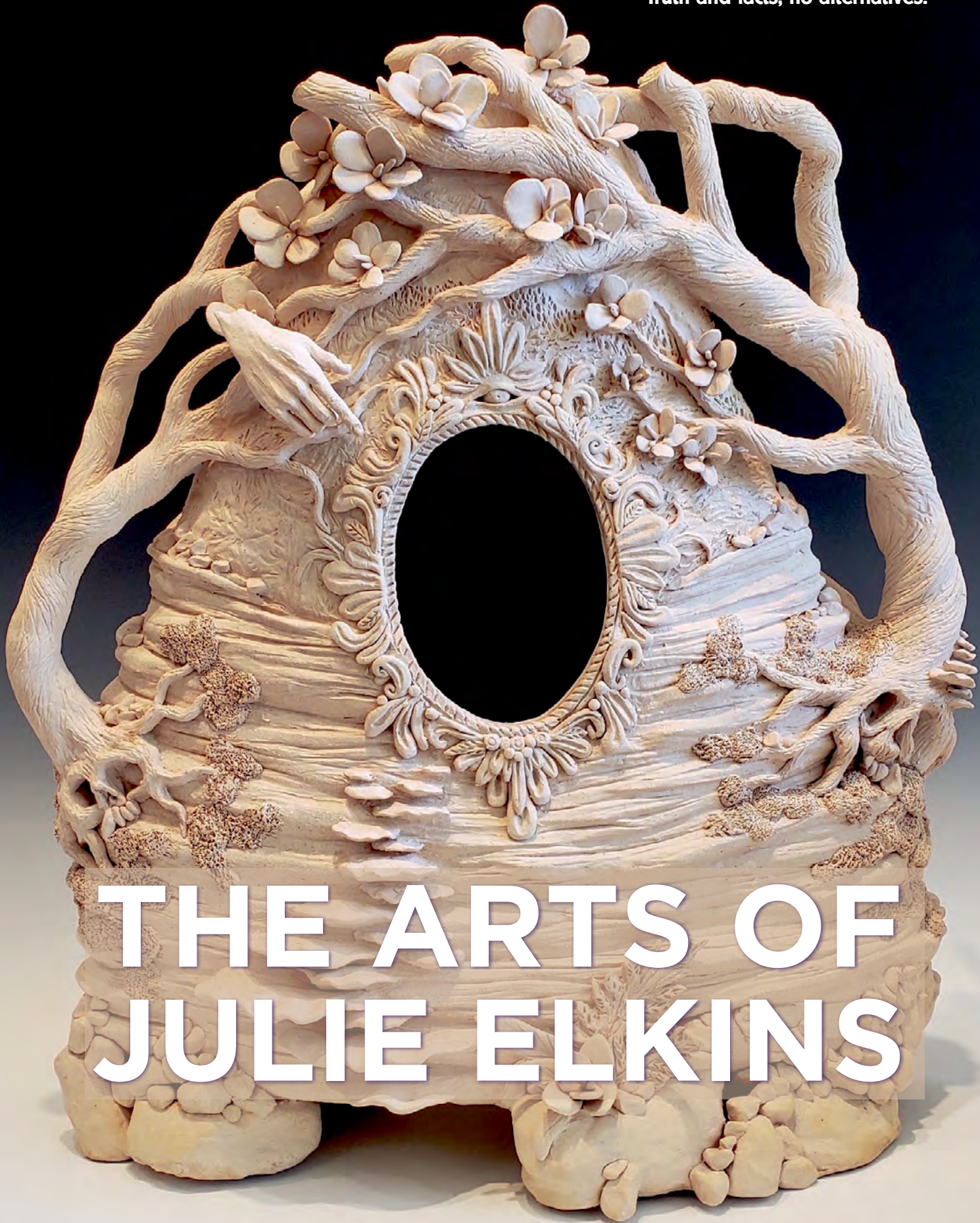


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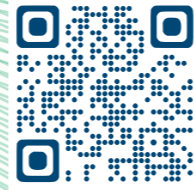


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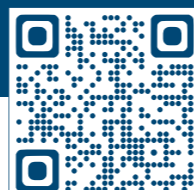
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Abbie Waters: The Habit of Being

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

This cover was first published in April 2012 not long after Abbie's death. My son attended school with Abbie—they were in the same grade, and I knew Abbie's parents. Here are links to the two audio stories I produced about Abbie.

<https://exchange.prx.org/pieces/178736-abbie-waters-the-habit-of-being-part-1>

<https://exchange.prx.org/pieces/179156-abbie-waters-habit-of-being-part-2>

FIRST MET ABBIE WATERS A little over two years ago when I was talking with David Hudson, principal of Holton Elementary School. We found ourselves in the art room and there were only two other people in there with us—Rolanda Scott, the art instructor; and Abbie Waters, a student who was about seven at the time.

I can tell you this much about Abbie based on that first meeting: she had no fear of the mic and her eyes were radiant blue and wide, and they could burn a whole right through you. She handled a paint brush with the deftness of a professional artist. At the moment we first met, she was painting ceramic leaves, with alternate brush strokes of bright green, then olive. Abbie wore a fine furze of hair on her head, as did her teacher, Rolanda Scott, and these two people had more in common with one another than their desire to make pretty things.

"Are you an artist?" I asked Abbie.

"Kind of," she said. "But my friend Catherine she's good at it cause she drew a whole live turkey." It was about a week before Thanksgiving.

"Do you have a special relationship with Miss Scott?" I said to Abbie.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Well, we both have cancer."

"We've been having a brief conversation because Abbie has eyebrows still," said Rolanda. "And I'm having a test in the donut machine this afternoon and Abbie told me all about it." She turned to Abbie and added. "It's not Krispy Kreme, is it?"

"No," Abbie said. "But when I did it, I watched Hannah Montana: The Movie."

"A little while ago we were comparing ports," said Rolanda, indicating the fleshy underside of her own forearm where there was a single bleb under the skin.

Mr. Hudson placed his palm on Abbie's head and said: "My wonderful person is coming along really, really well."

Late this past February, on a night that was bitterly cold, I met with Abbie's parents, Mary Ann Waters and Jeff Bernas, in their snug living room on Hermitage Road. They remembered how it all started, how the three of them had just returned from a Disney cruise to the Bahamas, well-rested and ready to tackle the new school year.

It was the winding down time that evening and there was still a hint of sunlight left in the world.

Mary Ann sat on the edge of the bed next to her daughter and tickled Abbie's belly. The girl twisted and turned to evade the assaults, and laughed almost to tears.

Mary Ann's hand crept back to her daughter's tummy, again, but not to tickle her this time.

"I felt a little mass in her tummy that felt hard," Mary Ann remembered. "It seemed weird and I thought, 'Well, maybe, I'm exaggerating.'"

But her mind wouldn't let it go, so she went online, looking for clues. Virtually every website she went to recommended an immediate meeting with a pediatrician, so the next day after school Mary Ann took Abbie to see the doctor.

"And they looked at it and said, 'You've got to get pictures of this right way,'" said Mary Ann. At VCU Hospitals, technicians took the pictures and radiologists examined the data. "They said maybe it's just a cyst, or maybe it's nothing at all," Mary Ann said. Regardless what it was, the doctors recommended immediate surgery and a biopsy.

A few hours can be a lifetime, and a few minutes an eternity. Time slowed almost to a halt when Jeff and Mary Ann got the results of Abbie's biopsy.

