"We cannot lose focus on the people and communities like Snow Shoe. They deserve our focus and our attention just as much as any other demographic," Takac said. "... I would never ask anybody whether they supported me or not; I'm going to help everyone. I hope that over time I'm able to demonstrate that this isn't just an election year focus. This is something that I'm really wanting to build over time."

Weekly office hours are among the ways Takac has attempted to connect with residents. Either he or a member of his staff are penciled in to answer questions from 9:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Snow Shoe Township Building, 268 Oldside Road.

Dush represents the largest state legislative district east of the Mississippi River. It's made up of at least part of

seven rural counties that — when combined — are larger than Connecticut. There are likely more trees and deer than there are people.

Though they're on opposite ends of the political spectrum, both Takac and Dush tabbed upgrading Snow Shoe's infrastructure as a top priority.

Whether it's the water or sewer systems, electric or broadband, each needs to reach a level where businesses don't see those systems as prohibitive.

"I see opportunity," Dush said. "The people up there are good people. They've got a strong work ethic. They'd like to see some things that'll help them with the infrastructure needs so that they can get business back up there again."

Snow Shoe's future won't just fall on the shoulder of its representatives. One of the area's biggest challenges, Preslovich said, is convincing people there is ample opportunity.

The Mountaintop Region isn't the only one in Pennsylvania fighting those battles. Rural communities throughout the state are facing many of the same hardships. Solutions have been difficult to find.

Much of what is left in the wake of a shuttered market, hardware store, pharmacy, medical clinic and two restaurants are unanswered questions. If that were an industry, business would be booming in Snow Shoe.

"We don't have the answers and we're looking for solutions, but solutions cost money," Bucha said. "... For small communities like ours in Centre County — and all of us basically — do we have a chance or don't we have a chance?"

Published March 4, 2023

Funding the 500

A landmark school funding case put K-12 spending on trial

By Marley Parish

Pennsylvania Capital-Star

Jennifer Hoff had just moved into a house in Delaware County. It was 1997. Eight months pregnant with twins, she was standing in her front yard, looking at her new home, when a neighbor — now a friend — welcomed her to Lansdowne.

“They did a bad job replacing your windows. And by the way, the schools are awful,” Hoff told the Capital-Star, recounting the greeting more than two decades later.

At the time, Hoff knew her kids would eventually get a public education in the William Penn School District, so she began attending board meetings after giving birth. She wasn’t willing to accept that “awful” was the status quo — a brush-off comment — for her community’s public schools.

“I had to do something and find out, be part of the solution and not the problem,” she said. “And so, I ran for school board.”

December will mark 16 years since Hoff first joined the board of directors, and she’s still working to create a better education system — not just in her district but statewide. Her next four-year term, however, could be her last, assuming lawmakers adhere to a Commonwealth Court directive by developing a funding model that ensures a “thorough and efficient” education system.

In February, Commonwealth Court President Judge Renée Cohn Jubelirer declared the existing state funding system unconstitutional in a 786-page ruling after a four-month trial in a landmark case filed in 2014.

For the six school districts, two associations, and the group of parents



PHOTO: AMANDA BERG FOR THE CAPITAL-STAR

Penn Wood High School in the William Penn School District, Lansdowne.

included in the case, the ruling — which orders lawmakers and the governor to collaborate with educators to “make the constitutional promise a reality” — came as a victory. It was “an earthquake,” as Dan Urevick-Ackelsberg, a senior attorney at the Public Interest Law Center, put it after the decision came down.

Throughout the trial, attorneys from the Public Interest Law Center, Education Law Center, and O’Melveny & Myers, a law firm that dedicated a pro bono team to the

case, argued that the current funding system, which relies heavily on local property taxes, has resulted in disparities between low-income and wealthy districts, arguing that schools are underfunded by at least \$4.6 billion.

And the consequences last far beyond a graduation date.

“You rely on a good education to get a good job, to move your family, to have a nicer life than your family before,” Hoff said. “And by not educating folks and by

funding on property taxes, you keep people where they are.”

Cohn Jubelirer concurred with the petitioners, writing that students living in poor school districts with low property values “are deprived of the same opportunities and resources” as those living in wealthy school districts with high property values. The disparity, she added, “is not justified by any compelling

Continued on next page

government interest nor is it rationally related to any legitimate government objective.”

“All witnesses agree that every child can learn,” she concluded in her decision. “It is now the obligation of the Legislature, executive branch, and educators to make the constitutional promise a reality in this commonwealth.”

With budget negotiations playing out this month between Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro and the politically divided General Assembly, advocates and educators expect a significant downpayment on education, and they’re waiting to see how officials begin to fix the existing funding system while making workforce investments amid a worsening educator staffing crisis across 500 public school districts. But bringing the funding system into constitutional compliance is likely a multi-step — and multi-year — process, lasting far beyond the June 30 budget deadline.

Legislative Republicans could still file an appeal. However, advocates who have been with the case from the beginning — and working on fair education funding decades before its filing — have no plans to give up on pushing for a new system.

“All of us must be in this for the long haul,” Maura McInerney, legal director at the Education Law Center, told the Capital-Star. “This is about the future of our children, the future of our communities, and the future of our state.”

A case years in the making

Michael Churchill was working in his office at the Philadelphia-based Public Interest Law Center, where he serves as of counsel, or a special lawyer, when the Commonwealth Court decision came in February.

It was late in the day, and “we all just jumped up,” Churchill, a chief architect of the case, told the Capital-Star.

The legal victory is a career highlight for 83-year-old Churchill, who joined the Public Interest Law Center in 1976 and has dedicated most of his life to civil rights issues.

As the son of a city planner father, Churchill grew up discussing how the government could “serve people rather than serve the people who are in government.” His wife, who was a Philadelphia public school teacher, motivated his interest in education and equity.



“All of us must be in this for the long haul. This is about the future of our children, the future of our communities, and the future of our state.”

Maura McInerney

Legal director at the Education Law Center

“I wanted to make sure that what was available to some was available to all,” he said, explaining his more than 30-year history of litigating education cases in Pennsylvania.

According to Urevick-Ackelsberg, Churchill is the reason why Pennsylvania’s school funding case went to trial.

“None of it would have happened without him,” Urevick-Ackelsberg told reporters in February.

In 1997, the Public Interest Law Center partnered with Philadelphia and its public school system to file a case — *Marrero v. Commonwealth* — that challenged the state’s funding system, arguing that Pennsylvania failed to provide a constitutionally required “thorough and efficient” education.

The case never made it to trial, but Churchill never gave up, working behind

the scenes and developing a legal strategy to challenge how Pennsylvania funds its public schools while still taking on other civil rights cases.

The “real genesis” for the 2014 case, Churchill said, stemmed from widely-debated \$1 billion budget cuts under former Republican Gov. Tom Corbett in 2011.

After that, the Public Interest Law Center was “bombarded with attention” from parents and educators who wanted to take legal action, Churchill said. So, attorneys took it on, teaming up with the Education Law Center to develop a plan.

Over roughly six months, the centers evaluated and found who was willing to sue the Department of Education, eventually landing on six schools, the Pennsylvania NAACP, the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools,

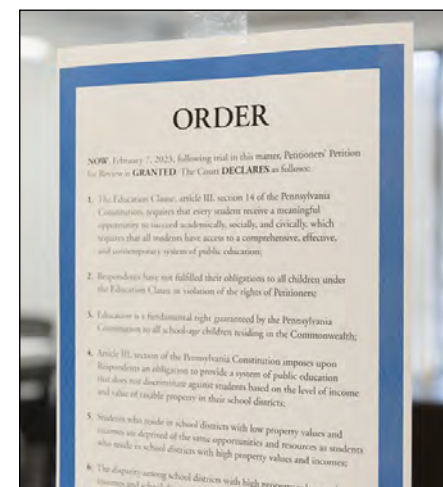


PHOTO: AMANDA BERG FOR THE CAPITALSTAR

ABOVE: Details of the February court ruling are displayed at the Education Law Center in Philadelphia.

LEFT: Maura McInerney, legal director, and Margie Wakelin, senior attorney, at the Education Law Center in Center City Philadelphia on June 15, 2023.

and a group of parents representing rural and urban parts of Pennsylvania.

“I think many districts were quite reluctant,” Churchill said, describing a fear of possible retaliation from joining the lawsuit, “which nobody had been part of before.”

Pennsylvania uses two formulas to determine how much its public schools receive annually. Most of the state’s basic education dollars run through a formula that uses a “hold harmless” approach to ensure schools don’t lose funding even if enrollment has declined, calculating appropriations using enrollment numbers from the 1990s.

Pennsylvania adopted a new method in 2016 that directs funds based on enrollment numbers, English learners, poverty levels, and median household income. But the fair funding formula only applies to new funding, meaning that the aid schools receive doesn’t meet their needs.

The petitioners didn’t ask for a specific dollar amount for the state to allocate toward K-12 education, but instead asked the court to declare the current model unconstitutional, using witness testimony,

Continued on next page

state testing data, and graduation rates to showcase the disparities created by the current system.

Every decision leaves 'collateral damage' somewhere else

For the districts represented in the case, joining was their best option.

It was either sign on to the lawsuit or continue making decisions that came with "collateral damage," as Shenandoah Valley School District Superintendent Brian Waite said during the trial.

Waite, who has led the district in rural Schuylkill County since 2016, is regularly faced with decisions about shifting resources, which often create other challenges.

From having to reassign a Title I specialist helping elementary kids to the district's kindergarten program, which had class sizes of more than 30, and having educators in at least 10 classes teach two subjects at the same time — every allocation takes away from something else, whether it be staffing or delaying another infrastructure project.

And while the district has used federal pandemic relief funds to address needs and considered applying for grant funding, administrators always need a contingency plan for when those financial boosts run out, he said.

"Every day, we are working to try and figure out what we can do with the current staffing we have and how we can make the most of the staff and minimize the collateral damage on the fewest number of kids," Waite told the Capital-Star.

When Greater Johnstown School District Superintendent Amy Arcurio took the stand, she described having to make "awful" decisions about allocating resources, picking whether to renovate a deteriorating building for student and staff safety or close it altogether.

After it shut down the building, the district had to decide how to maximize space elsewhere, converting storage closets into classrooms. With 1,200 students at its elementary school, most of whom need one-on-one attention or small-group work, and only two reading specialists, which students get access? Who on staff takes on more?

The funding case, Arcurio added, wasn't just about the six school districts getting ahead. They might have signed up to do the work, but a constitutional funding



"The Education Law Center's mission is to ensure access to a quality public education for all children in Pennsylvania," according to the ELC website.

PHOTO: AMANDA BERG
FOR THE CAPITAL-STAR

system will benefit kids statewide.

"I don't regret it," Hoff, who was school board president, when the William Penn School District joined the case. "These communities, these families, these young people are worth fighting for, and they know we're fighting for them."

Addressing a broken funding system

Bringing the funding system into constitutional compliance, McInerney said, requires lawmakers to address adequacy and equity.

To her, that means examining all education spending: K-12, career and technical education, and early childhood education. It also requires solutions to address the educator staffing crisis, ensure safe facilities, and equip schools with textbooks, classroom supplies, and technology.

"[In] our school funding case, we disclosed that children who are living in poverty have more significant educational needs," McInerney said. "They don't need less; they need more support."

School funding cases in other states — such as Illinois — resulted in new formulas and adequacy targets, which calculate the cost to educate students within a district based on cost factors outlined in an evidence-based funding formula, to remedy a broken system.

"That's the way other states have addressed this issue by ensuring that

those communities are not taxing themselves at four times the rate, but ensuring that there's adequate state funding to meet the needs of the children they are serving," McInerney said.

An appeal to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court is still a possibility, though Shapiro previously said that Republican leaders privately indicated that they won't challenge the Commonwealth Court decision.

If the ruling stands, lawmakers have said addressing the problem will require a system overhaul, with proposals to address educator staffing shortages already circulating in Harrisburg.

"It will take all of us — Republicans and Democrats; teachers and administrators; students and families; advocates and community leaders," Shapiro said of fixing the funding model during his budget address. "It will take all of our ideas for not just how many dollars we set aside from the state for public education but how we drive those dollars out to local districts adequately and equitably."

The governor's \$44.4 billion budget proposal calls for a \$1 billion boost for Pennsylvania schools. Facing criticism for not including new "Level Up" funding for the 100 poorest districts, Shapiro — who thinks completely fixing the funding model will take multiple steps — has said the next budget will further increase education spending and drive out dollars "in an equitable fashion."

Republicans, however, aren't totally on board with the governor's suggested spending plan.

Earlier this month, Senate Majority Leader Joe Pittman, R-Indiana, said each one of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts has a different definition for what's fair, adding that Senate Republicans want to prioritize school infrastructure projects and finding ways to repurpose school buildings that have closed in rural areas with declining population numbers.

"I think we're always looking for ways to figure out how to drive those dollars out more correctly," Pittman told reporters. "But I also think that we need to make it clear that it has to also include parental empowerment, parental engagement. That is absolutely critical to us."

He added that the Commonwealth Court decision "didn't distinguish between public and private education."

"It distinguished educational opportunities," Pittman said. "And it also made reference to the fact that providing equal education doesn't always have to translate into more funding."

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PITTSBURGH INDEPENDENT

Historic Western PA bakery Byrnes & Kiefer fires workers by the dozen over holidays

By Brian Conway

Four days after Christmas, 2022, workers at Byrnes & Kiefer commercial bakery and warehouse in Callery, Butler County, cleaned and counted inventory to prepare for a major inspection.

Around 1pm, management bought pizza, from Milano's down the street.

By 2pm, almost everyone was fired.

"It was a shock," said one of the dismissed employees, who had worked there for about two and half years in a variety of roles. "A lot of people were crying. My friend, his eyes were red. He was bawling."

"A lot of people here live paycheck to paycheck."

Founded in 1902, in Pittsburgh's Strip District, Byrnes & Kiefer provided commercial baking products to clients like Eat'n Park and Giant Eagle. And until late 2021, Byrnes & Kiefer also manufactured Reymers' Lemon Blend, an orange-lemon flavored drink that was popular in Pittsburgh for over a century.

The Independent spoke with over a half-dozen former workers of Byrnes & Kiefer's Callery headquarters. Workers were granted anonymity due to concerns that critical comments about a former workplace could prejudice them in the eyes of future employers as they search, many of them urgently, for a new job.

"I just bought a car, probably a month after I started there," said another former employee, who was only recently hired full-time after months as a temp worker.

"I kept asking every week, 'How am I doing? Can I improve?' I need to have job security. They kept telling me I'm doing good: 'Don't worry, everything is fine.' I don't know how I'm going to make my car payments."

Workers present the day of the layoffs delivered the news to those who weren't, meaning some employees heard they had been laid off secondhand, and in at least one case, thirdhand.

"Byrnes & Kiefer Company is closing its Callery and Hermitage facilities but will continue to operate its other businesses located in California and North Carolina," confirmed Tom Meinert of Meinert/Mashek Communications on behalf of Byrnes & Kiefer, in a statement emailed Wednesday, Jan. 4.

"We are grateful for our employees' efforts and remain

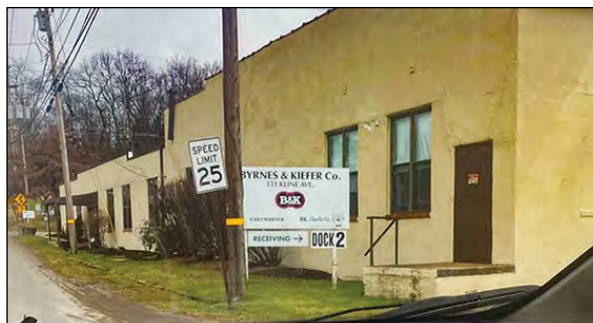


PHOTO BY BRIAN CONWAY.

Byrnes & Kiefer headquarters in December 2022.

committed to our company's tradition of delivering the highest quality bakery supplies and goods," he said.

Meinert declined to respond to follow-up questions or provide the total number of employees terminated.

In addition to their Callery headquarters and their Hermitage subsidiary, Charlie's Specialties, Byrnes & Kiefer also owns Fullerton, CA's Chefmaster and High Point, NC's Carolina Cookie Co.

Approximately 50 people worked at Byrnes & Kiefer's Hermitage location, according to a September 2021 news article from WFMY.

On Wednesday, Jan. 4, The Sharon Herald reported on the Hermitage closure, but did not report the number of workers laid off. The Herald reported that the lights at the Charlie's Specialties plant were turned off when they visited Wednesday, and that no one answered the doorbell.

According to three firsthand accounts from workers in three separate departments who were present during the mass layoff in Callery, operations manager Gary Zacherl spoke to about 25 staff members for roughly 10 minutes last Thursday, telling workers that operations were ending and that unless he had already spoken with them privately, they were to leave and not return. (Several workers stated a crew of about six remains to wind down operations.)

Those in attendance said that Zacherl declared the company would not dispute any worker's unemployment claims. Several stated that Zacherl blamed the layoffs at least in part on employees, saying their unreliability caused order fulfillment issues, a sentiment he had expressed to staff before.

Almost all of the workers who spoke for this article

complained of high worker turnover. One former manager noted that it was difficult to get to Callery without a car, and that wages for similar jobs in nearby Cranberry Township typically paid better than what Byrnes & Kiefer offered. "If you worked here for a year, you were in the top 10%," said the employee of two and a half years.

Many workers spoke of poor working conditions and frustration with management. Four workers who spoke with the Independent expressed a belief that management did not adequately respond to an incident over the summer in which a worker allegedly drank alcohol during their lunch break and later drove a forklift into scaffolding that held up stacks of granulated sugar in the warehouse. (The Independent was shown a photo of the damage to scaffolding allegedly caused by the described incident.)

Many of the employees contacted for this article believed that the decision to close had been in the works for some time, making the abrupt layoffs even more upsetting. They point to a warehouse owned by Byrnes & Kiefer at 2600 Freedland Rd in Hermitage, adjacent to Charlie's Specialties, which was listed for sale roughly 3 months ago.

Aaron G. Byrnes of Newport Beach, CA is listed as President and CEO of Byrnes & Kiefer's California subsidiary, Chefmaster. Byrnes did not respond to multiple requests for comment left with his assistant. A 2002 Post-Gazette article reports that Aaron is the son of long-running former chairman, Edward G. Byrnes Jr.

Former Byrnes & Kiefer President & Chief Executive Officer, Scott Douglas, did not respond to multiple requests for comment left on his cell phone. Employees, and Douglas's LinkedIn, state that his tenure expired at the end 2022.

Pennsylvania is an "at-will" employment state. According to the PA Department of Community and Economic Development, "an employer may terminate the services of an 'at will' employee, with or without cause, at any time — as long as an employee is not let go for an unlawful purpose, such as age or racial discrimination."

"I'm OK right now, but the holidays just passed," said a former packaging employee of more than 2 years. "Maybe I wouldn't have spent what I spent had I known."

"This puts a stop to plans I've been making," they continued. "It's been stressful mentally. Eventually, the money is going to run out."

Published Jan. 6, 2023

Standard-Speaker



PHOTO: JOHN HAEGER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A new traffic signal was installed in 2022 at the entrance to Blue Creek Investments' 1.2-million-square-foot building on Route 309 Hazleton, seen Dec. 21.

'This is our chance'

By Sam Galski
Hazleton Standard-Speaker

A sprawling 1.2 million square foot warehouse that was built earlier this year near Hazleton's Birch Knoll neighborhood is one example of how industrial and warehousing projects are reshaping the landscape of Greater Hazleton.

The building dwarfs longtime businesses that line Route 309 and the homes to the north of it. A new traffic signal has been installed near the entrance off Route 309 for a tenant that has not yet been named.

More changes are on the horizon, with at least seven other large industrial projects planned throughout the region in different stages of development.

Community stakeholders, meanwhile, are banding together to stay a step ahead by planning for impacts that those projects will have on infrastructure, transportation, housing, schools, health care and utilities in Greater Hazleton.

Joe Clifford, who helped organize a workshop earlier this

year at Penn State Hazleton to give stakeholders a comprehensive look at the projects and identify needs of a growing community, said the latest economic boom is different than in years past, as it likely will bring more workers and families to an area that already has a "large, fully employed workforce."

"When we look back at economic development over time, it was always to bring in jobs because we had a large unemployed workforce," Clifford said. "We don't have that today. It's going to bring people into the area - which is different from the past."

In his view, communication among stakeholders and municipal leaders is key to staying ahead of the development.

"If we get 30 million square feet of warehousing, what does that generate population-wise, for infrastructure, schools - all of that," he said. "I think we need to work together to make sure those things are ready when those buildings and when those operations start. From a personal perspective, I want to see the area ready to absorb the growth in a positive way. This is our chance."

Monitoring progress

Local officials say they are monitoring the projects as they progress.

Hazleton Mayor Jeff Cusat said he's been in communication with developers of three projects in the city.

Blue Creek Investments completed a 1.2 million square foot building behind Birch Knoll and is designing a second building in excess of 450,000 square feet that will front Route 424, according to Thomas Meagher, executive vice president of Blue Rock Construction, the development arm for Blue Creek.

Work has generally slowed through the holiday, but Cusat said Blue Rock will focus on its second building, known as "Hazleton South."

NorthPoint Development, which has proposed six warehouses along Route 424, three in the city and three in Hazle Twp., is working on a land deal to move its project forward, Cusat said.

Continued on next page

Hazleton Creek Commerce Center Holdings LLC, meanwhile, is blasting and leveling property as it develops a 5.5 million square foot industrial center for wholesale, warehousing and manufacturing on mine-scarred land in Hazleton and Hazle Twp., Cusat said.

The challenge: Housing

The mayor said he sees positives as jobs will boost earned income tax revenue as the buildings come online. Real estate tax revenue will increase as programs that offer tax incentives expire after 10 years, he said.

The challenge, he said, is meeting the demand for housing.

"We have been meeting with residential developers and are also trying to get projects going which could be in the city limits," Cusat said.

Several developers have proposed housing projects:

- OB International Development is pitching market-rate housing, apartments for veterans or a combination of housing and offices at the former St. Joseph's Hospital in Hazleton.
- Allen Ridge Associates has proposed 216 townhouses and 11 single-family homes on 36 acres off North Wilson Street in Hazleton.
- The city's plans for using federal funds to develop a paper street called David Avenue in the Terrace would make land between Ferrara Avenue and East Broad Street available for private development.
- Post Road Construction is developing 67 market-rate apartments at the former Hotel Altamont in Hazleton.

Hazle Twp. Supervisors' Chairman Jim Montone said some of the larger development projects, such as Mericle Commercial Real Estate's CrossRoads East Business Park

on 1,100 acres in the township, are 10 years from completion.

At least two developers have pitched projects for building townhouses in the township that could help meet a demand for housing, he said.

Other projects, like NorthPoint's warehouses, will cross boundary lines and require cooperation among local officials, Montone said.

"We all need to make sure this happens in a good way," Montone said. "It's going to be a big impact to the area."

Contrary to the view of some residents, Montone said recent development projects are creating jobs that pay "pretty decent money with good benefits."

The city, township and West Hazleton also teamed for a project to develop a regional comprehensive plan that will provide a roadmap for development.

"That's going to be a big part," Montone said. "That's going to help us over the next 10 years to decide on housing and infrastructure."

Business and utilities

Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce and Hazleton City Authority are also keeping tabs on development.

Chamber President Mary Malone said her organization is continuously working to keep the business community informed about private development that has been fueling growth.

A forum that the chamber recently hosted gave PennDOT an opportunity to update the region on transportation projects, which helps keep the lines of communication open, she said.

"It is exciting and challenging at the same time," she

said. "Workforce, housing, education and healthcare are impacted by this kind of growth as well as infrastructure like water, sewer and transportation. We have seen growth in small business opening as well."

At Hazleton City Authority, which provides water for some 15,000 customers in parts of Luzerne, Carbon and Schuylkill counties, officials issue a document called a "will serve" letter to businesses or developers that inquire about water service, said Scot Burkhardt, HCA's director of operations.

"(The letters) tell us what your process will be and is it general use or if you are using water in a higher capacity," he said.

Burkhardt said basic warehousing typically has minimal impact on the water supply because those types of businesses generally use water only for restrooms and general use.

Larger customers like CAN DO consume about 400,000 gallons of water per day for businesses in its industrial parks while Niagara is currently allotted 550,000 gallons per day, he said. Niagara's allotment, however, will gradually increase to about 1.75 million gallons per day by the end of 2023, he said.

HCA's customer base consumes uses an average of 6.5 million to 7 million gallons per day, Burkhardt said.

Tracking consumption is a priority as the authority continues tackling about \$100 million worth of distribution system and filtration plant upgrades over the next five years, he said. Officials are also working to identify new sources of water to meet the needs of a growing customer base, he said.

Contact the writer: sgalski@standardspeaker.com; 570-501-3586

Published Jan. 1, 2023

why newspapers?



Local newspapers are read by voters
in all geographic locations.

92% of rural voters read a newspaper frequently.

Nearly 75% of urban and suburban voters read the newspaper frequently.

READING EAGLE

Police recruitment is a challenge for departments in Berks

By Steven Henshaw
Reading Eagle

As the Reading Police Department's primary recruiter, Lt. Lance Lillis' calendar is filled most weeks with career fairs at schools and institutions within the city and beyond — far beyond.

As part of his mission to promote his department as a wonderful career opportunity for students, Lillis, who is the department's community response coordinator, has visited Penn State University campuses from Berks to Schuylkill Haven to Hazleton.

He's traveled as far as Mansfield, just south of the New York state line and about 160 miles from Reading, to recruit Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania (formerly Mansfield University) criminal justice students.

Locally, Lillis and some of his Reading police colleagues recently set up a recruitment table at a Reading Royals hockey game at the Santander Arena. Two days earlier, the officers and representatives of other Berks County police departments were at Alvernia University's career fair at the main campus in southwest Reading.

Lillis has also been making the rounds at job fairs. He posts his activities on the department's Facebook page.

The Reading Police Department is taking extraordinary measures to encourage men and women to take the written civil service test out of necessity in a difficult environment for police officer recruitment.

"It's been more of a challenge the past few years," Reading Police Chief Richard Tornielli said.

Nationally, news coverage involving police abusing their authority, including the killings of unarmed Black men, has tarnished the



BILL UHRICH-READING EAGLE

Lt. Lance Lillis, Reading police community response coordinator, has been working on recruiting new officers.

image of law enforcement officers.

"A lot of things have happened in the country," Tornielli said. "You can go back to Ferguson (Missouri), the incident there. Obviously the George Floyd incident. It's made recruiting police officers more difficult. And there's a lot of challenges for police officers these days."

Two decades ago, when Tornielli and his contemporaries were applying for the job of police officer on the Reading force, close to 400 others would be taking the exam at the same time for a shot at a few

openings. Fewer than 100 showed up the last time the test was given in 2022.

The civil service test is the first of several steps in the process of hiring a police officer with no prior training in Pennsylvania. Other cities, including Philadelphia, are facing severe police-staffing shortages due to officer retirements and a dwindling pool of applicants.

The Reading Police Civil Service Commission recently offered its latest written test at Alvernia University. To encourage more people to sit for the test,

city officials dropped the \$35 registration fee for the exam.

Anyone who is at least 20½ years old and a U.S. citizen was eligible to take the test.

Officials said about 60 people showed up.

Tornielli said the department expects it will need to hire at least 10 police officers early this summer to fill vacancies. But those hired won't be ready to go out on street patrol on their own for nearly a year from their date of hire.

Continued on next page

Those who pass the test must successfully complete a physical fitness test, a background check and a psychological exam before being added to the hiring list. Hired cadets receive pay and benefits while attending the Reading Police Academy for six months.

Following the academy, rookie officers undergo 12 to 15 weeks of on-the-job training in which they're paired with a field training officer.

The lag between hiring and readiness as a full-fledged police officer is why recruitment is a year-round process.

"One of the things we're doing," Tornielli said, "is trying to get out there and really sell the profession, sell the benefits of doing this kind of work and what we have to offer."

What Reading offers that small departments in the suburbs or rural areas cannot match are abundant opportunities for specialization.

Lillis said he uses his own background and career as hooks when he talks to students about the opportunities that exist within his department.

He usually talks to criminal justice majors, but he'll jump at the chance to talk to any college senior about going into the field.

"Our department, what's nice about it, is we have specialty units such as the bomb squad," he said. "We have K-9, we have criminal investigations, we have vice investigations. We have a major tech (evidence unit).

"So I try to use that as a selling point. There are opportunities they're going to get in a department of our size as opposed to, let's say, a 10-man department. If you think you want to be a police officer, this department is a great place to be."

Also, thanks to Reading's recent emergence from the confines of the Act 47 state program for financially distressed cities, Reading offers a much more competitive salary than it has over the past decade, as well as pension and other benefits that are hard to top anywhere, Tornielli said.

The department was losing officers it hired and trained after a few years on the job to suburban departments that offered much higher pay. The new police contract that included significant raises has curtailed the exodus, Tornielli said.

The salary for a Reading police officer starts at \$59,695 for someone with no

"Our department, what's nice about it, is we have specialty units such as the bomb squad. We have K-9, we have criminal investigations, we have vice investigations. We have a major tech (evidence unit). ... If you think you want to be a police officer, this department is a great place to be."

Lt. Lance Lillis

experience and tops out at \$85,278. A newly hired officer is able to reach the top step in the pay scale with only five full years of service.

"This administration has really put an emphasis, especially coming out of Act 47, of trying to do what they could in terms of the pay and restoring some of the pension benefits we lost in Act 47," Tornielli said.

Not just in Reading

Even large suburban police departments are seeing a decline in applicants despite generous pay and benefits.

"We've experienced shortages for individuals looking to enter into the field of law enforcement, even with a salary and benefits package we feel is extremely competitive," Cumru Township Police Chief Madison Winchester said.

The 2023 starting base pay for a Cumru patrolman with no experience is \$70,275 a year. With predetermined step increases, a patrolman's annual base pay climbs to a maximum of \$104,112 under the current contract.

Winchester, who started his career with the Reading Police Department in 1998, said there were just shy of 100 applicants for Cumru's 2017 civil service police exam, the first that was administered after he was hired as the township police chief.

"This last test we administered, in 2022, there were 23 applicants," he said.

The 29-member department is starting to ramp up recruitment efforts, Winchester said, because it has not received the number of applicants needed to maintain a robust list of qualified candidates from which to hire.

A rule of thumb in police hiring, Winchester explained, is you can expect to lose nearly 50% of applicants at each step in the screening process: background check, physical fitness test, psychological evaluation and police academy.

That's not a concern in a field of hundreds of applicants, but it's a potential

problem with a pool of only two dozen, he said.

Winchester said that with so many departments chasing fewer applicants, those considering law enforcement careers have been known to compare contracts for the most lucrative salaries and benefit packages.

Pulling experienced officers

The Exeter Township Police Department, which is the second-largest police department in Berks, recently hired five officers.

Some large suburban departments have the luxury of attracting experienced officers from urban departments.

Of the five officers recently hired by Exeter, only two are rookies.

Exeter, which has 37 officers, draws talent from various departments because of its highly competitive salary and good reputation, said Sgt. Sean Fullerton, department public information officer.

"We're lucky we're able to pull from different agencies and different states," Fullerton said, noting one of the new officers had worked for the New York Police Department.

The starting rate for an Exeter patrol officer with no experience is \$71,504. After seven full years of service, a patrolman's pay tops out at \$108,566 under the current contract.

Members of the Exeter force help with recruiting by the professional way in which they handle themselves, Fullerton said.

"We want to be attractive," he said. "That is part of our job, to showcase our department in the best way to garner that interest."

Like other departments, Exeter has experienced a downward trend in the number of people taking the civil service exam, he said. Around 100 people showed up for the exam when it was given last year, about half as many as the previous test.

That's a potential issue given that the department faces future shortages due to the potential retirements of close to half of the force within the next five years, Fullerton said.

Difficult time

The Eastern Berks Regional Police Department has struggled to reach its full complement of 19 officers since the department was formed in 2020 through the merger of the Boyertown and Colebrookdale Township forces, Chief Barry Leatherman said.

The department launched into the process of hiring two officers to reach the target of 14 full-time officers but only garnered one qualified candidate, he said.

A year later, it started the hiring process again and hired one more officer who left six months later for a higher-paying position with a Montgomery County department.

"In the last three years, since June 2020, we've only been fully staffed six months because of the challenges in hiring," Leatherman said.

There were only 17 applicants for the Eastern Berks department's Nov. 19 civil service exam, and only 11 of those show up.

"That's a really low number," Leatherman said.

Especially concerning about the response, he said, is the department held off on advertising the announcement until the 2023 pay rates that included significant pay increases were approved.

The minimum starting pay went to \$64,952 from \$56,825 under the previous contract. The maximum pay for a patrol officer went to \$92,732 from \$84,115 under the previous contract.

The number of steps to reach the top step was compressed to two. In other words, an officer with two years of full-time service will earn a base salary of \$92,732.

Leatherman has concluded the pay rate cannot be the reason his department is struggling with manpower shortages.

"We're not having trouble hiring and recruiting because we don't pay good pay and benefits," he said. "What we're offering is certainly not at the top scale, but it's not at the bottom either. I think we're right where we should be for a community of comparable size and demographics."

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BUCKS COUNTY

Courier Times

How drivers are fighting, and winning, automated ticket technology on Bucks County school buses

By Jo Ciavaglia

Bucks County Courier Times

The video that played in a Bensalem district court was less than 10 seconds long, enough time to show a green Kia appear to drive past a stopped school bus in the opposite traffic lane shortly after 8:30 a.m. on Sept. 28.

Evangelene Moore owns the car, but testified that she wasn't the one driving it. Moore was at home in bed asleep after working her normal overnight shift.

"I can tell you it was not me driving that car," she told District Judge Michael Gallagher. "They don't have my face. There is no proof in the video. I know who was driving the car, but it's not me."

Enforcement program shows stunning number of violations

Police, state lawmakers and school officials have touted the program as a more efficient way to enforce the law and keep children safe.

But it's rare that students are hurt or killed as a result of drivers illegally passing school buses and the number has dropped over the last decade, according to state data.

The number of deaths and injuries fell from 16 in 2012 to eight in 2019, PennDOT data show and three deaths or injuries statewide were reported in 2020 and 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic kept students from physically attending school full time.

Pennsylvania law requires drivers stop at least 10 feet away from school buses with red signals and stop arm activated and wait



until the red signals are turned off before proceeding.

The only exception is if the school bus is stopped on the opposite side of a divided highway that is separated by a physical barrier like a grass median or concrete island.

Across the state, nearly 10,000 drivers were cited for illegally passing a school bus between 2017 and 2021, roughly 2,000 a year, according to Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Court data.

The court data showed that Montgomery and Bucks counties were ranked as second and third highest in percentages — 13% and 7% — respectively for the number of

citations issued over that time period.

But data from BusPatrol, the Virginia company that holds contracts with 20 Pennsylvania school districts including Bensalem, Pennsbury and Quakertown in Bucks County to provide its camera technology on school buses, suggests the violation is more prevalent.

As of December, the company reported nearly 8,000 civil violations had been issued in the Pennsylvania school districts it contracts with since the start of the 2022-23 school year.

Previously, the only way a driver could be cited for illegally passing a school bus was if an eyewitness, such as a police officer,

At the start of the 2022-23 school year, three Bucks County school districts signed contracts to put high-tech cameras on school buses to better catch drivers who illegally pass school buses. The program has resulted in thousands of \$300 citations and raised scrutiny among drivers, critics and some police.

ANTHONY GROVE, COMMONWEALTH MEDIA SERVICES; ANTHONY GROVE

bus driver, or passerby, wrote down a license plate number and could identify the person driving the vehicle, according to police.

The police departments in Bucks County with BusPatrol contracts agree that most of the violations happen on multi-lane highways without physical barriers dividing the lanes.

In Richland Township, police issued 401 school bus stop violations between Sept. 11 and Feb. 24, according to Chief Richard Ficco Sr. Two vehicle owners filed challenges and both won their appeal, he added.

Continued on next page

Both appeals involved violations on the opposite side of a stretch of Route 309, a five-lane highway with two school bus stops and no physical barrier separating traffic, Ficco said.

The stretch of highway is where most of the stop-arm violations in Richland have occurred, and Ficco acknowledged that drivers in the opposite travel lanes might not see a stopped bus.

After the first hearing in January, Richland stopped approving violations on the opposite side of Route 309.

In Bensalem, where two children were killed and one injured after drivers ignored stopped school buses between 2012 and 2020, police approved an average of 32 violations per school day during the first months of the program, said Bensalem Det. Sgt. Glenn Vandergrift, who oversees the program.

Previously, the department typically issued 30 to 50 traffic citations a year.

"We didn't even realize how bad it was out there until we started this program," Vandergrift said.

Of the more than 3,500 tickets that Bensalem issued since the start of the school year, roughly half the violators have paid the fine, and about 20 people filed appeals, Vandergrift said.

District Judge Joseph Falcone, who oversees one of two district courts in Bensalem, estimated about 20 people have challenged violations in his court and he's upheld the \$300 fine in only about 40% of cases.

Most of Bensalem's violations also have involved multi-lane roads with no physical center barriers, Vandergrift said. Among them two are so-called "hot spots" identified using the BusPatrol AI data — Knights Road between Dunksferry and Street roads, and Bristol Pike between Hulmeville Road and Tennis Avenue.

Recently Bensalem police have deployed a motor patrol unit to those areas for "targeted enforcements" of school bus stop-arm violations, which could result in a traffic citation which carries the stiffer penalties.

But the problem is when people see a marked patrol car, they are less likely to break the law, Vandergrift added.

Following publication of this story, Bensalem publicly defended its aggressive enforcement of the new law noting that "just one injured or dead student is too many."



CHRISTOPHER DORNBLASER/BUCKS COUNTY COURIER TIMES

Brian Russell, supervisor of Operations and Transportation for Bensalem School District, explains how the new bus camera technology works.

"The statistics prove that this program is reducing the chance that another family has to grieve the death or serious injury of their child while attending Bensalem Township schools," the department said in a post on Crimewatch.

The department added that the goal of the program is to change driver behavior and reduce violations, which it has accomplished recently. The average number of daily violations issued in Bensalem dropped 32% between January and April, to roughly 24 a day, according to BusPatrol data.

"These numbers continue to trend downward," the department said.

Falls police officer won't approve more violations

Falls Township police issued roughly 600 stop-arm violations between September and Jan. 12, but it has suspended approving new violations, in part, over questions about who is responsible for paying awards to drivers who prevail in court, Chief Nelson Whitney said.

As of Feb. 21, Falls had a backlog of roughly 1,000 violations — roughly 150 violations a week — but the police officer overseeing the program said he is no longer reviewing them.

"The law really hasn't caught up with this program," Falls Lt. Hank Ward said. "I don't think it's fair for the people right now."

Ward said he turned down 60% of the first 500 violations issued because he found problems with them, such as incidents where the stop arm was

extended — activating the automated camera system — but the bus was still moving.

"I try to gauge, if I was there in my police car would I give them a ticket," Ward said.

Ward said he only issued traffic tickets for stop arm violations in cases where he could identify the driver who passed the stopped school bus. It feels wrong to send violations to vehicle owners without proof that they were driving, he added.

The first few months of the enforcement program, he found numerous violations were sent to people when evidence suggested they were not the ones driving, Ward said.

Those were among the concerns that led Ward not to oppose 31 challenges filed in district court. As a result those vehicle owners were awarded \$125 each to cover the court filing fee and gas expenses.

Ward said he became wary of the violations after speaking with vehicle owners.

He found out that eight who received violations had taken their car to the same auto garage near a bus stop and its mechanics on test runs were likely responsible for the violations.

Another owner had her license plate stolen off her car at a Philadelphia garage and it was put on a car that got a violation, Ward said. Yet another owner got a violation after she reported her car was stolen.

All but one incident also occurred on Lincoln Highway, Oxford Valley and Tyburn roads, which are four-lane highways

without physical barriers dividing the north and south bound lanes, Ward said.

Some drivers who received violations on those roads told Ward that they did not stop because they had cars behind them and they feared braking suddenly would have caused an accident, he said.

The easiest way to keep kids safe at school bus crossings and reduce illegal passing incidents is for the school district to move the bus stops where the most violations are occurring, Ward said

He estimated 30% of violations are at a bus stop off Lincoln Highway in front of a newer townhouse development.

Who makes money off of the program?

The \$300 fine for the violation is divided among a participating school district, which gets \$250, the enforcing police department gets \$25, and \$25 goes to a state school bus safety grant program.

So far, ticket revenue in Bensalem has reached an estimated \$88,500; Falls and Richland Township departments have taken in an estimated \$15,000 and \$10,025, respectively.

Most of the ticket revenue generated for the school districts goes to BusPatrol, according to five-year contracts each district signed with the company. The districts pay the company out of its portion of ticket revenue.

Under the contract terms, BusPatrol is paid \$150 for each violation plus a monthly technology fee calculated based on the number of school buses in a district.

If a district doesn't take in enough ticket revenue to cover the technology fee, the balance rolls over to the next month. At the end of the contract any outstanding fees are voided, meaning the program doesn't cost the district anything, according to the contracts.

School districts keep any ticket revenue left over after paying the bus technology contractor. So far, though, Bensalem is the only school district that appears to be profiting from the new revenue stream.

Bensalem's share of ticket revenue was roughly \$885,000 for the first five months and after paying BusPatrol, it has more than \$225,000 leftover. District spokeswoman Susan Phy said leftover money will go into the general fund to offset district expenses.

Continued on next page

Quakertown Community School District won't know how much extra money it will see until the end of its contract, district spokesman Gary Wecklesblatt said.

For the first five months the district has taken in at least \$100,250 in ticket revenue, but it is still in the red to BusPatrol for at least \$17,000 in unpaid fees; Pennsbury also appears to owe BusPatrol at least \$60,000 in fees.

Drivers call enforcement program a money grab disguised as traffic safety

The potential for school districts, police departments to make money from writing violations creates public suspicion and skepticism about the motivations behind the law, according to critics.

The National Motorists Association, which advocates for drivers, believes automatic traffic enforcement is fundamentally unfair because it undermines due process rights, spokeswoman Sheila Dunn said.

Violations are mailed to the vehicle owner, often days or weeks after the incident, which hinders an ability to preserve evidence that could exonerate a person, Dunn added.

Cameras can malfunction and without an eye witness, there is no mechanism in place for a violator to face an accuser.

Unlike with regular traffic citations, vehicle owners who want to challenge a violation must file a civil motion against the police department in district court. The process requires paying a roughly \$100 filing fee, which is not refunded if the violation is upheld.

Also unlike traffic court, the burden of proof is on the vehicle owner to prove he or she was not driving when the violation occurred.

Lower Makefield resident Vic Livingston found problems with the video showing his car driving past a stopped school bus shortly after 4 p.m. on Oct. 6.

The violation said the incident happened in the 500 block of Stevens Road in Falls, but he claims that the school bus was parked on Trenton Road.

The video does not show any children on the bus or the stop arm extended, he said. His wife, who he said was driving, claims she did not see the stop arm extended.

"There is no way you could see it, let alone react to it," he added.

But rather than spend more money to fight the violation, Livingston begrudgingly paid the \$300 fine.

"It seems to me, I would hypothesize, this is more of a revenue generating scheme than protecting school bus safety or the safety of children getting off the school bus," Livingston added. "If it's not unconstitutional, it's certainly not fair."

Philadelphia resident Roy Millard admitted he was driving northbound in the left lane when his 2016 Honda passed a stopped school bus in the southbound lanes of Knights Road, a four-lane highway.

But he claimed the video angle doesn't show his viewpoint as a driver. He was paying attention to the traffic in front of him. The stop arm extended as he passed the bus so he had no time to stop.

"I didn't see that thing, it came out fast," Millard told Bensalem District Judge Michael Gallagher at a December hearing on his appeal.

Millard added that he believes that school buses should carry warning signs like with red light cameras alerting drivers they are being filmed.

"I feel as a citizen that I should be

warned that I'm being watched by a school bus. My civil liberties I feel were violated," Millard said. "I'm paranoid that now I'm being watched by a school bus."

His arguments didn't persuade Gallagher, who upheld the violation.

The same judge also upheld the violation for Evangelene Moore, who claimed she was asleep, when her Kia passed a school bus. She alleged her son was the one driving the car that morning.

But Moore isn't giving up. She found an attorney and plans to appeal the violation in Bucks County Common Pleas Court.

Her attorney, Donald Williford, said he doesn't believe owning a vehicle is enough evidence to prove that someone is driving a car.

But the way the new law shifts the burden of proof from the state to the vehicle owner makes it harder for a person to prove their innocence, especially if the person is unfamiliar with the legal system.

"It's strange to me and I've been practicing for 35 years," Williford said. "You can imagine a person without an attorney, they're totally in the dark."

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East Side Renaissance

Erie group eyes multimillion-dollar upgrades along Parade Street

By **Jim Martin**
and **Kevin Flowers**
Erie Times-News

Bishop Dwane Brock, pastor of Victory Christian Center and CEO of Eagle's Nest Leadership Corp., is excited by the development he's seeing in Erie.

He sees it on Erie's bayfront, where new hotels, restaurants and the Erie Bayfront Convention Center have taken shape over the last 15 years.

He sees it along West 12th Street, along State Street and North Park Row, where the Erie Downtown Development Corp. is in the midst of a \$100 million reimagining of the city's core.

"It's beautiful and wonderful," Brock said of efforts being made throughout the city. "But something happens when you get to Parade Street. You hit a wall. I call it the Twilight Zone."

Brock is part of a group of three local Black leaders who want to bring back Erie's east side as a part of an effort they call the East Side Renaissance.

The East Side Renaissance is led by Brock, along with Marcus Atkinson, the former executive director of the nonprofit ServErie who now teaches public speaking and enhanced reasoning to at-risk students; and Matthew Harris, a former Pennsylvania State Trooper who created "Character: Be About it," a crime-prevention program.

A tale of two cities

All three men, who shared their plans recently with the Erie Times-News, say they want to bring the same sort of energy and investment that's lifting up other Erie neighborhoods to Erie's east side, focusing initially on Parade Street between East Sixth Street and East 12th Street.

That footprint is located in the city's east bayfront neighborhood, an area that



PHOTO: GREG WOHLFORD/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

Leaders of the East Side Renaissance walk along Parade Street in Erie. From left to right are: Matthew Harris, 53, a former Pennsylvania State Trooper who created "Character Be About it," a crime-prevention program; Bishop Dwane Brock, 63, pastor of the Victory Christian Center and CEO of Eagles Nest Leadership Corp.; and Marcus Atkinson, 52, the former executive director of the nonprofit ServErie who now teaches public speaking and enhanced reasoning to at-risk students.

includes roughly 2,000 residents, 10% of whom were born outside the U.S., according to U.S. Census Bureau data. The area's median household income is just above \$19,000 a year, and 56% of residents live below federal poverty guidelines, according to census data.

In that area, census data shows, 42% of residents are white; 28% are Black, 19% are Hispanic and 10% are Asian. The median value of an owner-occupied home is \$45,400.

Enhancing Parade Street — via new investment, the rehabilitation of properties and other improvements — was a key recommendation in a wide-ranging improvement plan for Erie's east bayfront,

completed in 2020 with the assistance of Erie Mayor Joe Schember's administration.

That east bayfront plan was developed to align with Erie Refocused, the city's multi-year, comprehensive development plan.

The East Side Renaissance aims to build on that theme.

"When we look at Erie, Pennsylvania, it is nothing more than a tale of two cities," Brock said. "We have the haves and the have-nots...and most of our economic development (efforts) have been focused on the west side, the downtown district, and whatnot."

Schember said his administration is

aware of the Parade Street plan.

"We have received a cursory overview and support the idea of development in general," Schember said. "We look forward to hearing from residents and seeing the detailed plans."

Schember added that city officials expect to see significant outreach to businesses, residents and other stakeholders along Parade Street as the plan develops.

Residents want improvements

Kathy Wyrosdick wants to know more about the Eastside Renaissance as well.

But Wyrosdick, the city's director of

Continued on next page

planning and neighborhood resources, pointed out that residents living near Parade Street have told city officials they want to see significant improvements there in relation to the east bayfront neighborhood plan.

The neighborhood plan was driven by citizen input, specifically door-to-door surveying handled by city officials and a team of volunteers.

"It was apparent when we were doing the east bayfront work and collecting data that Parade Street is still a solid commercial corridor that provides valuable services to people who live in that area," Wyrosdick said. "Stabilizing and enhancing Parade Street was considered a high priority by people there."

The east bayfront plan specifically focuses on the portion of the city from Erie's waterfront south to East 15th Street, between State Street and the Bayfront Connector.

The plan suggests numerous upgrades in that area including upgraded lighting, additional security cameras, blight-reduction strategies and a new parks/trail network that highlights cultural and ethnic diversity.

History of Parade Street

There is a lot to try to restore here.

Before commerce moved west to State Street in the early 20th century, Parade Street was the original "Main Street" for the growing port town of Erie.

In the earliest days, according to Chris Magoc, professor of history at Mercyhurst University, Parade Street was part of the route from Waterford to the area around Fort Presque Isle, overlooking Presque Isle Bay and located near where the Pennsylvania Soldiers' & Sailors' Home is now, at 560 E. Third St.

The route was used by teamsters delivering goods between French Creek in Waterford and ships on Erie's bayfront, bound for other cities via Lake Erie. Parade Street got its name because parades were indeed held on the avenue for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Parade Street was once filled with businesses and activity. In the 1920s, some of the businesses along Parade Street included the Erie Carpet Co., the Bank of Erie, Finn Bros. Jewelers and the Globe Electric Company, among others. The area around East 10th and Parade streets included the Parade Street Market as well as the Isis and Wilkay theaters, all three long gone.



PHOTO: GREG WOHLFORD/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

The former East Erie Turners building, in the 800 block of Parade Street in Erie, is part of the East Side Renaissance project.

Kraus Department Store, 810 Parade St., is one of the only businesses from that time to survive. Tom Nowosielski, a fourth-generation co-owner of Kraus, welcomes the potential for new development.

His business opened in 1886 and is one of the oldest family-operated businesses in Erie.

"Hopefully things work out for these gentlemen because we definitely need some investment in this part of town," Nowosielski said. "It would be awesome."

Nowosielski said his family's business has remained on Parade Street for 136 years "because of our customer base. We love dealing with our customers. And the neighborhood needs us here. We'd like to see others come in here and give the neighborhood what it needs."

An ambitious plan

Like efforts by the EDDC, the East Side Renaissance is expected to lean heavily on real estate development.

The group, which has quietly acquired 18 properties on or near Parade Street, has ambitious plans for the east side neighborhood.

Ultimately, those plans include a new bank office, something that's missing from Erie's east side, leading to a low banking participation rate among residents.

The big-ticket wish list of the East Side Renaissance doesn't end with a bank. Brock, Atkinson and Harris aspire to develop

both a grocery store and a social club.

In both cases, they are aiming high.

Brock conjures up a vision of a high-end dining and social club that would cater to a minority clientele.

"Can you imagine having an Erie Club right here one Parade Street, where people can come... dressed and have a sense of pride?"

Their goals for a neighborhood grocery store are just as bold.

"I am not talking about a mom-and-pop store," Brock said. "We are talking about a Wegmans-style store right here on Parade Street, where the young people are taught customer service, where it's lit up, looks nice and is crisp and clean."

Nowosielski likes the idea of a bank and a grocery store.

"They are definitely needed," Nowosielski said. "Those would be good anchors for this area. Go from there, and keep (developing) one step at a time."

Brock, Atkinson and Harris, each of whom has spent his career focused on working with people — not in real estate or land development — pledge that the East Side Renaissance will reflect a focus on improving individuals' lives.

"There has to be a parallel approach," Brock said. "You can't renovate buildings without renovating people. It just doesn't work."

Details are still taking shape, but Brock,

Harris and Atkinson envision training programs that would help provide broad job readiness skills and specific training to help them become more employable.

In one way or another, all three leaders of the East Side Renaissance have long been in the business of revitalizing people.

Atkinson and Harris have worked extensively in local schools to help students develop speaking and life skills.

Brock, whose Eagle's Nest teaches financial literacy, said East Side Renaissance sees developing people and skills as being of equal importance to building new buildings and renovating old ones.

Plans to rebuild the people and the spirit of Erie's east side are expected to expand on the efforts of the Eagle's Nest, Atkinson's efforts and "Character: Be About It," a crime-prevention program created by Harris in 2012 that puts law enforcement officials into local classrooms to focus on essential character traits, such as integrity, kindness, determination, hope and self-regulation.

The program has helped nearly 1,000 students in 50 Erie-area schools.

Researchers at the Susan Hirt Hagen Center for Community Outreach, Research and Evaluation at Penn State Behrend in 2020 found that middle school students involved with Character: Be About It "endorsed more positive attitudes towards police officers and were less likely to endorse aggressive behavior" and exhibit greater self-control.

Organizers of the East Side Renaissance say their vision is built on training young people to see the possibilities.

"They have had their dreams confiscated. I know what it is to have a dream confiscated," Brock said. "I know what it is to feel lonely because I don't have aspirations about a future."

The message to kids and young adults, he said, "is that they, through hard work, staying out of trouble, going to school, getting good grades and investing back in Erie, Pennsylvania, they can become assets."

Property acquisition

The plan of the East Side Renaissance is to back this change of mindset with real estate purchases and redevelopment.

To date, organizers have either purchased or have commitments to purchase 18 parcels in their Parade Street neighborhood.

Continued on next page

While no direct paperwork links any purchases to East Side Renaissance, an entity called Eastward Ventures LLC, registered to a Michael A. Peterson, has acquired numerous properties in the neighborhood since early December, according to Erie County property records.

Those properties include:

- 307 E. Seventh St.
- 311 E. Seventh St.
- 308 E. Ninth St.
- 701-03 Parade St.
- 709 Parade St.
- 717 Parade St.
- 901 Parade St.
- 908 Parade St.
- 924 Parade St.
- 926 Parade St.
- 1108 Parade St.

The address for Eastward Ventures is listed as 1561 E. 12th St., which is the home of World Gutter Systems Inc., a business owned by Peterson.

Brock confirmed there is a connection between Eastward Ventures and his organization, but would not elaborate on Peterson's involvement. Peterson did not return telephone calls seeking comment.

"That's us. That's how we had to do it," Brock said, referring to using a different entity to make the purchases.

Business owner buy-in

Robert Vincent is paying close attention to rumblings about Parade Street revitalization.

"I want to know more," said Vincent, 64, the owner of Beez Appliances, 916 Parade St., which has operated on Parade since 1997.

The business sells and repairs reconditioned stoves, refrigerators, washers, dryers and televisions, drawing customers from as far as western New York and northeastern Ohio.

Vincent told the Erie Times-News that he has been approached several times by a local real estate professional about a possible purchase of the Beez Appliances building.

Vincent purchased 916 Parade St. in April 2000 for \$158,000, according to county property records. The nearly 17,000-square-foot building also includes a number of second-floor apartments, one of which Vincent lives in.

Most of the other apartments are vacant or used to store parts for appliances, Vincent said.

"If I'm going to sell a building that I work in and live in, I need to know more about the game plan for this neighborhood," Vincent said. "Just more about what they want to do. I'm not interested in standing in the way of progress, and I have a lot of respect for Bishop Brock."

Brock's group had hoped to buy the Beez Appliance building. But Brock said he had a change of heart after visiting with Vincent for roughly three hours on Monday.

"I was greatly impressed," Brock said. "He has a phenomenal operation and he is really filling a need within the community. I think he provides a service that is really needed," Brock said. "Some people cannot afford a new appliance. As I told him, we are not in the business of trying to take something over. We are in the business of trying to help."

Brock sees an opportunity for the East Side Renaissance to help Vincent's business even if they don't buy it.

"We are going to do some things to help him take his business to the next level — facades, paint, point the bricks and new signage," Brock said.

Harris said recently that the group is in the process of acquiring two "transformational properties on Parade Street."

He continued, "We're going to continue to develop plans for what we do with each of those buildings as we go through our developers and construction team."

Brock last week confirmed the tentative acquisition of one of those transformational properties.

"We can't disclose the amount, but we were able last week to get a verbal commitment on the East Erie Turners," Brock said.

He was referring to the former East Erie Turners Club building at 829 Parade St. The club, which was built in 1890, once had as many as 5,000 members but has been closed for about seven years. The building has been listed on Preservation Erie's 2021 list of Erie County's Most Endangered Properties.

Dave Stuck also supports what Brock, Atkinson and Harris want to do.

"Honestly, my total opinion on it is that Parade Street has been neglected in this city for years and years," said Stuck, who oversees Denny's Ice Cream Stand, 929 Parade St., as well as an adjacent carwash and self-service laundry businesses.

Stuck's family has operated businesses in

that area — including Marty's Tavern, at 1003 Parade St. — since 1976.

Stuck said he hopes the Parade Street project "includes things like more restaurants or a grocery store for the people who don't have cars and have to walk."

Stuck said he's proud that his family's businesses have become anchors in an inner-city neighborhood that has been plagued by poverty, crime, blight and other problems.

"I live in Edinboro. I tell people about our businesses and they're like, 'Oh my God, you conduct business down there?'" Stuck said.

Details yet to be announced

Brock, Harris and Atkinson envision it now as the potential site of a new upscale club.

The project's three leaders are holding back on some details of their plans for now, and they are not ready to talk about the support they have lined up.

While investment in the project is already well into seven figures, Atkinson said the most important help they have received so far takes the form of in-kind services.

Partners in the community have worked with them to understand the intricacies of financing, capital stacks and balancing "this exotic mix of state money, federal money and local money," Atkinson said.

While the principals in the East Side Renaissance don't want to talk just yet about who is supporting their work, all three stress that they have been sharing parts of their plans with people and organizations that are in a position to help.

After 42 years in the Erie community, Brock said, "I have been on the front line of dealings and I have developed quite a few community partners across the years."

Among others, the group has shared its plans with Erie Insurance, which has been the first and largest backer of the EDDC.

"The East Side Renaissance leadership team has shared with us their bold, long-term urban renewal action plan for Erie's east side," said Matthew Cummings, a spokesman for Erie Insurance.

"ESR's vision for the revitalization of the Parade Street corridor and their targeted approach to community programming are closely aligned with the Erie Refocused plan and our commitment to making downtown Erie a vibrant, equitable and inclusive place to live, work and play," he continued.

Cummings didn't specify the level of involvement that the Fortune 500 company might have.

He did say, "We have a long history of supporting community organizations and social impact projects in the neighborhoods surrounding our home office campus and look forward to furthering our collaboration in support of ESR's transformative vision in the years ahead."

Move fast and do big things

Harris, Brock and Atkinson have borrowed a concept from the EDDC. They want to shock the market with big, bold moves that take place quickly.

Harris said he envisions reasonably priced, high-quality apartments in a neighborhood transformed with new businesses and rehabilitated storefronts.

But the transformation that lives in their shared vision doesn't end with a few blocks along Parade Street and the work won't be completed in a year or two.

"The east side didn't become this overnight," Atkinson said. "This (work) will outlive us. Certainly, we have to lay a foundation for the next generation to come and keep building upon. But we have to take the bull by the horns and do something that is profound in many ways."

And by something profound, they mean bucking conventional wisdom and investing in a community that's been wanting for investment for years.

"Here you are just a few blocks away from millions upon millions upon millions of dollars of development and yet you don't feel a part of it," Atkinson said. "If we are going to do this, then it has to be done right. And we've got to be committed to it because we will go to our graves doing this work."

A six-block stretch of Parade Street is seen as the first step of this project.

Revitalization efforts are expected to move west toward Holland Street from there, Brock said.

"Then we are going to move east toward Wallace (street) and on and on and on," he said. "It's going to be truly an East Side Renaissance."

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MOUNTAIN HOME

Pennsylvania & the New York Finger Lakes

A BIG HEART IN TIOGA

You can get (almost) anything you want at Rosie's restaurant

By David O'Reilly

Her father's death broke Rosie's heart. Wide open. Tom Knapp was seventy-five when he collapsed at his Lawrenceville home in April, 2019. "It was my fiftieth birthday," Rosie Silvernail recalls. She's sitting at a table at her homestyle restaurant, Rosie's, in Tioga. "There was nothing he wouldn't do for someone in need," she says, and her eyes glisten.

Nowadays, folks across northern Tioga County say the same of Rosie. "We cannot thank you enough for your support and hard work and caring ways for Jeff and his family," reads one of the many thank-you notes taped around the front door. "You are truly a blessing," reads another.

But to fully understand Rosie's reputation for kindness, check out that coffee canister on the counter.

Donation for Christmas reads the hand-lettered sign wrapped around it. 3rd Annual Thomas Knapp Free Thanksgiving Dinner.

"After my dad died, we wanted to honor his memory," she explains. And so, after acquiring the restaurant at 6 Wellsboro Street about a year after Tom's death, (she'd been a waitress and cook for three decades) she came up with an extravagantly generous idea. Come Thanksgiving, her newly opened Rosie's would serve turkey dinner—loaded with potatoes, gravy, stuffing, cranberry sauce, and dessert—to everyone who showed up.

For free.

Her mom, three sisters, and two brothers were all in. Nieces, nephews, cousins, and in-laws, too.

"We're a close-knit family," explains her sister, Virginia Gee, of Lawrenceville. "And Dad's loss was particularly hard on Rosie."

All through that November they watched for sale-priced turkeys. They started baking cakes and pies as the big day approached, and in the wee hours of Thanksgiving day they descended on Rosie's restaurant to start roasting, mashing, seasoning, stirring—and packaging.

Why packaging? "Because we were still shut down on account of covid," Virginia explains. "We figured we'd be handing out dinners at the door for people to take home. Only they started coming inside, wanting to sit down. So,



Rosie Silvernail and her restaurant are cherished by the community they serve.

we said 'OK. Have a seat. We don't care if we get arrested.'"

"I think a lot [who came inside] were looking for company," recalls Rosie. They included people from area homeless shelters, "but also people without family nearby, many of them elderly. They didn't want to celebrate Thanksgiving alone." Soon every table was filled, and strangers, masked and unmasked, were making friends. Then came the big surprise. Many grateful diners started making donations.

"We never expected that," Rosie says, but by the time they locked the door they had about \$1,200.

What to do?

Her sister, Brenda Nagy, proposed buying Christmas presents for children whose families couldn't afford to do that. Rosie agreed, and they turned to the local Salvation Army's Angel Tree for the wish lists of eight or nine families in the Northern Tioga School District, where the Knapps were schooled and where most of her customers hail from. Armed with each child's Christmas wish, they scoured stores and websites to buy presents for all.

"We're bargain shoppers," says Rosie's sister, Joanne

Continued on next page

Knapp-Elvidge, down from Elmira this afternoon. Brenda, of Middlebury Center, who's been in the kitchen making tomorrow's macaroni and cheese, chimes in.

"All the money goes right to kids," she says. And "every dime" dropped into that donation canister will subsidize this year's Thanksgiving feast, says Rosie, with all proceeds then going for Christmas gifts and children's needs.

"We do all this because, back in the day, we were the poor kids," Rosie explains. Their father had health issues, and the family got by on his disability payments. "I was one of those little girls who didn't have a lot, but every Christmas American Legion Post 235 would get us brand-new gifts. It kind of sticks with you."

Last year's free Thanksgiving dinner drew three hundred guests and raised \$2,500. The sisters bought Christmas gifts for children in fifteen anonymous families, and the surplus still provides shoes and coats for needy youngsters.

Just then, a voice pipes up from an adjacent table.

"Did Rosie tell you that during covid she was feeding

children through the window?" asks Helen Brensinger, a registered nurse from Mansfield. Rosie's embarrassed, but explains that in the early months of the pandemic she gave away hot dogs, fries, and mac and cheese to Tioga's middle school kids.

"You deserve recognition," says Helen. "They were lined up at the door. You're a sweetheart—and a good cook."

The kindnesses keep on coming. Breakfasts are free for dads on Father's Day, for moms on Mother's Day, and coffee is on the house every Tuesday.

"It's my way of giving back to my customers," Rosie says. Stop by, and you'll find Elmer Huel and his retired buddies lingering at a table. Their waitress cleared the breakfast dishes a while ago, but there's no rush. It's like family here.

"My wife passed away a year and three months ago," recalls Elmer, ninety-one, "and Rosie would not let me pay for a meal for weeks after. Every time I went to pay my bill, the waitress would say 'Rosie's got this.' Every time."

Brian Fish lauds Rosie's hiring of local homeless and

people with autism and developmental delays as dishwashers—one of whom has drawn an "I ♡ Rosie's" that's posted over the door. Gene Farman, white-bearded and stout, shows photos of himself playing Santa for the children's Christmas party she hosted here last year. And Don Treat marvels at how "just last week the Masons were cooking a chicken dinner for a fundraiser, and she showed up with all this food she made. Wouldn't take any money for it. She said 'This is my donation.'"

Minutes later, a middle-aged woman steps inside and asks for Rosie. The two chat, Rosie nods, and the woman grasps Rosie's hands in gratitude.

"My mother had a bleeding stroke," Susan Plaza of Elkland explains, and Rosie just agreed to help raise funds for her travel expenses to Geisinger Medical Center.

"She's got a big heart," says Susan. "A very big one."

Award-winning journalist David O'Reilly was a writer and editor for thirty-five years at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he covered religion for two decades—davidcoreilly@gmail.com.

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Life is full of emotion.



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PN PHILADELPHIA NEIGHBORHOODS

Crime: Without targeted support, youth are left behind

By Natalie Kerr

There's a neighborhood in West Philadelphia called "The Black Bottom."

It's the lower end of West Philadelphia, hence the name, from 33rd Street and 40th to Lancaster Avenue and Curie Boulevard. The population has historically been predominantly Black, though gentrification has now largely forced out Black residents.

The area that remains is a tough place to live. Cement and asphalt choke out trees, and McDonalds and liquor stores vastly outpace supermarkets and parks. To Paul T. Jackson, it's a "raging ghetto." But it's also his childhood home.

Youth programs like writing and poetry workshops, recreation centers and after school programs where Jackson spent time with peers and trusted adults shaped his life dramatically, pulling him towards his creativity and talent for mentoring, and away from destructive paths like drugs or street gangs.

Now he works at Frontline Dads, a program on Broad Street near Dauphin that serves youth living in difficult circumstances. They nurture children's passions in a safe and supportive environment.

"We got two choices in society," Jackson said. "We can continue to support and build organizations like this, or we can allow the decay to happen and everybody who suffers as youth are traumatized. What happens when they grow to become young men, young women, and they tear out other people or at least become reserved?"

Youth programs are pivotal intervention points for children who are vulnerable to cycles of violence and crime. But these organizations struggle to make headway against the systemic poverty and racism plaguing communities and are stymied by the lack of coordination with other local programs.

But, organizers are adamant that nothing is impossible. The kids they work with are smart, driven, creative and resilient, and when given spaces that accommodate them, they flourish.

Life for kids in Philadelphia

In the early 2000s, Barbara Ferman, a political science professor at Temple University, started the University Community Collaborative to use Temple's research to benefit the surrounding community.

Ferman wants to make sure that young people, especially those of color, are heard. So she called the first program "VOICES"; and gave youth tools to become outspoken advocates for issues affecting them and their communities.

"We cannot listen to young people, because they're young, and especially Black and brown, because we have all these stereotypes about their abilities," Ferman said. "They want their voice to be heard. Throughout all of our programs, we provide a space for them to speak, and not just token speaking, because we do listen to them."

Phoenix Glover, a sophomore at The Workshop School in West Philadelphia and a participant in POPPIN, a UCC program



PHOTO: NATALIE KERR

Two brothers toss tennis balls against a wall to entertain themselves after school at Frontline Dads.

teaching high school students media skills, is struggling to adapt to sudden changes at her school.

Each morning students walk through metal detectors manned by security guards and have their phones confiscated until the end of the day, Glover said. The change is a response to students bringing weapons to school, but the new rules

make Glover feel less safe, because without her phone she can't contact help or her parents in an emergency.

Glover's frustrated that no one consulted or warned the students before making changes, which are time consuming and intense.

Continued on next page

“They didn’t tell us that this was happening,” Glover said. “They sent an email a day before, knowing that the students don’t really check their emails as much.”

Schools are important social welfare agencies; they provide space for voting, celebrations, medical care and feeding children healthy meals, said Jonathan Zimmerman, a history of education professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

But school has changed dramatically as buildings evolved from one-room school houses, to looking factory-esque, to now resembling hospitals, Zimmerman said. Schools are also now fulfilling more roles without necessarily seeing increased resources.

“We’re asking them to do everything from, attend to people’s health and their diet, to teach them about the evils of racism, and most of all, to prepare them for a workforce that’s changing radically,” Zimmerman said.

Programs like sex, drug and alcohol education and gun safety drills are meant to solve social ills, but other public institutions are better equipped to confront issues youth are facing, Zimmerman said.

This is especially true when children aren’t going to school regularly, because of work, insufficient transportation, caring for a sick relative or homelessness, Zimmerman added.

“School simply can’t do all the things we expect it to do,” Zimmerman said. “We think of it, many of us, as terrible, as inefficient, because we’ve overloaded the expectations.”

Children can also receive mental health care from school counselors, but for kids from trauma backgrounds, this likely is not adequate.

Trauma can stem from intense and sudden events, like a car crash, from living in communities affected by violence and poverty or inherited through previous generations enduring racism, said Lauren DellaCava, senior director of Complex Care Management for Community Behavioral Health at the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services.

CBH works with the Philadelphia School District on evidence-based therapy, trauma-informed care and educating teachers and parents about child behavior and responses, DellaCava said.

“If you have a child who has self-regulation issues and they’re in a really chaotic



Stormy Kelsey discusses storyboarding for video with POPPYN participants.

PHOTO: NATALIE KERR

classroom, it’s going to be really hard for them to regulate,” DellaCava said. “Best practice is working with the caregivers as well so that a child is set up for success.”

Kids can also experience traumatic events at school, with annual school shootings and active shooter drills becoming more frequent.

Since January, there have already been 616 mass shootings in the United States and more than 1500 kids aged 0-17 killed by guns, according to the Gun Violence Archive. Philadelphia has reported more than 2,000 gun violence victims in 2022, with young Black men as the most affected.

Ruth Abaya, attending physician at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and the program manager for the Philadelphia Department of Public Health’s Injury Prevention Program, has seen young patients with severe panic and anxiety after mass shootings at other schools.

“They know they’re living in a world where somewhere else, someone who looks like them and is their age got shot at school,” Abaya said. “How are they supposed to feel about going to school? How is their little mind supposed to process that?”

Gun violence is impacting after-school activities too.

Recent shootings affected Overbrook High School in West Philadelphia, with four students injured on Nov. 23 shortly after

dismissal, and Roxborough High School on Sept. 27 when 4 students suffered injuries and a fifth was shot and killed after a football practice.

Naeemah Morton is in 11th grade at Carver High School on 16th Street and Norris, and goes to football games with her friends at schools like Bonner Prendergast High School in Upper Darby.

Several games ended early because of fights or claims that someone had a gun, Morton said. She’s pretty sure those claims were false, but didn’t stay to find out.

“This is how Philly is now, everyone’s on alert,” Morton said. “I just know, when I see one person run, I run too.”

Hope for the future

Many young participants don’t expect to live past the age of 25 because of the gun violence they witness on a regular basis, said Aaron Wells, executive director of North Philly Project, an organization supporting North Philadelphia youth and families.

“That is such a dire outlook when you’re 14, 15 years old,” Wells said. “When you start to ask questions, ‘What do you dream about? What are the things you want to succeed? What do you think is best for the community?’ they’ll tell you things like, ‘for older people to talk to us, to see us.’”

Kids living in underserved neighborhoods can feel like no one cares about them or their community, and will likely act in ways

that reflect that outlook, Ferman said. Community investments in infrastructure and maintenance indicate to people that they have value.

For Jackson, growing up in a neighborhood where he constantly heard gunshots, lost loved ones to violence and witnessed violence and death taught him that community needs get ignored, even by those who are supposed to help, like the police.

It’s difficult for kids in those environments to trust people and accept support, so Frontline Dads workers are trained to understand psychological barriers and make kids feel part of a caring community, said Rob Lynch, a staff member and former participant at Frontline Dads. Part of that is reinforcing to youth that their lives have purpose, even if their past was difficult.

“Just because you get wrapped up in that nonsense or whatever you want to call it, it doesn’t mean that’s the end of your life because you made the wrong decision,” Lynch said.

Kamryn Contee, a volunteer at Frontline Dads, encourages kids to express their emotions through journaling, painting and one-on-one conversations, she said.

Having a feminine presence softens the toughness of male-dominated spaces and shows that it’s okay to be vulnerable, Contee added.

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Young Black men are constantly told to hide their emotions and therefore struggle to respond healthily to challenging situations, said Tina Collins, the founder and director of the Show Me The Way Foundation, a fine arts and recreation youth organization.

“It’s okay to be angry, we all experience all those emotions,” Collins said. “But if you don’t know how to vocalize and determine and identify those emotions, then your first reaction of course is going to be spontaneous.”

Kids’ conflict resolution skills atrophied during the COVID-19 pandemic when they couldn’t go to school and learn interpersonal skills, said Aisha Winfield, program director at the Blues Babe Foundation, a nonprofit that shares a space with Frontline Dads to provide after-school and summer programming.

Kids who experience trauma often don’t highly value their own lives or their peers’ lives, and don’t understand why violence isn’t a legitimate way to resolve conflicts, Winfield said.

Adults need to be better listeners and role models for working through difficult situations and the emotions that accompany them, otherwise kids will never learn healthy conflict resolution, Collins said.

Positive role models expose children and teens to opportunities and reinforce that they are capable, said Lekeisha Eubanks-Evans, senior director of employment and workforce programs at the North Philadelphia department of Project HOME, an organization fighting poverty and homelessness.

Having role models who are also Black, indigenous or people of color helps children identify themselves with success, Eubanks-Evans said. People from nontraditional backgrounds, like those who didn’t attend college, went to trade school or got a job through a union, show students the options available to them.

“When you ask kids when they’re five or six years old, ‘what do you want to be?’ You hear like the same five answers, a nurse, a doctor, a lawyer...” Eubanks-Evans said. “These are the things that they know, they haven’t been exposed to anything else.”

Winfield holds professional and creative workshops for kids at the foundation so they can find their passions and learn to value their lives.



PHOTO: NATALIE KERR

School District of Philadelphia buses wait for students on Broad Street near Diamond on Nov. 5.

But often, the best thing people can do is to listen, Winfield said.

“Being a really good listener and giving them the space – whether it’s to ramble, talk about their dreams, their ideas, how their school day was, just being able to listen,” Winfield said. “As a parent, I know that you’re working and on the go a lot of times, so it takes a village, and it’s a community effort.”

A sickness in the system

Programs at North Philly Project vary, from family health and nutrition, to STEM and reading comprehension, to youth mentorship. But in every need there’s a commonality: generational poverty.

“We see the issues, all categories, whether it’s education, whether it’s crime, social injustice, whether it’s criminal justice, health disparities, wherever it is, whatever it is, we saw as an underlying factor, generational poverty,” Wells said.

The U.S. Census recorded a decreased percentage of people in poverty in Philadelphia every year for the last decade.

But this statistic alone is misleading because in Philadelphia poverty is highly concentrated in neighborhoods that experience systemic disinvestment, said Caterina Roman, a criminal justice professor at Temple.

“You look at the whole city, we’re decreasing on poverty, but as soon as you go neighborhood by neighborhood, neighborhoods are getting more segregated and going into deeper poverty,” Roman said.

Less than 15 percent of the population living in Zip Codes 19128 and 19118 – the Roxborough and Chestnut Hill neighborhoods, respectively – lives under the poverty line, whereas the poverty rate can exceed 45 percent in 19121, the Zip Code encompassing part of Temple’s campus, according to Pew Charitable Trusts’ 2021 State of the City report.

Increasing financial stability, access to healthy food and quality education preempts violence by reducing the problems that people use violence to solve, Jackson said. Violence prevention

often starts much later, with individuals affected by gun violence or exhibiting concerning behaviors, rather than supporting overall community development.

North Philly Project exposes people to new ideas and opportunities so that they aren’t drawn to violence in the first place, Wells said. If violence is all that is modeled to them, they will feel increased motivation to use a gun.

“Prevention for us doesn’t start with the gun, it starts with the motivation to pick up the gun,” Wells said. “What am I emulating, what am I seeing, what is being displayed to me? How can I show you something different than what you saw on the street corner, or what you heard in the basement or what you saw in the schoolyard?”

Helping people with basic needs, like buying food or diapers, ending harmful relationships and finding a safe place to stay, is a central focus at the city’s Office

Continued on next page

of Violence Prevention, said Executive Director Shondell Revell.

This earns OVP workers community trust, identifies fundamental community problems and reduces people's likelihood of turning to violence or crime to make ends meet, Revell said.

"You can't write policy if you don't understand the situation or the problem," Revell said. "You have to have that micro work, you have to have the boots on the ground, you have to have a day-to-day grind, you have to be able to go into a community and actually walk the street."

There aren't enough pathways to good paying jobs, Eubanks-Evans said. Kids are struggling to get quality education for college acceptance or to pass apprenticeship exams for unions and trade schools, or to earn more than the minimum wage.

Youth often start side hustles – legal and illegal – to supplement their income, Williams said. Their entrepreneurial skills are not being nurtured or directed towards positive outlets.

"Sometimes it's out of necessity, sometimes it's out of trends and following other people," Williams said. "Nonetheless, if we can take that skill, that ingenuity, that drive, and put it in a positive place, hopefully it can benefit everybody."

Approaches to crime must be holistic and focused on public health, which addresses factors leading to violence rather than focusing on crime and policing alone, Revell said.

It also means acknowledging the specific risk factors and opportunity structures at each stage of life, because the same intervention that worked for one individual won't necessarily work for another, Roman said.

Violence prevention and exposure to paths besides violence needs to happen early in a person's life, Roman said. Kids become disillusioned and frustrated, making them vulnerable to destructive decisions like joining a street gang to find belonging, protection and validation.

"We have to be thinking about preventing the younger children from getting to that point that they've already turned to these groups, because once they're in them and hanging out with antisocial peers, the kids that are maybe more prone to violence or have used violence, it's really tough to get kids out," Roman said.

Someone's motive can help identify

effective violence interventions, but should be combined with addressing community-wide drivers leading people to crime, otherwise, cycles will be repeated, Abaya said.

Those systemic problems are in part why increased incarceration doesn't necessarily reduce violence, Abaya added.

"There are absolutely circumstances where someone has done something extremely harmful to someone else, and there needs to be criminal justice responses to that," Abaya said. "But we also need to recognize that others will come up in their place if the soil is the same."

People don't suddenly decide to commit crime, they are gradually integrated into a lifestyle of violence and are often victims before they are perpetrators, said Marla Davis Bellamy, director of Philadelphia CeaseFire, a public health violence intervention program based out of Temple's Lewis Katz School of Medicine.

"Basically, we're talking about the same population," Davis Bellamy said. "It behooves us to not only look at the shooters, but also the victims, because typically they too are caught up in the lifestyle. But we don't see it early on, we don't respond early enough."

Many perpetrators are contacted by systems meant to disrupt violence before they commit a crime, but systemic barriers can reduce efficacy, Abaya said.

Even if people are recruited to programs, they may not accept because of work restraints or distrust in the system, or if they do join, they may not complete the program or have proper support once they do, Abaya said.

"If we want to not be telling the same story about violence, 20 years from now, we have to do the hard work of discussing that we need to transform the environment," Abaya said. "[That's] like the hardest thing to do, right? But it's the essential thing."

Change narratives to change outcomes

Context about root causes and solutions for gun violence is critically absent from conversations about crime, especially in media, said Jessica Beard, associate professor of surgery at the Lewis Katz School of Medicine, trauma surgeon at Temple University Hospital and director of

research for the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting.

When people view reporting that paints a shooting as a single event, known as episodic crime reports, they are more likely to blame victims for violence, but when people view reporting that has context, they are more likely to blame social structures, Beard said.

Beard led a March 2022 study with 26 trauma unit patients to learn their perspectives towards how media covered their shooting and their attitude toward overall media coverage of gun violence. The survey, completed in conjunction with The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting, Penn's School of Nursing, Temple's School of Medicine and Lehigh Journalism and Communications, found largely negative attitudes because of inadequate context provided about victims beyond the injuries they suffered.

"These episodic crime narratives can feel dehumanizing when you're the victim of gun violence, we also found that none of those patients that we interviewed had ever been approached by a journalist for an interview," Beard said.