Abbie had stage IV rhabdomyosarcoma, a cancerous soft tissue tumor that

frequently occurs in striated muscles, and though it's comparatively rare—only about 350 case new are reported each year in this country—it is the most common soft tissue tumor found in children.

The tumor was large and wrapped around the tightly packed organs in Abbie's small abdominal cavity. It was almost too much for Mary Ann and Jeff to take in. Something horrific had invaded the interior of their Snicker Doodle, their Sweet Pea, their little Abbie. The cancer had also spread to her lungs.

But there was an upside to all of this.

"The doctors said Abbie's cure rate was still very promising," said Mary Ann.

And the surgeon who would operate on her, Dr. Charles Bagwell, had good news to report. "The tumor wasn't attached to any of her organs," Mary Ann said. "It was just in the wall of the abdomen."

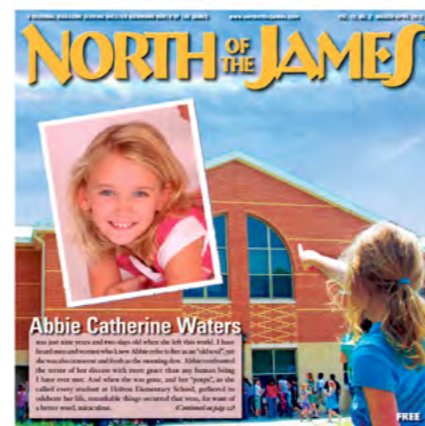
The operation had been a success. What's more, the spots in her lungs had disappeared.

Abbie was winning this battle. There was follow up radiation and chemotherapy, and everything looked good. By late June the treatment was supposed to be over.

"It was the day she was supposed to ring the bell and be at the end of her protocol," Mary Ann said. "But they did a scan and they noticed a few little spots in her lungs and we were like, 'Oh no, it's really bad.' So they went in and did a surgery on those and by the time they did that surgery they were gone. It showed nothing. We were super-excited."

Shortly after the school year started, Abbie began acting in a way that was entirely out of character for this child who had the sunniest of dispositions even when life presented a storm front. Among other things, she complained about gym class.

It turned out she had a collapsed lung, and had been walking around with it for



well over a week.

"She had relapsed," Mary Ann told me.

When they went back to the hospital, there was more bad news, but Abbie would again rebound.

"There was still some sense of hope," said Mary Ann. After spending almost a month in the hospital, Abbie was able to return home with a portable device that enabled her parents to drain her lungs. "Abbie put it in a little Hannah Montana bag, a little purse, and carried it around with her," Mary Ann remembered. "This whole time was like we were on a roller coaster ride."

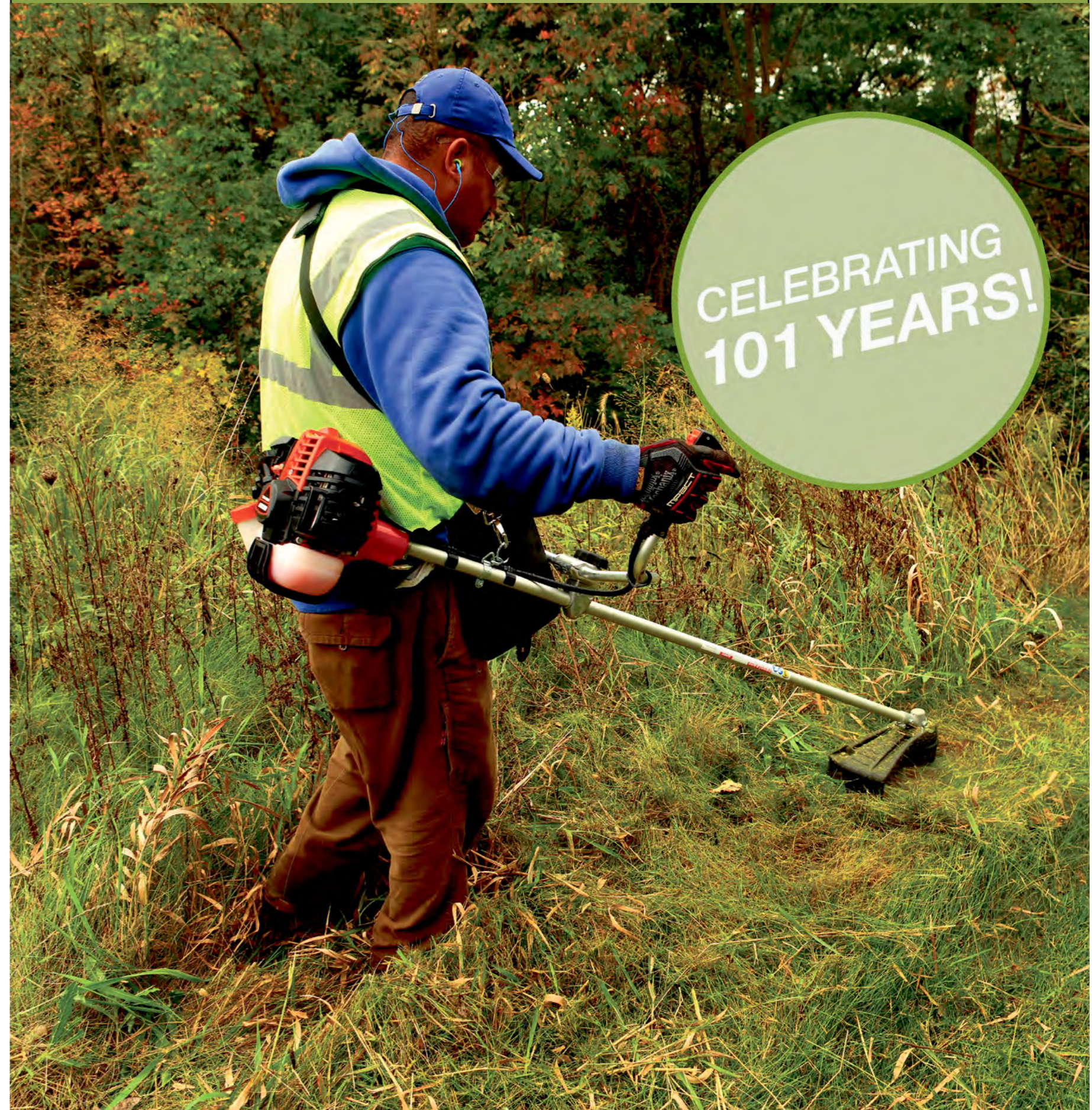
And they could never quite see what was over the next summit. In October, after a series of scans, a doctor called Mary Ann and told her that things looked very bad. "Evidently rhabdomyosarcoma is very aggressive when it relapses," she said. "The whole lining of the lung was covered and then it squished her heart. They were lining us up with hospice and we weren't anywhere near that emotionally."

Nor was Abbie. Another round of chemo seemed to do the trick. Abbie bounced back. "They were all amazed at how well she was doing," Mary Ann recalled. "She even got to go trick-or-treating, and through the end of January she was jumping around and running."

"That was also about the time she went rock climbing at a birthday party," said Jeff. "And Abbie was still climbing up farther than most of the kids."

Abbie Waters had once again defied the

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cancer. She was a survivor and taught those around her more than a thing or two.

“Abbie was our world,” said Mary Ann. “She was filled with life and zest and she cherished her friends more than anything else. She taught us to cherish our friends. She taught us a lot.”

Abbie’s unflinching optimism set her apart from everyone else. “The neighbor lady who watched her when she was little called her Happy Abbie,” Mary Anne said. “Because she was always happy.”

That’s what her first grade teacher, Dana Gum, also remembered. “When she was in my room for first grade Abbie just lit it up,” Dana told me. “Just a bright smiling face. I never saw her sad, never saw her unhappy in any way. Abbie was like a little mother hen to the boys, and to the girls she was everybody’s best friend. She was just always happy and excited about whatever we were doing.”

Dr. Bagwell was also struck by Abbie’s sheer joy to be alive and she became one of his favorite patients. “Abbie really touched my heart in a special way, and all our patients touch our hearts,” he told me. “But with Abbie it was quite different. She had an incredible spunk about her.”

One of Abbie’s oldest and dearest friends, Emily Welch, remembered how Abbie was there for her when she had a bone cyst removed. “Abbie was such a good person,” Emily said. “She was having her own problems and she came to see me and she wrote me, even though she was having terrible pain. She was there for me.”

Abbie loved her friends and parents and teachers best of all. But she also loved Justin Bieber and Hannah Montana and pinwheels and play dates and swimming and fingernail polish. While she was in the hospital, Abbie began painting the nails of nurses, and at least one doctor. “She was doing the nails of the nurses and the next thing you know we’re making rounds and there appeared a Styrofoam cup at her bedside on the table with TIPS written on it,” said Dr. Bagwell. “She had a long line of nurses and student nurses and nursing assistants who were waiting for Abbie’s Nail Salon to open.”

On the day of her discharge, Abbie asked her doctor and friend for a favor. “She said with that impish look in her eyes, ‘I want to do your nails,’” Dr. Bagwell said. “What could I say? And as you can see on my office door there is a picture of

me with bright pink nail polish on.”

By early February 2011, the cancer had returned with a vengeance. Abbie began hemorrhaging. “That was very painful for her,” Mary Ann remembered.

She received infusions of blood, but her body could no longer handle the chemo that had kept her going. “At the beginning of April we started planning for her birthday which was on the twentieth,” Mary Ann said. “She wanted her friends over at the house all day and she wanted a Justin Bieber birthday cake.”

On the morning of her birthday, Abbie selected her clothes with great care and dressed with precision, then waited by the front door for her guests to arrive. All day long, people were coming and going, and that night Abbie wanted to go to the movies. Everyone gathered as the cake was brought to Abbie.

She blew out the flames on nine tiny candles, sending her breath over an image of her beloved Justin Bieber who stared up at her from the flatland of the birthday cake.

After watching Soul Surfer, Abbie and her friends were all going to have dinner with their parents at Northside Grille, which had become something of a tradition. But on the way home from the movies, Abbie had a change of heart. “Mommy I’m not feeling so good,” Abbie said. “Can we go home and Daddy go to Northside Grille.”

So and Abbie stayed home and talked about what a great day it had been. And then Abbie asked her mother this: “Am I going to die tonight?”

“No,” said Mary Ann. “We’re going to cuddle tonight.”

The night was long and hard for Abbie, and in the morning her parents took their daughter to the hospital.

“Abbie had made us promise that if it ever got really bad we would tell her,” Mary Ann said. “But in our minds it was never really bad.”

This time it was different, and Mary Ann and Jeff told their daughter how bad her situation was. That day, Holy Thursday, Abbie told her mom, “I will have to tell my friends.” And her friends were contacted.

Abbie wanted to know about the second life. “She quizzed everyone in the room, and there were a good number of people in the room,” Mary Ann said. “She didn’t want to die. She screamed at the top of her lungs that she didn’t want to die.”

Everybody there told Abbie they believed in the afterlife, which seemed to soothe her. For her part, Abbie said she believed in reincarnation and suspected she would come back one day as Justin Bieber’s daughter.

Mary Ann had sent emails to Holton Elementary School and the parents of Abbie’s closest friends, and people started arriving in droves.

“Mr. Hudson came, Miss Gum came, Miss Oliver came, Miss Prentiss came, Miss Smart came, the doctors, the nurses came, and lots of our friends and the kids came,” said Mary Ann. The room was packed.

By that time, Abbie couldn’t talk and breathe at the same time, so her words were infrequent. At Abbie’s request, Mary Ann talked to the girls’ friends. “I told them what was happening and they held her hand,” said Mary Ann.

At about seven that evening, the kids left the room and the family was alone with the nurses and Dr. Bagwell, those who had been there since the beginning of Abbie’s ordeal.

“It doesn’t hurt when you die,” Mary Ann told her daughter. “It hurts while you’re living, but the actual moment when you die that does not hurt. I promise you it does not hurt.”

And Abbie slipped away a couple hours after her friends left. And there was no pain in it.

Abbie had prepared for her own death. In February, she picked the color of wristbands that bore the simple legend: Abbie’s Peeps. She ordered 600 of them so everyone at her school would have one to remember her by.

They arrived two days before her death, on her ninth birthday.

Over the next month several remarkable things would happen that would bring Abbie home, again and again. Not long after her death, Father Fred Feusahrens celebrated Abbie’s Mass of Christian Burial. Later, in the courtyard outside St. Paul’s Catholic Church, Abbie’s parents and friends released living butterflies from paper envelopes. While the others flew away to graze among flower petals, one, the largest, which represented Abbie, flew back to her father’s outstretched finger. “We tried to get the Abbie butterfly to go away, and it wouldn’t,” said Abbie’s good friend Emily Welch. “It just stayed there. So all of us said to the butterfly, ‘Abbie, go on, go up to heaven.’ And then she flew off and it was an amazing sight.”

A few weeks later, more than a thousand people gathered at Holton Elementary School in honor of Abbie Waters. There was dancing in the gym, a bounce house outside, games, wheelchair races, and, of course, fingernail painting. The Holton Choir sang an inspired rendition of “Rockin’ Robin”, and, later, one of the most moving interpretations of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” I have ever heard.

It was a bright, clear early spring day, and something amazing happened as all watched.

“Dr. Bagwell grabbed me and showed it to me,” Mary Ann remembered. “It was a beautiful rainbow and it went straight across the school. I remember the kindergarteners started chanting her name, which was wonderful. It was exactly what she would have wanted.”

And the students all saw the rainbow for what it truly was—not just an anomaly of nature. They saw it as Abbie’s broad smile. I saw it too, that crystal blue sky day, imprinted with a vibrant rainbow that had no business being there.

I am not sure what miracles really are. Sometimes, I think they depend entirely on personal perception. Too often we are numb to our surroundings, our senses dulled by the rote of routine, the grind of daily living. It takes determination to train our senses to be on alert, though maybe, in the end, this has more to do with neurochemicals and synapses and the packets of information etched on neurons than it does our own will. I don’t know. Yet, undeniably there are times when our antenna flicker to life, stimulated by every small thing around us. And at these times we embrace it all, as if we are aware, on some level, that nothing lasts forever. Nothing.

There were miracles in the rainbow and the butterfly; I’m sure of that because that’s what the kids said and they would know. Their antennae are always active. But the greatest miracle is in the living. All of it, every single moment. And if Abbie in her life, no matter how brief it was, instructed us in understanding this then Abbie still lives. And not in a purely metaphysical or theoretical or spiritual way. For Abbie did live among us and her presence is still felt within us. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of people—women, men and children—who carry Abbie with them. She is part of us now, imprinted on countless neurons within a thousand skulls. **✎**

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Earth Day, a Short History of Saving the World

by JACK R JOHNSON

THREE HUNDRED YEARS ago, the Hindu Bishnois people of India set the standard for saving the world. Their religious sect held two important environmental principles:

Be merciful to all living beings and love them (i.e., don't eat them); Do not cut down green trees.