Media coverage of subway crime has made Ameia Bess, a senior at Mastery Charter School Pickett Campus in Germantown and POPPIN participant, feel unsafe when she travels to Philadelphia Community College for dual enrollment classes. Especially as a woman, she travels quickly and doesn't interact with other passengers.

"All the stories you hear on the news, I've never been affected by it personally, but when you hear about someone that was the same age as you, it kind of makes you think, 'okay, that could have been me if I was there at this time,'" Bess said. "It puts me on edge."

Stormy Kelsey, the POPPIN program coordinator, worries that the media uses fear mongering to increase ratings and focuses disproportionately on negative events, they said.

POPIN was created in 2011 as a response to negative coverage of Black youth in Philadelphia and on national news networks that depicted them as violent criminals needing police intervention, Kelsey said.

"They said 'you know what, that's not representative of all of us, and where are the news cameras when we're doing good things in our community?'" Kelsey said.

Though POPPIN covers serious issues like youth homelessness, it is still a positive outlet for youth to create authentic narratives about their experiences and the things they struggle with or are worried about, Kelsey said.

Changing media coverage and who controls narratives is central to making people feel safe, understood and celebrated, Wells said. This is a critical starting point to creating safer, happier and healthier communities.

"Can't we show the beautiful street instead of always showing the street is torn down and with the holes and the trash on it?" Wells said. "Because that's not the whole story. We begin to emphasize our strengths versus our deficits, it begins to change the atmosphere."

Greater than the sum of its parts

When Collins first became block captain on 32nd Street and Newkirk, her neighbors weren't happy. She was new to the neighborhood and hadn't earned her stripes yet.

People were initially wary of her ideas, like starting a paid youth clean-up group called "Newkirk Junior Street Keepers" and organizing block parties with music, waterslides and DJs. But her persistence paid off.

"People started talking to each other, we started interacting," Collins said. "It literally has been transformed into a village."

Everyday Collins feels the impact of what cooperation can do, and she knows that if block captains combined forces in the same way, they could make a huge difference in their community.

Collins feels limited by the geographical boundaries of her block and disappointed that block captains don't communicate. She is creating a virtual meeting schedule for block captains to discuss residents' needs and their projects to unify and support each other, she said.

This is a problem affecting organizations at every level in Philadelphia. Violence prevention work is institutionally siloed into departments and individual organizations, making it difficult to connect people to appropriate resources and creating a sense of competition for funding.

When leaders at Project HOME connect with other organizations, they sometimes feel a sense of mistrust from fears that if

other programs share their ideas, Project HOME will receive the funding they need or lure participants away, Eubanks-Evans said.

But Project HOME can't provide every resource a person needs, so networking with other local organizations is vital for families to access the right services, Eubanks-Evans said.

"We just need to do a lot more of trusting our partners in this area and this community of resources and utilizing each other in that way," Eubanks-Evans added. "There is this huge mistrust. Everybody's going for the same funding and just afraid that somebody's gonna steal their funding or steal their students."

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that funding for violence prevention and community programs tends to come all at once after high-profile events, like a mass shooting, then peters off as focus shifts elsewhere, Winfield said.

A comprehensive network of Philadelphia organizations that both leaders and participants can access would streamline communication, increase support and reduce how overworked people are, Eubanks-Evans said.

A unified resource network would also increase recognition of trauma or concerning behaviors early enough to be addressed before a person becomes involved in violence, DellaCava said. People usually need multiple resources to fully address the problems they are facing, and relegating them to only one resource will be inadequate.

"We cannot provide behavioral health services and then all of a sudden, that means that this person has sustainable employment and this person is reunited with their child and this person has the appropriate education," DellaCava said. "All of those things require the services systems to work together."

Even schools are impacted. There are 13,000 local school districts in the U.S.,

creating massive inequalities in people's access to high-quality education, Zimmerman said.

Ultimately, the people most harmed by this disconnect between resources are those in need, Davis Bellamy said.

"I firmly believe that we could probably save more lives, we could do things that would really impact change in terms of the city, if in fact, we work closely together and with one another," Davis Bellamy said.

CeaseFire began remediating this issue in 2020 by starting a collaboration-based public health service called "The Philly Hub" to bring coordinated care from city agencies and social service organizations to people in crisis, according to a brief.

About 70 organizations, like schools, mental health counselors, substance abuse treatment centers and housing programs, meet every week to assess specific cases and determine the best interventions for each person or family, Davis Bellamy said. It ensures that support is holistic and targeted, and that people aren't being left behind by the system.

"We've developed friendships and all of this out of this experience," Davis Bellamy said. "I know now without a shadow of a doubt that this aid can be done. People can work together, it just makes life a lot easier, quicker, faster."

Nurturing strengths

Evans-Eubanks has learned to let things that are out of her control go.

Though the school system and the government complicate their work, beyond being advocates, they can't change those systems. What they can do is use the strengths and resources they do have to help as many people as possible, Eubanks-Evans said.

"You just can't focus on that way, it makes you feel defeated, and makes you feel like there's nothing you can do to

affect change, and that just is not true," Eubanks-Evans said.

Kids can feel similarly when they struggle consistently in school or aren't achieving goals as easily as peers with more support, Eubanks-Evans said. They need someone to validate their abilities and celebrate their successes, know that they are active participants in creating their program plan and that program leaders are fully committed to helping them achieve that plan.

This reduces the shame people feel asking for help and encourages open communication of their experiences and needs, Eubanks-Evans said.

To Wells, it's not about giving youth a voice, it's about showing them they already have one. Kids have a lot to say, and when they aren't heard, they may lash out to get the attention they need. But treating youth with respect and care empowers them to think about their future and the strengths that they have, Wells said.

This looks like giving them the information and opportunities they need to achieve their goals, which are often withheld from people of color, Wells added.

"We cannot wait for systems that have failed us to this point, as if next week they're going to not fail us," Wells said. "But if we could give information on not just where to go get help, where you can help, where you can plug in, that's changing the mindset from deficit based to strength based. Everybody brings something to the table."

Punitive systems fail to see people who are currently part of the problem as a way towards solutions, Revell said. Several people working at OVP used to be involved with crime but now spend time in their communities, where they have massive credibility, bringing others into the fold.

"You have to have individuals who are really indigenous to that community at the table, because they're the ones that have

the solution, they're the ones that really understand what's going on," Revell said.

Especially in a city like Philadelphia where each neighborhood has a strong identity, approaches have to be tailored to those living there and what changes they want to see, Ferman said. Outreach workers need to resemble those communities – sending white people to tell Black and brown people how to live is offensive and ineffective.

Even in small ways, people can't be presumptuous about the support other people need, Winfield added. She'll leave out books or games for kids at the foundation, and instead they will draw with chalk for hours.

"As much as you try to plan and try to think about what they need, their creativity is incredible, and they can do more with some of the small things that we figure are kind of insignificant," Winfield said.

Kelsey is grateful for the students who come to POPPIN twice a week, often traveling long distances after full days at school, they said. Their dedication reaffirms the need for spaces where youth can be vulnerable and share their stories.

There aren't enough institutions that value and respect youth voices and recognize their ability to strengthen communities, Kelsey said. Taking a step back and letting young people show what they're capable of is an important part of the culture at youth programs.

"Having that vulnerability and humility and knowing when you can say that you're wrong or that you don't know, you don't have to always be the all-knowing person in the room, that shows a respect for young people," Kelsey said. "It's your story to tell and like letting them have ownership over their story – I think that's pretty unique to youth programming specifically."

Please email any questions or concerns about this story to: editor@philadelphianeighbors.com.

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TIMES LEADER

115 YEARS STRONG

‘We just want justice,’ say family of disabled man who died after punch



TAYLOR FAMILY PHOTO

Joshua Taylor is seen in a family photo. The 32-year-old Hanover Township man died after being punched in the stomach in August, 2022. No one has been charged in his death, which was ruled a homicide following an autopsy.

2022 death of Joshua Taylor, 32, was ruled homicide by coroner, but no one has been charged

By Roger DuPuis
and Hannah Simerson
rdupuis@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE — To Joshua Taylor, “everybody was nice.”

“He was a 32-year-old guy, but he was very childlike, with a childlike enthusiasm for everything,” uncle Jim Kinsman said of Taylor.

Kinsman and wife Brittany recalled Taylor, who had a mild intellectual disorder and a severe speech impediment, as a trusting soul who loved his life, and loved his job at Vesuvio’s pizzeria and bar on North Main Street, where he worked as a fry cook and cleaner.

That’s where a stomach punch from a fellow employee in the early hours of Aug. 26, 2022 led to Taylor’s death later that day. Following an autopsy, the Luzerne County Coroner ruled Taylor’s death a homicide, caused by “blunt abdominal trauma.”

Nearly a year later, no one has been charged in the case. Family members, who say the incident was captured on surveillance video, want to know why no one has been held accountable for the punch that ended Taylor’s life.

They believe the Wilkes-Barre Police Department failed to properly investigate Taylor’s death. They want to know the status of a complaint they filed last December against city police Detective Joseph Sinavage, who was assigned to the case, which was later transferred to the state Attorney General’s office.

They say Sinavage was dismissive of their

concerns and wrongly portrayed Taylor as “a tough guy looking for fights, who got what was coming to him.”

And they believe the case should be referred to federal authorities, given that they say Taylor was routinely bullied, up until the time of his death — including by the individual who punched him.

“He was targeted because he was disabled. That would be a federal hate crime,” Jim Kinsman said in an interview Friday. “I would love for someone to invite the Department of Justice to look into this case. The only reason why Josh is dead is because of his disability.”

Kinsman also questions whether race was a factor: Taylor was Black, while the person believed to have punched him is white.

No comment from city

Members of Taylor’s family, including the Kinsmans, attended Thursday night’s City Council meeting to air their concerns before Mayor George Brown and council members. Their remarks are described in more detail below.

“No one cares more about special needs people than myself, but I don’t have an answer for you tonight, other than I feel your grief,” Brown said to Taylor’s family at the meeting.

The Times Leader reached out to Brown and Police Chief Joseph Coffay on Friday seeking comment on the family’s concerns regarding Sinavage and the investigation.

Continued on next page

The newspaper received only the following statement from Brown:

"As you are aware, the criminal investigation has been referred to the State Attorney General's Office at the request of the Luzerne County District Attorney.

"The City of Wilkes-Barre's internal review of the complaint filed related to the actions of a city detective has been assigned to a supervisory Lieutenant and is an open and ongoing process.

"Based on the foregoing, there will not be any comment or interview regarding the incident."

Separately, a message sent to a member of the Vesuvio's ownership team on Friday was not immediately answered.

Retracing Taylor's steps

A 2008 Hanover Area High School graduate, Taylor was the son of Jack Taylor and Susan Kinsman-Taylor, who is Jim Kinsman's sister. He was the elder brother of twin sisters, Jacqueline and Jessica.

According to his obituary, Taylor also attended Luzerne County Community College, and had a passion for the culinary arts.

Kinsman on Friday said Taylor's parents are still traumatized by their son's death and find it difficult to speak publicly, which is why he and his wife agreed to be interviewed and speak on their behalf.

"They really haven't had a chance to heal," Kinsman said of Taylor's parents.

Even their Hanover Township home carries painful memories — that's where the mortally injured Taylor was dropped off after the attack, vomiting and in pain.

Taylor's parents discovered him unresponsive the following morning; he was transported to an area hospital where he died.

"They lived with us for the next six months," Kinsman said. "It was only very recently they moved back into the house."

Jim Kinsman said Taylor hadn't been working that Thursday night last August, but went to Vesuvio's to pick up some money he was owed for work and have some drinks.

"He went there to get it (the money) and ended up hanging out," Kinsman said.

The Kinsmans say there is video of the punching incident in the early hours of Friday, Aug. 26 which led to Taylor's death, but that they have not seen it, despite requests to police — and despite reports



ROGER DUPUIS | TIMES LEADER

Jim Kinsman and wife Brittany are seen with documents related to the 2022 death of nephew Joshua Taylor. "If they did everything by the book, then just prove it to us," Jim Kinsman said of the investigation by Wilkes-Barre police. "But I don't believe they did. That's my feeling and I'm not afraid to say that."

that it had been circulating in the community.

"We only know what the video shows from what we've been told," Brittany Kinsman said.

The family has been told by the state Attorney General's Office that they have secured the tape, which is a source of relief, she added.

The Times Leader reached out to the AG's office with questions about the case. A spokesperson replied that they could only confirm receiving the referral and could not provide any further comment.

The Kinsmans say after Taylor was punched, no one came to his aid.

"He was knocked to the floor, where people stepped over him like he was garbage," Jim Kinsman said.

"Joshua was given a ride home by a Vesuvio's staff member that dropped him off on the sidewalk," he added. "They took a video of Joshua vomiting before driving away — presumably to humiliate him online as they often did."

Kinsman paused and shook his head before continuing.

"Josh was abused, man. He was abused," he said. "These people took advantage of him."

Brittany Kinsman said the pattern of abuse went back years, including by the man believed to have punched him.

That man "knew him his whole life, knew he had this disability, and was one of the people who bullied him his whole life," she said.

Initial investigation

Joshua Taylor died on a Friday, as noted. Jim Kinsman said he and other family members were present and listening on speakerphone when Sinavage called Taylor's mother the following Sunday evening to discuss the case.

"He told her that Joshua was not hit that hard — that it was a short punch. He told her to stop watching Bruce Lee videos on YouTube. He said the guys at Vesuvio's are all good guys and that they were just playing around," Kinsman said.

"We just couldn't believe what we were hearing," Kinsman said. "It caused rips and internal bleeding. You can't tell me it wasn't a hard punch. And regardless, you're hitting a disabled person in the stomach."

"They kept trying to downplay it, saying there was no intent, that it was just goofing around," Brittany Kinsman added. "Even if it was goofing around, you still need to be held responsible for your actions if you killed somebody."

Weeks later, the family was presented with the detective's report, which they claim painted Taylor in a negative light.

"He painted Joshua like a tough guy looking for fights and got what was coming to him," said Jim Kinsman.

"He portrayed Joshua and his killer as if they were very best friends when, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Joshua was bullied his whole life by this guy."

The Kinsmans also said that Sinavage became angry when informed that Taylor's death had been ruled a homicide by the coroner's office.

"Sinavage on the phone was pissed off when we told him that the medical examiner used the word homicide," Kinsman said, adding that the detective told the family "just because it's homicide doesn't mean it's criminal homicide."

When Taylor's mother became upset that charges weren't being filed, Sinavage threatened to arrest her for harassment, Kinsman added.

Taylor's family filed a complaint against the detective with the city on Dec. 20, 2022. Kinsman said he and Taylor's parents were in the room with Chief Coffay for that meeting.

They said the chief typed up their complaint, and told them he was going to assign a new lieutenant to the case. They're not sure whether that happened. Kinsman did say that Coffay seemed angry when they expressed a desire to continue with the complaint even after he told them a different detective would be assigned.

Transferred to AG's office

On Feb. 1, Susan-Kinsman Taylor received a letter from Luzerne County District Attorney Sam Sanguedolce.

The DA indicated that his office had requested the state Attorney General's office to assume jurisdiction of the case given

Continued on next page

“your dissatisfaction with the Wilkes-Barre City Police’s investigation and our office’s unavoidable inability to obtain certain information potentially relevant here ...”

Sanguedolce on Saturday confirmed to the Times Leader that family members insisted on the existence of evidence which neither his office nor city police could find.

He said he could not comment on the evidence, but also has said he does not believe WBPD was hiding anything.

The DA went on to say that the AG’s office can use a grand jury to subpoena evidence and compel witnesses to testify. While his office also has those powers, the county does not currently have a grand jury, the DA said.

Jim Kinsman said there has not been much communication since the AG’s office took over, but there has been some — and signs of activity.

“We felt it wasn’t being investigated by the city,” he said. “You know when somebody has accessed (Josh’s) medical records, because (his mother) has to approve it. No one did before. Once the Attorney General got the case someone actually did.”

Visit to City Council

Taylor’s family wants to make sure his case stays in the public’s mind. His death was the only homicide in Wilkes-Barre in 2022, and the only unsolved homicide for the year in Luzerne County.

They set up a table at the local NAACP’s Juneteenth Celebration in Wilkes-Barre last month. They also have a website, <https://realworldfeminist.com/justiceforjosh>.

And on Thursday, they went to City Council. In attendance were the Kinsmans, as well as Taylor’s parents and sisters.

There, Jim Kinsman read a statement — parts of which have been incorporated above — his wife read a letter from the local NAACP, and sister Jessica also spoke.

“We all had an underlying fear that a joke



HANNAH SIMERSON | TIMES LEADER

Jessica Taylor speaks before Wilkes-Barre City Council in July 2023, urging city officials to investigate the death of her brother, Joshua Taylor, who died after being punched by a fellow employee in August 2022 at Vesuvio’s in Wilkes-Barre.

would go too far and Josh would pay the ultimate price — and that’s exactly what happened,” said Jessica Taylor.

She described her brother as having “the innocence and gullibility of a third grader.

“Bullying was something that he and my family endured his entire life,” she said. “People could humiliate Joshua and he wouldn’t know. He wouldn’t realize it.”

Whatever prompted the punch, she told council someone needs to be held accountable for its consequences.

“You can’t just playfully shoot a gun in someone’s direction, accidentally shoot them, and say, ‘I didn’t mean it. I was just playing around,’” Taylor said.

“The same is true for punching a disabled person in the stomach. They can’t defend themselves — it’s murder,” she continued.

Jim Kinsman didn’t pull any punches, telling council and the mayor he felt the

city’s investigation amounted to “a cover-up” by Sinavage, who he said tried to “close the case in two days.”

“I feel sorry for what happened, but I will say this: our police department is doing what they can do best. There’s no sweeping under the table or trying to brush it away because it’s white on Black,” responded City Council Chairman Mike Belusko, who said he knew Taylor personally.

“I know the police department, and they’re true men and women in blue, but I hope and pray there will be an answer to this,” Belusko continued.

Other members also weighed in.

“Hopefully there will be some information and justice coming to you,” said Councilman John Marconi, noting that the family’s presentation was “powerful and moving.”

“I trust we’ll get the answers for you, and I pray that you get justice for Josh,” said an emotional Councilman Tony Brooks.

Another media outlet had reported that Brown planned to meet with family members on Friday. City officials did not respond to a Times Leader question asking if any such meeting took place.

Kinsman on Friday said he was not aware of any such meeting.

The emotion was still raw in his voice when he spoke about the council meeting with the Times Leader 24 hours later.

“If they did everything by the book, then just prove it to us,” he said of Wilkes-Barre police. “But I don’t believe they did. That’s my feeling and I’m not afraid to say that.”

“We want answers,” his wife added. “We aren’t going away.”

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NEWSPAPERS ARE THE FOUNDATION OF LOCAL NEWS

We highlight the good works that are being done by our friends and neighbors. From local park cleanups to charitable food drive, we cover the activities that improve our quality of life.

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City housing authority's vouchers repels landlords, imperils tenants

By Eric Jankiewicz

As Pittsburgh's housing authority prioritizes building and investing in a mixture of public and private redevelopment, housing advocates and others say the cost is a diminished and largely ignored Housing Choice Voucher program that leaves thousands on waiting lists.

While tenants and landlords have long grumbled about the program, people recently associated with the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh [HACP] are also coming forward to decry its ineffectiveness.

On Feb. 2, a former HACP staffer filed a complaint against the authority to the Pennsylvania Department of State. DeAnna Vaughn, the former primary administrator of the authority's Homeownership Program, is now a real estate agent and landlord. She wrote in an email to the department that HACP "does not adhere to basic business standards, which places vulnerable populations at risk of homelessness" including when it failed to pay one of her tenants' rent through the voucher program, also known as Section 8.

"The gross negligence and misconduct of this agency in regards to the administration of this federally funded program and others has fueled the affordable housing crises that the City of Pittsburgh faces," she wrote in an email to the department.

The Office of State Inspector General responded, saying that they did not have "investigative authority over the issues" and that they were referring her complaint to the HACP board.

While some would blame the city's housing problems on a low stock of affordable housing or stigma against accepting Section 8 voucher-holders, several landlords, tenants and former housing authority personnel are pointing to the authority's management.

With its high staff turnover, the housing authority has a pattern of not returning calls or emails and failing to pay rent to landlords who have accepted Section 8 vouchers, they say.

For years, housing advocates have questioned how HACP runs its voucher program. As part of HACP's special designation as one of HUD's Moving to Work [MTW] agencies, the authority is able to reallocate federal funds from vouchers to housing development. The agency has



PHOTO BY STEPHANIE STRASBURG/PUBLICSOURCE

Top: A house at 5127 Lytle St. Bottom: A house at 224 Johnston Ave. Both are properties in the Hazelwood area where tenants haven't received their Section 8 voucher payments for rent through the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh for more than a year.

argued that construction of new housing is more effective than issuing more vouchers.

"Unfortunately, our condition in this city is such that if I release 100 vouchers, only 33% will get filled," said Caster Binion, HACP's executive director. In a recent interview, he acknowledged that staff turnover had compromised efforts to improve the voucher program, but said recent hires and training should help.

Binion added, though, that rising rents have made it harder for the authority to compete in the rental market

because landlords can make more in market rents than they would from a voucher. Instead of funding vouchers, Binion said the authority has helped to create 180 units by investing more than \$14 million since he started as director in 2013.

"The more the voucher programs fails," Vaughn said, "the more development they can do and nobody is watching. The money doesn't disappear, it goes into another development," she said, referring to HACP's budget flexibility. "This is coming at the cost of tenants losing their apartments. Landlords don't get payments, and they don't stick it out. They're forced to let their tenants go."

'We need the housing authority to pay rent'

One nonprofit housing agency is holding out hope that they won't have to evict some Section 8 tenants despite not receiving rental payments from HACP, sometimes for years.

On Feb. 21, the nonprofit Rising Tide Partners wrote a letter to HACP's Chief Operating Officer Marsha Grayson, asking her to have the authority pay back rent owed in relation to Section 8 tenants.

The letter noted that Rising Tide hadn't received payments for many of their voucher holders in the last two years.

In one case, Rising Tide wrote to Grayson, one of their tenants "has filled out paperwork requested by Section 8 at least five separate times. She has received no response about submitted paperwork, but then has received additional requests for paperwork. She has had at least three different workers during this time period."

"No landlord would put up with that and even for [Rising Tide], it's starting to hurt our operations," said Tammy Thompson, a board member of Rising Tide with insider knowledge of HACP.

Thompson, who is executive director of the nonprofit Catapult Greater Pittsburgh, sat on the HACP's board from 2020 to 2022. She said she stepped down last year out of frustration with what she saw as disorganization in the Section 8 program and a refusal from HACP's leadership to address concerns and issues.

"I felt like I was being complicit in what the housing authority is contributing to this homelessness crisis," Thompson said about her time with HACP. "Not only is

Continued on next page

[HACP] not effectively housing people, it's contributing to people becoming unhoused and I couldn't be complicit in that anymore."

Kendall Pelling, Rising Tide's executive director, said he recently met with HACP leadership to discuss the payment issues. Pelling said HACP appeared to be willing to resolve the outstanding balance.

"We need, as a nonprofit landlord, to get rent or we won't survive and our properties won't stay affordable," Pelling said. "We need the housing authority to pay rent. It's the only way affordable housing works."

Payment delays deter landlords from Section 8

Households with vouchers pay 30% of their income toward rent and utilities, with the balance covered by the authority. Every year, several thousand people in Pittsburgh rely on the program to help pay rent. Thousands more wait on a list in hopes of getting future assistance.

HACP has 5,198 households, totaling 11,767 people, with active vouchers. There are more than 28,000 households on HACP's voucher waiting lists, though that does not necessarily mean there are that many unique applicants, as people can be on waiting lists for vouchers that follow the tenant, or vouchers attached to specific properties. Housing authorities are required by law to provide 75% of vouchers to applicants with incomes no higher than 30% of the area median income.

But landlords warn that it is becoming harder for voucher holders to find landlords willing to deal with HACP's delays in payments.

Robert Utter is the president of Lilac Investments, a residential and commercial real estate company, and he said that they no longer take tenants who have vouchers from HACP. He prefers to deal with the Allegheny County Housing Authority [ACHA], which operates throughout the county. Utter said he has 70 units that get vouchers through the county housing authority and another 20 units getting vouchers through the city's.

"The chasm between the two housing authorities is massive," Utter said. "ACHA is the gold standard for Section 8. HACP is abysmal, or insert whatever atrocious synonym. They're awful to deal with."

Utter said HACP takes weeks or months to complete every step necessary for a tenant with a voucher to move into one of his apartments.

"On average, I need to email [HACP] like 15 times to get a response," Utter said. "That doesn't happen with the county — nine times out of 10 they'll email me back the same day."

He said that if people leave HACP's employment, emails to those former employees don't get forwarded to active accounts. "So you never know if you're going to get a response."

Binion said he sometimes has the opportunity to meet with landlords who aren't getting Section 8 rent funds on time. "Once I meet landlords with these complaints, they stay in the program," Binion said.



PHOTO BY STEPHANIE STRASBURG/PUBLICSOURCE

Kendall Pelling, left, Rising Tide Partners's executive director, and Dee Levy, one of the organization's Section 8 clients, stand outside Levy's Hazelwood home.

Based on his experience with HACP tenants, Utter said, "the tenants with HACP are getting hurt. I can't help tenants who have HACP. I try to get them into the county."

Vouchers are portable, allowing tenants to move between different housing authorities.

"Once they live out in the county for a year," said Utter, "they can switch to an ACHA voucher and then move back into the city if they want."

Expired vouchers, unreturned calls

Tamika Johnson has qualified for a voucher, but nonetheless lives with her five children at a shelter in East Liberty.

Johnson said she lived in a city apartment from 2017 to 2020, thanks to a voucher through HACP. Since 2020, though, a series of problems — a failed housing inspection, difficulty finding a landlord, the fact that vouchers lapse if not used in 90 days — have hampered her search for housing.

She said she filed one grievance with the authority and, with the help of a shelter caseworker, has called and emailed repeatedly seeking clarity on the status of her voucher.

"They don't respond to me at all. It's like I don't exist," she said.

"On average, I need to email [HACP] like 15 times to get

a response. That doesn't happen with the county — nine times out of 10 they'll email me back the same day."

That's why she's living in a shelter.

She said her children can't stay at the shelter while she's at work, requiring her to get child care for her younger kids.

A typical day for Johnson involves taking the kids to school early in the morning and going to work. During her work day, she has to leave work to pick them up and take her youngest children to a babysitter for the remainder of her shift.

At the shelter, Johnson is not allowed to cook.

"When I'm done, we have to get dinner but the [shelter] cafeteria is already closed," Johnson said. Dinner is usually some kind of fast food.

"I can't take food inside the shelter, so we have to eat in the car," she said.

Promised voucher investments derailed

"We've had to create affordable housing," Binion said, referring to efforts like the Larimer Choice Neighborhoods program and other similar initiatives. "We're taking voucher money to create affordable housing."

In 2020, PublicSource reported that HACP planned to "enhance the voucher program," but Binion said last month that staffing shortages have hampered these efforts.

Binion said the authority is "aggressively training our new staff."

HACP has 299 employees, about 108 of whom do maintenance-related work.

"We've had an influx of personnel," Binion said, noting that they've hired "at least" eight new housing specialists to address the problem of people not getting their rental payments on time.

Binion said they were also working with a consulting company "to supplement for the lack of staff we've had."

He added that HACP is moving their offices into a new building that will allow employees to work from the office and cut down on delays related to employees working remotely.

"Everybody is working hard but we're below the water right now," Binion said. "We know that."

Eric Jankiewicz is PublicSource's economic development reporter, and can be reached at ericj@publicsource.org or on Twitter @ericjankiewicz.

This story was fact-checked by Jack Troy.

Our process:

Reporting on homelessness requires journalists to adhere to standards of accuracy and fairness while mitigating harm, avoiding retraumatization and respecting privacy and agency.

In preparation for this story, PublicSource journalists reviewed resources including Street Sense Media's guide to reporting on homelessness. To sum up Street Sense Media's guidelines, we sought to give people living in shelters or tents the same respect we would give sources who live in stable housing.

Published April 5, 2023

The Bradford Era

LONG SHOT

Dying man's words in 1944 unite families in 2023

By **Marcie Schellhammer**

marcie@bradfordera.com

It was a long shot. It had been around 80 years since a dying man's last words to a fellow airman were to "tell my parents I love them."

S.Sgt. Paul C. Akin heard the words of fellow S.Sgt. Richard Caserio, and came home from World War II anxious to carry out those wishes. Akin tried and tried, but in the years before the internet and easy access to worlds of information, had no luck.

"This really bothered Paul," said his son-in-law, Brad Stuart, who decided to take up the quest after his father-in-law had passed away in 2006.

Stuart, who lives in Texas, retired from his job as a SW engineer and manager at Raytheon in 2020 and began the search in earnest. He researched; he collected information; he sent letters, but didn't hear responses — until he contacted The Era, and 'Round The Square ran columns about the search.

Then Bradford residents Richard and Patty Colosimo read it. That is Richard Joseph Colosimo, named for his great-uncle, who was lost in World War II, Richard Joseph Caserio.

"All the people mentioned in the article are his family," an emotional Patty Colosimo told The Era after reading the column, expressing her surprise and excitement to hear about Stuart and his search.

"It was a wonderful feeling to know that Richard was not alone in his final minutes and that he was held and comforted by Paul. It is very comforting for us," she said.

"And from what Brad has told us, all the men in the squadron were all like brothers so he really was, in a sense, with family. We were also extremely impressed with Brad's persistence and commitment to finding our family, even after his father-in-law had passed. It is so special that this became his own passion to find closure for his family as well as ours. Now our families will always be connected."

BACKGROUND

"The search to contact Richard's parents (and later his family) began when my father-in-law, S.Sgt. Paul C. Akin, was discharged from the Army Air Forces (AAF) in September of 1945," Brad Stuart explained. "Paul did what



PHOTOS: PROVIDED

S.Sgt. Richard Caserio

he could to try to contact Richard's parents, however, obtaining information like that in the '40s wasn't as easy as it is today.

"I joined Paul's family as his son-in-law in 1989 and was told by Paul about the fellow crewman's dying request to tell his parents he loved them. It clearly bothered Paul that he had not been able to honor the request. Even in the late '80s, finding information was not that easy."

Stuart began collecting information on Akin's service during World War II, and working on creating and maintaining family memorials on the website "Find A Grave."

When he found Richard Caserio's obituary in The Bradford Era, and saw that his parents had died, he was disheartened, but saw there were family members still in the Bradford area and were members of St. Bernard Church.



Patsy Caserio

Father of S.Sgt. Richard Caserio



Anita Caserio

Mother of S.Sgt. Richard Caserio

Stuart tried emailing the church, but the emails went unanswered.

"When I failed to receive a response, I put the effort of contacting Richard's family aside, but continued to work on Paul's military records. Then on January 20th of this year, while going over Paul's military information, I re-read Richard's obituary and decided that I could try sending a request to The Bradford Era for assistance."

REACTION

The Colosimos pulled out family photos, called relatives and shared memories, finding comfort in the knowledge that Caserio hadn't died alone.

Patty Colosimo gave some background on the family. Caserio's parents were Patsy and Anita Basile Caserio.

"As for where Richard fit into the birth order, Josephine was the oldest child b. 1916, then Camille but they called her Camilla b. 1917, then Richard b. 1921, Anthony b. 1923 and Bernard b. 1928," she explained. Josephine married Johnny Colosimo, and were Richard Colosimo's grandparents.

"Josephine talked often to our family about Richard," Patty Colosimo shared. "My children remember her sharing his story with them — three generations later.

"A photo of him in uniform hung in the family home for many years, then in Josephine's home after her parents passed and now it hangs in our home," she said.

Continued on next page

"I have reached out to our Aunt Anita who lives in South Carolina to make her aware of this. She is the only living child of Josephine Colosimo, Richard's sister," Patty Colosimo explained. "We haven't seen her in years, but she was astonished to hear about the story. She turns 80 this year."

She shared that a sad part of the story is that none of Richard Caserio's siblings are still around. "His last remaining sibling, Anthony, passed in 2021. Anthony, too, was a decorated veteran and he would get quite emotional when he spoke of Richard," she said.

CONNECTION

The long search on Brad Stuart's part and his knowledge of Richard Caserio have created a connection between the two families.

Stuart explained, for his family, finding the Colosimos was a joyous occasion.

"Words can't describe our family's appreciation," he said. "We had all heard the story of Paul trying to reach Richard's family. His parents clearly knew he loved them, for his descendants to know that he didn't die alone, and to know that Crew 68 was a 'family,' is a help. The airmen in Crew 68 didn't expect to come home. All they had was each other and letters from home in which to take comfort."

However, he said, "I believe Richard's parents know. From Heaven above, they know. My wife was deeply touched to know that her father finally had closure for a promise he had carried for so long. I've been passing it along to all the other family members."

Stuart added, "I told Patty I felt like I knew the Caserio family. I was quite familiar with Richard's immediate family from their "Find a Grave" memorials. But now I had faces to go with the names. Patty shared pictures with me of Richard's parents, Patsy and Anita, along with pictures of his sisters Camille and Josephine, and his brother Anthony."

He's shared information on missions Caserio flew, pictures of the planes he flew, a copy of the War



At the wedding of Richard Caserio's sister, Camilla. Beside her is Josephine, and beside her is their brother Anthony. Their brother Bernard is not pictured.

PHOTO PROVIDED

Department's "WWII Honor List of Dead and Missing for the State of Pennsylvania," along with a copy of the US Army QMC (Quartermaster Corps) Form No.2-GRS (Graves Registration Service) indicating that Richard was buried in Cambridge on May 13, 1944.

"He was later repatriated to the U.S. to be buried in St. Bernard's Cemetery in Bradford on August 10, 1948 (finally making it home)."

Colosimo said that Stuart has been a "wealth of information" concerning Caserio, sharing many things the family didn't know.

"Our daughter Chelsea researches our ancestry and she

is speaking with Brad (Sunday) afternoon. She found Richard's draft card online through her research and is continuing to research his early life before he was drafted. She found that he worked at the old Hooker Fulton building."

She's reached out to Sally Costik at Bradford Landmark Society to find out what Caserio might have done, working back then.

Colosimo continued, "I am sure we will continue this exchange for a while. Ultimately, it would be great to meet him and his wife face-to-face."

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‘I’M HAPPY’

Edna Amaro settles into new home as affordable housing waitlists could take 5 years

By Jade Campo

jcampos@lnpnews.com

Edna Amaro woke in the middle of the night Thursday to a loud clapping sound. Given the recent stormy weather, it wasn't unreasonable to assume it was the low roar of nearby thunder.

When she got up to check, Amaro realized the booming wasn't thunder at all. It was actually her 7-year-old cat Mr. Tiger. The feline was racing up and down her hardwood floors with a toy — something he didn't have the space to do in her former apartment on Water Street.

It's been nearly three months since Amaro, 78, settled into a new home on North Lime Street, which she credits entirely to the generosity of the Lancaster community. Amid a looming eviction from the Water Street apartment where she had lived in for 45 years, Amaro shared her plight with LNP | LancasterOnline in January.

Amaro's eviction was set for April 1, but her landlord agreed to a grace period, allowing her to stay until she moved into a new place on April 15. Two-and-a-half months later, she's fully settled into an apartment on North Lime Street. All of the trinkets she adores are set up carefully around her spacious living room, and the religious items she brought have their own shrine in a corner of her living room, like she had them on Water Street.

Mr. Tiger has settled in nicely too, Amaro said. The pattering sounds of his paws chasing fake mice across the floor are a frequent reminder to Amaro of how thankful she is for the generosity she's received. After LNP | LancasterOnline first wrote about Amaro's housing problem, the Lancaster community responded, gifting her over \$20,000 via GoFundMe.

"We appreciate it and we love you," Amaro said. "I just hope if someone else comes along in my situation, the people of Lancaster will come along and help."

The community's response was what Amaro hoped she would elicit by sharing her story. She believes she was



"I just want everyone to know I appreciate everything they've done for me."

Edna Amaro

PHOTO: BLAINE SHAHAN

able to shed light on the severity of the housing crisis and hopes people will see her situation as an opportunity to help others.

The response also lifted her out of a dark time, Amaro said. The GoFundMe and encouraging messages she received taught her that kind people exist and she can still

have hope in a world that felt cold to her.

"I just want everyone to know I appreciate everything they've done for me," Amaro said.

Amaro is happy in her new home and believes her

Continued on next page

experience was all in God's plan. The North Lime Street apartment has more room and suits her needs better. Now, she doesn't have to worry about going up and down a flight of stairs, which she fell down a few times at her old place. She broke her toe once.

A tiny nest egg

While Amaro isn't facing homelessness in the near future, her housing situation remains precarious.

Amaro lives off \$1,150 monthly from Social Security, so most rentals in the city are beyond her budget. Before her move to Lime Street, she said she spent months searching for low-income housing. She called the United Way of Lancaster County's 211 seeking assistance, and she put her name on housing waitlists with no luck. That's when she decided to reach out to the Lancaster Watchdog.

The resulting donations to the GoFundMe in Amaro's name put her in a more comfortable spot financially and made it possible for her to afford the Lime Street apartment. The \$900 rent is almost double what she paid for her Water Street home, eating up most of her monthly Social Security check.

Amaro said she can rely on her stable income to pay the rent while setting aside the donated money for bills and essential items like food, furniture and clothes.

But when the GoFundMe balance runs out, she knows she'll need to find another solution. The rent is not sustainable for a person living on a set income, she said, so she's kept her name on a number of waitlists for low-income housing. She's received few responses; most low-income housing programs have waitlists of up to five years.

It's an open question if the donations from the community will be enough to support Amaro until one of

the programs has a spot for her. Discounted utilities she qualifies for from UGI and PPL are a help, but unexpected or emergency costs could deplete her savings.

A new appreciation

Amaro's new home is owned by Josh Gibbel, the same landlord who purchased her Water Street apartment in November with plans to renovate it. Gibbel helped Amaro search for an affordable place and, after touring multiple locations, Gibbel said it was clear Lime Street would be her new home.

"When we stepped inside this one, you could kind of see for the first time her eyes light up," Gibbel said, adding, "It's really good to see her happy and smiling (in her new home)."

The search for the Lime Street apartment brought Amaro and Gibbel closer. He regularly stops by to make sure she's doing OK and helps out with day-to-day tasks like mailing bills. Amaro said Gibbel even drove her to the hospital when her brother died in late May.

When she first met with the Lancaster Watchdog, Amaro said she had never spoken to Gibbel. The only thing she knew about him is that he was the reason for her eviction, so her opinion on him was soured.

Once she got to know him, Amaro said she changed her mind. Now, she thanks him specifically as one of the people who helped her the most during her time in need.

The experience has also had an effect on Gibbel, who owns seven units in the city with his wife, Kelly. Now, he said, he has a new perspective on his role and a more personal understanding of the housing crisis.

"This definitely highlighted for me in a new way the importance of... just making sure there's fair communication with what's happening," Gibbel said.



Edna Amaro outside her new home.

"These things can be fairly transactional a lot of the time, but definitely it's been a really good experience to have more personal interactions."

With a chuckle, Amaro said she probably will never hear from any of the housing programs she's applied to. Still, she's able to view her situation with a little lightheartedness.

"As long as I have money for food, my rent and my cat, I'm happy."

Published July 1, 2023

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Growing EMS crisis coming to a head

By Monica Pryts
Allied News Staff

EMS responders have long sounded the alarm of a coming crisis in the service, none louder than Doug Dick.

A few weeks ago, Dick, chief of Pine Township-based Superior Ambulance, mailed letters requesting that the municipalities it serves direct a half-mill of taxes toward the company.

The request has roiled some local municipal officials, even as they understand the need to throw EMS services a lifeline.

Grove City Council Vice President Joel Bigley said he was disappointed by the letter, calling it, "almost like an ultimatum."

But elected representatives from municipalities that have received the letter say they still need to figure out how they can help while also making sure they're doing what's best for the residents without breaking any laws.

"Ultimately, we all have to help in some way," said Larry Stewart, Pine Township supervisor.

Dick sent the letters to the 22 municipalities in Mercer, Butler and Venango counties that Superior Ambulance serves.

In the letter, he asks municipal leaders to consider passing a half-mill property tax increase to help the company manage the EMS crisis.

The letter, dated Nov. 16, said the municipalities are not upholding state requirements to provide private ambulance service with appropriate financial aid and administrative assistance.

In the letter, Dick said the municipalities had 15 days to respond before Superior Ambulance would begin charging municipalities \$500 every time the service responds to a call in the area.

If they do not pay within 30 days, Superior would give 90 days' notice that it will stop responding to 911 calls in that town while "pursuing other remedies."

Superior Ambulance wants to continue to serve the area, but the company cannot afford to provide such services without help, Dick wrote.

Bob Perrine, an East Lackawannock Township supervisor, also said that the municipality wants to help Superior Ambulance.

"Superior does most of our calls ... so we can't afford to lose them," he said.



PHOTO: ERIC POOLE | ALLIED NEWS

Advanced EMTs Jon Patterson and Kayla Reash check through the equipment in an ambulance at Superior Ambulance.

Perrine said East Lackawannock is working with its solicitor while exploring its options while looking into the legalities of directing tax revenue to a private company.

"The townships are mandated by laws and regulations ... We can't just write them a check for 10 grand," Perrine said.

Perrine and his fellow supervisors urged residents to attend their next meeting, 7 p.m. Monday at the municipal building, 1019 Mercer-New Wilmington Road.

The supervisors will be discussing the issue at that meeting.

Perrine described the township as "unique;" it's small and rural with an older population and quite a few Amish families, so ambulance service is a necessity.

Main fire protection is provided by the volunteer departments from New Wilmington and Mercer's East

End, and the township has a separate 3-mill fire tax that goes to those entities.

Perrine said he understands Superior Ambulance needs revenue, but there has to be a better way to go about it than what Dick proposed in his letter.

Pine Township's Stewart said he understands that Dick sent the letter to get people talking about the issue.

Stewart, president of the Pine Township Engine Company, said he knows that EMS service nationwide is plagued with a lack of resources.

Since Pine Township has already adopted its 2023 budget, it's too late to consider an EMS tax for next year.

Grove City Council agreed Nov. 21 to form a committee to further study the issue.

Continued on next page

Harrisville Mayor Gary Hughes attended that meeting and told Grove City Council his borough has been leaning toward approving a half-mill property tax for Superior Ambulance.

Dick said he knows there are differences between the state codes governing boroughs and townships laws, but he thinks both entities have the power to enact the tax he requested.

Liberty Township adopted a half-mill EMS tax this summer, and Dick said he is communicating with the municipalities and is getting some positive feedback.

He noted that he had sent a letter to Grove City in October suggesting a half-mill tax increase.

The state House Majority Policy Committee, then led by legislative Republicans, held a hearing on the EMS crisis Oct. 11 in Grove City, where participants discussed an EMS tax.

His latest letter is more in-depth and comes more than a year after local talks and the establishment of an EMS task force, he said.

Some people don't like change, but not providing financial assistance would be a violation of state law, he said.

He added that municipalities could earmark up to 25 percent of the local services tax for EMS; move money around to come up with extra funds; or use American Rescue Plan money.

"And there is nobody else to call," he said, because other ambulance companies are further away and also suffering the strain of decreasing number of employees and revenues that fall well short of covering expenses.

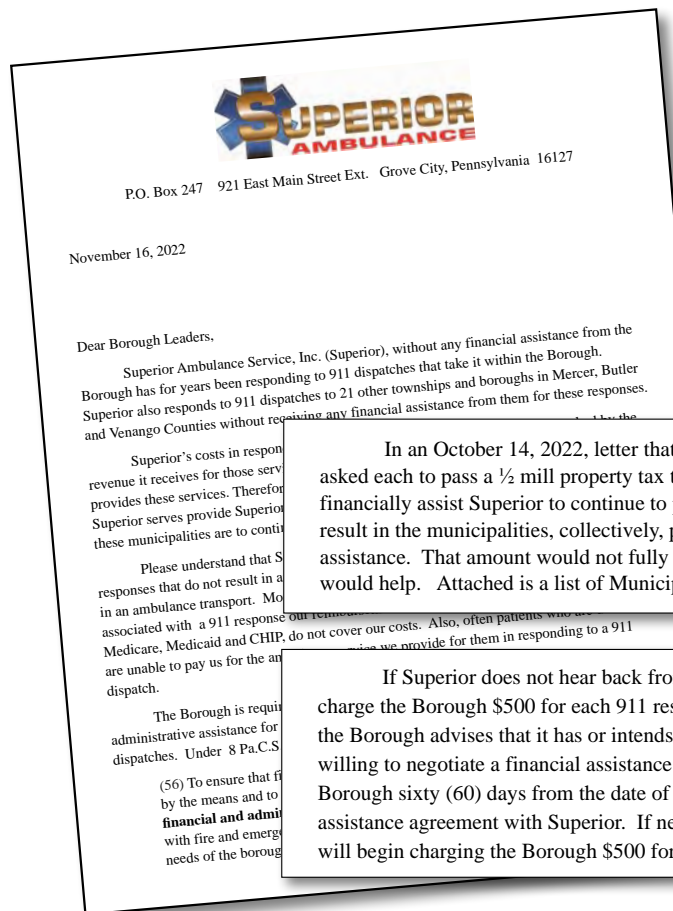
The median age of an EMS provider in Pennsylvania is 45, meaning there aren't enough younger people entering the field.

And even if each of the 22 towns adopted a half-mill tax, the results would be "minimal," just over \$234,000, he said.

Buying a new fully stocked ambulance is well over \$200,000, and supply and manpower issues are ongoing.

He'd like to see a town hall meeting organized to continue the discussion

Dick said some he has heard some "absolutely absurd" suggestions — eliminating benefits and offer only part-time



Superior Ambulance's letter to the borough of Grove City asked for a dedicated tax to subsidize its operations or it would start charging for calls.

In an October 14, 2022, letter that I sent to the Borough and the other 21 municipalities, I asked each to pass a ½ mill property tax that the law permits it to enact to collect funds to financially assist Superior to continue to provide 911 responses within its borders. That would result in the municipalities, collectively, providing Superior with around \$230,000 in financial assistance. That amount would not fully cover our losses in providing 911 responses, but it would help. Attached is a list of Municipalities and what their ½ mill tax or equivalent is.

If Superior does not hear back from the Borough within fifteen (15) days, it will begin to charge the Borough \$500 for each 911 response it conducts in the Borough. If within that period the Borough advises that it has or intends to impose the requested ½ mill property tax or is willing to negotiate a financial assistance arrangement with Superior, Superior will give the Borough sixty (60) days from the date of this letter to impose the tax or enter into a financial assistance agreement with Superior. If neither occurs within the sixty (60)-day period, Superior will begin charging the Borough \$500 for each 911 response it conducts in the Borough.

positions or send only one certified person out on calls.

Dick said he has been looking to other communities in the region and uses Pike County as a good example of what can work.

There are 13 municipalities in Pike County; all but one adopted a 2-mill tax, which the county matched.

"They generated \$4.1 million," Dick said.

He asks residents to encourage their elected officials to support Superior Ambulance, which serves these municipalities:

- Mercer County — Townships of Coolspring, East Lackawannock, Findley, Jackson, Jefferson, Lake, Liberty, Sandy Lake, Springfield, Wolf Creek and Worth; and the boroughs of Grove City, Jackson Center, Mercer, Sandy Lake and Stoneboro.

- Venango County — Barkeyville borough and Irwin Township.

- Butler County — Harrisville borough and Marion and Mercer townships.

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REPUBLICAN HERALD

‘Early warning’

By Hyun Soo Lee

Pottsville Republican Herald

One year after the deadly Interstate 81 pileup of March 28, 2022, first responders, weather and transportation agencies are working to address the issues that arose before, during and after the incident.

The crash, which occurred around 10:30a.m. near Minersville Exit 116, claimed the lives of six people and left 29 others injured after more than 100 vehicles - including cars, SUVs and tractor-trailers - crashed into one another in the midst of a blinding snow squall.

One of the largest emergency responses in recent Schuylkill County history, the pileup ranks among the worst accidents of its kind in Pennsylvania since the start of the century.

“We’ll have to continue to work together across all avenues of the community to get to a point where, hopefully, this doesn’t happen in the future,” said John M. Matz, county Emergency Management Agency coordinator.

Many technological advancements, including variable speed limit boards along the interstate, have been implemented over the past year and are intended to warn motorists in similar situations, Matz said.

PennDOT has installed additional electronic speed signs along the highway, with built-in radars that can detect when traffic has slowed and relay the information to oncoming motorists.

“We have to look at where we can employ technology, particularly with smartphones and using electronics and warning along the interstate corridors - to be able to give early warning that people could slow down and avoid this,” Matz said.

Working together

Although they had been trained to respond to mass casualties, emergency services personnel had not expected to deal with the magnitude of the I-81 pileup, Matz said.

During the incident, several vehicles were seen proceeding at full speed before crashing into the mounting wreckage.

Matz said that in addition to bolstering technology, it will be important to raise awareness of using “common sense” when driving in such situations.

In the event of a similar incident, Matz said, EMA would



PHOTO: DAVID MCKEOWN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Emergency personnel work March 28, 2022, at the scene of the pileup on I-81. More than 100 vehicles were involved.

make early contact with Highridge Business Park and other nearby facilities that rely on tractor-trailer shipments.

“We could work out ways that we could try to give them warning when something’s going on,” he said. “And if they could then reach out to the truckers or maybe the trucks that haven’t left the facilities yet, so they could say to them, ‘There’s something going on, avoid this area.’ ” Although such warnings eventually show up on media, such as PennDOT’s 511PA.com, Matz stressed the importance of providing an “early warning” to motorists during the initial stages of a response.

Emergency services and businesses, like those at Highridge Business Park, must work together to relay the message, he said.

“That’s going to benefit everyone,” he said. “It’ll give

them the ability to continue their operations with the least amount of disruption, but also hopefully minimize the amount of traffic and vehicles that we have to deal with when the emergency occurs, and the emergency services are trying to restore some normalcy to it.”

Matz believes it is also important to direct people to a single phone number, or a single point of contact, for those who are seeking their loved ones in the aftermath of an incident.

“In the future, we would advertise a single number,” he said. “That way, it would allow us to take the messages and push them off to the proper organization that has jurisdiction for it.”

Continued on next page

Signs and snow squalls

PennDOT has installed 36 electronic signs on the stretch of I-81 between interstates 78 and 80, with 24 signs in Schuylkill County.

The signs are designed for optimal visibility even in the poorest conditions, as they flash yellow lights when speed limits are altered to fit the conditions, said Ronald J. Young, district press officer for PennDOT Engineering District 5.

“It’s important to stay calm, don’t panic, don’t slam on your brakes, stay in the lane you’re in and leave plenty of distance between your vehicle and the vehicle in front of you,” he said.

The agency has also added roadside weather information stations, which helps staff monitor weather conditions.

Additional cameras have been installed along I-81 to identify potential fog or whiteout conditions, he said.

“We feel that, overall, between the weather stations and the variable speed limit signs, they have been very effective tools to alert the public,” Young said. “They can tell people they need to slow down, that there could be weather conditions that are bad that they need to slow down or, if possible, avoid going through the area.”

The agency has continued to use its existing message boards posted along the interstate. Matz said the signs are designed to result in reduced speeds in all types of conditions in Schuylkill County, which he said is very “fog-prone.”

“It really comes down to the traveling public - whether individuals in passenger vehicles and commercial vehicles are heeding that information,” he said.

Young hopes the new safety enhancements will reduce the number of accidents in inclement weather. He noted that last year’s snow squalls were not identified by weather stations until the “very last minute,” and said the improved technology could help motorists stay safe.

Snow squalls are often the primary cause of pileups in Pennsylvania, Michael Colbert, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, said after the crash. He said the squall that resulted in the accident occurred suddenly and that the agency could not warn motorists because it was unable to detect conditions in the mountainous area.

Meteorologist John Banghoff said the weather service is



PHOTO: JACQUELINE DORMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Vehicles driving on the northbound lane of Interstate 81 on Monday pass the ramp for Minersville Exit 116 in Foster Township Today is the first anniversary of the pileup on this section of I-81 that killed six people and injured 29. The pileup occurred during a blinding snow squall.

working with other agencies, such as PennDOT and the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission, to enhance safety in adverse weather conditions on the road.

Additionally, meteorologists are continuing to research ways to forecast and warn motorists of snow squalls ahead of time, he said.

He said the weather service’s State College headquarters are located in the “epicenter” of snow squalls, which makes the facility ideal for research and educational outreach on the phenomena.

“It’ll be exciting to see how we can continue to improve those efforts and to help eliminate, or at least reduce, the number of deaths that result from them each winter,” Banghoff said.

Tough to handle

Despite the magnitude of last year’s incident, first

responders performed a commendable job throughout the sequence, said Scott Krater, director of the Schuylkill County Communications Center.

“It was handled the best that it could be considering the circumstances,” he said.

In addition to the deceased, 26 people were transported by ground for treatment and three by helicopter. Another 80 people were evaluated by emergency medical services personnel.

The section of I-81 near the accident site was closed for about 40 hours, as first responders continued to treat the injured and road crews milled and cleared the highway.

“You can’t prepare for something like that, but when it happens, you do the best you can with the resources you have,” Krater said.

Contact the writer: hlee@republicanherald.com; 570-628-6085

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THE DAILY NEWS

Family holds park dedication

By **REBECCA BERDAR**
Staff Writer

Saturday was declared Rogers-Newman Park Day in Mount Union as descendants of James and Connie (Newman) Rogers, who made their home in "Bricktown" after escaping the hardships of sharecropping in Virginia during the Jim Crow era, gathered to honor their legacy.

The dedication ceremony drew a crowd composed of over 100 family members, friends and elected officials.

"It's a great day for all of us," said Bernard Chatman, James and Connie's grandson who led efforts to rename the park.

"I've been chasing this dream since I was a little kid," Chatman said. "In 1950 I was born in a two-room shanty but from that shanty I traveled. The whole time I was traveling there was a drive, there was something pushing me to come back and do something."

Chatman, son of the late Peter and Matril (Rogers) Chatman, opened the dedication service with a prayer and shared highlights from his grandparents' history, including their long trek from South Boston, Virginia, to central Pennsylvania, in the 1920s.

Chatman's aunt, Lawanda (Rogers) Brown, 83, the youngest and last surviving child of James and Connie Rogers, cut the ribbon at the end of the ceremony while Chatman unveiled the park's new sign.

James and Connie made their way first to Claysburg, then Mount Union. They settled on a seven-acre farmstead across Hill Valley Creek from General Refractories, one of Mount Union's three brickyards that would provide work for the Rogers family and other families from Virginia they welcomed to their property. Eventually, the property developed into a small village of modest homes, Shantytown.

Shantytown was populated by African American families who, like James and Connie, traveled to Mount Union seeking new opportunities.



PHOTO BY REBECCA BERDAR

Descendants of the late James and Connie (Newman) Rogers gathered at Rogers-Newman Park on July 8 to see the park officially dedicated to the memory of the Rogers family.

The Rogers family purchased the land in 1945. Ten years later, in December 1955, James and Connie passed away within days of each other. The borough claimed the property through eminent domain in 1966.

Chatman has fond memories of spending his early years in Shantytown. He said he's learned that others, too, remember his grandparents' farm and the surrounding village with affection.

Harrison Galloway, formerly of Mount Union who now lives in Houston, Texas, passed along a story for Chatman to share about an annual gathering in Shantytown when Black families brought their hogs to the Rogers' farm for butchering.

Harrison, a classmate of Lawanda Brown, recalled the Black families that operated small farms out in Hill Valley and how they all came together before dawn Thanksgiving Day at the Rogers' homestead to butcher their hogs. The men, he said, handled the butchering while the women cleaned parts of the hogs.

"By the end of the day everyone was eating chitterlings, potato salad and cornbread," Harrison shared. "The meat was divided up and shared among the community. Those

were the best times growing up in a small town. Neighbors helping neighbors."

Alec Brindle, vice president of Mount Union Borough Council, read a proclamation dedicating the park to the memory of James and Connie Rogers. Before reading the proclamation, Brindle spoke about Mount Union history, how the town started out as a settlement along the Pennsylvania Canal and, thanks to deposits of ganister rock, became a national center for refractory work.

"Success was within every man's reach in this little town," Brindle said.

He pointed out that the brickyards are a common denominator among Mount Union area residents who worked in the industry, noting the Rogerses' story should resonate with many local families.

"People came from Russia, Hungary, Italy to Mount Union to start a new life," Brindle said, adding James and Connie Rogers were among those who chose Mount Union "to make a better life for themselves and their children."

Continued on next page

State Sen. Judy Ward said the story of Rogers-Newman Park and Saturday's dedication "is about what every community should be about" — history, patriotism, family, hard work and faith.

Ward continued that Rogers-Newman Park and nearby Silica Athletic Park bear "names that reflect the strength, vibrancy, diversity and spirit of this community. Most fitting is that these magnificent facilities will be utilized for purposes that bring people together, foster goodwill and enhance the quality of life here in the community."

Ward concluded her remarks by saying now is the time to embrace the park's symbolism.

"The foundation of the Rogers-Newman homestead was fortified by optimism and initiative so let us follow the example of Bernie's family and take control of our own destiny by pursuing our dreams with faith, confidence and steadfast resolve."

Huntingdon County Commissioners Jeff Thomas and Scott Walls also took part in the dedication, offering their congratulations to the Rogers' family and encouraging Mount Union Borough to reach out to the county for funding to support further developments at Rogers-Newman Park.

"The county can give out all the grant money in the world but unless you have the leaders in the community who are willing to act upon it and implement it, it's not going to happen," Thomas said, and called for a round of applause for all partners working to improve the park. "Keep up the good work, Mount Union, the whole county is proud of you."

Walls said people generally want the same things in life, as demonstrated by



PHOTO BY REBECCA BERDAR

Lawanda (Rogers) Brown and nephew Bernard Chatman took part in the July 8 dedication ceremony at Rogers-Newman Park, named after James and Connie (Newman) Rogers. Brown, the couple's last surviving child, performed the ribbon-cutting while Chatman unveiled the park's new sign, which gives a history of the Rogers family homestead that once occupied the park property.

James and Connie Rogers' life story.

"What do we all want? We want a good place to work, to live and raise a family," he said.

Audrea Holsey, president of the NAACP's Blair County Chapter, offered the organization's support for activities at Rogers-Newman Park. Holsey said the NAACP provides educational programming at several community parks in Blair County

and would like to do the same in Mount Union.

"We will extend our support for programs, teaching the history of the region and encouraging community bonds to strengthen at any opportunity we can," he said.

Holsey also presented Chatman with a certificate of achievement on behalf of the NAACP, Blair County Branch, in recognition

of his efforts to "preserve the legacy of Black communities in Mount Union."

Following the speeches, ribbon-cutting and formal unveiling of a sign commissioned by Chatman, the Broad Top Area Honor Guard, under the direction of Elmer Weimert, performed a gun salute in honor of those descendants of James and Connie Rogers who served in the military.

According to her obituary, Connie Belle (Newman) Rogers was born Aug. 5, 1905, in South Boston, Virginia, daughter of William and Betty (Jeanette) Newman. She was united in marriage to James Rogers in October 1923, at South Boston.

Mrs. Rogers died Dec. 8, 1955, at Harrisburg Hospital, age 50, following an illness of four and one-half years. She was survived by 10 of her 11 children. Two of her children, Doris and Lawanda, were still at home when she passed away.

At the time of her death, she and her husband were residing at A-2 Chestnut Terrace, then a brand new housing complex that started welcoming families in 1954.

James Leroy Rogers died Dec. 15, 1955, age 55, at J.C. Blair Memorial Hospital from injuries suffered in a three-vehicle crash which occurred Dec. 9, the day after his wife's death, amid snowy conditions along Route 22 near Mill Creek.

At the time of his death, Mr. Rogers was employed by the North American Refractories Co.

His obituary states he was born Oct. 11, 1900, at South Boston, Virginia, son of James Louis and Jane (Furgess) Rogers. He was employed in the refractories industry for many years, first with General Refractories, and had been with North American since 1930.

Published July 10, 2023



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The Daily Item

Valley schools not immune to teacher shortage

By Francis Scarcella

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SUNBURY — Valley school districts are no strangers to the national trend of classroom teacher shortages and the pool of teaching candidates continues to get smaller.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office analysis reported 233,000 fewer public school teachers in 2021 compared with 2019. And, it noted that teacher shortages are most acute in Western states, rural and urban areas, and high-poverty communities, and in subject areas like foreign languages, science and special education.

Those similar trends are seen locally, school officials said.

Mid-West Superintendent Joe Stroup said recruiting teachers has “been a challenge” due to the small candidate pool, particularly for subjects such as science, math, business and foreign languages.

“People aren’t going into teaching,” he said.

Teacher shortages “are real and we anticipate it will get more challenging,” said Frank Jankowski, superintendent at Selinsgrove Area School District.

The district has been able to fill vacant positions, but Jankowski said faculty turnover has been higher.

The problem is the small pool of candidates, he said, as there are an estimated 60 percent fewer prospective candidates graduating from Pennsylvania schools.

Dip in interest

Jankowski attributes a dip in interest in the teaching profession to the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors. He cited many teacher furloughs, program cuts and negative stories about teacher retirements and benefits during the recession a decade ago as another reason.

“People were not motivated to get into the field,” he said.

First-year special education teacher Logan Leiby said he believes one of those reasons is because he and his fellow freshmen in high school less than 10 years ago — a new potential generation of educators — were told there would be no jobs available.

“I remember hearing there were so many teachers out there looking for work,” he said. “I think this is part of what happened in the last 10 years and it scared people into changing career paths.”



PHOTO BY: ROBERT INGLIS/THE DAILY ITEM

Shikellamy elementary school teacher Kaylee Wojciechowski, left, works with students Kaebrie Lloyd and Cameron Attinger on their reading skills.

Leiby said he was not deterred but was a bit skeptical when he spoke to people about salaries.

“The unknown scared me about being a teacher,” he said. “I know that you have to work hard to get to the top and that is what I set out to do.”

‘Best job in the world’

Shikellamy High School teacher Sasha Beckman said negativity toward teachers is also a factor in why more people aren’t entering or staying in the profession.

“Reading and hearing stories on the news about the profession and the long hours and low pay is a factor,” she said. “I had a job in a different field and came back to become a teacher because it’s the best job in the world.”

Beckman said teachers don’t work a “7 a.m. until 3 p.m. job” and that is also a deciding factor for some.

“I wake up before the alarm goes off, and I’m running over things I want to do for the day,” she said. “The weekends I am doing school work and I really wouldn’t change that. I wanted to do something where the future would be better. I want to leave an impact.”

In Shikellamy, Superintendent Jason Bendle said the district is not experiencing the shortage.

“Shikellamy is proud that it has not impacted us at this point,” he said. “We take extra pride in creating a supportive environment for all new faculty.”

Continued on next page

Shikellamy High School Principal Marc Freeman said Beckman is an example of what prospective teachers looking at the career should follow.

"She (Beckman) has made amazing connections with our students even though we have only been in school half a year," he said. "She is one of our most positive staff members and works extremely hard to be her best. She values her students' opinions, accepts suggestions from her colleagues, and makes the most of every minute while at school."

Teachers' mental health

Beckman said she also knows that teachers struggle with mental health.

"I'm also telling myself when it's OK to put things down and we need to know we can't help everyone," she said. "We have hundreds of students and accepting it's OK to not be perfect all the time and knowing you can improve on yourself is important. It's also accepting we all have growth ahead of us."

Oaklyn Elementary teacher Kaylee Wojciechowski agreed.

"A big challenge is mental health," she said. "We hear about the lack of support from the public and your mental health can slip."

She said she hopes to see more teachers in the years to come because of the value the job holds.

"Teachers hold a very important puzzle piece to the world," she said. "We teach the future. When we go home we don't get to decide we are not a teacher. We talk to kids, parents, and we get weekends, nights and summers off, but it never stops. We put time in everywhere. We want to keep our kids growing."

Wojciechowski said another reason some may shy away from the career is the unknown.

"The hardest part is there is so much diversity that you don't always know what is happening," she said. "You want to be there for all of the students always but it's impossible to know what's happening. When you are with them and there you are making a difference for them."

Oaklyn Elementary School Principal Steve Renn said Wojciechowski is a natural-born teacher.

"It seems as though she has been training and preparing for this career her whole life," he said. "To watch her in the classroom, it is evident that she loves to teach, which resonates with our students and helps them to foster a love for learning."

Shikellamy Assistant Superintendent Mary Murphy-Kahn said shortages are a growing issue.

"For a variety of reasons, teachers are leaving the profession and undergraduates are not majoring in education," she said.

"At Shikellamy, we have been fortunate to fill our positions with fantastic teachers. Our new teacher 'induction program' assists with their transition to our school district. I want our teachers to feel supported in their first year of teaching and in their last year. Supporting teachers is essential."

Murphy-Kahn said she speaks with teachers daily.



Shikellamy High School teacher Sasha Beckman talks with two of her students, Lauren Benfer, left, and Kennedy Rudy.

PHOTO BY: ROBERT INGLIS/THE DAILY ITEM

"As a school leader, my number one priority is to make sure I talk to teachers on a daily basis," she said. "To our new teachers and to our veteran teachers. I want them to know how much I appreciate what they do. I want them to know what a positive impact they make," she said.

Making an impact daily

Teacher Elizabeth Rohland, of Selinsgrove, said she is impacting lives on a daily basis.

A former administrative assistant, she returned to school to obtain a Master's degree during the pandemic and was hired as a fifth-grade teacher in the Midd-West school district last year.

"As much as I loved my old job, I felt very disconnected from the world," Rohland said. As a teacher, "I'm having an impact on lives on a daily basis."

Stroup said a collaboration with colleges has helped with recruitment by bringing education students into Midd-West School District's classrooms to observe and student teach as part of the college curriculum.

Midd-West has successfully hired teachers, like Abbie Wolfe, a Danville native, through these partnerships, he said.

"I fell in love with Midd-West" while student teaching, said Wolfe who was hired at the district in 2019 and now works as a special education teacher in the autistic support program at West Snyder Elementary in Beaver Springs.

Wolfe said many of her college peers landed jobs fairly quickly but recalls several students leaving the program early in their college careers.

"One of the benefits of having classroom observations is you can tell if (education) is a profession for you," she said.

Wojciechowski agreed with the Midd-West teacher.

"It is the most rewarding job in the entire world," she said. "When a student comes up and tells me I'm the best, it's such a great feeling. Every day, you get to get up and see their little smiles and you can't get that anywhere else."

Bonds with students

Meghan Bussey, a 2022 graduate of Shikellamy, who is now studying at Lebanon Valley College to enter the teaching profession, said her mind was made up to become an educator long ago.

"When imagining my future, I always pictured myself as a teacher," she said. "Whether I would be a high school, middle school, or elementary school teacher was something that I just decided on last year. Last year I was given the opportunity to volunteer at Chief Shikellamy in a fourth-grade classroom with teacher Amy Herbster. Little did I know this experience would heavily influence the career path that I am on today. In Mrs. Herbster's class, I got to experience teachers' daily routines and responsibilities and first-hand see what it means to be a great teacher. I also formed unimaginable bonds with my students and was able to see the growth that came with working with them."

Bussey recommends students enter the field.

"I would highly encourage all students to consider a degree in education," she said. "Education is a field where you see the change you are making in the world. You also get to grow along with every student, which most professions don't allow you to do."

Dr. John Bickhart, the superintendent of Milton Area School District, said the district had 183 teachers in 2017-18 compared to 179 teachers in the 2022-23 school year.

"Our teacher numbers are good," he said. "We are able to fill positions. The biggest issue we have is school psychologist and then support staff (custodians, cafeteria workers, and paraprofessionals)."

Line Mountain Superintendent Dave Campbell said the teacher positions in math, chemistry and physics is where they have the most trouble. The number of applications for all positions is down more than 50 percent, he said.

Daily Item reporters Justin Strawser and Marcia Moore contributed to this report.

Published Feb. 21, 2023

The Sentinel Founded in 1861

Health systems partner with Midstate colleges to fill staffing shortages

By Naomi Creason
The Sentinel

For both UPMC and Central Penn College, the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a formidable hurdle.

On one side, the pandemic's health care challenges helped shape a nationwide shortage of nurses, technicians and staff who help keep the industry functioning.

For colleges, and Central Penn specifically, which focuses on adult and career education, some students simply did not return to school. And even after two years, the way the national economy has resulted in formerly lower wage jobs paying more and readily available positions for those who want to work, the pandemic wasn't the only reason adult students dropped their pursuit of education.

"Nothing is easy in higher education right now," said Michael Fedor, vice president of advancement and strategic initiatives at Central Penn College. "Many adults are finding good, paying jobs ... and not many adults can afford higher education. Some high school students can't afford to go to school full time."

Facing these challenges, UPMC and Central Penn College want to establish a program that Fedor hopes to see duplicated with other industries in the region.

"With the pandemic, we looked to each other for support," Fedor said. "To help UPMC, we could turn out an adequate workforce. The entire health care industry is seeing an unprecedented staffing shortage. We're doing our part to support them."

UPMC saw partnerships as an opportunity to improve its pipeline of workers and to help colleges and the community.



PROVIDED BY UPMC

Jess McGuinn completed the HACC Pharmacy Technician Certificate program to work as a certified pharmacy technician at UPMC Hanover.

"I'm pretty proud of these programs," said Lou Baverso, president of UPMC in Central PA. "It's an economic development benefit to our region with something like this. Students study here, continue to work here; they come from here. It's a benefit not only with a pipeline and workforce, but also a benefit to the community."

Baverso said UPMC and Central Penn College's partnership began when the college restarted its surgical technician

training two years ago. That partnership has grown to cover phlebotomist training, as well as the newest program offering a one-year diploma program for medical assisting.

Central Penn College has had a medical assisting program for years, but the new program offers a year of training and experience — or applied associate's degree — instead of other medical assisting programs that only offer six or

nine weeks of training. The coursework gets students ready for a position that has them doing anything from taking blood pressure to helping with scheduling appointments to keep the system running.

The program, most notably, also incentivizes students to stay local and work at UPMC.

In addition to offering a job after

Continued on next page

graduation, UPMC through the Pinnacle Foundation will start paying off the cost of tuition after the student works at the health system for two years. By five years, the partnership will likely completely pay off the cost of the diploma.

“Central Penn College was willing to do it, and the Pinnacle Foundation was willing to help us,” Baverso said, adding that while there are school-associated rotations and partnerships in the state and through UPMC, “the Central Penn College and Pinnacle Foundation partnership is unique to the region.”

Partnerships

Central Penn College is not the only higher education provider seeing a boon from a partnership. Both Penn State Health and UPMC in Central PA said they offer similar partnerships across their coverage region, and Baverso said UPMC makes sure these opportunities are available not just in Harrisburg, but in areas like York and Lancaster.

In addition to the medical assistant program at Central Penn College, UPMC in December also announced that through the UPMC Scholars program, it will also partner with HACC for a pharmacy technician certification program where students are hired by the health system and will receive payments equivalent to the full cost of schooling during their first year of employment, in addition to their salary, in exchange for a two-year commitment to UPMC.

Jennifer Sarff, vice president of human resources at Penn State Health, said that health system also has established partnerships at schools in the region over the last six months as pilot programs in certain segments of the workforce.

“We’re tweaking what we want to have a greater impact,” she said.

For both health systems, the partnerships have focused on technicians and medical assistants, who are assistants in primary provider offices and other outpatient settings.

“If you look at the top five and 10 roles where we have vacancies, some tended to be the entry-level positions,” Sarff said. “We can help develop them as individuals and professionals. ... We can create a way to bring them here, certify and train them. We can help give them a career with us.”

“These are more entry-level jobs where we might be competing with logistics and warehousing in the area or other places with entry-level jobs,” Baverso said. “We really wanted to have our own pipeline.”

Staff shortages

The need for these partnership and dedicated pipelines of employees is part of new efforts to fill vacancies in the health care industry.

“It’s definitely been a challenge,” Sarff

“If you look at the top five and 10 roles where we have vacancies, some tended to be the entry-level positions. We can help develop them as individuals and professionals. ... We can create a way to bring them here, certify and train them. We can help give them a career with us.”

Jennifer Sarff

*vice president of human resources
at Penn State Health*

said of staffing shortages. “For open positions, we saw the most in spring/summer of 2021. We have seen improvements — gradual, but improvements nonetheless — since then. Right now is the lowest number since the start of the pandemic.”

She said Penn State Health was in a tougher position than other health systems because it was in the process of opening two new hospitals when COVID-19 arrived. Penn State Health Hampden Medical Center opened in October 2021 and Penn State Health Lancaster Medical Center opened this past October.

“You have so many roles in health care, 10,000 different roles,” she said. “You have some one-off types, but you have those in IT jobs, supply chain, marketing, food service; really, really important roles.”

“We think COVID expedited a lot of departures,” Baverso said. It resulted in more retirements and nurses taking non-clinical roles where otherwise they likely would have stayed. “In some of the fields within health care, you’re seeing pockets or clusters of openings. For our laboratories, we had a more senior workforce, and they retired.”

Like Sarff, though, he believes the efforts UPMC has been making is helping close those staffing gaps.

“There is a light at the end of some number of years in the tunnel,” he said. “We can have these new pipelines, but if we can’t retain our staff, we won’t fix the problem. Not everything is dollars and cents.”

According to Baverso, UPMC’s retention efforts include focusing on the employee environment, offering career ladders in

nearly every field of the industry and listening to their needs, which has led to offering more flexibility in hours.

For both health systems, the pandemic has shaped a nearly new world in hiring and employment.

“Certainly it has upended the process,” Baverso said. “You have to be more nimble. Your response time has to be faster — these candidates are likely looking at multiple jobs. The workforce is different, and the pool is different; not in a bad way, but different than what we’re used to.”

“We’ve gotten really creative with types of compensation,” Sarff said. “If you look back five years ago, you wouldn’t see the number of referral bonuses, sign-on bonuses and retention bonuses. We do see it helping us with [hiring] and retention efforts.”

She said they’ve also had to change the timeline of job reviews to keep up with market changes and data.

“If we don’t do it even every quarter, we’re seeing some of our salaries are getting below market,” she said. “It’s a completely new dynamic in compensation. ... It’s not just what they’re paid. We’re looking at the needs of the workforce.”

Future of industry

Both health systems reported seeing early success in their new efforts to hire and retain employees. That success is likely going to keep opening up programs for other positions through schools in the region.

UPMC said it is finalizing partnerships with colleges in the region for echocardiographers or cardiac sonographers and respiratory therapists.

“We continue to look for partners in the region — where are there opportunities for universities or colleges to have a program and match it with our pipeline?” Baverso said. “We’re continuing to look at what makes the most sense.”

It has so far been a promising start for Central Penn College, as well.

Though the college has yet to see the new medical assisting diploma students graduate, Fedor said its students in the allied health field already see a much higher graduation rate than their counterparts in other fields at the college. He estimated that about 86% of the college’s graduates find a job, but those in medical assisting and allied health have a 90-plus percent graduation rate because of the need for these workers.

Fedor said affordable education is one of the core tenets of Central Penn College, and in addition to what UPMC offers through the Pinnacle Foundation, the college will also offer scholarships and free housing opportunities for single students in the program.

Fedor said the college is looking at more opportunities like these for training in other health care fields, but also toward partnerships with other companies that are in need of a trained workforce.

“This can benefit the Central Pennsylvania workforce,” he said. “We’re really excited about the innovative program.”

Fedor said the college works with some companies, like the Giant Co., to train or educate their existing workforce, but he said companies offering to pay for tuition and training of prospective employees could be the solution to personnel shortages in a variety of fields.

“We’re eager to see companies make that investment,” he said.

Published Jan. 3, 2023

'Getting home'

Bunkertown church, community help build house for local man

By Becky Lock

BUNKERTOWN — Enduring the constant trials of a traumatic brain injury couldn't dim the enthusiasm 23-year-old Austin Parker showed last weekend.

Austin was 18 when he was struck by a vehicle while bicycling. After spending a month at Geisinger Medical Center, nine more at Hershey Rehab and the last 4 ½ years at Brookline Manor, he has two words to explain what he's looking forward to most: "Getting home."

'So thankful'

But rather than outfitting his parents' old farmhouse with ramps and wider doorways, a team of volunteers from Austin's church, Bunkertown Brethren, and local businesses put their teamwork, vision and prayer into action by designing and building Austin's own little bungalow on a hill overlooking his parents' house.

Those who helped in the project were recognized during a dedication service Sunday morning at the church, then invited to an open house at Austin's new home.

"He loves it," said Austin's mom, Brenda Hunter, as the first group of visitors checked out the space. A front room will double as the main bedroom. One window looks out into a wooded area, and another has a view toward the Hunters' farmhouse.

Austin; his sister, Jasmin; and their parents, Brenda and John Hunter Jr., moved into the farmhouse in 2015, just two years before the accident. At the time, Austin set up his sleeping quarters in the front of the farmhouse's first floor. He planned to join the Army after graduating high school, Brenda said.

As he finished up his last years of high school, Austin joined the high school football team. A Boy Scout, he earned Eagle Scout status by completing a project at Union Cemetery, Mifflintown. Though his mom attended another church, Austin sought out Bunkertown Brethren and its active youth group.

He loved riding his bicycle and would coast down Bunkertown Road to church on Sundays. Church Pastor Wes Stahl's voice cracked as he recounted the day he saw fire trucks and an ambulance "screaming past" the



PHOTO BY BECKY LOCK

OPEN HOUSE — Jasmin, the 10-year-old sister of Austin Parker, leads a tour of her brother's new "apartment" during an open house Sunday at the family's Bunkertown Road homestead.

parsonage on their way to a crash "involving a car and a bicycle."

"My heart sank. We started praying," Stahl said. As first responders arrived and urgently called for a medical helicopter, "we prayed harder, worried, not knowing — yet knowing."

The church family answered his call to pray for Austin. As members filled the building in Bunkertown, Stahl went to Geisinger Medical Center in Danville. He stood at the

operating room, shoulder to shoulder with Brenda and John, and prayed over Austin prior to his first surgery.

"I prayed a simple prayer, asking God to hear the prayers that were coming up from our church family, from each of the homes, from right here in the church sanctuary," Stahl said. "We pleaded with Jesus to intercede on behalf of one that we loved. We're so thankful that he did."

Continued on next page

'Really nice'

Austin's new home, bedecked in brown siding, will sport a "huge camo theme" inside, said Jasmin. She and her mom plan to decorate the four-room home, adding creature comforts like curtains, blankets and a TV mounted on the pale green walls.

"I love it that he'll be moving home," she added.

Austin, who also has three older brothers, will need to have around-the-clock care and the family is in search of a few aides who can fill that need for them. His family hopes he'll be able to move in by Easter.

Much of the small home involves an open floor plan that merges into the kitchen area. A small room will serve as a guest room and there is a laundry room and a large bathroom.

"This turned out really nice," said Rob Sierer, one of the 29 individuals thanked by name during the Sunday, Jan. 15, dedication service, as he attended the open house.

Others who helped with the work included Brent Auker, Jerry Auker, Dave Bardell, Andy Carvell, Jamon Carvell, Mike Dressler, Dave Ebright, Kimi Fitzwater, Nate Fitzwater, Dan Fritz, Andrew Frymoyer, Jeff Frymoyer, Jon Hummel, Gary Krall, Bob Lehman, Pam Master, Ben Peachey, Jesse Peachey, Tina Rigsby, Tom Rigsby, Laurie Schreiber, Doug and Cathy Shellenberger, Jimmy Shirk, Ryan Stahl, Sara Steele, Jason Stuck and Dave Varner.

Also thanked were 15 area businesses that collaborated on the project.

'Best course of action'

"God's timing is so perfect," Steele, chairwoman of the church's Building Outreach Ministry, said during the service.

Early last spring, she explained, the Hunters were able to buy the home that they had been renting and, at the same time, the church's Building Outreach Ministry formed.

"We said, 'What can we do to help?' We turned to prayer to figure out what are the options. What's the best course of action? Where do we go from here," Steele said.

After a great deal of planning, the group broke ground last September.

"Nearly 30 people touched this home, just giving of their time, giving of their talents, giving of their hearts as they



PHOTOS BY BECKY LOCK

ABOVE: From left, Brenda, Jasmin, John Hunter Jr. and Austin attend Sunday's dedication service at Bunkertown Church of the Brethren. BELOW: Austin's new home, which overlooks his parents' farmhouse near Cocolamus.

serve Austin and his family," she said. "God built this house through all of you. You just made yourselves available. That's all it takes — just to make yourself available. God was in this every step of the way, making everything easy and right and purposeful."

Looking forward, Austin's family still needs to add handrails, a sidewalk, a concrete carport, and more stone for the driveway.

Though his family has not knowingly heard from the 21-year-old Mount Pleasant Mills woman who struck Austin and his bicycle that September morning in 2017, they did receive greetings and prayers from churches and people in a multitude of other states.

"I kept every card," Brenda said. "We're still getting cards from people. I have no idea who they are. They're not even from this state; they don't know who he is (but) they say, 'We still pray for you.'"

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The Long-Awaited Eight Miles

Economic development in Mon Valley ‘Rides’ on expressway link

By **Melanie McGinniss**

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The Pennsylvania (PA) Turnpike Commission (PTC) is moving forward with the addition of the 14-mile, Route 51 to Interstate-376 Project (Jefferson Hills to Monroeville), final leg to the existing 54-mile Mon/Fayette Expressway (MFE) from Morgantown, W.Va. to Jefferson Hills.

In 1985, legislation was passed to allow for the expressway project that is expected to be completed in 2028.

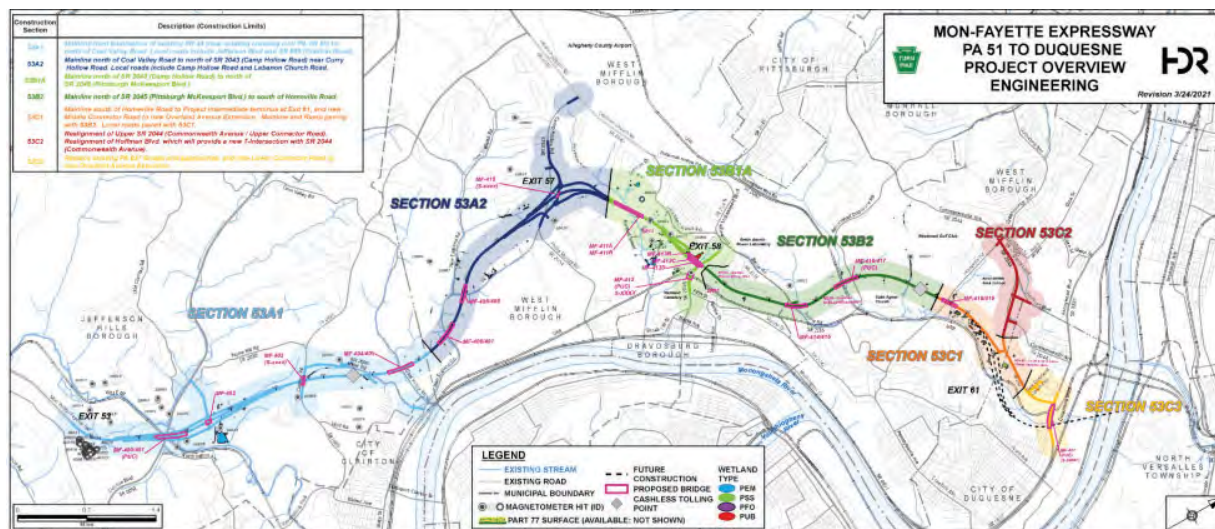
Renee Colborn, operations communication officer for the PTC, said “The Mon/Fayette Expressway, which is also known as PA Turnpike 43, stretches from Interstate 68 (I-68) in Morgantown, W.Va. to Route 51 in Jefferson Hills, that’s the part that already exists. What we’re going to build now is a section of it that will connect there (Route 51) to Route 837 in Duquesne...that’s eight miles.”

Colborn stated that “once this is built...it’ll be a quick link to all these communities, including your campus (Penn State Greater Allegheny PSUGA) from areas like Duquesne...depending on where all of your students live.” The new section will include the areas of Jefferson Hills, West Mifflin, Dravosburg, Clairton, and Duquesne.

For PSUGA, Interim Chancellor, Dr. Megan Nagel, said that the MFE will have a “long-term impact” on the campus. “It will just provide a more direct link from places that are farther out...from where I live in Monroeville, it’s such a pain to get there...it’s certainly on my radar,” Nagel said.

Tim Joyce, chief of staff to Sen. Jim Brewster (PA Senate, 45th District in the Mon Valley), also has knowledge and support for the Expressway. “If you’ve ever tried to get in from the eastern suburbs to Pittsburgh in the morning, it’s about an hour commute. And this would reduce the commute to maybe 15 minutes...that was one of the driving forces,” Joyce said. “South is pretty tough too, but they have an option there that the eastern suburbs don’t...they have the Pittsburgh Regional Transit T.”

The Route 51 to I-376 part of the MFE Project is divided into two sections, north and south of the Monongahela Rivers, and will start with the southern side. “Once that’s built, we’ll reevaluate what the funding stream looks like and see if we can build the northern stretch,” Colborn said.



COURTESY OF PA TURNPIKE COMMISSION

That would be the final six miles of the highway.

Colborn said that MFE will eventually stretch to Monroeville, but Monroeville to Jefferson Hills is financially a significant amount of money, and the funding is currently only available to reach the Duquesne area. “We’re getting the money through Act 89, which is the oil franchise tax,” Colborn said.

Joyce added that that is why the expressway is being constructed in phases. “When the turnpike has money to do another phase, they do it, and then work stops. Then they have to wait until they have money again. Right now, I think we have enough money to bring the road north into Duquesne, but to cross the river and come up through the Turtle Creek Valley into Monroeville, that phase is not planned yet nor funded,” Joyce said.

The southern section is also split into seven sections of construction from the Jefferson Hills area to Duquesne.

Colborn said that the PTC just received approval to send out the first bid for the first construction section (called 53-A1 on the construction maps) in Jefferson Hills. The bid goes out to contractors to estimate the costs and the PTC reviews for the lowest-priced contract that meets all the requirements of the construction. Because the bidding process takes months, Colborn expects actual construction to begin in the spring of 2023.

The history of the Mon Fayette Expressway spans decades, as far back as the 1970s. The PTC was mandated to build the highway by the state legislature, so it required tolls. The tolls help “recoup the costs of building it, number one, and number two, to maintain it,” Colborn said. “If maybe they asked PennDOT to build this brand-new roadway, there wouldn’t be tolls involved. But they (the legislature) told us we had to build it. The micro and macroeconomics to these types of projects are critical to consider before getting upset about tolls,” she added.

Joyce added to the history by saying “I think it’s like 15 years in a row the tolls have gone up. But what we did, we handicapped the turnpike when the state legislature, 12 to 15 years ago, passed legislation that the turnpike had to turn over \$400 million a year to PennDOT. This is because PennDOT needed money to maintain the roads and bridges.” He added “Nobody likes a tax increase...so instead of the legislature raising taxes or fees on drivers’ licenses and auto registrations and other things associated with vehicles...they put the burden on the turnpike.”

Only looking at 10 years, this would mean the PTC has given \$4 billion to PennDOT, “money that they could’ve used for their construction,” Joyce said.

No matter which way the project is viewed, costs and

Continued on next page

cost-savings are always at the forefront of any project, especially when it comes to highway construction and related infrastructure needs.

The PTC has to consider, the Federal Highway Administration mandates that the highway needs to be widened to three lanes, which is also expensive. "You know that we have problems with our bridges. PennDOT has the same problem. At least 20 percent of our bridges are failing...but we don't have the money to fix them," Joyce said.

To get the money, programs have to be cut or some have even suggested that the legislature should be cut in half, which Joyce noted is not an effective solution.

"Even if you eliminate the legislature, I think that would cut out one half of one percent of the annual budget...our budget is approaching \$40 billion a year. Even at that, we still don't have enough money to do what we need to do," Joyce said. "At least 75% of the budget is set in stone and already being used for education, health and human services and the department of corrections, including the state police," he added.

According to the PTC's website, the estimated overall cost of the Mon-Fayette Expressway project is \$1.01 billion (including designs, tolling equipment, utility movements, etc.). But it's not just a road that the money is being invested in. The whole purpose of the MFE is to spur redevelopment efforts and reindustrialize the Mon Valley area.

"This goes way back," Colborn said. "The legislation was being developed to help (build) a better highway access system in the area."

Colborn said that because the steel industry was declining in the Mon Valley area, legislators thought that building a highway for more things to take place would help the economy flourish and allow for free flow of commerce. Joyce explained that the other driving force to this expressway being built was for "the cost to companies, farmers...anybody that has to ship by truck because on a highway, you can use larger trucks with heavier weight limits."

For example, if you did not have this type of expressway, Joyce said that it might take several trucks to get milk from a farm in New York to grocery stores. In Pennsylvania, it might take even more because you "may have to take longer detours, or you have to send in smaller trucks, lighter loads," Joyce said.

In comparison, Colborn said, "New Stanton, for instance...didn't hardly exist before the turnpike came through, it was just farmland. So now there's all kinds of



PHOTO COURTESY OF PATURNPIKE COMMISSION

economic development in the area, gas stations, restaurants, hotels... everything."

Joyce added that when Interstate-279 (from Pittsburgh to the northern suburbs) was built in the early 1980s, it did a lot for communities like Pine Township. Not only did it cut the commute in half, but because it was easier to get around, in many cases, it doubled the value of the houses.

"The eastern suburbs were sitting here waiting for people to help. They put the East Busway in, but that stops in Swissvale...it doesn't come all the way out, it stops about halfway. Had it come to Monroeville, it would have had a greater impact," Joyce added.

The process of a highway project takes several steps before even starting, which is why it has and will take years. Right of way acquisitions are necessary, where the PTC needed to check all properties that are going to be affected and purchase them from owners.

The PTC hires staff for relocation and makes offers and helps those affected find a new place to live. Electric and gas utilities need to be coordinated so that all the utilities

are moved or removed from construction sites. The PTC also needs to get permits in every municipality before construction.

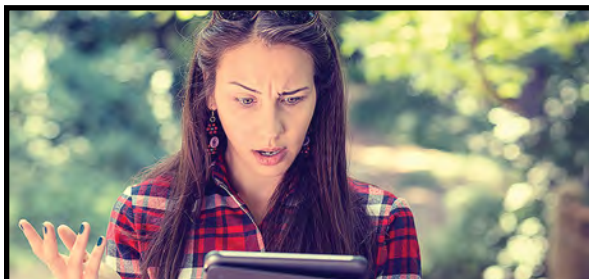
"All that stuff has to be in place before we can even begin to put a shovel in the ground," Colborn said, "but right now, we're pretty much on track."

The only small change in the project plan has been the design modification of a round-about in the West Mifflin and Dravosburg section, visually represented through a video on the PTC's MFE page (under the "News and Public Involvement" section.)

Colborn said that the MFE website page was updated in October to "switch gears and make it construction-friendly and let people know what is happening in each section." An interactive map is also available for people to click on and get facts about each section.

Visit www.paturndpike.com in the "Construction Projects" tab for more information on the MFE.

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The Herald

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Sharon has big plans, expectations for 2023

By **Melissa Klaric**
Herald Staff Writer

SHARON – Big changes are coming to the city of Sharon in 2023 in the form of new businesses, new projects, and new events.

The city is about halfway through the allocation of more than \$14 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds. A lot of disbursements have been in the form of grants to new businesses and restaurants opening in downtown.

Croakers Brew Pub is one of the restaurants that received a grant to help them relocate to 74 N. Sharpsville Avenue. Croakers is just one of the new restaurants opening up on what downtown development Director Sherris Moreira is calling “restaurant row.”

The pub has been hosting pop-up events and plans to open by the end of February, before they throw a huge St. Patrick’s Day bash from Thursday, March 16, through Saturday, March 18. The event would start with a city-wide St. Patrick’s Day parade that Thursday and continue with specials at the pub.

Croakers is now bringing in food trucks to its pop-up events. And, as some places encourage BYOB, Croakers’ owners, the husband and wife team Chris and Mara Palipchak, encourage BYOF – Bring Your Own Food.

“What’s happening is people are showing up, but they’re ordering wings or Pizza Joe’s, so it’s cultivating that community,” Moreira said.

Chris Palipchak said they want to work



Chris Palipchak, owner of Croaker’s Brewing Co., talks with Sherris Moreira, Sharon downtown development director, about the new business in Sharon.

TANNER MONDOK | HERALD

with the local restaurants, and a lot of the new ones coming in are located on the same “restaurant row.”

“We’ll have the menus from the Thai place that’s coming in, local pizza places, Julian’s, Our Gang’s, so people can order Door Dash,” Palipchak said.

Moreira said the Palipchaks are working hard to make Croakers a success story.

“Here’s what I love about them, they’ve already gone around to all the businesses to make friends and gain support,” Moreira said. “They’re doing it right.”

Two new restaurants are coming onto “restaurant row”: the Slippery Rock-based Elephant No. 8 Thai Restaurant at 52 N.

Sharpsville Ave., with plans to provide cultural music and dance performances in the new location. Also, Julian’s Bar and Grille, 234 S. Sharpsville Ave., opening in the former Lulu Beans Cafe site. They are planning live music and events as well.

A game-changer for the city

“Restaurant row is going to be game-changing,” Moreira said. “It’s bringing people into downtown Sharon, and do you think they’re just going to go to a restaurant? They might stop at a store or maybe they’re going to get their eyes checked and stop at a restaurant. It’s just about getting people to come down here.”

Moreira said city officials have been very strategic about the restaurants and the places they are bringing in because they don’t want them to compete.

Those restaurants aren’t the only ones that received ARPA funding.

Down on Chestnut Street a few blocks away, Nova Destinations is working toward opening at 23 Chestnut St. They will include a traditional Irish-English pub, a speakeasy, a Tiki bar, rooftop dining, and a boutique hotel in the four-story brick block, which most recently had been a brewery a few years ago.

Continued on next page

City officials are considering closing part of Chestnut Street permanently as part of being able to use the space for city-wide events.

This would lead the consumer to the original Quaker Steak and Lube restaurant down the street at 101 Chestnut St. The Lube, which also received ARPA funding, plans to open a three-season riverfront event space by the fall.

"We see it as a landmark, a gateway, a flagship of our brand," said Russ Berner, VP and partner of JDK Management, the company that owns the chain, which began with the Sharon restaurant. "We'll be upgrading parking and rehabbing the former train station and contributing to city events. We're just excited to be a part of all that's happening in downtown Sharon."

Building up by tearing down

Rounding out all the restaurant happenings in Sharon is The Corinthian Banquet Center, 47 Vine Ave. A small building behind the Corinthian has been demolished, and owner John Bianco is relieved.

"It's a long time coming," Bianco said.

Bianco is building an outdoor balcony off the ballroom of the imposing brick Corinthian building, which was erected in 1909 as a Masonic lodge.

"This building has held a lot of different emotions for me over the past three years," Bianco said. "It was everything from realizing what I had gotten into with some regret to a sense of hope for having a courtyard built out, including three years of anticipation including some time during COVID."

The wait worked out in his favor.

With a grant from the city, the building behind The Corinthian was demolished and a courtyard will serve guests outside.

The alley next to The Corinthian – officially named Central Way – will be known as "Artist's Alley."

"This is so cool," Moreira said. "There will be no (Huntington) bank building, so you'll be able to see the river from the alley."

Bianco plans to be able to serve the public in his indoor space and outdoor space by Memorial Day weekend or by summer.

"You can see the vision growing here," Moreira said.

Standing in Artist's Alley facing west, you can see the Huntington Bank building. Demolishing the building will be another



TANNER MONDOK | HERALD

John Bianco, owner Corinthian Banquet Center in Sharon, talks about the plan for the space behind his business where another building was demolished.

major change for the city and another area where Moreira sees her vision coming to life.

The building is scheduled to be down by the Father's Day car show.

"Right now we have to close streets to do any kind of large-scale event," Moreira said. "Having a larger green space by the Shenango riverfront will open up all kinds of opportunities for events of all kinds."

Vision coming into focus at last

Another project funded so far by ARPA is the Penn State Shenango Launchbox, which will provide grants to local businesses. The Launchbox program was created to help launch startup companies via specialized programs.

"We'll hear more about this later in the year," Bob Fiscus, city manager, said.

ARPA funding has also gone toward purchasing police equipment and training, COVID relief to small businesses, the support of the creation of a Sharon Community Development Corporation, which is a nonprofit that can help find funding for city initiatives and support downtown revitalization, large-scale business expansions including the support of a Diehl Automotive Group Headquarters, an Aquaponics program inside The Landing at the former Westinghouse plant, and the development of downtown apartments and

an indoor recreation center near Penn State Shenango.

"We're excited to see the approach the city is taking with the ARPA funding," said James Landino, owner JCL Development, which is developing the apartment and rec center, among other projects. "We believe we're going to see real change in 2023, proof of concept if you will, of visions we've all discussed and invested in for years.

All of which is the result of many years of developing a vision, making the investment, and doing the hard work to make it happen."

More business-focused events are also part of the change occurring in the city.

"We had a record Small Business Saturday celebration with more people shopping in our downtown that day since its inception," Moreira said.

"The purpose of building on and developing more events that center around our business community are two-fold. The first is to support our business community, and the second is to get more visitors into the city itself."

Upcoming events include:

- A Valentine's Day and Mother's Day artisan market with citywide events;
- A more-robust downtown Sharon Farmers Market;
- The continuation of last year's inaugural Shenango Riverfront Fireworks Celebration July 1, Frightfully Fun Fest Oct. 27 and Small Business Saturday Celebration Nov. 25.

The city continues to host the WaterFire Sharon festival – this year July 22 and Sept. 16 – along with the annual Father's Day Car Show, which also had record attendance in 2022.

Riverfronts, restaurants, recreation and retail

Molly Bundrant, president of Sharon City Council and a behavior intervention specialist for the SCORE program at West Hill Elementary School, said everything the city is focusing on relates to the overarching goal that came from the Sharon leader envisioning retreat held last spring.

"And that was a focus on riverfronts, restaurants, recreation and retail and in turn, this will help support our current residents with more jobs, more things to do and more places to shop plus attract more people to move here," Bundrant said.

Fiscus said taking a fresh look at how things have been done and adjusting how to move the city forward into the future continues to be key.

"This funding gives us the ability to strengthen our current business community while attracting additional ones that will help the city of Sharon become a destination for visitors and potential homeowners," Fiscus said.

Other non-ARPA-funded projects the city is focusing on in 2023:

- A \$730,000 gateway project at the Ohio line into Sharon at U.S. Route 62
- Expansion of the Lots to Love program, including creating interesting parklets on formerly blighted neighborhood sites and also getting lots back onto tax rolls via their adopt-a-lot program
- Continued demolition of blighted houses and buildings
- A variety of roadway-improvement projects such as Irvine Avenue reconstruction, which will include new sidewalks, curbs and pavement.

The word's getting out

"We'll be targeting additional redevelopment projects as well," said Fiscus, who also serves as the city's fire chief. "Just the word of changes coming alone has greatly increased the number of calls we are getting from interested developers, business owners and entrepreneurs, many of whom are touring our city with the downtown development team.

We expect more positive changes ahead just because of that alone."

As the city redevelops and grows its economy, expanding staff is part of the evolution. A recently filled public works director position, along with additional public works and code compliance staff, will help with the city's growth. The city still has additional open positions in the public works department and its police department.

"It's all a huge deal for us, and I'm really proud and excited," said Bundrant, who is going into her sixth year on council. "To be able to see these changes happening after we've been talking about it for years is a huge deal for us. I'll be excited to see what's going on here a year from now."

Follow Melissa Klaric on twitter @HeraldKlaric or email her at mklaric@sharonherald.com.

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THE MAINLINER

Cresson-Lilly area regionalized police study completed, reviewed

By Kristin Baudoux
of Mainline Newspapers

Approximately one year ago, representatives from Cresson Borough, Cresson Township, Lilly Borough and Washington Township began discussions on the feasibility of a regionalized police force to cover the four municipalities.

Since then, each of these municipalities' councils or boards agreed to participate in a police study completed by the Pennsylvania Governor's Center for Local Government Services.

The study was completed a few weeks ago, and the results of the study were discussed during a virtual meeting held July 11.

The meeting was hosted by Anne Weaver Morrow, an administrative officer with the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), though much of the discussion was led by Joe Kirschner, a retired police chief with over 53 years in the field of law enforcement. He is a regional police management consultant with DCED and served as the main consultant for the study among the four municipalities.

The numbers provided are estimates and are subject to change if progress continues on developing the combined department.

Area demographics and statistics

Based on the study, the combined area of the four municipalities is 25.8 square miles. Both Cresson Borough and Lilly Borough each make up .5 square miles of the coverage area. Cresson Township has 12.2 square miles, while Washington Township has 12.6.

As for population, 71 percent of the area's population resides in either Cresson

Borough or Cresson Township. The remaining 29 percent is located in Washington Township or Lilly Borough. The area's total population is 6,189.

Kirschner discussed the crime statistics for Cresson Borough and Cresson Township, since both municipalities have their own police departments. Based on the FBI's Uniform Crime Report, both

municipalities had a combined 105 crimes reported in 2021. Of those crimes, 10 are considered Part 1 or major crimes, including but not limited to, murder, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary or arson.

The majority of crimes reported, 95, were Part 2 crimes, which include forgery, possession of a controlled substance, vandalism and driving under the influence and minor thefts, among others.

The number of crimes was split almost evenly between the borough and the township.

Kirschner said the statistics for Lilly Borough and Washington Township were not included in the study, since the two municipalities are only covered by the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP). Kirschner said the PSP does not always report everything a local department would, and individual statistics can be difficult to obtain from the PSP.

At the time of the study, Cresson Borough had two full-time officers and two part-time officers. Cresson Township had two full-time officers.

Staffing

Kirschner said staffing needs for a regionalized force are better determined not by crime rates, but by a "calls for

When an officer is on duty, each car/officer would cover about 3,900 people. Based on population, retired police Chief Joe Kirschner said the department's coverage when on duty would be better than some of Pennsylvania's largest cities including Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Reading and Scranton.

service" formula developed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). This formula estimates an average of 550 calls for service per 1,000 residents annually. He said this formula is a better indicator for service needs and usually has a margin of error of only 2 to 3 percent.

"Based on that ... you should have a projected number of 3,404 calls for service," Kirschner said.

According to this formula, the study determined the regionalized force would need one police chief, one sergeant, three full-time officers, four part-time officers and one part-time secretary.

Kirschner did not recommend a full-time detective, since the number of Part 1 crimes is fairly low.

Based on the number of calls, as well as budget limitations, the regionalized department would provide the area with 16 hours of coverage per day, with PSP

coverage for the remaining eight hours.

The coverage area would be split into two zones, an eastern half and a western half, with an officer patrolling each zone on most days.

When an officer is on duty, each car/officer would cover about 3,900 people. Based on population, Kirschner said the department's coverage when on duty would be better than some of Pennsylvania's largest cities including Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Reading and Scranton.

He said the coverage would be close to Johnstown's, which has about 1 car/officer for every 3,690 persons.

New headquarters

A larger, regionalized department would also need about 1,200 square feet of office space. The existing Cresson Borough and Cresson Township offices are not large enough to handle a department of this proposed size.

One possible site for a new department headquarters is at the Cresson Township Municipal Building. Plans are in place to relocate magisterial district judge John Prebish's office to a new location, and once the site has been vacated, the study has determined the area as the best site for the new headquarters.

The study also determined that the number of patrol vehicles could remain at four. Both Cresson Borough's and Cresson Township's departments use two vehicles each.

Proposed budget

The 2023 police budgets for Cresson Borough and Cresson Township are \$258,172 and \$243,846, respectively,

Continued on next page

totaling \$502,018. The current per capita cost for Cresson Borough is \$169 and \$86 for Cresson Township.

Lilly Borough and Washington Township do not have dedicated police budgets. However, Lilly Borough has voted to enter an agreement with Cresson Borough for limited police coverage for \$1,000/month, but the Cresson Borough Council has tabled approving the agreement until the August meeting.

Based on these figures, Kirschner estimated a proposed regionalized budget of \$565,000. This proposed budget figure does factor in approximately \$100,000 in grant funding to form or maintain the force, dropping the net amount to \$465,000.

“We think you could easily get, most likely get, \$100,000 in grant money from various grant sources around the state,” Kirschner said.

Kirschner said these grant agencies are willing to distribute grants toward regionalization efforts or specifically for regionalized departments.

This net figure, Kirschner said, is a 7.5 percent decrease compared to total combined budgets for 2023.

The bulk of the budget (78 percent or \$440,000) would go toward personnel salaries and benefits. Kirschner said this amount is lower than the average budget for municipal police personnel salaries and benefits, which comes in around 90 percent.

The remainder of the budget would be broken down as follows: supplies, 3 percent; support services (training, auditing, computer services), 5 percent; vehicle expenses, 7 percent; and

Kirschner also noted that Pennsylvania has one of the highest numbers of municipal police departments by population in the country with 1,120. States with higher populations, such as California and Florida, have 388 and 311 municipal departments, respectively.

headquarters expenses, 7 percent.

Cost distribution

Kirschner said several methods were considered when distributing the costs for regionalized coverage among the four municipalities, such as population, mileage, property values or call volume.

After review, the study determined that a “cost sharing” method of 90/10 would be best at this time.

Based on this method, Cresson Borough and Cresson Township would each pay 45 percent of the department’s costs. Cresson Borough’s share would amount to about \$209,250, a 19 percent reduction compared to its current budget. Cresson Township’s share is a bit smaller, since its costs would be reduced by \$6,000 in headquarters rent payments per year. Its share comes in at \$203,250, a 17 percent reduction compared to its 2023 budget.

Lilly Borough and Washington Township would each pay 5 percent of the department’s costs, with amounts of \$23,250 each. Based on population, Kirschner said this would cost a little more than \$2 per person each month in Lilly Borough and Washington Township.

Based on this breakdown, Cresson

Borough and Cresson Township would each receive full police coverage. Lilly Borough and Washington Township would receive partial, random patrol coverage, but full police response to all incidents or other calls for service.

Police commission

To oversee the regional police department, a police commission would need to be established since the department would not be solely under the control of one municipality.

The commission would be comprised of two voting members from Cresson Borough, two voting members from Cresson Township, one non-voting member from Lilly Borough, one non-voting member from Washington Township and one voting community member or municipal official from either Cresson Borough or Cresson Township. Each person would serve a term of three years with the exception of the community member, who would serve a one-year term.

Lilly Borough and Washington Township would not have voting members since these municipalities are only paying a combined 10 percent of the department’s costs.

“It’s a fairly standard way to break that down,” Kirschner said.

Additional info

Kirschner said Pennsylvania has 39 operating regionalized departments in the commonwealth, one of which, West Hills, is located in southern Cambria County. He said this regionalized department has been in operation for over 40 years.

Over the past few years, 35 studies have been conducted on police regionalization, and about half of those studies have started or are in the development phase of creating a regionalized department. Kirschner estimated that Pennsylvania will have 50 to 60 regionalized departments within the next few years.

Kirschner also noted that Pennsylvania has one of the highest numbers of municipal police departments by population in the country with 1,120. States with higher populations, such as California and Florida, have 388 and 311 municipal departments, respectively.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, Kirschner and his team recommended that the four municipalities consider regionalization. He estimated that the regionalization process could take about six to nine months to complete.

No decisions on consolidation were made during the meeting. Those attending the meeting plan to take the information from the study and presentation and discuss it amongst other members of their respective boards and councils for further review.

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Altoona Mirror

Judge endorsement raises eyebrows

Kagarise's letter supporting candidate permitted by code of conduct, but unusual

By Kay Stephens

kstephens@altoonamirror.com

HOLLIDAYSBURG — A published endorsement letter for the May 16 primary recently raised eyebrows because it was written by Blair County Judge Wade A. Kagarise.

Generally, county judges take a hands-off attitude when it comes to campaigning activities, including endorsements, because of rules outlined in the state's Code of Judicial Conduct.

But that code has exceptions, including one allowing incumbent county judges, in the year they stand for retention, to endorse a candidate seeking the same judicial office.

The code also includes exceptions for magisterial district judges, also permitting them to show support for other judicial candidates in the year they run for election.

By closely following the rules, magisterial district judges can be in campaign photos and speak in favor of a fellow judicial candidate.

Penn State political science professor Michael Nelson said he's not surprised to hear of judicial endorsements and referred to the Wisconsin Supreme Court election that attracted a lot of press earlier this year.

In that state, the justices on a politically divided court openly endorsed Daniel Kelly, a conservative former state Supreme Court justice, or Janet Protasiewicz, a liberal Milwaukee County judge who went onto win the seat.

"I don't have any data on how common this is nationally and how it varies by level of court," Nelson said. "But there is a long-term trend of judicial elections looking like legislative and executive elections, more and more in terms of campaign activities, fundraising, advertising, etc."

Kagarise, who will be up for retention in November, said that before he wrote the candidate endorsement letters, published by the Altoona Mirror and other newspapers, he asked for the state's Judicial Ethics Advisory Board to review his intention to endorse a candidate.

The board's answer was that he was allowed to do so because he is running for retention in November. Had he not been seeking retention, he said the board's answer would have been no.

Kagarise's pursuit

Kagarise, who will be up for retention in November, said that before he wrote the candidate endorsement letters, published by the Altoona Mirror and other newspapers, he asked for the state's Judicial Ethics Advisory Board to review his intention to endorse a candidate.

The board's answer was that he was allowed to do so because he is running for retention in November. Had he not been seeking retention, he said the board's answer would have been no.

The Judicial Ethics Advisory Board, formed in 2022 by an order of the state Supreme Court, is currently made up of eight judges from appellate, county, municipal and magisterial district courts, and one attorney.

The board, which replaced the former Judicial Ethics Committee of the state Conference of Trial Judges, is assigned the task of providing advisory opinions regarding the state's Code of Judicial Conduct.

Kagarise said that based on prior rulings by the ethics committee — addressing election activities by judges up for retention — he believed he could write the letter endorsing Blair County judicial candidate David Consiglio.

Specifically, a portion of the Code of Judicial Conduct states that a judge, when a candidate for election or re-election, "may speak on behalf of any judicial candidate for the same office."

By asking the Judicial Ethics Advisory Board to review his intention — and getting its OK — Kagarise secured what is referred to as "rule of reliance" protection that he can use if a complaint is lodged against him with the state's Judicial Conduct Board.

Why make an endorsement?

Kagarise said he knew that his decision to endorse one of three candidates seeking a county judicial seat would generate questions — and he said he weighed the pros and cons.

"To me, it was important to balance what I thought would be people's perceptions of my making an endorsement with my belief of how important this year's election is going to be," Kagarise said.

In the May 16 primary, registered Republicans and Democrats can vote for two of the three judicial candidates, with the successful nominees getting their names on the November ballot.

Besides Consiglio, a Centre County attorney who grew up in Blair County, the other county judicial candidates are Fred Miller, the northern Blair County

magisterial district judge, and Joel Seelye, a longtime Blair County based attorney.

The two elected in November will take office in January and make up 40% of the county's five-member judicial bench.

The other 60% of the bench will include Kagarise and President Judge Elizabeth A. Doyle — if they win retention votes in November — and Judge Jackie Bernard, who is in the midst of her 10-year term.

Kagarise, who is finishing the last year of his 10-year term, said the seating of two new judges, at a time when society is changing, puts the county court in a position to establish direction for the future.

"I'm sure I have supporters out there who say I should refrain from stating my own personal opinion and I respect that," the judge said. "But I also ask them to understand how important this election is."

In weighing his decision, Kagarise said he settled on endorsing only one candidate because it leaves voters with a choice between the other two candidates.

"I've dedicated a large portion of my life to public service and I think the people who support me know that I'm not afraid to back away from tough decisions," Kagarise said. "This is a time when I didn't want to back away from doing what I think is the right thing to do."

The other judge up for retention

President Judge Elizabeth Doyle, who like Kagarise will be on the November ballot for retention, hasn't endorsed anyone.

"There are three excellent judicial candidates for two good vacancies on the court ... all qualified men of good character," she said.

As president judge, Doyle said she feels that it's her job to "welcome the choice of the voters."

Continued on next page

It's also the voters' choice — in November — to decide if Doyle is retained for another 10-year term starting in January.

"I am able to work with any of these candidates that the voters choose," Doyle said.

The option of judicial endorsement

Dennis Plane, political science professor and department chair at Juniata College in Huntingdon, said that if a judge's actions are raising eyebrows, that's a good thing, because it means the public is paying attention.

But even if the judge's letter complies with the state ethics rules, Plane said that doesn't mean the state's ethics rules are perfect.

"It is up to each citizen to decide for themselves whether the judge's actions are appropriate and to exercise their vote accordingly at the ballot box," the professor said. "If voters believe that Judge Kagarise acted unethically, they should vote not to retain him and/or vote against the candidate he is endorsing."

"They should also contact the state Judicial Ethics Committee or their local legislators and ask for a change in the ethics rule," Plane added.

Political science professor Joseph Melusky, director of the Saint Francis University Center for Study of Government and Law, said the opportunity for common pleas court judges to endorse a candidate doesn't happen often because it's restricted to the year they run for retention and that happens only once every 10 years. And he didn't readily identify any problems.

"It would be problematic if an endorsing judge sat on a higher court that would evaluate the successful candidate's later rulings," Melusky said. "In such circumstances, the endorsing judge would have expressed a personal bias in favor of the new judge. ... But that situation doesn't apply when a common pleas judge endorses a common pleas judicial candidate. They would be sitting on the same court."

While candidate endorsements can lead to post-election alignments among elected officials and colleagues, as expected in the highly-partisan Wisconsin Supreme Court race, Nelson said he isn't convinced that judicial endorsements are necessarily bad.

"Certainly, judicial candidates have long gotten endorsements from police associations and other groups," he said.

"A big issue in judicial elections — and especially local elections — is that voters have a hard time learning about the candidates," Nelson said. "Endorsements give voters more information about a candidate, which can help them decide which candidate to support on Election Day."

Endorsement vs. support

Kagarise's published letter referred to others who have endorsed Consiglio, including current District Attorney Pete Weeks.

Weeks said Friday that he has endorsed only Seelye because of Seelye's experience and local practice, while recognizing Consiglio and Miller as qualified candidates.

Weeks said he spoke to Consiglio and Miller about their campaigns and told each candidate: "Yes, you can say I have a favorable opinion of you."

Weeks also said he also authorized the Consiglio campaign to include him among the county's last four district attorneys supporting their candidate.

"I stand by what I wrote," Kagarise said Friday. "The information I put in that letter was based on the campaign's understanding of the support and endorsements it had."

Bar association's role

While a slew of local office holders, retired office holders and other local residents have written endorsement letters in favor of the local judicial candidates, the Blair County Bar hasn't.

President Brian Grabill, whose law partner is running for a county judicial seat, said that to his knowledge, the Blair County Bar Association has never engaged in the practice of endorsing county judicial candidates.

"While some local bar associations, such as Cambria County's association, have a policy in place for rating candidates as either highly recommended, recommended or not recommended, the Blair County Bar Association does not have such a policy," Grabill said.

The Pennsylvania Bar Association also rates judicial candidates, but only candidates seeking seats on the state's Supreme, Superior and Commonwealth courts.

Mirror Staff Writer Kay Stephens is at 814-946-7456

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Bedford Gazette

Fire blazes through Bedford businesses

By the Gazette Staff

A late night fire Monday that burned into the early hours Tuesday morning caused significant damage to some Juliana Street businesses in downtown Bedford.

Six fire companies and two ambulance services were on scene at the 11:32 p.m. blaze. Two ladder trucks were deployed, one from Bedford and the other from Windber, to try to knock down the fire and keep it from spreading to neighboring buildings — including the Hotel Pennsylvania apartments adjacent to the incident site.

Peppercorn Market owner Tyna Walker-Lay said she and her husband Patrick were alerted to the fire by a text message notification of movement detected by their security cameras in the nearby alley.

"When we looked to check (the cameras), we saw smoke," Walker-Lay said. "Patrick called 911. Our alarms in our buildings hadn't gone off yet."

Patrick Lay quickly arrived on scene, but the fire was already raging.

"We knew that any second, our 1758 wood timber structure was going go up in flames, but we wanted to be right there," Walker-Lay added. "At one point, there was a huge explosion and the phone went dead. Later, Patrick told me (the phone) blew right out of his hand."

Officials tentatively pointed to the rear of Pigeon Hill Studios, owned by Mari-Pat Beene, as the location where the fire started. The building also houses the Collective Market storefront and rents at least a portion of the upstairs space as short term rentals.

Two state police fire marshals were on the scene by 9:30 a.m. Tuesday. Christopher Fox, PSP public information officer, said the investigation is ongoing and no determination has been reached as to the cause.

Standing in the back of the property, near what was left of the studio portion of



PHOTO: RYAN SPRING

Debris and remnants of Monday night's fire sit inside what's left of a room at Pigeon Hill Studios on Juliana Street.

Pigeon Hill, Bedford Fire Chief Gary Cooper said he was the first emergency responder on scene.

"When I got here, we had heavy fire in this area right here," Cooper said.

While he said he does not think the rear portion of the building is salvageable, Cooper said he cannot speak to any structural damage to the upper floors of the front of the building. He said firefighters were able to get the fire contained before it reached the Juliana St. facade, but smoke, heat, and water damage are likely spread across the entire property.

"I'm devastated. What else can I say?" Beene said of the fire.

Haley Feaster, owner of Deep Rooted Co., located inside the Collective MKT space, said there was very little left inside the store.

"I don't know what the silver lining of this will be, but luckily everyone is safe," Feaster said.

Collective MKT offers a collaborative

space with other artisans, and Feaster said the community they have will give them the strength to move forward.

Mahendi owner Tera Herman, of Hollidaysburg, said she found out about the fire around 12:30 a.m. Tuesday morning when a friend saw it on Facebook and notified her. The business, located inside Collective MKT, sells artisan jewelry, home goods, and fragrances, among other items.

"I am grateful for the firemen and the quick response, because it's all volunteer," she said. "And for the community that's reaching out. I'm so glad to be a part of the community in Bedford."

Herman said she has already had an outpouring of love from a multitude of people. That, she said, is why she is not going to let the fire destroy her spirit.

Downtown Bedford Inc. manager Lindsay Salas said she had reached out to those involved and had already been on the phone to find out what help could be given.

But regardless, she feels the sense of camaraderie will help those affected going forward.

"I'm sure it's going to make them all come together as a business community, and as a friendship community," Salas said.

At the Hotel Pennsylvania apartments, property manager Chris Crawford said he looked out of his apartment window directly at the fire, which started just as he was getting ready for bed.

Firefighters communicated with him throughout the incident, originally suggesting they may have to vacate the premises, before ultimately deciding the fire did not pose a danger to the building or its occupants.

There are 49 residents in the building, all of whom are 62 or older, or disabled, Crawford said.

In addition to the Bedford Fire Company, crews from Everett, Shawnee Valley, Alum Bank, Cumberland Valley, Somerset (Windber), and Southern Cove responded, along with Bedford and Chestnut Ridge ambulance services, Cooper said.

"We did send one gentleman from Shawnee Valley to the hospital with a shoulder injury," Cooper said. He said it did not appear to be serious but he did not have an update on the firefighter's condition.

Praise for the response was universal.

"I appreciate all the mutual aid we had from the other departments," Cooper said.

"Our firefighter crews and worker crews are amazing," Salas said. "They do a great job for our town and our community. They're putting their own lives at risk every time they go out on one of those jobs."

Walker-Lay echoed those comments.

"The extraordinary efforts of the fire companies saved our building, and kept the fire from crossing the alley to other buildings," she said.

Published Feb. 28, 2023

Prison employee hailed as hero for rescue of two boys

By **Julye Wemple**

Muncy, Pa. — Andrew Hering was looking forward to a relaxing weekend when he left work a few Fridays ago.

As the maintenance foreman for SCI Muncy, and a former corrections officer, Hering's job meant always being on high alert for danger. So when he drove down the prison lane on July 7, he thought he was leaving that all behind for a few days.

Instead, Hering, 42, didn't make it beyond the end of the lane before he found himself racing to save a mother and two young boys when the van they were in caught fire.

Just as he reached the end of the lane that intersects with State Route 405, Hering noticed the van that had pulled off the road in front of him.

"It looked like it was smoking and overheating or the radiator was leaking," he said.

Hering pulled in behind the minivan to check on the driver and see if he could offer help. The woman, Therese Camacho, was on the phone with her husband. They'd just picked the car up from the repair shop, Hering later learned.

As he approached the car, the smoke began to thicken and Hering noticed something troubling. Whatever was leaking had ignited and little balls of fire were dripping underneath the vehicle.

"I opened her door and said, 'You've got to get out of the car,'" Hering told the woman.

The cab quickly began filling with smoke and the smell of melting plastic. Camacho jumped out, but told Hering her two small sons, Cole and Cayden, were in the backseat.

Hering understood the risk of jumping into a car about to go up in flames, but says he never considered doing anything else.



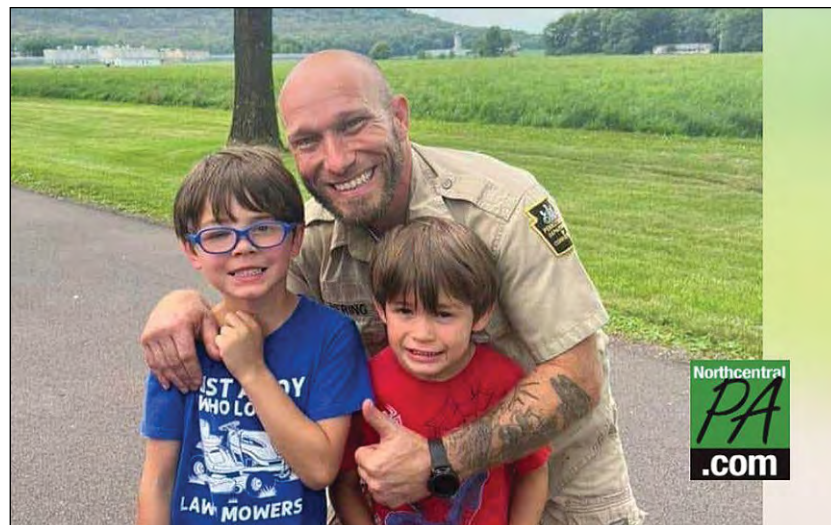
"I only did what I hope any person would do for my wife and kid," he said.

By this time, the wiring had begun to melt and when he tried to open the van's rear automatic door, it stopped halfway. Hering wedged himself between the door and the vehicle's frame and pushed his way.

"These kids are coming out, one way or another," Hering recalled thinking.

He climbed to the first row of seats and unbuckled one of the boys from his car seat. Once he freed him and got him out of the car, he made his way to the van's third seat where the second boy was waiting — fear in his eyes, but calm as Hering pulled him from his seat.

Hering even managed to take a look around the van for any toys or electronics the boys might need before climbing back out of the vehicle.



Northcentral
PA
.com

PHOTO PROVIDED

ABOVE: Andrew Hering stands with brothers Cole and Cayden after pulling them from a burning vehicle earlier this month.

LEFT: The front of the burned vehicle.

Just moments later, the van was engulfed in flames and quickly destroyed.

Camacho shared the dramatic rescue on Facebook and in the following days, Hering was overwhelmed with the response — from his friends, co-workers, and strangers alike.

"I got called a hero and an angel and all sorts of things," he admitted.

Hering doesn't want the fuss and he laughs when he hears the word "hero." But in quiet moments, with his wife Jaime and six-year-old daughter Cadence, the gravity of what could have happened hits him.

"Kids are so precious and at that age, so vulnerable," Hering said. "I'll never forget seeing the fear in their eyes."

And although the idea of being called a hero embarrasses him, he's taken it

seriously. That's why he's organized a fundraiser for the Camacho family, who not only lost their vehicle, but the money spent to have it repaired just before the fire, which was about \$1,000, Hering said.

The boys also missed a much-anticipated trip to Knoebels Amusement Resort, where they were headed the next day in their newly-repaired van, Hering said.

If nothing else, he'd like to see the family recover the \$1,000 they spent on repairs, he said.

The GoFundMe will close at the end of July and he plans to invite the family to the prison to receive whatever money has been raised by then. To donate, visit The Camacho Family fundraiser.

Published July 22, 2023

THE MORNING CALL

Room for more?

The Lehigh Valley's affordable housing crisis — and how to fix it

By **Lindsay Weber,**
Daniel Patrick Sheehan
and **Graysen Golter**
Of The Morning Call

Editor's note: The Lehigh Valley is experiencing a housing crisis. As the population grows, so does the demand for housing — leading to skyrocketing prices that are becoming unaffordable even to some middle-class families. Over the past few months, reporters with The Morning Call have interviewed government officials, housing advocates and others for an in-depth look at the demand for affordable housing. This is the first part of that series.

Gracie Santana, a lifelong Allentown resident, can't afford to rent an apartment in her home city.

Santana, a teacher at Lincoln Leadership Academy, which she attended growing up, has lived with her parents in Allentown's 8th Ward neighborhood ever since graduating from Temple University in 2019.

"My comfortability would be financially like \$1,000, but they're not even offering studios for that much," Santana said. "One of my paychecks does not even cover a room."

Santana's story is not unique. Across the Lehigh Valley, families are struggling to put safe, stable roofs over their heads. Rapidly rising home prices and rental rates are pricing many out of the market — even those who would be considered middle-class homebuyers like Santana.

"If you're a teacher," said Becky Bradley, director of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, "what housing is available for you, and is affordable based on your income?"

It's a problem, advocates say, that has wide-reaching implications for families across all income levels.



AMY SHORTELL/THE MORNING CALL

Gracie Santana is seen in her neighborhood along North 10th Street on Friday, March 31, 2023, in Allentown.

"If as a child you have stable housing, there's like an 80% better chance of going to college or a trade school," said Chuck Weiss, associate executive director for housing with Community Action Lehigh Valley. "That statistic is mind boggling — an 80% better chance. If you don't have stable housing, if you don't own a home, it's really hard to get a college these days ... that's among other things like credit and building wealth. There's no chance to build wealth without stable housing."

The U.S. Department of Housing and

Urban Development considers housing to be affordable if its costs are no more than 30% of a person's monthly income. That's roughly \$1,600 a month for a household making the Lehigh County median income of \$66,000.

According to Rent.com, the average studio apartment in Allentown costs \$1,691. A one-bedroom averages around \$1,731 and two bedrooms, \$1,871.

According to the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission and U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, about 30%

of Lehigh Valley households were considered "cost burdened" when it comes to housing. That's more than 80,000 households in Lehigh and Northampton counties.

Valley-wide, there is a shortage of about 14,500 housing units to serve people making less than \$25,000 a year, the commission says.

The planning commission says the region's "housing attainability" has long

Continued on next page

been an issue, but it's been made worse by pandemic job losses and rising prices. The Lehigh Valley just doesn't have enough housing — at the right prices — to accommodate the demand.

There's a shortage on the high end, too, meaning wealthier residents "buy down" or remain in cheaper housing and lower-income residents "buy up," paying more than they can afford. That creates a shortage of stock for middle-income residents.

Yet, with relatively few resources to tackle the problem, government leaders and nonprofits are limited in what they can do.

Cities like Allentown, Easton and Bethlehem are struggling to keep rental prices down as well as meet demand for housing. Rent control, which would cap the amount rent could increase year-over-year, is illegal under Pennsylvania law. In Bethlehem alone, the Lehigh Valley's second largest city, creating affordable housing for everyone would cost \$50 million every year.

In Lehigh Valley's suburbs, where home prices are rising, affordable housing developers also face an uphill battle against residents and government officials who do not want high-density housing in their communities.

Federal resources also are scarce — beginning in the 1980s when the Reagan administration slashed billions in social welfare programs, including ones that protect affordable housing, those resources have continued to decline. Subsidies available for housing are scarce, and waitlists for subsidized affordable housing span years.

So what can be done?

Alan Jennings, former director of Community Action Lehigh Valley, has dedicated his career and life to solving affordable housing, homelessness and poverty.

"We can solve this problem," Jennings said. "We lack the will."

It takes investment at local, state and federal levels to tackle the problem, Jennings said, but there's a lack of commitment. In particular, slashes to federal housing programs over the last several decades have shown that the federal government sees housing needs as dispensable, he said.

Santana said she's explored moving up to 45 minutes away for an affordable

"We can solve this problem. We lack the will."

Alan Jennings

former director of Community Action Lehigh Valley



DONNA FISHER / THE MORNING CALL / FILE PHOTO

Alan Jennings, former executive director of Community Action Lehigh Valley, has long been a crusader for affordable housing.

apartment. She spent some time apartment searching last year, but gave up after she found rent way out of her budget.

Affordable housing programs through nonprofits and the county are a mystery to her.

"It's never gotten to a point where I need to look into those programs but I do know they exist somewhere," she said. "But where to go for those things I have no idea where to even start."

Housing demand driving up prices

To Allentown Mayor Matt Tuerk, the problem comes down to supply and demand: The region faces a shortage of housing at all price levels, creating artificially inflated high prices. But the problem is most pressing for those who make less than the median income and can often only live affordably via government subsidized housing.

Tuerk calls himself a "believer" in the market and said one of the best ways to incentivize more affordable housing is to incentivize building more housing of all kinds. Most of the time that's market-rate housing, which is the most profitable for developers.

"I'm happy about what the market does in terms of building. I'm not happy when we can't quite keep up with demand for housing, period," Tuerk said.

The city is looking to incentivize building more housing for all income levels. It approved a flurry of housing in recent years and expects to add hundreds of units, many of which are apartments, in the next decade. The same is true of the Lehigh Valley's other two cities.

But it will take more than just the Lehigh Valley's biggest players to solve the issue. In fact, part of the problem, to some advocates, is that cities are forced to shoulder the burden of providing affordable housing.

Most nonprofits providing housing resources, subsidized affordable housing units and all of the area's homeless shelters are in Allentown, Bethlehem or Easton.

"The cities have the entire burden," Jennings said.

Further, municipalities and counties can only do so much with limited resources and authority. Developers are generally not obligated to provide affordable housing, even those who receive tax credits.

For example, the Neighborhood Improvement Zone in Allentown, which was created by state law and allows developers to tap state and local tax revenue to pay off construction loans, includes no requirements or incentives to include affordable housing units. It's something Jennings advocated for when he was on the NIZ board, but was never implemented.

In Bethlehem, City Council last year added to a requirement that developers who build housing in the city's LERTA zone, a state program that incentivizes development on former brownfield sites by partially exempting new assessment taxes for 10 years, include affordable units in their plans.

Council first added affordable housing measures to the LERTA in 2021, requiring developers to either pay \$25,000 per 10 housing units constructed or set aside 10% of the units as affordable housing. Council upped that requirement last year, to \$52,320 per 10 units.

It's unlikely to make a huge difference in the availability of affordable housing in Bethlehem — only around 17% of the remaining LERTA zone could become residential — but is a step in the right direction, according to Grace Crampsie Smith, council vice president.

"We have to start somewhere, and we have to give the message, and let the community know we hear them," Crampsie Smith said in August when council passed the ordinance. "Many people who are born and raised here can't afford to stay here. We hear people's concerns and we're trying to address it."

Could zoning be the answer?

The Lehigh Valley's municipalities could go further.

Inclusionary zoning is a tool municipalities can use to require market-rate housing

Continued on next page

projects to include a percentage of affordable units. It can be mandatory or voluntary with financial incentives, and usually applies only to projects over a certain number of units.

According to a study from Grounded Solutions Network, municipalities in the Lehigh Valley are a great candidate for inclusionary zoning ordinances.

Inclusionary zoning is most successful in regions with strong economies experiencing market and population growth. The Lehigh Valley's population is expected to increase by 100,000 by 2050. According to the Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp. and Site Selection magazine, the region, with its \$42.9 billion GDP, is among one of the top regions of its size.

Officials face a conundrum, however, in that they need to balance development against competing desires. Residents want open spaces to preserve at least some memory of the rural past. But to maintain open spaces, developments need to be more densely built, meaning residents may be more crowded than they bargained for.

"Everybody's trying to find what that new balance is," Bradley said. "How much (rural character) are they going to maintain? Local governments are really trying to navigate these challenges."

Inclusionary zoning can — and has been — implemented in some Pennsylvania towns.

State College, a borough in central Pennsylvania that is home to Penn State University, enacted an inclusionary zoning ordinance via its borough council in 2011.

The ordinance requires new housing developments with at least six units to either allocate 10% toward workforce-oriented affordable housing, defined as housing that is affordable to people making 60%-120% of the area median income, or pay a fee in lieu of the units to the borough, which will use the money to support affordable housing developments elsewhere.

The measure was prompted by what advocates called inflated housing prices driven largely by Penn State students, which were pushing out middle- and low-income workers and their families.

Colleen Ritter, executive director with the State College Community Land Trust, said inclusionary zoning increased the availability of affordable housing in the community.

Most developers opt to pay the fee rather than designate affordable units, Ritter said.

The Community Land Trust has been a benefactor of some of those dollars, which allowed the trust to acquire and refurbish more housing.

The trust owns around 53 parcels in the borough, which it renovates and sells to income-qualified buyers at affordable rates.

Yet issues remain. The trust receives funding from the federal HOME investment partnership program, but those dollars have largely remained stagnant as

affordable housing in the state's rural and suburban areas are education and zoning.

Educating communities, Hanchin said, means having conversations with residents before projects begin, to judge their feelings about new housing and determine their needs, such as the desire to preserve land. Officials must then be receptive to community feedback during the approval process.

"If you don't have that community

"Everybody's trying to find what that new balance is. How much (rural character) are they going to maintain? Local governments are really trying to navigate these challenges."

Becky Bradley

director of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission

the cost of building and maintaining homes has gone up, Ritter said.

"Back in the late '90s, early 2000s, with the amount of money we received, we might be able to do three or four new homes. Now we are at one every other year," Ritter said. "We do other things, we find money in other ways, but in general that's how we've been able to do it over time. That part is just frustrating, in the sense that those dollars have stayed pretty much the same; they just don't go as far."

The same is true for housing organizations in the Lehigh Valley. Without increased federal and state investment, local organizers can only make a dent in the problem.

"Our government has to be involved. It's the only one with the borrowing capability to respond to the need," Jennings said. "Pennsylvania doesn't have it, and in fact, they've cut their funding, not increased it."

A developer's perspective

Dana Hanchin is chief executive officer of HDC MidAtlantic, a Lancaster nonprofit that advocates for, and develops, affordable housing in Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland.

The organization doesn't have any active projects in the Valley's rural and suburban areas, but Hanchin said there is an "overwhelming" need for that kind of housing statewide as residents across different levels of income struggle to find the housing they need and can afford.

She said the biggest obstacles to

support ... that is a very important factor in whether or not that project will be successful," Hanchin said.

Even then, municipal zoning demands can make or break a proposed development and determine who gets access to affordable housing. That's especially the case when trying to modify an ordinance can require time and money that a developer may not have.

As such, Hanchin implores municipalities to evaluate their zoning to see if it's supportive for affordable housing and identify what needs to be changed for increasing density.

"With HDC, we build typically between 45 and 60 apartments per project, which requires a significant amount of land and also density," Hanchin said. "And so density becomes a challenge in suburban and rural communities because they may have restrictions on the number of dwellings per acre, and that would be challenging. ... If it's two dwellings or units per acre, our model isn't feasible there."

There can also be an implicit bias against people who most need affordable housing, Hanchin added.

The working class and the working poor "are the folks who kept us safe in the pandemic," she said. "They're our warehouse workers, our retail workers, our home health aides that basically earned wages around that rate \$12 to 15 an hour, and they deserve a place to call home as well."

Moving the ball forward?

That bias can put municipalities in a bind, caught between the desires of residents and laws that seek to assure the availability of affordable housing.

For example, Whitehall Township in 2017 paid \$350,000 to settle a federal complaint brought by PathStone Housing Corp., a nonprofit seeking to develop a former garment mill on South Quarry Street into 49 apartments for low- and moderate-income residents.

The project required zoning variances on parking space requirements and other matters. After hearing from residents — who said, among other things, that the project would lower property values and increase the need for police oversight in the neighborhood — the township withdrew its initial approval of PathStone's request for relief.

Rather than appealing the denial in court, PathStone filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, accusing Whitehall of denying the project on racial grounds in violation of the Fair Housing Act.

The township updated its zoning ordinance to allow such projects, but nonetheless signed off on a settlement involving the zoning hearing board, HUD and PathStone. The township did not admit to violating the Fair Housing Act under the settlement.

Jennings, though now retired, still frequents municipal meetings and remains an advocate for affordable housing in the Lehigh Valley.

To him, a promising sign is that Lehigh Valley cities are beginning to tackle the problem. Allentown and Bethlehem both are working on comprehensive housing studies, allocating millions from American Rescue Plan dollars to study the issue and build more affordable units.

But the next step needed, he said, is for rural and suburban municipalities to put their share of resources toward the problem as well. It's a responsibility those areas have shirked in the past.

Still, the investment from local cities on affordable housing shows that the tides are beginning to turn, in his view.

"For most of my 40 years of griping about this issue, I felt alone in the woods, you know, wondering if anybody can hear me," Jennings said. "What's exciting to me is that I think I'm starting to hear the kind of consensus that's needed to move this ball downfield."

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NEW Pittsburgh Courier

HISTORIC SETTLEMENT

City of Pittsburgh settles with family of Jim Rogers for \$8 million in wrongful death lawsuit

By Rob Taylor Jr.
Courier Staff Writer

You couldn't see James Frierson's eyes. They were hidden behind a pair of sunglasses.

Was it because of the sunlight, or was it to hide the pain, the hurt, the trauma of standing at the exact spot that his brother, Jim Rogers, was hit by a Taser numerous times by a Pittsburgh Police officer nearly two years ago.

No one offered to provide medical help to Rogers, 54, even as attorney Todd Hollis said he sat in the back of a police car "for over 30 minutes, screaming and begging for help. There were sergeants, there was a lieutenant, medics there...all of them heard him...asking to be given medical attention. West Penn Hospital is three blocks away from here. They drove by Shadyside Hospital...our experts have said that had he been given medical attention sooner, he would have lived."

Hollis, Frierson, and numerous community advocates were on hand on Harriet Street in Bloomfield, on the afternoon of April 27, to announce that the City of Pittsburgh had settled with the family of Jim Rogers for \$8 million in the wrongful death lawsuit. The lawsuit was filed in April 2022 by the estate of Jim Rogers, who was Black. Hollis was the attorney representing the estate.

On Oct. 13, 2021, a woman on Harriet Street called police to report that a man had "stolen" a bicycle, although witnesses on the street said the bicycle had been left for anyone to take. When police arrived, they found the alleged suspect, Rogers. One of the officers, Keith Edmonds, then used a Taser on Rogers repeatedly. Much of the incident was caught on video.

"Officer Edmonds' brutal attack on Mr. Rogers through the repeated use of a Taser on an unarmed, nonviolent, older gentleman was without cause or justification and undertaken recklessly, wantonly and with gross negligence," read



Attorney Todd Hollis, center, announces an \$8 million settlement with the City of Pittsburgh for the family of Jim Rogers.

part of the lawsuit filed against the city, 11 police officers and two paramedics.

Police took Rogers towards the Allegheny County Jail, but after noticing his deteriorating status, they quickly took him to UPMC Mercy Hospital. However, Rogers died the next day, Oct. 14, 2021.

The incident took place prior to Ed Gainey, who is Black, becoming Pittsburgh's mayor. But a few months after Mayor Gainey took office, his office announced that it had fired five Pittsburgh Police officers connected to the incident.

That wasn't going to be enough, Hollis and the Rogers family said.

"This is the most egregious case that I have ever seen in my 29 years of practicing law," Hollis said on April 27, moments after announcing what he called a historic settlement. "It's senseless. Most people probably won't believe me, but when we decided to resolve this case, my interest was not the money. The money is going to help Mr. Rogers' daughter secure a future for her children. I'm at the stage of my life where legacy is more important to me, knowing that my daughter can walk in any neighborhood and not be judged simply because she doesn't fit in. I want to know that when I'm long gone, our children will live in a better place than what exists now.

Harriet Street will go down in infamy as one of those neighborhoods that committed the worst crime in human history."

Tim Stevens, Chairman and CEO of the Black Political Empowerment Project, said he met Rogers on a few occasions. "He was just a gentle soul. Anybody who met him would know that. He was not a threat to anybody. Just because he was born Black, and maybe dark, maybe that meant something to somebody. But he was a human being, and he took the bike back, and he's dead."

Mayor Gainey released a statement shortly after the news conference. It read, in part: "My heart is with Jim Rogers' family, friends, and loved ones today. As we put his family's lawsuit against the city behind us, the city continues to pray for the family over this unnecessary loss of life...In addition to the monetary remedy of this settlement, we will also be reviewing our use of force policies with the family and other advocates. We are committed to changing policing in our city and working to rebuild community police relationships so that everyone in Pittsburgh feels safe."

Hollis announced that the family of Rogers wants the City of Pittsburgh to implement a set of policies dubbed the "Jim Rogers Rules," which are broken into

five components: General changes related to the culture of policing in the city; Changes related to the use of force; Changes specifically related to the use of Tasers; Changes related to the medical care provided to criminal suspects by police officers; and Discipline.

More specifically, the Rogers family wants the city to "train officers to de-escalate situations instead of enflaming them," "retrain every officer with access to a Taser in the policy and practices and the appropriate and inappropriate use of Tasers," and "implement a policy and congruent training of EMTs that they are free to assess the situation at the scene of a police incident and determine all who need to be treated and make that determination free of police guidance."

"There has to be a better way of dealing with the public so that police are not given the unilateral authority to decide when and if somebody will get medical attention," Hollis said at the news conference. "And why would 30 police officers respond to a homeless person (Rogers) who had allegedly stolen a bicycle? We're in Zone 5. Could that have been the most important crime on October 13?"

Hollis added: "Had he been given medical attention sooner, he would have lived. From a humanitarian standpoint, how many times does somebody have to ask for help before a reasonable person decides to give them help?"

For Frierson, the older brother of Rogers, he was asked by reporters what he would say to the Pittsburgh Police officer who Tased Rogers, and the others who failed to come to Rogers' aid thereafter.

"What is there to say?" Frierson replied. "I've watched that (video) over and over again, it was the most inhumane thing I've ever seen, even if he was not my brother. It was just unreasonable."

Frierson added: "There's never going to be closure, ever. You can't unsee what we saw."

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BUCKS COUNTY HERALD

Out of Kabul's darkness, Fatima shines



COURTESY OF SOLEBURY SCHOOL ATHLETICS

Solebury School student-athlete Fatima Daryabi arrived on the Spartans' campus last October after fleeing Afghanistan in 2021.

By Don Leypoldt

Not all champions hoist trophies.

Fatima Daryabi's statistics don't pop. The Solebury School senior scored three goals for the girls soccer team this fall and made five appearances as an enthusiastic reserve for the girls basketball team this winter.

"When she is on the bench, she is everyone's biggest cheerleader," noted Solebury girls soccer coach Tommy Harkanson. "They all look to her for the first high five."

Yet if Lionel Messi or LeBron James ever found themselves on Solebury's campus, Fatima Daryabi could teach both some lessons on winning in life.

When Harkanson sent Daryabi in for a penalty kick this year, she wasn't attempting a 12-yarder. It was more like an 11,300-miler. That's roughly the distance from Kabul to Abu Dhabi to Fort Bliss, Texas, to Solebury ... the journey that Daryabi made solo as a high school junior when she fled her native Afghanistan.

On Aug. 15, 2021, American high school students were soaking in the last lazy days of summer break.

On Aug. 15, 2021, Fatima Daryabi boarded a U.S. military plane ... by herself ... bound for who knows where but knowing that wherever that plane landed was almost certainly better than the home she was leaving.

"I left when the Taliban took over Afghanistan," Daryabi said. "I left alone. I got on a military plane and didn't know where I was going to land. I spent 15 days in Abu Dhabi in a resettlement camp. After that, they moved me to Texas and I was in a military camp for 42 days getting processed, working out my work authorization cards and things like that."

In Afghanistan, Daryabi participated in an

online book club led by American women. One of them, Mercer County's Susan Weintraub, reached out to Daryabi and was thrilled to discover her student landed in the U.S. Weintraub contacted several area schools to try and place Daryabi. After an initial interview, Solebury School offered Daryabi a full scholarship. She arrived on campus last October.

Just days after Fatima left Kabul her brother Taqi, a journalist with an investigative newspaper, and his photographer were beaten by the Taliban for hours "with batons, electrical cables and whips," reported the BBC. Police were infuriated that Taqi covered a women's protest in Kabul. When Taqi lost consciousness, the beatings finally stopped.

Taqi became an international cause celebre, with pictures of his gruesome welts and bruises showing up on both the BBC and Al-Jazeera. Even more ominous than the violation of Taqi's human rights were what his arrest signaled: it was one of the earliest broadcasts to the world that despite cheap talk, the "new" Taliban was just as vicious as the old Taliban.

"I have brothers living in the States," Fatima shared. "My parents recently immigrated to another country. It is hard to live in Afghanistan because of my brother who is famous. The Taliban is looking for him. They went to his office looking for him and they have searched buildings.

"It was very hard to connect with my family for a while. I get to talk to them, but there is a very big time difference and sometimes I have to stay up very late to talk them," she continued. "And sometimes, I refuse to talk to them. It's not because I don't love them. It's because I don't know what to talk about with them."

Continued on next page

Here is the “sweet” part of Daryabi’s bittersweet saga. In many ways, she is a normal, happy, healthy teenager. She plays sports. She has friends and fun. She loves her school. “I have all of these amazing things happening to me in my life,” Daryabi explained. “I do so many things in and outside of school that are fun for me. I don’t feel like I want to share something like that with my parents or siblings back home, because they don’t have that, even though they are all happy for me.”

“My sister talked to me about how the Taliban stopped her,” Daryabi continued, “and said the next time, if she is not fully scarved down, they will shoot her. I cannot just say ‘Yes, we had a basketball game and we won.’ Or ‘I hung out with friends and had pizza.’”

“I think everybody looks at her problems, and they are a little bigger than their own, and Fatima never looks at it as a problem. Ever,” Harkanson observed. “The girls pick up on that and want to work harder with her on the team.”

Daryabi’s life experiences forged her with iron fists in velvet gloves. On the one hand, her charisma and positivity got her elected as Solebury’s class president. Even though she was in Fort Bliss for just six weeks, Daryabi launched a book club – translating from Persian – that doubled as an English class for refugees who didn’t speak the language.

Back home, she knitted scarves and gloves so street children would have something to wear in winter. “Everyone loves Fatima” is heard repeatedly on Solebury’s campus.

At first Solebury “was kind of hard. It was very different, coming from Afghanistan and going through all of the trauma, all of the anxiety and depression from being lonely and away from home,” Daryabi admitted. “But coming to Solebury, you join a community where everyone is so nice and so welcoming in making you feel like you count. That you matter.”

“I didn’t know anything about the States,” Daryabi continued. “I just saw it in the news and read books about it. Once I got here, it was the same life just in a different place.”

Part of her life that carried over was soccer. One of eight children, Daryabi loves “the beautiful game” and watched as much as she could with her brothers. “I had a favorite team,” she smiled. “For a



ABOVE: Solebury girls soccer coach Tommy Harkanson and Spartans senior Fatima Daryabi.

PHOTO: DON LEYPOLDT



RIGHT: Fatima Daryabi scored three goals for the Solebury School girls soccer team this past fall.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SOLEBURY SCHOOL ATHLETICS

while it was Barcelona, but then Messi got out and Neymar got out. Now, it’s Manchester United.”

“Her touch ability was really good after a few practices,” Harkanson noted. “I saw her as an attacker, just instinctually with her size, and she is pretty fast.”

“I picked her for a PK one time because I knew she wouldn’t get nervous,” continued Harkanson with obvious understatement. “She is an outstanding student as well, always working hard. I taught her in two classes – health and microbiology. She got

an A+ in both. She ate up the material.”

Daryabi developed a close mentorship with Harkanson. “I joined soccer because (Tommy) was inspiring me and there were so many other friends on the soccer team. It was about the teamwork and connecting with more people,” Daryabi shared. “You can come in at any level, and you are improving to get to the same level where everyone else is. The coaches are trying so hard for that (to happen).”

“And it was my way of blocking any other problem in my life,” she noted. “I was able

to forget about everything and just shoot the ball. Soccer season was the best part of my life in the U.S.”

The iron fist? Daryabi couldn’t play sports back home. “We have a phrase back in Afghanistan: ‘Freedom for the neighbor’s daughter,’” Daryabi grinned sarcastically. Everyone is for equality ... but don’t let my daughter be the one who breaks the mold.

“It was a privilege,” she emphasized the word, “to get to where you can play sports. Education is not a right. It’s a privilege. You have to fight for it.”

Fight she did, getting up at 5 a.m. and biking the 40 minutes to school – against her parents’ wishes – so she could join that book club.

She still fights. In some sense, Daryabi’s life could be seen as a winning Powerball ticket. Daryabi doesn’t look at it that way.

“There are millions and millions of girls back home who cannot go to school and cannot get out,” Daryabi pointed out. “I had survivor’s guilt for a while and I still feel it, but I don’t let it get in the way of fighting for what is right. Fighting for what I know can make a change.”

“I don’t know what I am going to study for but I know which direction I am going,” she continued. “Maybe journalism or medical because those services are what we need in Afghanistan. I lost my best friend three years ago, after a bomb explosion because the hospital refused to do services because she couldn’t afford it. That is heartbreaking.”

“She’s tough to talk about honestly,” Harkanson admitted. “She’s so impressive that I struggle to find words sometimes. It’s crazy to think that somebody living in Afghanistan just a couple of years ago is so well adjusted and is a normal American teenager now. She is a leader across the board while still learning the language – and teaching the language – to other people.”

“You can say any attribute you want and it fits her,” he finished. “She is unbelievable.”

“I know what I want to do in the future: stand for who I am and stand for everyone that needs someone to take their hand. That is the biggest part of my heart leading me the way I am going,” Daryabi shared. “I feel the responsibility and I feel like I have the opportunity, so why not?”

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PHOTO: ANN BELSER

Kentucky Avenue School language arts teacher Tara Henson sits with middle school students as they protest gun violence following a school shooting at The Covenant School in Nashville, Tennessee.

Kids take on gun violence

Middle school students join national walkout

By Ann Belser

Tara Henson's middle school language arts students walked out of Kentucky Avenue School and set up a protest on the steps of the Third Presbyterian Church in Shadyside calling for gun control.

During the week that Kentucky Avenue School was closed for spring break, three 9-year-olds and three adults were killed by a shooter at The Covenant School in Nashville, Tennessee, and then less than a mile away from Kentucky Avenue School, students at Central and Oakland Catholic Schools were forced to hide, then evacuate

in response to a false report of a shooter.

On April 3, when Kentucky Avenue School reopened, some of the children found themselves concerned about going back to class. Even though the calls had not been about their school, it was too close.

In response, on Wednesday, April 5, the language arts class took part in the National School Walkout to stop gun violence called by Students Demand Action, an organization calling for gun control. The students made posters and organized their walk-out with the help of

faculty members Andillion Del Pesco, Caroline Massie, and Chris McElligott. Henson, the language arts teacher who stayed with the students outside, had her own reason for the protest: Her son was one of the students at Central Catholic who was hiding in the bathroom thinking the school was being attacked.

"Coming back on Monday I feel like everybody was really tense because it was so recent," Liam Spencer, an eighth-grader at the school, said the day after the protest. "Everybody was really tensed up."

Continued on next page

"We were on spring break when the Nashville shooting happened and I remember being really shocked when it happened. When we came back to school, I think a lot of us were scared or nervous. This happened so many times there have been like 377 school shootings since Columbine. We didn't just want this to be another one. We wanted to do something about it, so we set up the walkout to spread word about it."

Eighth grader Maia Stern

The middle school language arts class sat down with a reporter from Print the day after their protest to talk about the reasons that they walked out of school. They described what it has been like to grow up in a country where the white board in their classroom has the statistics “Guns are the leading cause of death among American kids & teens. 1 out of 10 gun deaths are 19 or younger; Since 1999 Columbine, more than 338,000 students in the U.S. have experienced gun violence” and “there were more school shootings in 2022 than in any year since Columbine.”

The 12 students sitting around a table in Henson’s class have spent much of their lives aware of gun violence.

“Back when I was in third grade, my summer camp did a shooting drill and we hid in the pool room, in the hallway connecting the lockers. We hid there for like 30 minutes and then we went outside,” eighth-grader Lea Julian said. “After that, I always have an escape plan prepared, or a little hiding spot that only I knew about, so that if I hid there, I knew I would be safe because I knew where the exit would be.”

Soren Yates, an eighth-grader, lamented that students now have to be aware of any of this.

“Students should be ready to learn, not to survive,” he said.

Annabelle Peters, also an eighth-grader, said she really became aware of mass shootings after the 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Squirrel Hill. She said her father gave her the advice to place books in her backpack and place it in front of her. “I’ve always just looked around and thought, ‘where can I hide in case there was something.’”

Seventh-grader Noah Nixon’s family belonged to Congregation Dor Hadash, one of the three congregations that were located in the Tree of Life. He noted that the shooter was specifically targeting his

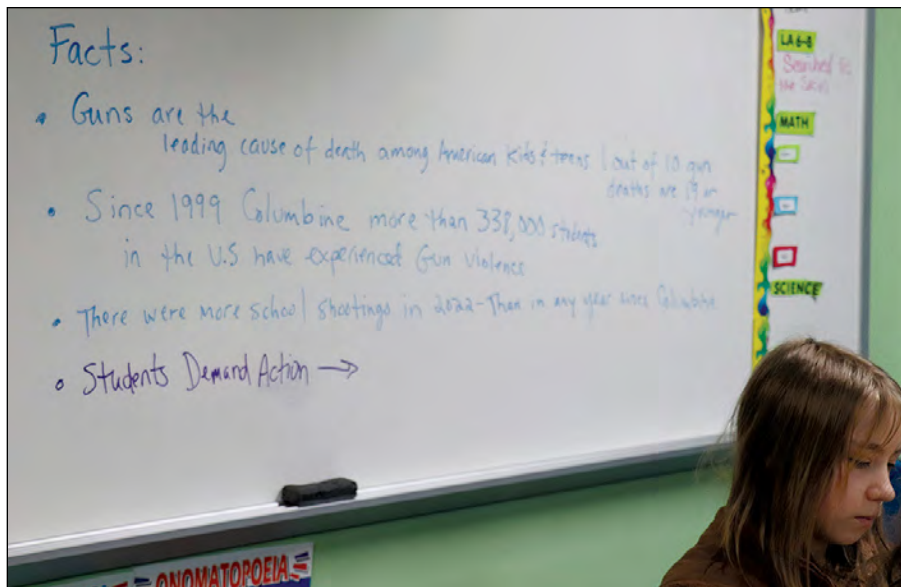


PHOTO: ANN BELSER

Axel Julian, a seventh-grader at Kentucky Avenue School, sits in his language arts classroom. On the board behind him are statistics about mass shootings at schools and how gun violence is the leading cause of death in children in the U.S.

congregation because of its support of immigrants.

Annabelle described her experience of being a child whose route to school takes her past the scene of that mass shooting: “I went from seeing groups of people walking out of there, to fences around it, and flowers and just all of the stuff. It was just very scary.”

While Mabel Wagner, a sixth-grader from Brighton Heights, said that there had been a drive-by shooting down the hill from their home.

Kentucky Avenue School is a small private school located under the Third Presbyterian Church at the corner of Fifth and Negley Avenues with its entrance on Kentucky Avenue. The school, which is for children in kindergarten through eighth grade, has 64 students.

“We were on spring break when the Nashville shooting happened and I remember being really shocked when it

happened. When we came back to school, I think a lot of us were scared or nervous. This happened so many times there have been like 377 school shootings since Columbine. We didn’t just want this to be another one. We wanted to do something about it, so we set up the walkout to spread word about it,” Maia Stern, also in eighth grade, said.

“I think what we were trying to accomplish with the walkout was just bringing people together, not necessarily to change other people’s minds, but bringing people who agree that this should be stopped together; and become more passionate about it.”

The middle schoolers kept a count of how many people honked or waved during their protest: 120 people expressed their approval.

“A guy stopped at the red light in front of us and said, ‘You guys are doing great; don’t let anybody intimidate you,’” Liam

Spencer, an eighth grader said. “There were two people who shook their heads and were like, ‘no.’”

The students in Henson’s class have also developed nuanced views of gun control and the government regulations that are needed.

“I think that it is way too easy to get a gun, especially an assault rifle. Those should be in the military,” Maia said.

Axel Julian, a seventh-grader, said he understood that people may want to collect vintage guns from World War I or II, but he did not think they should be able to be fired.

Nora O’Connell, an eighth-grader who earned a scouting “rifle shooting” merit badge, said she understands why women might want to carry a gun when walking at night, “Especially nowadays, you never know what’s going to happen.”

Then she added, it should be a pistol, not an assault rifle.

And Ray Valentine Lanza talked about how hunters use single-shot rifles, not semi-automatics.

The young people have also thought about the need for background checks for both criminal records and mental illness.

Maia pointed out that the shooter in Nashville had both multiple weapons and a diagnosed mental illness.

“There should be very extensive background checks for people with a past history of criminal records and mental illnesses that play a large part in what they will do with a firearm,” Soren said. He also agreed that civilians should not have access to high-powered military rifles.

When asked about their reactions to the shooting in Nashville and the false reports at the nearby Catholic high schools, seventh-grader Micah Lagana replied, “I wasn’t surprised because it just happens so often. It’s madness.”

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Unfair Housing

Affordable, decent housing comes at great cost to Governor's Square residents caught in a maintenance, ownership struggle.

By Maddie Gittens

Three-year-old Stevie bounces around his great grandmother's small apartment. A kid's show plays on the television in the living room, but he has no attention for it. Instead, Stevie reaches for the light switch, his small finger flicking it off-on-off-on.

"Stop it, Stevie!" his great grandmother scolds, her phone pressed to her ear. She continues her conversation.

Stevie wanders the apartment and climbs onto an armchair.

Britni Lowe, Stevie's mom, is unfazed by the distractions. She calmly attends to her son while recounting the recent housing trouble she's faced.

For six years, Lowe has lived in her one-bedroom apartment on Forrest Street in Harrisburg, only a quick walk from her grandmother Faith's apartment. She moved in after experiencing a period of homelessness and was granted a housing choice voucher, also known as Section 8, which provides rental assistance.

Her apartment is one of over 200 rental units within Governor's Square Apartments, which includes affordable multi- and single-family properties in the Camp Curtin neighborhood.

While Lowe was happy to have a place of her own, problems with her unit began early on, she said. Over the years, she's had issues with rodents, leaky windows and cracking along the walls. She's found mold in the vents, holes in the ceiling caused by nosy squirrels and bricks coming loose on the exterior of the building. Lowe has done whatever maintenance she could on her own, setting out mousetraps and spraying for bugs. But, on the whole, she explained, most of her maintenance requests to the property management went unanswered.

"You become unhappy when your home doesn't feel happy," she said. "It makes you feel like you don't matter here. This has taken a toll on my mental health."

The trouble with her home reached a peak in August when Lowe came home to a "Condemned" notice affixed to her door. It stated that her building, which includes her apartment and one other, was "found to be unsafe due to damage, decay, dilapidation." The city's evaluation form



PHOTO BY DANI FRESH

Britni Lowe walks into her condemned apartment in Governor's Square.

"You become unhappy when your home doesn't feel happy. It makes you feel like you don't matter here. This has taken a toll on my mental health."

Britni Lowe

also said that it was "a blight to the neighborhood, a hazard to public health and safety." She had 60 days to leave the property, it stated.

"I'm in there with my baby," Lowe said. "I felt hopeless."

Later that month, Lowe attended a town hall event for residents of Governor's Square, put on by the Camp Curtin Neighborhoods United group. She stood in the back, Stevie in tow, and voiced her concerns over her living conditions with a room full of other residents with stories like hers.

The Meetings

On a Wednesday and subsequent Thursday night, residents of Governor's Square Apartments filed into the lobby of the PA Fair Housing Council on the corner of N. 5th and Maclay streets. Camp Curtin Neighborhoods United President Laura Harding opened the meeting from a podium, stressing the importance of a solutions-based discussion.

Continued on next page

Not only had the meeting drawn the attention of tenants, but of several local officials who joined, including Harrisburg Mayor Wanda Williams, City Council President Danielle Bowers and other members of council, state Rep. Patty Kim (D-103) and Magisterial District Judge Sonya McKnight. Representatives from the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA) and Dauphin County attended, as well.

Comments from residents moved from specific complaints about their apartments to questions about how to withhold rent until issues are addressed. In Lowe's case, she had urgent questions about where she was supposed to go now. With a shaky, yet firm, voice, she made her case.