In 1730, their commitment to these religious principles were severely tested. The king of Jodhpur decided that he needed to build a new palace and wanted to use the Khejri trees the Bishnoi grew. He sent soldiers to gather the wood. A female villager named Amrita Devi would not relent. She decided to hug the trees to protect them, and encouraged others to do the same, proclaiming: "A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree." The soldiers struck her with an axe. When her three daughters witnessed the brutality, they rushed and hugged the trees as well, and were also killed by the soldiers. After their example, other Bishnois from nearby villages traveled to the forest and embraced the trees to protect them. As each villager hugged a tree, refusing to let go, they were beheaded by the soldiers. News spread. Bishnois from some eighty-three villages traveled to save the trees. Older people went first. Many of them were killed as they hugged the Khejri. Like some cheap FOX News host, the king's minister, a fellow named Giridhar Bhandari, claimed that the Bishnoi were only sending people whom they thought were useless to be killed. In response, younger men, women, and children began to hug the trees, resulting in dozens and then hundreds of them being killed. In all, 363 Bishnois were murdered while protecting the trees.

When the king, Maharaja Abhai Singh, learned about the carnage, he was repentant and forbade any killing of animals and cutting of trees in the Bishnois territories afterwards. To this

day, one can spot the endangered Black Buck, peacocks and other wildlife, and tree cover where the Bishnois communities live, which is why the Bishnois are considered among the earliest conservationists in the world.

In the United States, the modern environmentalist movement can trace its roots to someone almost as heroic, our own Amrita Devi, Rachel Carson. Marine biologist and author of the seminal environmental work *Silent Spring*, Carson documented the dangers of the pesticide DDT while also questioning America's blind post war faith in technology. *Silent Spring* took Carson four years to complete. It meticulously described how DDT entered the food chain and accumulated in the fatty tissues of animals, including human beings, and caused cancer and genetic damage. A single application on a crop, she wrote, killed insects for weeks and months—not only the targeted insects but countless more—and remained toxic in the environment even after it was diluted by rainwater. Carson concluded that DDT and other pesticides had irrevocably harmed animals and had contaminated the world's food supply. The book's most haunting and famous chapter, "A Fable for Tomorrow," depicted a nameless American town where all life—from fish to birds to apple blossoms to human children—had been "silenced" by the insidious effects of DDT.

In retaliation, Monsanto, which produced DDT, published and distributed 5,000 copies of a brochure parodying *Silent Spring* entitled "The Desolate Year," relating the devastation and inconvenience of a world where famine, disease, and insects ran amok because chemical pesticides had been banned. Some of the attacks were more personal, questioning Carson's integrity and even her sanity.

President John F. Kennedy read the book however, and ordered the President's Science Advisory Committee to



examine the issues the book raised. The report thoroughly vindicated both *Silent Spring* and its author. As a result, DDT came under much closer government supervision and was eventually banned.

After Carson, the U.S. environmental movement gained an unlikely champion; President Richard M. Nixon. Ever the politician, during his first State of the Union address, delivered in 1970, President Nixon designated the environment as the defining issue of the new decade. "The great question of the Seventies is...shall we make our peace with nature and begin to make reparations for the damage we have done to our air, to our land, and to our water." In a divided political climate, the Nixon administration initiated many of the most important, and enduring, environmental policies in American history. He signed the National Environmental Policy Act, the Clean Air Act of 1970. He created the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency and signed the Endangered Species Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act. He oversaw the creation of the Legacy of Parks program, which converted more than 80,000 acres of government property to recreational use in 642 new parks.

Despite his ignominious political end, Nixon's legacy as a steward of the environment may well outshine any other president, even Teddy Roosevelt. Nixon declared the first-ever Earth Day, on April 22, 1972, the same year he also created the Environmental Protection

Agency and signed the Clean Water Act. "Nothing is more precious and worthy of preservation than the rich array of animal life with which our country has been blessed," he said.

Nixon was able to do this in a highly partisan environment, because at that time, the Republican Party was still onboard with being decent conservationists. In fact, while the original congressional resolution to create Earth Day came from Wisconsin Democrat Gaylord Nelson, the resolution was co-sponsored by California Republican Pete McCloskey. The 1968 Republican Party platform called for an expansion of urban green spaces and of our natural parks, declaring that "our nation must pursue its activities in harmony with the environment.... We must be mindful of our priceless heritage of natural beauty." Yes, that plank came from the Republican Party platform.

The environment became a more partisan economic issue in the 1980s and 1990s, with businesses vociferously opposing regulation. But as Tina Featherstone has noted in *The New Republic*, "...the biggest lesson of Nixon's time is that a huge political movement can shape the political culture, allowing even the most hardened right-wing culture warrior to find their inner tree hugger."

By the way, that term for environmentalists derives from the Hindus Bishnois mentioned earlier, the original "tree huggers" who sacrificed their lives to save trees. **NJ**

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Short History of a Long War, Part II: Birth of Israel and the Nakba

by JACK R JOHNSON

SPEAKING A FEW weeks ago, talking about Gaza and the West Bank, Ariel Gallner, a member of the Israeli parliament said, “Right now, one goal: Nakba! A Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of 1948!”

It’s an odd thing to wish for, downright malicious, but Gallner is a hard-right member of Netanyahu’s Likud party, and like many on the far right, doesn’t believe Palestinians have an historical claim to their own homeland. Following a clash in April 2023 in which Israeli forces killed a 15 year old Palestinian child in the Aqbat Jaber refugee camp in Jericho, West Bank, Kallner was quoted by CNN as saying “The land of Israel belongs to the people of Israel, belongs to us... I think that those who live here, the Arabs and so on, they can live here. But it’s our land.”

Yet, up until 1948, the land that is called Israel was primarily Palestinian. The “Nakba of 1948” occurred about seventy-five years ago when Palestinians were forcibly removed, or sometimes killed, to ensure a Jewish majority state.

Although May 15, 1948, became the official day for commemorating the Nakba (and the day David Ben-Gurion, as head of the Jewish Agency proclaimed the creation of Israel as a nation), armed Zionist groups had launched the process of displacing Palestinians much earlier. In fact, by May 15, half of the total number of Palestinian refugees had already been forcefully expelled from their country.

In early 1947, the British government announced it would be handing over the ‘administration’ in Palestine to the United Nations and ending its colonial project there. On November 29, 1947, the UN adopted Resolution 181, recommending the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab

states. At the time, the Jews in Palestine constituted one third of the population and owned less than six percent of the total land area. Under the UN partition plan, the Jewish population was allocated 55 percent of the land, encompassing many of the main cities with Palestinian Arab majorities and the important coastline from Haifa to Jaffa. The Arab state would be deprived of key agricultural lands and seaports, which led the Palestinians to reject the proposal.

Although displacement of Palestinians from their lands by the Zionist project was already taking place during the British Mandate, mass displacement started when the UN partition plan was passed. Shortly following the UN Resolution 181, the Arab League members Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq refused to accept the UN partition plan and proclaimed the right of self-determination for the Arabs across the whole of Palestine. The Arab states marched their forces into what had been the British Mandate for Palestine, starting the war which overshadowed both the Nakba and the formation of Israel.

After an initial loss of territory by the Jewish state and its occupation by the Arab armies, from July, 1948 the tide gradually turned in the Zionists’ favor and the Arab armies were push out of much of Palestine. In early 1949, Israel signed armistices with Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, ending the immediate conflict, but no actual peace agreements were ever signed.

With a quasi-permanent ceasefire coming into effect, Israel’s new borders, later known as the Green Line, were established. Israel was in control of the Galilee, Jezreel Valley, West Jerusalem, the coastal plain and the Negev. The Syrians remained in control of a strip of territory along the Sea of Galilee. The Egyptians retained the Gaza



Photo credits to Jorge Fernandez Salas.

strip and still had some forces surrounded inside Israeli territory. Jordanian forces remained in the West Bank, where the British had stationed them before the war.

Earlier during this period, the so called ‘Nakba’ was occurring. In less than six months, from December 1947 to mid-May 1948, Zionist armed groups expelled about 440,000 Palestinians from 220 villages. The Palestinians packed their belongings, piling into cars, trucks and donkey carts. Many locked their doors and took their keys with them, expecting to return when the war ended. Jewish mortars and loudspeaker trucks shook Arab neighborhoods in early 1948 as sectarian fighting consumed the newly partitioned land that would soon become Israel.

Returning home would prove impossible for an estimated 750,000 Palestinians and their millions of descendants. Israeli intelligence archive records, finally opened in the 1980s, showed how Israeli operations, including psychological-warfare broadcasts, helped drive the exodus.

“The element of surprise, long stints of shelling with extremely loud blasts, and loudspeakers in Arabic proved very effective when properly used,” reads an Israel Defense Forces intelligence report

from June 1948 that called Jewish combatants “the main factor” in the exodus. Amid the prolonged shelling, the trucks broadcast the threatening sounds of wailing sirens, fake screams and evacuation warnings.

“Each and every district underwent a wave of migration as our actions in that area intensified and expanded,” the report stated, adding later that sometimes Arabs would attempt to return home shortly after fleeing, “which forced us to engage, on more than one occasion, in expelling residents.”

Descendants of Arabs who fled during these events ultimately formed the Palestinian refugee population — 70 percent of today’s Gaza Strip residents are considered refugees.

“There’s academic quibbling about the details — to what degree was it planned, to what degree was it the circumstances of war, to what extent was it ideologically central to Zionism — but nobody denies that huge numbers were driven out,” said Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University and author of “The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine.

There were massacres that occurred along the way, brought about in many cases by Zionist militia

like Irgun and the Stern Gang. Although hardly discussed in the Western Press, these massacres are also what is meant by that term the ‘Nakba.’

Before May 15, 1948 some of the most infamous massacres had already been committed; the Baldat al-Sheikh massacre on December 31, 1947, killing up to 70 Palestinians; the Sa’sa’ massacre on February 14, 1948, when 16 houses were blown up and 60 people lost their lives; and the Deir Yassin massacre on April 9, 1948, when about 110 Palestinian men, women and children were killed. All totaled, between 1947 and 1949, Zionist military forces attacked major Palestinian cities and destroyed some 530 villages, killing some 15,000 Palestinians.

In recent days, U.N. experts and Palestinian leaders have invoked concerns of a second Nakba. They point to Israel’s directive urging 1.1 million Gaza residents to flee south as the IDF bombards the enclave in retaliation for Hamas’s Oct. 7, 2023 attacks.

“There is a grave danger that what we are witnessing may be a repeat of the 1948 Nakba,” said Francesca Albanese, U.N. special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in occupied Palestinian territories. “The international community must do everything to stop this from happening again.”

According to which causality report you read (Gaza Health Ministry figures show 17,487 Palestinians have been killed thus far), the Nakba of 2023 has already exceeded the Nakba of 1948, just as Ariel Gallner had wished. **NB**

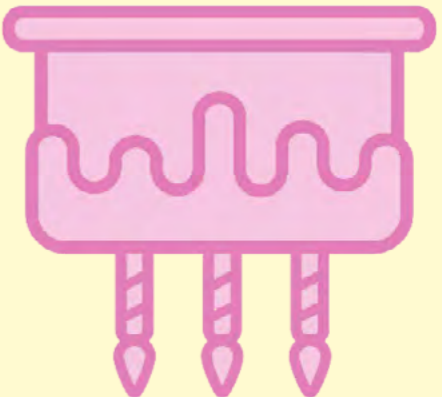
Next month, The Suez Crisis, the Six Day and Yom Kippur wars, Lebanon and the rise of the PLO

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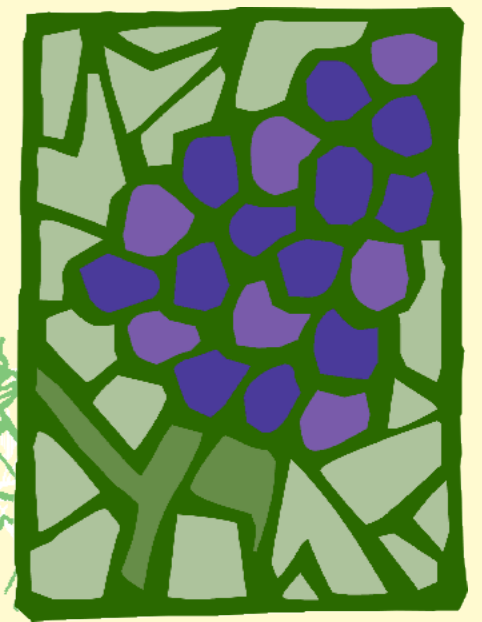
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Once Upon a Vine



THE MANY ARTS OF JULIE ELKINS

TWO THINGS HAPPENED WHEN JULIE ELKINS WAS VERY LITTLE.

At her grandparents' home in Stafford County there was a trickle of a stream on the back end of their property that carved a deep gorge through blue marl, slippery as eel skin. And her grandfolks, Frances and Jim Elkins, showed Julie how to cut blocks of this gray clay out of the creek banks which she would then mold into bowls and pots that she would stain with the juice of chokeberries and blackberries and pokeberries, then take them back to her parents' home where she would set them on the roof to harden in a kiln of sunlight. But when the rains came, the small vessels would melt away and streak the side of the house, dripping down on the windowpanes, and she would hear her mother or father yell, "Julie, what the hell are you doing?" She was seven years old at the time.

Two years before that, at frequent family gatherings, adults would often quiz Julie about what she wanted to be when she grew up. Julie would answer: "Cookie Monster," and they would laugh at her. It frustrated Julie that no one seemed to understand her, but she really couldn't put it into words. She didn't even have the word, that is until the day she watched Jim Henson's "Labyrinth" on a VHS tape. After the credits rolled up there was a behind the scenes segment. And these adults were doing exactly what Julie wanted to do when she grew up and they even had a word for it. The next time a relative asked Julie what she planned to become as an adult, she said, "I want to be a puppeteer." And the response was invariably, "You can't be a puppeteer."

Although she grew up in Fredericksburg, Julie spent much of her time at her grandparents' 160 year old house up in Stafford. Her grandfather was a lieutenant colonel in the Marines; her grandmother was a dancer, a basketball coach, a teacher and a painter. Her grandparents gave Julie a magnifying glass and she would spend hours outdoors peering into the secret lives of ants and ladybugs, and the miniature forests of lichens and mosses. Everything a wonder. What's more, her grandmother Frances would invite her to watch videos of Bob Ross.