However, there was a general air of confusion at the meetings. How did things get to this point? Whose responsibility was it to fix these problems? What's going to happen next? Questions like these went unanswered, or at least, were left unclear. Even many of the officials in the room were uncertain of the details.

But what wasn't foggy was that code citations on the properties were stacking up against Governor's Square. According to Anne Montgomery, director of Harrisburg's Bureau of Codes, the city has been to court with Governor's Square "many times" over code citations that weren't brought into compliance. At the time, Williams said that there were over 100 code citations for the properties. As of late September, the city also had condemned seven Governor's Square properties, meaning they are structurally unsound, and placarded another 17, which means they are deemed non-habitable.

According to Williams, she's been hearing of the issues at Governor's Square for around two years, though some residents say their problems started even earlier.

Early this past summer, Rhonda Mays of the Fair Housing Council of the Capital Region started noticing an uptick in people requesting assistance with issues at Governor's Square.

"They had a terrible problem with their units being habitable," she said. "It wasn't just little things. It was big things."

When the organization starts seeing a pattern like this, they keep a file to document the complaints. From there, they try to advise tenants on things that could help, such as putting their complaints in writing and making sure property management gets them. Withholding a portion of their rent is another option—although an unpopular one—for tenants. But according to Mays, there's not a lot that can be done.

"There's not a whole lot that we can tell the tenants," Mays admitted. "It's a matter of waiting out the process."

There were all those officials and agencies in the Fair Housing lobby during the tenant meetings, but there wasn't much they could do.

The entity that certainly could do something—the owner—wasn't there.

Intervention

In the late 1990s, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) foreclosed on a large swath of

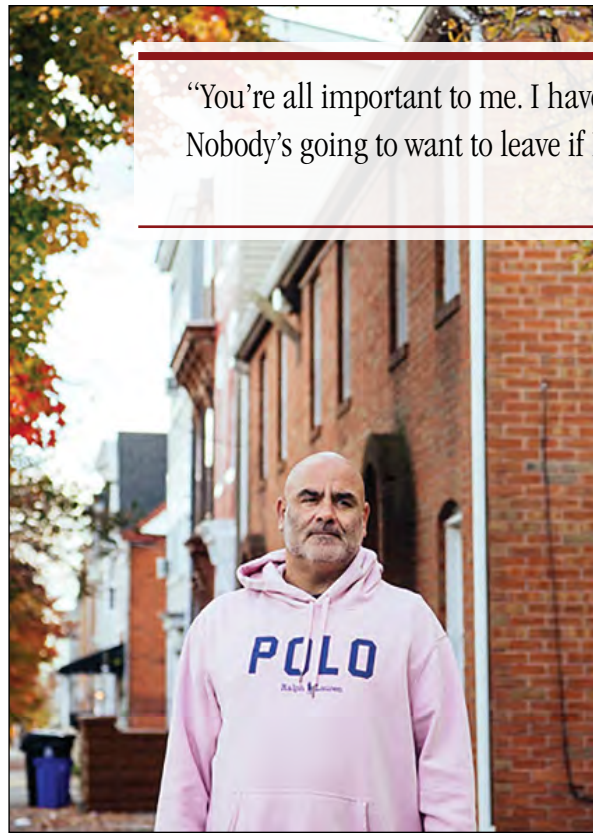


PHOTO BY DANI FRESH

apartments that it held mortgages on, formerly the Maclay Street Apartments. Instead of auctioning the properties off, they were transferred to the city in 2003, and the Harrisburg Redevelopment Authority (HRA) took the title.

Harrisburg then issued a request for proposals and selected Maryland-based Landex Development to obtain and renovate the 222 rental units known as the "Residences." The company also would later construct and obtain dozens more properties, called the "Towns." Landex formed Uptown Partners LP to be the managing limited partner.

To help offset the cost of building affordable housing, HUD awarded the project an "Upfront" federal grant of about \$10 million for renovations. Additional funding was obtained through PHFA low income housing tax credits, among other contributions. Landex completed the project in 2012.

Along with the funds came restrictive covenants, requiring the property to remain affordable for 30 years, until 2034.

"They were excited to work with us and built a high-quality project," said Bryan Davis, director of the Harrisburg Redevelopment Authority. "It was such a huge, positive impact."

But, these days, Davis was feeling differently about how things were going at Governor's Square, saying that HRA is "very disappointed in the existing owner."

In a statement, Uptown Partners acknowledged the issue, saying that they "understand and appreciate the

"You're all important to me. I have the experience to pull this off. Nobody's going to want to leave if I take over."

Stephen Schuback

concerns about maintenance issues and the need for capital improvements at the property."

"We are prioritizing the most important needs and working hard to resolve them as soon as possible," the company stated.

However, in its statement, the company added that the cost of services, such as water, trash pickup and maintenance, has far outweighed the revenue received in rent. The company claimed that, due to the pandemic, residents "suffered severe financial hardship" and therefore still owe a significant amount of back rent. The statement also noted unexpected costs from chronic illegal trash dumping on the property, among other issues.

"This property is more than 50 years old and was last renovated 15 years ago," Uptown Partners said in its statement. "We recognize that a significant intervention and a sizable investment are needed to address the residents' needs."

Also in the statement, the company noted trying to work with the city regarding the sale of the property. According to Davis, during the pandemic, Uptown Partners put Governor's Square up for sale, but received no interest from buyers.

However, within the past year, one interested party has come forth.

Stephen Schuback is a Harrisburg native who has had his eye on Governor's Square, and he will tell you frankly that he saw it as a good business investment. It was the potential for money-making that brought him back to the city from his home in South Carolina. But as he began interacting with residents, he knew he wanted to help them, he said.

"You're all important to me," Schuback assured residents at the first of the two Governor's Square tenant meetings. "I have the experience to pull this off. Nobody's going to want to leave if I take over."

Uptown Partners said that they have an agreement to sell the property to a private group, but would not confirm that Schuback is that "private group." However, Schuback told TheBurg multiple times that he has a contract with the owner to take over the 222 rental units. Additionally, Davis of the Harrisburg Redevelopment Authority confirmed that they have not had any other serious interest in the property.

Schuback's resume notes his experience in affordable and market-rate housing development, including a renovation project for an affordable housing development in Akron, Ohio. That one was similar to what's happening at Governor's Square, he said.

Continued on next page

But returning to Harrisburg holds a different meaning for him.

While his younger years in the city were fraught with drug dealing and other criminal behavior, landing him prison time, Schuback said that, with this project, he hopes to change the way his name is remembered.

"I'd like people to remember me for something more than what I did as a kid," he said. "I want them to know my family cared about the community."

When Someone Cares

Debbie M. Taylor, is another tenant who, like Britni Lowe, has struggled with maintenance issues for several years.

Taylor, a 67-year-old Harrisburg native, is known as "Gigi" or "the gorgeous granny" around her Governor's Square neighborhood. She's friends with her neighbors, especially the ladies in her apartment building, which includes another Debbie Taylor who lives above her. She makes brownies and finger Jello for the neighborhood kids and is friendly with the maintenance men who walk by, calling one "Papa Smurf" for his white beard and asking another if he likes her red-painted toenails.

Taylor loves the people she lives near, but, when it comes to the condition of her apartment, she said that the past two years have "sucked."

Her screen window was broken for almost a year, and the hallway in her building was never clean. She and the other ladies would regularly scrub it themselves. The grass and landscaping weren't maintained, and the playground across the parking lot used to look like a jungle, she said.

But recently, things have started to improve, she explained.

Schuback, while still pursuing purchasing Governor's Square, has, in the meantime, taken to fixing up residents' units. He has a contract with the owners, he said, to repair and answer maintenance requests on the property. Many residents who had long-unaddressed maintenance issues started to see change.

While Uptown Partners wouldn't confirm that they contracted Schuback to do the work, they said in a statement that, "a number of resources have been engaged to make repairs at the property. We're pleased with the progress that's being made. The health and safety of the residents are our top priorities."

"Since Steve's been here, everything's getting better," Taylor said. "He cares. It's a different feeling when someone cares."

According to Schuback, he's doing the work for free, while the owners pay for supplies.

He has also helped Lowe, who soon will move into another Governor's Square apartment and out of the condemned building, he said. She's excited that Stevie will have his own room in the new place.

"I'll be happy to get us out of here," Lowe said.

Schuback is confident that the work he is doing will show the city that he is capable of and serious about taking over and renovating Governor's Square.



PHOTO BY DANI FRESH

While Schuback said that he already has an agreement to purchase Governor's Square from Uptown Partners, there are approvals he must get to actually obtain the properties.

Because of the HUD Upfront grant that was given to the owners to develop the property back in the earlier 2000s, Uptown Partners and Schuback must get approval of the sale from HUD.

According to the HRA's Davis, this grant functions more like a loan, which eventually will need to be paid back or forgiven by HUD. If someone wants to purchase Governor's Square, however, that grant/loan needs HUD approval to be transferred to a new owner. In order to request that transfer, Schuback was required to submit a financial, construction and management plan, among other details, about his proposal for Governor's Square. He sent that plan in August to HRA, which functions as a conduit for the loan between HUD and Governor's Square.

If approved by HUD, Schuback would take on \$8.8 million in debt from the HUD grant for the majority of Governor's Square properties—the 222 units.

Davis said that Schuback's plan is still under review.

Although Harrisburg officials have repeatedly said that the city doesn't have authority over what happens with the property, the administration has had things to say about the project.

According to Harrisburg Communications Director Matt Maisel, "[Schuback] is nowhere near where he needs to be financially to acquire the property."

Schuback has proposed a \$12 million renovation, estimating that each unit will require about a \$56,000 upgrade. However, that budget is a little under half of what the city and HRA claim is needed. A building assessment report ordered by the Harrisburg Housing Authority in 2021 found that \$22.5 million was needed to renovate Governor's Square.

Schuback, while still pursuing purchasing Governor's Square, has, in the meantime, taken to fixing up residents' units. He has a contract with the owners, he said, to repair and answer maintenance requests on the property. Many residents who had long-unaddressed maintenance issues started to see change.

"Whether or not he truly wants to do good by the residents there is entirely separate of whether he can," Maisel added.

He said that Schuback would not be acquiring the property any time in the near future.

On the other hand, Schuback feels confident in his estimated renovation costs.

"I'm good at what I do; it shows in my work," he said. "I didn't think I was going to get this resistance. At the end of the day, I'm going to get what I want."

HUD Regional Public Affairs representative Sean Callahan said that the department has not received a package with information about a proposed sale from Uptown Partners, something that is required for HUD review. To be approved for the acquisition, a new owner would need to show that they have the capacity to manage the property, Callahan said.

"It does not appear the prospective owner has demonstrated capacity," he said.

In October, Schuback received notice from the city that he was missing building permits for work he was doing on properties at Governor's Square. He refuted that he needed them for the repairs he was doing.

"I'm used to getting what I want," Schuback said. "But I'm starting to lose my patience. At some point, I've got to realize that this is futile."

Schuback said that he has tried to meet with city officials to discuss issues like these, to no avail. Maisel said the city has reached out to him to meet, also unsuccessfully.

Waiting Game

Back over on Forrest Street, Governor's Square resident Linda Manigault has accrued a list of maintenance

Continued on next page

requests sitting largely untouched for two years. Trash piled up behind her apartment, duct tape covered the gaps in her back door frame, area rugs hid the stained, aging carpet and, most recently, a mouse in her kitchen had her running for higher ground upstairs.

She's thought about moving, but the low rent price has kept her around for years. There's no way she could find something this cheap, she said.

Manigault's dream is to move to Georgia. She's been saving her money. But she knows the housing market isn't in her favor right now—especially not for affordable housing.

"If I have to wait, at least I want to be comfortable here," she said.

That's the unfortunate reality that many low-income residents are living in. Affordable housing is in short supply, and demand for it is high. It's a reality that's left residents like Manigault stuck, without options.

"It's not good," said Leah Eppinger, executive director of Dauphin County's housing authority. "There is a large shortage of units and a large population in need."

The county's housing authority doesn't do work in Harrisburg city, which falls to the Harrisburg Housing Authority, which didn't return calls for comment. But Eppinger's outlook on the state of the market applies widely, as housing shortages are a nationwide problem.

According to Eppinger, around 3,000 households are on their waiting list for public housing, and their Section 8 housing choice voucher program has been closed to new applicants since 2009 while they've worked through that list.

For a family trying to find affordable housing right now, "it's probably impossible," she said.

Like many residents, Britni Lowe has thought about moving out of Governor's Square. She has searched online for other apartments, but has struggled to find affordable options. When she has, they're often owned by out-of-town landlords, which makes her nervous. She's also



PHOTO BY DANI FRESH

Linda Manigault stands out front of her home.

found that not many landlords are willing to accept her housing choice voucher. Like others who have come to the same conclusions, Lowe has stayed put.

The sentiment around Governor's Square has improved as Schuback has made upgrades to apartments, cut the grass and cleaned up illegal dumping hotspots, giving residents a sense of hope. But as discussions continue in the offices of city and state officials, the question of what happens next remains.

In the meantime, Governor's Square families are left stuck in the middle, waiting on an answer.

It's naptime for little Stevie. He cries in his stroller as Lowe stands outside her condemned apartment. He was recently diagnosed with autism, she said. All she really

wants is to make sure she's always able to put a roof over her son's head. But these past months, even that felt uncertain.

It's mid-October, and it's been over 60 days since the condemnation notice. But Governor's Square still hasn't moved her, although Schuback has made some repairs to her building and said he plans to move Lowe to the new apartment soon.

Lowe's hope is tempered with realism, because she knows that things could change on a whim.

"I'm gonna roll with whatever comes my way because I don't have no other choice," Lowe said. "Life is unpredictable."

Published Oct. 31, 2022

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You can count on us!

Satellites, drones join fight against air pollution in PA

Technology reveals otherwise invisible emissions from gas wells, chemical plants

By Ad Crable

In the summer of 2021, a twin-engine special research aircraft took off from State College, PA. Over three weeks, the plane flew 10,000–28,000 feet over oil and gas wells, landfills and coal mines in four regions of the state. The mission was to pinpoint sources of high levels of methane gas, known as “super emitters,” for the nonprofit group Carbon Mapper and its funding partner, U.S. Climate Alliance.

From a hole cut in the belly of the plane, they trained a camera-like device developed by NASA — an imaging spectrometer — that uses light wavelengths to pick up escaping plumes of methane. Methane emissions are the second-largest cause of global warming after carbon dioxide, and controlling them is increasingly considered a key to arresting climate change.

Methane is invisible to the naked eye. But spectrometers, and devices like them, detect and measure the infrared energy of objects. The cameras then convert that data into a three-dimensional electronic image.

For the 2021 aerial probe, Carbon Mapper targeted areas of generally high methane levels that the organization had previously located using readings from space satellites operated by the European Space Agency.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PHYSICIANS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, PA CHAPTER

ABOVE: A camera that sees infrared light waves captured this daytime image of methane emissions (the orange “smoke”) from a gas-fired power plant in Pennsylvania. INSET: A conventional camera image of a gas-fired power plant in Pennsylvania.

During the flights, the researchers found 63 super emitters. Most, they concluded, were the results of leaks and malfunctioning equipment.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, which collaborated in the project, was thrilled by the reactions they received when they took the results to the sources of the highest emissions. The operators of six landfills and six oil and gas wells responded by voluntarily fixing equipment or taking other steps to reduce emissions.

“That’s a really positive thing. This is

[proof] that making methane visible can lead to voluntary action,” said Riley Duren, Carbon Mapper CEO and founder.

In Pennsylvania, the use of this and other technology has energized a new breed of environmental activism aimed at detecting air pollution from the sky and from the ground. Their tools include satellites, airplanes with specially equipped air monitors and ground-based remote-sensing cameras like those used by government regulators and gas operators to find leaks.

Sometimes, communities and groups

use these devices to document problems. They also use them to document air quality before gas wells or petrochemical plants are built.

“It’s not our parents’ or grandparents’ environmentalism. It’s definitely not just sitting in trees. It’s a different type of environmentalism and it’s much more sophisticated,” said Justin Wasser of Earthworks, a national environmental group that helps communities fight oil, gas and mining pollution.

Continued on next page

High tech eyes

Later this year and in early 2024, Carbon Mapper Coalition and its partners, which include NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory and Planet Labs, plan to launch two satellites to monitor methane emissions around the world. The first phase of the monitoring program has a \$100 million budget, all funded by philanthropy.

Also early next year, a satellite dubbed MethaneSAT, funded by such high-profile financial backers as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, is scheduled to begin orbiting the Earth to monitor methane emissions.

"Methane satellites are going to dramatically change this work. This time next year, you and I are going to be talking about how astronomically large this problem is and why we haven't been working on this for years," Earthwork's Wasser said.

Since 2020, the Pennsylvania-based group, FracTracker Alliance, has used ground monitors in southwestern Pennsylvania to document the cumulative effect of air pollution from fracking wells and petrochemical plants.

Now, armed with a \$495,000 federal grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the group has purchased a drone that will carry infrared cameras over wells and gas-related petrochemical plants, looking for methane releases as well as smog-forming chemicals and volatile organic compounds. The grant is part of a new federal initiative to enhance air quality monitoring in communities across the U.S.

"This kind of camera never seemed possible before. It seemed like a wish list," said Ted Auch, FracTracker's primary drone operator. "We'll be deploying drones in a lot of hard-to-reach spots like up a hill, in a hollow, around a corner. We can pinpoint smokestacks."

The group hopes that the data it yields will bolster the group's stance that new gas well permits should be granted only after considering an area's cumulative air quality, executive director Shannon Smith said.

Christina Digiulio, a retired analytical chemist now working for the Pennsylvania chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility, gets busy when she fields a health complaint from a resident living near a gas well, gas-based petrochemical plant or a landfill that's accepting fracked-gas waste.



Melissa Ostroff, a licensed thermographer for the environmental group Earthworks, used an infrared camera to detect methane leaks from a natural gas well in Pennsylvania.

PHOTO COURTESY OF EARTHWORKS

A certified thermographer, she lugs a \$100,000 gas-imaging forward-looking infrared (FLIR) camera to a gas well pad or the fence line of an industrial plant to look for plumes of methane and volatile organic compounds.

"We are using technology now that the industries have kept to themselves. We are an extension of our own regulatory agencies," she said.

Getting results

Environmental groups that share findings from their high-tech devices with regulators and gas operators report mixed results.

After the 2021 flights departing from State College, Carbon Mapper found that 60% of the methane releases documented were coming from vents in active and old underground coal mines — more than from oil and gas sources combined. Although venting is allowed to prevent the buildup of gases for safety reasons, regulators and researchers alike were surprised at the volume.

But the coal industry did not cooperate in measuring emissions from the mines and threatened criminal trespass charges for flying over them, DEP's Sean Nolan told the agency's Air Quality Technical Advisory Committee.

For the past two years, Melissa Ostroff, a thermographer for Earthworks, has roamed Pennsylvania with a handheld FLIR camera looking for fugitive methane and other invisible pollutants leaking from hundreds of active and abandoned oil and gas well sites as part of the group's Community Empowerment Project.

Of 52 instances of methane leaks she

has reported to DEP, the agency sent someone to inspect the sites 31 times. Often, she said, equipment malfunctions causing the emissions were fixed.

In one of her most visible investigations, Ostroff found a gas well leaking methane gas in a popular park in Allegheny County. She reported the pollution to both the gas company and DEP. Within days, the leak was repaired with new equipment installed.

Digiulio once detected emissions coming from a compressor station on a liquid natural gas pipeline being built in the eastern part of the state. She notified her state senator, who determined that the company did not have a permit for releases. Work stopped until a permit was obtained.

But some environmental groups said that their reports to regulators of unauthorized pollution go unchecked or that operators are allowed to fix problems without being cited for violations.

On May 11, the Environmental Integrity Project and Clean Air Council filed a federal lawsuit to halt illegal releases of pollutants from a massive Shell plant using natural gas to produce plastics near Pittsburgh. The groups cite unpermitted releases of pollutants recorded, in part, by high-tech air monitors that Shell agreed to install as part of a previous settlement agreement.

Funding boosts

The increased use of citizen science is getting support from the federal government.

Under the EPA's proposed new nationwide rules to regulate methane gas, oil and gas drillers would be required to act

on potential leaks at super emitter sites found by third parties, such as environmental nonprofits, universities and others.

In a separate initiative, the EPA has announced \$53 million in grants in 37 states, including the Chesapeake Bay states of Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, New York and West Virginia, to fund grassroots monitoring efforts in communities. The money will help pay for the purchase and deployment of various devices communities can use to detect harmful emissions.

Pennsylvania will receive 11 grants under the program, with four supporting work by the Environmental Health Project to analyze air quality data as well as helping communities to understand it. A grant to the Maryland Department of the Environment will help reduce air pollution found by sensors in three environmental justice communities, and Virginia will receive two grants to enable the Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe to set up an air quality program in their community.

The aid for monitoring "will finally give communities, some who for years have been overburdened by polluted air and other environmental insults, the data and information needed to better understand their local air quality and have a voice for real change," said Adam Ortiz, EPA administrator for Mid-Atlantic region.

Though thrilled to access equipment that can help amass hard evidence of pollution, some environmental groups are wary that they may have an increased role in protecting public health when it is the responsibility of government agencies to do just that.

"The data does not have the weight of EPA's Clean Air Act's requirements," said Nathan Deron, the environmental data scientist for the Environmental Health Project. "At the end of the day, it's up to DEP and other state regulators to listen to communities and act on the data that is being gathered."

"We have more advanced technology. The gas industry does, too. But that, in itself, is not enough to influence policy if the political will isn't there," FracTracker's Smith added. "We want to influence regulators to put in more protections."

Ad Crable is a Pennsylvania-based staff writer for the Bay Journal.

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THE PROGRESS

Clearfield County Jail: A modern-day case of 'whodunit'

By Julie Noal

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CLEARFIELD — In a modern day case of 'whodunit,' the question of who is responsible for a roof snafu at Clearfield County Jail remains unanswered.

On Dec. 13, Clearfield County Commissioners announced the county hired Pittsburgh-based law firm D'Amico Law Offices LLC to file a lawsuit related to the original construction of the jail — a project that occurred more than 40 years ago.

In May, commissioners said ABM Industries of Pittsburgh, a firm overseeing the current CCJ renovation project, discovered a support structure that should have been located between the jail's roof and exterior walls was missing — even though that crucial part of the construction is shown on the blueprints and drawings from when construction began in 1979.

This error — or oversight — will cost today's taxpayers an additional \$2.9 million on top of a \$3.8 million renovation price tag to correct the problem.

Commissioner John Sobel said the county found itself in a situation where it had to spend a substantial amount to add the beam that should have been installed when the structure was built four decades ago.

"Someone using deceptive practice prepared those plans," Sobel said at the Dec. 13 meeting. But who was responsible?

The cast of characters is not only large, but also no longer available to answer the mystery questions of who, what, when, where and why. Most of those involved with the original jail's construction are deceased and many documents are lost or destroyed.



THE PROGRESS FILE PHOTO

Orange fencing can be seen on the left of the Clearfield County Jail where a multi-million dollar renovation project is ongoing.

The Progress has researched numerous past stories from archives dated through May 1978 to when the current jail opened in May 1981 in an effort to recover information leading up to the current jail's construction. (See "The Jail the County Built")

Who?

The list of decision makers is large when it comes to who was responsible for building the current Clearfield County Jail.

Clearfield County Commissioners

Harris Breth, Dick Lininger, Ken Bundy, and later on, Mark Vrahas.

Architect

L. Robert Kimball & Associates of Ebsburg

Clearfield-Elk Counties Joint Correctional Facility Authority

(formed in February 1979). A.J. Palumbo was named as the authority's chairman.

Liaisons

John Anderson and Frank Reed

Clerk of the Works

George Carns

Other important names that appear in several past stories are Clearfield attorney Carl A. Belin Jr. and businessman E. Jay Master — local men who vehemently opposed the jail's construction.

What?

In the mid-1970s, Clearfield, Elk and Jefferson counties decided to pursue constructing a regional jail that would be located in Clearfield County. At the time, the cost was estimated to be around \$3.35 million, but later ended up being estimated at \$4.4 million by the time the project broke ground.

Jefferson County leaders pulled out of the deal relatively quickly, and later on, Clearfield County leaders opted to withdraw from the agreement with Elk County and build their own jail instead. Construction began in mid-1979 and the facility opened on May 21, 1981.

The Missing Piece

Current day commissioners were shocked earlier this year to discover the jail renovation project was suddenly much

more costly — because a support structure under the roof that was visible on the original building plans was surprisingly missing.

"We were astonished," Sobel said of ABM's discovery of the missing support structure in a recent telephone interview with fellow Commissioner Mary Tatum.

"Number one, you assume things like that aren't done. ABM has assured us (the roof) won't collapse and it has lasted all of these years," Sobel said. "But I am absolutely surprised that an accident or collapse hasn't happened."

Unanswered Questions

Why was this important piece of construction missing? Perhaps Belin had the answer all those years ago.

Belin and Master were quite vocal in their opposition of the jail project, stating the proposed structure was too large and too costly for county taxpayers. Despite both men voicing their objections, Judge John K. Reilly Jr. approved construction and

Continued on next page

contracts for the proposed jail.

In about three years' worth of stories obtained from at least three newspapers' archives, the names of the contractors who submitted and were later awarded bids were never mentioned. In fact, in March 1979, *The Progress* reported almost 50 firms submitted bids. But commissioners did not report what the lowest bids were.

Melissa Melewsy, legal counsel at Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association in Harrisburg, said that information should have been disclosed.

"Right to Know laws have been around since the 1950s," Melewsy said in a telephone interview from Harrisburg. "Financial records should have been made public, and I don't know why (the commissioners) wouldn't give that information."

Melewsy said there should have been disclosure and bid requirements, even more than 40 years ago.

"It's very odd that the commissioners wouldn't have released the names of the contractors who were awarded bids. It is also odd that the media at the time didn't go after that information. The contractor didn't show up incognito, and there should have been nothing secret going on."

Sobel agrees with Melewsy.

"The commissioners should have made (bid information) available. The law hasn't changed in that regard."

But Sobel added that 40 years ago, especially in small communities like Clearfield, business deals were commonly made with gentlemen's agreements and handshakes.

"People just did business in a more casual and relaxed way," Sobel explained. "But now we're paying the consequences."

Clearfield County Industrial Park

At the same time that the jail was being built, construction of the Clearfield County Industrial Park was also ongoing. In August 1979, the park's authority announced that all of the funds that were promised to finance the project have not yet been received — bringing a possible halt to the project mid-construction. At the time, the authority's engineers pressed the authority members to demand the commissioners' promise to provide \$864,000 of county funds toward the project. However, that promise was allegedly a verbal guarantee only.



This May 1979 story in *The Progress* is one of many that span several years from the mid-1970s to late May 1981, telling the story of how the current Clearfield County Jail came to fruition.

Two years later, when the jail was ready to open, the commissioners made an announcement that they had to pay off a \$864,000 loan to the industrial park.

Pointing Fingers

According to archived stories, Belin held a press conference right around the same time that the jail opened in May 1981 — questioning the county's financial status as well as \$1 million in budget overruns. He complained that the jail fund was audited by no one except the commissioners.

Belin pointed out that the \$4.4 million jail was surprisingly built below budget — at only \$3.5 million.

"Do we have the same building and are we going to get the same facilities at the jail than originally thought?" Belin was quoted as saying. Because Belin pointed out that only an audit would answer the question about the jail coming in at \$800,000 less than anticipated — and how a \$864,000 debt for the industrial park was suddenly able to be paid.

Belin, who is now in his 80s and still has a law office in Clearfield, was not available for comment.

James W. Laing, who was the county treasurer at the time, reported at Belin's press conference in 1981 that he had no contact with the proceeds of the jail fund for construction of the jail, and that commissioners had not provided him with any knowledge of the jail fund's finances.

In rebuttal, the commissioners said the jail funds were handled through the Pittsburgh-based bonding house Butcher and Singer.

According to an inflation calculator, \$864,000 in 1981 is now estimated to be \$2,829,728 — the same additional cost that the county has to pay to fix the more than 40-year-old oversight.

Sobel said the process of delving through county records to find those responsible was a daunting task — one that took months.

"We had to talk to some of the older members of the courthouse community . . . had to find old (commissioner meeting) minute books. A lot of the information reported in the commissioner meetings of that era didn't have the information we needed."

Sometime next month, unanswered

questions should hopefully be brought to light when the county's lawsuit is recorded — naming those believed to be responsible, specifically contractors. The lawsuit will name the parties believed to be responsible for not installing the beam and representing that the beam had been installed when the job was completed.

"We are hopeful to recoup most or all of this money because it would bring the cost of the jail renovations down for the county and the taxpayers," Sobel said.

But as far as individual decision makers, like former commissioners, jail authority members, liaisons and others associated with the project — Sobel said people will have to draw their own conclusions based on limited information available.

Is it a crazy coincidence that in 1981, the jail came in about \$800,000 under budget at a time when the commissioners owed the industrial park authority \$864,000? And that the \$800,000 difference is about the same cost as the missing support piece?

"It should be explored," Sobel said. "Whether it is crazy coincidence, I don't know. But it sure is awfully coincidental!"

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THE EPHRATA REVIEW

Community effort brings groups together trying to find solutions for growing homeless problem

By Larry Alexander

(This is the second of a two-part series on the growing homeless problem in the Ephrata area and the groups trying to help)

Following the incident of 16 homeless men seeking warmth in the train station this past winter, Ephrata Mayor Ralph Mowen felt a need to mobilize community assets, so he put out a call to all of the local agencies, both social service and civic.

The response was monumental. At the first meeting on May 4 held at Good Samaritan Services on West Locust Street, twenty-seven people from 16 different organizations gathered to give comment and share ideas. Represented were Wellspan ECH, the Ephrata Library, the Ephrata Ministerium, Mainspring of Ephrata, Ephrata Area Social Services, City Gate, Good Samaritan Services, Lancaster Stands Up, the Lancaster County Housing and Redevelopment Authority, Borough Council members and administrators, Ephrata Police, Ephrata Area School District, Lancaster County Homeless Coalition, Tenfold, Pennie, and REAL Life Community Services.

From this a task force was formed. Currently eight to 12 people get together every month at Good Samaritan.

"With that group we are making some progress," Mowen said.

Homelessness is such a daunting task to undertake. A major step is changing how Ephrata's residents view the homeless.

"One of the things we're going to do is to try to educate people to remove the stigma, so that when someone says 'homeless' they don't immediately think of



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY GOOD SAMARITAN

A homeless mother plays with her child at Good Samaritan's shelter for homeless women with children.

someone sleeping on a park bench," Mowen said.

Currently a number of homeless people hang out at the train station and use its toilet facilities. They also join with low income families for free lunches at City Gate at 100 E. Main St. Unfortunately these gatherings have a nervous effect on some residents. Those trying to help are seeking to alleviate that fear.

"There is no correlation between those gatherings and crime," said Joy Ashley, director of Mainspring of Ephrata, whose

offices are in the train station. "(Police) Chief John Petrick validated that. There's no increase in crime, petty theft or anything like that."

"I think what really upsets me," Liz Ackerman of the Northern Lancaster County Chamber of Commerce said of the free lunch line, "is people who look at this and say 'this is bad for Ephrata. We don't want this and we shouldn't have this here,' while not embracing the fact that Ephrata has a history of helping their neighbors. These are all our neighbors. It does not

matter if they are not someone that you know personally. They are your neighbors. They are humans. They want dignity."

Kim Warner of City Gate emphatically added, "Crime has not increased since the shelter was here."

Indeed, the homeless police their own ranks, said Ismail Smith Wade-El, president of Lancaster City Council and a member of the Lancaster County Homeless Coalition. They will turn in to police anyone who engages in illegal activities such as theft or drugs.

"Everything we want for ourselves and our families, they want for themselves and their families; a safe neighborhood, a clean place to wash up, a hot cup of coffee," Wade-El said.

The toughest nut to crack in regards to helping the homeless is finding affordable long-term housing. Mowen admits to the difficulty of the task saying landlords understandably want to make the most of their investments. Then there's the stigma attached to the word "homeless." Mowen feels that it's more a case of people saying "not in my back yard."

"As soon as people hear that a place is going to be low-income housing, right away they think of crime, drugs and sinking property values," Mowen said. "That is crap. Just because it's low income housing does not immediately make it a crime zone."

Mowen admits it's going to be "really, really hard" to find affordable housing, but he's hoping to find a developer or developers "with deep pockets" who will

Continued on next page

step up. There are grants out there, he said, but “they don’t last forever.”

Occasionally there’s a success story.

Shelley Leister, an EASS case manager, mentioned a single mom with one child whose husband died suddenly. Dad was the breadwinner and mom was a stay-at-home mom. Suddenly, the mother and her child could not afford to stay in their home because the husband’s insurance was only enough to cover funeral expenses.

Leister said a pastor heard about the problem and mentioned it to his congregation to see if anyone could help.

“From that conversation I had a landlord call me and say he had an apartment coming open and would ‘love to bless’ this family with it,” she said.

The mom rented the two bedroom apartment for a “very affordable” \$700.

Unfortunately those success stories are rare.

“Maybe it’s pie in the sky and this group doesn’t have the ability to achieve its lofty goals,” Mowen said. “But we’ll continue to try to seek contacts with groups like Lancaster County Redevelopment Authority. They’re in this group so maybe they can help.”

There had been discussion on possibly using the former Washington Avenue School, which is currently vacant, as a location for low income housing or as a winter shelter. The school district has no immediate plans for the building.

“There are grant funds, and I’m talking big money, available to develop low income housing,” said Leister. “Whether we can do something with that, I don’t know.”

While affordable housing is drying up, forcing individuals, families and senior citizens out onto the street seeking limited amounts of shelter, agencies strive to provide food and other necessary services.

Ephrata leads northern Lancaster County in helping the homeless through agencies like City Gate, Good Samaritan and Ephrata Area Social Services, among others.

Located at the corner of East Main and Washington Avenue for the past six years, City Gate, although not an over-night facility, does provide a place for the homeless to find warmth on cold winter days. They can also get hot coffee and meals. Every Saturday, City Gate provides free lunches. Churches do not just provide the food, they also pack and hand out the lunches.

“People now know we’re here, that we



Sandy Muckle of Hope United Methodist Church hands out free lunches at City Gate.

PHOTO: LARRY ALEXANDER

have food available, so we’re seeing a lot more people,” Warner said. “When we began these lunches I prayed we could do it once a month.”

Now City Gate hands out an average 200 lunches every week.

While the center is religious-based, it is a 501(C)3 non-profit agency. Warner said people can come in and hang out, get some coffee and food.

“We don’t preach at people or thump them over the head with the Bible,” Warner said. “We just try to build authentic relationships so we can speak truth into their lives and hopefully help them get unstuck from where they are. Sometimes it just takes somebody caring and listening to make them feel better and be able to take that next step in their recovery.”

Ephrata Area Social Services is also feeling the surge of homelessness. Leister said there is a direct correlation between the pandemic and homelessness.

“A lot of people lost their income,” she said. “We’ve had a significant increase in people coming in through our doors.”

Sadly there is not much she can do to help. While EASS has food and clothing banks, finding affordable places to live is – again - all but impossible.

“I have nothing for them,” she said. “It’s hard to look at them and say there’s nothing I can do to help you.”

She told of a working father and daughter who’ve been homeless for 18 months.

Water Street Rescue Mission would allow him to stay, but the daughter is a minor and can’t stay alone in the women’s side. With nowhere else to go, they sleep in their car, a campground or short-stay hotels that he can afford on his salary.

Some strides are being made to provide needed services. Working with Refresh Lancaster and the Lancaster County Homeless Coalition, a shower truck is available each Wednesday morning from 9:30 to 11:30. Located behind the Pioneer Fire Hall, the truck contains two shower rooms and a medical examination room where the homeless can receive some basic services such as blood pressure monitoring, blood sugar counts and connection to a medical provider. People can also sign up for insurance, receive certain types of testing and if needed, receive wound care.

Criticized by some residents in the belief that the borough was paying for the water with tax money, Mowen said the cost – which was estimated to potentially cost about \$11 per week - is being covered by an anonymous donor.

“Absolutely not one cent of borough taxpayer money will be going to support the trailer,” Mowen stressed.

Thankfully, one potentially serious need has been resolved. Until recently those who look out for the welfare of the homeless feared the lack of a winter shelter. The house on West Locust Street used for the last two years is unavailable

as that use might violate zoning.

“Having that shelter was huge for Lancaster County,” said Liz Ackerman of the Northern Lancaster County Chamber of Commerce. “Ephrata was leading the way to identify that these are community members who need assistance. We could provide that assistance and we give them that help.”

The specter of no shelter this winter loomed large. Then the Living Room church group who occupy the former Doneckers’ building at North State and Walnut streets stepped forward and agreed to open their doors. The building has been approved for up to 30 individuals, which agencies hope is sufficient.

“Last year we averaged anywhere from about 12 to 20 individuals,” said Hannah Miller, chief program officer for Good Samaritan.

Winter quarters aside, shelter remains a prime concern.

“The only shelter in Lancaster County that is taking individuals is Water Street Rescue Mission,” Leister said. “Unfortunately at this time they have no openings. So anyone who comes in and needs somewhere to go, there is no place that will take them.”

While housing is almost unattainable, what EASS can offer people is food, hot meals, hospital referral and transport if needed. The agency can also set people up with state assistance like Medicaid, food stamps and, in some cases, cash assistance. Mail can be received at EASS.

In losing their homes, some people have lost their legal documents such as Social Security cards, Medicare and Medicaid cards and birth certificates. Without these as proof of identification, most government services are denied. EASS, City Gate and Lancaster-based Tenfold can help people get new cards and re-establish their identities.

Maybe Mowen’s task force can’t cure all of the problems that afflict the homeless, but just addressing it is a big step forward.

“I think the committee has provided a means of communication that can be shared amongst us as to everything each of our agencies can offer, what each of us can and cannot do to address the problem,” Miller said. “With that knowledge now we can understand.”

Larry Alexander is a correspondent for The Ephrata Review.

Published November 2022

Mayoral candidates stand up in support of drag community

By **Jeremy Rodriguez**
PGN Contributor

Eight Philadelphia mayoral candidates let their city know that they are not participating in the national war on drag performers.

Drag queens Brittany Lynn and VinChelle brought drag performers from around the city together for a PGN photo op with the mayoral candidates at City Hall. Other performers in the March 21 photoshoot included Dominique Lee, Eric Jaffe, Morgan Wells, Poochie, Rocceaux, Domingo Chiquito, Tina Montgomery, and Yari. Together, they posed with mayoral candidates Amen Brown, Jeff Brown, Allan Domb, Derek S. Green, Helen Gym, Cherelle Parker, Maria Quiñones-Sánchez and Rebecca Rhynhart.

The event comes at a time when the drag community is under attack across the country. Events such as Drag Queen Story Time have been the subject of protests and threats of violence, often causing acts of violence and forced event cancellations, including at the Cherry Hill Library and Bradbury-Sullivan LGBT Community Center. Furthermore, 15 states have either restricted or introduced legislation restricting drag performances.

"I think it's really important to live in a city like Philadelphia that's so welcoming to its cultural diversity and to show that to other cities and states, especially now when drag queens, LGBTQIA+ communities and marginalized communities are constantly under attack by new legislation," Brittany Lynn said on organizing the drag performers with VinChelle.

Allan Domb was the first candidate to show up for the photoshoot. He said he is "a big supporter of every citizen of this city" and noted that he would've attended the photoshoot even if he wasn't running for mayor. He went on to affirm that anti-drag legislation across the country would not discourage him from supporting

every Philadelphian.

"I am going to be the mayor for every person in the city," Domb said.

Jeff Brown echoed that statement, noting that "there is no better way to express that than being involved with everyone, enjoying life together and having fun together."

"I think it's important to show we're going to stand up to [anti-drag legislation] because these are human rights and we have to stand up to anyone that tries to take away our human rights," Brown said.

Derek Green said that showing up for the photoshoot was important because it illustrates the progressive history of the city and that "we need to continue to uphold that mantle even as we're seeing these negative things happen across the country."

"Drag performances go way back to Shakespearean times," Green said. "People are trying to enjoy themselves and provide entertainment. We should not be castigating people based on their lifestyle or based on how they want to express themselves. I think today shows that that's not tolerated in the City of Philadelphia."

When asked why she attended the photoshoot, Maria Quiñones-Sánchez laughed and said she wanted to "be cool" before saying it was "a great opportunity to have fun while also promoting the intersectionality of what's going on in the city."

"This is an opportunity for us to elevate the conversation and really push back on all of these miserable people who have all this time to tell us what we need to do with our bodies and who we love and how we live," Quiñones-Sánchez said.

Cherelle Parker said she decided to show up because she was "p----d off" about the anti-drag legislation around the country. While waiting for her photo op, Parker mingled with the drag performers and even received some beauty tips from them. While each candidate had to pick a card at



PHOTOS BY KELLY BURKHARDT

Cherelle Parker, who won the Philadelphia Democratic mayoral primary in May, poses with performer Morgan Wells.

random to determine the performer they'd photograph with, Parker also requested her own personal photo with all of the performers in attendance.

"There is so much diversity," Parker said when asked why she wanted an additional photo. "I'm a Black woman. I know what it's like to be put in a box because I'm Black and then I'm a woman. But if you look at the variations of style and grace and focus — on the costumes, the design, the makeup, the hair — everyone is different and beautiful in their own right and that's why it was important for me so people could see us all together."

Helen Gym brought a rainbow feather boa and a pride flag with her to the photoshoot.

"This is a celebration," Gym said. "I have long said that Philadelphia should be the loudest, proudest city in America and that matters right now more than ever. This is not just about props or fun. It's really a

strong statement of presence, of visibility, of joy, and of ownership of this space and in particular, this political space."

Rebecca Rhynhart also had fun during her photoshoot, as she did power poses and other variations with the drag performer she selected. The candidate hung out with the performers after her photos were taken and even invited them to her inauguration party should she become mayor.

"I want to stand in support of the LGBTQ+ community," Rhynhart said. "Around the country, there has been this real war against drag queens and it's ridiculous and it's horrible. In Philly, that's not the case."

Amen Brown said he attended the photoshoot because he wanted to show that he is "for everybody."

"[I showed up to] show this community that they have a friend in me," he said. "I love everybody and to show up today in person to show them that I'm here for you is sending a clear message that [I'm] going to be mayor for the entire city, no matter who you love or who you go home to."

Yari spent several minutes with Gym, whom she sees as a role model, after the candidate's photoshoot.

"I thank every single one of the candidates for helping us break this glass ceiling and in return, I hope that we can also do our part to help them break their glass ceilings," Yari said.

Once the photo shoots were complete, VinChelle reflected on the event.

"It was so beautiful to see and it gives me a little bit of hope that there is still going to be people that are on our side," VinChelle said. "A lot of times, I've been thinking that a lot of people are against us, but it's so nice to see that different mayoral candidates of all colors and all genders came to support the performers, queens and kings."

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PHOTO BY PAUL VASILIADES

The one and only romance of Jay and Nancy Krevsky

By Randy Gross

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Lights up. A YOUNG MAN enters the stage, begins to sing the following lyrics from Ruggero Leoncavallo's "Mattinata," only in Italian.

*"Put on your white dress too,
and open the door to your minstrel!
Where you are not, sunlight is missing;
where you are, love dawns."*

RALPH BELLINI, described as an eighty-year-old man who is "vigorous and full of life," enters, is tempted to speak to the young man, but instead sits down on a park bench. Little does Ralph know, he'll

soon be meeting 75-year-old CAROL REYNOLDS who, as the play title hints, will become Ralph's final romance.

That opening scene from Joe DiPietro's "The Last Romance," a heart-warming comedy about the transformative power of love, was reenacted by Jay and Nancy Krevsky in 2013, at a time, ironically, they were the exact ages of characters Ralph and Carol. Though having appeared on stage, separately, in more than 120 shows in a career spanning more than six decades, it's the only time the couple has ever acted together.

With hindsight, and the permission of the author, it might be more accurate to retitle the play "The Only Romance." Keeping in

mind that the Krevskys have been married nearly as long as their involvement with theatre, it becomes clear that their enduring romance hasn't just been with each other, but also with the stage – and, moreover, the entire Harrisburg community. It is for those reasons, and also because the entire Harrisburg community has loved Jay and Nancy back (as supported by the glowing quotes that follow this article) that the Krevskys have been selected as this month's Influencers.

Greasepaint in their blood

Nancy Conway may have not done any acting as a child, but her father, Tim (of no relation to the late comedian with the

same name) was an instrumental force in the early development of Harrisburg Community Theatre, the forerunner to Theatre Harrisburg. Even so, many of her earliest childhood memories revolve around the stage, including a humorous one involving her father.

"When I was 4 years old, I would go to rehearsals with my dad. And, he had a scene with Lavinia Buckwalter, who was our prima donna at that time," she recalls with a grin. "And he kissed her, on stage, and I yelled at the top of my lungs 'I'm gonna tell my mommy!'"

Jay Krevsky, on the other hand, grew up in Allentown and was already taking on

Continued on next page

stage roles as a teenager. "I did shows at the Jewish Community Center, and I just found it to be great fun," he says. "And I did a couple of plays in high school, which I enjoyed very much." One of his early memories is of actor Billy Sands, who came to Allentown as a guest director in those days and directed Jay in a play. "If you ever watch the 'Bilko' show [which was part of 'The Phil Silvers Show']," he reminisces, "he was one of Bilko's guys."

Nancy developed a love for theater at an early age but was too shy to perform on stage herself. As an adult, in the late 1950's, she enrolled at the Harrisburg Institute of Medical Arts for a two-year program that would eventually land her a job as a lab technician at Harrisburg Hospital.

By this time, Jay already had a college degree himself, but was floundering. "I didn't know what I was going to do ... I was a biology major at Muhlenberg, and I got out of the Army, uncertain about what to do, and somebody said, 'why don't you try teaching?'"

The lives of the lab technician and aspiring teacher – both theatre enthusiasts – were about to intersect.

Pure kismet

Fate. Destiny. No matter how you describe it, the stars and planets must have been aligning for both Jay and Nancy in 1958, the year when Jay moved to Harrisburg.

"Timing is everything," Jay recalls, "I went to Susquehanna Township, a week before school started, the third week of August, and their one Biology teacher retired the day before I got there. So, they hired me on the spot, and said 'you better go get certified.'" It would be the start of a long career for Jay, as both a teacher and administrator at William Penn High School, and a principal at the city's one-time Arts Magnet School.

By September of that same year, Jay was already being lured back to the theatre – and ultimately, into Nancy's arms.

"Some guy that I was friendly with when I came here said 'why don't you look up Harrisburg Community Theater?' And I did, and I went to their opening show, which was 'The King and I,' and I was blown away by the quality of production," says Jay. "And the next show was called 'The Happiest Millionaire,' and they had a role in there, and I auditioned, and I got a part, and I made all kinds of new friends, and it was wonderful."

That chance casting in "The Happiest Millionaire" would also lead to a chance meeting with Nancy. Jay elaborates:



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Jay Krevsky



"Every night after rehearsal, everybody would go to Abe's Tavern at Third and Seneca. Hang out and have beers, snacks, whatever. And not only the cast and crew, but theater hanger-onners. You know, people who loved the theater. And one night I was there, and I was sitting next to Nancy's father – I didn't know who he was, except that he was a good guy named Tim – and I happened to mention to no one in general that I needed a date for opening night. And somebody at the table said 'Tim, why don't you tell him about Nancy?' And Tim took out Nancy's picture, and she was very attractive, and I called her, and we went out. We went to the closing night party, and then we started dating, dated for two years, during which time she got cast as Anne Frank in her first audition ever. We got married in June of '60."



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Nancy Krevsky



Adds Nancy, "we had a great time ... we were at the theater all the time, including after hours. We just loved it! A wonderful courtship!"

After the Anne Frank role, Nancy's "acting bug" would end up rivaling the size of Jay's passion for theatre. Says Jay, "Nancy's had, in my opinion, all the great roles in women's theater. She played Daisy in 'Driving Miss Daisy.' She played Maggie in 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.' She played Stella in 'Streetcar.' I mean, the list is endless."

He continues, "And, over the years, I was lucky to get so many great men's roles. I did Tevye in 'Fiddler on the Roof' – at York Little Theatre in the early 70's. And Sancho in 'Man of La Mancha.' And I did Harold Hill in 'The Music Man.'"

Though neither of the Krevskys have ever

had the desire to take their talents to bigger stages in New York City, Jay likes to lay claim to having performed in the Big Apple. "I've sung on Broadway," he muses. "8th Avenue and 57th Street. There's a little bar there called Don't Tell Momma. I was there with my daughter, a jam-packed little bar with a piano where you can get up and sing, and Mona and I went up there and I sang 'If I Were a Rich Man.' When I finished, I sat down, the audience gave me a nice response, and some guy comes by my table and says 'if you can do it, I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna get my music, I live right up the street. I'll be right back.' That mystery singer turned out to be Lin-Manuel Miranda."

The importance of theatre

The importance of local theatre and the importance of the Krevskys to the local theatrical community are pretty much synonymous.

"It's very important to keep a community looking at itself," says Nancy. "For me, I think the importance of live theatre is that it reflects society."

Adds Jay, "I'm a strong believer in the Arts in general. And the fact that people can appreciate the arts in every form, it's such a blessing to society."

Jay and Nancy's combined 120-plus stage roles not only have contributed to the local fabric of Harrisburg's stage community, but they are the very thread that has stitched together the quilt. Countless actors, directors, dramaturgs, and stage managers – everyone in local theatre who has followed in their stead – have benefitted from the Krevskys dedication to the craft of, as Nancy puts it, "seeing something that is going on at the same time and having a chance to look at it through a different perspective." And they continue to be involved, spearheading such fundraising initiatives as Theatre Harrisburg's Angel Campaign, with Jay actually hand-signing the marketing letters.

With children and grandchildren who have also connected themselves with the theatre, including their son, Solomon, who currently sits on the Theatre Harrisburg board of directors, the Krevsky family is now a 4th generation stage family – so it should come as no surprise that Jay and Nancy share the same hope and vision for their beloved theatre's future.

"It's been 97 years, and we want it to continue," beams Nancy. "That would be a

Continued on next page

wonderful legacy.”

“There are very few theatres that are older than Harrisburg Community Theatre,” adds Jay. “And we want to see its survival, we want to see it continue thriving.”

Stop by the Jay & Nancy Krevsky Production Center of Theatre Harrisburg some afternoon or evening and witness for yourself just how well things are thriving. While you’re there, you very well may hear that young man again from “The Last Romance” repeating his refrain about what can still best be classified as an only romance ...

*“Where you are not, sunlight is missing;
where you are, love dawns.”*

Praise for Jay & Nancy ...

“For years, my late husband, Jay Miffoluf, was very active in the Central Pennsylvania theater community. Ironically, there were many occasions when people would mistake him for Jay Krevsky and vice versa even though they looked nothing alike. Yet my Jay and I could think of no greater compliment than being called ‘Jay Krevsky.’ Jay and Nancy are stellar human beings. They have been the heart and soul of theater in Harrisburg, giving of themselves both on stage and behind the scenes and making sure that theater thrives in the area.” – *Lori M. Myers, author/playwright*

“I’ve known Nancy and Jay Krevsky through Theatre Harrisburg for many years. They have had a tremendously positive impact on the community’s cultural life, and are well respected, admired, and held in deep affection by all who have met them.” – *Carrie Wissler-Thomas, President, Art Association of Harrisburg*

“I have known at least three generations of the Krevsky family, and they are true pillars of the Harrisburg community. In the world of local theater, Jay and Nancy top the list! As talented performers, as tireless volunteers, and as generous benefactors, they warrant a standing ovation from everyone who knows them!” – *David J. Morrison, Executive Director, Historic Harrisburg Association*

“My first show at Theatre Harrisburg - when it was still HCT - was *Guys and Dolls*. I was cast as a member of the Salvation Army Band and Jay Krevsky was playing Nicely-Nicely Johnson. I was new in town and a stranger to everyone in the cast. Jay made sure I felt welcome and included right from the very first day. Over and over again, he and Nancy made sure



PHOTOS BY PAUL VASILIADES

Theatre Harrisburg

my husband Ed and I were included as part of the Central PA theater community. The two of them are a terrific couple and such assets to the community.” – *Marjorie Bicknell, Playwright*

“Jay and Nancy are two of the most genuine, kind-hearted people you could ever meet – they are treasures who enrich the fabric of our communities. Their contributions to the performance arts arena, and the community as a whole, cannot be overstated. Salt of the earth people with servant hearts, Jay and Nancy lead by actions and example, not boasting.” – *Mike Pries, Chad Saylor, and George P. Hartwick, III, Dauphin County Commissioners*

“When I was a student at The Harrisburg Arts Magnet school, I recall Jay Krevsky - the principal at the time - walking the halls

and offering support to each student. He knew students by name and made them feel welcomed - as though they belonged. Throughout my adult life the same warm reception is what I received while finding my voice as a playwright. Mr. Krevsky - as well as his wonderful wife Nancy - are an integral part of the local regional theater scene. I am absolutely thrilled to have my play *Pieces* premiere at the Krevsky Center next year! It is my full-circle moment.” – *Paul Hood, Playwright/Author/Actor*

“Jay and Nancy are pillars of the Harrisburg arts community. They are generous and gracious and brilliant. My favorite Jay memory - aside from all his wonderful performances of ‘If I Were a Rich Man’ - was a party at the Hilton years ago. The birthday celebration turned into a fantastic sing-along around the piano.

There’s nothing quite like singing through the score of *1776* with Jay Krevsky.” – *Stuart Landon, Producing Artistic Director, Open Stage Harrisburg*

“Just say ‘Jay and Nancy’ and everyone will know it’s the Krevskys! They are Harrisburg-area theater royalty and beloved members of the Jewish Community. Jay and Nancy’s hearts are as big as their talents, which is why their influence is felt in the best of all possible ways and why they are held in such high regard.” – *Mike Greenwald, Senior Advisor, WITF-FM*

“Jay and Nancy Krevsky are the living, breathing Mom and Dad of Harrisburg Theatre; nothing less. They have been fixtures at Theater Harrisburg for over half a century, and their performing space on Hurlock Street is very rightly named after them. I speak from a different perspective, however. I’m the Artistic Director of Gamut Classic Theatre in Harrisburg, now celebrating nearly 3 decades in our lovely city. It would have been easy for Jay and Nancy, as scions of Theater Harrisburg, to have regarded myself and my wife (and co-founder) Melissa Nicholson as rivals in such a small community. But they welcomed us unconditionally. And, in many cases, joined in our endeavors.” – *Clark Nicholson, Founding Artistic Director, Gamut Classic Theatre*

To find out more about Theatre Harrisburg’s 2022-2023 Season (their 97th!) or to donate to their Angel Campaign, visit theatreharrisburg.com.

Published Oct. 12, 2022

I, Robot?

AI: Is it a tool or a takeover for business?

By Stacy Wescoe

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Artificial Intelligence programs like ChatGPT have been making headlines lately with experts both warning of the danger of their proliferation, while others tout their benefits to both business and creatives.

But just what can AI do for business? We asked it.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has revolutionized the way businesses operate, and its potential is only growing. With the help of AI, businesses can streamline their operations, automate tedious tasks, improve customer experiences, and make data-driven decisions. Here are some ways businesses can use AI to improve their operations:

1. Customer service: AI-powered chatbots can provide 24/7 customer service, answering frequently asked questions and providing helpful information. This takes the pressure off customer service teams and ensures that customers always receive prompt responses.

2. Sales and marketing: AI can analyze customer data to identify patterns and predict future behavior. This information can be used to create targeted marketing campaigns and personalized sales strategies.

3. Supply chain management: AI can monitor inventory levels, predict demand, and optimize shipping routes to ensure that products are always in stock and delivered on time.

Those four paragraphs are an excerpt from an essay written by a ChatGPT-powered app, when prompted to "Write an article explaining how businesses use AI to improve operations."

The answer was thorough and accurate – although experts warn AI can repeat inaccuracies and can't be relied upon without independent, human fact checking.

But these programs can do a lot. Should people – like journalists and copywriters – be worried that the bots will take over their jobs.

No, said Jody Pillard, director of sales for Hammertech, a division of Weidenhammer in Reding.

He said it's a tool, not a takeover. But it is something to get to know.

"It's one of the most exciting technologies out there. There are tremendous possibilities with it," Pillard said.

He said business leaders need to learn about the tech, and learn about it quickly, because it is coming, and it is coming on fast.

"The velocity [of its development] will accelerate at a rate we are not used to, just as the internet changed things faster than we had ever experienced before," he said.

Like Pillard, Alyse Mitten, owner and marketing strategist for Interlace Communications in Hamburg, said ChatGPT is a tool, not a takeover.

She has begun using it to help her create marketing messages for clients and has found it to be a great assistant to clean up

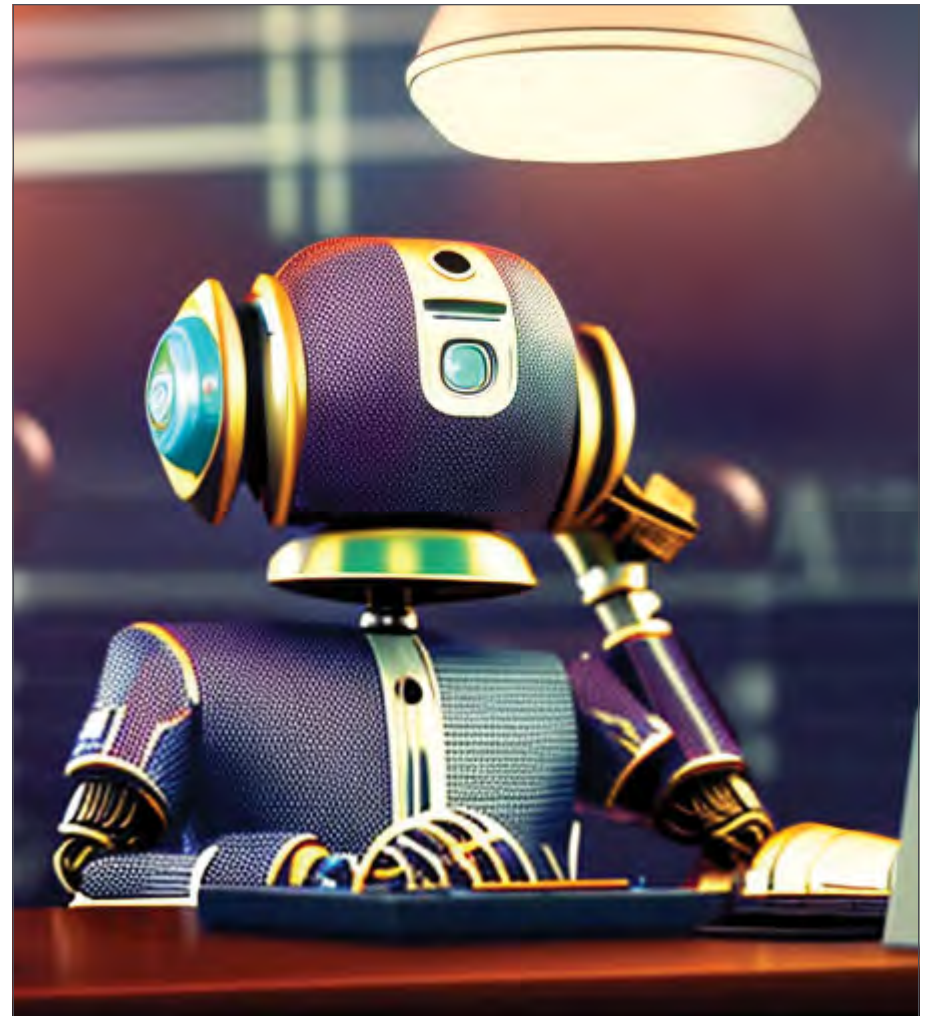


PHOTO CREATED USING MIDJOURNEY AI

Are you chatting with a customer service representative or Artificial Intelligence? Technology is at the point where you might not know the difference.

copy and get the message out in the most effective way.

But, she said, it's not something she relies on to replace her own creative work.

She gave the example of a recent fundraising promotion she put together for a client.

She wrote her own promotion and then used ChatGPT to write a promotion based on the parameters she gave it. She then asked the AI to make the message stronger, and then to make the message softer.

She took what she wrote and what

ChatGPT wrote and combined it into what she thought was the best pitch and presented all three pieces, her original, the ChatGPT version and the version where she combined her own and the ChatGPT version.

She said her client, without knowing which was which, chose the human/AI combination version, which Mitten said she feels was a strong illustration of how ChatGPT contributes to creative work.

She said it can assist the creative process and speed up content creation

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considerably, but still needs a human touch.

"I feel that businesses need to realize that they need to know about this going forward. It's here and we're going to be using it everywhere," she said.

While platforms like ChatGPT, which provides written content based on prompts and Midjourney AI, which creates art based on word prompts, are making headlines, the use of AI has been around for some time.

Companies' customer service chat functions have been assisted with AI technology for some time.

First Commonwealth Federal Credit Union of Trexlertown is one of many local institutions that have been using the tech to streamline operations and improve customer service.

Oscar Avtex, vice president of the credit union's contact center, said First Commonwealth began using AI enhanced chat for customer support during the pandemic.

"It was the fastest and most efficient way to provide support to our members," he said. "We have seen an overall improvement."

Since implementing the AI supported chat system he said they had a 150%

Other ways ChatGPT said it can be used to boost business:

<p>Quality control:</p> <p>AI can analyze data from sensors and cameras to detect defects in products and prevent them from reaching customers. This ensures that products are of the highest quality and reduces the risk of recalls.</p>	<p>Fraud prevention:</p> <p>AI can analyze transaction data to identify patterns of fraudulent behavior and prevent fraudulent transactions from occurring.</p>	<p>Human resources:</p> <p>AI can analyze job applications, resumes, and employee performance data to identify the best candidates for open positions and improve employee retention rates.</p>	<p>Financial management:</p> <p>AI can analyze financial data to identify trends and make predictions about future performance. This information can be used to make data-driven decisions about investments, pricing, and budgeting.</p>
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increase in call volumes over 2019 and they were more productive with fewer resources while still maintaining a 91% member satisfaction rate.

While he said he believes all companies should be exploring how AI can enhance operations, Hammertech's Pillard said businesses and individuals should use caution when using AI.

"They need to keep an eye on the guardrails they set up around this technology," he said. "It's very convincing and if it's not correct it can be used to spread misinformation."

Phishing and scams are things that

businesses and individuals need to be concerned about more than ever with the increase in the power of AI.

He noted that scammers can very convincingly edit videos, voices and even email style to convince people they are a familiar trusted source to gain access to a company's computer system and data.

But caution isn't slowing down the adoption of AI, and people – especially the younger population – are adopting AI technology and adapting to it quickly.

Intelligence.com recently conducted a survey about people's plans to educate themselves about AI.

It found that 10% of Americans have completed a ChatGPT course, 23% are currently taking a course and 30% plan to take a course in 2023.

It also said that employers are starting to see AI training as an important factor in hiring.

Pillard said professionals that haven't trained in AI should consider learning more about it and how it can be used in their work.

"The more you try it the more you will find everyday uses that AI can help you," he said.

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Newspapers are the most trusted source of news and information among all age groups.¹

Gen X

75% of Gen Xers read newspapers to learn about products with which they are not familiar.¹

Gen Xers are twice as likely to say that newspapers are their most important news source compared to YouTube.²

Nearly 7 in 10 Pa. adults, age 40–59, read a daily, Sunday or non-daily print or digital newspaper, or visit a newspaper website each week.³



59% of Gen Xers trust paid news and information more than free media.¹

‘Antisemitism is an existential threat’: Susan Wild



Summit panelists brief community on hate trends, counterefforts, what’s next

By **Carl Zebrowski**
Editor

The Summit to Combat Antisemitism on March 12 started with a joke.

U.S. Rep. Susan Wild told the audience at the region’s first-ever antisemitism summit that while she was getting ready for the Jewish Federation of the Lehigh Valley and Anti-Defamation League event, she texted the organizer, Aaron Gorodzinsky. She “thanked” him for scheduling the event early on the first morning of daylight saving time, after everyone was just robbed of an hour’s sleep.

The reply was quick and droll, as those who know the Jewish Federation’s director of campaign and security planning might have expected: “Antisemitism never sleeps.” The crowd cracked up. The comment was welcome comic relief to those who may have arrived a little uptight, given the subject matter about to be discussed. It was also true.

As the crowd at Muhlenberg College soon heard from a host of panelists that included Wild, State Rep. Mike

Schlossberg, law enforcement officials, and experts on hate crimes and security, antisemitism in fact does not sleep. Panelists spent the day explaining the specific threats it poses and what governments, organizations and individuals are doing and can start doing to combat them.

From 2020 to 2021, reports of antisemitic incidents increased 34% across the nation to an average of seven per day, according to the ADL. Pennsylvania, for its part, led the nation with 473 reports of antisemitic and other hate propaganda.

“I’ve heard the profound concern in my constituents’ voices,” said Wild, who represents Pennsylvania’s 7th District in Congress. “Antisemitism is an existential threat to everything that matters to us, including democracy itself.”

Locally, this past December, some attendees at Bethlehem’s Christkindlmarkt wore T-shirts with messages of hate. In October 2018, a gunman opened fire at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and killed 11 people in the deadliest attack ever on the U.S. Jewish community. This February, a 28-year-old man was charged with hate crimes

after police said he fired at two Jewish men walking home from synagogues in Los Angeles.

Acts of hate are fueled by today’s polarized politics and the ease of spreading ideas on social media, Jonathan Greenblatt, executive director of the Anti-Defamation League, said in a video prerecorded for the event. “Antisemitism isn’t just a Jewish problem,” he said. “It’s a problem that affects all of us. It’s the canary in a coal mine.”

Schlossberg, who represents the state’s 132nd House District, voiced a particular interest in this area. “We as Jews must make sure that every targeted group is protected,” he said, pointing out that state government is working on legislation to broaden protections.

The state legislature is also working to adopt the widely recognized International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. Making that definition official would give Pennsylvania law enforcement a more solid foundation for investigating incidents and making arrests.

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Crimes of hate, contrary to what many people think, are not the result of centralized planning. They aren't typically coordinated by organized extremist groups. "It's useful to think of extremism as loosely organized networks, bound mostly by ideology," said Ben Popp of the ADL Center on Extremism.

The organized groups supply a sort of basis for their convictions and promote that through social media, said Dave Wilson, director of the duty desk of the Secure Community Network. Individual sympathizers and small clusters of them cobble together their own makeshift credos from what they find. "Every one is a very unique brand of extremism," he said, "cherry-picking ideas to match their political beliefs."

Social media also provides this sympathetic audience with methods and procedures for sowing chaos. The information spreads quickly and widely. "Every single day there's a new tactic, a new trend," said Wilson.

There are some recent trends panelists found particularly troubling. "I'm really concerned about the harassment of kids in middle school, high school and college," said Andrew Goretsky, regional director for the ADL. "It's really important that we're taking steps to combat that."

Congresswoman Wild said she's worried about insiders working to undermine organizations. "One of my deepest concerns is infiltration into our police forces, military services and positions of authority," she said. "All our work can be undercut but people who have infiltrated those organizations."

Others panelists were concerned about online gaming and the connections naive youths may make while playing. John Piser, regional director for SCN, believes that the upward trend for incidents of antisemitism and acts of hate will continue.

But there's reason for optimism too. "What keeps me up is the level of hatred that's out there and the growth of it," Piser said. "What gives me hope is the response to that."

The systems in place and the responses to incidents often succeed, Wilson said, despite that "almost every week we're finding a direct credible threat." Ben Popp continued along that line. "We don't hear about when information gets sent and nothing happens," he said. "We only hear about the bad things. But rest assured that actions get thwarted."

Success is a result of surveillance, reporting, tracking, cooperation, investigation and decisive action. All of those began to be pursued in earnest after the Tree of Life attack, Wilson said. SCN and ADL both grew, monitoring mechanisms were upgraded, and communication and cooperation among the FBI, Department of Homeland Security and the host of state and local emergency and law enforcement authorities improved.

In the end, there's no substitute for the training, planning, funding and other elements required to combat antisemitism effectively. Persistence is also crucial. As Aaron Gorodzinsky put it, "Everything we've accomplished in the Lehigh Valley took years and hundreds of hours."

Published April 2023

6 things you can do right now to combat antisemitism

By Carl Zebrowski
Editor

Panelists at the Summit for Antisemitism did more than update the crowd on the current state of antisemitism and what's being done to address the problem. Their coverage of the day's topics can be pared down to a to-do list for the defense. Here are some things you and your businesses and organizations can work on now:

1. Be Aware

Know what to look for. There are more possibilities than you may think. Consider the number 18, for example. You know it as a symbol of good luck. But it's also a symbol for Adolf Hitler — the 1 stands for A and the 8 for H, based on the letters' places in the alphabet. Hate groups are no doubt proud of themselves for coopting the good luck symbol for their own ends, if they realize it. 18 still means luck, of course, but not if it's spray-painted on a synagogue door. To learn about more hate symbols you may not know, visit the Anti-Defamation League's hate symbols web page at [adl.org/resources/hate-symbols/search](https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbols/search).

Also, pay attention to trends. "What we see in the bigger cities makes its way to the smaller communities," said Aaron Gorodzinsky of the Jewish Federation. "We know what's coming."

2. Prepare

"You can't build the organizations and systems you need when you need them," said Adam Teitelbaum, associate vice president of public affairs for the Jewish Federations of North America. Make sure your organizations are building relationships with other groups, improving security measures and training their people in advance on what to do right now and what to do if the unthinkable happens.

3. Report, Report, Report

That exact wording came from Lieutenant William Slaton of the Pennsylvania State Police. People tend to keep quiet about incidents that they've witnessed, sometimes uncertain whether an act was worthy of follow-up. A national survey of Hillels concluded that about two-thirds of those who experienced an antisemitic act did not report it. "If you're unsure," Slaton said, "just report it to law enforcement." If the incident is an emergency or just happened, call 911. If not, you can report it to the ADL at [adl.org/report-incident](https://www.adl.org/report-incident).

Once you report the incident to authorities, organizations ranging from the ADL to local police to the FBI will work together as necessary to investigate and take further action. Don't follow up your reporting by unnecessarily making the news public. "There's a tendency to post it on your social media," said Andrew Goretsky of the ADL. "Don't do that. We don't want to give them any more publicity."

4. Lobby Local

"I cannot emphasize enough how much of this is based on local participation," Teitelbaum said. Critical decisions on legislation, law enforcement, security funding and education all start there, yet too many efforts focus on the national.

So, attend local school board meetings and voice needs and concerns. Bad things can happen at the school board level, with elected members potentially blocking education efforts and worse. Experience shows that attitudes and actions there spread to the state and national levels.

Also, call your various elected representatives to press for legislative action. "Hearing from constituents directly is one of the most impactful things," said U.S. Rep. Susan Wild.

5. Educate

Teach your kids about the Holocaust, antisemitism and hate crimes. "Go home today and have a conversation with the younger people in your life," Teitelbaum said. "When we stand on the shoulders of the generation before us, we can see a future the previous generation couldn't. And the generations after us are standing on our shoulders."

See that your schools are teaching the other kids about those things too. And remember that they'll require informational and physical resources to do that. "It's our responsibility to make sure the schools have what they need," Gorodzinsky said.

6. Come Together

"Unless everybody is safe, no one's safe," said Robin Schatz, director of government affairs for the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia. Jewish institutions are better prepared than others, Gorodzinsky said, so they can guide others on what actions to take and how to improve security. "We have guards. We have cameras," he said. "The bad guys don't just go home and have a cup of coffee. They go to the next available church."



Chestnut Hill Local

Donations from developers irk some voters in council race

by Tom Beck

With affordable housing and other development concerns emerging as a major issue in the current race for city council, many voters in the 8th councilmanic are considering what kind of relationship each candidate has with developers, and what kind of impact those relationships might have on their concerns.

Some voters say they are looking for a candidate who refuses contributions from big developers. Others say that refusing developer money can be an unnecessarily divisive policy that leaves important stakeholders out of the process.

Incumbent Councilmember Cindy Bass, after 12 years in office, accepts donations from developers and has assembled a robust list of political donors – a fact that her supporters say suggests she's performing well in office. Her ending cash balance now totals \$98,871.29. In the most recent funding cycle, her average donation was about \$594.

Meanwhile, when Seth Anderson-Oberman announced his candidacy in February, he pledged not to take money from corporations or "big developers." While he has outraised Bass in the most recent report, his total cash on hand is \$74,394.55, and his average donation was \$177.

His position has attracted certain supporters, like Germantown resident Ann Doley, who has been campaigning for Anderson-Oberman.

"I saw that Councilwoman Bass had a much higher percentage of very large contributions," Doley said in a phone call. "A lot of the contributions were from people who were involved in real estate, development, and parking downtown - these big corporate places. You wonder why are all these people supporting my



In 2012, fire ripped through this vacant and unsealed building, causing severe damage. It was owned by the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority at the time.

councilwoman? They're not connected to this district."

According to the most recent campaign finance reports, developer Bart Blatstein of Tower Investments and Carl Dranoff, president and CEO of Dranoff Properties, are among the developers who contributed at least \$1,000 to Bass' campaign. Both live in Center City. Neither Blatstein, Dranoff nor Bass responded to the Local's requests for comment before press time on Tuesday.

Anderson-Oberman's refusal to accept developer donations has rubbed others the wrong way.

West Powelton Development president Anthony Fullard, whose firm has a memorandum of understanding with the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation to potentially redevelop the Germantown Town Hall, said he's "a little offended" by the notion that his campaign

donations wouldn't be welcomed by a district council candidate – especially since he was born and raised in the district.

"We all should be involved in how to make the 8th District a better district," said Fullard, who lives in Mt. Airy, grew up in Germantown, and donated \$100 to the Bass campaign during the most recent fundraising cycle. "I think that it is extremely important that we support our candidates because they have to raise money in order to win. That is the American way of how one gets into office."

Bowman Properties owner Richard Snowden, who also lives in the district and was scheduled to host a fundraiser for Bass Wednesday, April 19, agreed.

"While it makes a nice sound bite to say that contributions from real estate developers are off limits, is there a compelling reason for this stance any more

than not taking contributions from unions, trial lawyers, bankers, manufacturers, car salesmen or dog groomers, jugglers and circus clowns?" he said. "Like most things, public life is more nuanced than that sort of scattershot approach and one would hope that someone who is going to do the people's business would have the ability and maturity to discern whose heart is in the right place without discriminating against whole categories of professions."

Philly Office Retail president Ken Weinstein, a developer who lives in the district but does not plan to contribute to either the Anderson-Oberman or Bass campaigns, said such political donations are complicated by the Philadelphia City Council's practice of councilmanic prerogative, an unwritten rule which effectively gives district council representatives veto power over development projects.

"Whenever you have a rule that puts that power and decision-making in one person's hands – in this case the district council member – you are opening up the possibility of impropriety in the process," Weinstein said.

Weinstein, who is active in the city's Democratic party and does make political donations, said he doesn't personally seek favors, but he does see councilmanic prerogative as a system that invites abuse.

"Not only is it wrong because it opens up the system to bad actors, it's also creating ten cities when we should be thinking as one city," he said, referring to each of Philadelphia's ten councilmanic districts. "We should not have different zoning overlays in each district and we shouldn't have a different set of rules for each district. We should be coming together as one city."

Continued on next page

Fullard, meanwhile, said he thinks councilmanic prerogative is good for the city.

"The citizens of that district should have someone that they can go to and support their concerns," he said. "It's not about a prerogative, it's about a representative who voters choose to make sure their voices are heard."

Anderson-Oberman said Snowden, Fullard and Weinstein are all examples of developers who deserve a say in shaping the communities in which they do business. But he still wouldn't take their money, he said, despite the fact that all three live within the 8th District.

"If they have a project that they want to build here, we're open to having a

discussion about what that looks like," he said. "But I don't want [a donation] to influence, or even give the appearance of influence, on the final outcome."

Anderson-Oberman did accept \$310 from Yvonne Haskins, a lawyer and community activist who lives in the 8th District and has also developed property there.

But he said he doesn't think of Haskins, who has helped lead a long-running effort to redevelop the Germantown YWCA, as a "big" developer.

"I don't know Yvonne's holdings or what her projects are, but I think we have to make a distinction between a small-scale developer who cares about the community and has a stake in the outcome of that development, and corporate developers

who don't live here and don't have to interact or engage with the community," Anderson-Oberman said.

Haskins told the Local that she has developed about 20 units of affordable housing in the past, and is no longer engaged in development.

Committee of Seventy policy director Patrick Christmas said developers who make political contributions often expect "access" in return.

"These contributions are not evidence of quid pro quo," he said, "but evidence of the power and interest that development firms feel they need to get."

In a better system, Christmas argued, district council members would not exert unilateral power over land use, and the

Philadelphia City Planning Commission, along with neighborhood residents, would have more influence.

"It's a problem," Christmas said. "The Planning Commission engages in a methodical approach to shape public input. That's where most of our planning decisions should come from, not a project by project basis the councilmember determines."

Labor unions are the only interest group associated with Anderson-Oberman's campaign finance reports. He collected a \$1,000 donation from SEIU's Pennsylvania branch, a union for healthcare workers that Anderson-Oberman has been involved with in the past.

Published April 20, 2023

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WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

Developers' application shows potential avenues for Lycoming Mall

By Pat Crossley

Williamsport Sun-Gazette

Senior care. Restaurants. Grocery stores. Office space. A "mixed-use work/play/live site."

While Jon M. Jahanshahi of FamVest Partners LLC cautions that plans are still fluid and it's too early for anything to be set in stone, an application to a state redevelopment program offers glimpses into the potential future for the Lycoming Mall.

"At this time, FamVest is focused on the purchase of the parcel and then the initial site work. We continue to work with local stakeholders to maximize this public/private partnership and are committed to an outcome that will be both beneficial to the local community and serve as an economic driver for the entire county," Jahanshahi, President of FAMVEST Partners and also Executive VP of Acquisition for HFL Corp.

"Our goal is to provide an environment that is attractive to potential tenants; however, the mix of potential tenants remains fluid. That said, we are continuing discussions with potential commercial and hospitality prospects, and the plans for residential housing and recreational space are being developed," he added.

Closing on the mall property is expected in early spring.

"As you are aware, it will be a multi-phase project creating a new, mixed-use development on the property. The initial phases will include changes to the existing infrastructure by adding new transportation assets; demolishing and refurbishing existing buildings; adding new utility assets; and constructing new buildings," Jahanshahi stated recently echoing the words of his associate, Ara Kervandjian, who is listed as the manager, vice president and secretary of the company, when he spoke at the Lycoming County Commissioners' meeting last month.

The mall is composed of the main structure, which houses retail spaces, and certain auxiliary retail sites along the road circling the mall.

In terms of the demolition of portions of the main mall structure, approximately 300,000 square feet of the mall building is slated to be demolished, according to an application to the state Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program, for which the Sun-Gazette filed a right-to-know



request with the Open Records Office for the state's Office of the Budget.

The application said "based on the planning level project cost opinion, the overall building demolition project cost could be \$3,323,000."

Demolition of part of the mall would create an approximately 6.8-acre parcel where the developers are considering developing a mixed-use retail/restaurant/office space during a later phase in the project, according to the application. Following the demolition, the main mall building will be approximately 550,000 square feet.

The plan calls for that portion of the building to be transformed into a "mixed-use work/live/play site."

"A portion of this redevelopment in a future phase is contemplated to also include senior care and medical facilities sorely needed in the area," the developers stated in their plan.

Part of the plan addresses the deteriorating pavement on the parking lot and surrounding roadway.

Work on the parking lot, including milling, grading, repaving and applying striping, is estimated to cost \$5.2 million.

The road which circles around the mall property also could be repaved.

Phase I of the project could include development of three peripheral areas or outparcels for commercial use. Potential uses would include full-service and quick-service restaurants, pharmacies, grocery stores or other retail uses.

"We anticipate the preparation of each site and construction of a white-box building to cost approximately \$2 million per site," the developers' plan stated.

"These outparcels will serve as the catalyst for future tenants and the greater redevelopment plan," according to the plan.

Three of the proposed outparcels include a restaurant and retail pads west of Ollie's and a hotel on a vacant lot near the former Best Buy.

The report from R. K. Webster LLC, civil engineering consultants, included in the application estimates the cost for site work and construction would be \$2 million for each parcel for a total of \$6 million for all three.

The overall roof replacement improvement project would add another \$3.3 million to the rehabilitation of the mall. Some of the mall store roofs date back to as early as 1996, which was the last time the Sears store roof was replaced.