Julie Elkins surrounded by her work.

"She did a lot of floral oil paintings and stuff like that," Julie tells me. "She had this cool studio. She supported and encouraged me."

When Julie started school, she began to understand at a fairly early age that she was an artist by nature.

"I couldn't talk," Julie says. "I was weirdly mute. People called me shy, but I don't even know if it was shyness. It was that I couldn't bring myself to talk to people. It changed when I was twenty-seven."

Back in her early school days, Julie learned there was more than one way to connect and communicate with her peers. "I couldn't talk, but I figured out that I could draw and do these characters," she says. "So in first grade I made this little character called the Bald Eagle,"

she says. It was a sort of featherless bird holding its wings across its crotch in embarrassment. "I would slide it over and people would go, 'That's hilarious,'" says Julie. "I'd just draw it over and over again; that's how I made friends."

Julie's mom signed her daughter up for a drawing class. "I became the art kid in school," she says. And her fifth grade teacher, Miss Horne, let her and a friend perform improv skits after lunch every day. "So I was insanely shy, but I could perform and be this character and make people laugh," says Julie. In middle school Julie began to learn about sculptural ceramics, and she had an ah-ha moment about her innate artistic gifts. She was doing a drawing of a doll her grandfather had given her. Julie had no idea how she was able to manipulate

the colored pencils with such precision. After all, she had no real training in the art of drawing; this ability seemed to be woven into the fabric of her being.

"It's a very distinct memory," Julie tells me. "I remember it coming to me really easily like I had done it before, but I hadn't."

At that moment Julie understood, at least on some level, that she was an artist. "I remember, I said to myself, 'Oh, I can do this; this is what I do,'" she remembers.

As she was preparing to graduate from high school, Julie seriously considered joining the Marines. After all her grandfather was a Marine and so was one of her aunts. And her friend Mike, also a Marine, was actively recruiting her to join up.

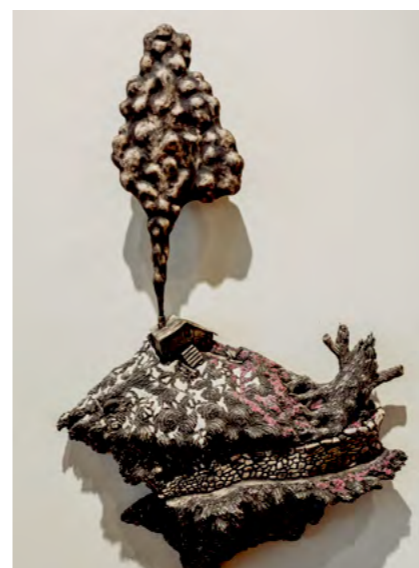
Somehow or other though her art teacher, Miss Campbell, got wind of Julie's plan.

"You're not doing the military," Miss Campbell, a VCU alumna, told her. "You're going to art school."

"What is art school?" Julie asked.

So Miss Campbell helped her charge fill out the application. "VCU was the only school I applied to and I got in and I got some scholarships," Julie says.

After completing the arts



"Mom's Piece"

foundation program (AFO) Julie joined the crafts department. "I was thinking I need to make a living and crafts stood out as something you could make a living at," says Julie. "Everything else seemed too abstract." So she learned metal-smithing and ceramics in the crafts studios, and from friends she also learned woodworking skills.

Julie was drawn to sculptural ceramics, and learned more than a little from internationally renowned ceramic artist Sergei



"Before You Go"

Isupov, who did a demonstration at VCU. "He worked in porcelain sculptures with really bright colors so I learned from him how to make my own under glazes with Mason stains to get painterly surfaces," says Julie. "I learned a lot of techniques from him."

More than that though, Sergei advised Julie on how to make a living as a ceramic artist.

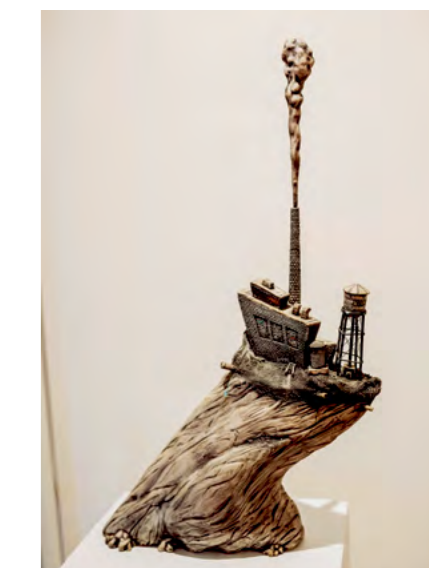
"You can make your sculpture, but hide a teapot in it," Sergei told her.



"Chimney"

"Because people collect teapots, and they'll buy your work if your sculpture's a teapot."

Julie followed Sergei's advice, at least initially, but by degrees the teapots were gobbled up by the sculptures. "The teapots became more and more hidden and then they became not functional and then the spout and the handle started disappearing," Julie says. "Maybe a tree would be a handle. I have a crazy one of a monster puking up skulls, and the skulls



"Lucky Strike"

are the handle. I stopped including lids, but I would keep the shape and then gave it up completely."

At her back, Julie always heard reminders of one of her first artistic loves—puppetry. In 2020, during the height of the pandemic, several things happened that would lead her back to those childhood dreams of puppetry.

In rapid succession, Julie's grandparents and mother died, and the NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts)

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images courtesy of JULIE ELKINS



"Harper's Ferry"

large scale full body puppets so my puppeteers were wearing large hats. And I made all the costumes."

Julie pauses for a long moment. "It was about losing my mom," she says. "There was this possum character who was grieving. And they've got this pink cat that's a friend and a pet and they go on this adventure and they meet some unexpected friends." In the not-too-distant future, "Playing Possum," which premiered a couple years ago at

Bonnaroo, will be coming out on Amazon Prime.

Over the years, Julie has produced scores of music videos with her friends. She has also created a likable puppet friend named Murv, who's something of a journalist. He's a little like Robert Smigel's Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, but without the edge and the biting sarcasm. There's also kind of a streak of Pee Wee Herman in Murv.

"He's got a YouTube channel

called MurvTube and he does a lot of interviews and he's got a theme song," says Julie. "This is what baffles me—it's the magic of puppetry—I don't know what Murv's gonna say, it's his own thing."

She remembers when she first created him. He looked at Julie and said, "How's it going?" And she said, "Who are you?" To which this puppet, that sort of resembles a blanched Maine Coon, replied, "I'm Murv."

Since his birth, Murv has really gotten around. "He went to the North Carolina Pottery Museum," Julie says. "He went to Virginia State and interviewed students. He talked to Miguel Carter Fisher about figure modeling and did some figure modeling. He went to a cat show and talked to the cat breeders about breeding cats."

Throughout her adventure as an artist, Julie has done more than her fair share of teaching, and often she learns much from her students.

In fact, a student at Virginia State University challenged her in a way that caused her to examine her understanding of art.

In her classes she would frequently tell the students to make a sketch before they created a piece of ceramic sculpture.

One of her students protested.

"Do we have to?" he asked. "Can't we just go with the flow? Can't we just make something?"

"It's not going to go well," said Julie.

"How do you know?" the young man responded. "Why don't you demo something without having an idea first?"

Julie took the bait, and the ceramic sculpture that resulted blew her away.