The total anticipated purchase price for the Lycoming Mall is \$15.5 million including closing costs, according to the application. Of that, the Lycoming County has pledged a loan of \$5 million, another \$5 million comes from a bank loan and the remainder would be an investment from the developers.

Jason Fink, president and CEO of the Williamsport/Lycoming Chamber of Commerce, which has been working with the developers, shares the excitement for the revitalization of the Lycoming Mall property.

It's a sizable property that was a focal point for decades and has been a commerce center for years, but acknowledged "the mall has been struggling to survive," said Fink. "I am anxious to see what they are able to do."

Without the investment of the developers, the mall, which is mostly vacant, would likely risk facing the same "blighted and abandoned fate," as other malls across the country, according to FamVest. Instead, with this plan the mall could bring much needed housing, upwards of 500 jobs and retail and local tax revenue, to a once-bustling property.

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The Tribune-Democrat

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AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Solutions sought for living issues in Johnstown region

By Dave Sutor

dsutor@tribdem.com

JOHNSTOWN, Pa. – One of the first steps taken by the newly formed Johnstown Quality Affordable Housing Task Force was to help arrange for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development representatives to visit the city in late April.

HUD Mid-Atlantic Regional Administrator Matthew Heckles and others from the agency toured part of the city and participated in a roundtable with more than three dozen community leaders from various sectors, including government, nonprofits and law enforcement.

The discussion highlighted the importance cooperation between local, state and national organizations will need to play as the area attempts to deal with its myriad of issues regarding affordable housing.

“This task force is really just a way to truly bring a collaborative process together to look at housing from all different aspects, all different segments,” task force member Susan Mann, president of the 1889 Foundation, said. “It’s just kind of trying to really bring it all together and look at really best practices, too, what other communities have done that are similar to Johnstown and try and bring some of those potential best practices here.”

“The best way to do that is to try to really come together and look at this from a commonsense perspective.”

After the meeting, Heckles said, “Sometimes to a fault, but I can be an optimist, and here I’m definitely an optimist. I think that Johnstown has



THOMAS SLUSSER

Johnstown Quality Affordable Housing Task Force members, from left, Jeannine McMillan, 1889 Jefferson Center for Population Health executive director; Susan Mann, 1889 Foundation president; and Mike Kane, Community Foundation for the Alleghenies president, address the media at the Central Park Complex in downtown Johnstown.

incredible strength from which it can build to revitalize its downtown area and its neighborhoods.”

The task force, which formed in March, consists of multiple partners, including the City of Johnstown, Johnstown Housing Authority, 1889 Jefferson Center for Population Health, 1889 Foundation and Community Foundation for the Alleghenies.

“We recognize that there are many challenges under that housing umbrella that have really been discussed over the past several years, things like obviously affordable housing in general, looking at blight and trying to keep people in their

homes before they become dilapidated, also looking at the state of some of our current public housing,” 1889 Jefferson Center for Population Health Executive Director Jeannine McMillan said.

McMillan said that the issues with local affordable housing constitute a “human service crisis” and “public health crisis” that interconnect with other concerns facing many residents, including food insecurity, transportation and general well-being.

“I think one of the biggest challenges now – and it’s not unique to our area – obviously is there is so much need right now not only looking at affordable, safe

housing options, but all of the other challenges that folks are at risk for in the community,” McMillan said.

HUD and the Johnstown Housing Authority play major roles regarding local affordable housing, with 2,347 people living in public housing and another 1,095 getting federal Section 8 voucher assistance, as of March 31.

JHA Executive Director Mike Alberts said the authority is participating with the task force, in part, because, “It’s good to have good connections and have people that are on the same page who want to do what’s best for the residents’ lives.”

Also on the federal level, Pennsylvania U.S. Sen. Bob Casey Jr., a Democrat and chairman of the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, introduced the Visitable Inclusive Tax Credits for Accessible Living (VITAL) Act. The goal of the legislation is to increase investment in the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program and develop more accessible housing units for older adults and people with disabilities.

“Far too many older adults and people with disabilities cannot afford accessible housing, live in unsafe housing, or live in institutions even though they’d prefer to stay in their communities,” Casey said in a released statement. “This is unacceptable.”

“We need to ensure that families have a real choice when it comes to the place they call home. My legislation would ensure that we are ramping up accessible housing development to meet the widespread needs of these communities.”

Dave Sutor is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. He can be reached at 814-532-5056. Follow him on Twitter @Dave_Sutor.

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TOWN AND COUNTRY

LOCAL NEWS FOR LOCAL READERS SINCE 1899

News from Bally, Douglass, East Greenville, Green Lane, Hereford, Lower Salford, Marlborough, Milford, New Hanover, Pennsburg, Quakertown, Red Hill, Trumbauersville, Upper Hanover, Upper Salford, Washington Township and nearby communities.

UPSD board approves armed guards for 2023-24 school year

By **Bradley Schlegel**
Staff Writer

Despite the objection of a resident and the opposition of two Upper Perkiomen School Board members, armed guards are coming to the district. Last week, the members voted to approve a three-year contract with a Jenkintown firm.

Members Judith Maginnis and Dana Hipszer voted against an action item that will pay the Cardinal Point Security Group more than \$1.522 million over the life of the service agreement that runs from July 1 until June 30, 2026. It includes an option for a fourth-year renewal.

An armed guard will be stationed at the high school and middle school from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. A similar guard will be located at the 4th & 5th Grade Center, as well as Marlborough and Hereford elementaries from 8:15 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. Monday through Friday, according to the district's security agreement with the agency.

Two unarmed guards will be allocated at the high school each day from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. An additional unarmed guard will be assigned from noon to 6 p.m. An unarmed guard will also be assigned to the middle school each day from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.

During the next school year, the district expects to spend \$489,750 for the service. It will pay each armed security officer \$43.50 per hour at an estimated total cost of \$313,200. The unarmed guards will earn \$170,100 at a rate of \$31.50 per hour, according to the language of the agreement.

The total security expense will increase to \$507,624 for the 2024-25 school year. That number goes up to \$525,624 the following year, according to the agreement embedded in the meeting agenda.

Administrators initially budgeted \$288,000 for the armed guards for the upcoming year, according to an email message received two months ago from district spokesperson

Alexis Jenofsky. Council President Melanie Cunningham characterized the approved figure of \$489,750 as a combination of the new armed guards and the guards/crossing guards the district had previously, according to an email message received Monday morning. She wrote that the difference was included in the facilities committee portion of the budget.

On its website, the Cardinal Point Security Group claims it is committed to a focus on comprehensive safety that encompasses physical safety, positive climate, effective culture, and strategic professional development. It states that the organization's goal is to build exceptional proficiency and long-term self-sustainability for a childcare organization, school, and house of worship, governmental or private business. The agency specializes in protection services for those groups of clients.

It also provides executive protection services for specialized events, according to the webpage.

Christopher Springfield – the CEO and president, a United States Marine Corp veteran who holds a Master of Science Degree in Organizational Dynamics from the University of Pennsylvania – oversees all aspects of company operations. Springfield, a retired deputy chief of police, has created comprehensive police tactics curricula and trained police officers, military special operations teams and security personnel, according to his biography. It also states that he has received several thousand hours of leadership, investigations, and tactical-related training and holds various instructor certifications.

Several members voted for the action item despite expressing concerns during the June 15 regular meeting. Vice President Peg Pennepacker told the audience she “hated” the proposal, but that she was leaning towards supporting it.

J.P. Prego described his vote as the most significant since those related to the

COVID-19 pandemic. He said the board was putting “something in place to deal with the worst-case scenario. Unfortunately, it’s something we have to do.”

Several members expressed a concern over police response time. The district’s five schools, located in five separate municipalities and spread across two counties, are covered by three community police departments and the state police.

Mike Elliott described the contract as a viable option to help keep the students safe.

Maginnis expressed skepticism that an armed guard is the most effective way to prevent a mass shooting. Prior to the vote, she referenced a report from the Washington Post that claimed an armed school resource officer was able to stop or disarm an active shooter in two of 225 incidents of gunfire on school grounds between 1999 and 2022.

Some of the deadliest school shootings occurred at buildings with an armed resource officer, according to Maginnis. She referenced incidents at Robb Elementary School in 2022 (28 dead), Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (29 dead), Santa Fe High School in 2018 (30 dead), Marshall County High School (31 dead) and Great Mills High School (32 dead) in 2018; Santana High School in 2001 (33 dead) and Columbine High School in 1999 (34 dead).

“More often than not, the armed guards were outgunned by the shooters,” Maginnis said.

The member said the board and administration should have initially considered preventative measures such as installing alarms on school doors or metal detectors.

“I’m not 100 percent against armed guards,” she said. “But we jumped right to [that option] before we even locked our doors.”

Maginnis said the public should have been included in the process. She suggested that administrators put together

a task force consisting of parents, students and business owners during the upcoming school year to examine the issue.

“I really wish this had been done more openly,” she said.

Hipszer expressed a preference to hire additional school resource officers. He described the contract for armed guards as presenting a false sense of security. He also said he was concerned that approval would further delay the necessary conversation regarding the creation of a regional police department.

“Someone, somewhere, sometime, we will need to bridge the disconnect between what the community wants and what it needs, and what municipal leaders are promoting,” Hipszer said.

According to Keith McCarrick, the creation of a regional police department would solve this issue for the district. He described the implementation of armed guards as necessary.

Prior to the vote, Red Hill resident Julia Swift told members that the presence of armed guards will do active harm to the children’s well-being and never be enough to protect them. She said that the children “would become immersed in an atmosphere of fear that their friends and teachers are potentially hostile.”

Pennsburg resident Vicki Lightcap lauded the board for approving the motion. “I think with the times we’re living in, I’m glad you are making the choice to protect our kids,” she said.

According to the message from Cunningham, the district has no interest in starting its own police department. “It would be really nice if those who were not in favor of us hiring armed guards would focus their efforts on Upper Hanover [in] creating a [regional] police force,” she wrote. “But that still leaves Hereford out in the cold. This seems to be the best solution for the time being.”

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TIMES NEWS

Serving the people of Carbon, Schuylkill, Lehigh, Monroe & Northampton counties

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DELIVERY

Towns ask for help in blight battle

Representatives request commissioners adopt deed fee for demolitions

By Amy Miller

amiller@tonline.com Blight.

It's a problem many small towns in the region face.

But some communities in Carbon County are hoping that a law enacted in 2016 may be able to help them fight back against dangerously dilapidated homes.

On Thursday, representatives from Nesquehoning, Lansford, Summit Hill, Jim Thorpe, Lehighton and Palmerton gathered at the county commissioners' meeting to urge the board to implement Act 152 of 2016. The act adds a \$15 fee on all mortgages and deeds recorded with the county recorder of deeds office and would be used to create a fund to demolish beyond repair buildings.

Nesquehoning councilwoman Abbie Guardiani, who served as the group's spokesperson, spoke about the towns and the issues the face with the growing blight problem in the communities.

"Property blight is a serious and costly problem that affects the quality of life for everyone here in the county," she said, noting that many homes in these municipalities are between 80 and 100 years old, are side-by-side or half a double. Residents in one side are being forced out because the other half of the structure is falling apart.

One home that was used as an example is a home on Center Avenue in Jim Thorpe, where a family resides in one half, but the other half is rapidly collapsing in on itself. The borough doesn't have all the funds to demolish it and rebuild the center wall for the other side.

Guardiani said that blight is due to fires, abandonment and owners who just don't care about the property.

"These properties represent a serious health and safety hazard for the neighbors, for our volunteer fire companies, police



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Three photos of blighted homes that municipal officials held up at the Carbon County Commissioners' meeting on Thursday as they requested the board to implement Act 152 of 2016 to help fight blight in small communities. From left are a burned out home in Nesquehoning, a building in Summit Hill, and an abandoned home that has been the center of much discussion in Jim Thorpe.

departments and the community at large," she said.

Blighted homes devalue a community and deter good residents and businesses from moving into the area.

She asked the county to look into Act 152, which currently is utilized by 26 counties in the state, including Monroe and Schuylkill, as a way to help the municipalities tear down these structures.

"Establishing a fee of \$15 to record a deed or mortgage is not a burden on anyone when you consider the downstream consequences of allowing blighted properties left to stand," Guardiani said.

The commissioners asked questions about how this would be overseen and how the distribution of funds would be determined.

Commissioner Chris Lukasevich asked why can't the municipalities just increase their moving permits by \$15 to then bring in the funds for demolition instead of the county implementing this. Then the money would directly go to that municipality.

Commissioner Rocky Ahner said that while

he is in favor of helping with the problem, he said he feels zoning laws also need to be addressed to help fight the problem. He also suggested increasing citation fees and stopping properties from continuously changing hands and getting worse.

The board pointed out that it received \$1 million to help fight blight before it gets to the point where the home needs to be torn down. Guardiani said that was a start, but the money will only go so far before it is completely spent.

Act 152, while it may take a while to generate a significant amount, will be a continuous pot that could be used, she said.

Guardiani suggested that when the fund gets to a certain amount, applications could be accepted and then reviewed.

"You look at which building is absolutely the worst, roofs are collapsing. It's dangerous, somebody's going to get hurt. A fireman is going to get killed. Something terrible is going to happen and that's the one that comes down," she said, adding that the fund then resets.

Lukasevich asked Guardiani if she would come speak to the Carbon County Council of Governments about the issue and see where the municipal members stand.

The representatives also presented the board with several resolutions their towns passed, photos of problem buildings and Monroe County's program outline.

Staff members for State Sen. David Argall also spoke about what is being done to help communities and how Schuylkill's program has been a catalyst to secure larger matching grants.

The commissioners took no formal action on the request, but asked for information on the group's next meeting, which will be held at 6 p.m. Wednesday in the Summit Hill borough building.

"We come here looking at you and saying help us, we're doing our best. Help us," Guardiani said. "... This is not something a small borough can do on its own. You cannot fight this problem on your own."

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PARKLAND PRESS



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THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER



FOR THE PARKLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT

50¢ A COPY

High school seniors learn about firefighting

By Lou Wheeland
Special to The Press

With an ongoing scarcity of volunteer firefighters throughout the country, Parkland High School provided an Introduction to Firefighting for Seniors program May 30 at the school.

Led by Fire Sciences teacher Eric Gopen, seniors were introduced to different facets of firefighting by firefighters from Woodlawn, Greenawalds, Schnecksville, Laurys Station, Tri-Clover and Neffs volunteer fire departments.

Woodlawn Engine 3212 was used to demonstrate how a pumper provides water to extinguish a fire.

Community Fire Company 1, Schnecksville, brought a rescue truck to demonstrate different types of rescue tools needed to extricate crash victims from their vehicles.

Neffs Volunteer Fire Department provided Quint 1621, a multipurpose aerial truck to demonstrate aerial operations.

Water for the tower was provided by Laurys Station Mini-Pumper 1271.

According to Gopen, several students expressed an interest in becoming volunteer firefighters and would connect with their local fire departments.

Published July 6, 2023



PRESS PHOTOS BY LOU WHEELAND

ABOVE: Woodlawn Fire Department Lt. Andrew Arney helps high school student Syeda Hasnain handle a hose at the firefighting program.

RIGHT: Firefighter Tom Burkhardt, Community Fire Company 1, Schnecksville, watches as Parkland High School senior Spiro Karas gets hands-on experience May 30 with a battery-powered rescue tool at the school's Introduction to Firefighting for Seniors program.

FAR RIGHT: Firefighter Tom Perun, Neffs Volunteer Fire Company, was flying the elevated platform of Quint 1621 at the program on May 30.



THE CITIZENS' VOICE

The Predator Catcher relishes the chase

By James Halpin
Staff Writer

WILKES-BARRE - Minutes after the Luzerne County Predator Catcher signed on to the Grindr social networking app while sipping coffee at a local Denny's, he rubbed his hands together in excitement.

Catch No. 513 was on the line.

"I was shocked that someone took the bait out here in Luzerne County," Musa Harris said. "It's tremendously hard to catch someone in Luzerne County because everybody knows who I am and that I'm out here to expose you."

The 43-year-old Kingston man says he's exposed more than 500 child predators since he started operating as the Luzerne County Predator Catcher nearly three years ago. Most of his catches are exposed only on videos that receive thousands of views on social media, but police in Luzerne County have begun filing criminal charges in some of his cases.

The "catch" Harris made in South Wilkes-Barre the afternoon of Feb. 25 came with surprising ease. Minutes after opening the Grindr app, Harris assumed the identity of a 15-year-old boy and quickly engaged in a sexually explicit conversation, saying "I don't mind age if you don't."

"Cool, 'cause I'm almost 16. I just don't want nobody to find out," Harris told his quarry.

As soon as the text shipped off, Harris turned to journalists watching at his table.

"I want to see what he says now - if he's going to block me or if he's going to keep going," Harris said. "This is the crucial point right here, because the age has dropped."

The man's initial response was wary: "That's jailbait." But after Harris assured him he was "no snitch," the man promptly responded with, "How far are you from Academy?"

"How are you going to go to jail? I'm not telling?" Harris replied.

"Go to Sunoco," the man wrote back, referring to a gas station on Academy Street.



Musa Harris, right, talks with a man he encountered online and later confronted in South Wilkes-Barre. No charges have been filed in the incident.

SEAN MCKEAG / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Harris told the man he was over on Hutson Street, a 10-minute walk away. Then he quickly got up, paid the bill and got on the road.

Harris got out of his car about a half block away from the Sunoco to avoid suspicion and approached the store with his hood up and a mask on to conceal his age. His new acquaintance, however, was nowhere in sight.

After waiting in front of the store for a few minutes, Harris got a message that the man was waiting a few blocks down Academy Street.

A short walk down to the corner of Irving Place led to the confrontation.

"You have been Musafied," Harris said, using a term approved by the website Urban Dictionary meaning "to be suddenly exposed."

The unidentified man, who quickly pulled his coat over his head to conceal his identity, repeatedly accused Harris

of "entrapment," saying his Grindr profile indicated he was 18 years old.

"I said I didn't want to meet you," the man said.

"So why am I here then?" Harris asked. "If you declined, then why am I here?"

As Harris followed the man through the streets of South Wilkes-Barre, the man called for an Uber and Harris called 911.

"What's your name?" the call-taker asked.

"LC Predator Catcher," Harris answered.

In his effort to escape Harris, the man walked onto the levee trail and then crossed the Susquehanna River over the Black Diamond railroad bridge before returning to the Wilkes-Barre side. An Uber driver eventually showed up and then drove off after seeing Harris and members of the media pursuing the caller.

Continued on next page

For more than an hour, Harris followed the man as he awaited a police response, recording all the while with his phone. The man insisted throughout that Harris had duped him by listing his age as 18 on Grindr.

"You're trying to be righteous. You put up 18 on there," the man said.

"All right, but what did I tell you? Kids lie to get on apps," Harris said. "That's how old you've got to be to come on the app. All right then, but I told you underneath that age and you agreed. It was not a kid. It was me the whole time."

"So what's the problem?" the man asked.

"What's the problem?" Harris said. "That you agreed upon a 15-year-old coming here to have sexual pleasure."

At one point Harris' catch accused him of being a predator himself.

"I'm a predator? I'm the predators' predator," Harris said.

The man again crossed the Black Diamond Bridge and went into Edwardsville. When Wilkes-Barre police finally arrived on the scene, he was gone.

The officers said they would notify their counterparts in Edwardsville about the situation.

However, Edwardsville Police Chief David Souchick said his department never received a call for assistance from city police on Feb. 25.

Wilkes-Barre Police Chief Joseph Coffay said his department had been unaware of an "undercover investigation occurring in the city" on the date in question and that the case is currently an open investigation.

No charges had been filed by the time of publication, according to court records.

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Police and prosecutors are divided on Harris' tactics

By Amy Marchiano
and James Halpin
Staff Writers

It's a sunny January afternoon on the streets of Harrisburg and Musa Harris confronts a man he says was looking for sex with a minor.

While recording the encounter with his phone to share with his 50,000 Facebook followers, Harris, who styles himself "The Luzerne County Predator Catcher," calls 911.

"I have an individual over here who tried to hook up with what he believes is a 15-year-old child," Harris tells the dispatcher.

When a Harrisburg police officer arrives, he tells Harris the district attorney isn't going to press charges.

"We've had this talk with you before," the officer says in the video. "We understand what you are doing, but the way you are going about it is not helping the situation if you want to go and have these (people) charged."

Harris, 43, of Kingston, claims to have "caught" more than 500 men in several counties over the past three years while posing as a minor seeking sex online. But prosecutors and police in most jurisdictions say they can't pursue such cases under state law.

The exception is Luzerne County, where 20 people have been charged using evidence provided by Harris.

But, on this day, the alleged predator is told he's free to go.



SEAN MCKEAG / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

District attorneys in different counties disagree on whether alleged child predators snared by Musa Harris, the self-described Luzerne County Predator Catcher, can be successfully prosecuted.

DA: We won't prosecute

Dauphin County District Attorney Francis T. Chardo said he doesn't know Harris, but he's familiar with predator catchers setting up stings. He encourages people like Harris to report their tips to law enforcement instead. Otherwise, their efforts will be in vain.

"We won't prosecute on the basis of their stings," he said. "They are not viable prosecutions."

Chardo said there is "entrapment as a defense and entrapment as a matter of law."

"The bottom line is these guys don't know where the line is," Chardo said.

Harrisburg Bureau of Police Deputy Chief Dennis Sorensen said he understands what Harris is doing.

"He's trying to make the world a better place from his perspective," said Sorensen, who wouldn't provide the name of the

officer who interacted with Harris in January.

Investigations, however, should be left to law enforcement, he said.

"We cannot condone vigilante justice."

Difficult cases

Police in Kingston and prosecutors in Luzerne County take a somewhat different view, having pursued charges against 20 of Harris' "catches."

Under state law, someone can be charged with unlawful contact with a minor only if they approach an actual minor or a law enforcement officer posing as one for sexual purposes.

To circumvent that, prosecutors in Luzerne County have charged Harris' suspects with attempted unlawful contact with a minor and offenses such as solicitation to commit a sex crime.

"Our research led us to different charges that make certain cases possible," District Attorney Sam Sanguedolce said. "But we still run into the problem that he doesn't know exactly what evidence we need, so it's more of a crap shoot based on the evidence he turns over whether or not we can bring charges."

Authorities decided to pick up some of Harris' cases because they can't ignore crimes taking place in the community, he said.

"On the one hand, these are dangerous people, so we can't just ignore it and let them run around on the street,"

Continued on next page

Sanguedolce said. "On the other hand, the cases are extremely difficult to put together, especially when the evidence is brought by Mr. Harris."

Kingston Police Chief Richard Kotchik said one of his detectives reviews Harris' cases and consults with prosecutors to determine whether a given case is viable. Many times, they are not.

"There's a reason why there haven't been 300-400 arrests. It has to be done to the letter of the law," Kotchik said. "He does good with what he does, when he does it the right way, yes. But we don't encourage it."

Kingston Detective Stephen Gibson, who has been reviewing Harris' cases and filing charges on some of them, also cautioned that vigilante work can interfere with operations police are already conducting.

"We don't want vigilantes running around doing this kind of stuff. That's the reason we have police," Gibson said. "They could be compromising an investigation that's already ongoing, because obviously law enforcement already does these things... He isn't trained to do it and doesn't know the law."

It remains to be seen whether Harris' cases would hold up on appeal because to date none has reached the state's appellate courts. However, there has been a Luzerne County Court ruling in a case involving Harris that appears to uphold such prosecutions.

In that case, a defense attorney sought dismissal of charges against his client before trial, arguing the law prohibits prosecutions based on a private citizen posing as a minor.

County President Judge Michael T. Vough denied the petition, ruling prosecutors had established a seemingly valid case.

"Whether or not the commonwealth will ultimately be successful in proving defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at trial remains to be seen," Vough wrote.

Harris says he welcomes the grudging support he now receives from local law enforcement and he's glad to see some of his targets held accountable.

'Dangerous' behavior

Authorities say vigilante predator catchers pose a danger not only to themselves but to the people they're catching.

Already, two men Harris has caught - a dentist in Berks County and a 911 call-taker in Schuylkill County - have killed themselves after being exposed on social media.



SEAN MCKEAG / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Musa Harris, right, talks with Wilkes-Barre Police Officer Justin Morris in South Wilkes-Barre about a man Harris says he "caught" while posing as a minor online.

Harris said he doesn't regret what he's doing but he does sympathize with their families.

"They took the coward's way out. I think they (were) hiding secrets that they didn't want out," Harris said. "I feel sorry for the families, for their loss. Not as far as them taking their life, but I feel sorry for the families."

One of the suicides took place in Minersville, where Police Chief Michael Combs said authorities have taken a case-by-case approach to Harris' work.

"That's tragic, but in both of those cases they were more well-known individuals," Combs said. "From their perspective, life as they knew it was over."

The chief said catching criminals can be dangerous work, and questioned the safety of Harris' approach.

"If someone's a child predator, they deserve to be caught," Combs said. "There's no arguing that point. The concerns here are obviously, one for his safety. One of these days there's a concern that someone is going to say, 'My life is over. But so is yours.'"

So far, Harris' catches have been relatively peaceful, although one man tried grabbing his phone and another pulled out but did not use a hatchet. Harris maintains he is not worried about his safety.

"That don't have me nervous or nothing like that," Harris said. "Most of them, when

they be having weapons and stuff on them, they think it's for protection, so nobody don't rob them."

Harris said he has been threatened just once, by a target who told him he'd have his family killed. Calling it a "scare tactic," Harris called the police anyway. They showed up but didn't arrest the alleged predator. Harris claims the man was arrested months later because of information he provided.

Harris says he's not afraid of what might happen to him, and that he puts "the fear in them that if they try anything, it's going to end badly for them."

Still, Adam Wandt, an attorney and assistant professor of public policy at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York and co-chair of the New York City Bar Associations' Committee on Technology, Cyber and Privacy Law, said people like Harris pose a host of problems.

"The vigilante takes a risk in contacting the child predator," he said, including putting innocent people in danger. "I think that this behavior is extremely dangerous."

When law enforcement officers conduct surveillance, they are able to monitor communications and take other actions the vigilante is not, he said.

Evidence collection could be compromised because of vigilantes, he said, and prosecutors need to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

"The defense will attack the motives of the vigilante," Wandt said. "They may have a very hard time being able to get a conviction in a court."

He suggested if people like Harris really want to get child predators off the streets, they should become police officers or advocate for changes in the law.

"Law enforcement should be and must be doing this type of activity," he said.

Money a motive?

No matter how noble their pursuit, predator catchers aren't always all about advocacy, Wandt said.

"They are doing it for social media subscribers," he said. "They are doing it for live clicks."

Harris, who said he lost his job during the pandemic, admits he gets donations through social media, but he wouldn't say how much.

"It's not a tremendous amount or anything like that," Harris said. "I love doing what I do. I don't do it for the money."

The Pennsylvania Department of State Bureau of Corporations and Charitable Organizations sent Harris a letter in July ordering him to stop soliciting contributions because he is not registered with the bureau.

In January, the department said it had yet to receive any documentation from Harris and declined further comment. Harris acknowledged he received the "cease and desist" notice but ignored it because he doesn't believe he should have to register.

"Why would you do that if you're just putting videos up," he asked.

Harris believes the letter is related to a sexual assault awareness event he organized last year at Kirby Park in Wilkes-Barre at which he sold T-shirts. He said his significant other donated half the proceeds to charity.

While Harris revels in bringing alleged predators to justice, he admits he has his own criminal past.

"I sold drugs before," he said, and went to prison. Harris said it took him "years to straighten up."

But he said he doesn't hide from his past. "People can change."

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Reconstructing Pittsburgh's hidden history

By Megan Trotter

Pittsburgh history is collected across the city through museum archives and commemorative statues but is missing an important piece: the stories of individuals who were forced to hide behind closed doors.

Founded in 2012 by oral historian, Harrison Apple, who prefers they/them pronouns, The Pittsburgh Queer History Project, reconstructs the history of LGBTQ+ individuals.

Beginning as an investigation of gay-owned-and-operated after-hour nightclubs, Apple's work has blossomed into a safe community of what they like to refer to as a place of "labor and love."

With the search starting as a deep desire for continuity between their own experiences as a gay person and the experiences of individuals 30 to 50 years older, Apple collected over thousands of stories and artifacts of the gay community.

"The sort of coded languages and the strategies for invisibility make it really hard to understand what happens behind closed doors. Which of course was the point. I needed to find a way to answer my question of what is a gay social club," Apple said.

Focusing their research on creating outreach Apple slowly built up trust and was eventually introduced to a pioneering member of Pittsburgh's gay community, Robert Johns, otherwise known as "Lucky."

In 1967 Lucky opened the first gay social club known as the "Transportation Club."

Despite commercial establishments being prohibited from serving known homosexuals during this era, Lucky's club created jobs for people who did not pass

as straight or cisgender during the 1950s and 1960s.

Apple recalls sitting in their car on Lucky's street trying to catch their breath before formally meeting him for the first time.

"I was so scared to meet him because I had heard about him for almost a year," Apple said.

Despite the nerves, Lucky welcomed them, stating simply that Apple was family. The two built a friendship that lasted until Lucky's death in 2014.

In Lucky's memory, Apple opened the "Lucky After Dark," visual exhibit featuring over 12,000 items ranging from photographs to clothing to video and realia—testaments from gay social clubs between the 1960s and 1990s.

"It's so common for people to be extractive and think that they're doing something good when you're really just eulogizing someone's impending death and burying them in their memories," Apple said about interview work with members of the gay community.

During their initial meeting warmed by the comfort of an electric fireplace, Lucky provided knowledge and experience that continues to aid Apple's research.

He had given a clear picture of the gay origin story of Pittsburgh.

Dec. 5, Apple, and a few other Pittsburgh Queer History Project members gathered in Carnegie Mellon's College of Fine Arts building for the 3rd iteration of the MS89 screening series.

Director, Zed Armstrong, who prefers they/them pronouns, and collaborator Michel Ferrucci joined as panelists the screening of the 1988 City Council fight for

anti-discrimination laws in Pittsburgh

The documentary featured testimonies from the case and interviews from the gay community after learning of the ruling.

Audience members snorted at the remarks of council members who proudly opined that it was "Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve," during an interview within the documentary.

The evening closed with a more lighthearted and elaborate video performance by Pittsburgh drag queen "Sandy Beach."

Armstrong, formally Pittsburgh's Original Gay Cable Network producer, spoke about their work covering the construction of the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

As part of filming, Armstrong ventured to Washington D.C. to cover the small groups working on sections of the quilt in memory of their friends.

"It seemed like they were endless. Each piece represented a person who had died of AIDS," Armstrong said.

Apple shared the struggle of reconstructing individuals' experiences during the time of the AIDS epidemic.

"It's a big ask to have people retell incredibly traumatic stories about people they loved and lost way too soon. And in a world that would in response to that death, tell them that they deserved it and that they caused it," Apple said.

Ferrucci, who owns a vintage clothing store that is popular among the younger queer community, is a long-life resident of Pittsburgh. He recalls his earlier years within the city when gay individuals were not as accepted.

"Pittsburgh can be kind of a conservative

town even among the gay community. I mean, not quite so much now as it used to be, but I think we were seen as kind of weirdos," he said.

In the mid-eighties, Armstrong was one of two artists who put together an exhibit on Duquesne's campus.

Featured in the display was a photo of Armstrong's girlfriend's unshaven legs.

"They were abstract. But my photographs were considered offensive to the community, so they shut the gallery down," they said.

While Duquesne offered no official reason regarding the closure, Armstrong learned from an employee the true nature of the exhibition's shut down.

Since then, Duquesne has begun to take steps in broadening its acceptance through several LGBTQ+ organizations and an annual gender-neutral fashion show.

While the Pittsburgh Queer History Project seeks to celebrate and memorialize gay individuals, there are artifacts Apple can't include in the public side of the project.

"Lucky, when I was interviewing him, had given me 5 diaries that he wrote between 1955 and 1979," Apple said.

"He explained to me that 'I know you, and you know me, and I want you to read these to get a better sense of how you write my story, but I don't want you to share them.'"

Apple plans to pass the diaries on to someone who understands the agreement to never share them publicly. Apple shared that oral history has taught them that no one has the right to know everything.

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Approximately 1,500 people were forced to evacuate their homes in East Palestine, Ohio after a cloud of toxic chemicals exploded into the sky following a train derailment. Environmental contaminants are regularly transported by rail in the U.S. and very few officials are trained on how to properly react when such a disaster occurs.

WAY OFF TRACK

Weighing profit vs. public safety in wake of East Palestine train derailment

By Jonathan Burdick

Huntington, West Virginia is a city of 50,000 residents only a few short miles east of Kentucky and just south of the Buckeye State, the Ohio River serving as its northern border. In June 1998, 30 freight cars of a 148-car train derailed on its northeastern edge, less than a football field's distance away from the river. From the overturned cars poured 30,000 gallons of formaldehyde, a chemical that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

describes as being a "highly toxic systemic poison" that can severely burn the eyes and skin, cause dizziness, and even lead to suffocation.

Fortunately, there were no serious injuries. The spill was also contained before it entered the river. Still, questions remained. How could evacuees be certain it was safe to go back home? What if other substances on board – sodium hydroxide, hydrochloric acid, molten sulfur, and chlorine – had spilled too? What if there

had been an explosion? Moving forward, just how safe were they? How prepared were they?

In the wake of the Norfolk Southern freight train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio in February, which exposed the community and first responders to dangerous vinyl chloride, these questions have entered the public conversation once again. What exactly comes through our communities – whether by rail, road, or waterways? What plans are in place if such

a disaster were to strike our neighborhoods? Are we taking a more preventative or reactive approach with our safety measures and plans?

"The fire service as a whole in the United States is woefully under-trained and woefully under-equipped to respond to a large-scale hazmat (aka hazardous material) incident like this," a member of the International Association of Fire Fighters

Continued on next page

who trains firefighters on hazmat incidents told NPR in March. This aligns with what was reported following the East Palestine derailment: most of the hundreds who were initially on the scene to assist lacked proper training and even the most basic of hazmat equipment. What appeared to locals like a lack of transparency in the days that followed (and the decisions being made that put East Palestine in the national spotlight) did not help with perceptions either – many left wondering who was even calling the shots. The local fire chief? Norfolk Southern? The Environmental Protection Agency?

Speaking to the Senate Commerce Committee, Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw stressed that safety was a corporate priority and even pledged to voluntarily create a training center for dealing with hazardous materials, but he notably stopped short of endorsing proposed bipartisan legislation on rail safety.

His comments also did not seem to inspire much confidence in communities wondering whether they might be the next site of a dangerous derailment, an incident such as in Graniteville, South Carolina in 2005 when two Norfolk Southern trains collided, exposing hundreds to toxic chlorine and killing nine. South Dakota News Watch referred to the chemicals that come through its state each year as the “11 billion-pound mystery.” A number of fire chiefs and health officials have publicly pleaded for railroads to provide more transparency on what is being transported through communities, a concept that railroad companies have pushed back against for decades. Amanda Garrett, writing for the Akron Beacon Journal wrote, “People in East Palestine, like others who live near rail tracks across the country, don’t know what’s on the freight cars and tankers passing through their town.”

There are 28,000 locomotives to carry 1.6 million railcars across 140,000 miles of rail lines in the United States. Over the past two decades, U.S. Bureau of Transportation data shows there have been over 50,000 train derailments across the country. With freight railroads so essential to the nation’s supply chain, speculation and assertions continue as to the inevitability of such derailments as well as to what degree past derailments have been preventable.

The Association of American Railroads, whose members include Amtrak, Norfolk Southern Railway, and Union Pacific, among others, highlighted in its recent March 2023 newsletter (notably without



This photo from the Environmental Protection Agency shows crash site recovery operations in East Palestine, Ohio where a Norfolk Southern train derailed in February and spilled toxic vinyl chloride into the surrounding environment.

mentioning East Palestine) that the last decade has been the “safest ever” for railroads, and that accidents requiring a hazardous material response have been at an “all-time low.” They note that more than “99.9 percent of all hazmat moved by rail reaches its destination without a release caused by a train accident” and that hazardous material rail accidents have decreased by 78 percent since 2000.

Indeed, dive into pre-2000 newspaper archives reporting about pretty much anywhere throughout the United States and one will likely see story after story covering derailment after derailment, year after year. Chemical spills. Explosions. Evacuations. Bridge collapses. Close call after close call.

Sometimes derailments were more inconvenient than dangerous, such as when plywood was dumped in the center of Union City, Pa., tying up traffic for two days or outside of Lake City, Pa. when beef and USPS mail were scattered across the countryside.

In other cases, the danger posted was much more significant. In Ashtabula, Ohio in 1963, 55 cars derailed at 50 miles per hour leading to the explosion of a tank carrying an unreported chemical. In Irving, New York in 1965, mere feet from the shores of Lake Erie, a train derailed with cars that included primarily passengers and mail – but the conductor alerted authorities that other cars included explosive and even radioactive material. A “special crew” dispatched by the Atomic Energy Commission was sent to assist with cleanup.

The same year near Conneaut, Ohio, 17 cars derailed, spilling deadly hydrogen cyanide, which, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “affects the body’s use of oxygen and may cause harm to the brain, heart, blood vessels, and lungs.” Fortunately, according to reports at the time, the winds worked in their favor and didn’t send the toxic fumes into the nearby populated areas. Elsewhere in the United States, derailments were also frequent. One 1973 butane explosion in Georgia was described as being “like an atomic bomb.”

Lack of communication and coordination following a crash sometimes exacerbated the problem. In February 1975, in Harborcreek, Pa., a Norfolk and Western train derailed resulting in the need of a salvage crew. During this process, cars caught fire sending “black smoke billowing over the area,” the Erie Daily Times reported, infuriating Harborcreek officials, including the fire chief who filed charges against the railroad and salvage company, only to find out that they had been given permission to burn the cars by the Pennsylvania Department of Environment Resources (which in 1995 was split into the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Department of Environmental Protection). The fire chief responded that he strongly objected to “outsiders coming into Harborcreek and violating the laws township people live with.”

In May 1980, in the middle of the night, a Conrail train derailed by a housing project near Pittsburgh Avenue in Erie, rupturing a

tank that the conductor initially reported was leaking the extremely toxic vinyl chloride. Fortunately, according to reports, the conductor had misread his chart and the tipped tanker had spilled over 10,000 gallons of the non-toxic, non-flammable propylene glycol instead.

Still, it was enough to get the attention of Mayor Louis J. Tullio, who stated that while preparations for such disasters were ultimately the county’s responsibility, he wasn’t opposed to the city having a plan as well. “The potential exists for a major disaster,” he noted. “We should be prepared.”

In 1987, Pennsylvania U.S. Senator Arlen Specter spoke before the Senate Commerce Committee arguing that trains carrying hazardous materials simply should not go through populated areas. “These accidents are occurring more frequently and are an increasing peril to residents of our cities,” stated Specter.

In response, Erie County Executive Judy Lynch noted it wasn’t that simple. Specter was well-intentioned, she believed, but despite significant concerns, Erie County industries also relied on many of these dangerous chemicals. It was knowledge Lynch desired, not necessarily an outright ban. “We have to understand what is coming through the county and being used by industries here,” she told the Erie Daily Times. “[W]e have to have plans.”

The county was simply ill-equipped. The only hazardous material response team were volunteers that were “understaffed and under equipped” and operated out of an “old van,” she said. This was especially a concern, director of the Erie County Emergency Management Agency Nick Sleptzoff told the Erie Daily Times, as on Interstate 90 alone he estimated that around 800 shipments of hazardous materials crossed Erie County each day – not including what passed through by freight or water.

“If we knew about some of the stuff moving on I-90, it would probably curl our hair,” Sleptzoff told Jack Grazier of the Erie Daily Times the following year. “[B]ut unless something happens involving one of those shipments, we have no knowledge of what’s going on.” He added that Erie had been lucky so far, but the luck wouldn’t last forever. “It will happen,” he stressed. “We will have one. ... [T]he potential for disaster increases each day.”

It almost happened near Elgin, just outside of Corry, Pa. in 1988. A train tanker carrying 36 tons of the explosive, toxic, and carcinogenic toluene diisocyanate broke away from its train. The conductor, who was aboard, tried to stop it from rolling, but the hand brake failed. He had to jump from the tanker before it tipped off the rails. Fortunately, the tanker did not rupture and there was no spill.

"It's frightening when you think about that particular chemical," Sleptzoff told the Erie DailyTimes afterwards. "We might have had to evacuate the entire Corry area."

Around this time, Erie Congressman Tom Ridge had his office attempt to get details from Conrail on what was coming through Erie, but Conrail officials stated it simply wasn't possible. Moving into the last decade of the 20th century, the newspapers continued covering derailments and close calls: an Akron, Ohio fire involving four cars carrying butane, leading to hospitalizations and citywide school closures. Twenty-nine cars derailed in Craigsville, Pa., a rural community between Butler and Kittanning, in April 1990 resulting in an explosion and fire and crude oil dumping into their town's primary creek.

And so on.

Of course, time and time again, fingers have been pointed at railroad companies having significant freedom to self-regulate

– sometimes referred to as "performance-based regulations." This allows the railroads to set their own performance goals and plans for achieving them, rather than having a government regulation that, for example, all freight trains must have a certain type of braking system (which could, naturally, eat into corporate profits).

It's the age-old battle between those who wish to regulate and those who see regulation as a financial hindrance to business. In Erie, the power of the regulators was demonstrated in recent years with the Erie Coke plant, which was sued and shut down outright by the state after years of defiant Clean Air Act violations. In other cases, regulations fell short, such as in 2016 when it was reported by Ed Palattella in the Erie Times-News that the federal government had approved 150 trucks of "high-level liquid nuclear waste" to travel from Ontario through Erie County on Interstates 90 and 79 on its route to a processing plant in South Carolina.

The reality is that the term itself, regulation, is politically-loaded, like most things in the public discourse. Regulations should not be viewed as a simplistic collective ("regulations are bad!") and should instead be viewed individually. What purpose does a regulation serve? Who benefits (and who doesn't) from an active

or proposed regulation? If given the option between profits and doing the right thing, what choices will a corporation make? These are conversations that hark back to the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 and continued throughout Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, the regulatory laws of the Nixon administration, the deregulation under Presidents Carter and Reagan, and through the debates, arguments, and lobbying of today.

Since the East Palestine incident, Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and J.D. Vance (R-OH) have proposed rail safety legislation. In explaining it, Brown argued that fines simply weren't enough of an incentive (those \$6.5 billion in stock buybacks over the past two years for Norfolk Southern aren't helping with the perception). Brown and Vance's proposal demands increased safety requirements, new braking system rules, and two-person crews must be made mandatory. Prevention, after all, is preferable to reaction.

Accidents are inevitable. The goal is to ensure that avoidable ones do not occur. When they do happen though, communities must be prepared. Plans should be in place. Proper funding should be provided. Communication will be key.

The Erie County Department of Public Safety did not respond to requests for

more information for this story, but the county has a web page dedicated to Emergency Management and another explaining the county's Haz-Mat Team, which in 2021 received a new Freightliner Command Bus. First responders also now have access to an app called CrewForce which provides "access to mission-critical information in real time." With cell phone availability, instructions could also be quickly communicated to the general public faster than in previous decades.

These incidents create understandable skepticism and distrust towards corporations, institutions, and bureaucracies, but they also provide an opportunity for bipartisan cooperation by our lawmakers – as long as citizens continue to put on the pressure, continuously, year after year, and long after the media circus wanes and attention moves elsewhere.

The shipment of hazardous materials via train is nothing new, nor is their frequent derailment. Learn more in this archived Erie Reader story from 2016 by Lisa Gensheimer entitled "Bomb Trains: Pipelines on Wheels" (eriereader.com/article/bomb-trains-pipelines-on-wheels)

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Newspapers are the most trusted source of news and information among all age groups.¹

Baby Boomers

Baby boomers rank newspapers as the **most trusted source of news** and information.¹

84% of baby boomers have **taken action as a result of seeing an ad** in a print newspaper in the past 30 days.²

More than 7 in 10 Pa. adults, over age 60, read a daily, Sunday or non-daily print or digital newspaper or visit a newspaper website each week.³





MORRISONS COVE HERALD

Women gaining responsibility and visibility in agriculture

By George Berkheimer
For the Herald

The USDA's Census of Agriculture provides a detailed look at the state and health of agriculture in the United States every five years. It also gives some insight into trends that are shaping and changing the industry.

One big reveal from the last Census in 2017 was the growing number of women involved in agriculture. They scored big gains in production as well as leadership roles.

The national numbers tell an interesting story. According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, the number of farms may be decreasing, but the overall number of agricultural producers rose from 3.18 million in 2012 to 3.4 million in 2017, an increase of 7 percent.

The number of female producers, however, rose from 969,672 to more than 1.2 million during that period, representing a 26.5 percent increase.

Granted, the USDA changed the way demographic data was collected in 2017, which could have influenced this drastic increase, but the numbers have undeniably improved since 2012.

That year, the Census recorded a 6 percent decline in the number of female producers and a 3.1 percent decline in the number of producers overall compared with 2007 figures.

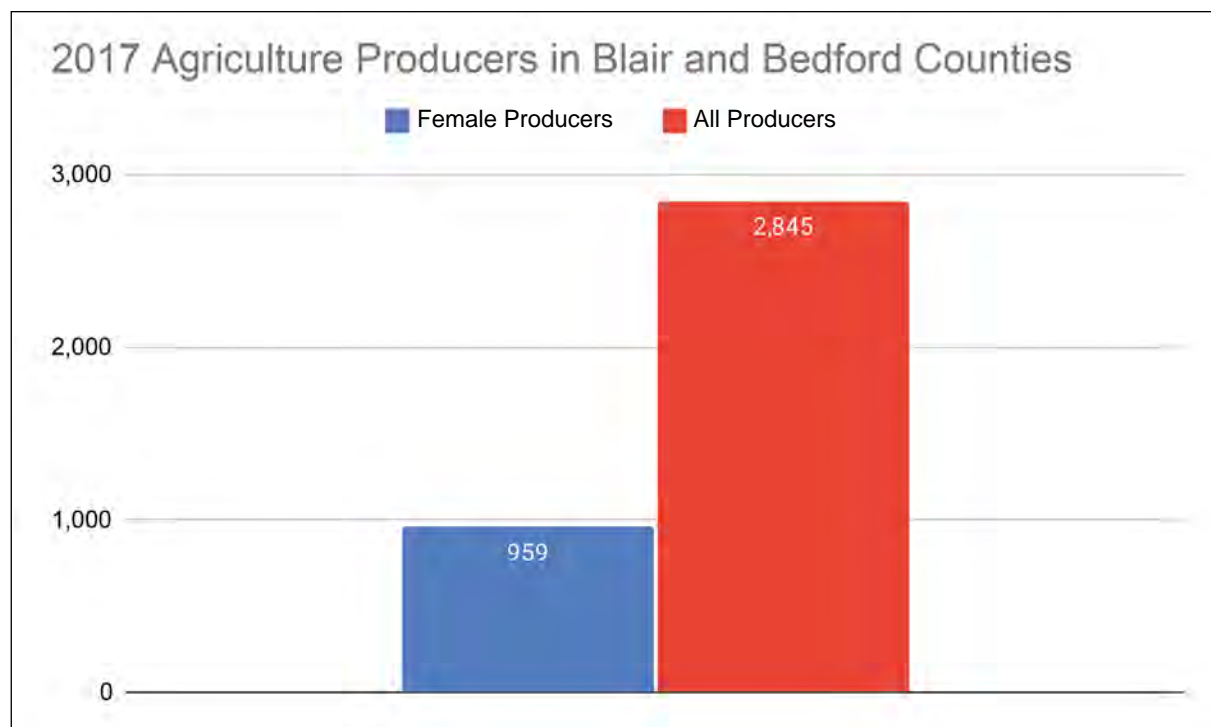
As of 2017, women accounted for 36 percent of the nation's producers, compared with 30 percent in 2012. The number of farms solely owned and operated by women remains small, at 9 percent nationally.

Local growth

Locally, the numbers echo the national trend.

In 2012, Bedford County had 1,210 farms, 553 female producers on 530 farms, and 140 farms with principal female producers. The actual number of principal female producers was not tallied.

By 2017, there were 1,159 farms, 642 female producers on 613 farms, and 381 farms reporting a total of 387 principal female producers.



For Blair County, there were 525 farms in 2012, 186 female producers on 171 of those farms, and 56 farms with principal female producers.

By 2017 Blair County saw a decrease to 496 farms, but there were 317 female producers on 293 of those farms, and 172 farms reporting a total of 183 principal female producers.

The involvement of women comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with farming, considering that most operations in the area are family businesses.

What's more interesting is the fact that women are taking on considerably different roles than they've assumed in the past and becoming more visible as leaders and innovators.

Cassie Yost, a dairy educator for the Penn State

Extension in Huntingdon County, said many of the outreach and education programs she oversees are tailored to female producers who are interested in adding diversification to their families' businesses and want to introduce more value-added products.

"Men and women gravitate to specific roles on farms depending on their own skills and strengths," Yost said. "Lately we've been looking to get women who are involved in agriculture introduced to newer topics and networking with each other."

Changing roles

The 2017 Census of Agriculture found that female producers were most involved in day-to-day decisions and

Continued on next page

record keeping/financial management. Male producers had higher rates of involvement than females in land use/crop decisions and livestock decisions.

That's not exactly an accurate picture of farming in the Cove.

"Women are certainly making a mark here for a number of reasons," said John Burket, the dairy manager at Burket Falls Farm in East Freedom. "In general, women seem to have more patience than men for dealing with animals and livestock, and now have many more positions as herd managers and caretakers. That's a high-paying position today, considering the very large herds they deal with."

There are a number of female herd managers in the Cove region, including Caroline Zimmerman, who is responsible for Dry Creek Farm's 260-cow dairy operation in Martinsburg.

Technology's influence

One reason women are taking on more demanding jobs in agriculture is that the nature of the work has changed with the introduction of robotics, automation, and data computation.

"It doesn't have anything to do with more women's rights or anything in the media," Yost said, but is tied more to the fact that agricultural career opportunities have become very broad and diverse.

"There are opportunities in agriculture now way beyond just [labor]," said Jennifer Heltzel, who is the herd manager for the fourth-generation Piney Mar Farm in Martinsburg, which she operates alongside her husband Andrew. "Technology takes some of the physical labor out of the puzzle and allows for a wider set of people, including women, to be involved in more aspects of farming."

Pedometers and other technology tools collect data for each of Piney Mar's 130 milk cows, making it easier for Heltzel to assess their health and detect potential problems early.

"We have milking parlors that make it a lot easier to milk our cows than in the past, and feeding systems take away the need to shovel a couple tons of feed every day," she said. "That doesn't mean it's not still an incredibly hard job. Working with animals can be physically taxing and it's definitely not a desk job."

Since graduating from college in 1998, Heltzel said she has noticed an increase in younger women going to college to study agricultural science and animal science.

"I would say the majority of students graduating from veterinarian schools now are female, even in the large animal field," she said.

Better opportunities

Look no further than the Future Farmers of America photos and news stories in the Morrison's Cove Herald to see how much things have changed in the local area.

Yearbook photos from the 1980s and 1990s typically contain only a handful of female members, even after the organization's national constitution was changed to admit women in 1969.

Today, however, young women dominate the photos and

are more likely than not serving in their chapters' leadership positions.

"There's a healthy ratio of male and female students at our Central Cove FFA Chapter, and it goes to show that women are considering agriculture a viable career opportunity, it's something they're interested in and can see a future in," Heltzel said. "I'm glad those opportunities exist for my daughters. I think it provides them with avenues to explore what leadership means, because FFA is all about leadership development."

More changes ahead

In her own leadership roles, Heltzel is involved on several national boards. She represents the Northeast Area as an elected director of the Dairy Farmers of America cooperative, serves as treasurer for the National Dairy Board, and is a board member of Dairy Management Inc., a national dairy promotion organization.

"Millennials are taking a very strong interest in leadership outside the operations of their own farms, whether it's at a national level or on cooperative boards,"

she said. "I feel my opinions are as respected and valued as anyone else's. I don't know that there's a difference, we're all treated equally."

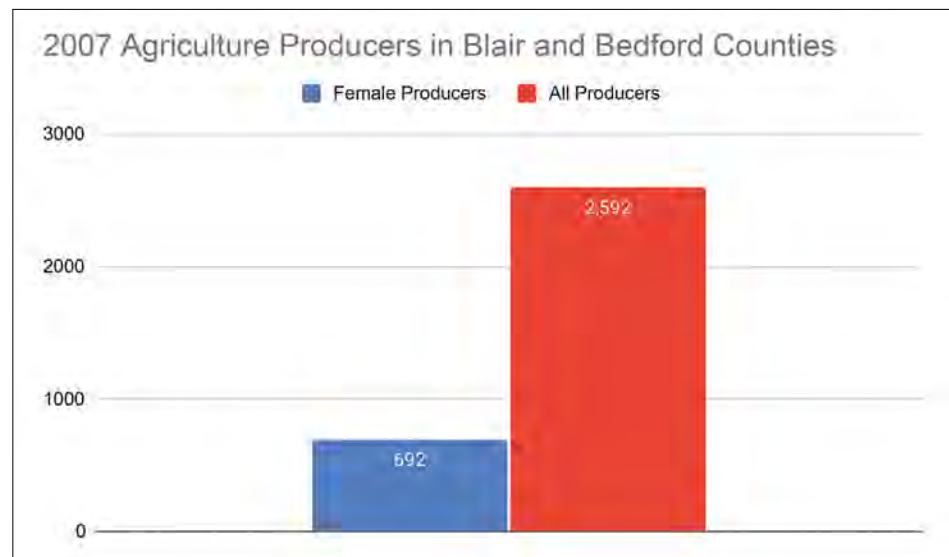
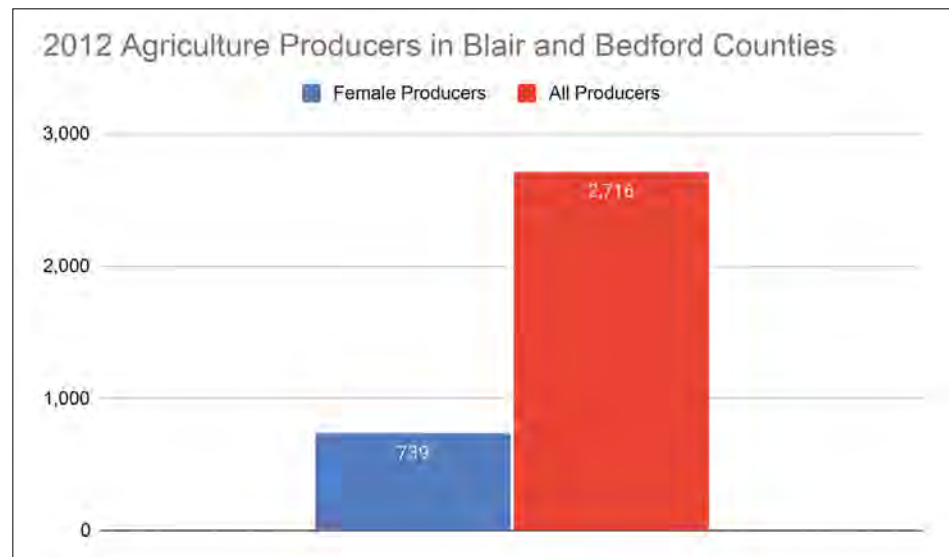
That's important, Heltzel said, because agriculture is becoming more diverse in both career opportunities and producers.

"We all need to eat, and we need people from all backgrounds and interest levels to be part of producing food for our country and the world," she said, predicting that agricultural jobs will become even more diversified in the future.

"In the next 10 years, just like we've seen in the last 10, the technology changes are going to be beyond what we can expect or imagine," Heltzel said.

The USDA's 2022 Census of Agriculture is underway, with an expected release date of spring or summer 2024. Census surveys will be mailed to farmers and producers in November, and the deadline for responses is February 2023.

Published Sept. 22, 2022



In Pa. county jails, people with mental illness are routinely met with pepper spray and stun guns

A WITF investigation finds that corrections officers use physical force on people who may be unable to comply with orders due to a mental health condition.

By Brett Sholtis

When police found Ishmail Thompson, he was standing naked outside a Dauphin County hotel, where he had just punched a man. A mental health specialist working with the county prison said Thompson should be sent to a hospital for psychiatric care.

But at the hospital, a doctor ran some tests and cleared him to return to jail. With that decision, Thompson went from being a mental health patient to a Dauphin County Prison inmate. Here, he was expected to comply with orders — or be forced to.

Thompson soon would be locked in a physical struggle with corrections officers — one of 5,144 such “use of force” incidents that occurred last year in Pennsylvania county jails. A WITF investigation found that almost one in three uses of force from 25 jails during the last three months of 2021 involved a person who was having a mental health



MIXED MEDIA BY TOM DOWNING / WITF

crisis or who had a diagnosed mental illness. The situation brings risks ranging from lasting psychological trauma to death.

At the jail, when corrections officers tried to strip-search Thompson, he ran into a shower where he was “wetting himself down,” prison records show. An officer pepper-sprayed him in the face and tried to take him to the ground. Thompson fought back. Staff flooded the area, handcuffing and shackling him.

An officer covered Thompson’s head with a spit hood, a breathable fabric that prevents fluids from escaping. They put

Thompson in a restraint chair, a device that prevents a person from moving their arms or legs.

About 20 minutes later, an officer saw that Thompson was taking “short, abnormal breaths.” Medical staff sent him to the hospital, noting in a report that he was not breathing. Five days later, Thompson died. The district attorney said no criminal charges would be filed.

County officials declined to comment on Thompson’s treatment, saying Thompson’s family plans to sue the jail.

Dauphin County spokesman Brett

Hambright said nearly half of the people at the jail have a mental illness, “along with a significant number of incarcerated individuals with violent propensities. There are always going to be use-of-force incidents at the prison. Some of them will involve mentally ill inmates due to volume.”

Most uses of force don’t lead to death — and the coroner did not determine whether Thompson’s death was due to being pepper-sprayed and restrained. But the practices corrections officers employ every day in

Continued on next page

Pennsylvania county jails can put prisoners and staff at risk of injury and can hurt vulnerable people who may be scheduled to return to society within months.

Across the U.S., two-thirds of people in jails are there pre-trial — meaning they haven't been convicted of a crime. Most are there on nonviolent charges such as parole violation, theft, drunkenness and drug possession. Though their time in jail may be relatively short, those who fail to adapt can pay a heavy price.

"Some mentally ill prisoners are so traumatized by the abuse that they never recover, some are driven to suicide, and others are deterred from bringing attention to their mental health problems because reporting these issues often results in harsher treatment," said Craig Haney, a psychology professor at U.C. Santa Cruz who specializes in prison conditions.

The option to use physical force is essential for officers to prevent violence against others. However, records obtained by WITF show that a significant number of uses of force are against people who are not hurting anyone else. The records, written by corrections officers, provide candid details on what led them to use painful control measures against people in distress.

In these records, just one in 10 uses of force are in response to a prisoner assaulting someone else. Another 10% describe a prisoner threatening staff.

WITF found that one in five uses of force — 88 incidents — involve a prisoner who was either attempting suicide, hurting themselves or threatening self-harm. Common responses by prison staff included what was used on Thompson — a restraint chair and pepper-spray. In some cases, officers used electroshock devices such as stun guns.

Records also show 42 cases where corrections staff noted someone appeared to have a mental health condition but still used force when the person failed to respond to commands.

Supporters of these techniques say they save lives, but some jails in the U.S. have moved away from the practices, saying they're inhumane and don't work.

The human costs extend far beyond the jail, reaching the families of prisoners killed or traumatized, as well as the corrections officers involved, said Liz Schultz, a civil rights and criminal defense attorney in the Philadelphia area.



PHOTO: JEREMY LONG/WITF

Adam Caprioli of Long Pond, spent about five days in Monroe County Correctional Facility after calling 911.

"And even if the human costs aren't persuasive, the taxpayers should care, since the resulting lawsuits can be staggering," Schultz said. "It underscores that we must ensure safe conditions in jails and prisons, and that we should be a bit more judicious about who we are locking up and why."

Many counties did not provide the records WITF requested. As a result, the map excludes data from several large jails such as those in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. In total, WITF combed through records from 25 counties and identified 456 use of force incidents over the last three months of 2021. This map provides snapshots of some of those uses of force. WITF chose these examples because they involve people with mental health issues. In most instances, either the county or WITF has chosen to redact prisoner and staff names:

'The sick part about it'

Adam Caprioli heard gunshots. He ran outside his house into the cold October dark. The gunshots were getting closer. Out there somewhere in the woods. Whoever it was, they were coming for him.

He called his dad, who told him to calm down — Caprioli lives with anxiety disorder and bipolar disorder. The 30-year-old had used methamphetamine a few days earlier,

and the drug made him paranoid for days on end.

Next, he called 911. He told them about the gunshots. Police didn't seem concerned. They took him to the emergency department.

Caprioli said that back home two days later, he became convinced there was something medically wrong with him. Once again, he called 911. Police arrived. This time, they took him to Monroe County Correctional Facility.

Inside the jail, anxiety coiled around his chest. He said prison workers ignored his requests to make a phone call or speak to a mental health professional. Hours passed. He became convinced that corrections officers planned to kill him.

"And they're sitting there just laughing about the situation," Caprioli said. "Now I really think I'm here to die. Like this is really what's going on in my head: Like, I'm here to die. Nobody even knows I'm here."

Caprioli tied his shirt around his neck and choked himself until he passed out. He struggles to explain why. Maybe he thought that would get him the medical attention he needed. Maybe he didn't care anymore.

Corrections officers saw him and decided it was time to respond.

Prison staff often justify physical force by saying they're saving the person's life, said

Alan Mills, an attorney who has litigated use of force cases and who serves as executive director of Uptown People's Law Center in Chicago.

"The vast majority of people who are engaged in self harm are not going to die," Mills said. "Rather, they are acting out some form of serious mental illness. And therefore what they really need is intervention to de-escalate the situation, whereas use of force does exactly the opposite and escalates the situation."

After they saw Caprioli with his shirt around his neck, officers wearing body armor and helmets rushed into his cell.

The four-man team brought the 150-pound Caprioli down to the floor. One of them had a pepper ball launcher — a compressed air gun that shoots projectiles containing chemical irritants.

"Inmate Caprioli was swinging his arms and kicking his legs," a sergeant wrote. "I pressed the Pepperball launcher against the small of Inmate Caprioli's back and impacted him three (3) times."

Caprioli felt the sting welting in his flesh. Then, the sting of powdered chemicals in the air. His stomach turned: Nobody would help him. Here, they would only deliver pain."

That's the sick part about it," Caprioli said. "You can see I'm in distress. You can see I'm not going to try and hurt anyone. I have nothing I can hurt you with."

He was handcuffed, shackled and placed in a restraint chair. They put him in a shower, then took him to the hospital "for assessment." They brought him back to the jail, took his clothes, gave him a garment that he could not use to hurt himself, called an anti-suicide smock, and medications that put him in a stupor.

A few days later, they released him.

He later pleaded guilty to "public drunkenness and similar misconduct," records show. He did not receive a jail sentence.

In hindsight, Caprioli realizes the gunshots he heard were auditory hallucinations. Maybe they were fireworks. Maybe they were nothing at all. Caprioli blames himself for using drugs — and he still struggles with addiction, saying he's been self-medicating with alcohol. But to him, his experience in jail did nothing to help him with these issues — and nothing he did justified the way officers treated him.

"All I needed was one person to just be like, 'Hey, how are you? Like, are you okay? What's going on?'" he said. "And I never got that, even to the last day."

Monroe County Warden Garry Haidle initially agreed to talk for this story, but stopped responding to requests for comment. Monroe County District Attorney E. David Christine, Jr. did not respond to requests.

Lasting harm

Jail is not an appropriate setting to treat serious mental illness, said Dr. Pamela Rollings-Mazza at PrimeCare Medical. She is the vice president of behavioral health at the company, which provides services at about 35 county jails in Pennsylvania, including Dauphin and Monroe counties.

The problem, Rollings-Mazza said, is that people with serious issues don't get the help they need before they are in crisis. At that point, police can be involved. Someone presses charges. And people who started off needing mental health care end up as inmates.

"So the patients that we're seeing, you know, a lot of times are very, very, very sick," Rollings-Mazza said. "So we have adapted our staff to try to address that need."

PrimeCare psychologists rate prisoners' mental health on an A, B, C and D scale. Prisoners with a D rating are the most seriously ill. Rollings-Mazza said they make up between 10% and 15% of the overall jail population. Another 40% of people have a C rating, also a sign of significant illness.

That rating system shapes the care psychologists provide, Rollings-Mazza said. But it has little effect on jail policies.

"There are some jails where they don't have that understanding or want to necessarily support us," she said. "Some security officers are not educated about mental health at the level that they should be. So you know, the challenge has become working with the staff and the facility and trying to educate them."

Rollings-Mazza said her team frequently sees people come to jail who are "not reality based" due to illness and can't comply with orders. They are often segregated for their own safety, and may spend up to 23 hours a day alone. That virtually guarantees that people will spiral into a crisis, said Dr. Mariposa McCall, a California-based psychiatrist who recently



COURTESY OF ALAN MILLS

Alan Mills
executive director
Uptown People's Law Center



BRETT SHOLTIS / WITF

Dr. Pamela Rollings-Mazza
PrimeCare Medical



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Jamelia Morgan
Northwestern University
Pritzker School of Law

published a paper looking at the effects of restrictive housing.

Her work is part of a large body of research showing that keeping a person alone in a small cell all day can cause lasting psychological damage.

"Even if someone doesn't have a mental health condition, a lot of them tend to start feeling claustrophobic, agitated, anxious, angry, irritable," McCall said. At times, that results in people trying to hurt themselves.

For those who do have diagnosed psychiatric disorders, it's a matter of time before their worsening mental states lead them to do things like cut themselves or bang their heads off cell walls, McCall said.

At that point, staff are required to act.

McCall worked for several years at state prisons in California, and says it's important to understand that the culture among corrections officers prioritizes security. As a result, staff may believe that people who are hurting themselves are actually trying to manipulate them.

"And so it creates a certain level of disconnect from people's suffering or humanity in some ways, because it feeds on that distrust," McCall said. In that environment, officers feel justified using force whether or not they think the prisoner understands them.

Who is responsible?

When someone dies or is injured in jail, it's the corrections officers and wardens who are most frequently targeted in lawsuits, Mills said. However, the broader culpability extends from jails to state governments that set policies and fail to fund the mental health services that could keep people out of jail.

Officials in Dauphin County agree, saying "stagnant funding" amid an increase in people needing mental health services has led to an over-reliance on jails, where the "lights are always on."

"We would certainly like to see some of these individuals treated and housed in locations better equipped to treat the specificity of their conditions," Hambricht said. "But we must play the hands we are dealt by the existing system as best we can with the resources that we have."

The state Department of Corrections has limited authority over county correctional institutions, according to DOC spokeswoman Maria Bivens. It does inspect the jails every year or two years as required by state law. Bivens declined to provide inspection reports or summaries of those inspections.

The Department of Corrections training academy in Elizabethtown provides training to some county jails. About 130 county jail officers have been through the academy so far this year, Bivens said. That four-or five week coursework involves a wide range of topics and has evolved to respond to a need to address mental health issues.

Whatever officers may learn at the academy, WITF's investigation shows that pepper spray is seen as a ready solution: It was used in 31% of the uses of force examined. Bivens emphasized that the state training is a "baseline introduction to the profession" and counties are responsible for their staff.

Along with requesting records, WITF sent interview requests to 61 counties and followed up with a handful of wardens in counties that provided use of force reports. None agreed to talk about how their officers are trained or whether they could

change how they respond to people in crisis.

Searching for solutions

To really understand the issue, people need to look at the hours, days and weeks leading up to uses of force, said Jamelia Morgan, an attorney and professor at Northwestern University Pritzker School of Law.

Morgan studies a growing area of civil litigation. Lawyers have successfully argued that demanding that a person with mental illness comply with orders they may not understand is a violation of their civil rights under the U.S. Constitution and the Americans With Disabilities Act. Jails should be providing "reasonable accommodations" for people with a designated illness.

"In some cases, it's as simple as having medical staff respond as opposed to security staff," Morgan said.

But these cases can be difficult to litigate due to a complex grievance process that prisoners have to follow prior to filing suit, Morgan said. That's especially tricky if someone's illness makes it difficult for them to communicate clearly.

"If you're not getting access to mental health treatment or medical care, that in many ways makes the administrative process unavailable to you," Morgan said.

To solve the problem, wardens need to redefine what it means to be in jail, Morgan said.

"And so if we start to see the the problem of cell extractions and use of force and solitary confinement as health problems, as indicative of a denial of health care access, or a lack of health care access and mental health care services within prisons, we will respond differently — if we wanted to actually solve the problem."

Some jails are trying this. In Chicago, the Cook County Jail doesn't have a warden. Rather, it has an "executive director," who is a trained psychologist. It's part of a total reimagining of the jail after a 2008 U.S. Department of Justice report found it was violating inmates' civil rights.

In recent years, the jail has gotten rid of most segregated housing, opting to put problematic prisoners in common areas with some additional security measures in place whenever possible, Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart said.

A mental health transition center within the jail provides alternative housing — a “college setting of quonset huts and gardens” — where prisoners have access to art, photography and gardening classes, Dart said. There’s also job training, and a case management system works with local agencies, planning for what will happen once someone leaves the jail. Just as important, Dart said, jail leadership has worked to change the norms around when to use tools such as pepper-spray.

“Our role is to keep people safe, and if you have someone with a mental illness, I just don’t see how Tasers and O.C. spray can do anything other than aggravate issues, and can only be used as the last conceivable option,” Dart said.

In Dauphin County, Hambright said restraint chair and pepper spray use have decreased since 2019, part of “ongoing comprehensive review and reform of prison operations.”

And about 250 law enforcement officers in Dauphin County have completed crisis intervention courses, which he says has resulted in a 10% decrease in the number of prisoners with mental illness at the jail since it was implemented in 2018.

At the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, Vice President Brinda Penyak drew a line from the increase in people with mental illness in jail to the failure of the community-based mental health system to meet demand.

The pandemic has started to change that, she said. Increasingly frank conversations about mental health have led to more support for investment. But that support hasn’t yet translated to a significant change to the way people get mental health care.

“The system is really overtaxed, and it’s not just the jail system,” Penyak said. “It’s the probation system. It’s the courts. It’s the treatment system — so there does need to be a real commitment.”

Editor’s note: This story was produced through the 2021-2022 Benjamin Von Sternenfels Rosenthal Investigative Mental Health Fellowship — a partnership between the Carter Center’s Mental Health Program and Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting. The fellowship honors Benjamin von Sternenfels Rosenthal, a writer, athlete, devoted son, brother and friend to many. von Sternenfels Rosenthal was the son of Inka von Sternenfels and Robert J. Rosenthal, CEO of the Center for Investigative Reporting. Benjamin lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. He died by suicide in August 2019.

Published Oct. 12, 2022



WITF reporter Brett Sholtis speaks with Adam Caprioli of Long Pond, about his time in Monroe County Correctional Facility.

PHOTO: JEREMY LONG / WITF

How we reported this

This story evolved from earlier work looking at uses of force in Bucks County Correctional Facility, where WITF found that a woman with a serious mental illness had been pepper-sprayed and was being kept in horrific conditions.

That reporting elicited widespread outrage, and days later the woman was moved to a state psychiatric facility. However, people who had been in jail or knew someone in jail were quick to tell me that what happened in Bucks County was pretty common.

This work sought to learn just how common.

Aggregated use of force data is available from the state Department of Corrections. Its records show how many times pepper spray, stun guns, restraint chairs and other control measures were used last year. But these aggregated records lack key context. They fail to show what events led up to the uses of force.

To answer that question, I needed to look at the use of force records themselves. I knew from prior reporting that these documents, written by corrections officers, contain a wealth of quantitative and qualitative information.

So in January, I filed right-to-know requests for use of force records from 60 of the 61 county jails in Pennsylvania. (Wyoming County Correctional Facility didn’t receive my request due to a bad email address). The request was for documents from the last three months of 2021. That’s 91 days.

I also requested jail policies related to using certain types of force, such as pepper spray, the restraint chair, spit hoods and anti-suicide smocks. About half the counties denied my request. I appealed these denials to the state Office of Open Records, with guidance from the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association’s Melissa Melewsy. At the center of these appeals were discussions around whether making these documents public would threaten public safety, staff or inmate safety, or building security. I argued they wouldn’t. Counties argued they would.

Most counties won their appeals and did not have to turn over documents to me. However, 32 other counties granted at least part of my request. Some of these counties redacted names from the use of force reports. Others did not. Some small county jails had no uses of force during that time period.

Others provided policies but declined to provide detailed reports.

I think it’s worth noting here that, while Pennsylvania Right-to-Know Law allowed counties to shield their documents from public view, other counties saw no issue with sharing them with WITF.

When the dust settled, I had obtained use of force records from 25 jails. The map shows the counties that provided those records. I’d caution against drawing any conclusions from a county-by-county comparison. These numbers are snapshots of uses of force around the state but don’t represent long-term trends. A fair comparison between counties would require more data and was not the focus of this story.

The documents shared vary greatly from county to county in terms of how much info they provide. This posed challenges for the next step of my work — converting raw records into lines on a spreadsheet.

For that reason, the database we built has limitations. For example, some counties indicated whether a person was in segregated housing when a use of force occurred. Others didn’t. So I did not include data about segregated housing in the report, even though a lot of uses of force took place there.

Race, age and gender data was also imperfectly available — partly due to redactions.

Speaking of, WITF chose to redact some names from records even though they were provided to us. We felt that we should give anyone named in a story a chance to comment for that story.

From the beginning this story sought to look at the systems in place at county jails, rather than identify “bad apples.” Indeed, a key finding is that when people in crisis are treated badly in jails, it’s often not due to an unethical corrections officer, but rather, a system poorly designed for people with these issues.

Special thanks to WITF’s Jeremy Long, Tom Downing and Ashlee Edwards, who contributed to this story by providing visual elements. Additional thanks to PennLive’s Joshua Vaughn, whose reporting revealed important details about Ishmail Thompson’s death, and to fellowship mentors and advisors.

—Brett Sholtis

Bushkill Creek dries up, fish die. Again. Is it the Stockertown cement plant's fault?

By Rudy Miller

For lehighvalleylive.com

There was no better fishing or wading in the Bushkill Creek than in Tatamy, according to Joe Baylog.

The clear water once flowed from bank to bank, according to Baylog, the local chapter president of Trout Unlimited.

For the past 20 years, though, it's been known to dry up, leaving hundreds to thousands of dead fish per episode. His organization counts at least 15 instances since 1999. One incident in 2020 left 2,000 fish dead.

Baylog connects the creek's decreased water flow to the increased depths of the nearby Hercules Cement quarry. The cement plant doing business as Buzzi Unicem USA lies in Stockertown. Its quarry is in Upper Nazareth Township with a sliver in Palmer Township.

As the quarry goes deeper, the creek keeps drying up, Baylog said.

"They're destroying a natural resource," Baylog said Sunday.

Plant manager Rad Slavov said the plant is saving the creek, not destroying it. He maintains the stream has long had an intermittent flow, dating well back into the quarry's 100-plus-year history.

To access limestone at increasing depths, the quarry must pump out groundwater at the quarry floor. This groundwater feeds the creek and keeps it flowing when rainfall is scarce, Slavov said.

Conservationists say each of the 15 Bushkill Creek fish kills coincides with power outages or pump failures at the quarry. The stream that flowed freely for hundreds of years now suddenly relies on man-made pumps for its water, they say.

Under pressure to make the pumps more



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE BAYLOG

Members of the Forks of the Delaware chapter of Trout Unlimited snapped this photo of a dried-up Bushkill Creek on May 18, 2023.

reliable, Buzzi is installing \$3 million backup generators this month, Slavov said. If the power goes out, the pumps will keep pumping.

During the installation of the backup generators, however, the pumps needed to be turned off. This resulted the latest dry-creek episode and the latest rift between the cement plant and the community.

Baylog reports a fish kill in the creek on Wednesday, May 17, and Thursday, May 18. Members of his organization photographed the dead fish around noon May 18.

Tatamy resident Brad Frace posted to Facebook after he spotted the dried-up creek around 4 p.m. May 17. He scooped up fish from shallow puddles in the dry

creek bed and deposited them in a deep pool near "the beach," a stretch of creek that runs behind the Tatamy Volunteer Fire Department.

"There were fish everywhere," he said. "It was disgusting."

Tatamy Borough Manager Mark Saginario said he received some calls May 18 from residents concerned about the dry creek. He said he could have organized an effort to rescue the fish had he known the pumps at the quarry were turned off.

"It's a shame," Saginario said.

Slavov says cement plant employees continuously monitored the stream. Fish observed in small pools were moved to larger ones. When the creek got too dry, the quarry turned the pumps back on.

"It was a well-coordinated effort on both Wednesday and Thursday," Slavov said. He said no fish deaths were observed.

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission fisheries biologist Dan Ryan said last week the state didn't receive any reports of trouble at the creek. By the time a fish and boat commission representative checked the creek, the water level had risen. It's unclear how many fish were affected, what sort of fish were affected or how many died.

Ryan said the event may have stressed the fish, but small fish can survive in pockets of water if the flow returns relatively quickly.

"I know folks are concerned when the flow goes down, but we took extra precautions to make sure the fish remained safe," Slavov said.

Slavov said work still needs to be undertaken to synchronize the backup generators so that they automatically turn on when the power goes out. That work will likely be moved to the fall when the creek level is higher. It's too dangerous to work on the generators unless the pumps are de-energized, he said.

Maya van Rossum of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network said her organization is taking a close look at what happened May 17 and 18.

"There's lots of evidence that the creek went dry," van Rossum said. "It was a huge problem and it should not have happened."

Van Rossum's organization threatened to sue Hercules in 2020 over the fish kills. While Baylog is pleased to see the backup generators going in, he's concerned over continued quarry missteps, including the latest gaffe over the generator installation.

Continued on next page

Baylog said hydrological gauge data and Trout Unlimited observations show “flow dropped dramatically when the pumps were shut off and remained minimal for the remainder of the work period” on May 17 and 18.

The cement company says its continued mining has little effect on the creek. Most of the water at the bottom of the quarry comes from underground streams, not the creek, they say. A dye test ordered by the state in 2020 shows only 10% of the water pumped out of the bottom of the quarry came from the creek and 90% came from deep springs, according to the then-plant manager. Hercules says naturally occurring sinkholes are draining the creek, not the quarry activity.

Or, as Baylog suggests, the 60 million gallons of water a day being pumped from the bottom of the quarry is exacerbating the sinkhole problem. And even if only 10% of the quarry water comes from the creek, that may be enough to completely drain the stream, he said.

More and more sinkholes keep opening up around the quarry in the vicinity of bridges and homes along the creek, Baylog said.

Two big questions loom for the cement company and the creek:

1. The quarry depth is at or close to sea level. The owners want permission to go 50 feet deeper. How will this affect the creek and the local water table?

2. When the cement plant eventually shuts down, what happens when the pumps turn off for good? Will the Tatamy stretch of the Bushkill Creek dry up permanently?

The Department of Environmental Protection is taking a close look at both questions, Baylog said. He shared a March 23 letter from a Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection geologist asking Hercules to address 17 deficiencies if it wants an extension of its mining permit



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRAD FRACE

Tatamy resident Brad Frace rescued this trout from the dried-up Bushkill Creek around 4 p.m. Wednesday, May 17, 2023.

(and an opportunity to dig from its current depth, 50 feet above sea level, down to sea level).

Slavov said Monday that Hercules has responded to or is in the process of responding to all 17 allegations as part of the “normal back-and-forth exchange” during a permit extension. He said the deepening is proposed on the east end, or the “dry side” of the quarry. The west end is the side continually pumped free of groundwater, he said.

Department of Environmental Protection spokeswoman Colleen Connolly said her department is reviewing Hercules’ April 2023 submission.

“We cannot give a timeline for a decision,” Connolly said.

The state wants a detailed analysis on what an additional 10 years of pumping would mean to the local geology and an analysis on whether nearby sinkholes can be attributed to the quarry. It wants more

details on the methodology of the 2020 dye test. The DEP is reviewing Hercules’ application and its own data to determine the quarry’s impact on the creek and surrounding area.

“The department is reviewing a very complex and detailed permit application,” Connolly said.

Slavov said Monday, “the available evidence shows that the limited deepening request will have no adverse effect on the hydrologic balance” of the area.

The state wants a plan to gradually reduce pumping to minimize the environmental impact when the quarry eventually shuts down. The quarry is responsible for moving a huge amount of water, the equivalent to draining Lake Wallenpaupack every two years, Baylog said.

Quarry records show about 4 million to 8 million gallons a day were pumped out back in the 1970s Baylog said. That figure

grew to 20 million gallons a day in 1999 before topping out at 60 million gallons a day now, he said.

Slavov said the quarry will fill with groundwater once the plant shuts down. The effect on the creek should be minimal, he said.

“The current plan, however, is to continue to operate the quarry for many years into the future to support the adjacent cement plant operations,” Slavov said.

Baylog said he doesn’t oppose the quarry. He acknowledges the quarry provides 130 jobs, jobs Slavov calls “high paying.” But the quarry’s economic benefits must be balanced against the need to preserve the environment. The payoff of continued mining comes at the expense of more study, more analysis, more proof that continued mining won’t contribute to the death of the Bushkill Creek in Tatamy.

Connolly said the DEP received many public comments during a hearing last year on the quarry’s impact. Anyone who still wants to weigh in can contact the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection’s Pottsville District Mining Office regarding the permit application.

The creek in Tatamy remains a Class A coldwater fishery, the highest designation for a trout stream in the state, despite its troubles over the past 20 years. It’s regrettable to see how the creek has changed for the worse and would be even more regrettable if it dried up for good, Baylog said.

Hercules doesn’t own the stream, he said. The company must be held accountable for its actions, he said.

“That stretch was once one of the nicest, most pristine sections of the creek when I was a kid,” Baylog said. “I wouldn’t walk back there now.”

Rudy Miller may be reached at rmiller@lehighvalleylive.com.

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AFTER CHOC



PHOTO: RACHEL RAVINA - MEDIATEWS GROUP

A homeless encampment is pictured June 9, 2023, just off the Schuylkill River Trail in Norristown.

One year later, Montgomery County remains without homeless shelter

By Rachel Ravina

rravina@thereporteronline.com

NORRISTOWN — It's been a year since the Coordinated Homeless Outreach Center shut its doors.

Formerly operating out of Building 9 on the grounds of the Norristown State Hospital, the 50-bed facility, known as CHOC, was the largest and only space for single adults ages 18 years and older experiencing homelessness in Montgomery County.

Situated on a portion of state land conveyed to the Municipality of Norristown, it was one of several social services agencies in need of a new place when leases lapsed on June 30, 2022.

"It was certainly sad closing the building," said Program Director Christina Jordan. "It was by no means a perfect building at all, but it was a hub, and I think we knew losing that resource ... would lead to more people outside."

It's been a year since the Coordinated Homeless Outreach Center stopped operating. No new facility has been built as the homelessness situation in Montgomery County appears to have hit a tipping point.

"I think what we're seeing in Norristown right now could be an example of that. It's hard for us because our hands are tied because we don't have the resources to be able to help," said Owen Camuso, regional director of Resources for Human Development, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that oversaw CHOC's operations.

Camusa was referring to the attention homelessness has gotten recently, particularly in Norristown and Pottstown. Rumbblings about a possible sweep of encampments had been circulating in recent months, as Norristown officials sought to crush those rumors by issuing a statement earlier this month. Dozens of advocates, area residents and concerned citizens came to a June 6 council meeting in Norristown where frank conversations about homelessness took place during a lengthy public comment period.

A look back: Homelessness in Montco following CHOC closure

Earlier this year, there were 357 people found to be experiencing homelessness on a cold night in January. The Point-in-Time Count, an annual federally mandated initiative, "gives one snapshot into the trend

of homelessness in Montgomery County, according to Kayleigh Silver, administrator of the Montgomery County Office of Housing and Community Development.

Along with the area's lack of affordable housing stock, Silver cited the after-effects of the pandemic and devastating impacts of Hurricane Ida in 2021 as contributing factors for the 2022 figures. Hurricane Ida produced historic flooding levels, eliminating affordable units in places such as Riverside Apartments in Norristown. Flooding damage left the building located along Schuylkill Avenue uninhabitable, and its residents unable to find an apartment they can afford.

"The years that I have worked with the CHOC there's always been a waitlist to get into a facility like this," Camuso said. "So if you're taking beds offline, that waitlist is just going to keep growing." Smaller shelter-based resources are available for those in need for women, families and people experiencing domestic violence in Montgomery County. Emergency shelters are opened during instances of extreme weather. However, advocates point to a capacity issue.

With a concentration of social service agencies in places such as Norristown and Pottstown, the two boroughs often feel the weight of responsibility to care for the area's homeless.

"The narrative has been spun that CHOC has brought homelessness to the area," Camuso said. "I don't want to go down that road really because I think that human services strengthen community support network, and not bring people to that situation."

"Our community is better when we have services to help get people housed and to help get people fed and support each other," Jordan said.

Still, it's concerning for Montgomery County Commissioners' Chairman Ken Lawrence Jr., who maintained the mindset of more needing to be done for the area's most vulnerable individuals.

"You know we have 62 municipalities in Montgomery County, and I would welcome any of those 62 raising their hands," Lawrence said.

"I always think for a county of our size,

Continued on next page

and with the population that we see, that we should have more than one shelter in Montgomery County," he said.

Issue remains 'complex'

Jordan and Camuso reflected on the journey they've taken over the past year.

She recalled how representatives "stopped admissions May 1," ahead of the 2022 lease lapse, and "at the time of the closure," they were tasked with helping about 20 remaining clients find places to stay.

"Every person when we closed the door at the CHOC had an option to transition somewhere," Camuso said. "Whether that was straight to permanent housing, or straight to kind of a hotel situation, or reconnecting with family or things like that."

Resources for Human Development has pivoted over the last year, but still remained on the ground here in Montgomery County. Instead of having people come for services, services are brought to individuals.

"Our goal is to get people into an emergency situation and then transition into permanent housing as soon as possible," Camuso said. "So our philosophy has not changed through this — just the way that we're doing it has changed."

Hotels have been the main resource "to get people off the streets" in "emergency situations," Camuso said. The nonprofit has procured "blocks of rooms" to help solve a short term problem.

"That ... for a long term strategy, that's not sustainable," Camuso said. "Financially, it's not sustainable, and capacity wise, that's not sustainable, because we can't serve as many people as what we did previously."

Montgomery County has also provided monetary contributions, according to Lawrence, who said \$2 million has been allocated since the CHOC's closure for hoteling and the further expansion of Street Outreach services.

County officials too acknowledged how those accommodations can only go so far.

"Hoteling is a very temporary solution, and we look at the needs of those who experience homelessness, there is a range, and so we want to be able to have services that provide a full continuum of services for that population," said Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services Director Tamara Williams.

In March, the county launched a task force with the focus of tackling homelessness.



RACHEL RAVINA - MEDIANEWS GROUP

Members of the Street Medicine team are seen working Nov. 1 in Norristown.

But it remains a complicated problem without a viable solution.

"I think we talk about homelessness as a complex public health issue, and we need supportive places for folks to get inside quickly, but we also need affordable housing, and a whole host of other options and supports, and different things to help different people," Jordan said.

Lawrence agreed.

"This is not solely a housing issue," he said. "We need more mental health treatment beds. We need more treatment centers for drug addiction. It's not always just a housing issue."

"Even with a shelter, or a hotel, I mean some of the people — who are living in encampments, or on the streets — they need more help than simply housing, and we need to make sure we have more wraparound services provided for them, and we need our state government and federal government to help with that," Lawrence continued. "And that's not unique to Montgomery County. That's happening across the region, and across the nation, frankly."

Facility plans stuck in talks

Camuso told MediaNews Group prior to the CHOC's closure about plans to construct a new facility in Lower Providence Township. County leadership supported that plan.

"The county and the state had funded RHD to develop a new supportive housing model out in Lower Providence Township,"

said Montgomery County Chief Operating Officer Lee Soltysiak. "So this would be a new, attractive and innovative way to deal with rehousing individuals in the county, and once it's open, I think it'll be a site that really the whole county can be proud of, and so we're working with the township very closely to make sure the zoning will accommodate the location, and to address all the needs that we know people utilizing the site will need in terms of transportation and supportive services to get them rehoused as quickly as possible."

A location of a proposed site was not disclosed, but Camuso stressed the organization "feel(s) that we have a legitimate land use" to develop somewhere within the township's 15-mile boundaries.

Discussions continue, but a year later, it appears as if plans have stalled.

"The county does not do the local zoning," Lawrence said, adding that "we need local municipal partners for that."

"We need to better understand what they're trying to propose. That's been a part of the conversations that have been ongoing is to try to pin down a little bit," said Michael Mrozinski, Lower Providence Township's community development director.

"It's not going to be what I would consider in the homeless world a 'barrack-style shelter,'" Camuso said. "It's not going to be that. It's going to be a short term housing program."

The proposed project will be called Genny's Place, a name Camuso said pays tribute to the memory of former CHOC

Director Genny O'Donnell. Jordan is set to assume a leadership role, as the director of Genny's Place, once it opens.

The estimated 20,000-square-foot space would offer "efficiency" apartment style "short term supportive housing" for up to 60 people, he said, with "specialized services to meet the needs of the population."

"It's still in conceptual phase," Camuso said.

The development was met with "some resistance" from community members, who Camuso said expressed reservations.

"I don't want to tag it, me personally, as nimby-ism," Camuso said, referring to an acronym that stands for "not in my backyard."

"They have legitimate concerns and we heard those," he continued. "So we wanted to work with them on a solution for that because ... if we just kept saying you're 'nimby' and you're this. If we just kept saying that's the problem, we're not going to get anywhere."

Camuso said those concerns ranged from future traffic patterns to crosswalks, as well as questions about the development's actual purpose.

"Is (it) a soup kitchen? People are going to be standing out in front and it's going to be large people congregating. That's not what we do," he said. "That's why we're providing short term housing."

Resources for Human Development expressed plans to first construct a "facility that would work for possibly a temporary period of time," before ultimately building a permanent one, Camuso said. The former could take six months. The latter, two years.

"I'm confident that we have a legitimate land use, and I'm confident that we will make it happen," Camuso said. "It's just the timeframe is what I'm not confident about because we need everybody to come together to get something done."

As time goes by without measured progress, more people remain without access to shelter. It's a problem advocates like Camuso and Jordan struggle with as they continue to provide assistance.

He, like many others in the conversation to solve homelessness maintained the "takes a village mentality" is crucial to work towards an actionable solution.

"Everybody needs to do something if we really want this to help people that we need to help in Montgomery County," Camuso said.

Published June 30, 2023

Latrobe Bulletin

LVSD school board conducting business behind closed doors

BY JOE WELLS

Bulletin Staff Writer

During the June 13, 2022, Ligonier Valley School District Board of Directors regular meeting, board members spent the hour approving a \$32.9 million budget, new and updated policies, and appointed new coaches for various school sports.

By any means it was a typical school board meeting except that none of seven present members discussed any of the items they voted on. The approval of a multi-million dollar budget and other items without any explanation to the board or public raised concern for the Bulletin that the district was holding private deliberations on public matters.

Seven months after that meeting, school board director Cynthia Brown asked that a policy the board was voting on be amended. Again, no discussion was held by the school directors.

After receiving emails from the school district that showed board members hold discussions of agenda items through email, out of the public eye, the Bulletin reached out to the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press for legal support.

"Pennsylvania's Sunshine Act makes clear that deliberations of public bodies like the Ligonier Valley School District must be open to the public, with only limited exceptions," said Paula Knudsen Burke, the Reporters Committee's Local Legal Initiative attorney in Pennsylvania. "It's a clear violation of the law for school administration officials and board members to misuse executive sessions and conduct deliberations over email about important issues like health and safety, curriculum, and the school district's budget."

The Reporters Committee's Local Legal Initiative provides local news organizations with the legal services necessary to pursue investigative and enterprise stories.

The program is funded through a \$10 million investment from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to bolster local journalism.

On Tuesday, the Reporters Committee sent a letter to the Ligonier Valley School District on behalf of the Bulletin, outlining past practices of discussing public matters in private, both online and in executive sessions. It has asked that the board respond to the letter before its Feb. 13 meeting.

Other issues found during the Bulletin's investigation include the lack of public and advertised committee meetings by the board's eight committees.

The board holds a committee of the whole meeting an hour before the regular monthly meetings but again, little discussion is had by the directors. Instead, the board typically receives information from school administrators about items that may or may not be on the agenda that evening. Barring a long presentation, those meetings typically last around 15 minutes.

The letter to the school board asks that it, "cease holding improper executive sessions, maintain and provide agendas and meeting minutes for all open meetings, and immediately stop conducting their deliberations via email or other forums that are closed to the public."

Melissa Melewsky, media law counsel of the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association, said agencies that violate the provisions in the Sunshine Act could face civil or criminal penalties for their actions.

"The law imposes penalties because it recognizes that government functions best when it is aided by and accountable to an informed and actively involved citizenry," Melewsky said.

While correcting these issues do make

the jobs of reporters at the Bulletin and across western Pennsylvania easier to gather necessary information, it is the goal of news organizations to distribute accurate and factual information to citizens to be better informed.

"Pennsylvania's Sunshine Act makes clear that deliberations of public bodies like the Ligonier Valley School District must be open to the public, with only limited exceptions."

Paula Knudsen Burke
*Reporters Committee
for Freedom of the Press*

"Without access, there is no accountability. The public can't understand or participate in decisions made behind closed doors, physical or electronic," Melewsky said. "Secrecy in government harms the public interest and erodes public trust, and the Sunshine Act seeks to prevent those consequences."

After the Jan. 9 meeting, the Bulletin filed a Right-to-Know Law Request for emails of board directors discussing meeting items over the past few months. While the district complied with the request within a week, providing 42 pages of emails, it raised more questions.

The Bulletin discovered some emails were cut off or missing. The emails also showed a Sept. 12 discussion between Brown and Superintendent Tim Kantor on a health and safety policy, which had swayed her from pulling the motion for a separate roll call vote hours before the regular meeting.

The board approved the health and safety plan along with two other measures in an 8-0 vote.

During that same Sept. 12 meeting, the Bulletin objected to the board's announcement of what it discussed during the prior executive session as insufficiently specific.

The school board's solicitor, Dennis Rafferty, said he could not disclose the matter or name the parties involved because failing to handle the matter in a confidential manner could compromise the district.

"We take the Sunshine Act seriously, I take it seriously and I can assure you that we don't and we didn't conduct any deliberations regarding ... any matter that might be brought up before the public at the meeting," Rafferty said at that meeting.

Since those meetings the Bulletin has tried to get more information on how the school board sets its agenda and deliberates on the matters to make a decision when it's time to cast a vote.

It has appealed its Right-to-Know request seeking the missing emails and asking for the district to ensure it conducts a good faith search for all responsive records.

On Jan. 20, the district provided the missing emails and response to other matters brought up in the appeal. A final determination by the Pennsylvania Office of Open Records is due by Feb. 23.

In a separate request, the Bulletin has also asked for similar emails from the board of directors dating back to the fall of 2021. The school district elected to take a 30-day extension and is required to provide the Bulletin with a response on Feb. 23 as well.

The Bulletin, led by managing editor Tara Ewanits, will continue to hold those in government accountable to the public they serve.

Published Feb. 9, 2023

Town hall engages community to reinvigorate movement for racial equity

By **Tim Stuhldreher**

"You are all a part of history," John Maina said Saturday morning.

Maina was speaking to around 100 community members gathered at the Multipurpose Activity Center at Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology for "Together We Can: A Townhall on Targeting Hidden Injustice."

The event was organized by the Lancaster Justice Seekers Collective, which is trying to mobilize energy around social justice and produce lasting change.

That energy was evident in 2020, Maina said: The Black Lives Matter movement sparked by George Floyd's murder was powerful.

Yet by 2021 it had lost momentum, he said. That prompted the collective's members to come together to figure out how to continue to mobilize.

Specifically, they want to involve young people of color, potentially by organizing a large-scale summit featuring a nationally known figure.

"Today is our first step," Maina said — enlisting members of the community and hearing from them what their priorities are. Their responses will be assessed at a follow-up meeting this coming Saturday.

What's next?

Lancaster Justice Seekers Collective is following up its town hall with a meeting from 10 a.m. to noon Saturday, March 25, at Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster, 328 W. Orange St., Lancaster.

Everyone is welcome. Participants will review the input gathered at the March 18 town hall "and dig into the details of growing a movement to make Lancaster County a community that works for everyone," the collective said.

To contact the organizers, email hiddeninjusticeslanc@gmail.com.

Interspersed with spoken-word pieces by emcee Sir Dominique Jordan, local leaders provided briefings on the issues at hand and some of the local work addressing them.

Alisa Jones, president of Union Community Care, gave an

overview of the Lancaster Racial Equity Profile. She focused on the economic data, which shows among other things that child poverty rate among Black and Latino county households is more than three times that among Whites.

"Income creates equity," Jones said. Over the past 40 years, however, income inequality has increased, both nationally and locally. "We are growing in the wrong direction. ... This should concern us," she said.

NAACP Lancaster branch President Blanding Watson gave an overview of his organization's work. Alice Yoder, executive director of community health at Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health and a Democratic candidate for Lancaster County commissioner, told the audience that the only way to make sustained systemic change is through collaboration.

She offered two local examples: The Lancaster County Children's Alliance, which serves victims of child abuse; and Joining Forces, formed to combat the opioid epidemic.

"Together we are greater than the sum of our parts," she said.

The presenters then stood aside and asked the attendees to do their part: Engaging in facilitated discussions around three questions around racial equity.

Responses were posted on the wall, and participants could post stickers on the ones that jumped out to them.

Among the themes that resonated: Education, pay and housing inequity. An admonition to "Own Our History — acknowledge our disparities" drew numerous stickers, as did a call to make it possible for people who usually aren't afforded a voice to participate in the conversation, offering stipends or childcare if need be.

Respondents cited a need to shift political power and to "scaffold" initiatives so that each builds on the next.

In an "open mic" segment that followed, audience members expanded on those points.

Dr. Cherise Hamblin, founder of the nonprofit Patients R Waiting, said she wanted those in attendance to put their words into action.

"Operate in your sphere of influence, make a difference



PHOTO: TIM STUHLBREHER

John Maina, founder and CEO of the Central PA Equity Project and a Lancaster Justice Seekers Collective member, welcomes participants to "Together We Can: A Townhall on Targeting Hidden Injustice," at Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology.

and center Black people in decisions that you're making, if you actually want to see something change," she said.

Towahna Rhim, who works in diversity, equity and inclusion administration at LG Health, said marginalized people weren't the only ones missing at the town hall: So were "C suite" leaders, the people with the power to make a difference.

"We get them to the table by making it psychologically safe for them to be here," she said.

People need to be prepared to be uncomfortable, Sophie Xiong said: "If you're defensive, you're not learning."

Avara Thompson offered a metaphor: When she and her children tried playing the game Sorry! by the rules, it wasn't fun, even though having fun was the point. So she changed the rules.

Jordan Wormley said he's tired of just talking: "How do we stop just meeting like this?" he asked. "How do we go from talking to doing?"

Speaking after the town hall, Maina pronounced it a success. It had created a safe environment that allowed residents to talk about their concerns. Next Saturday, those concerns will be reviewed, discussed and turned into a plan of action.

"We will continue as a collective to listen to our community," he said.

Published March 20, 2023

YORKDISPATCH

If Central York doesn't learn from second book ban, students say they'll 'be back out again'

By Meredith Willse
The York Dispatch

Central York students and recent graduates, fresh off the school district's second book ban, are realistic about what the new library policy means — and doesn't mean — for them going forward.

"It's not the perfect policy, but I think it's probably one of the best starting points that we could ever ask for," said Zachary Smith, an 18-year-old who helped lead protests this spring before he graduated.

"It is a policy," Tristan Doud, who'll be a senior this fall, chimed in.

Olivia Pituch, also 18 and now a college student who participated in protests against the district's first book ban in 2021, is similarly circumspect given the recent past.

"We are getting the books back on the shelves — hopefully," she said. "That's what they said, at least."

Recent experience tells the teens that they can't yet let their guard down.

In 2021, student activists took a victory lap after the elected school board reversed a ban on various teacher resources that predominantly targeted works by creators of color.

Book challenges filed by a single person — school board candidate Faith Casale — led to the removal of two books earlier this year. A panel of educators decided to pull "Push" by Sapphire and "A Court of Mist and Fury" by Sarah J. Maas from circulation, setting off a new round of student protest.

Pituch, like many of the young people involved in protests, held her breath when the board voted Tuesday night.

All three agreed that work on the policy isn't finished.

Doud said district officials need to work on their communication skills. He wants to see parents made aware of the new policy — and actively engaged in any changes to book categories.

Under the new library policy, parents can challenge the age level that librarians assign to books. Books can't necessarily be removed from shelves entirely, as they were this year, but a single parent's challenge could result in limiting access to that book for all students, not just their own child.

Opponents of the new policy — many of them supporters of the book ban — say it doesn't go far enough.

Pituch said the policy as it's written doesn't give much



PHOTO: DAWN J. SAGERT, THE YORK DISPATCH

Tristan Doud, a senior at Central York High School, addresses the board during Central York School District's school board planning meeting Monday, June 12, 2023.

"wiggle room" for the targeting of specific books.

"I've been looking for the loopholes," she said. "I know that all of us are going to be keeping a pretty close eye on everything because we've seen how sneaky they can be in the past."

While books can't be easily removed from the library under the new policy, Pituch worries that some books may be stopped from entering the system.

During Tuesday night's meeting, several elected school board members groused about the public scrutiny the district's book ban and library policy received. They seemed to advocate for such matters being dealt with internally in the school district, without scrutiny on social media and in the news.

The students saw that attitude as something of a red flag.

"The protests, they're not as much for [the board members] because we've already spoken to them," Doud said. "it's more for . . . letting everyone else know."

For his part, Doud said he doesn't care what board members think of the student protests. Those public protests, he said, were only necessary because the school

wasn't listening to them.

If the board members didn't want the school to look bad, he said, "don't make us have to do that."

Smith agreed that the protests were necessary because the students weren't being heard.

The point of the first round of protests, Pituch said, was to raise awareness and make everyone understand that the situation was a bigger deal than some made it seem. She said it was great that people spoke out at board meetings, but that didn't raise awareness. Protesting made people listen and get involved.

Doud saw new faces, even during smaller protests, and witnessed active discussions taking place in the community.

Smith said the protesters weren't really trying to convince other students to join their side. The larger point was to raise awareness, he said.

"Obviously we have a side that we want the books back," he said, "but we weren't saying we were in the right and they were in the wrong."

Pituch's stepfather, Michael Stewart, is running for school board this year, part of a slate of candidates who've explicitly come out against the book ban. Pituch was shocked that another candidate, Faith Casale, was the one who originally challenged the books.

"There would be someone on the school board essentially that would be pushing . . . for banning books," Pituch said. "That doesn't make me feel very good."

All three said they didn't blame Casale or the committee who reviewed and ultimately removed the books.

"We said we didn't want to be dictated by other people's parents, but we never were like, 'This one person is the worst ever,'" Doud said.

He said they just wanted their own parents to have a say and not have their rights superseded by others.

Not one of the students believes their work is done, although they're cautiously optimistic that Tuesday night's vote will make it clear that book bans aren't acceptable in Central York School District.

If officials don't learn from this latest round, Pituch said, they could risk completely destroying the district's public reputation.

"They know we'll be back out again," Pituch added.

— Reach Meredith Willse at mwillse@yorkdispatch.com or on Twitter at [@MeredithWillse](https://twitter.com/MeredithWillse).

Published June 21, 2023

Search area for Cavalcante expands

By **Richard L. Gaw**
Staff Writer

While the search for killer Danelo Cavalcante continues to hold much of southern Chester County in the captive grip of fear and concern, the search for the Chester County Prison escapee – now approaching its second week – has intensified, as hundreds of local, state and federal agencies using drones, helicopters and K-9 units narrowed Cavalcante's whereabouts to a two-mile radius near Longwood Gardens – a search area that has now expanded.

At a 30-minute press conference held on Sept. 4, Lt. Col. George Bivens of the Pennsylvania State Police – now the lead investigator in the search for Cavalcante – said that four confirmed sightings have led to the narrowing of the search for Cavalcante to an area bordered by the intersection of routes 52 and 926, Route 52 north to Parkerville Road and southeast along Route 926 in Pocopson Township.

"We have secured that area, and continue to actively search it," Bivens said. "While there are a number of challenges, we are confident that if he is in there, we will find him."

Bivens was joined at the Sept. 4 press conference by Chester County District Attorney Deb Ryan and Supervisor Deputy U.S. Marshal Robert Clark.

At Longwood Gardens

During a press conference held at 8:30 a.m. on Sept. 5, however, Bivens said that authorities received notification from security police at Longwood Gardens that trail-cam photographs taken at Longwood Gardens on Sept. 4 depict Cavalcante walking north at 8:21 p.m. and south at 9:33 p.m. at the same location. Bivens said that while Cavalcante has not changed his appearance, he has obtained a backpack, a duffel pack and a hooded sweatshirt.

Bivens said that after consulting with the District Attorney's Office, it was decided that authorities would expand the search area beyond its original two-mile perimeter

to include an area south of Route 1 near Longwood Gardens.

In addition, Bivens said that he and Ryan had lengthy discussions with representatives from the Unionville-Chadds Ford and Kennett Consolidated school districts. As a result, both school districts were closed Sept. 5, while the U-CF district operated on a Flexible Instructional Day.

"We will continue to work with those districts to determine what will occur in the coming days," Bivens said. "[At 5:27 a.m.], a reverse 9-1-1 call was sent to the residents within a 1.5-mile area of the camera [that was located at Longwood Gardens]. This was expanded to three miles at around 7 a.m.

"We had already requested and begun to mobilize resources from additional federal agencies last evening to include the FBI and the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol. People and equipment from those agencies have been added to the search as we speak."

On the recommendation of authorities, Longwood Gardens was closed Sept. 3; it offered limited access to its grounds on Labor Day and plans to fully reopen Sept. 6.

'Stressed' and 'desperate'

At the Sept. 4 press conference, Bivens said that authorities came very close to capturing Cavalcante; a trooper caught a brief and sighting of the escapee within the perimeter area. The officer promptly attempted to chase him but was unable to catch him as Cavalcante disappeared into the thick woods. Bivens also said that two burglaries have occurred in the vicinity over the past few days but have not been directly traced to Cavalcante.

There is a \$10,000 reward for anyone with information that leads to his capture.

"He's going to need clothing. He's going to need food, and because it's getting hot out there, he's looking for better shelter," Bivens said.

"One of our practices in how we conduct these types of investigations and manhunts is that we will continue to push him hard. I intend to stress him. I want to push him hard and he will make mistakes.

He will show himself. He's already shown himself a few times. We will contain him, and we will eventually catch him.

"He is desperate and does not want to be caught and has very little to lose at this time."

Bivens said that in the likely event that Cavalcante is captured in the next few days and does not actively surrender to authorities, "deadly force is authorized."

"He has the option to surrender," Bivens said. "That is what we hope he will do."

Cavalcante was convicted on August 16, 2023, of first-degree murder for fatally stabbing his 33-year-old former girlfriend in front of her children in 2021 and sentenced to life in prison without parole. On Aug. 31 at 8:50 a.m., the 34-year-old Cavalcante escaped from Chester County Prison and was later seen walking on Wawaset Road in Pocopson Township.

Chester County District Attorney's Office reported three days ago that Cavalcante was observed on a residential surveillance camera this morning approximately 12:30 a.m. in the 1800 block of Lenape Road, approximately 1.5 miles from Chester County Prison.

Bivens said State Police is continuing to ask for the public's help in the ongoing investigation. He encouraged the public to become familiar with the description of Cavalcante: The escapee has light skin, is about five feet in height and weighs about 120 pounds, with shaggy black hair and brown eyes. As seen on a surveillance video that was released to the public on Saturday – confirmed to be Cavalcante walking beside a residential driveway – he is wearing long pants, a light-colored t-shirt, and white sneakers – the same items he was wearing when he escaped from the prison early last Thursday.

"Within the secured area I have described as well as near there, we are asking residents to check on their neighbors," Bivens said. "If they are not at home, please let us know so that we can check their property in their absence. We know that we have numerous homes

within the search area in which we presume that the occupants are away for the holiday weekend. We have been checking the exteriors of many of those homes, but as they return, if they find anything disturbed, please stop and call us, so that we can check it out prior to their going through their residence."

New tip line: (717) 562-2987

Bivens also encouraged residents who live in the search vicinity to check their home security cameras and call a newly created tip line at (717) 562-2987 if they have any additional information that could lead to Cavalcante's capture – or sign up at ReadyChesco.org to obtain access to alerts.

Bivens said that the State Police have made a recording of Cavalcante's mother – speaking in Portuguese – asking her son to surrender peacefully, that is being broadcast on loudspeakers in the vicinity of that two-mile radius.

"I would like to thank the community for their support," Bivens said. "I know that this has gone on for a couple of days now. I know it's stressful for the community, but I want to assure you that all of us up here and our respective offices are working diligently to bring this to a conclusion as quickly as possible."

Ryan said that the District Attorney's Office continues to be in contact with nearby residents about the latest updates, as well as with the superintendents of nearby school districts.

While she avoided providing any details on how Cavalcante managed to escape Chester County Prison, Ryan said that the goal of the District Attorney's Office is to "find this man and capture him."

"Our position is that Danelo Cavalcante's desperation will not outlast the resolve of our investigators, and that goes for the state police, the U.S. Marshals Service, and our state and county investigators," Clark said. "We are all on the same team."

To contact Staff Writer Richard L. Gaw, email rgaw@chestercounty.com.

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LEADER TIMES

BC3 @ Armstrong in Ford City holds ribbon cutting ceremony

By DENNIS PHILLIPS
Associate Editor

It was a bittersweet day in Ford City on Wednesday as people gathered to celebrate the opening of a new educational facility while remembering a family member, mentor and friend who dedicated his life to making the community a better place.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony for the official opening of the BC3 @ Armstrong State Rep. Jeffrey P. Pyle Building was held with BC3 representatives, elected officials and the Pyle family on hand to remember the legacy of the late educator and lawmaker. Katherine Pyle, the youngest daughter of Jeff and Michele Pyle, was one of the featured speakers during the ceremony.

Katherine Pyle, who attended the ceremony with her mother and sister, Lauren, said 26 years ago her parents purchased a house that was near the former Ford City Junior-Senior High School, the same location where the new BC3 @ Armstrong facility was constructed, so Jeff could be near the school where he taught and so his future children could one day easily walk to school.

"This building is the epitome of what my dad worked for his entire life. Helping others learn how to help themselves," she said.

"He really believed in the saying 'Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.' Through helping others better themselves, he bettered himself too. It's only fitting for his legacy to be built on the grounds where his entire family and community learned how to better themselves throughout the years."

Katherine said it's a tremendous honor to be one of the speakers during the



Elected officials, BC3 representatives and the Pyle family cut the ribbon officially opening the doors to the new BC3 @ Armstrong Ford City campus, featuring the State Rep. Jeffrey P. Pyle Building.

PHOTO BY DENNIS PHILLIPS | LEADER TIMES

ceremony officially opening the educational facility that bears her father's name.

However, she wishes her father would have been there to see the facility open.

"It is my greatest honor and my greatest regret that I'm here in place of my father," she said. "I'm so grateful that this building will be one of his many contributions to our society."

State Sen. Joe Pittman (R-41) said the construction of the new BC3 @ Armstrong facility was a true collaboration of many entities, including state elected officials, Armstrong County Industrial Development Council, Armstrong County Commissioners and Armstrong School District.

"You know this really is a partnership right here," he said.

Pittman said it was about 11 years ago that the school district decided to consolidate the school in Ford City with the

former Kittanning Senior High School to form the Armstrong Junior-Senior High School.

He said, at the time, people in Kittanning and Ford City were concerned about what would be next and what would be done with the two former school properties.

"And here we are today, moving forward," he said.

Pittman said a year and a half ago ground was broken for the construction of the new facility, with Pyle in attendance. With Pyle passing away in September, Pittman said the former educator might not be there in person, but he is there in spirit.

"This was Jeff Pyle's dream," he said.

BC3 President Dr. Nick Neupauer jubilantly started his remarks by shouting "We did it. We did it."

He said COVID-19, inflation and supply

chain problems couldn't stop the construction of the facility.

Neupauer also discussed the history of the site with the long history of Ford City Junior-Senior High School that dates back to the early 1900s.

"These are sacred grounds," he said.

Other speakers during the ceremony included Megan Coval, BC3 Education Foundation executive director, and external relations; Sophia Klukan, BC3 @ Armstrong student; Dr. Brian Burke, BC3 @ Armstrong faculty; Don Myers, Armstrong County commissioner; and state Rep. Bryan Cutler (R-100), House Republican leader.

Dennis Phillips is the associate editor of the Leader Times. He can be reached by calling 724-543-1303, ext. 1318, or dphillips@leadertimes.com.

Published April 14, 2023

New study exposes privilege at top colleges

New opportunities for rural applicants likely

By Andy Abel

In the wake of *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard* and *SFFA v. University of North Carolina*, the recent Supreme Court judgments against affirmative action, attention appears to be shifting from race to economic disadvantage in college admissions.

A major new study funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, the JPB Foundation and the Overdeck Family Foundation exposes the connection between top colleges, money and privilege in American society. The study can be downloaded at nber.org/papers/w31492.

Raj Chetty and David J. Deming, both of Harvard, and John N. Friedman of Brown produced the study, which finds that highly selective colleges increase elite privilege by favoring the wealthy in the admissions process. That is no surprise; what is new is the clarity of this research and the size of the effect.

The study is part of a nationwide effort to shine a light on the role top colleges play in maintaining inequality and elitism. This new discourse is of interest to the people of South Central Pennsylvania because it is likely the new pressures on college administrators will force open new opportunities for this region's college applicants.

One of the findings of the study that is likely to draw less attention is that students from low-income families have a much better chance of admission than students from all but the uppermost income bracket. Amid the concern over the privilege enjoyed by the super-wealthy, it is reassuring to note that Ivy-Plus colleges (Ivy league, Stanford, MIT, Duke and Chicago) actively favor applicants of modest means. The problem is that few such students apply.

Given the new focus on economic disadvantage, local applicants to top

colleges who are from non-elite families are likely to be advantaged as never before in coming admissions cycles.

Understanding privilege

One of the common misconceptions about college is that graduates from expensive private colleges earn more. Surprisingly, that is usually not the case. What matters most for salaries is a student's major. For instance, an engineer from a state college is likely to earn more than a teacher from Harvard.

The results from Chetty et. al. support studies over the past 20 years that find attending highly selective colleges has little impact on earnings.

However, Chetty et. al. highlight a very important outcome: Leadership positions in our nation are far more likely to go to people from Ivy-Plus colleges. According to Chetty et. al., although Ivy-Plus graduates make up a very small fraction of the US population, "...these twelve colleges account for more than 10% of Fortune 500 CEOs, a quarter of U.S. Senators, half of all Rhodes scholars and three-fourths of Supreme Court justices appointed in the last half-century."

To put it crudely, an Ivy-Plus pedigree won't get you cash, but it'll likely get you power and wealth, which matter more in the long run.

A seldom discussed impact of college choice derives from social connections and marriage. Spouses and employment networks often result among college friends, which means that whereas the college you attend may not affect your salary right after graduation, it is likely to affect your wealth and status over your lifetime.

Chetty et al. show hints of this understudied effect by demonstrating that, although salaries after graduation show little variation by college, Ivy-Plus graduates are far more likely to reach the top 1% of the income distribution than others,

including their peers from highly selective public flagship colleges and universities.

One of the most striking findings from Chetty et. al. is that applicants with low test scores and grades and who are from very wealthy families get a much bigger boost from extra-curricular activities, whereas grades and test scores matter more for lower income students.

Rural empowerment

Ivy-Plus colleges draw the overwhelming majority of their applicants from coastal cities. Although this may seem as if top colleges prefer such applicants, admission committees are widely believed to give preference to rural applicants. In fact, many colleges announce this quite openly. It is just that there are few rural applicants. Chetty et. al.'s findings support the assumption that this is in part due to the lower average incomes of rural families.

Having so many of America's leaders from elite colleges presents a concern for areas such as South Central Pennsylvania; it means that this region is under-represented among the country's movers and shakers.

Having America's power elite disproportionately from coastal cities is a longstanding social problem that disadvantages rural communities. This outcome appears to be exacerbated by top colleges' preferential treatment of rich applicants, and by the shortage of applicants from regions like ours.

A larger implication of Chetty et. al.'s findings is that the social divisions of our era are increased by the persistence of privilege across generations and regions. They conclude that Ivy-Plus colleges "could diversify the socioeconomic backgrounds of America's leaders by changing their admissions practices."

Implications

Money will likely play a role in college admissions for the foreseeable future, but

if money comes to matter somewhat less, the effect on communities such as ours could be meaningful.

That is not to say that a family's wealth no longer matters. As any good college counselor knows, the easy way to get rich kids into top colleges is to make sure they check off the box announcing they will not be applying for financial aid.

The college admissions data released in conjunction with the SFFA cases has been claimed to suggest that top colleges use tricks to ferret out which applicants come from money.

For instance, Ivy-Plus colleges are reputed to favor the "fancy sports" connected to social elites, such as squash, crew, fencing, water polo, swimming and golf (although the 2020 article in *The Atlantic* that drove this story was later retracted).

Colleges operate within a simple system: Those with larger endowments can afford top shelf professors and attract eager applicants (willing to pay and bequeath more money).

College administrators and professors clearly disdain the admissions preference for the wealthy and push against it to the extent they are able. Witness, for instance, that Chetty et. al. was conducted entirely by professors at Ivy Plus institutions and funded by institutions with strong ties to these universities.

What all this suggests is that if you are from South Central Pennsylvania and you are from a wealthy family, as long as you are a strong student your chance of admission to one of the nation's top schools is very good (especially if someone from your family attended your school of choice previously).

If you are not wealthy, but you are local and a strong student, your chance of admission is likely to be higher over the coming years than ever before.

Published July 26, 2023

GAP: No other trail like it, says Virginia man

By **Roxanne Abramowitz**
The Daily Courier

"A national treasure," that's how Jack Tracy describes the Great Allegheny Passage.

The Fredericksburg, Va., man should know because he's made the 333-mile trip from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C., on the GAP and C&O Canal Towpath trails 31 times since 2008.

"It's amazing," Tracy said. "There's no other trail like it with the scenery and the history and all the little railroad towns you go through."

Tracy discussed the trail as he enjoyed a homemade breakfast at Lucy King's Connellsville Bed & Breakfast on the West Side this week – just one of his railroad town stops along the way.

Tracy, retired in 1999 from the U.S. Air Force after 31 years, decided in 2008 he wanted to experience long-distance biking. He was living in North Carolina at the time.

"At that time the only riding I did was around town," he said. It was about a 26-mile circuit around the town.

The trail is special for another reason to Jack — it's a place to make friends, including Ron Morris of Douglas, Ga.

A chance meeting in Harpers Ferry, W.Va., developed into a friendship.

Morris now joins Tracy on twice-yearly trips along the GAP and C&O Canal Towpath — as well as other adventures around the world.

While Tracy was riding the C&O Canal Towpath and Morris was hiking off the Appalachian Trail, each was staying at the same bed-and-breakfast in Harpers Ferry.

That was in 2010.

"I'd hiked the last 200 miles in 10 days," Morris said. "My feet were chewed up and I was sitting with my feet in a bucket of water."

"Jack walks by after coming off the biking trail. It was hot — over 100 degrees. He came in and said, 'My God, what is wrong with your feet?'"

The conversation continued about Morris' hiking experience.

"He said you have to get a bicycle," Morris recalled.

In 2010, Morris bought a bike.

He said the two started a friendship that day, exchanging emails and phone calls.

In one of those emails, Tracy asked Morris to join him on a trip from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C., on the trails.

It was the first of 15 GAP-C&O Canal Towpath rides together.

They meet in Washington, D.C., where

Continued on next page



PHOTO BY ROXANNE ABRAMOWITZ | THE DAILY COURIER

Bed-and-breakfast owner Lucy King welcomes bikers Jack Tracy (left) and Ron Morris to Connellsville. The avid bike cyclists love the Great Allegheny Passage.

they board an Amtrak train to Pittsburgh. At first, they'd stay at a hotel along Smallman Street, eventually learning it was cheaper to stay Homestead.

"But that's even getting expensive now," Tracy said.

For this trip, they decided to stay at the Little Boston Inn in Boston, Pa., near Elizabeth.

"That was really nice," Tracy said.

Experienced riders, they have biked trails across the nation and around the world.

In 2011, Morris got a call from Tracy.

"He asked me 'what do you think about riding The Divide?' Morris said. "I said, 'I have no idea what that is.'"

The route crisscrosses the Continental Divide from north to south starting in Banff, Alberta, Canada, and finishes near the Mexican border.

"It's all camping," Tracy told Morris. "I think with your camping experience, I bet we can make a good team."

Morris said he looked at the route — 46 days and almost 3,000 miles.

"I called him back and said, 'let's do this,'" Morris said.

On another adventure, they traveled 31 days along the Pacific Coast from Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, to Mexico.

They've biked from Lake Champlain on the New York-Vermont border into Canada to Montreal.

In 2015, it was Route 1, Iceland's national road, which encircles the Nordic nation.

Tracy said he learned about Route 1 while watching "CBS Sunday Morning." A reporter was stranded in Iceland for a week, rented a car and discovered Route 1.

"I got a bug that it might be a good bike ride, so I sent Ron an email," Tracy said. "I said 'what do you think about riding all of Route 1 — all of it.'"

Morris remembered that email, believing

"That's what our stops are about now, meeting our friends. It's become a big social thing. It's not how much we are traveling a day, but we are headed to see people."

Jack Tracy

it was a route along the U.S. East Coast, but Tracy set him straight.

"It was a tough ride," Tracy said.

Morris said it was the coldest summer Iceland experienced in 43 years, with highs in the 40s.

"Weather is always a big factor, and there it is their life," he said. "Everyone in Iceland has a wind story. But we met some really great people."

It's become a tradition with the biking-buddies — meeting people on their rides and making friends.

Their spring and fall rides along the GAP and C&O Canal Towpath trails have become more about meeting up with the people they have met over the years.

The men start at Mile Marker 150 in Point State Park, Pittsburgh, and go all the way to Washington, D.C.

Tracy said they've biked in many places in and out of the United States, but the GAP, "it's the one."

"It's just a fantastic trail," he said.

Morris said they are seeing more people from outside the United States.

"They are coming from all over," Tracy said.

Before the trail was completed in Pittsburgh, it contained gaps, he said.

Cyclists had to cover those gaps along motor-vehicle roadways.

Tracy said the biggest change over the years is local appreciation of the trail and those who use it by people along the GAP.

"When we meet the locals, they have a real understanding of how important this trip is," he said.

At one point, towns depended on railroads but now residents in them realize they are dependent on the trail, Morris said.

Lucy King is one of the many friends they have made along the way.

"We stay with Lucy," Morris said of the West Side bed-and-breakfast site.

They stayed at the nearby Comfort Inn once when Lucy didn't have a room. Morris said the hotel is nice and good for the city — another sign of success driven by the trail.

"They are like family to me," King said. "Ron loves my pumpkin pancakes. I make them all the time for him."

Morris and Tracy return the sentiment.

"It's our home for one night two times a year," Tracy said of the bed-and-breakfast and its owner. "You are a treasure."

He said Lucy goes above-and-beyond for her guests.

"Lucy took us around the area," Tracy said. "We were all over the place."

Originally from the Pittsburgh area, King has seen change in Connellsville.

"The town is developing, and people are noticing the change," she said.

King said the trail is bringing people into town.

She said Connellsville is fortunate to have the Comfort Inn along First Street, noting the Melody Motor Lodge in Dunbar Township is another overnight option.

"We stayed there," Tracy said, adding that King once took them to the Melody when she had no room at her site.

King opened the bed-and-breakfast business as the trail was developing. The Progress Fund was working to develop the areas along the trail in Connellsville and Meyersdale, she said.

"When I saw this place, I knew it was perfect," she said of her building.

It was near the trail and easy to convert into a bed-and-breakfast facility, she said.

In addition to Connellsville, Morris' and Parker's stops along the trail include Pittsburgh; Confluence; Cumberland, Md.; Hancock, Md.; and Harpers Ferry, then ending in Washington, D.C.

"That's what our stops are about now, meeting our friends," Tracy said. "It's become a big social thing. It's not how much we are traveling a day, but we are headed to see people."

Tracy said his original trip along the trail was in July 2008.

"It was God-awful hot," he recalled.

He said Morris talked him into making trips earlier in the year — when it's cooler and not as many bugs.

Morris said people ask why they do the trail twice a year.

"October, it's a different trail," he said. "It's the same trail but it's a different trail. It's cooler weather. It's just different."

Before meeting Tracy, Morris had not ridden a bike since he was 12.

He raced in marathons from 1978 to 1984, then took up golf and got bored.

Morris bought a bike after meeting Tracy.

A retired New York Life insurance agent, Ron said he's traveled 76,000 miles by bicycle, and generally rides about 50 miles a day.

The two are looking forward to their next trail ride in the fall, but first Tracy has to undergo hip surgery.

"He'll be back in October," Morris said.

Published May 19, 2023

why newspapers?

87% of Pennsylvania voters agree that local newspapers help keep people connected to their community.

New Mercy House tenant sees impact

By Vanessa Pellechio Sanders
Times Staff Writer

New Mercy House tenant Matthew Love started self-medicating with alcohol and marijuana to deal with the loss of his mother in 2013.

It took the Philadelphia native years to go to his first treatment center in Lancaster in 2019.

The 37-year-old became the first resident to move into the Mercy House in Gettysburg on June 9 with a new provider, TNH Sober Living LLC, also known as the Nicholas House.

Love, who has been sober since April 14, thanked Adams County commissioners for opening Mercy House, 45 W. High St., Gettysburg, at their June 28 meeting. He waited to speak with them after the meeting.

"They are giving me the opportunity to have a steady place to live while I am in recovery," Love said. "The Mercy House has been a blessing to me."

TNH Sober Living has allowed him to focus on recovery "without the burden of having to pay an enormous rent," said Love.

Adams County Commissioner Marty Qually said he was excited Love took the time to share his gratitude.

"This is our job. This is what we do. This is the services we provide," Qually said. "It's good to see someone who is taking it seriously."

On his second day of staying at Mercy House, Love successfully obtained employment at Food 101, located at 101 Chambersburg St., Gettysburg.

The hours work well for Love, so he can continue to attend his meetings and appointments and not get "too overwhelmed in early recovery."

"The people of Gettysburg have been very welcoming," Love said. "The neighbors always say 'hi' and don't shun you. I would have thought it would have

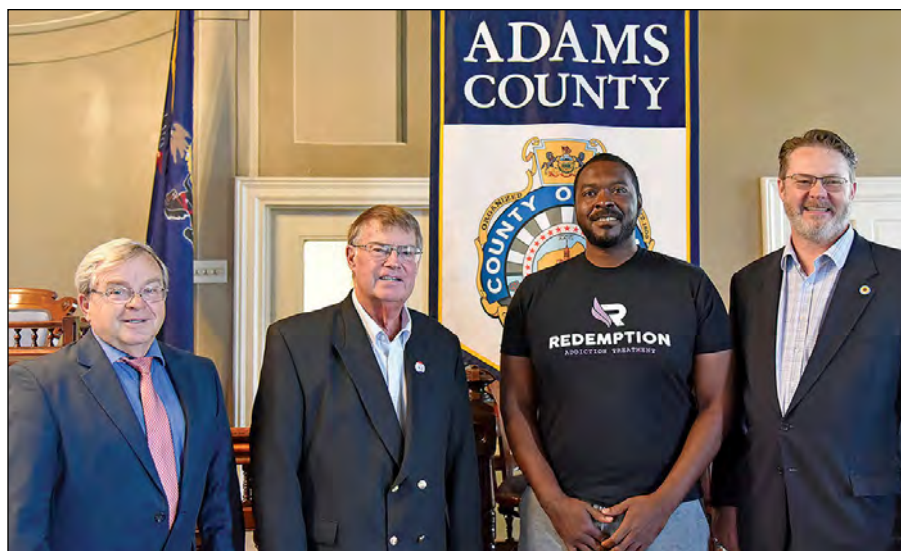


PHOTO: VANESSA PELLECHIO SANDERS/GETTYSBURG TIMES

New Mercy House tenant Matthew Love attended the Adams County commissioners' meeting on June 28 to thank commissioners for opening the sober living program. From left are Commissioner Jim Martin, Commissioner Chair Randy Phiel, Love, and Commissioner Marty Qually.

been frowned upon, but I have not seen that. Especially as a person of color, I thought there would be dirty looks."

Love's alcoholism began in 2013 when his mother passed away.

"I took her death very hard. I didn't know how to deal with it. I smoked weed and drank," Love said.

In the past, Love along with five siblings lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Philadelphia with his single mother who also struggled with substance use issues, he said.

His mother made the tough decision to send three of her children, including Love, into foster care in 1997.

After his mother completed treatment, the family reunited in Middletown, Pa., in 2000.

During his first treatment center experience in 2019, Love said he learned "another world of trauma and how people self-medicate."

In his childhood, Love said attention in

the family was not spread out equally, so they learned how to self-soothe.

"Even as a child, I remember eating a bunch of sugar and snack foods to make myself feel good. I didn't know that was a sign of addiction," Love said. "That helped me understand I was affected through trauma."

Prior to Mercy House, Love was at Bowling Green Brandywine Treatment Center in Chester County and had the option to go to a sober living house or return to his Lancaster residence.

In April, Adams County commissioners approved agreements with TNH Sober Living to locate its services at the county's 45 W. High St. property.

Commissioners approved a commercial property lease agreement for a five-year term with TNH Sober Living since the county owns the property. TNH Sober Living began paying \$2,000 per month May 1.

The Mercy House is almost halfway to capacity with a fourth tenant moving in this

week, according to Paul Van Jura, executive director of TNH Sober Living. The recovery house, certified by the Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, has a capacity of eight tenants, he said.

Van Jura said an agreement is anticipated to be in place with WellSpan Health by Aug. 1 with TNH Sober Living providing certified recovery specialist services by the end of August or early September.

Other services like Alcoholic Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings should start at the end of this month, according to Van Jura.

The goal is to serve the overall community, not just the recovery house tenants, Van Jura said.

Founded in 2016 by a group in long-term recovery, TNH Sober Living has been "committed to providing fresh, useful, mission-driven support services to individuals and communities impacted by addiction and mental health disorders," according to its website.

In the future, Love said he hopes to become a productive member of the Adams County community.

"I want to accomplish not only long-term sobriety but a great foundation for life," Love said.

Love has been developing a nonprofit called The Lov3 Foundation "that aims to provide support and mentorship to teens and young adults dealing with substance use issues," he said.

"Substance use is a mental health issue. I want to show people it is not something that is dirty and bad. It is a disease. With the proper treatment and improvement plan, you can get through this," Love said.

Those interested in more information about Mercy House, can email admissions@thenicholashouse.com; call 717-224-7898; or visit the website at thenicholashouse.com and click "Get Help Now" for the online contact form.

Published July 11, 2023

The Meadville Tribune

MEADVILLETRIBUNE.COM

U.S. Army veteran gets free tracked wheelchair

By Keith Gushard
Meadville Tribune

Herbert Thomas can't hide his enthusiasm or gratitude for the gift of mobility once again.

Thomas, 54, of Meadville, a 14-year U.S. Army veteran who served in Iraq, has regained mobility thanks to an all-terrain wheelchair. It's a gift from the Freedom Alliance, a nonprofit military support organization based in Dulles, Virginia.

"Snow, rain, even bad sidewalks or roads — it doesn't matter," Thomas said with a smile as he showed off his tracked wheelchair recently. "I'm just ecstatic about it — I get to go hunting and fishing again."

Thomas, an Army staff sergeant, severely injured his spine in June 2003 during deployment to Iraq.

Thomas was in a vehicle convoy providing security to another unit, when the convoy rolled into an enemy ambush. Thomas sustained severe back injuries and had to undergo surgery to rebuild his back using multiple rods and screws.

Thomas earned a Bronze Star medal and was the only noncommissioned officer in his unit to receive the honor. The Bronze Star is the U.S. military's fourth-highest individual military award — awarded for acts of heroism, acts of merit, or meritorious service in a combat zone.

Due to his back injuries, Thomas' mobility has been adversely impacted, preventing him from walking or standing for any extended period of time.

"I can still walk a short distance (about 30 yards), but then I have to rest," he said.

For Thomas, trying to enjoy therapeutic outdoor activities he loves like hunting and fishing with his family, has been a challenge due to his mobility issues.

"We tried to go fishing a couple years with regular wheelchair and I got stuck — and she's six months pregnant," Thomas said referring to his companion Elaina Conwell. "We had a heck of a time."

Thomas spent several years trying to get aid from any organization, but was unable to do so because he still had some, though limited, mobility.

"We'd been struggling for more than five years to try to get someone help us out," Conwell said.



SHANNON ROAE/MEADVILLE TRIBUNE

Herbert Thomas, a wounded U.S. Army veteran from Meadville, talks about receiving an all-terrain wheelchair to improve his mobility. Thomas' companion, Elaina Conwell, and son, Nathen Thomas, look on.

"At one point I said 'I've had enough,'" Thomas said. However, he credited his daughter, Kristen, with helping him to keep trying.

About two years ago, Thomas came across the Freedom Alliance via an internet search and reached out to the organization. He then was put on a future aid list by the Freedom Alliance.

"I got a call from them about a year ago and they said they're going to help me out by building a (customized wheel)chair," he said. "They asked me what I might want on it."

Thomas asked for his military rank and the U.S. Army seal as well as accessories to hold fishing and hunting equipment. Thomas' chair was presented to him Nov. 30 by the Freedom Alliance at Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2006 in Meadville.

The all-terrain chairs like the one given to Thomas are

customized to the needs of each recipient and come equipped with tank-style treads to handle sand, snow and uneven ground, according to Tom Kilgannon, president of the Freedom Alliance.

"He's a guy who really enjoys the outdoors," Kilgannon said of Thomas. "The great outdoors really plays a part in this in keeping his spirits up. This chair really gives him a lot more confidence and independence."

The Freedom Alliance has spent nearly \$1 million providing more than 65 similar chairs to other wounded veterans around the country, according to Kilgannon.

Thomas said he's extremely appreciative of being a recipient.

"I just want to thank them so much," he said. "I couldn't do anything. Having this — it's awesome."

Published Dec. 12, 2023

"Snow, rain, even bad sidewalks or roads — it doesn't matter. I'm just ecstatic about it — I get to go hunting and fishing again."

Herbert Thomas

THE CENTRE COUNTY GAZETTE

Field of Dreams

\$1.1 million grant funds myriad of field upgrades

By Chris Morelli

Centre County Gazette

BELLEFONTE — When Gene “Buddy” Johnson was elected mayor of Bellefonte Borough, he had quite a long “to do” list. One of the items on that list was major improvements and renovations to the John Montgomery Ward Baseball Field at Governors Park.

By the time April 11 rolls around, Johnson can scratch that one off his list.

Thanks in part to a \$1.1 million grant, the field is getting some much-needed upgrades and improvements.

“It all started with a flagpole,” Johnson joked. “I had reached out to the VFW and the Bellefonte American Legion. Each donated \$500 and we ordered a flagpole. We started talking and I said, ‘I wish we could do something more than just a flagpole.’”

Johnson approached former Pennsylvania Sen. Jake Corman to talk about potential upgrades.

“I went to him in a mayoral capacity and I asked if there was anything he could do for the borough for the Governors Park field, which was pretty dilapidated and falling down,” said Johnson. “He said, ‘Let me see what I can do.’ We were fortunate enough to be able to get a nice grant and be able to start to put this whole dream together.”

The Bellefonte Area High School baseball team lost its field at the high school when Rogers Stadium was renovated and expanded. The Red Raiders were forced to play at the Governors Park field, which had seen better days.

When the Red Raiders’ home slate begins on April 11, fans may not recognize the field. There is a state-of-the-art turf infield, a drainage system, signage throughout, two new dugouts, stadium-style seats, bleacher



SUBMITTED PHOTO

An aerial view of the work being done at the John Montgomery Ward Baseball Field at Governors Park.

seats and a sparkling new press box.

“We came up with what we could do within the parameters of the grant. Everything just sort of fit,” Johnson said.

One of the gems of the improvements will be seating. According to Johnson, there will be two rows of 10 stadium-style seats on each side of the field — a total of 40 seats. There will also be 30 feet of metal bleachers directly behind home plate.

“You’re going to have plenty of viewing. And you’ll still have your option to go out to right field or out on the hill to watch the game, if you want,” Johnson said.

John Nastase Construction secured the winning bid for work at the field and guaranteed that the work would be complete by April 1.

“By the grace of God and good weather, they’re going to meet the deadline,” Johnson said.

Corman, a Bellefonte resident himself, has a love for the sport of baseball.

“When they decided to move the baseball team over here, it was clear that it was going to be a long time before they could build them a real field,” Corman said. “This was doable, but it wasn’t very nice. I called the superintendent (Tammie Burnaford) and said, ‘I’m going to solve your problem and it’s not going to cost you a cent.’”

Because the baseball field is owned by the borough, Corman knew that a grant — and subsequent improvements — was possible.

“I represented Huntingdon Borough and their field was in major disrepair. They had to go to Juniata College to play. We were able to get them some money so they could fix up their field,” Corman said.

Corman said he approached the borough. Borough Manager Ralph Stewart and Assistant Borough Manager Don Holderman got on board. The rest, as they say, is history.

The field, which will feature a turf infield and a natural grass outfield, will be a gem among Centre County ballfields. In addition to being used by the Bellefonte High School baseball team, the American Legion team will play on the field, as will the Centre County League.

“It’s very exciting,” Corman said.

This isn’t Corman’s first time fixing up a local field. He also got some funding for the Bellefonte Little League parks.

“We were able to get new lights there and a third field,” Corman said.

According to Corman, this is about more than just improvements to the baseball field.

“You want to have quality of life issues to attract people to want to live here. You’ve got to have amenities — like the baseball field, like the pool — to attract people. To have a first-class facility such as this will be very exciting for the community,” Corman noted. “It solved a high school problem, but it will be used for far more than just the high school.”

According to Johnson, it took a lot of effort — and a lot of people — to make the dream a reality. In addition to John Nastase Construction, Johnson thanked the Bellefonte Borough, Stewart, Holderman, Coach Jon Clark and booster club President Dave Capperella.

“I’ve never done a project like this. It’s been a group effort and we’ve gotten a lot of help,” Johnson said. “It’s been pretty incredible. The field is going to be used a lot. It’s going to be an asset to the community. We’ve been very blessed and fortunate.”

The Bellefonte Area High School baseball team is slated to play its home opener at 4:30 p.m. on April 11 against Mifflin County at the new-and-improved John Montgomery Ward Baseball Field at Governors Park.

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NORTHEAST TIMES

Zone 1

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Remembering No. 33, Matthew Coll

By Tom Waring
Northeast Times

Tacony Academy Charter High School and the Gift of Life Donor Program teamed up on Friday for a baseball game in memory of Matthew Coll.

Matthew was a popular Tacony Academy Lion (class of 2018) who played left field and did some pitching for the baseball team.

"He was a blast to have here," said coach Joel Cecchini. "He gave it his all, 100 percent. It was a real joy to have him out here."

Tragically, Matthew died in February 2022, two weeks after being involved in a car accident at Verree Road and Bloomfield Avenue. Matthew, 22, was a passenger in a car that police said was speeding on northbound Verree when it hit another car that was traveling on southbound Verree and making a left onto Bloomfield. The police investigation continues.

Matthew, who lived in Fox Chase, is survived by his parents, Mike and Colleen, two sisters and two brothers. A brother, Thomas, was also a passenger in the accident and suffered serious injuries, but has recovered.

Matthew was an organ donor, and his kidneys and liver were donated to people in need while his lungs, brain and tissue went to research.

"Matt just happened to be their miracle," said his mom, who also urges everyone – especially young people – to wear seatbelts.

The game took place at American Legion Playground, across the street from Tacony Academy. The opponent was W.B. Saul, and both teams were so committed to the game that they played even though schools were closed for a Muslim holiday.

Saul also had a donor angle to the game. Last September, student Nicolas Elizalde was shot to death after a football practice at Roxborough High School. Nicolas'



Thomas, Colleen and Mike Coll throw out the ceremonial first pitches.

corneas were donated after his death.

As for Friday's baseball game, it was a classic. Tacony Academy won it for Matthew, scoring eight runs in the bottom of the seventh inning for a 19-18 victory.

The game took place during National Donate Life Month. Each player on both teams wore jerseys featuring No. 33 – Matthew's number – and the Gift of Life logo. Some wore bracelets that read, "Matt Coll, Always a Lion."

Mike, Colleen and Thomas Coll each threw out ceremonial first pitches, with No. 33 printed on the balls.

Gift of Life volunteer Earl Jones, who received a heart transplant 21 years ago, set up an information table on organ and tissue donations.

"It's nice they're doing this," said Mike Coll, who worked with Matthew at the

Harry J. Lawall & Son prosthetics and orthotics company.

A week earlier, Matthew's family and friends were joined by members of the Tacony Academy community for the annual Gift of Life Donor Dash outside the art museum. More than \$3,000 was raised for Gift of Life by the Matthew's Gentle Giants team – so named because Matthew was 6 feet 5.

The Coll family last Friday donated \$1,600 in T-shirt sales to an athletic scholarship fund in Matthew's memory at Tacony Academy and previously donated \$1,000 to the school library, as Matthew's favorite teacher was librarian Sheri Zachary.

"I had the same soft spot for him," Zachary said. "We're not supposed to have favorites, but I did."

Tacony Academy athletic director Paul

Rieser, too, has fond memories of Matthew.

"He was a funny kid. A nice, nice kid. He always popped in the office to say hi," he said.

Rieser credited the Coll family with being strong and generous following their loss, and was proud of how his school has rallied around the Colls. The partnership among the Colls, Gift of Life and Tacony Academy will continue.

"This is good stuff," Rieser said, surveying the field. "The No. 33 is everywhere."

Donations in Matthew's memory can be sent to the Gift of Life Donor Program, 401 N. 3rd St., Philadelphia, PA 19123 or at <https://give.donordash.org/team/479808>.

To become an organ and tissue donor, call 800-DONORS-1 or visit donors1.org/ register.

Published April 26, 2023

Expanding the work pool

Workforce initiative of waiving need for 4-year degree for state jobs a growing trend

By Melinda Rizzo
 Contributing Writer

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro's first executive action – to waive four-year degree requirements for about 65,000 state jobs – seems to be making a hiring difference in other industries.

Shapiro, a Democrat, signed his first executive order January 18, 2023, to do away with the four-year degree requirement for 92% of state government jobs.

Fulfilling a campaign election promise to remove the degree obstacle in state government positions, Shapiro set in motion a paradigm shift as other states in the U.S. are now embracing similar practices.

"I applaud the administration for setting an example [for how] we can remove barriers that are artificial in many cases and grow our workforce. Anything that can increase that pool is a good thing," said Ryan Unger, president and CEO of the Harrisburg Regional Chamber of Commerce and CREDC.

"While I've seen progressive businesses prior to this executive order remove the four-year degree barrier – often in the IT sector – for some professions [the degree] is necessary," he said.

Unger said as many other obstacles – from a lack of skilled labor to the job application process and a reduced number of job applicants – continue to plague hiring, reducing or eliminating four-year degree requirement can help more positions be filled.

The action "allows folks an even playing field. I think we do primarily look at skills and experience," Unger said.

Essential employment skills – with or without a degree

Critical thinking, the ability to analyze data or situations and the capacity to communicate clearly and effectively remain top qualities employers seek among job candidates.

"If you can do those things almost any employer will want to hire you," Unger said.

Manuel Bonder is Shapiro's press secretary and spokesperson in Harrisburg.

Bonder said removing the four-year degree requirement was a priority for Shapiro to create opportunities and open a door for people to succeed in Pennsylvania "whether



PHOTO/FILE

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro waived four-year college degree requirements for about 65,000 state jobs back in January.

you have a college degree or not."

"It's been a really encouraging response across Pennsylvania and across the country," he said.

Other states have either taken action to eliminate state job four-year degree requirements for most jobs, or they are considering it.

So far, other states that have taken action including Alaska, Colorado, New Jersey (April 2023), Maryland, North Carolina, Utah and Virginia, according to Forbes.com.

"To see folks across the political spectrum move in this direction, to create more opportunities for people without college degrees is encouraging," Bonder explained.

"It's a big priority for the governor [Shapiro] and to see it happening in other states," he said.

Persistent worker shortage

Pamela Hill, founder and CEO of Signature Staffing Inc. in Lemoyne, Cumberland County, said the worker shortage since the advent of COVID-19 has exacerbated finding qualified candidates to fill positions.

Signature Staffing is a full-service staffing firm. The company works with clients to fill employment positions – from temporary to full time hires. They also screen, source and present job candidates to clients for consideration.

Addressing the shortage of workers, which began to accelerate during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and continues, means "companies are clamoring for employees, and they can't go the traditional route with applicants with college," she said.

She suggested this need has prompted many firms to reconsider not only their hiring practices, but whether rigid degree requirements are really necessary in all cases and positions.

Job descriptions

Hill said reconsidering four-year degree mandates allows prospective candidates with comparable experience to be considered without the bachelor's degree.

"A lot of corporate management and their human resources teams would come up with job descriptions for what they felt worked at the company," she explained, "but things have shifted so much the (clients) are relaxing points, from formal education to hands-on experience."

Hill said many seasoned employees learned their jobs through experience, rather than having a college or university education.

Because employers may have fewer candidates from which to choose to fill vacancies, they begin to see job descriptions may be getting in the way.

"When clients recognize they need people so badly, they're willing to make some changes – and good changes – like getting rid of the things that are holding people back," she said.

"For many years, a client wanted all employee candidates to have a four-year degree, especially [hires] in IT. That requirement since Covid has changed," Hill explained.

"Now they'll take someone who has experience, but not the degree...whereas before they missed a lot of candidates," she said.

Hill said the shift could benefit women who have paused their working or professional careers to stay home with children or to care for aging parents.

"I'm really glad this has happened. Just because someone doesn't have a college degree doesn't mean they can't do a great job," she said.

Published May 15, 2023

Childcare crisis in Lebanon area:

One center is closing, others struggle to keep staff

Daniel Larlham Jr.

Lebanon Daily News

Lebanon County has a competitive hiring market with more jobs than there are people to fill them.

The childcare sector has been hit especially hard by this worker shortage, creating a cycle in which parents who could be in the workforce aren't able to find accessible or affordable childcare.

In a survey conducted in February by Start Strong PA and Pre-K for PA, which received a response from nine early childhood care and education facilities in the county, 100% indicated that they suffered from staffing shortages.

At the time of the survey, 1,391 children were currently on waiting lists, 22 classrooms were closed and the programs reported that an additional 298 children could be taken in if they were fully staffed.

Dawn Clark has owned and operated Sunshine Child Care Center Inc. for 26 years. In August, she will be closing down the facility permanently.

Clark said she was struggling to find qualified workers even before the pandemic, but she has really struggled over the last few years.

She remembered that she used to have waitlists in some of her rooms because there wasn't any room, but because she can't keep a full staff, she has a waiting list because she isn't able to keep rooms staffed.

Even when she does find people to hire her turnover rate is now higher than it was before the pandemic, and she attributes at least some of that to the fact that people can go work many other places for higher wages and less responsibility.

"Childcare is very stressful, you're dealing with kids and families," she said. "So I think that it's just too easy to go make more money with less responsibility."

To be allowed alone in a room with children, a staff member is required to have a high school diploma or GED and at least 2,500 hours or two years of childcare experience, making an already tight labor pool even tighter for childcare facilities desperately looking to hire.

Previously, she was able to hire college students and recent grads focused in education to work for her with relative ease, but with a competitive labor market and low rates of new educators, that has become harder to do.



PHOTO: DANIEL LARHAM JR.

Sunshine Child Care, Inc. will permanently close at the end of August.

Out of the 40 or so students currently enrolled in the program, many parents have found luck in getting them into other programs, often farther away and more expensive, while some children will be moving into kindergarten in the fall. Others, Clark said, have had to change their work schedule or leave the workforce entirely in order to take care of their child at home.

Clark said that just three of her current 10 employees might be considering looking for jobs in childcare after the closure. The rest will be leaving the field entirely.

She said that other childcare facilities have reached out to her asking if anyone would be looking for work, but she wasn't able to help them. She's worried that with childcare worker numbers dwindling, the childcare profession is in danger.

"Basically we're all having the same issues," she said. "Being able to pay staff what they deserve to be paid, but just even acquiring the staff period, because of a limited number of people available with the qualifications that they need to have."

Solutions proposed

Childcare employment and access to childcare are two things that cause concern for the Lebanon Valley Chamber of Commerce as well.

In late May, the chamber signed on to a letter, along more than 50 other chambers across the commonwealth, urging legislators to consider solutions to the childcare crisis.

The letter asks legislators to consider four solutions:

- Offer tax credits for employers who furnish employee childcare or tax credits and cost splitting for employers who offer to fund childcare expenses for their employees.
- Childcare tax credits for families, which would expand the Child and Dependent Care Enhancement Program to allow more middle-income families to qualify for tax credits on childcare.
- Retention and recruitment legislation that would create hiring incentives and rebates for childcare workers as a first step to address ongoing issues of low wages.
- Changes in regulatory reform, which would ensure that input from childcare providers would be considered in any further regulatory proposals as well as ensure that any changes do not lead to increased costs for providers.

In order to qualify as a staff member able to work in a room alone with children, hundreds of hours of training are required for average wages of around \$12.50 an hour in Pennsylvania and \$14 an hour in Lebanon County.

"When you think that you can work at so many different places, for \$17, \$18, \$19 an hour, without credentials, and without having to, you know, get on the floor and change diapers and the other things that go along with working at a childcare center," said LVCC President Karen Groh. "How are we attracting employees to these kinds of really important jobs?"

Groh said that affordable access to child care, along with access to transportation, housing and skills, are some of the largest barriers to enter the workforce.

"To keep our local economy going, we have to be able to provide support services for those basic needs when we are asking these individuals to go back to work," she said.

Daniel Larlham Jr. is a reporter for the Lebanon Daily News. Reach him at DLarlham@LDNews.com or on Twitter @djlarlham

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the almanac

SOUTH HILLS COMMUNITY NEWS

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One random note at a time

Notes spread hope at home and abroad

By Katherine Mansfield

Staff Writer | The Almanac

Gabrielle Bovard was 14 years old when she slipped a random note between the pages of a library book.

"I was feeling super insecure and I didn't really fit in. I felt like, there's got to be more than this feeling. Please tell me that it gets better," said Bovard, an upbeat user experience writer from South Fayette. "I either have to accept that life, which they say is good, is actually really painful and uncomfortable, or I have to be somebody who goes out and makes it better."

Bovard resolved to make the world a nicer place.

The Chartiers Valley graduate splashed colorful words of encouragement on notebook paper and printer paper. She'd stick her messages to telephone poles around Scott Township – where she grew up – with blue painter's tape, or tuck random notes into library books.

Bovard figured if she was seeking a sign from the universe that every little thing was going to be all right, someone else was searching for the right words at the right time, too.

"I didn't even realize that I was starting a movement. Something really simple becomes really powerful over time."

For two decades, Bovard's charming random notes have decorated parking meters, overlook handrails, light poles and other surfaces in the greater Pittsburgh region and beyond. The notes, written in Bovard's small, cheerful font, encourage people throughout the United States and as far away as Australia (Bovard, a travel enthusiast, takes her notes on vacation) to "do the thing that's been on your heart forever" and remind them that "you are so much better than you realize."

"Notes have shown up in different places, notes have shown up in languages

that I don't speak," Bovard marveled. "There's been some in South America – I've never been to South America. One was found last summer in the UK. I've never been to the UK. Things like that are really, really cool. It always blows my mind. It doesn't matter where I am; we all have the same things going on."

After a run-in with a random note fan named Adam Conkey, a Carnegie Mellon grad who spotted Bovard taping positivity around Pittsburgh and told her she needed to brand the project, random notes moved online. Now, they live in both the real world and on randomnoteproject.com (Conkey graciously built the first iteration in 2011; now, Bovard, who graduated from Chatham, runs the website).

Since launching [@randomnoteproject](https://www.instagram.com/randomnoteproject) on Instagram in February 2021, Bovard's account has amassed over 1,000 followers. People find random notes while hurrying from the coffee shop to their cars on weekdays, or during evening strolls, and share the wise words to social, often tagging Bovard's Insta.

"It's a good way to build community. They can share, comment, add them to their stories. It's nice to be part of the positive social media presence," said Bovard, who also hosts the Random Note Project Facebook page.

Folks also submit found notes – sometimes anonymously – through the website. From there, Bovard shares the person's note and story to social media. She is honored that strangers around the world trust her to share their tales of the right words found at just the right time.

Once, a nervous woman with a heavy heart passed a random note as she headed to her first post-diagnosis cancer appointment.

"The note she found said, 'You're going to survive this,'" Bovard said, voice tinged with awe. "I don't know her. Somehow,



Gabrielle Bovard delights in leaving little kindnesses in her wake, but she derives the most joy in hearing how her Random Note Project impacts those who find the right words at the right time. Finders are encouraged to share the notes, and what they mean to them, on social media or at randomnoteproject.com.

that note found its place to the place she needed to find it."

A gentleman who lost his job during the pandemic went for a late-night walk to clear his mind. Suddenly, Bovard's perfect penmanship told him, "Everything's going to be okay."

Bovard realized the impact of her passion project during a positivity-spreading excursion through Pittsburgh. One weekend, armed with uplifting words and painter's tape (her perspective has changed, but Bovard's methods have not, she laughed), She hopped aboard a city bus.

She found an empty seat and struck up a conversation with the stranger beside her, who wondered what the spunky woman was doing out and about. Bovard explained her project, reached for a random note and

handed the message to the gentleman.

"He held it to his chest and said, 'This one is so special,'" Bovard recalled. "Later in the conversation, he mentioned to me he had been struggling a lot with suicidal thoughts. I'm not trained as a therapist."

When the bus reached Bovard's stop, she stood and said, "I hope I see you again here."

Silence. Bovard started for the door. The stranger called her name.

"I'm going to see you next weekend," Bovard remembered him saying. "Your note said you have many beautiful days ahead! And I did: I saw him again the next week."

Moments like that make the Random Note Project worthwhile. Bovard said friends often wonder if she's bothered by the copycat notes that crop up throughout the area and the world.

"I always love when other people join in, because their perspective on the world is different than mine," she said.

She encourages anyone interested in spreading goodness to volunteer to pen their own random notes through the project's website. The more people spreading positivity, the better.

Today's world often pressures creators to dream bigger, and Bovard said several friends have asked her when she's scaling up the Random Note Project, or if she'll ever appear on "Good Morning America."

"If it happens, that's great," she laughed.

But her main goal has been and remains making the world a better place, one random note at a time.

"We're all kind of the same; we all need to feel connection," Bovard said. "Life has hardships, but you're here. You get to be a part of it. There is so much good out there. Wherever you are in life, it's OK. Just keep going."

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PHILADELPHIA Jewish Exponent

‘It’s an Obligation’:

Efforts to institutionalize dignified burial, cemetery restoration

Sasha Rogelberg
Staff Writer

A simple, traditional Jewish funeral costs about \$7,500-8,500, according to Joseph Levine & Sons Funeral Home partner Brian Levine. That’s with a plain, wooden casket and no limousines, flowers or death notice advertisements.

The burial and funeral process, a necessary part of the Jewish life cycle, is costly and, for the past 50 years in Philadelphia, the Jewish community has tried to lighten the burden for families who cannot afford it.

Today, the Dignified Burial Fund, run by the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, is the foremost effort for this cause. The volunteer-led organization uses its emergency aid to assist in the burial of Jewish women and uses additional funding from the Jewish Family and Children’s Service of Greater Philadelphia’s critical needs fund to help friends to provide families in need with a modest Jewish funeral and burial. They use cemetery plots in Har Yehuda Cemetery, Har Nebo Cemetery, Montefiore Cemetery and six other area Jewish cemeteries, donated by families who do not need them. DBF also uses grant money from the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia.

Since September, DBF has reviewed 26 cases and assisted in 22. In its first year in 2018, it reviewed 17 cases and assisted in 11.

Though in demand, DBF has changed hands multiple times since its creation. Many of the Jewish leaders involved in the project, as well as in cemetery maintenance and cleanup, have additional jobs and responsibilities. To ensure DBF and cemetery restoration efforts continue and have consistent financial support, the project should be institutionalized, argued Eileen Sklaroff, president emerita of FHBS and DBF co-founder. She has worked to create a nonprofit that would oversee these efforts.

“If we had this overarching nonprofit, then it would incorporate all functions that were related to death and dying. Burials and funerals would be under the auspices of this nonprofit entity,” Sklaroff said. “That would make sense to me.”

Though Sklaroff is leading these efforts in the hopes of institutionalizing DBF, she’s not the only one interested. Friends of Jewish Cemeteries, a project of the Jewish Federation, has also expressed interest in a nonprofit that would support the cause.

The Jewish Federation, which previously operated DBF



COURTESY OF RICH BLUMBERG

Jewish community leaders are interested in a nonprofit that would oversee both dignified burial and cemetery restoration and maintenance efforts.

and has organized community cemetery clean-ups, is looking into nonprofit models to steward these efforts. In iterations around the country, Jewish Federations have incubated these nonprofits, which then became independent entities.

As of this month, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia did not offer an update on the status of the nonprofit creation.

Sklaroff argues that a nonprofit would make the vetting and fund distribution process for DBF efficient and consistent.

She first came up with the idea for DBF in 2016, when the Jewish Federation and FHBS worked together to update a database of donated graves across various Jewish cemeteries. Working with Linda Roth from the Jewish Federation, Sklaroff catalogued the database, previously held by Jewish Family and Children’s Service, which documented how and where cemetery plots were used. The Jewish Federation held the updated database.

Families of deceased relatives who no longer need space in a cemetery plot cannot sell back the land to cemeteries, but they can donate it, according to Levine. These plots are used for free or to subsidize burials for

poor families. Before DBF, Levine & Sons, as well as other Jewish funeral homes, provided these services themselves, using money from JFCS, FHBS or the Fischer Memorial Burial Park.

“It’s an obligation that when needed or when called upon, we do what we can to help those who we need to help,” Levine said.

About 5% of the funerals Levine provides are free or subsidized, about one or two a month.

At the same time, Sklaroff began organizing meetings with leaders from Jewish Federation, JFCS and Jewish funeral homes, including Levine, on how to make the free and subsidized burial process more streamlined across the community.

Using the database, cemetery and funeral home owners, such as Levine, would have a standardized process to assist families in need. JFCS would conduct a needs assessment for families, and FHBS would identify costs and a burial plot.

Addie Lewis Klein, former senior director of community development at Jewish Federation, gave \$10,000 in seed money to the cause, which then became DBF.

“When there are living people with unmet needs, it is sometimes hard to prioritize providing a dignified burial and caring for our cemeteries,” Klein said. “But I really think they are key parts of our legacy as a community and that we do have the responsibility to treat them as places of honor.”

When Klein left the Jewish Federation in 2022 to become the executive director of the Macks Center for Jewish Connections in Baltimore, DBF changed once more.

The Jewish Federation handed over DBF, and \$20,000 in grant money, to JFCS to handle the project. Five months later, FHBS took over DBF, but JFCS still partners with FHBS and conducts the needs assessment for each case.

Though DBF continues to have a demand and operate successfully, there are still limited resources — both in people and monetarily — that prevents the project from having a greater impact, Sklaroff said, underlying the urgency of a nonprofit.

“I can’t see any organization in the community that will take this on,” she said. “It’s a huge amount of work.”

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THE TRIANGLE

Founded 1926 | Drexel University's Independent Student Newspaper

Drexel Community for Justice holds indefinite sit-in

By **Kejsi Ruka, Kiara Santos**
and **Luke Leonetti**

On Feb. 21, student organizers from Drexel Community for Justice kicked off an indefinite sit-in protest both outside of Main Building, the office of President John A. Fry and the office of the Provost.

Organizers have stated that they will occupy the Main Building until the following demands are met: President Fry removes Brett Altman and David Adelman from the Real Estate Advisory Council and Drexel commits \$10,000,000 to directly support Townhomes residents.

The action initially began with a rally outside at the Dragon statue on 33rd and Market St. Chanting "housing is a human right" and "save the people's townhomes," students marched down to Main Building, less than eight blocks away from the Townhomes. From there, one group of protesters remained outside while another group staged a sit-in outside of the Provost's Office.