"It was the coolest thing ever," she says. "It was basically a portal into the abyss of death and birth. You look into a black hole and have no sense of depth."

And it clarified in her mind the very nature of art.


"I realized art is to teach you something," she says. "Art is the thing you go fishing for in the ether, and you pluck the idea. You become the conduit, you catch the idea in the cosmos and you pull it down and you create it and then when you're done look at it and you say, 'What does that have to teach me?'"

Years ago when everything in her life had taken a definite turn south, she and her partner set out on a strange voyage in an improbable craft. They launched their fiberglass canoe and scant belongings at Rockett's Landing. Their destination: Key West, Florida, via the Intracoastal Waterway.

"I wanted to do an odyssey and see what I was made of," Julie Elkins says. "There are too many stories to tell here, but I'm writing a book. We went through the Dismal Swamp, which was on fire at the time. Eighty-one days later we arrived

at Key West, and ended up staying there for two years.

She remembers a rogue wave they encountered off Hilton Head Island. The water was crystal clear and through the wave's transparent curl they could see the broad fleshy face of a sea creature, an enormous organism like the head of a giant puppet, and they thought it might be a shark. "It wasn't a hammerhead, but it was a giant sting ray," Julie says. "It was huge, and it slid across my lap."

It was like an idea out of the subconscious that materializes as art. 

Julie has a show called *Resonance* at Eric Schindler Gallery that runs through April 21. This 20-year retrospective of her ceramic art will amaze and mystify and have you wondering how clay can be transformed into sculptures, some of which are complex landscapes, others stratified narratives.

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Kenya Gibson Launches Campaign

KENYA GIBSON, WHO is running against incumbent Ann-Frances Lambert for the Third District seat on City Council, launched her campaign on April 7, and she pulled out her second term as the Third District School Board representative.

“I think that accountability and transparency at the city level is critical,” she told a crowd of about 100 people gathered at a private residence in the 3200 block of Woodrow Avenue on Richmond’s Northside. “The number one crisis we have in the city is the cost of living crisis. This crisis is, I believe, fueled by the reality that we have city leadership that is elected with

developer dollars.”

“And what does that mean?” she asked. “We see public housing that’s being privatized. It means that housing that is actually affordable for Richmonders to live in is being condemned. And that paves the way for, I believe, and I went to school for architecture school so I can say this, shoddily built soulless apartment complexes all over the city.”

And then to a round of applause, she added: “We don’t need any more Chipotles.”

Less than an hour before Kenya’s stump speech began, and just blocks away from the Woodrow address, scores of people had gathered at Richmond Community Hospital in an effort to preserve this important,

iconic structure from demolition.

“I feel really strongly that we don’t own our history,” Kenya told the crowd during her campaign launch. “The history of the City is something that we are supposed to be protecting, and so making sure important buildings continue to stay there like Richmond Community Hospital on Overbrook. This is important work to do.”

She concluded her stump speech saying: “I’m promising that I will work with you all, and that together we will make Richmond, the Richmond that we deserve. I can pull in people to show up and to demand that City Council do the right thing.”

FIRST SUNDAYS AT RICHMOND COMMUNITY HOSPITAL

On the first Sunday of every month now, in the early afternoon, there’s a service held at a building on the city’s Northside that embodies a spirit unlike any other structure in Virginia. It is testament to perseverance and



Kenya Gibson with supporters at her campaign for council kickoff.

justice.

“The Richmond Community Hospital was actually started as an idea by Dr. Sarah Garland Jones,” told me on the first Sunday at April in the shadow of this hospital. “Dr. Jones was the first woman to receive a medical degree from the Commonwealth of Virginia. She was also African-American. She realized that the African-American community needed a place where the patients could be treated with dignity and could be treated by Black physicians because Black physicians did not have hospital privileges in White institutions. So she rallied the community and it took about three decades to raise the money needed to erect the building.”

On Independence Day, 1934, Richmond Community Hospital admitted its first patient, and continued operating through the 1980s, according to Viola. “African-American patients from across Virginia came here,” she says. “And the patients were treated with respect and

dignity and provided the best medical care of the day.”

Virginia Union University purchased the building in the 1980s and has owned it ever since.

“Earlier this year there was an announced plan by the university to actually have housing built here, but there was no indication that it wanted to save the building,” Viola said. “In fact Virginia Union stated it wanted to demolish the building.”

Viola responded to an editorial that ran in the Richmond Free Press. “There was a groundswell of support and Farid Schintzius contacted me and we began the First Sundays,” said Viola.

During the First Sundays many have come forward with testimonials about their personal connections to the hospital. “People came into the world here; people left the world here,” said Viola Baskerville.

The day after I spoke with Viola I talked with Dr. Fergie Reid, Jr. who

practices medicine in Sherman Oaks, California. His father, Dr. Fergie Reid, Sr., a civil rights activist and the first African-American elected to the Virginia General Assembly since Reconstruction, had privileges at Richmond Community.

“He practiced medicine there, and I was born there,” Dr. Fergie, the younger, told me. And then he said this: “If Westhampton Elementary School, Miller & Roads Department. Store., the Carillon War Memorial, the Byrd Theater, the Governor’s Mansion, the Capitol Building, the Oliver Hill Building, the Reid’s Row Buildings, the old Richmond Memorial Hospital, the old Armory Building, Jefferson Davis’s House, the Hippodrome Theater, Maggie Walker High School, Maggie Walker’s House, Ginter Park Elementary School, and a whole host of other Richmond, Virginia buildings are deemed worthy of refurbishment and adaptive reuse by Virginia’s powerful decision makers, then the old Richmond Community Hospital building meets the criteria for being



Mary DePillars, Janis Allen, and Viola Baskerville in front of Richmond Community Hospital, rehabilitated and adaptively reused as well.”

BELLEVUE PORCHELLA 42024

Bellevue’s most popular annual event, which highlights community and musical talent, will be held later this month on the palindromic date of 4.20.24.

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grim days when a virus had changed the world for many of us. Brooke Ullman came up with the idea while she was out strolling one evening and chanced to hear The Bellevue Bon Temps fiddling up a Cajun storm from their backyard which faces on MacArthur Avenue.

So the seed was planted, and a few months later, on a stifling midsummer afternoon, it was germinated when Brooke watched from her front yard as a family with three kids briefly stopped in front of the home of Haze and Dacey, two local musicians who were playing on their front stoop.

As Haze played on his upright bass, Dacey improvised a song for the kids. When the family moved on, Brooke crossed the street and told her neighbors how much she enjoyed listening to them play. And then she said this: "Wouldn't it be cool if we had an outdoor walk-around little music thing?"

They both nodded. "Yeah, it'd be great," said Dacey. "Will you do it? Will you

organize it?"

"I ended up mentioning it to Summer Gentry and she said, 'You absolutely have to do this. This is a great idea. We absolutely have to do this. Get on the call and you have to mention it,'" Brooke told me years ago.

This year's event to be held from 12:30-6pm on Sunday, April 20 features more than 35 bands. Fauquier Avenue from Laburnum to Bellevue will be closed from 11:30 am till 6:30 pm to all traffic. For more information please visit <https://bellevueporchella.com/>

MONTHLY MUSIC LINEUP

AT NORTHSIDE GRILLE

Here's a list of bands and events hosted by Northside's leading music venue—Northside Grille.