Outside, students and community organizers were joined by the Save the UC Townhomes Coalition, members from Police Free Penn and from Students for the Preservation of Chinatown (SPOC), among others.

The Drexel University Police Department and the Philadelphia Police Department have been monitoring the situation and the student protesters, being strict in allowing only students with physical Drexel I.D. 's inside of the building.

"DUPD and PPD entered the building... they barricaded us in. They did not allow us access to bathrooms the entire night – from 10 p.m. to to 8 a.m. we were told if we were to cross that barricade, we would be considered trespassing and face expulsion," said Chelsea, an organizer for



PHOTO COURTESY OF SAMUEL GREGG | THE TRIANGLE

Drexel for Justice, to the Triangle in a video interview via Instagram.

Organizers stated that police used intimidation tactics on protesters overnight and tried to keep them up by whistling, jangling keys and making other disruptive noises.

On the first day of the strike, Senior Vice Provost Lucy Kerman came out to assess the situation and talk to the protesters. The organizers stated that no material updates emerged from that conversation and that Kerman said Drexel would continue conversations with the Townhomes residents.

On Feb. 23, the third day of the sit-in, President Fry sent out an email to the Drexel community stating: "While the

University has not been involved in the sale or purchase of the townhomes, we recognize that this is a complex and challenging situation. Consequently, I have met with several UC Townhomes residents to learn directly from them about their experiences and to hear their ideas about how the University can be supportive."

Fry further explained the university encourages inquiry and debate, saying, "In that spirit, we will continue to safeguard the right of student protesters to assemble peacefully without violating any University policies or disrupting classes or regular operations."

No concessions have been made on behalf of the university's side, despite the sit-in continuing for nearly three days at the

time this article was published.

Over the course of the protest, students have dropped in to join the sit-in; there have been teach-ins and political education sessions, as well as activities such as creating art and playing music.

For over one and a half years, the residents and allies of the University City Townhomes have been protesting their imminent displacement. University City was once known as the Black Bottom, a primarily African-American lower income section of West Philadelphia that became gentrified by the efforts of former mayor Frank Rizzo, and universities such as Drexel and the University of Pennsylvania. The UC Townhomes, whose land was purchased for \$1, were built in 1983 after the Rizzo administration found itself in federal court due to housing discrimination. This land is now valued at over 100 million dollars.

Ever since landlord Brett Altman declined to renew the lease of these affordable housing complexes, the residents and surrounding communities have pushed back through rallies and organized protests across the city. They were able to put back the end of their HUD contract by several months. However, the contract officially expired as of Feb. 21, 2023.

Students had previously protested outside the newly-opened Drexel Health Sciences Building on Dec. 7, 2022 during the building's ribbon cutting ceremony. The building is on the site of the former University City High School, demolished by Drexel in 2014.

As of the time of publishing, the strike will continue until demands are met. For live coverage of the sit-in, follow along via Instagram @drexeltriangle and @drexelforjustice.

Published Feb. 23, 2023

The Ligonier Echo

Voice of the Ligonier Valley since 1888

Dickinson School remembered with bronze plaque at Market Street site

By Laurie Bailey
For The Echo

Every hour on the hour the bell tolls in Ligonier's Town Hall. It's the very same bell that once signaled the day's start for local students at the Dickinson School, formerly located at Market and Church streets.

"If you got there early enough, you could help ring the bell," says Greg Smith who attended the school from 1954 to 1961.

Until now, the bell was the only reminder that the 3-story, yellow brick structure even existed from 1903-1971.

Last week, thanks to a partnership between the Ligonier Valley School District Foundation and Ligonier Borough – and Smith who spearheaded a project to mark the school's former location – a bronze plaque was placed on the stone "walk-through" wall on the Market Street side of the municipal parking lot, close to where the school's entryway would have been.

Funded by the LVSD Foundation and installed by the borough, the \$1,200 plaque shows a line drawing, sketched by Smith, and provides a brief history of the school and a QR code.

"Here we have the additional details collected by Helen Sitler (former foundation board member) and Greg Smith as they worked to gather the history of the school," says Shawn Proskin of the LVSD Foundation board.

It was crafted by Shaffer Memorials of Loyalhanna, Pennsylvania.

The 12-room school was named for educators the Rev. E.H. Dickinson and his wife, Abbie, who founded Rev. E.H. Dickinson's Ligonier Classical Institute, the area's forerunner to a high school in the late 1800s. The institute was located in a separate building and, at some point, in the Dickinson School, or "The School," as it was known until 1931. It was the only

public school in Ligonier, according to Sitler.

"It housed elementary grades and gradually included two years of high school, she says. "In 1918, high school became four years."

From 1932 to 1971, it became known as "The Grade School" or "The Dickinson School."

Smith fondly remembers clapping erasers on the front porch of the square building with a large wooden-floored, high-ceilinged open area in the center.

"We would play there in the winter or when it rained," he says.

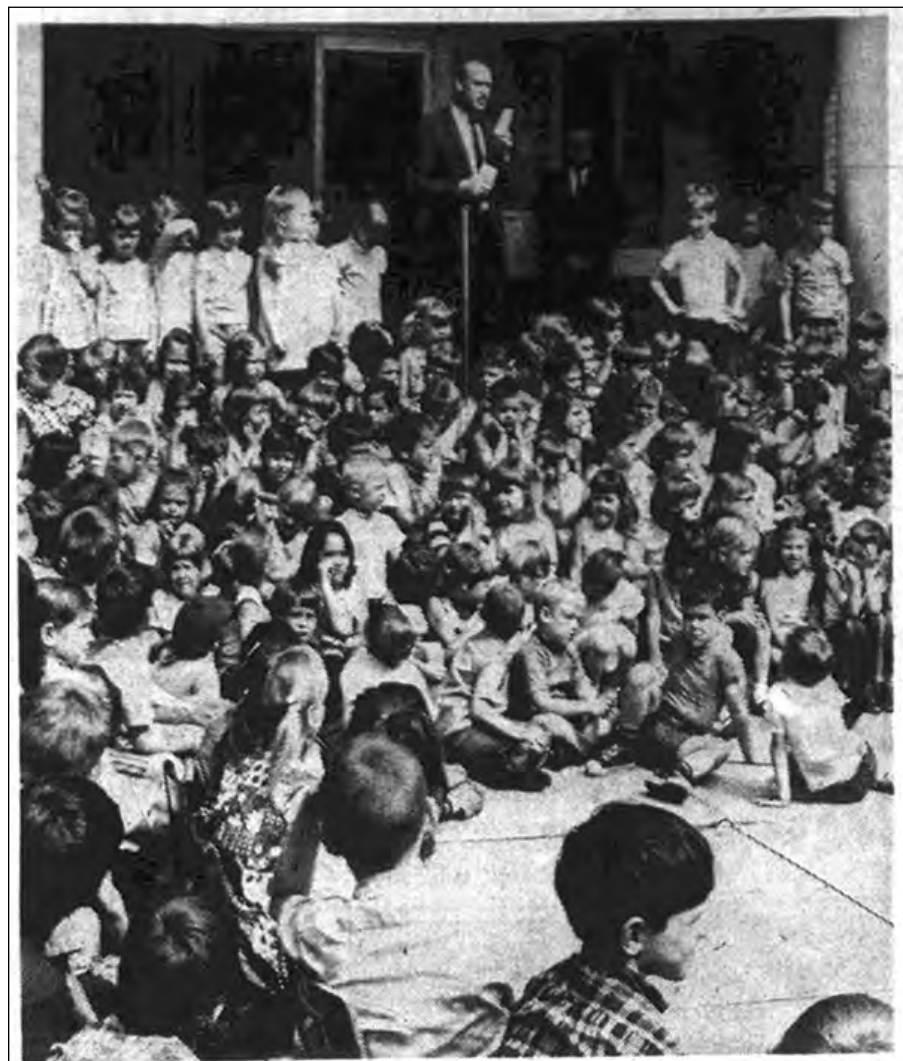
And there weren't snow days, he adds, but some students would ski to the school where they recited text from their "Alice and Jerry readers" and take notes on writing tablets with a picture of the state of Pennsylvania on the covers. At Christmas, all the students would gather in the entry area to receive Christmas gifts from members of the Mellon family.

At the end of the 1970-71 academic year, the last students to attend the school gathered in the third-floor auditorium where they listened to speeches by Ligonier Mayor Clarence B. Ruff and Superintendent of Schools Milroy Carnahan. The elementary choir sang "School Days" and "America," according to a June 1971 article in the Echo.

"Walk around Ligonier and you'll see a plaque on anything and everything...but there is no mention anywhere in the entire town of the school which was there for all those years; thousands of students went through it," Smith says. "After we're gone, well, there won't be any reminders whatsoever except for my little plaque."

Former Dickinson School students and teachers are invited to the municipal parking lot at noon on Aug. 27 to dedicate the new plaque.

Published Aug. 22, 2023



DICKINSON SCHOOL CLOSING—The end of an era occurred yesterday as Milroy Carnahan, superintendent of Ligonier Valley School District, addressed a group of students and parents who gathered for a special ceremony to mark the official closing of the school. The building will be demolished to make way for a parking lot. (Bulletin)

This photo appeared in the June 9, 1971, edition of the Latrobe Bulletin.

NEW CASTLE NEWS

Century-old News building packed with history, memories

By Dan Irwin
New Castle News

J.Q.L. Roberts would feel right at home.

Learning that he had received a reply to a classified ad he had placed in the New Castle News, the North Hill resident reported to the newspaper's business office to retrieve it.

That was nearly a century ago, and today, the office looks virtually the same as it did when Roberts entered in 1923.

The building at 27 N. Mercer St. opened that year, making this year its 100th anniversary. Hailed in a News article at that time as "one of the most modern newspaper plants in the country," the building hosted an open house and dedication on its first night that attracted "hundreds of New Castle citizens."

Reporting on the event, The News noted that more than one visitor called the plant "a real credit to the city," and that "while the business office, finished in the Italian Renaissance style, excited the admiration of the crowd, the mechanical department and the press room, both of which are as modern as it is possible to make, attracted a great deal of attention."

Though the mechanical department and press room are gone, the business office – with its vaulted arches; ornate plaster ceiling and brass chandelier; walls, counter and stairs of imported Italian marble; and paintings linen murals that depict the history of print communication – looks little different from when it first opened its doors 100 years ago. The lone exception may be the stairs, which are visibly worn in the middle due to a century of foot traffic.

In addition, The News maintains a third-floor room where it has preserved such relics of the past of a linotype



This photo is undated, but it appears to have been taken not long after the 1923 opening of the New Castle News building on North Mercer Street.

machine and other items and tools used in an era when hot lead was an integral part of setting newspaper type.

IMPRESSIONS

The "museum," as some have come to call it, and the business office not only stand as jewels of the local community, but also of the entire Community Newspaper Holdings Inc. chain, which owns the newspaper.

"Every time I visit the New Castle News, I am struck by the impressive lobby, especially the mural telling the story of print," CEO Donna Barrett said. "It gives me goosebumps.

"Without question, the lobby of the New Castle News is the most historic and

significant in our company. I hope our readers in New Castle can take pride in this community treasure."

Bill Ketter, CNHI's senior vice president of news, recalls his first time walking into The News office.

"It struck me as akin to a museum on the history of how print communications have advanced over the centuries ...," he said. "Murals in the high-ceiling, spacious lobby illustrate the evolution of informing the public in print, starting with the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics to the invention of the printing press in the 15th century to the late 19th century when the invention of the linotype machine mechanized the setting of hot metal type instead of by hand.

"The New Castle News building represents history saved and preserved. I love it."

About those murals – actually a series of half-circle depictions – they were painted by artist Oskar C. Gross, who had been commissioned to create them.

Born in 1871, Gross studied at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, learning from the top masters of Europe. According to local historical advocate Audrey Przybylski, his murals won a competition at the 1900 World's Fair in Paris. He moved to Chicago in 1902 and began painting murals throughout the

Continued on next page

country, but later switched his focus to painting portraits, according to Przybylski.

THE OPENING

While all agree that The News' lobby has aged well over the years, there is some question as to just how many days that comprises.

A photo that hangs in today's newsroom shows the business office and includes a hand-lettered notation from The Charles T. Metzler Fine Art Department – which framed it – that the photograph is a "Picture of New Castle News Business Office Taken on the Opening Night, Nov. 23, 1923."

And yet, according to the Nov. 30, 1923, edition of The New Castle News, the paper's business office didn't open its doors to customers until Nov. 28 of that year. However, the office may simply have been the last part of the building to put employees to work. A story in The News' Nov. 28, 1923, edition noted that while the business office had just opened to the public that morning, other departments housed in the structure already had been "operating normally for several weeks." The business office opening was delayed, The News reported, because of unresolved interior decorating issues. Those, the Nov. 21 edition reported, were being addressed by decorator Miss A.L. Pierce, who was "putting the finishing touches to the draperies that will hang in the windows and on the mezzanine floor."

BIG CHANGES

While the ornate business office with its brass fixtures, marble counter and mezzanine office overhead would be easily recognizable to anyone who visited the building in 1923, the rest of the structure would not.

Two retired composing room workers, Jim Brooks and Darrell Hege – both of whom started at The News in the 1950s and once worked its typesetting machines – returned to the building recently and shared the rest of its original layout, which was still in place during their early years of employment.

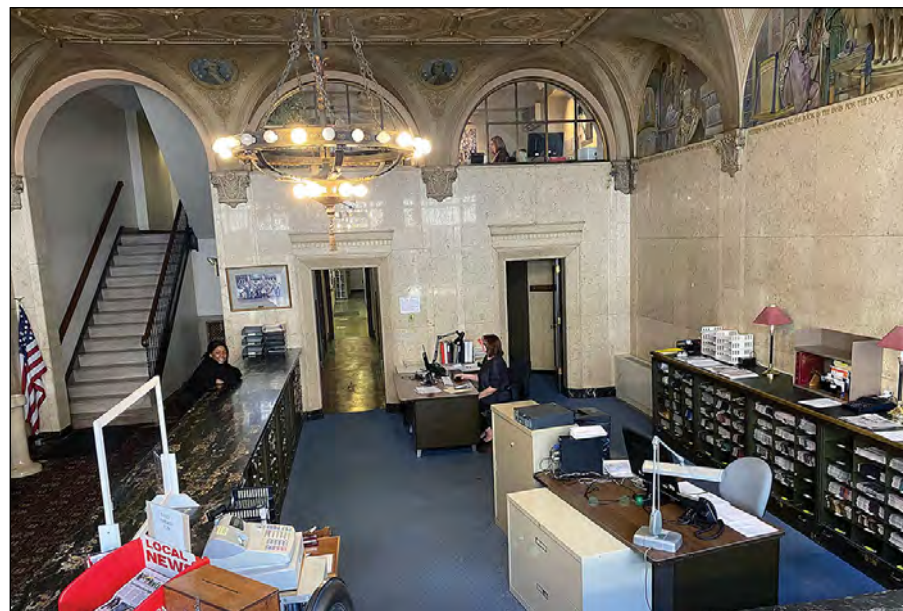
They noted that the second-floor space currently home to the advertising department and a conference room did not exist before a newer, adjacent building – to which the newsroom and printing press were relocated around 1960 – was erected.

"The (original) press itself took up the first two floors," Brooks recalled. "It took



ABOVE: This photo, which hangs in the newsroom, purports to show the New Castle News business office on 'Opening Night, Nov. 12, 1923.' However, an article from that time reports that the office actually opened on Nov. 28, although other parts of the building had been in use prior to that.

BELOW: The New Castle News business office looks much the same today as it did in 1923, with its marble counter, brass chandelier wall paintings still vibrant.



up the first floor and it went up into the second floor. If you went up the front steps when you went in the front door, (former publisher) Dick Rentz's office was on the median level. It looked out onto the advertising classified department."

Now, a 180-degree turn would reveal a hallway flanked by a conference room and

a pair of offices that eventually opens up into a room occupied by advertising representatives.

"But then," Brooks said, "there were windows there that viewed the press. When they took the press out, they put that level in; a whole new level. That floor wasn't there then."

The front steps then continued up to the third floor. Now divided into a conference room, "the museum" and other storage space, the level at that time was "wide open," Brooks said, with at least 10 linotype operators, a teletype room and plate-making operations took place. The newsroom also was situated there.

In the teletype room, Hege recalled, the machine produced a punched tape not unlike a player piano roll

"The girls would put a clothespin on it and hang it up," he recalled, and then the guy over here (Glenn Fox), he'd run them on the linotype," said.

Those types of machines were phased out decades ago, with production now done digitally. However, one third-level feature that remains is a wooden floor made of two-by-fours, a safety precaution against the hot lead that at times might spill onto it.

BACK TO THE LOBBY

The awe-inspiring 1923 business office didn't just preserve itself.

Brooks credited the generations of the Rentz family, who were co-owners and publishers of the paper; especially Richard L. Rentz Sr. – with a concerted effort to maintain it.

"I think in the early '80s they had a crew come in and restore all these pictures," he said of the murals. "I couldn't tell what they had done, they did such a good job.

"Dick was big on keeping it original. They would clean these doors once a week. Beryl Hall would be out there cleaning that brass, shining it. That's how Dick (who also had a passion for antique and classic cars) wanted it. He wanted everything to be pristine."

Efforts such as his weren't solely to keep up appearances. The building's well-preserved link to the past, current publisher Sharon Sorg said, serves as a motivator for the newspaper's mission.

"The history in this building is a constant reminder of the longevity and importance of what we do," she said. "Details like the intricate painting in the lobby and the 'museum' upstairs that showcase how those before us had to produce a newspaper are priceless.

"It is much easier to tackle what lies ahead when you realize all that was sacrificed to get us here."

d_irwin@ncnewsonline.com
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Cranberry Eagle

‘SOMETHING’S GOING TO BREAK’ County strains under growing need for child care

By Austin Uram
Eagle Staff Writer

When Cranberry Township resident Allison Truman was pregnant with her first child, Noah, last year, she said she did not expect the crisis facing the county’s child care industry.

“It was hard, to be honest, because I always read things like, ‘As soon as you get pregnant, as soon as you find out, you need to get on a day care waiting list,’” Truman said. “And I always thought — not to call it a joke — but I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, there’s no possible way.’”

For a while, Truman was able to work from home and care for Noah after his birth in May 2022. When the balance of work and child care became too much, though, she was surprised to find that options in the area were limited.

Alexandra “Ali” Feicht, owner and director of Ali’s Little Hands Learning Center in Center Township, said her facility has 38 families on its wait list.

The Rose E. Schneider YMCA’s new Early Learning and Child Care Center had 76 potential applicants on its wait list — with only 50 spots available to families.

Both centers cite a national staffing crisis as the main hindrance to child care availability post-COVID.

“Long, long, long story short is the waiting process to get into a facility is at least six months,” Truman said. “Up to a year.”

After a few months of caring for Noah and working from home, Truman said she and her husband began shopping around for day care.



SHANE POTTER/BUTLER EAGLE

From left, Ellie Feicht, 6, Griffin Delaney, 8, Beckett Feicht, 6, and Declan Delaney, 10, play at Ali’s Little Hands Learning Center.

“We had two in mind that we really liked — one was super-expensive, and when it came down to it, it wasn’t the cleanest, and I just didn’t really get a good vibe,” Truman said. “So then we found one that we really like, we went through that whole application process and waiting process. They said it would probably be like a three-month wait.”

For the time, Truman said she managed balancing work and child care for those three months. A month before Noah was

supposed to begin care, though, she was informed that his spot had been given away.

“I was super upset, because I’m thinking, ‘Oh my gosh, what am I going to do now?’” Truman said. “My family lives far away, my husband’s family lives far away, so we really didn’t have any help — it’s just basically us.”

The day care explained to Truman that her spot had been given to one of the facility’s

employees who recently had given birth.

“She said he wouldn’t be able to start until the second week of January,” Truman said. “That was back at, like, a month before he was supposed to start — so, like, July.”

During the six-month wait, Truman said she began to have reservations about sending her son to the day care.

“Then we graciously had a family friend

Continued on next page

step up and offer to ... watch him until we felt comfortable sending him," Truman said. "So we've been doing that ever since."

Truman said her friend has more than 10 years of experience as a nanny for families and that they pay her comparable to what they would have paid for a child care facility.

"It's amazing, and I truly feel so lucky because I know most people don't have this kind of situation," she said. "Obviously, it is hard for a mother to let her baby go in the care of somebody else for a few hours a day, but not only is she a true friend, she's a family friend."

Truman, who works as a buyer for Rue 21, said she and her husband moved to the township from Erie for work and have watched the area outgrow itself in the last four-and-a-half years.

"I think there's a lot of people flocking to this area, and there's not enough facilities to support all the growing families that are coming to the area," she said. "Honestly, Cranberry is such a lovely location, it's a great community, so I understand why people would want to lead their families here. That's exactly why we are raising our family here."

She estimated the average cost of day care in the area to be between \$350 to \$550 a week, though. By contrast, a family friend in Erie operates Milestones Early Learning Center and Academy, which charges about \$250 a week.

A staffing crisis

"And I don't think there's enough child care facilities in not only the Cranberry area, but, I think, the Pittsburgh area," Truman said.

In an effort to serve that need, the Rose E. Schneider Family YMCA is preparing to open its own Early Learning and Child Care Center. Truman and her husband signed up immediately.

"We got the email — probably because we're members — I think we ended up getting it first," he said. "I'm just hoping we're one of the first ones on the list."

Truman said her husband signed up only moments after registration opened for members.

"So we're really hoping now we do secure a spot," Truman said.

Carrie Ohorodnyk, executive director for the center, said the idea for the new Early Learning and Child Care Center is a response to that need in the community.

"The big thing was that we had this

"If a staff (member) quits tomorrow, I have to tell families they can no longer be enrolled because, to stay within state compliance, I have to be within ratio. That happened to us in January."

Alexandra Feicht

owner and director of Ali's Little Hands Learning Center

space available," Ohorodnyk said. "And when we were looking at the best way to serve the community, that was obviously it."

And while the center only is waiting on a site inspection for a potential July opening, she said, staffing remains an immediate concern — not only for the Cranberry YMCA, but for many child care centers across the country.

"A lot of centers aren't operating at full capacity because they don't have the staff to do so," Ohorodnyk said. "In our Butler facility, for a while, we had a wait list but couldn't take on more children, because we didn't have the staff to support the ratio."

In early June, Ohorodnyk had said the center was only half-staffed, with plans to do a partial opening in July if the trend continued.

"I mean, really, there's a lot of competition out there as far as pay goes," Ohorodnyk said. "There's other industries out there that have competitive pay that's equal to what we would pay per hour — and they're doing that instead of working in child care."

Feicht, of Ali's Little Hands Learning Center in Center Township, agreed that staffing remains a crisis for day care centers.

"I've been hiring since 2020," Feicht said. "We were doing great until the pandemic hit, but then once the pandemic hit, I still have not fully recovered."

The center, which has been open since 2018, can hold 72 children — ages 6 to 12 — at maximum capacity. With its current staff of 13, Feicht has stepped down from her administrative role to help, but the center can only care for 61 children.



SHANE POTTER/BUTLER EAGLE

Alexandra Feicht, owner and director of Ali's Little Hands Learning Center in Center Township, plays with Blake Feicht, 4.

"Right now, I could have another staff, and I could house between six to 10 more children, depending on the ages," Feicht said. "We have to be in state compliance."

Feicht said a core group of longtime employees has been keeping the center operating, but turnover continues to be a problem, in addition to a lack of applicants.

"If a staff (member) quits tomorrow, I have to tell families they can no longer be enrolled because, to stay within state compliance, I have to be within ratio," Feicht said. "That happened to us in January."

In addition to the 61 children at the center, she said she receives an average of three phone calls a day looking for child care — adding to the 38 families already on her wait list.

"Most of them are parents who are trying to go back to work, so I've had a few conversations with moms trying to get back into the workforce, but they can't because they don't have child care," Feicht said. "It's kind of like a never-ending circle."

One center's experience

As a privately owned center, Feicht also said lacking health care benefits for employees has made it difficult to attract staff and fill that need.

"I'm not a corporate center, so I don't have the policies to help," Feicht said. "Something that I thought would be very useful is if the state — the (Office of Child Development) and the (Early Learning Resource Centers) — were able to offer a

marketplace for them, specifically for child care."

And while there has been a federal effort to make child care centers affordable for families, the legislation has done little to help the centers themselves, Feicht said.

"I think we need to increase our wages. To increase our wages I would need help from the state or to increase my prices — which isn't really helping the families," she said. "If I'm going to increase my rates, which I've done to help increase pay for the staff, what they are wanting and what the parents are paying is a very large gap to fill that."

Locally, Feicht says she participates in a virtual support group of facilities trying to weather this crisis.

"That's been helpful, it's like support, you're not alone, and we're all on this sinking boat together," Feicht said with a laugh.

But the issue is not limited to just the county or the state, she added.

"It's not even just the state — it's national," Feicht said. "I mean, I'm part of a support group on Facebook too for directors, and we're all in that same sinking boat."

Even as the United States reaches record lows for unemployment, industries such as child care continue to see a staffing crisis in the wake of the pandemic.

"Something's going to change, or something's going to break," Feicht said.

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40 years a mystery

The hidden Willard Mural's artist revealed

James Engel

The Daily Collegian

"To The West - Introspection"
 "To The North - Wisdom"
 "To The East - Illumination"
 "To The South - Innocence and Truth"

For 40 years, those words have remained painted in the center of a broad green-and-orange mural beneath the Willard Building in the center of Penn State's campus.

Under some grating and surrounded by electrical equipment, the wall painting has survived in a dank and occasionally semi-flooded tunnel, which can be accessed on foot on the western side of Willard near an extension of Fraser Road.

Passed by thousands each day, the art is nearly invisible to most who walk by. Only the very left panel can be seen from the outside. But this edge has drawn in a consistent audience since its creation, and it has brought with it just as many questions.

The painting, which features tall plant stalks and orange geometric patterning, has remained essentially without context for years.

Its creator, its era and its background have been more or less a mystery to the Penn State community.

A research services specialist in the Eberly Family Special Collections Library at Penn State, Alex Bainbridge said she began researching the origins of the mural in 2017 after a patron requested information from the library archives.

Searching through files on the Willard Building, the Office of Physical Plant and The Daily Collegian archives, Bainbridge said she was forced to report back an inconclusive answer to the patron.

Since then, she said Special Collections has received at least one request a year related to the subterranean work.

Roadblocks like these aren't uncommon in the archival field, she said, but this one became the "classic roadblock" to her. Each time she hit a similar point on another project, she said she thought back to "the damn mural."

"What it stands for, for me, is that archives will be forever fascinating," Bainbridge said. "It takes a lot of research with these sorts of mysteries to piece together the clues, and people can do it for just eons."

Outside of its central location on campus, Bainbridge said interest in the mural was likely bolstered by its role as a PokéStop in the alternate reality game Pokémon GO, which allowed players to collect in-game items by visiting the mural.

In addition, an article published on the site Atlas Obscura gave the mural a public face and web presence for those interested to flock to.

Atlas Obscura is a site allowing users to publish information about obscure or lesser-known locations in various places throughout the world. Similar to Wikipedia, it lets users edit and add content about places of interest abroad or at home.



PHOTO BY JAMES ENGEL

Light hits the central text of the Willard Mural in University Park. The text and themes were inspired by Native American art. BELOW: The term "MPF 82" can be found in the corner of the Willard Mural.



And in 2017, that's what Steven McAninch did.

At the time, McAninch was a pharmacology and toxicology student at Penn State. He said he came across the mural, and after finding no public information about it, he decided to throw it on the site.

He compared the style of art on the wall to that found in the mysterious Voynich Manuscript, a strange Italian Renaissance codex containing illustrations of unknown plants with descriptions in an undeciphered language.

"Once again, the meaning of this inscription, beyond interpreting or expounding upon the design, is unknown," he wrote in the article. "Some speculate this is either guerrilla art or the remnant of a mural project by a painting class.

Whatever the case, this artwork is worth seeing if you have a few minutes and aren't afraid of a bit of litter."

McAninch graduated in 2019 and is now a research technologist in the Penn State Cancer Institute in Hershey.

He said he always felt the mural was "very beautiful," and he appreciated the coloration and patterning.

"I didn't know what message or philosophy it was trying to get across. It was nonetheless beautiful and food for thought," he said. "It was a small and mysterious part of my everyday world on campus while I lived there and spent my days there. That made it pretty meaningful to me."

But outside the boxes and negatives of the library, Bainbridge said she came across one clue that set the groundwork for understanding the hall-spanning opus.

In the now-deleted forums of Atlas Obscura, an account called "mpf6" commented that they had helped create the mural in class in 1982.

Bainbridge then confirmed two mural painting classes had taken place in the summer of 1982 — Art Education 487 and Art Education 488. And she found a professor.

Continued on next page

Yar Chomicky was a prolific artist who served as a Penn State faculty member and professor from 1949-1986. He also taught the supposed art classes in the summer of '82.

A protégé of Austrian artist and Penn State professor Viktor Lowenfeld, Chomicky largely took over his mentor's student mural program, instructing courses throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s. He died in 1992.

Colm Chomicky, the professor's 67-year-old son, said his father's mural classes were responsible for a lot more than potentially the one in Willard.

Students painted throughout Calder Way, the now-inaccessible tunnels beneath Shortlidge Road and the South Residence Halls, he said. Most of these murals are now painted over or obscured.

A retired environmental engineer residing in the Kansas City area, Colm said the '70s were an especially "dynamic" time for mural painting at Penn State.

His father, he said, was popular among students and professors, and he painted a mural series currently displayed at the Mifflin County Historical Society.

Colm was also a sculptor and watercolorist, and he authored "Watercolor Painting: Media, Methods, and Materials."

"He was known for a lot of things, not just the murals," Colm said.

Dodging an electrical box and ducking under some wire supports to the far-right side of the Willard mural, the painting ends with stray brush strokes and is stained with mud, presumably from 40 years of Pennsylvania thunderstorms.

But in gray paint next to a solidified chunk of earth, the mural offered a hint to its origins. It reads: "MPF 82," the same initials and timeframe offered by the Atlas Obscura commenter.

Analyzing graduation commencements from the early to mid '80s, only one student in Art Education and related studies matches the initials.

Her name is Mary Patricia Ford. But her students call her Ms. Ford.

She is a fine arts teacher at Pennsauken High School in Pennsauken Township, New Jersey — right across the river from Philadelphia. She is originally from Holmes, Pennsylvania, in Delaware County, and she graduated with a degree in art education in 1983.

Ford confirmed she is the "MPF" who helped create the mural in the summer of



PHOTOS BY JAMES ENGEL

The right side of the Willard Mural. Part of the right side is opposite electrical equipment.

1982 under Professor Yar Chomicky. She helped to design it, and she did most of the painting, she said.

"I've been getting [Atlas Obscura's] emails for years, and I opened it up, and 'Oh my gosh, there's my mural,'" Ford said.

The center "medallion" and its text were painted in the tunnel by Ford 40 years ago. She and a few other students worked up the design based on Native American art, she said.

Always having an interest in Indigenous American art, she said she cannot recall the specific Native influences that led to the text and styles — but the artists knew they wanted something "geometric."

The project initially began with around 10-12 students, but most moved to different projects or were absent from the tunnel, she said. By the project's end, Ford said she and an occasional partner, whom she cannot recall, were the sole occupants of the tunnel under Willard.

Riding through campus on her 10-speed bicycle, she said the whole project took about 15 weeks, and she worked six days a week to complete the mural. She called the whole process "therapy."

Of professor Chomicky, she said she remembers him as a "very kind man" with "a passion" for his work. Ford said the professor valued student opinions, and he liked the Willard mural, even if he was weary about the location Penn State had picked out for its creation.

"He loved it. He didn't critique it at all," Ford said. "He just said, 'Nice work' and walked away."

She got an A in the class.

At the time of its painting, four administrative offices sat opposite the mural with windows into the tunnels. Ford said she befriended two of the office occupants, who appreciated the work as opposed to their previous view of a blank concrete wall.

The art teacher called her workspace "a cave," although the offices that sat opposite the cave have since been converted into a screening room, losing one of the four windows in the process.

"I always wanted to put some stone arch going in to say, 'This is a cave. This is a grotto. This is an experience,'" Ford said.

Her final class before graduating took place in the Willard Building some time later, she said. She said she thinks it was statistics.

After graduating, Ford said she spent five summers working in the Alaskan fishing industry to pay back her college debt before beginning her career in education. She has spent the last 29 years at Pennsauken, where she's currently teaching drawing courses.

"I'm called the mom at school because that's the type of teacher I am," she said. "I'm very old school."

Ford also obtained a degree in horticulture from Temple University, where she met her husband, she said.

About a decade ago, she said she took her husband on a trip to Penn State and showed him her work. But the art teacher said she was displeased by the electrical equipment that had been installed in the tunnel since her time there.

"I was very disappointed to come in and see that," Ford said. "They didn't care about the artwork. They just needed to put the equipment there."

Ford said she continues her creativity. At Pennsauken, she said she painted murals in the halls of the school and has supervised students doing the same.

In addition to her artistic projects, Ford said she worked as a photographer for the Collegian, which she "loved."

"I'm still using my art. I take pictures almost every day, so I'm still using my photography, and I'm still teaching," she said.

The mural in the access tunnel under the Willard Building was never a mystery to Ford. And she said she didn't know it was one to others until she read McAninch's Atlas Obscura piece.

But, to most, it was a mystery. And even the most basic questions were left unanswered. So:

Who? — Ford and her classmates.

What? — A pretty big mural.

When? — Summer 1982.

Where? — A tunnel under Willard.

Why? — For a Yar Chomicky art education class.

The questions are answered now, but the mural hasn't changed.

According to Steven Watson, director of planning, design and properties in the Penn State Office of Physical Plant, there are no plans to remove the mural "due to it being relatively inaccessible and not visible from the public realm."

Ford and her classmates' work will remain hidden in plain sight, although maybe a bit less mysterious.

"I'm glad I left my mark on Penn State — in many ways," Ford said. "Between The Daily Collegian and the mural!"

Editor's Note: We would like to extend special thanks to Penn State Special Collections and Alex Bainbridge for their previous investigations into the mural. This work wouldn't have been possible without the groundwork laid by Bainbridge and the aid of the archives staff.

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How California Avenue businesses triumphed over COVID-19

By **Caitlyn Scott and Madison Stokes**
Staff Writers

BRIGHTON HEIGHTS — With the COVID-19 pandemic presenting local residents and businesses with unexpected challenges, many had to quickly develop new plans of action, figuring out how to maintain both personal interaction and business. This was particularly true along California Avenue in Brighton Heights.

Despite efforts to minimize the virus spreading, the first case in the United States was detected on Jan. 20, 2020, in Washington State, leading to the World Health Organization (WHO) decision to declare COVID-19 a pandemic less than two months later on March 11.

Three days later, Allegheny County would report the first positive COVID-19 infection, leading then-Governor Tom Wolf to announce the closure of all nonessential businesses five days later, causing local shops and restaurants to reevaluate new ways of marketing to the community.

John Bratton, owner of California Cycle Path located on California Avenue, said the closure of nonessential businesses due to coronavirus resulted in the end of in-person interactions. This led to utilizing online resources in order to maintain community engagement.

“Our fitness community continued to support us through virtual classes and via social media,” Bratton said. About 80% of their members are committed to a Cycle Path membership, which is a monthly autopay system.

Along with California Cycle Path, many businesses along California Avenue have continued to question and reflect how the effects of the pandemic impacted and changed personal interactions and business between owners and residents within the community.

Tom Friday, owner of Tom Friday’s Market, which has become known in the Northside as both a butcher shop and a grocery store combined in one complex, said that although the pandemic did not seriously hurt his business, new guidelines and procedures had to be implemented to maintain customer and employee safety.

“We didn’t really experience serious hardships,” Friday said. “We limited the number of customers in the store at one time and enforced the ‘6-feet apart’ rule. We also installed plexiglass shields at counters and ensured that both customers and workers were wearing masks. For precautionary measures, we shut down every day for extensive cleaning.”



PHOTO BY MADISON STOKES

Tom Friday, owner of Tom Friday’s Market, weighs a bag of meat. The combined butcher shop/grocery store stayed open during the pandemic as an essential business, but had to implement many safety measures.

Tom Friday’s Market, categorized as an essential business, remained open through the progression of the pandemic without limitations on production. They relied on advertising as a way to maintain business at a pre-pandemic level.

Friday said that advertising on social media to maintain contact with customers, along with connecting to radio and newspaper outlets such as The Northside Chronicle, aided in maintaining community connection and production of products that started to become scarce within the area.

During the pandemic, the market’s production of goods, along with customer interaction, increased by 30% over pre-pandemic levels. With operations returning to normal, production and customer interactivity declined slightly but it’s still 20% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Unlike Tom Friday’s Market, California Coffee Bar was forced to close for two months, with pickup-only service offered two weeks after reopening, according to Karis Bowman, the store’s owner.

“When we reopened, it was tough at first as business was incredibly slow,” Bowman said. “A lot of our regulars weren’t aware that we had reopened. We were down to

one barista manning the whole operation during the week and just two on weekends.”

Despite this, Bowman said that the community aided in the coffee bar’s return to normal operations, providing aid in advertising operations during COVID-19 limitations and restrictions. “Customers were willing to wear masks, for the most part [and] we actually came back from the pandemic with stronger sales than we had before,” Bowman said

As a result of the pandemic, Penn State Social Science and Research Institute concluded that more than 3 million jobs and \$25 billion in sales were lost within the restaurant industry, and that occurred within the first 22 days of the virus’s impact.

The research institute also found that 22% of restaurant operations were completely closed two months later, with “34% of on-site operators such as schools, malls, stadiums and businesses” similar to California Cycle Path and California Coffee Bar being completely shut down for in-person operation.

Although this was the case, there were ways in which governmental aid provided merchants with support to maintain business in communities like Brighton Heights.

The Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) created the COVID-19 Relief Statewide Small Business Assistance program, which provided grants and debt relief from \$5,000 up to \$50,000 to small businesses that experienced economic hardship.

In total, the DCED has allocated \$225 million for COVID-19 relief to support small businesses struggling during the pandemic.

Despite the pandemic presenting Northside businesses with challenges, support from the community and continued advertising made operations easier, further connecting customers to owners and workers.

“The community had continued to support us [during the pandemic period] by showing us love and support via social media and by attending our virtual classes,” Bratton said. “Some members even donated to our local charities that we support through our new membership trial.”

“When everybody shut down and reopened, you saw so many struggling from the pandemic,” Northside resident Evonne Hunter said. “Everybody around here depends on this location for haircuts and businesses like Tom Friday’s for meat. You can see that things are now really picking back up.”

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The Mountaineer-Journal

Ribbon cutting held for new portion of Ghost Town Trail

One step closer to finishing loop

By **Kristin Baudoux**
of Mainline Newspapers

Only 1.5 miles remain for the C&I Extension of the Ghost Town Trail to become the first looped rail trail east of Oregon.

On Friday, Aug. 25, members of the Cambria County Conservation and Recreation Authority (CCCRA), local government officials, as well as special guests Cindy Adams Dunn, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) Secretary, and Nathan Reigner, Pennsylvania's new director of outdoor recreation, held a ribbon cutting ceremony at the start of new 3 mile portion of the trail just off of Beulah Road outside of Nanty Glo.

"Everyone knows that we love trails here in Cambria County," Cambria County president commissioner Tom Chernisky said at the ceremony.

This 3 mile portion which starts on Beulah Road and ends on Springfield Street in Nanty Glo, is the fifth addition to the C&I Extension. Only 1.5 miles remain to complete the 32 mile loop trail. Funding for this portion of the trail was provided through DCNR, the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) and the Community Foundation for the Alleghenies.

Dunn highlighted that rail trails, like the Ghost Town Trail and its extensions are assets for economic development in small communities across the commonwealth.



PHOTO BY KRISTIN BAUDOUX

A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held Aug. 25 to celebrate the opening of the new 3-mile portion of the C&I Extension of the Ghost Town Trail along Beulah Road between Nanty Glo and Ebensburg.

"We're proud at DCNR that we were able to put \$282,000 into this section here, and we've already committed a million to the 1.5 miles that's remaining," Dunn said.

"We're committed to seeing this through, because we see this as a phenomenal asset to this area."

Along with the \$1 million committed from DCNR, the CCCRA has been working to secure the final \$5.2 million to complete the final portion of the loop, which will require the construction of two pedestrian bridges and a culvert.

Reigner said when outdoor recreation is established in an area, the "outdoor economy" develops around it.

"This is other people's money coming in," he said, "and not only other people's money coming in, but sticking here and circulating around the community."

He added that the growth in outdoor recreation can also encourage young adults to stay in the area or move to the area and grow the local economy.

While there is much to celebrate about the ongoing expansion of local trails, the need for volunteers and funding to help maintain the trails was addressed. The CCCRA has recently dealt with several washouts along its trails, resulting in at least \$120,000 in damages in 2023 so far. That amount does not include general upkeep costs.

Laurie LaFontaine, vice president of the C&I Trail Council, underscored this importance for maintenance funding so the trails can continue to provide opportunities for outdoor recreation for generations.

"We have to make sure we give our people money to maintain these trails in order to be as important and significant as we are," LaFontaine said. "I know dollars are hard to come by, but this is a true treasure."

The Ghost Town Trail is the second most used trail in the commonwealth, and was named Pennsylvania's Trail of the Year in 2020.

Published Aug. 31, 2023

Observer-Reporter

Clerk of Courts Davis held in contempt, sentenced to jail

By Mike Jones
Staff writer

Calling it the “most undignified display of behavior” he’s seen in all of his years in the law, Washington County President Judge John DiSalle held Clerk of Courts Brenda Davis in contempt of court for her refusal to transfer juvenile case files upon his order and sentenced her to serve at least 15 days in jail.

Nearly nine months after Davis defied DiSalle’s order on Nov. 24 to facilitate the removal of the files from her office, the contempt hearing was finally held Thursday morning in which the judge ruled that she committed official misconduct as an officer of the court, displayed disobedience and exhibited misbehavior in the presence of the court.

In finding her in contempt, DiSalle sentenced Davis to serve 15 days to six months in the Washington County jail, pay a \$5,000 fine and the costs of prosecution.

“It was the most undignified display of behavior of all the years of my career,” DiSalle told Davis during her sentencing. “I’ve never seen something so offensive.”

She was handcuffed and immediately escorted from the courtroom, which had a couple dozen people in attendance for the proceeding with a heavy presence of sheriff’s deputies stationed around the building. Many attorneys and court staff watched as she was led out of the building and to a sheriff’s vehicle before being driven across the street to the jail for booking. Davis said nothing as she walked out in handcuffs surrounded by an entourage of deputies.

The minimum sentence Davis will serve is 15 days, but she’s likely to be paroled after that time and finish the remainder of her punishment on probation. After she’s released, she must comply with a list of provisions – including following DiSalle’s



Clerk of Courts Brenda Davis is led from the Washington County Courthouse in handcuffs on Aug. 4, 2022, after President Judge John DiSalle found her to be in contempt of court and sentenced her to serve 15 days in jail. The case revolved around her refusal to follow DiSalle’s court order transferring juvenile case files from her office in November 2021.

MIKE JONES/
OBSERVER-REPORTER

future administrative orders – as part of her probation or she could face revocation. Davis was emotionless as she listened to the sentence.

Before being sentenced, Davis spoke in court and attempted to apologize to DiSalle, but it was clear in the judge’s mind that the damage had already been done.

“I would like to apologize for any actions that were construed by the order. I wasn’t expecting to be assaulted by sheriff’s deputies on two (occasions),” Davis said before DiSalle interrupted her. “I have followed court orders and will continue to follow your orders.”

“I accept your apology, but it’s too late,” DiSalle said.

She claimed her refusal to follow the judge’s orders was because she wanted more time to read it and consult with her

personal attorney since her office didn’t have a solicitor at the time. But DiSalle responded that she never came to his courtroom upon his request that fateful day to explain herself, which could have expedited the process.

“It could’ve ended in three hours, but it didn’t,” DiSalle said of numerous appeals filed by Davis that prolonged the situation. “I spent half a day on this that should’ve been done in 10 minutes.”

Thursday’s contempt hearing lasted more than an hour and became testy at times as DiSalle and Davis’ attorneys, James DePasquale and Charles Gallo, went back and forth on the merits of the case.

At the onset of the hearing, DiSalle explained the history of the case that dated back to last summer when Davis waived many of her duties, including her

office’s functions involving juvenile case files. He cited a Sept. 17 meeting between himself, Davis, Court Administrator Patrick Grimm and her office’s solicitor at the time, Dennis Makel, in which it was explained to her that the waiver was invalid.

“The meeting broke down and you vowed to file an amended waiver, which you did,” DiSalle said.

She amended the waiver and then eventually withdrew it altogether, and then appealed the situation to the state Commonwealth Court when it was clear that the court would eventually be moving the files. She then sent a letter to Grimm stating she would not allow the transfer of the juvenile case files.

Continued on next page

"Any attempt to remove the files will be met with opposition," Davis wrote in the letter, which DiSalle read aloud in court.

All of that led to the events of Nov. 24 in which DiSalle wrote the order transferring the juvenile case files from her office to the Juvenile Probation Office. But Davis refused to comply with that order and blocked sheriff's deputies from taking the files, even going so far as slamming the vault door where they were stored so they could not be retrieved. She later refused to go before DiSalle to explain her actions before claiming to suffer from back pain following the altercation with the deputies.

DiSalle played two videos during Thursday's hearing, including the one showing her interaction with the deputies. After the 10-minute video of the incident was played for the audience, the judge disputed her claim that she was assaulted in which she appeared to fall to the ground and lay there for several minutes while

medics tended to her. The state Attorney General's office investigated the incident and declined to file charges against anyone.

DePasquale argued that the issue related to the juvenile case files being moved was rectified within three hours of the initial incident when other workers in the clerk of courts office facilitated the transfer.

"Nothing occurred in the courtroom directly in front of your honor. And what did happen was cured in a few hours," DePasquale said of the files.

DiSalle said Davis refused to come into his courtroom when he was there and that she could be heard "screaming" in a hallway about the situation. He added that she "absconded" by leaving the courthouse that day, although DePasquale said that she was seeking medical treatment for unspecified injuries.

"I can't see how you can say this took

three hours," DiSalle said of DePasquale's argument that the situation was fixed quickly. "We spent countless hours, days."

Gallo also said that Davis was within her rights to continue appealing the judge's orders to the state's higher courts and that he as her attorney made a "good faith argument" about her office's right to control the juvenile files. She filed multiple appeals that eventually reached the state Supreme Court, which rejected her argument in June and set the stage for the contempt hearing. DiSalle originally scheduled the hearing shortly after the Nov. 24 incident, but he rescheduled it multiple times due to the appeals.

DiSalle said during the hearing that there continue to be problems in the clerk of courts office, and that Davis has been "obstinate" in dealing with some issues in recent months.

"Matters that used to be routine have

become an ordeal in the courthouse," DiSalle said.

Even with the contempt hearing now behind her, Davis could face other legal problems after it was revealed in May that the state Attorney General's office is investigating whether she manipulated electronic time cards for her employees to pay them when they weren't working. No charges have been filed against anyone in that case as of Thursday.

Davis, a Republican who defeated incumbent Frank Scandale for the position in 2019, is in the middle of her first term in office. Scandale, a Democrat who served one term, was charged shortly after that November 2019 election and accused of stealing more than \$97,000 from his department over several years. He pleaded guilty in October 2020 and was ordered to pay nearly \$118,000 in restitution and sentenced to home confinement.

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Marisa Vicosa tells the horrific tale of her 2 daughters' murder by ex-cop father

By Mike Argento

Marisa Vicosa pointed to the photo of a child depicted on her sweatshirt. In the photo, the girl is kissing Marisa on the cheek.

"This is my youngest, Aaminah," Marisa said. "She was 6. She wanted to be a veterinarian because she loved animals and she loved bugs. She was a loving and spunky girl, full of personality. She was super smart."

The other photo depicts Giana with Marisa. Giana is smiling. "Giana was 7," her mother said. "She was super smart, even smarter than her sister. Giana wanted to be a scientist and an inventor. She said she wanted to find a cure for cancer. She wanted to invent a machine that would do all the chores for me."

Giana was studious and serious. She loved science and doing scientific experiments and solving math problems. She completed second grade in half a school year, homeschooled by her mother, an elementary school teacher. "She was a thinker," her mother said. "You could see it in her eyes when she was deep in thought." Aaminah was more outgoing. Giana liked to sing. Aaminah, her mother said, was "more of a dancer."

They were beautiful girls.

And they are gone, murdered by their father, Robert Vicosa, who killed them and his girlfriend before turning the gun on himself.

"I still have a hard time understanding," Marisa said. "It's like my brain..."

Her voice rattles to a stop, the words catching in her throat.

"Everything I went through is nothing compared to having to live every day without my daughters," Marisa said, the words struggling to escape. "I'd go through it a



PAUL KUEHNEL/YORK DAILY RECORD

Marisa Vicosa takes a moment to compose herself while trying to share some of the more dreadful moments of her ordeal that eventually ended in the loss of her daughters.

hundred times if I could have them back."

Struggling to understand

This is the first time Marisa has publicly shared what happened to her and her daughters that horrific week in November 2021.

While the news media followed the events breathlessly as police in Pennsylvania and Maryland scoured the region in search of her estranged husband, she was ensconced in a hotel, registered anonymously, desperately praying that her daughters would be returned to her.

The pain and grief are still with her – and always will be.

And while she struggles just to keep living, she hopes that by sharing what

happened to her, and what she believes are the missteps made by the police that led to the unimaginable tragic end of that week, will lead to change.

She never wants anyone to go through what she has. No one can imagine what she has endured. By telling her story, she hopes that they can understand, even if, in the end, she struggles to understand it herself.

A dream life

It was her dream life.

Marisa grew up in York City, raised by a single mother; her father wasn't in the picture. He left the family when Marisa and her three brothers were quite young and had nothing "whatsoever" to do with the family – something he now regrets, said

Marisa's mother, Diane Calhoun. Diane worked as a dispatcher and later as a transportation broker for trucking companies to support her four children.

Marisa did very well in school, her mother said. She tested at near genius IQ, her mother said, and was among the students in the high-achievers group. "Looking back," Marisa's mother said, "she was the good one."

It wasn't until she was in middle school that she believed she'd ever have a chance to go to college, Marisa said. Some of her teachers at Hannah Penn Middle School encouraged her to prepare for higher education, telling her that she was bright and had a lot to offer. She dreamed of being a teacher. She liked kids and was the neighborhood babysitter growing up.

After graduating from William Penn Senior High School, she went to Millersville University, studying education with the goal of being an elementary school teacher. One of her teachers helped her pay for college, Diane said.

While at Millersville, a friend introduced her to Robert Brown III, as he was known then. He was working as a police officer in Baltimore County and would drive to Millersville to visit her. Sometimes, she'd visit him at his home in Maryland. Eventually, Robert moved to the Spring Grove area to be closer to her.

After she graduated from college, she got a job teaching at Chapel Hill Elementary School in Perry Hall in Baltimore County and continued to date Robert. They were together, on and off, for seven and a half years.

She doesn't know how true it was at the time, but she felt that she found something in Robert that had been lacking in her life – a family life, stability and love.

Continued on next page

"I guess I sought to have a life different than what my life was growing up," she said. "I thought I found something better."

But she could feel something was wrong. "Looking back," she said, "I could see when things were going his way, things were good." When things didn't go his way, they weren't. He was never physically abusive, she said, but he was verbally and emotionally abusive. "He was the type that things I'd confide in him, he'd bring up and use against me," she said. "He could be very aggressive and just downright mean."

A couple of times while they were dating, she would leave him. Robert would be "very apologetic," she said, "expressing that he wanted to do better. I guess I felt confident he was trying to be a good man, a better person."

They were married in January 2014. She was pregnant with their first child then, Giana, born on Jan. 24. Aaminah was born about 18 months later, on June 8, 2015.

After they were married, they changed their last name to Vicosa. Robert wanted to change his name because, like Marisa, his father had been absent during his upbringing, and he wanted to jettison any vestige of the man. He selected Vicosa because it was the name of a town in southeast Brazil that, centuries ago, served as a sanctuary for escaped slaves. "He was intelligent and studied and knew a lot about those types of things," Marisa said.

The marriage worked, sometimes, following the template established while they were dating. They went to counseling, Marisa said, and she believed Robert wanted to change. Marisa dedicated herself to saving the marriage. "I guess I saw marriage as an obligation, and I wanted to do everything I could to try to make it work," she said. "I think he tried. I think he started out trying, but eventually that led to manipulation."

And then, she said, "Things became incredibly difficult when he was terminated from the police department."

'He thought he was better and smarter than anybody else'

During her daughter's marriage, Marisa's mother knew something was wrong but didn't know the full extent of it. Marisa had told her things about the marriage that concerned her. Something just wasn't right, Diane said.

But, Diane said, "Up until that point, he never physically abused her or the kids." She just knew "something else was going

on." Marisa's younger brother, Agustin Ayala, said, "I don't think my sister was ever very happy in that relationship."

Diane never liked Robert. "His personality was that he thought he was better and smarter than everybody else," she said.

'He just lost it'

Robert Vicosa, it could be said, wasn't an exemplary cop.

He joined the Baltimore County department on Dec. 11, 2002, and, according to department records, was first disciplined in October 2007 for failing to show up for a district court hearing. He was also disciplined for the same reason in June 2008.

In June 2019, after he had been promoted to sergeant, he was accused of engaging "in an ongoing course of improper conduct with three female subordinates (officers)," according to department records. Specifically, he was accused of watching "inappropriate videos in their presence, making inappropriate remarks of a sexual nature, and leering." An investigation substantiated the accusations and, after a trial board, he was docked 45 days of paid leave and demoted two ranks to officer.

In March 2021, he was accused of insubordination, refusing to attend required training sessions, sleeping on the job, and conduct detrimental to the department, according to the records. Robert requested a trial board be convened to hear the charges, but he was fired before it could meet. Later, on Aug. 3, 2021, a trial board found him guilty of all charges and upheld his dismissal.

He did not take it well.

Marisa said he didn't discuss the charges in detail. She did read the document outlining the accusations. Robert admitted to joking about the R. Kelly case, which involved bizarre sexual accusations and was in the news at the time, but he denied most of the charges. He told her that he had been targeted and that a lot of other officers were out to get him because he was tough on them and held them to account for their actions. He told her that the things he was accused of doing – at least the things he did not deny – did not call for demotion or termination and that other people in power had gotten away with much worse.

"One day," Marisa said, "he just lost it."

They were in the kitchen, talking. The girls were in an upstairs bedroom of their



PHOTO: PAUL KUEHNEL/YORK DAILY RECORD

Lt. Ken Schollenberger, of York Area Regional Police, speaks Nov. 17, 2021 during a news conference about the kidnapping investigation.

Pleaser Lane suburban-style home in Windsor Township with Robert's grandmother, who periodically came to visit. The talk turned ugly, and Robert became argumentative. At one point, Marisa mentioned that she had asked him to do something, and he hadn't done it.

"That just set him off," she said.

He started destroying everything, she said. He threw things. He broke a pantry door. He threw chairs and appliances and flipped a table over.

Marisa retreated to the bedroom to be with her daughters. She could hear her husband downstairs destroying the house. It was terrifying, she said. "That was the first time he had gotten like that," she recalled.

The next few days, she spent daytime hours away from the house with her daughters while Robert cleaned up the mess he had made.

Not long after that, in July 2021, she was showering when Robert barged into the bathroom and began screaming in her face and blocking her from leaving the small room, she recalled. She asked him to let her leave and he responded with anger, spitting on her as he screamed at her and calling her "a horrible mother and a horrible wife," she said.

She kept asking him to let her out of the

room. He did not retreat.

Finally, he left the bathroom and went to an adjacent bedroom, where their daughters were with his grandmother. "He started telling my daughters I'm a horrible mom, what a horrible mother I am," she said.

That was the final straw. She left the house and went to her mother's home in the east end of the city.

He was not pleased about that.

He refused to allow her to see their daughters unless she agreed to terms that he had dictated. "He didn't want my daughters around my family," Marisa said. "He didn't want them at my mother's house. He was very controlling."

Marisa filed for custody, but initially she had difficulty having the legal documents served. To avoid service of the papers, Robert was staying at the home of one of his former colleagues, a Baltimore County officer named Tia Bynum, who lived about 10 minutes away from their home. Marisa said she didn't know the nature of Robert's relationship with Tia. He wouldn't tell Marisa where their daughters were staying, she said.

Finally, in September 2021, the custody papers were served, and Robert agreed to

Continued on next page

50-50 custody, an arrangement called 5-5-2-2. Marisa would have the girls for five days, and then they would be with their father for five days, and then they'd return to Marisa for two days and after that, to Robert for two days before the cycle began again. Marisa had asked the conciliator for custody during the week, since she had been homeschooling the girls, and as a teacher, she was more than qualified to make sure their educations were not sacrificed to marital discord. The conciliator concluded that Robert seemed like a smart guy and "looks like he could figure it out," Marisa recalled.

Marisa wanted the split to be as amicable as possible. She told Robert she didn't want a divorce unless he wanted one. She told him, "I don't want anything. No alimony. No child support. You can keep the house." The house was in her name, and she told him she would sign it over to him.

Robert didn't want to talk about it. "It was just every attempt to communicate was met with aggression," she said. "There was no talking to him. I tried to talk to him, but it always led to arguments. I knew he was angry. I knew that, in his mind, I had betrayed him."

She was worn down.

After all she had been through, she said, "I guess I just wanted peace."

'I was going to die'

Nov. 11 was her birthday.

That Thursday in 2021, she got a message from Robert inviting her to come to the house Friday evening to have birthday cake with their daughters. The next day, he sent her a message asking whether she was coming over. She replied that she'd come over when she was finished with work. (She works from home.)

She finished work late, and between 8 and 9 p.m., she went over to the house on Pleader Lane. She had cake with her daughters and after they finished, Robert sent the girls upstairs to be with his grandmother, who said later that she was sleeping. As she began to leave, Robert called her back into the kitchen. "I got something for you," he told her.

She told him, "You didn't have to get me anything." She wasn't expecting anything, she said later.

When she returned to the kitchen, Robert was looking around, as if he had misplaced the gift. He said, "It's a bracelet."

As soon as he said that, Bynum appeared

in the room. She had been hiding in the dining room, and Marisa believes that "bracelet" was a code word for her to enter the kitchen.

Robert told Bynum, "Grab her."

Then he approached Marisa and held a gun to her head.

Marisa screamed. She was in shock, disbelief. She was not sure what to think.

Robert barked, "Shut up. It wouldn't be good if anyone came downstairs."

He directed Marisa to the basement, at gunpoint. Robert and Bynum bound her to a table with zip ties and rope secured around her wrists and ankles.

"At that point," Marisa thought, "I was going to die." Her primary concern at the moment was what was going to happen to her daughters after they killed her.

Bynum stood by, holding a pistol, as Robert scolded her. "How could you do this to me?" he said. "I did everything for you. I'm the best thing that ever happened to you. How could you leave me?"

Marisa tried to answer intelligently – a difficult thing to do while bound to a table with a gun pointed at your head – and fell back on instinct to extricate herself from this dire situation alive. She had to be agreeable, she concluded.

They untied her and while Bynum held her at gunpoint – she had a small gun, Marisa recalled, "a girl gun" – Robert went upstairs. She pleaded with Bynum, "Why are you doing this to me? I didn't do anything to you."

Bynum replied coldly, "You have to talk to him."

Robert crushed up some pills – she's not sure what they were – and made her snort the powder and forced her to smoke some weed. He took her upstairs to the living room and sat her on the couch. Bynum was in the kitchen, watching.

Robert told her he was going to have sex with her and asked whether she wanted to do it in on the couch or in the bedroom.

"No, no, I don't want to do that," Marisa told him.

He took her to the bedroom. He was going to rape her while Bynum recorded it. Marisa kept saying no. Eventually, Robert asked Bynum to leave the room. She rolled her eyes and walked out. Then Robert raped Marisa.

After, Marisa passed out. "I guess I was high," she recalled.

The next morning, she noticed on her phone that she had missed calls from her mother and her brother. Her mother was concerned that she hadn't returned to her home. With all she knew, her mother said, "I couldn't believe Marisa would stay there that night. I got me thinking that something was not right."

She told Robert, "I'm going to have to talk to them." Robert warned her not to say anything that would raise suspicion and said, "If they show up, it won't be good."

Marisa called her brother and assured him she was fine. She told him that the girls were sick, and she was staying at the house to take care of them. She had purportedly been texting with her mother, but Diane said the texts didn't sound like her daughter. There was something off about them. And she didn't believe that Marisa's daughters were ill. The girls had just been at her home, and they seemed fine.

Marisa had picked up the ingredients for her mother to make fudge for a family gathering that weekend. Marisa told Robert that she had some groceries in her car, and she had to drop them off at her mother's house.

Robert drove her to her mother's house. She went in, put the groceries on the kitchen counter and left. She thought she didn't want her mother to be suspicious, something Marisa believed would endanger her mother's life. She thought it was the best thing to do at the time. A surveillance camera recorded the visit, and Diane said when she watched it, it seemed odd. She could see her daughter enter the house while Robert stayed on the porch and watched her through the front door.

Diane called Marisa, but she didn't pick up. She texted her daughter, but the responses didn't sound like Marisa. "All kinds of things were running through my mind," Diane said. None of them were good.

Marisa and Robert returned to the house on Pleader Lane. She didn't have much choice in the matter. Robert told her he wanted her to return to his home and she had to pretend to agree. It wasn't difficult. He had a gun.

She stayed in a bedroom much of the day. Later, Robert entered the bedroom and told her to perform a sex act. She shook her head and said, "No."

Robert made it clear that non-consent was not an option. "You're not understanding the situation," he told her.

On Sunday, he kept telling her that he

wanted her to return home and that everything would be like it was before. Marisa agreed with everything he said. She thought that was her only way out of this alive. She asked to be able to go to her mother's house and get some things and her laptop for work. Robert agreed. Marisa wasn't sure what to make of it. She was in disbelief that he would let her go.

He told her he would take her to her mother's house. Marisa said she didn't think that was a good idea. It would look suspicious, she reasoned, and he didn't want to raise suspicion.

He agreed, with a warning. If she called the police or told her mother what was happening, he promised to kill her. He promised to kill their daughters. He promised to kill her mother, her brother, her nieces and nephews. He would kill everybody.

She was terrified as she walked to her car. She had no idea what was going to happen. She had one thought: "I'm going to be shot in the back of my head before I get to the car."

'Like living in a movie'

It was, she said, "like living in a movie," a horror movie. She couldn't believe what was happening. But it was real, too real.

She drove directly to her mother's house on Wellington Street. She thought she may be followed, or that her husband had placed a tracking device on her car. Previously, she suspected her husband had been stalking her. He said things that indicated he had been following her. Her suspicions were right. Later, she found a notebook – presumably Bynum's because it didn't contain her husband's handwriting – that detailed a conversation she'd had in her car. She believed her husband planted a listening device in her car.

As she drove, she thought, "I have a choice to make. Do I go to the police, or do I try to handle this myself? Do I try to get a gun myself and go back and kill Robert before he has a chance to kill anybody?"

She wondered whether the police would be able to intervene before Robert carried out his threat to kill everyone.

It was terrifying that she was even having that thought. She decided to go to the police, she said, "because that's what the law says you're supposed to do." It was the right thing to do, although later, it wouldn't seem so.

Continued on next page

When she arrived at her mother's house, some of her nieces and nephews were visiting. She worried about their safety. She gathered some things and then called her mother into the bathroom. She told her, "Robert and Tia are trying to kill me." She said if the police showed up, she knew that Robert was more than capable of killing all of them before the cops got through the door.

She told her mother to get the children out of the house and take them someplace public where they would be safe. Diane took her grandchildren - the oldest was 18 - to Wal-Mart in East York and told them to stay close to people just in case Robert or Tia were stalking them with harmful intent.

Diane drove to the York City Police department to report what was happening. The city police advised her to call 911 since it was outside their jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, Marisa had driven to the East York Target, thinking that if Robert was tracking her, she could explain that she stopped at the store to get hair products for the girls.

She knew where the break room was in Target, at the back of the store. She asked the workers there to call the police; she needed help.

A Springettsbury Township Police officer arrived, and after hearing a short description of what had happened over the past two days, he told her it wasn't his department's jurisdiction. He called the York Area Regional Police - now called the York County Regional Police - which patrols Windsor Township.

A York Area Regional officer drove her to the station and placed her in an interview room. A woman named Laura Wilson, the desk officer, took her statement. Another officer - perhaps a detective - was in the room too.

After she gave her statement, the officers left the room to discuss what to do.

When the officers returned, they advised her to seek an emergency protection from abuse order. They would also ask the district judge to issue a search warrant for the Pleader Lane home. They also suggested that it would be a good idea to go to York Hospital and have a rape kit completed. They told her it would help. "At that point," she said, "I felt I had to prove what I was saying was true."

They took her to the courthouse, where District Judge Ronald Haskell, over Zoom, approved the emergency PFA and issued



PHOTO: PAUL KUEHNEL/YORK DAILY RECORD

Photographs, stuffed animals, and flowers are part of a memorial at a candlelight vigil Nov. 21, 2021, for Giana, 7, and Aaminah Vicosas, 6, at the site where the sisters were killed.

the search warrant. Then, she said, Officer Justin Main drove her to the hospital, and she underwent the examination.

At about 3 a.m., she recalled, Cpl. Daniel Miller and another officer showed up at the hospital. They looked worried, she said. For a moment, she believed, "They were going to tell me my girls were gone."

She said Miller, understanding the life-and-death gravity of the situation, had wanted to execute the search warrant as soon as possible, as soon as the manpower could be mustered to ensure it was done in as safe a manner as possible. She said Miller told her that the chief, Tim Damon, shot that down, saying that it would be better to wait until Monday morning when the girls were on the school bus. She didn't know at the time that Lt. Kenneth Shollenberger, Miller's direct supervisor, and Damon declined to go on duty to supervise the police response. (Coincidentally, Damon lives near the Vicosas' former Pleader Lane home.)

Marisa told Miller that she homeschooled her daughters and that they wouldn't be on a school bus in the morning. She asked to speak to Damon.

She said Miller got on the phone. She's not sure who he was talking to - later, she would learn that he was speaking to Shollenberger, his direct supervisor - but when he got off the phone he appeared to be aggravated and frustrated that his superiors were hesitant to act in what he believed was a dangerous situation.

When Miller got off the phone, Marisa recalled, he seemed deflated.

It was evident, she said, "they didn't have a Plan B."

She said, "They had no answers for me."

She said Miller told her that not many people are aware of it, but she could go to the District Attorney's office and file a private criminal complaint against the chief.

At about 5 a.m., she said, Miller drove her to a hotel and checked her in anonymously. She said he paid for the room using his personal credit card.

Taking matters in their own hands

When police declined to act, Marisa's family and friends took matters into their own hands.

Diane and Agustin went to the home of her youngest brother, Dustin, to let him know what was going on. Dustin, Agustin and two family friends armed themselves and drove to the Pleader Lane home.

"They were going to kill Robert," Diane said, and in the process, rescue Giana and Aaminah.

They entered the house through a sliding glass door and searched, Diane said. Nobody was there. They found the room in the basement. All they found, in a back room, was the table Marisa had been bound to. In the house, Diane said, they found a satanic bible and a statue of a demonic figure. Marisa's underwear was wrapped around the statue's head.

'I thought they were going to find him'

The next day, Monday, Nov. 15, Marisa returned to the courthouse. She went to the District Attorney's office and filed a private criminal complaint against Damon. Then she was placed on the list to appear before a judge to have the emergency PFA converted into a temporary PFA.

At 2 p.m., she entered the courtroom. It was crowded. "It was like walking into a room full of abused women," she recalled, "listening to everybody's horrific stories of abuse while waiting for my name to be called."

It appeared that she was low on the list. At one point, a sheriff's deputy entered the courtroom, looking panicked, she recalled. The deputy got the judge's attention and asked him to take her case immediately. They were prepared to execute the search warrant and needed to proceed as soon as possible. The judge called her to the bench, asked her a few questions and signed the order.

The police were ready to act.

At 3 p.m., the police descended on the Pleader Lane home to serve the PFA and the search warrant.

Nobody was home.

Robert's phone pinged to Bynum's home, Marisa said. Police obtained a search warrant for her home and served it at 4 p.m. Robert and the children weren't there. Bynum told police she didn't know where they were, even though phone records obtained later showed she was in constant contact with Robert. She also told police what Marisa described as "a messed-up story," saying she was the victim, that it was Marisa and her family who were trying to attack her.

Even though police had information that Bynum was an accessory in the crimes committed against Marisa and the abduction of her daughters, they did not take her into custody. Nor did they order surveillance of her.

Marisa returned to her hotel room and awaited news. Marisa's mother, who was also staying at the hotel, was hopeful. "I thought they were going to find him and arrest him and bring my granddaughters back," she said.

'Someone else's life'

On Tuesday, Marisa said, Shollenberger came to the room and told her that Robert

Continued on next page

had stolen a woman's car at gunpoint. He had run the car he had been driving into a creek on Monday, and after spending the night in a camper trailer on the property of a Red Lion area woman, he held the woman at gunpoint and took her Volkswagen Jetta. Giana and Aaminah had been with him.

Marisa thought, "Finally, they believe me and they're finally going to begin moving forward."

That day, police returned to Bynum's home, but she wasn't there. Meanwhile, Baltimore County Police suspended Bynum that day. Marisa was upset they didn't detain her the previous day. On the one hand, she said, "I knew it was my word against theirs. But it appeared to me that (the police) were being very cautious because they were dealing with police officers."

The hours ticked by, slowly. "I was just scared and confused," Marisa said. "I was trying to remain hopeful. I just wanted my babies back. I felt helpless but hopeful at the same time."

Meanwhile, police in Pennsylvania and Maryland conducted a manhunt for her husband, Bynum and her daughters. There was news that Robert and Bynum had carjacked an SUV at gunpoint in Cockeysville, Maryland, just north of Baltimore. They forced the man to drive them, and the girls, around the Baltimore area for a few hours and released him unharmed.

Marisa did not have a good feeling about how the manhunt was going. She felt she had to do something. On Thursday, Nov. 18, she asked her brother to drive her to Maryland to look for Robert and the girls, a long shot to be sure, but it was something – and better than sitting in the hotel room alone with her thoughts. Other family and friends had been searching for Robert and the girls since they had disappeared. Diane enlisted the help of people she used to work with – truck drivers who did a lot of deliveries in Maryland – to be on the lookout for her son-in-law and grandchildren.

Agustin said, "My head was all over the place, trying to figure out what was going on. I just wanted to try to help my sister."

They were driving back from Maryland, on Interstate 83, when Marisa's phone rang. It was Shollenberger. She was terrified to answer it, fearing the worst.

She did answer, and Shollenberger asked her to meet him at the hotel. He wanted to give her an update. "What is it?" she asked. He told her he didn't want to do it over the phone.

She hung up. She felt dread.

Then her brother's phone rang. A friend told him that something was on the news about a car crash in Maryland that involved Robert Vicoso.

Marisa called Shollenberger back and asked about the car crash.

Shollenberger told her, "Giana is gone." Aaminah, he told her, still had a pulse and was taken by helicopter to a hospital in Smithsburg, Maryland. He told her to return to the hotel and he would arrange transportation to the hospital. Marisa just wanted to be with her daughter.

Marisa told her brother. He screamed. At that moment, Agustin felt a surge of emotion. He said, "I wanted somebody else to feel that pain too."

She arrived at the hotel. Shollenberger was waiting for her. She could see it on his face. He didn't have to say anything. She knew. He told her Aaminah didn't make it.

"I just remember screaming and crying," Marisa said.

Her mother remembers just trying to hold on, to be there for her daughter. She remembers thinking, "This can't be real. This has to be somebody else's life."

She didn't want to let go

Marisa would learn later that police had spotted Robert in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, near the Maryland border. Bynum was driving. Robert was in the back seat of the stolen Ford Edge with the girls. Shortly after crossing into Maryland on Route 418, the car veered off the road and struck a culvert. Police determined that Robert first shot Bynum and then murdered his daughters before turning the gun on himself.

Marisa wanted to get to the hospital, and police rushed her there, hitting 100 mph as they sped to Smithsburg. At the hospital, she was met by doctors, a counselor, Maryland law enforcement officers and FBI agents.

They asked her whether she wanted to spend some time with her daughter. She hesitated.

"I wasn't sure it was the right thing to do," she said, her voice cracking and tears cascading down her cheeks. She paused.

And then said, the words catching in her throat, "I didn't know if that would be my memory of her I'd have forever."

She decided she needed to see her daughter. She needed to say goodbye.

She was escorted to the hospital room. "There she was," she said.

She crawled into the bed and embraced her daughter, once so full of life, now lifeless. She held Aaminah for several hours; she's not sure how long it was. It seemed like an eternity.

She didn't want to let go.

'It baffles me'

"My daughters could have been saved," Marisa said.

She believes that had police acted immediately and served the search warrant and PFA that Sunday night or early Monday morning, her daughters would still be alive, and she wouldn't have to live with the pain, the grief, the loneliness, the emptiness.

"What I want the police to know, what I want law enforcement to know, is that we ... are required to rely on them for justice, so they have an obligation to get it right," she said.

Last month, Marisa and her lawyer, Philadelphia attorney Harold Goodman, reached a \$3 million settlement with the York Area Regional Police Department for its repeated missteps that she believes led to her daughters' deaths.

"I think there's more to be done in terms of leadership of the police department," she said. "I think there's been no real accountability. It baffles me why that leadership is still in position. More than anything, I would hate to have this happen again."

She and Goodman recently met with the York County District Attorney's office to discuss what steps were being taken to reform law enforcement policies to address the errors made in this case. The DA's office has said it is reviewing the policies and procedures, an effort that is ongoing.

Goodman said, "What Marisa has been forced to survive can't be translated into words. She is unbelievably courageous and strong and has committed herself, as has my firm and I, to not let this go back to the way it was."

The police department, in a response filed in York County Court after the

settlement was approved by a judge, asserted that it had done nothing wrong.

There have been some repercussions. In March 2022, Cpl. Daniel Miller was demoted to Officer, according to police records. The reason for the demotion was not specified.

Damon, who has repeatedly not returned calls requesting comment, remains the chief. Calls to Miller were not returned either. David Naylor, an East Manchester Township supervisor who serves as chairman of the regional police department's commission, said the commission's solicitor advised them not to discuss the matter beyond the department's legal response. Naylor also said he was unable to discuss Miller's demotion because it was a "personnel matter."

A lonely existence

Marisa said, "It's like your brain is trying to conceive something that's impossible to conceive."

Did she ever believe that her husband could do something so horrible, so unthinkable?

She paused and thought about it.

"There's a lot of evil in the world," she said. "Over time, my husband was becoming more and more evil. He was allowing the evil to consume him."

She said, "I think mostly, in terms of his mentality, he saw me, and he saw his daughters, as his property."

For a long time after that horrible week, she said her life was "just about getting the strength to get out of bed." She had to try to arrange her daughters' funeral, she said, "in the midst of feeling like you have nothing."

She has prayed a lot and has had a lot of support from her family and friends.

But hers is a lonely existence.

"I can be surrounded by a hundred people, but I still feel alone inside," she said. "I keep a lot of it inside. I have my moments but try to do it in private. Every day, I have to give myself permission to live, to try to find happiness in each day and to accept that God has determined that it is not my time."

Columnist/reporter Mike Argento has been a York Daily Record staffer since 1982. Reach him at mike@ydr.com.

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The Lititz Record Express

Roy Mellott's nature habitat habit

By Laura Knowles

The rural property of Leah and Roy Mellott is home to horses, chickens, and an abundance of birds, bees, butterflies, and wildlife.

The horses and chickens are Leah's avocation, while the birds, bees, butterflies, and wildlife are Roy's passion.

Roy Mellott has been so successful at transforming his 6.8-acre property into a haven for nature that he was recently recognized as the second annual native gardener by the Lititz Garden Club.

Last year the honor was presented to Greg Wilson for his Ballstown Road property. "I was very honored to receive the award from the Garden Club," said Roy Mellott, who lives on Firestone Road in Warwick Township. "It means a lot to me after so much hard work."

Leah Mellott was the one who nominated her husband for the award. She has seen him work tirelessly to transform a one-time soybean field into a natural habitat for all sorts of wildlife using only native plants.

In her letter to the Lititz Garden Club, Leah wrote, "I would like to nominate my husband Roy Mellott, Jr. for your ecology-friendly garden habitat of the year award. His journey into the garden has evolved over time. Ever since he was young, he has always had a love of nature and especially reptiles."

She recalled how when the couple was first married their small home was fronted by a tangle of plants because he had found praying mantis nests and wanted the hatchlings to get the best chance for a good start. That was just the beginning. When the couple moved to their present home 13 years ago.

Roy's love of natives and pollinator plants blossomed.

He steadily built his garden from the ground up, using only native plants that originated in Lancaster County. He took



Roy Mellott (above) was nominated by his wife Leah and was recognized for his native gardening skills by the Lititz Garden Club.

master naturalist classes and befriended several local gardening authors and native plant nursery owners. While his garden was originally meant to attract milk snakes and brown snakes, he has discovered a bounty of bees, insects, birds, butterflies, and other creatures that appreciate his efforts.

"I was most excited to find a family of Baltimore Orioles that especially like the tall tickseed or coreopsis," he said, noting that the beautiful yellow-orange and blackbirds seem to love the tiny black seeds of the yellow-orange tickseed plants.

The native flowers in his garden have attracted all sorts of other birds, like brown thrashers and bluebirds. Butterflies and bees flit from blossom to blossom, like bergamot and ironweed. There have also been red fox families loving the natural habit. There are plants like aromatic sumac,

butterfly weed, wine cap, coneflower, native petunia, black cherry, river birch, and sassafras.

Plants that might not seem like natives, but are, include the Carolina rose and beach plum.

Mellott is an avid disciple of the renowned native plant expert Douglas Tallamy, who wrote the book, "Bringing Nature Home." Tallamy maintains that yards should have more native plants and less manicured lawns to provide the best habitat to keep native birds, bees, and bugs alive and thriving.

"Right now I have about 20-30% garden and the rest is lawn," says Mellott. "I'm hoping to eventually change that to 70% garden and 30% lawn."

He describes his garden as more of a wildlife habitat, rather than a formal garden.

While he considers the form and function of plants, his focus is on creating a native habitat for the various species in the area.

"The native plants are important because they provide biological services to the wildlife in the area, as well as food and cover," explains Mellott.

A scientist by nature, Mellott is an environmental chemist, testing soil, water and air for volatile organic compounds using GC/MS technology. He earned his degree in biology from Millersville University.

"My garden is my passion," he says. "Others like my wife might call it an obsession."

Mellott has done all the work in the garden himself, fitting in his projects on weekends and early evenings after work. While he is not a member of any specific gardening clubs, he is a Master Naturalist with the Lancaster Conservancy and a Habitat Steward with the National Wildlife Federation.

"I was thrilled to get the award, This has been a lot of work, and it was nice to be recognized for it," said Mellott.

Ken Heiser, a lead cultivator and president of the Lititz Garden Club, said that Mellott's native habitat garden is exactly why the award was created last year. All too often gardens are honored because of the formal design or the varieties of beautiful flowers and plants.

"Gardens that use native plants attract native species, and play a valuable role in preserving our natural environment," says Heiser, noting that the Lititz Garden Club members have focused on the importance of plants that bring nature home and sustain wildlife.

Laura Knowles is a freelance feature writer and regular contributor to the pages of the Lititz Record Express. She welcomes feedback and story tips at lknowleslrc@gmail.com.

Published September 2022



Campus poll examines student perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion

By **Katie Oglesby**
Editor-in-Chief *and*

Alli Dayton
Managing Editor

A recent campus-wide survey by The Gettysburgian evaluated how student perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion differed. The survey was sent to several student organizations, including organizations that represent the identities of historically underrepresented communities.

306 students completed the survey, with 219 students identifying as white and 87 identifying as people of color (POC).

Safety

The survey first provided questions about perceptions of safety among Gettysburg College students. Overall, 92 percent of the students surveyed feel either somewhat safe, safe, or completely safe on campus, and 90 percent of students of color feel either somewhat safe, safe, or completely safe on campus.

Contrastingly, 76 percent of both white students and students of color feel either somewhat safe, safe, or completely safe in the Town of Gettysburg. This leaves 24 percent of students feeling somewhat unsafe, unsafe, or completely unsafe in the Town of Gettysburg.



PHOTO: BORNA GANJI/THE GETTYSBURGIAN

Anecdotal evidence from students suggests that many tend to feel unsafe on campus.

Inclusion Officer of Student Senate Allie Acero '23 said, "We've had issues over the years with select few people in the greater Gettysburg community harassing students of color on public streets, but it is only this year that there is a larger and overbearing sense of unsafety now on our campus."

Satisfaction with Racial Diversity

Next, the survey examined student satisfaction with the racial diversity of the Gettysburg College community.

Regarding the racial diversity of the student body, 40 percent of students said they were somewhat satisfied, satisfied, or completely satisfied. Another 40 percent of students noted that they were somewhat dissatisfied, dissatisfied, or completely

dissatisfied. 20 percent of students said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

The statistics differed slightly when students identified their feelings about the racial diversity of Gettysburg College's faculty and staff. 42 percent of students said they were somewhat satisfied, satisfied, or completely satisfied, and 34 percent were somewhat dissatisfied, dissatisfied, or completely dissatisfied with the racial diversity of the faculty and staff. 23 percent felt neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with this diversity.

Anderson Gray '23, DEI Chair of Alpha Delta Pi, said that while underrepresented groups seem to be gaining more of a voice on campus, she believes the administration has slowed these changes.

"As an [Africana Studies] major who cares about seeing herself represented in faculty and staff on campus, it is disheartening to see so many Black faculty members having left within the last two years because of the lack of support at this college," Gray said.

Acero expressed a similar sentiment.

"I feel like there has been a decrease in diverse faculty, which can be explained by recent budget cuts, but because of the decreasing diversity, there is less of an opportunity to foster an inclusive

Continued on next page

community,” Acero said. “Without a diverse faculty, potential students of color might be dissuaded from coming to Gettysburg College because there aren’t outlets of support that understand students’ struggles from a personal level.”

She noted that, “As a queer woman of color, an immigrant, and a first generation student, I feel like there aren’t many outlets for me to speak about my experience and be related to. Last year, I brought up creating a Filipino Student Association to the only Filipinx faculty I know, but since then, the professor has left Gettysburg College.”

Inclusion on Campus

The survey then asked students to consider the extent of their feelings of inclusion and isolation on campus, based on their racial identities.

97 percent of white students said they feel somewhat included, included, or completely included, whereas only 71 percent of students of color said they felt the same way. 3 percent of white students felt somewhat isolated, isolated, or completely isolated based on their racial identities, compared to 29 percent of students of color.

Specifically, concerning campus social activities, 99 percent of white students said they felt somewhat included, included, or completely included, in contrast with 80 percent of students of color. Only 1 percent of white students identified themselves as somewhat excluded, excluded, or completely excluded from campus social activities, whereas 20 percent of students of color felt that way.

DEI Chair of Alpha Chi Rho Henry Namiot '23 said, “...I feel that the college is mostly ambivalent to the minority groups on campus. At the LASA general meeting, it was brought up that often the students are responsible for creating their own safe spaces and that the school favors some

groups over others. There is much that can be improved with the college’s DEI efforts, and I hope that when they do reconsider their approach, they think about how to serve all of the communities on campus and not just a select few.”

Recommendations from Students

Finally, the survey asked students whether they would recommend Gettysburg College to an incoming student with the same racial identity as them. 88 percent of white students said that they would recommend the College, and 63 percent of students of color said they would recommend the College to someone with their racial identity.

On the topic of Gettysburg College’s current diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, most students believed that the College should be doing more. 79 percent of students believed the College should do more to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, 10 percent said there is nothing additional that they could do, and 11 percent said they were unsure about whether additional initiatives are necessary.

Department Chair and Associate Professor of Africana Studies Scott Hancock said, “My impression, based on interactions with students, [is that] students are ambivalent about campus climate, and much less than impressed with DEI, at least in the area of issues of race, as well as regarding sexual harassment and assault. But...this is anecdotal—and while that kind of evidence is important, it is often not conclusive. I don’t know to what extent the students I talk with are representative of the entire student body, though I suspect they are at least somewhat representative of underrepresented groups and of many female students.”

Harrison Moore '23, DEI chair of Sigma Chi said, “Gettysburg is doing more to

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

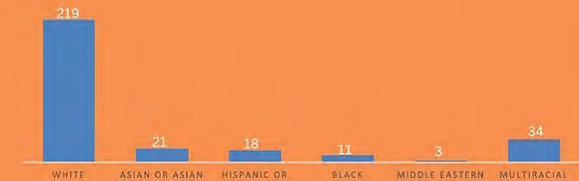
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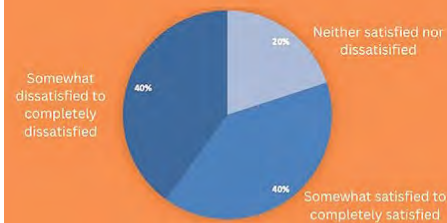
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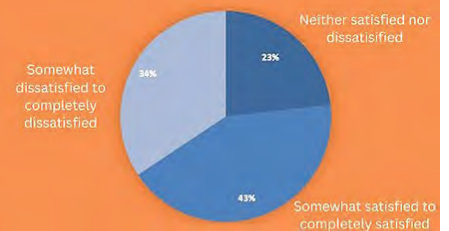
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POC



How satisfied are students with the racial diversity of Gettysburg College's student body?



How satisfied are students with the racial diversity of Gettysburg College's professors and faculty?



How isolated do students feel on campus based on their racial identities?



Should Gettysburg College do more to promote DEI on campus?

YES 79% UNSURE 11% NO 10%

Source: The Gettysburgian Campus-Wide Survey on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion | Data from Oct. 2022

publicly address DEI concerns than some other colleges, but there is definitely room for improvement. I would like to see less delay between identifying a problem on campus and implementing solutions. The iterative cycle should be much quicker; any information derived from a survey or poll

could be found simply by talking and listening to marginalized students. Direct communication and fast action are the best ways to enact meaningful change.”

This article originally appeared in the October 2022 edition of The Gettysburgian, the Gettysburg College student newspaper.



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SPORTS

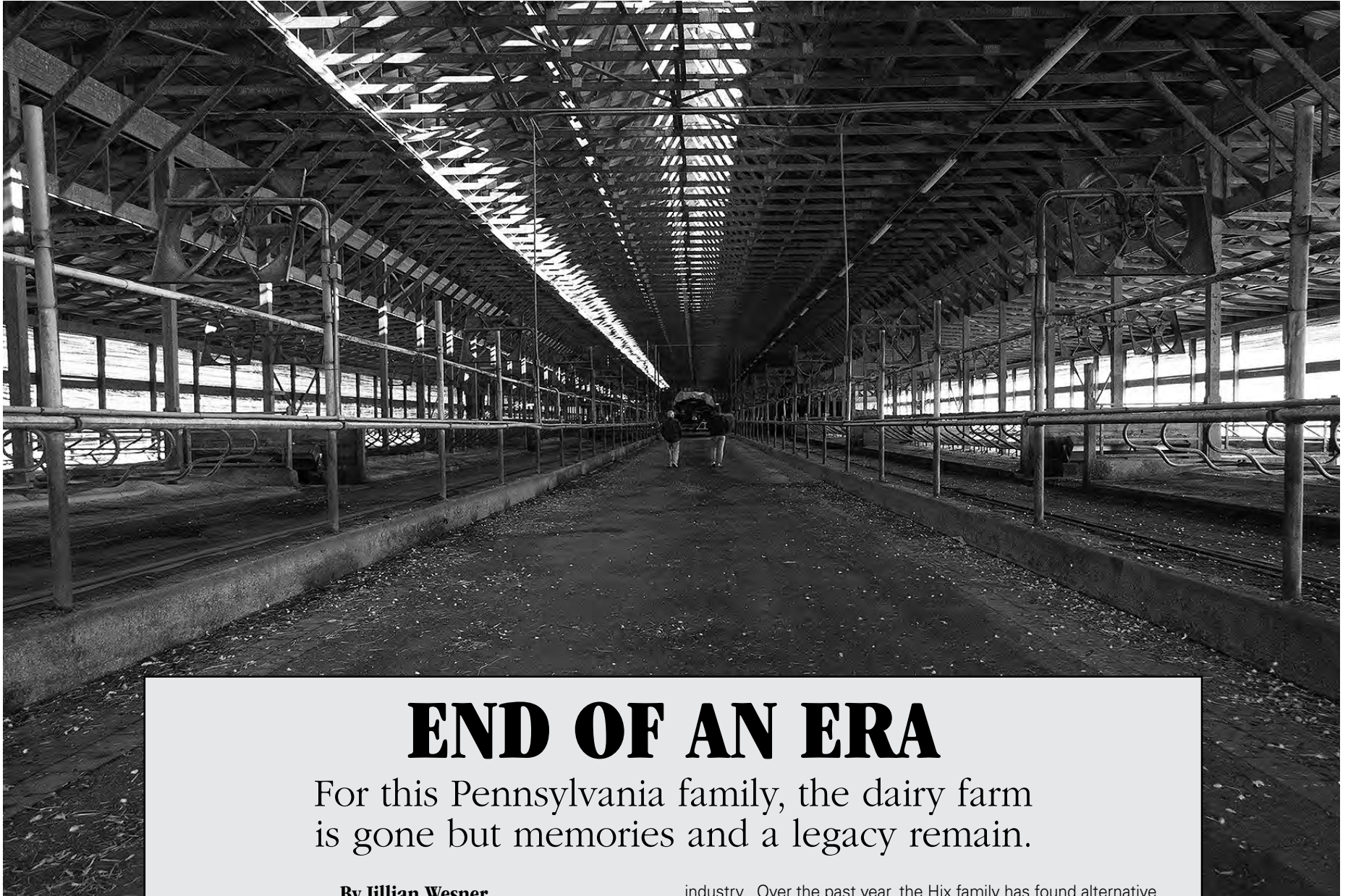
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THE LION'S ROAR

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END OF AN ERA

For this Pennsylvania family, the dairy farm is gone but memories and a legacy remain.

By Jillian Wesner

Anthony Hix, comes from a multigenerational dairy farm in Mohrsville, Pennsylvania. While home for Thanksgiving, he reminisced about what was once a fully operational dairy barn owned and operated by his grandfather.

Hix, 21, spent most of his life helping his family on Skyline Acres – milking, herding and repairing.

In 2021, after several years of declining milk prices, his family made the decision to sell their cows and retire from the dairy

industry. Over the past year, the Hix family has found alternative ways to feed their passion for agriculture.

Having accumulated upwards of 20 beef cows as well as growing crops on their over 1,000-acre property, they continue their legacy as farmers.

Hix is pursuing a degree in aerospace engineering at Penn State, with plans to graduate in the spring. He has dreams of pursuing his own contributions to the farming industry.

Published Dec. 19, 2022

Visit <https://www.thelionsroaratspsu.org/home/end-of-an-era/to-view-the-accompanying-video>.

COURIER EXPRESS

Invictus owner, praised for quick response, felt 'responsibility' to disarm gunman

By **Brianne Fleming**

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DuBOIS — Hailed for his quick response by authorities, Joe Morrison of DuBois says he doesn't "feel like a hero at all" after taking an active shooter situation into his own hands just a couple of days ago. Instead, Morrison felt he just did what he needed to do.

He and his wife, Shealene, own and operate Invictus — a recreational facility as well as the nightclub-themed bar Nightfall — on DuBois Street.

A business owner can never imagine they'll be faced with the shocking and traumatic situation that occurred on the early morning of Sunday, Feb. 19, when the business the Morrisons have built from the ground up was swarming with frantic customers.

The victim, 31-year-old Ani Myrtaj of DuBois, had been shot during a struggle for a handgun that was allegedly pointed at Joe Morrison by Zachery Dodson. Morrison has been credited for disarming and detaining Dodson, 27, of Clearfield, after facing him head-on, obtaining and unloading the gun and pinning Dodson to the ground until police arrived.

As of Monday, Myrtaj was listed in stable condition, according to authorities. Dodson, who had been an officer with the Curwensville Borough Police Department and Clearfield County Sheriff's Office at the time of Sunday's incident, though off duty, faces felony charges of aggravated assault and making terroristic threats along with misdemeanor charges of recklessly endangering another person and simple assault. Dodson is currently in the Jefferson County Jail.

From the beginning, it was Morrison's dream to bring an exciting and unique recreational business to his hometown, something the couple has continued to build on since opening in April 2021.

And, the Morrisons have not taken this responsibility lightly, always keeping safety at the forefront.

Morrison's struggle to disarm the alleged shooter only lasted a few seconds. But, those few seconds potentially saved the lives of others.

Face to face with crisis, Morrison said there was no other option than to react, and fast, knowing he needed to get the gun out of the suspect's hands. In one of the scariest moments of his life, he feared that one wrong move, or



PHOTO SUBMITTED

Pictured are Joe and Shealene Morrison, owners of Invictus on DuBois Street.

"slip," during the take-down could make the situation worse, for him and for others.

"I'm responsible for everyone here," he said. "It's my responsibility to keep them safe."

Morrison credited his past training as being crucial in this situation, including infantry in the U.S. Army, which equipped him with invaluable skills he needed to disarm the alleged shooter. Having also been a wrestler throughout most of his life was key to taking Dodson down and keeping him pinned to the ground, unable to harm anyone else, until police arrived quickly to the scene.

"I think by the quick intervention of the owner, he (Morrison) definitely saved his life by engaging the guy (Dodson) and probably multiple other people," DuBois City Police Chief Blaine Clark said following the incident.

Joe and Shealene repetitively said how grateful they are for the many loyal and supportive customers Invictus has. People who were there that night "didn't miss a beat," with many jumping in to help the victim, retrieving medical equipment from their vehicles, doing whatever they could in the face of chaos.

The customers who were confined to the bar area were cooperative, listened and were very brave following the incident, said Shealene.

Looking ahead

It is not lost upon the Morrisons how immensely worse this situation could have been.

Even still, they plan to reopen Invictus soon.

As they are able to, the couple says they will hopefully be replacing their current security system, installing more cameras outside and automated security doors, as well as have highly-trained security personnel on site.

It's a harsh reality that something like this can happen anywhere, to anyone, they said. All people can do is remain aware of their surroundings, and be as prepared as possible.

A humble person, Morrison shies away from the word "hero." He feels many emotions, including guilt, when it comes to the victim and the many customers who experienced this at his place of business.

But, many now see him for his brave actions, including Shealene, who realizes the outcome for her husband could have been much different.

Joe also credits Myrtaj, who—at first—was in between her and Dodson, attempting to de-escalate the situation. That extra second or two, said Morrison, gave him the time he needed to comprehend what was happening, and act as quickly as possible.

There is a sense of community at Invictus, where everyone often feels included, respected and has a great time, said Joe, something the alleged shooter will not take away from them.

"We have poured our hearts and souls into this," Joe said. "We have fallen in love with the way people have reacted to this place."

Despite the ongoing commotion since Sunday, much can be said about the outpouring of support the Morrisons have received since the incident, said Shealene. The widespread response on social media has been very positive, with regular customers committing to coming back once they reopen, and kind words from new customers who are now planning to support the business.

"We want to thank the community for all of their support—there is a lot of it," said Joe. "There are so many people behind us, and we feel that. We are so grateful for it."

Published Feb. 21, 2023

THE NEWS-ITEM

‘Family knows best’

County launches center to support parents, children

By **Danirae Renno**

SUNBURY — Northumberland County unveiled a Family Engagement Center Wednesday to help families build natural support systems, strengthen parenting skills and provide a community meeting space. The center will also help families take control of cases that would otherwise go to Children and Youth Services and the court system.

The building boasts newly painted calm lilac walls with paintings by the supervisor and fresh flowers on tables. Signs hang with quotes like “Don’t climb the mountain alone,” and “There’s more to family than you might think.”

It’s a stark contrast between the white walls of the Northumberland County Courthouse just a few blocks away, and it’s much less intimidating to parents than the Children and Youth Services building.

Seven years ago, Northumberland County had 260 children in the foster care system, a number that’s dropped to 68. The extreme drop in cases is a reflection on the steady push that the county Children Youth Services department has made to keep children out of foster care and with their families.

“We can finally say to parents, ‘We have a program to help you and keep you where you need to be,’” said Director of Social Services Leslie Ward. “We just didn’t have the resources before and we had to send kids straight to foster care.”

It takes work to keep families together, and Children and Youth Services Administrator Katrina Gownley is clear that the Family Engagement Center is not a Children and Youth outreach — it’s about the community.

“It is run by us, but it’s a different building and a different feel. It’s very homey and welcoming, a major gap that we are hoping to fill so that families don’t



DANIRAE RENNO/THE NEWS-ITEM

Pictured is a space for families to sit down and talk inside the new Northumberland County Family Engagement Center, an outreach to help families break harmful cycles and children who may otherwise end up in foster care.

have to come to our building,” Gownley said. “We are putting control back to families, because we know that family knows best.”

Partners in the Family Engagement Center include United Way, Transitions of Pennsylvania and Big Brother/Big Sister. The center will offer parenting classes, truancy prevention, life skills classes, individual and family therapy, crisis rapid response, family engagement and support groups.

The Family Engagement Center’s roots go back to 2019, when Northumberland County was one of three counties selected by the state to be part of the Family Engagement Initiative. After monthly group meetings between the courts and Children and Youth, the need for a center came to light.

“This building was sitting unused, so

from there the idea grew to see if we could create a space for family engagement and here we are,” said Northumberland County President Judge Charles Saylor. “It helps the courts when we know that there are these types of services and placements available as we try to come up with solutions and make orders from the bench.”

The Family Engagement Center hopes to provide help to families with breaking the cycle of dysfunction. It will offer culinary and woodshop classes, and is fitted with a full kitchen and washers and dryers.

“I think one of the gaps this closes is the gap with the community, because child abuse is not just a Children and Youth problem, it’s a community problem,” Gownley said. “We welcome community members to sit on our board, come to meetings and come here and do whatever

it takes to help families bridge the gap in addiction and family.”

For Ward, bridging the gap has a personal meaning.

“Every family has a story, and a lot of us say that every family is one step away from having a Children and Youth case,” Ward said. “I have a son in recovery and I’m considered a soccer mom where I live.”

The newly titled Family Engagement Supervisor, Melissa Eisenhour, has seen hundreds of families that could use services like the center throughout her 11 years of experience in Children and Youth. She worked six years in general protective services and three years in foster care.

“I’d like to help bridge the gap that has so many people lost between high school and where they are, because there are so many basic skills that people don’t have like budgeting, cooking, sewing, basic nurturing skills,” Eisenhour said. “I want things to get better for people, and we want to start getting them to break the cycle.”

Funding for the center was provided through federal, state and county funds, as well as grants for the different programs the center will provide.

Another initiative of the center will be to ease truancy numbers across the county. Children and Youth had 2,400 truancy referrals last year, so they’re starting a parent truancy awareness program in the center.

It’s quick responses like these that help the organization push out increasingly positive numbers.

“Research shows that even if a kid spends one day in foster care, it’s so traumatic for them,” Gownley said. “That’s why we look for relatives, but even then, kids want to be with their biological parents.”

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NORTHWESTERN PRESS



Girl Scouts earn Bronze, Silver, Gold awards

By Shannon Smedstad
Special to The Press

Over the past year, Girl Scouts in the Northwestern Lehigh area identified and fulfilled needs in the community.

Part of the Girl Scout experience is working toward three high awards.

Fourth and fifth graders can work on the Bronze Award. Middle schoolers can work toward the Silver Award and high school Girl Scouts work on earning the Gold Award.

To earn these awards, girls identify, plan, build, create and deliver various projects that make the community a better place.

Molly Schlofer and Lily Kinnon each earned the Silver Award.

Schlofer received the award for beautifying the Northwestern Lehigh Community Park softball fields.

Kinnon earned her award for putting together craft kits for the Lehigh Valley Health Network Pediatric Infusion Center.

Junior Troop 650 made pillows for and delivered them to Valley Youth House in Bethlehem.

The pillows will bring comfort to children staying in a VYH shelter.

Kourtney Keim, a graduate of Northwestern Lehigh, earned the highest Girl Scout award: the Gold Award.

Keim was recognized for her outstanding work to make and organize others to make large quantities of masks during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Members of Junior Troop 6602 earned their Bronze Awards by supporting Forgotten Felines and Fidos animal shelter in Germansville.

They made and donated toys and pillows, volunteered time cleaning at the shelter and setting up the outdoor catios, and donated Girl Scout Cookies to the shelter volunteers.

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Scouts with Junior Troop 650 made pillows for and delivered to Valley Youth House, Bethlehem.



Molly Schlofer earned her Silver Award for beautifying the Northwestern Lehigh Community Park softball fields.



Lily Kinnon shows the craft kits she put together for the Lehigh Valley Health Network Pediatric Infusion Center.

The Home News

Your Local News

Cinderella's Closet giving girls and gowns their fairy-tale moment

By Catherine Stroh

Do you have a prom gown you are thinking of getting rid of? Do you or someone you know need a prom gown? Cinderella's Closet is giving future prom-goers and beloved prom gowns a fairy-tale ending.

Cinderella's Closet is currently accepting prom gown donations in good condition through Friday, March 10 at the following sites:

- Vintage House of Hair, 60 S. Main St., Nazareth. Call 610-365-2455 for drop-off hours.
- American Legion, 278 Race St., Bath. Drop-off Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 2 to 5 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday from 5 to 8 p.m.
- Bath Municipal Hall, 121 S. Walnut St., Bath. Drop-off Monday-Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The magic will happen on Sunday, March 26 between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. at the American Legion in Bath, where anyone in need of a prom dress is invited to try on and take home the gown of their dreams on a first-come, first-served basis and at absolutely no cost. Anyone under the age of 18 should be accompanied by a guardian or adult. There will also be a sign-in sheet for prizes related to other prom needs such as hair, nails, flowers, etc. Gift card donations from hairdressers, florists, etc. are happily being accepted.

The idea for Cinderella's Closet came from Bath resident Robin DeReamus.

"I know how times are tough and I came from a household where money was tight. I loved my prom dress and kept it for 20 years because I just could not see just

dumping it off to Goodwill. I wanted to give it to another girl who would love it just as much as I did," said DeReamus of her inspiration behind Cinderella's Closet.

DeReamus said on the day of Cinderella's Closet the girls will be treated as if they had gone to a dress boutique. They will be properly measured so they know what sizes to shop for and assisted with trying on the dresses.

"We are [wishing for] all positive vibes and hope that they fall in love with a gown!" said DeReamus.

With prom being in May, DeReamus wanted to make sure there was plenty of time for the girls to pick out their gowns and get their alterations done. DeReamus said if there is a big response this year, the event can be expanded next year to include more days where girls can come and find their dream dress.

"To say I am incredibly grateful for Miss DeReamus is an understatement – if only others would care as much as she does for those less fortunate. I'm truly humbled that she shared her idea with me and look forward to a wonderful event," said Bath Mayor Fiorella Mirabito who was quickly on board to help spread the word.

"With so much hate going on in school with bullying and social media, I felt compelled to help our young girls in some way. This would be such a gift for someone who normally may not even go to prom, because getting a dress was impossible. I mean, who couldn't use a fairy godmother moment, right?" said DeReamus.

For further information or if you'd like to donate a gift or prize to Cinderella's Closet, call Robin DeReamus at 484-894-6370.

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THE DISPATCH

Locals work to have AED machines available at Little League fields

By Lauren Hagens
of Mainline Newspapers

Portage local Jean Kinley and Summerhill local Kelly Penatzer are trying to ensure that young athletes and sports attendees are kept safe in our county.

After recent events with professional NFL player Damar Hamlin, people have growing concerns over cardiovascular health surrounding athletes while playing sports.

Hamlin, a player for the Buffalo Bills, went into cardiac arrest during a football game on Jan. 2. Since then, health professionals have become more aware of these emergencies and want to make sure places are adequately equipped to handle a situation like this if it were to arise.

Kinley and Penatzer teach CPR classes, are prehospital oriented and are involved with their local ambulance services. Both women also enjoy sports.

At first, the two discussed trying to get Automatic External Defibrillators (AEDs) at the Portage and Summerhill baseball fields, but since then they have expanded their efforts.

"With the current events, we thought now would be a good time to start," said Penatzer.

They believe that all children and spectators should be protected when attending these games. In addition, there have been increased wait times and limited availability of EMS units in the area, so having AED machines readily available could save someone's life.

The two also emphasized that it's not just

the force of a hit to someone's chest that can cause a cardiovascular event. The placement of a seemingly minor hit can trigger a life-threatening arrhythmia.

Since first coming up with the idea, the two women looked to see where all of the teams travel to and began reaching out to those coaches and fields to see if they had AED machines.

Kinley said that she believes only two Little League baseball fields had AEDs, so they had to expand their project to make every child safe.

While many school districts have AED machines available at their athletic facilities, a lot of local fields do not have the funding or resources to have the machines on hand.

The two are now working on getting AED machines for fields in Portage, South Fork, Summerhill, New Germany, Adams Township, Lilly, Cresson, Gallitzin, Chest Springs, Patton, Northern Cambria, Ebensburg, Jackson Township, East Hills, Hastings, Johnstown, Nanty Glo, Conemaugh, Loretto, Colver and Revloc.

The two women have also been attending municipal meetings to tell local government officials about their project, which was designated the #3 Project.

"Sometimes we have to go through supervisors or council members, but everyone has been receiving it well," said Penatzer.

"Some of the municipalities have COVID money left too, so we want to try and see if they can donate any of that," added Kinley.

In addition to asking local municipalities if

While they are currently focusing on the Little League baseball teams having the machines, their overall hope is that they can be used by other sports leagues during their seasons.

they can contribute any funds, the two have also been asking local clubs and organizations to support the project as well. They are also trying to find grants that could help them fund the AEDs.

The #3 Project is being operated through the Portage Area Ambulance Association, as the association was able to negotiate a deal to bulk purchase AEDs.

Currently, the total purchase price for a setup is \$1,514, which has a \$764 savings on each unit. The women are planning on purchasing 27 AEDs for the county, which would total about \$41,000 for everything.

The selected machines are simplistic AEDs that work for both pediatric patients and adults. Instead of having to switch out the pads depending on the size of the patient, the machines will work for both kids and adults based on the push of a button.

"I think this is the best one to use

because it is easy and simple and saves time," said Kinley.

The two said they will happily train coaches or anyone who might have to use the machines.

While they are currently focusing on the Little League baseball teams having the machines, their overall hope is that they can be used by other sports leagues during their seasons.

"I truly feel like the coaches will pass them on to the next sport," said Penatzer.

Their first goal is to get all the AEDs ready by the start of the spring baseball season.

"The main goal is to flow from baseball to football to soccer and everything else. We want these to be available for all sports for all youth," Penatzer added.

They haven't worked out all of the details, as the #3 Project is fairly new, so they aren't sure if the coaches, local government officials or field/ park managers will be in charge of the machines.

The important part is that everyone has easy access to AEDs and that they can be stored properly during winter.

"An AED is something you hope you never have to use, but we all saw what CPR and defibrillation can do," said Kinley.

"We think we've covered everyone in the area, but others can contact us to see if we need to do another round," Penatzer said.

Those interested in getting involved in the project can email Kinley at jeankinley@verizon.net for more information.

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PHOTO BY THERESA AURIEMMO

Pictured is the Hannah Catherine Wolfe Memorial Playground at Kinzua Bridge State Park, created by the Kinzua Bridge Foundation Inc. This playground features two train-themed playgrounds. One is for children under 5, and the other is for children aged 5 and above.

Kinzua Bridge Foundation celebrates 30th anniversary

Preserving history and promoting Kinzua Bridge State Park

By Theresa Auriemmo
 Special to the Republican

The Kinzua Bridge Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit organization established on November 1, 1993, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Devoted to restoring and preserving the Kinzua Bridge, promoting its historical and cultural importance, and facilitating the development of the adjacent State Park, the foundation has played a vital role in supporting and enhancing the Kinzua Bridge State Park. Serving as a local voice and advocate, the foundation has worked to ensure the preservation and success of this iconic landmark.

Recognized as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization on April

13, 1995, the Foundation worked diligently to receive and invest monetary gifts and donations for the establishment or development of projects that serve the park's long-term interests.

Under the guidance of its members and officers, the Foundation has made substantial contributions to the park's preservation and promotion. Mary Ann Burggraf serves as the Executive Director, leading the Foundation alongside Jeffrey Wolfe as the President. Additional officers include Kim Magnetti as the Vice President, Deborah Lunden as the Secretary, and Deb Kilmer as the Treasurer.

A cornerstone of the Foundation's efforts is the annual Fall Festival, which serves as their major fundraising event

for the year. The festival, held on the third weekend in September, features a vibrant array of arts, crafts, food vendors, and live musical entertainment. However, due to circumstances such as the 2003 tornado damage, the construction of the Sky Walk in 2009, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, some editions of the festival had to be canceled. This year, the Fall Festival will return on September 16 and 17.

Throughout its history, the Foundation has actively engaged in various activities and initiatives at the Park. In 2002, it launched a petition drive titled "Save the Bridge" to urge the state to allocate funds for the stabilization and rehabilitation of the historic Kinzua Bridge. Tragically, in

Continued on next page

July 2003, an F1 tornado struck the bridge, resulting in significant destruction. Undeterred, the Foundation conducted fundraisers to support the rebuilding efforts, culminating in the Kinzua Bridge Commemoration Day event held in September 2003.

In addition to their advocacy work, the Foundation has played a vital role in multiple improvement projects at the park. Following the tornado's aftermath, the Foundation participated in two Clean-up Day events in 2004, assisting in refurbishing the park for visitors. However, when the governor determined that the Kinzua Bridge would not be rebuilt, the Foundation shifted its focus towards making improvements to the State Park itself.

In 2004, the Foundation collaborated with the park authorities to allow Boy Scouts to conduct work projects and camping in a special day-use area, contributing to the park's maintenance and enhancement efforts.

That same year, the Foundation embarked on an endeavor to secure funding for the rehabilitation of the remaining tower. Through a successful letter writing campaign involving local and county officials, as well as organizations, the Foundation managed to secure \$1 million in State Capital Budget funding.

The Foundation's contributions extended beyond fundraising and advocacy. They donated an apple press to the Park for cider-making demonstrations during events and the annual Fall Festival.

In 2009, the Foundation conducted yet another petition drive to "Save the Bendigo Complex-Kinzua Bridge State Park" from closing due to severe budget cuts proposed in the State budget. No parks closed that year. Additionally, they assisted in organizing a book signing event for author Brian Weakland, with book sales benefiting the Foundation.

The Foundation initiated the Commemorative Brick Pathway project in 2010. The bricks were initially laid by the entrance to the Skywalk in 2012 and unveiled during the Fall Festival. However, they have since been relocated and now form a Keystone in front of the Visitor Center. This project serves as an ongoing endeavor and a continual fundraiser for the Foundation.

The Foundation also played a pivotal role in the organization and sponsorship of the opening of the Skywalk on September 15, 2011, actively assisted in coordinating the event and provided support as a sponsor.

When the Historical Marker at the State Park disappeared following the tornado, the Foundation collaborated with the park to replace it. They split the cost of the replacement marker, which was prominently unveiled during the Skywalk opening ceremony on September 15, 2011. The Foundation has also been instrumental in addressing various needs of the park, such as signage replacement, upgrades to the entrance road, and the installation of bear-proof garbage containers.

Recognizing the park's achievements, the Foundation nominated it for the "Park of the Year" award in 2012 (which it won) and provided a sign acknowledging the award and purchased a glass hexagonal case to display the wooden bowl award in the Visitors Center.



PHOTO BY THERESA AURIEMMO

Pictured is the Keystone formed by commemorative bricks in front of the Visitor Center at the Kinzua Bridge State Park.

The Foundation has actively participated in the Park's History Day and Heritage Day events, selling merchandise to raise funds for future projects.

In 2013, the Foundation purchased a time capsule to commemorate the Park's 50th anniversary, with the capsule set to be opened in 2063. They also wrote a letter to the governor encouraging the construction of the Visitors Center and made donations to the Lutheran Home for the Presents for Patients program and to the Kane Rotary for their annual auction.

In 2014 and 2015, the Fall Festival had to be canceled due to the ongoing construction of the Visitor Center. However, the Foundation remained active in participating in various events as a means to sell merchandise and raise funds by attending notable gatherings such as the Kane 150th event, the Swedish Festival, Flickerwood Winery Festival, and the McKean County Historical Society Pig Roast at the County Fairgrounds. It also played a crucial role in the groundbreaking ceremony for the Visitors Center, covering half of the catering costs.

In 2015, the Foundation's members continued fundraising efforts by attending various events. They participated in a meeting to review and provide feedback on the Visitors Center exhibits before finalization. Additionally, sharing the cost of refreshments with the Allegheny National Forest Visitors Bureau.

The Fall Festival made a comeback in 2016, and the

Foundation took part in the Swedish Festival as a vendor, and attended the Grand Opening of the Visitor Center on September 15th, providing refreshments for the event. Furthermore, the Foundation entered into a partnership with the PA Wilds Cooperative to sell their t-shirts and sweatshirts in the gift shop located within the Visitor Center.

The Fall Festival returned again in 2017, with the Foundation funding the purchase of a plaque to honor Odo Valentine. In the same year, the Time Capsule was finally sealed and placed in the Visitors Center, with the intention of opening it in 2063. The Foundation also made a donation to the State Park to provide donuts and coffee for a Veterans Day event.

Continuing involvement, the Foundation held in the Fall Festival in 2018, purchased a bronze plaque for the large stone where the brick keystone is located, and made donations to the Kane Rotary for their annual auction, Project Graduation in Kane, and the General Kane event in Kane, PA.

One significant project undertaken by the Foundation was the construction of a playground with a train theme. Despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Foundation successfully raised funds and completed the project in 2021, held a dedication ceremony, naming the playground in memory of "Hannah Catherine Wolfe," and unveiled a bronze plaque honoring major donors.

It has also donated funds to the park for various initiatives, including the mounting of a bobcat for display at the Center, the planting of a pollinator garden, the purchase of bird seed for winter, and support for a winter dog-sled event.

In 2022, the Foundation held the Fall Festival once again, attended a Columbus Day event in October, donated funds to the "I Kid A Rod" event at the Park.

As the Foundation celebrates its 30th anniversary, its dedication and support for Park have played a crucial role in preserving the historical legacy and promoting the Park's continued success. Through their ongoing efforts, fundraising initiatives, and collaborations with park authorities, the Foundation has made a lasting impact on the preservation, improvement, and visitor experience at the Park.

Looking ahead, the Foundation plans to celebrate its 30th anniversary, the State Park's 60th anniversary, and the 20th anniversary of the F1 tornado in 2023. It will hold the Fall Festival and continue to attend other events at the Park, further contributing to its growth and development.

For those interested in joining the Kinzua Bridge Foundation, applications can be requested from a member or via their website. The Foundation's website, www.kinzuabridgefoundation.com, provides comprehensive information about its initiatives. Contact can also be made via email at kbf@kinzuabridgefoundation.com, and updates can be found on the Facebook page by searching for Kinzua Bridge Foundation.

Published July 17, 2023



HISTORY PRESERVED, PART 2:

The Media Plus Club & Central Penn's lost radio station

By Dylan Bowman
Knightly News Reporter

As the rich history of the Boyer House accumulated into a final story during the summer term this year, another golden nugget, previously unknown to the majority of the school, surfaced.

Did you know Central Penn used to have a radio station?

Neither did I, nor did any other member of The Knightly News Media Club, or any student or staff we reached out to. It was as if this radio station had fallen clear off the map nearly 30 years ago and was never heard of again. I jumped at the opportunity to uncover such a lost treasure.

Here is what we found.

From FM to AM

Though a powerful resource, the Internet often has little to say about local histories or small operations of the past. That's why we turned to Central Penn College alums to find our answers.

And find them we did.

According to several alums who were communications (known then as mass media) students at the time of the radio station's operation, it started as an FM stationcall-signed WCPR.

Operated by the Media Plus Club, the station lived from about 1980 to 1984. Even with help from available alums, not much else is known about this elusive part of Central Penn's history.

Some research indicated that the WCPR FM license was sold to Temple University and the signal from Central Penn College went dark for several years. That is, until a



FROM A CENTRAL PENN YEARBOOK AMONG HOLDINGS OF THE COLLEGE'S LIBRARY

The Central Penn Business School's Media Plus Club, 1983. Front row (left to right): Cynthia A. Corle, C. Saylor, Susan M. Boyer. Back row (left to right): Trudy A. McCauslin, Karla K. Brandt, K. Palmer, N. Freireich and Debra A. Pyle.

few years later, in the late '80s, when new students expressed interest in reviving Central Penn's radio presence. Shortly after, Central Penn was back on the air, broadcasting to the Summerdale area with a new call sign: WARP 640 AM. As an AM station, the connection between the old and new radio stations was hard to find, as the licensing of both was nearly a decade apart. This resurrected WARP 640 station, however, was also short-lived, lasting from 1988 to 1993.

Memories of the major

As research continued on this increasingly extensive history, The Knightly

movie cameras and tape recorders!"

Just as The Knightly News Media Club of today has Professor Paul Miller and Professor Michael Lear-Olimpi as mentors, Fahnestock and Reigle made clear that the Media Plus Club had mentors, too.

Well remembered by alums of that time are Adjunct Professor Barry Fox (considered a "professional in the radio world"), Professor Robert Emerick (taught serigraphy – silkscreening – and mass media), Department Chair P. Rodger Magriney (taught photography, radio and TV broadcasting) and Central Penn faculty member Ron Ross, who was instrumental in reviving Central Penn's radio station as WARP 640 AM.

Signals from the past

Reigle, a mass media student from 1988-1990, and Fahnestock, a mass media student from 1990-1992, both recalled the Central Penn Business School radio program being stationed in The Underground, specifically Room 35, where the office of Athletic Director Kasey Hicks is now

According to the alums, the room was extremely small, allowing for only about two people to sit with the equipment: two turntables, a CD-player rack, a cassette player, a reel-to-reel projector and a phone with a red notification light that allowed for on-the-air phone calls from the public.

"I did arrange for some other students I was friends with to call into the show to make it appear that somebody was listening," Fahnestock admitted. "I also played a lot of music."

News had the honor of meeting with two alums who were part of the mass media program at the time: Craig Fahnestock and Dean Reigle.

Upon returning to campus, both had stories to tell.

"There was a very small amount, about 12 students, in the whole mass media program when I was here," Fahnestock stated.

Reigle confirmed these thoughts.

"We (mass media students) were basically made fun of because we didn't have any books like other majors did," Reigle said. "We were carrying around

Continued on next page

Similar to today's communications and corporate communications program, all mass media students worked with a mix of mediums to heighten their skills across the board before graduation.

Central Penn alums Ann Marie Knorr-Fischer reminisced on this aspect of her education.

"Since back then the degree was mass media, all students had to take a variety of classes," Knorr-Fischer stated. "So, we all dabbled in radio, TV, PR (public relations) and graphic art, until our second year, when we chose a focus."

The broadcast video room

On a tour of the Central Penn campus, Fahnestock and Reigle pointed out where everything had been in The Underground: the stairwell they descended as students to get to the radio room, the existence of the same space from which their airwaves had emanated, the fact that they and their mass media friends had hung out in The Underground hallway – and another unexpected bombshell. Pointing at the yoga section of the gym, both echoed a memory of something else unknown to the current media club: a video broadcast room.

According to the alums, the space was once filled with professional broadcast and communication equipment, including two to three television cameras, black curtains, lighting sources and a large desk where students acting as anchors could sit, fulfilling their requirements for various video class projects.

This room and its equipment were used to create "mock TV show broadcasts" that would allow the mass media students to become accustomed to a life behind the camera. Other projects, such as 30-second commercials and other personalized projects (music videos and campus-event videos) were created to instill media-based skills in those students.

Impact of the Media Plus Club

Both the radio station and broadcast room were used for numerous general and special events that benefited what was once known as the Central Pennsylvania Business School.

Fahnestock and Reigle each had memories of how the club and mass media program operated on a regular basis.

"We, the school in general, did a fundraising event called Hands Across



Media Plus Club member working on printing/press project.

America," Fahnestock stated. "We all got together, put paint on our hands and then made a big mural of handprints. I don't remember what exactly the fundraiser was for, but I remember recording some of that project. I also remember we got some local PR out of it, like a local TV station."

Upon further investigation into a 1992 "Video Yearlook" VHS tape created and provided by Fahnestock for this article's research, this fundraiser footage was found, depicting the event and handprint mural exactly as Fahnestock had described.

It was quite a historical gem to behold.

Knorr-Fischer also shared her memories of the club's impact.

"We did a big Halloween dance both years I was there that the radio station sponsored," Knorr-Fischer stated. "I also did a new wave/pop show in the evening (I was really big into Duran Duran; that was my style of music back then)."

Most of the alums also stated that they were heavily involved with interviewing and recording audio segments outside of class, especially on campus, for class projects.

Central Penn's 1983 yearbook (during the time of the WCPR station) also is testimony that the Media Plus Club served the college by "selling surprise birthday parties to parents of freshmen" by "baking a cake, decorating it and then taking pictures of the student to send to their parents." The yearbook also mentions that

they provided advertising services to other clubs.

The club also produced flyers and newsletters that were then printed in an off-campus facility as part of a printing class. As part of the mass media program, these were the equivalent of the current Knightly News publication that presents in a printed edition articles published on the club's blog.

Impact on alums

As this historical mystery of Central Penn's past was uncovered, it was interesting to hear the impact the mass media program and radio station had on these Central Penn College graduates.

After many a story was shared, The Knightly News asked the group of former students how they had been affected by the school and their time in the mass media program, particularly while working at the radio station.

"A skill I picked up here (Central Penn) was reading out loud," Reigle said. "You have to read out loud to understand if you can say the words and pronounce them. I still do that!"

Knorr-Fischer mentioned other skills.

"Being a station manager taught me how to be a leader and how to spot talent, which I have used over the course of my career," she said. "It also taught me how to look at all aspects of the media and how they all work together."

Another Central Penn alum and radio-station manager who assisted with research by providing knowledge of photos found in this article, Susan Teeple, shared the radio station/mass media program's impact on her.

"My experience with Central Penn's mass media program and the radio station taught me how to quickly compose and present factual and appealing concepts across multiple platforms," Teeple stated. "To this day (40 years later), I continue to draw from the copywriting skills I crafted while at school."

Fahnestock added his input on the effect the program had on him.

"I think for the most part, the mass media program really helped me learn how to problem-solve – adapt and find solutions – got me out of my comfort zone, made me do things that I never thought I could do or would do or wanted to do and just set me on the path of who I am and who I became as a person," he said. "As I think

back throughout my professional life, I always come back to where it all began for me: Central Penn."

Fahnestock is working at the Pennsylvania Municipal Authorities Association and hopes to open a brewery in the Harrisburg area.

Teeple lives in West Virginia, working in constituent services for a county-government office, assisting visitors with vital records, deeds, wills and research projects.

Knorr-Fischer works for BRP Entertainment as an entertainment consultant, helping clients book local and national speakers, and entertainment, for events.

Reigle is creating videos in which he reads to his audience through his YouTube channel "Reading Little Blue Books" and does so under the name "Dean Shunkwiler" on TikTok and Instagram.

On-air legacy

With the mystery drawing to a close, it is amazing to see just how far we've come.

At the beginning of this journey, Central Penn College and The Knightly News Media Club knew nothing about this hidden gem. Now, with the lost radio station finally being recovered, students, staff, faculty and the community at large can enjoy the story of a local treasure buried for so many years.

Central Penn College was once on the air!

If you are a student or faculty member passing through campus this semester, take a moment. Go to The Underground and think for an instant what transpired in those few rooms, now filled with new material and serving a new purpose.

This respect for the past is where school spirit comes from. Never forget that. To learn more about Central Penn's radio stations, visit The Knightly News Media Club's website to listen to Episode #161 of The Knightly News Podcast, where club co-adviser and podcast producer Professor Paul Miller and I interview Fahnestock and Reigle to hear their stories.

Bowman is co-president of The Knightly News Media Club @ Central Penn College, its CPC Film Series reviewer and chief photographer.

Comment or story? Contact KnightlyEditors@CentralPenn.Edu.

Edited by media-club co-adviser and blog editor Professor Michael Lear-Olimpi.

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THE RIDGWAY RECORD

Ukrainian native Elizabeth Groff shares story on how shoebox gift changed her life

By Jake Mercer
Staff Writer

ST. MARYS- Elizabeth Groff, who is a national spokesperson for The Samaritan's Purse Project Operation Christmas Child, visited Faith Baptist Church in St. Marys this past Saturday to share her story on how a shoebox gift changed the trajectory of her life.

Ridgway residents have participated in the Operation Christmas Child project for years, which has over 4,000 donation sites across the country and asks for donations of school supplies, hygiene items, and more.

Groff grew up in southern Ukraine and dealt with major adversity in her life from the start.

When she was only one year old, her father tragically lost his life in an alcohol related accident.

After the loss of her husband, Groff's mother used alcohol to cope with the pain of his absence.

A few years later, Groff's mother gave birth to her sister, Tanya. Knowing that she could not support two children on her own, the family moved in with their grandparents in a nearby village.

The village provided a better life for Groff and her sister, but their mother's drinking habits continued to go in the wrong direction. She was not around to take care of her kids during this time, and Groff's grandparents grew older and were unable to work.

As a result, the family lost all of their land that they depended on to plant food and became very poor. Groff quickly became the head of the household, as she was tasked with taking care of her sister and her grandparents.

She recounted times in the village where she would be going door to door begging others in the village for food due to being too young to work.

Around the same time, Groff's mother became pregnant once again with another child, and Groff now had to take care of two kids. Sadly, Groff's youngest sister passed away at just seven months old because Groff's mother fed her alcohol instead of milk.

Groff knew to protect her sister, Tanya, they had to leave the village and get away from their mother. The sisters, at the young ages of seven and five, decided to hop on a bus and run away.

The two were noticed at a bus stop as being displaced by a clerk at a store near the stop, and were taken to a detention center in Ukraine.

Life was better for the sisters there, as they had basic necessities and kids around their age to play with.

After a year at the detention center, the biological father of Groff's sister came to the center after being notified of where she was placed. Groff was left behind to fend for herself after this individual told her she was not wanted by him because Groff ' wasn't his daughter.'

"All I felt was heartbreak," Groff said. "The only family I had left was being taken away from me."

The trajectory of Groff's life changed when Operation Christmas Child came to her orphanage to deliver their shoebox donations.

The shoebox was packed full of items, including a coloring book, school supplies, and hygiene items. However, one item in particular stuck out to the ten year old at the time.

"My favorite item was a yellow yo-yo," Groff said. "It represented hope that there would be better things to come."

Better things would come for Groff. She had the opportunity to travel to Virginia for two weeks as a member of the orphanage choir through a program they had set up in the state.

During the second week of the choir's stay, Groff visited a home which would become hers permanently. Groff's adoptive father felt a calling from a higher power that Groff would be his adoptive daughter after her visit.

Now 13 years old, Groff called the United States her home. Once finding out that she received her shoebox from Operation Christmas Child, she wanted it to pay it forward. With the help of her adoptive family, Groff packed 100 boxes the first year she participated in Operation Christmas Child and made it a tradition each year.

Years later, Groff went off to college at Virginia Tech University, and decided to establish an Operation Christmas Child club on campus. With the blessing directly from legendary head football coach Frank Beamer, Groff got the Virginia Tech football team to pack shoeboxes.

Now living in Galveston, Texas and having a job in the healthcare field, Groff continues to speak around the country on how Operation Christmas Child impacted her life.

Late in 2021, Groff was reunited with her sister after 20 years of being apart. A year later, Groff and her adoptive Dad worked with different churches to get her sister and nephew out of war-torn Ukraine.

Their efforts were successful, and her sister and nephew live with Groff and her husband in their Texas home.

Groff returned to Ukraine this past



PHOTO BY JAKE MERCER

Elizabeth Groff of Operation Christmas Child visited Faith Baptist Church in St. Marys to share how one donation from the project changed her life.

January to deliver Operation Christmas Child's 200 millionth shoebox.

"I was so excited to be able to take that gift and give it to a child in my home country," Groff said.

Groff urged those in attendance to keep packing these shoeboxes each year

"I'm so thankful for the person that packed my shoebox," Groff said. "They may never know the impact it made on my life."

Operation Christmas Child will embark on its 30th year in ministry this year.

For more information on how to get involved in Operation Christmas Child, visit samaritanspurse.org.

Published April 25, 2023

\$100G held up amid fire probe

Victims' relative wants answers about fatal 2022 Nescopeck blaze

By **Susan Schwartz**
Press Enterprise Writer

NESCOPECK – More than \$100,000 donated to help the survivors of a fire that killed 10 people a year ago today remains locked up in a bank account because investigators haven't finished their investigation.

Meanwhile, Harold Baker, who lost his son, daughter, grandson and several in-laws in the blaze, is haunted by unanswered questions: Was it arson? If so, who set it?

The fire at 733 First St. here broke out on the porch just after 2 a.m. Friday, Aug. 5, 2022. It went up quickly and only four people escaped. Among the 10 who perished were three children.

Normally, the State Police fire marshal releases at least basic information about fires within days. In this case, the fire marshal said he turned the report over to the Shickshinny barracks, where his findings have remained secret as part of a criminal investigation.

State Police in Shickshinny say the investigation remains open.

This week, Trooper Albert Oliveri said the investigation into the fire is ongoing. He could release no details nor explain why it is taking so long to close the case.

He added the State Police have nothing to do with the withholding of funds from the victims for whom they are intended.

A lawyer advising the managers of the GoFundMe account said he has recommended avoiding doing anything with the money until the case has been closed.

Meanwhile, Baker said he and his wife, Rebecca, have not been able to pay the funeral home that buried Rebecca's father, David Daubert Sr., and brother Brian Daubert.

But Baker said the money issues are not what bother him most.

"We still have no answers," he said. "None of us got no closure in this."

Tragedy twice over

The fire claimed the lives of David Daubert Sr., 79; Brian Daubert, 42; Shannon Daubert, 45; Laura Daubert, 47; Marian Slusser, 54; Star Baker, 22; Dale Baker, 19; and three children, Aiden Daubert, 6; Ariana Trout, 7; and Bradley Trout, 5.

The office of Luzerne County Coroner Jill Matthews said all 10 victims died of smoke inhalation, and she ruled their deaths accidental.

Four residents escaped the flames, Baker said: David Daubert Jr., David Hons, Austin Kerns, and a man he knew only as Uncle John.

Eight days later, the family suffered another loss when a motorist drove through a crowd at a fundraiser to help them, killing another relative, Rebecca Reese, 50, and injuring 17 other people.

Adrian Oswaldo Sura Reyes, 25, was sentenced to two life imprisonments last month for that murder and the killing of his own mother that day, along with 123 to 380 years for 19 counts of attempted homicide.

The incident was unrelated to the fire.

Mayor: Have patience

Nescopeck Mayor Massina urged patience with investigators.

"These things take time," he said. "You see lots of investigations on the news that take months or years to come to a conclusion."

But his daughter, Robin Massina, who set up the fund to help the survivors, feels they and the town should have answers by now.

"This impacted everyone," she said. "It affected a lot of people. Kids lost students who sat next to them in class. Teachers lost students."

A local excavator helped find the bodies of the people who died, then returned to bury one of their dogs, she said.

"The whole town pulled together," she recalled. "People donated water to firefighters and the family. They donated food, and clothes, and grief counseling."

And they gave shocking amounts of money, she said.

Funds tied to probe

Massina started a GoFundMe campaign for the family, arranging for donations to go into a First Keystone Community Bank account, opened for that express purpose. The bank also accepted direct donations on behalf of the families.

As the amount climbed, Massina said, she didn't feel comfortable being responsible for it. So she turned over management of the funds to another grandfather of the children who died in the blaze. He, in turn, used his own money to hire a lawyer to help him, she said. That attorney arranged for the money to stay put until the investigation was complete.

"We didn't want to give out \$10,000 to someone and then find out they started the fire," she said.

On Friday, Ed Ciarimboli, of Fellerman Ciarimboli law firm in Kingston confirmed the firm is advising the funds remain where they are for now.

"The money is in the GoFundMe account pending the completion of the Pennsylvania State Police investigation," he said. "Once that is completed and there is a determination as to the cause and origin of the fire, it will be distributed immediately."

Robin Massina said she and the grandfather told survivors and relatives to contact them for funeral expenses, rental deposits, clothes, furniture, food and other needs. She would like to talk to the Bakers to see if she could tap the donation fund to help them pay the funeral home.

Marking the day

Family members continue to grieve, Baker said.

This would have been a banner year for his daughter, Star.

"Star would have been getting married this year," he said.

Baker is a volunteer with Nescopeck Fire Co. The day of the blaze, he rushed to the burning house but was beaten back by flames.

His son, Dale, became a firefighter in Nescopeck at 16. He used to ride his bicycle to the fire scenes or the fire hall, where he would wait for his father, Baker remembered.

He'd picked up his application to join Berwick's Reliance two weeks before the fire, and was posthumously voted into that company.

So every time Baker responds to a page, he says he misses Dale.

He and Rebecca have been getting counseling, he said. But bearing the loss hasn't gotten any easier.

"Nothing helps," he said. "No one can give our family back."

He recently joined Ranger Hose Company, he said. Keeping busy makes him feel better.

"It's the only place I feel comfortable, out there protecting people," Baker said.

Family members are preparing to mark the anniversary of the deaths with a private memorial for relatives and firefighters, he said.

"They all knew my son," he said. "This hurt them real bad. It hurt us all."

"Pray for my family."

Susan Schwartz covers the Berwick area. She can be reached at 570-387-1234, ext. 1306, and susan.schwartz@pressenterprise.net, or followed on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/PESueSchwartz>.

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Indiana Gazette

Purchase Line student launches crisis training program with pilot event

By Nathan Zisk

nzisk@indianagazette.net

Purchase Line School District 11th-grade student Anna Layden, 16, launched the Think Quick initiative, a program aimed at teaching students how to respond to crisis situations, on Thursday, April 27, at the district's high school library.

Layden, who developed Think Quick, said the program focuses on giving students access to training and lessons that would help them properly react to crisis situations such as shootings, medical emergencies, accidents and more.

At the April 27 pilot event, three STAT MedEvac officials oversaw "stop the bleed" training for Purchase Line juniors and seniors. During the training, students used gauze and tourniquets on mannequin limbs to learn how to prevent blood loss in crisis situations involving open wounds.

STAT MedEvac officials Cynthia Snyder, MHA, NREMT-P, CCEMT-P, FP-C; Matt Horton, FPC, NRP; and Joe Caldwell, NRP, FP-C, taught students how to apply pressure to wounds with their hands, pack and press wounds to control bleeding and apply tourniquets to limbs.

Snyder, Horton and Caldwell also presented an informative slide show to students before breaking into groups of 10 for training.

"(Snyder brought) all the equipment," Layden said. "She (had) an educational slide show about stop the bleed as well. She talk(ed) about different do's and don'ts when you see someone you may need to use stop the bleed practices on."

Layden said roughly 100 students participated in the hour-and-a-half training sessions that took place throughout the school day.

Benjamin Bush, the district director for



NATHAN ZISK/GAZETTE

Purchase Line 11th-grade student Anna Layden, 16, developed the Think Quick initiative to help train people in how to respond to crisis situations.

Sen. Joe Pittman, R-Indiana, was also present at the pilot event.

Layden visited Pittman's office in October 2022 to promote Think Quick as well as garner the senator's support. Pittman told Layden he wanted to support the Think Quick initiative and suggested Layden start small with a pilot event at her school.

"It sounded like a fantastic idea," Bush said. "We appreciated her initiative, so we suggested she try to get a pilot program set up."

Bush, who said he's participated in numerous stop the bleed trainings due to his background in law enforcement, said the pilot event was a success.

"I've done all this in the past, but it's been awesome to see the kids learn these skills because you need them anywhere," Bush said. "You could be driving down the road and see an accident. You could be

walking through the community, and somebody could fall and need help, and now (these students) have the ability and skills thanks to Anna's efforts. ... I think (the pilot event) was executed very well. The students seemed engaged and understanding of the process."

Bush said he and Pittman plan to continue supporting Layden's efforts and the Think Quick initiative with hopes it will expand.

Layden's ultimate goal with Think Quick goes well beyond stop the bleed training at Purchase Line. She plans to incorporate CPR and AED, first aid, "run, hide, fight" and various other trainings into the program, and she hopes other school districts across the state and nation will pick up Think Quick as a model for crisis training.

"I hope to get all this training in other school districts as well," Layden said. "I want to develop a model for other schools to follow. I would present the model to them to show what works for us, what could work for them ... and allow (the districts) to see the educational programs and almost pick and choose what works for their school.

"But I would greatly encourage having the most educational programs possible to (train) the most amount of people."

Layden said increasing access to the trainings she plans to offer through Think Quick could help contribute to a safer community.

"I wanted to start (Think Quick) so people could feel safer in their everyday lives and in their communities," Layden said. "If people knew how to respond in crisis situations, we'd have a safer community and world. And with crisis situations happening every day ... there are so many different instances where someone might

need this type of training to help them."

Layden said she came up with Think Quick after a Purchase Line marching band trip last summer to Kennywood. A few weeks after attending the trip to Kennywood, Layden heard there was a shooting at the amusement park.

"When I initially heard there was a shooting at Kennywood and that my group and peers had just been there weeks prior, I felt unprepared," Layden said, "and I knew my peers would feel unprepared. ... I really thought I wouldn't know how to react and my fellow peers wouldn't know how to react in a crisis situation such as a shooting."

But Layden said the programs she wants to offer through Think Quick would be applicable to more than just shootings.

"(Think Quick can help with) any type of dangerous situation (in which) people might not know how to react," Layden said. "If someone is choking at school, basic first aid might include the Heimlich maneuver, and that can help. Stop the bleed training can (be used) in school shootings, but it can even (be used) if someone is cooking at home and gets cut by a knife and needs help. If there's a pool with no life guard and someone needs CPR, (this training) may save someone's life."

As for the future of Think Quick, Layden said she wants to turn the initiative into a nonprofit organization.

"Hopefully, in the fall, I'll be bringing a CPR and AED program to Purchase Line students and possibly stop the bleed training to other school districts in Indiana County," Layden said. "For the spring, I'm not quite sure yet, but I'm hoping to expand it even more to more students and more people in Indiana County. I'm super excited for the future of Think Quick."

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The Montgazette

The Students' Voice



PHOTO BY RACHEL YEHEZKEL

“The bees do a lot for us, not just with making honey and beeswax but also with pollination. Having bees in your backyard makes it easy to grow fruit trees and vegetable gardens.”

Ofer Yehezkel

Backyard beekeeping: Beneficial or blameworthy?

Gavriel Yehezkel

The Montgazette Contributor

At a time when environmental concern for pollinators has spiked, and support for local businesses has grown, local beekeepers have been making the best of a complicated situation.

Over the past few years, many have heard about the “Save the Bees” campaign. This initiative is based on statistics that indicate several bee species have become endangered, which caught the attention of many newfound beekeepers worldwide. These new beekeepers have begun efforts to attract more bees by increasing the amount of flora and fauna in their area.

Five years ago, Ofer and Rachel Yehezkel noticed a severe lack of pollinators on a walk during what used to be the busiest time of year for bees in their area. The couple dreamed of owning a farm one day, so they decided to take their first step by backyard beekeeping.

“We’d always wanted to try beekeeping but didn’t think it’d be for a long while. Later on, we looked into the environmental benefits, as well as financial, and decided it’d be a great idea to try our hand at the beekeeping business,” said Rachel Yehezkel.

Soon after, business was booming, as the two set up stands in various local farmer’s markets. From Horsham to Abington to Glenside, they quickly became

one of the biggest businesses in the Philadelphia area for bee products.

“The bees do a lot for us,” Ofer Yehezkel says, “not just with making honey and beeswax but also with pollination. Having bees in your backyard makes it easy to grow fruit trees and vegetable gardens.”

Even though it seems like there is no bigger benefit to nature than cultivating a pollination powerhouse, could honeybees be over-pollinating? Although many types of bees are under threat of endangerment, honeybees are not. In fact, there are more honeybees today than ever. It begs the question, are honeybees pushing out other pollinators?

The answer: It depends. Beekeeping, as

a hobby, usually does not require enough hives to affect pollinator competition. However, large food corporations often hire beekeepers to move beehives into their orchards for a more fruitful blossom. This usually ends up pushing natural pollinators out of their native environment.

There are remedies. Growing a garden or planting simple lawn flowers can encourage the growth of native pollinators, such as bumblebees or butterflies, which can thrive in these local areas.

Overall, supporting local honey businesses is not a disservice, but an incentive to appreciate nature’s lasting bounty.

Published October 2022



Assistance given to veterans, first responders

Kristen Stagg

Staff Reporter/Dillsburg Banner

Several area men are members of a board that assists veterans and first responders in achieving wellness through a foundation that supports a three-pronged approach.

Boots To Health Foundation is run by an eight-member board that includes Don Trott, 82, of Carroll Township; Doug Lemley, 53, of Monaghan Township; and Logan Spiewak, 24, of Franklin Township.

While all three men are active on the board, the younger man also serves as a personal trainer to veterans and first responders in his Boots To Health (BTH) gym that the Foundation supports.

It all started in 2021 when Spiewak, a Mechanicsburg native, was newly discharged from the Marines after an ankle injury. He found himself at loose ends what to do next since his dream of Marine service ended so unexpectedly.

He was working out when he ran into Trott, a fellow confessed "gym rat." Trott admired Spiewak's unusual sneakers. Spiewak pegged the older man as a down-on-his-luck widower, so bought Trott a pair of the admired sneakers the following day. Trott, a retired businessman, thanked Spiewak but assured him he could afford to buy sneakers if he needed them. Spiewak waved him off, but continued to engage in regular conversations with Trott throughout the summer.

Then came the day Trott challenged Spiewak: "Where's your spiritual health?" Spiewak had run-ins with the law from middle school clear through high school, and while he'd long since abandoned the so-called friends who dragged him along on lawbreaking activities, he hadn't outrun the guilt and shame of his past.

Trott's challenge resulted in Spiewak's becoming a born-again Christian. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Spiewak started working as a personal trainer in March of 2022 and opened his gym later that same year. He focused on assisting both military - past and present - and first responders to achieve wellness through a three-pronged approach: physical training, nutritional coaching, and counseling. He was mentored by Trott, whose backing was key in forming the 501(c)(3) foundation that makes Spiewak's services available to those who might not otherwise be able to afford them.



Personal trainer Logan Spiewak, center, helps clients with a strength-building exercise at his Boots to Health gym in Mechanicsburg.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Trott, a 30-year resident of Carroll Township, says, "I have 58 years in faith-based fundraising, so I've learned a thing or two along the way."

He helped Spiewak set up Boots To Health Foundation (BTHF) and its board, of which he himself is the co-founder and chief operating officer.

The foundation's eight-member board uses an application process to vet prospective recipients based on criteria that includes the seriousness of their intent, commitment to the three-month-long program, and need.

Lemley, vice chair of BTHF for less than a year, says he was struck by the unique approach of the BTH process. "You always feel better mentally after working out," he says, "or, at least, I do. So you're automatically getting a mental boost. But the reverse isn't necessarily true. If you spend time in therapy you don't necessarily get a physical boost from it."

Lemley says unlike other programs for veterans, BTH's emphasis is on physical well-being and faith. And for anyone who needs it, BTHF offers professional counseling as well.

Lemley knows something about the process from personal experience. He's been working out with Spiewak three times a week for three months. He's shed at least an inch from his waist, but is far more interested in the reduced stress and improved sleep he's seen. "I know this

works," he says, "[which is why] I was happy to join the board and get involved in helping others."

Online marketing, referrals from local veterans service organizations and word-of-mouth ensure that Spiewak is busy six days a week.

The Foundation has provided over 250 personal training sessions in his gym through financial aid resulting from funds provided by individuals and companies, bolstered by grants.

While Trott's experience in fundraising was key to getting the foundation started, recent health issues required the octogenarian to step back his involvement. Lemley admits it was Trott's connections that resulted in "promises for sizable donations" to BTHF late in the spring. BTHF's marketing materials reached production in July, less than a week before Trott's hospitalization.

Still, the BTHF board continues to move forward. Long-range plans include expanding the BTH gym to larger facilities, hiring additional trainers, and keeping the unique approach to holistic health for veterans and first responders affordable to those in need.

The loudest praise comes from BTH "graduates." One said, "Seeing the positive impact [Spiewak] had on me, I'm excited to help other veterans find the same support."

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HERALD-Standard

Officials: New procedures put in place in treasurer's office at Uniontown City Hall

By Mark Hofmann

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Uniontown's mayor and solicitor said officials are taking steps to make sure business in the city treasurer's office continues on, with safeguards in place, after the treasurer was charged with allegedly stealing nearly \$107,000 tax payments.

Solicitor Tim Witt said council passed a resolution with strict procedures governing how cash payments will be handed in Treasurer Antoinette L. Hodge's office.

"And the city is going to insist on fastidious adherence to those procedures," Witt said Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Hodge, 53, of Uniontown was charged with theft, misapplication of entrusted property, perjury and receiving stolen property. A statewide grand jury heard testimony that after Hodge was installed as treasurer in 2020, she took over filling out deposit slips, was the only person to reviewed tax account information, and eliminated other checks and balances.

According to the grand jury presentment, sometimes weeks would go by before Hodge deposited money paid to the office.

Witt said council is currently evaluating how to shift duties within the office. In addition to Hodge, the office is staffed with a deputy treasurer and a clerk.

Despite any new or forthcoming policy changes, Witt said because Hodge is an elected official, she will remain the city's treasurer.

"What has transpired thus far hasn't implicated any removal procedures," he said.

In early 2021, city council launched an investigation after more than a dozen taxpayers received delinquency notices despite having already paid their taxes, mostly in cash. An extensive forensic audit of 2020-2021 found that there was a loss of \$106,750 of taxpayer money during that time.

The charges filed against Hodge alleged she took the money and used it for personal gain, taking multiple vacations and spending hundreds of dollars a day on lottery tickets.

Mayor Bill Gerke said he wants city residents to be



PHOTO: HERALD-STANDARD

Antoinette L. Hodge

reassured that if the council sees something wrong, they will look into it.

"We're doing everything in our power to oversee that something like this doesn't occur again," said Gerke. "That's why we ordered the forensic audit. We saw some improprieties that were going on with the finances of the city."

Witt said once the city received the auditor's report, a claim was filed with the bonding company in light of the loss. The company approved the claim and reimbursed the city the missing \$106,750.

Gerke said the city will likely not be reimbursed for either its legal fees and the fees from the forensic audit, which totaled \$91,000.

Hodge, who also testified before the grand jury the recommended the charges, denied taking funds entrusted to her office, and in a lawsuit filed in 2021, claimed city officials hindered her from doing her job because she is Black. That suit also claimed some city officials may have altered records to accuse Hodge of misconduct. In August, the lawsuit was dismissed at Hodge's request after her attorney cited the ongoing grand jury investigation.

A preliminary hearing is scheduled for Hodge at 1:30 p.m. Jan. 10 before Magisterial Judge Jason Cox.

She is free on \$75,000 unsecured bond.

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NeuPress

Is it time to embrace the inevitable future of ChatGPT?

By Zachary King

ChatGPT is a chatbot with a large language model that can speak in conversational dialogue and produce human-like text. It can help customize resumes and cover letters, brainstorm ideas, explain complex topics, write essays on any topic, and many more things.

George Asimos, the director of writing here at Neumann, believes it is his responsibility to help students embrace new sources that come along and slowly become the future. He said that out of all his students, only one person had even heard about ChatGPT before he mentioned it. He guessed that "Many people may not know about it because it's not appealing and isn't image-based."

He mentions that reading is more of an issue than writing when it comes to literacy. He believes that ChatGPT, in a way, can help reading skills since everything it produces is in written form and not visualized through imagery.

Dr. Caleb Mezzy is a sports management professor who touches on ChatGPT briefly in his courses. He thinks it can benefit his students if used properly with a purpose. Mezzy was able to break down some pros and cons of the use of ChatGPT for students.

He believes that it is a great way to receive quick

information when needed. It could also make students reliant on it, however, which would lead to crippling their critical thinking skills.

"Although ChatGPT may write a paper for you," he says, "students still have to fact check it to make sure the information is credible as it isolates information from the web and puts it together." Mezzy uses the necessity for fact-checking as a teaching point for students to continue to dive deeper into their research, regardless of the source.

I then took it upon myself to go to the writing center and give them two different copies of an old research paper to see if they could spot any differences between my version and ChatGPT's. When creating the ChatGPT version of my research paper, I just typed in the topic, and it began typing a whole paper on my laptop. It was amazing to see a paper being written in real-time by an AI like it was nothing when I struggle at times just coming up with ideas.

Erica O'Mahony, the director of the writing center looked over the two papers and noticed some differences immediately. She said that she could tell immediately which paper was written by ChatGPT because "There were no mistakes in grammar and punctuation that AI can identify."

She added that there were "no citations, missteps in

organization, and almost two paragraphs that were completely identical."

She then said that my paper "was more conversational, with citations (where the punctuation was incorrect), and, while there was minor repetition, no two ideas were 100% identical in phrasing."

Overall, Mahoney stated, "In terms of writing, the AI draft was better, but if I were a professor I would doc major points for no citations or references (plagiarism), repetition, and jumbled organization." For the student draft, she said, "I would doc some points for grammar, sentence structure, and repetition/organization."

She concluded that "It would be interesting to see how each would be graded by a professor, but it is obvious who did what between the AI and the student."

Students may try to use ChatGPT as a way to cheat, but over time professors would just start to restructure the way their assignments are crafted to force students to think critically.

This type of technology is here to stay for years to come, so why not teach students how to use it responsibly and be productive with it in the future? Professors at Neumann seem ready to take advantage of the technology and adapt it to benefit students.

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Maritza has a new home

By Dave Buffington

Maritza's House of Style has a new home.

And it's on a prominent corner in Hummelstown, just as it has been for more than two decades.

Maritza DeJesus, owner of the popular hair styling salon, has purchased the former "Sweet Dawgs" property at the corner of Main and Cameron streets, across from the Soda Jerk restaurant.

"I'm a spiritual person and let me tell you, I prayed on that building," DeJesus told The Sun. "It's a light at the end of the rainbow."

The deal follows a year of uncertainty and legal drama following the purchase of the property DeJesus was leasing at 33 N. Hanover St. That purchase – by Talisman 7 Ventures – triggered a three-way dispute between DeJesus, Talisman and the Koons family, the previous owner of the Hanover Street property.

DeJesus attracted considerable support from the community, support expressed at borough council meetings and through letters to the editor here in The Sun.

"My clients are backing me up and supporting me," DeJesus said in July 2022. "I feel the love. Hummelstown has my heart. It's a family at the shop."

However, in March, Dauphin County Judge John Cherry ruled in favor of Talisman in its suit to evict Maritza from the Hanover Street property. In his order, Cherry wrote, "Defendant's (DeJesus) pleadings and arguments raise no issue of fact or substantive defense to overcome the conclusion that Plaintiff (Talisman) is the legal owner of the property at 33 North Hanover Street"

After the ruling, DeJesus told The Sun she was working to find a new location in the Hummelstown area, and according to one of the agents involved with the deal, DeJesus settled on the Sweet Dawgs property on May 30.

The agent, Todd Decker, told The Sun, "A good team effort to make this happen. She is SOOOO happy. We are all so happy she can now move on, in her own property and operate from a location that everyone will be able to smile as they drive by her place."

DeJesus told The Sun that her last day at the Hanover Street location will be June 16 and that she hopes to reopen in the new location by the end of summer.

"Pretty much the whole town is helping me move on the 17th," DeJesus said. "I have a lot of people helping me. I'm so blessed."

Published June 8, 2023

"My clients are backing me up and supporting me. I feel the love. Hummelstown has my heart. It's a family at the shop."

Maritza DeJesus in 2022



PHOTO: DAVE BUFFINGTON

The new Maritza's House of Style will be located in the former Sweet Dawgs frozen yogurt shop at the intersection of Main and Cameron streets.



DelVal's housing shortage

Where Will We Go?

By Gillian Baker
Full360 Digital Producer

As the end of the semester approaches, most students who live on campus eagerly anticipate finding out what their housing selection is for the next school year. You gather with your roommate(s), log onto the portal, and pray you get into your dorm of choice, which for most students, is South Hall or Centennial Hall.

When some students went to log on last month, they were met with quite the surprise response: No rooms available.

Refreshing the page and double checking their applications were submitted, many students were confused as to why they had seemingly no rooms available. Incoming seniors had no option but Cooke or Berkowitz Hall, despite having first choice. The only way around this was to opt for a five-person suite, meaning three people in a room made for two, which many students said they objected to.

Some were told they actually would not be getting into a dorm at all.

April Vari, Vice President for Campus Life, acknowledged the "high demand for housing this year" and emphasized that deadlines are a critical part of the process.

"In anticipation of this fact, we were very aggressive with communicating with returning upper-class students about how critical it would be for them to complete their housing application/request for housing by the stated deadlines so that we could accommodate the demand."

Vari and Thor Banks, DelVal's Director of Residence Life and Housing, said they sent out multiple communications, and "in fact went so far as to send a communication to students' homes to impress the importance of the deadline."

Officials also said, "At this time, we

believe we have met the demand of returning students who were on time, and even those who were given up to two weeks grace period with the timing of their application."

Students acknowledge that many notifications were sent out to students to complete housing applications and requests. Many students by that point had also heard about the impending shortage and were presumably planning.

When asked why some students claim they were denied housing, officials said, "Every returning upper-class student who requested housing by the stated deadline has been housed or is in the process of being housed. Further, students who applied late but by the end of the selection process (which concluded on the 17th) are also in the process of being housed. So, through the closure of the selection period, we have accommodated returning student demand, or are in the process of doing so."

Off-campus housing: Not an easy option

Because freshmen and sophomores are supposed to live on campus, they got priority for housing, and a few upperclassmen were told to find off-campus housing. In a place like Doylestown, rent isn't necessarily catered to college students. The prices are expensive, and not everyone can consistently spend that much money towards rent.

Rourke Watson, an incoming sophomore, expressed his feelings towards being accepted into dorms over older students.

"I am grateful to be placed into South (hall), despite only being an incoming sophomore. Some of my friends who are a grade or two above me weren't able to get in, and I definitely feel bad for them," Watson said.

It's not uncommon to see younger students in dorms like South and Centennial for the coming year. Most impending sophomores were able to secure one of the two halls, despite soon to be seniors choosing 1-2 days before them and said to only be able to choose two-person dorms. Generally, students want to live in a two or four-person suite in South, as the rooms are newer and bigger, and they are equipped with their own bathroom.

Many sophomores and juniors feel that their time sharing a bathroom in dorms with no A/C has been served, and are frustrated about spending another year in these conditions. While most students are generally in agreement with this, some students are okay with living in any dorm and sometimes choose the ones that are communal.

Officials backed this up, saying "Upperclassmen are always scattered throughout all of our buildings, every year... There are always students who are not necessarily happy with the room they get during selection, but that's inevitable and happens every year, and is different than not being able to house students."

Nate Reed, an impending senior, understands how many students are feeling.

"I understand why people are mad, and personally, I would be too. Living in a dorm like Berk or Cooke when you're a senior can't be ideal. You spend your time as an underclassman waiting to get into South and then being denied that is pretty annoying," he said.

University officials added: "I know that students often think of South and Centennial as the 'upperclassmen' buildings but in truth, in every given year, there are more returning upper-class students who want to live on campus than there are spaces in South and Centennial.

Upperclassmen are always scattered throughout all of our buildings, every year."

"To add more opportunities for returning students to be accommodated in South Hall, we created three-person options – we have done this many times in the past and the accommodations in South offer the square footage to do so. It's been a very popular option through selection."

"If I was asked to move off campus, I think I would have considered my options about school. Rent in Doylestown is expensive and that doesn't include your groceries or consider the car you have to have," Watson said.

Though students like Watson were able to land a spot in South Hall despite their age, the shortage still caught up to them. The only option for him and his roommate group was to opt for a five-person suite, which for them meant a random roommate.

"For me," Watson said, "I'll be in a room with someone I don't know. For the random roommate, they'll be coming into a room of four friends that they don't know. It's definitely going to be a new experience for all of us."

Many students who have received a random placement or random roommate are typically living in South/Centennial hall (with few exceptions). Some students find this unfair, as they had a full group and had to split up or even be placed into makeshift housing, like a lounge. The spaciousness of a lounge may sound nice, but don't forget some students are still living in dorms with no A/C or they must use public bathrooms. Some say they've had to deal with smoke alarm mishaps and frequent power loss.

As time runs out for on and off campus living, some students face a looming question: Where will we go?

Published April 28, 2023

Federal Work Study program to continue for rest of semester with funding from next year's budget

By Erin Yudd
Editor-Elect

The Federal Work Study (FWS) program is set to continue until April 22 with the reallocation of a "limited portion of funds from the upcoming academic year," according to an email sent to work study students last Friday from Ashley Bruder, the human resources coordinator at Point Park. The program was previously set to end on April 8 due to budgetary limitations.

Students are still limited to five hours per week and prohibited from working during finals week, which is April 23 through April 28.

"With the FWS budget being increased for 2023-34, after careful review, we are confident that we can borrow and apply this partial funding to the 2022-23 academic year with no effect on work study funding levels for next year," Bruder wrote in the email.

Bruder said that the university manages FWS according to the Department of Education regulations and is "required to ensure spending allocations are managed for all years," in a statement written to The Globe.

"The University is diligent in managing the actual FWS funds spent to the annual budgeted amount," Bruder said in the same statement to The Globe. "As a result, we are confident that allocating a small percentage of the 2023-24 budget to fund the remainder of this academic year will have a nominal effect on budget usage for the next academic year."

According to Bruder, the hourly rate for FWS next year will be 12 dollars, and students will be able to work eight to 10 hours per week, depending on the budget and their financial need.

Nanina Grund, a senior psychology major and FWS student at the Student Activities Involvement and Leadership (SAIL) office, was surprised when the email was sent out, as the SAIL office was given some funding to continue their services.

"Thankfully prior to the email sent out about work study

"With the FWS budget being increased for 2023-34, after careful review, we are confident that we can borrow and apply this partial funding to the 2022-23 academic year with no effect on work study funding levels for next year,"

Ashley Bruder

Human Resources coordinator

being fixed, the business office granted our department to use their own budget to keep us work studies on hire," Gund said. "It took weeks to hear back from them about it... we were given more hours for the week after the 8th, then working back to five hours during finals week. That's through our own office in comparison to working only five hours and no work during finals that HR allowed us."

Grund tried to find work elsewhere when the first announcement was made about FWS ending early but did not have luck as "no one was going to hire someone for such a short amount of time." She has been working in the FWS program since she was a freshman and has "never seensomething like this before," but is not too worried about the FWS program's future because she is graduating this semester.

"I would be a bit worried [about funding taken from next year's budget]; everything at Point Park funding wise is heavily dependent upon enrollment," Grund said. "I am graduating, and I've seen a few things in my time here that haven't happened in so many years, like a pandemic, new presidents, etc."

Grund feels that there would have been "a lot of

unhappy students" if FWS was to end on April 8.

"I can only speak for myself but if some work studies ended on the 8th, and if my office wasn't allowed to use their department's funds, that would be a lot of unhappy current students who are going to suffer because of the school's mismanagement," Grund said. "I am not saying that it was just HR and totally isn't directed at Ashley [Bruder], but I think that the school truly must realize the priorities of the student, making sure offices are properly staffed and maintained for students to have an enjoyable time here."

Brooke Gilman, a sophomore forensic science major and FWS student in the library, was happy to get the email but is worried about next year as well.

"I was happy for it to continue as it helps me with rent yet confused on what this will mean for the 2023-2024 school year," Gilman said. "I'm not sure how I feel as I'd rather be able to work all my hours next year than risk the same thing happening again as this year."

Gilman said she would have rather had the program stay being done than take from next year's budget.

"I am very worried about the future as they are taking from the budget already," Gilman said. "I would rather it have stayed being done and for them to fix the budget for 2023-2024 to make sure everyone can work the full year and get the money they deserve."

Summer state work study opportunities are available for the summer, which are funded through Pennsylvania rather than the federal government. The summer state work study program allows departments to hire summer student workers and have 50% of wages reimbursed by the state of PA, according to Bruder. This program was offered last summer as well.

Students must be a permanent Pennsylvania resident, be enrolled at least half-time at the university and be an undergraduate student who is eligible for the PA State Grant Program in order to work through the summer state program.

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