4/12, First Animal Response Team; 4/13, Grain Hoppers with Unknown Pleasures; 4/14, The Sweet Potatoes; 4/17, Ramona Martinez; 4.18, Mike Norris and Derelicts of Grace; 4/19, Jonathan Meadows; 4/20, After Porchella Patio Party; 4/21, Caroline

Vain; 4/24, Mackenzie Roark; 4/25, Armistead's Army; 4/28, Willie Williams. Coming in May—Janet Martin, Ramona & The Holy Smokes, Carmen Ann and the Low Down Gamblers, and much more!

Northside Grille
1217 Bellevue Avenue
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MAY FAIRE FESTIVAL AT RICHMOND WALDORF

Mark your calendars for a family-fun day in celebration of spring at Richmond Waldorf School. The annual May Faire Festival will be held from 11 am till 2pm on Saturday, May 4, rain or shine. Maypole Dance begins at 10am. The event is free of charge and open to the public.

Tickets sold at the door, or pre-ordered, allow you to participate in activities such as flower crown making, jump rope making, tie-dyeing, a visit to the Pocket Fairy, and more. All proceeds benefit the

students of RWS. Local vendors offer a wide range of refreshments.

For more information, please visit <https://richmondwaldorf.com/mayfaire/>

Richmond Waldorf School
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Dallas Wommack with her daughter at Richmond Waldorf.

DIVERSIONS

Get Your Kicks Way Off Route 66

by FAYERUZ REGAN

THE AMERICAN WEST IS still shrouded with an air of romanticism. At the heart of our fascination is the desert. The spirit of the West is celebrated in many ways, but none more American than a good old-fashioned road trip.

The visuals are strong; waves of heat rising off the asphalt, saguaro cacti, and fiery sunsets. Road trip films often become classics. Easy Rider followed two bikers through the American Southwest and became an anthem for youth counterculture in the 1960s. My generation venerated the film Thelma & Louise, where a soul-searching road trip liberates the female characters. Many of us dream of getting our kicks on Route 66.

My fascination began with a glow-in-the-dark tee I bought at one of Jerry Garcia's last Grateful Dead shows. A cartoonishly hilly desert was split by a two-lane highway, and the sky was full of stars. It spoke of adventure.

Every year I escape winter with a trip back to California, where I once lived. As the years go by, my circle has whittled down to a tight-knit group. This means less obligations and being nimble. I found myself once again venturing into the desert.

I want to share a few gems off the beaten track - places I find extraordinary. Should you ever want to get your kicks, string these stops together for an adventure you'll never forget.

JACUMBA HOT SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

They say Jacumba sits atop a vortex. Indeed, the place has a strange energy. Sitting a quarter mile north of the Mexican border, one side sees Border Patrols barreling through the sand, kicking up dust, and lining people up. On the other side is a desert oasis. Not a gated resort but an intentional community of musicians, artists, and shaman apprentices. This long-forgotten resort was re-injected with life when three young visionaries bought the entire town.

They revived the natural hot spring, which now pulls the healing "magic water" into pools flanked by fire pits and



Salvation Mountain, in California's Sonoran Desert.

hammocks. The onsite restaurant serves gorgeously plated Mediterranean foods. The bar is dark, and filled with soft-focus paintings from the 1970s. Think of women in gauzy states of toplessness. The authenticity and remoteness of this place, coupled with the beautiful dilapidation of the surrounding dwellings, transports you to a Moroccan mountain town.

SALVATION MOUNTAIN

A mountain emerges in the Sonoran desert, drenched in over 60,000 gallons of paint. A technicolor waterfall and yellow brick road wind around the foothill. Towering above are stucco red letters, spelling out "God is Love."

Salvation Mountain was Leonard's Knight's labor of love. For nearly 30 years, he painted the folk art masterpiece and slept under the stars in his hammock. He happily gave tours of the psychedelic interior. Tree trunk columns were made from stacked tires covered in stucco. Painted branches extended from them, shooting off like rainbow lightning. Car windows were set into the stucco to let light in. Though he has passed, the place still resonates with his hopeful energy.

BOMBAY BEACH

Nestled along the Salton Sea, this town was nearly abandoned 20 years ago. I remember a sign on a trailer reading, "Keep Out: Pit Bull with AIDS". Those that remained scraped by with things that old neighbors, and society at large, had discarded. This Mad Max ingenuity

was an offshoot of creativity, and it was unstoppable.

Fast forward to 2023 - the Bombay Beach Biennale takes place from January to April, pulling in creatives from around the world. Artists convert abandoned spaces and found objects into art installations and immersive experiences. One of its founders is Tao Ruspoli, an Italian prince who was once married to Olivia Wilde.

PIONEERTOWN

Roy Rogers and Gene Autry helped to found Pioneertown in 1946. A movie set built to replicate an 1880s Western town, it has been featured in multiple films. The place has had a bit of a renaissance, and many of the facades have been converted to specialty shops. The wild west vibe feels authentic. Residents wear crumpled western hats, dusty boots, and tumbleweed blows by as if on cue.

At the center of this rustic scene is Pappy and Harriets, a beloved music venue and BBQ restaurant. Robert Plant is a regular and the place pulls in noted artists. Angelenos make weekend pilgrimages to see their favorite bands in an intimate space, and you never know who is going to pop in around Coachella time.

Not mentioned but looming large in my mind: Slab City. That place deserves its own article.

Happy trails.

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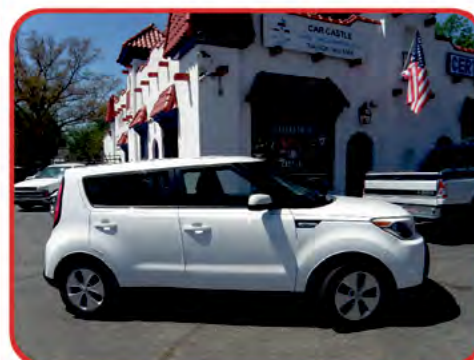
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BOOK REVIEW

“The Women”

by **FRAN WITHROW**

IN 1966, AFTER HER brother Finley is killed in the Vietnam War, twenty-year-old Frankie McGrath decides to volunteer as an Army nurse and, despite the disapproval of her parents, heads off to the battlefield.

In “The Women,” Kristin Hannah has written an insightful novel about the challenges women faced during this tragic war. While historical novels abound about World War II, those about the U.S. involvement in this particular conflict are few and far between. I am glad to see Hannah shedding light on this era.

Frankie comes from a sheltered, well-to-do home, so she is green and innocent when she first arrives at the hospital in Vietnam. But very quickly she becomes a first-rate nurse, fearlessly and tirelessly working to help soldiers with horrendous wounds, sitting with those who cannot be saved, and supporting the South Vietnamese civilians who are hurt in the cross-fire. From a helicopter, she watches Agent Orange wipe out vast acres of the jungle. She cradles dying children who have been burned by bombs. There is horror everywhere.

During all this, she is supported by her two good friends, Barb and Ethel. She even finds a love interest. And despite the atrocities she witnesses, she feels she is doing important work. Finally, after two tours of duty, she is ready to return to the United States.

The second half of the book is perhaps the more important one. There are many books about the horrors of war, but fewer talk about life afterwards. This one does, in detail. Frankie struggles to adjust to life back home and Hannah vividly describes how people respond to Frankie and other military personnel returning to the U.S. from Vietnam. By this point, American involvement in the war is deeply unpopular, and Frankie is met with derision and disdain.

Protesters spit on her and cabbies drive right by her. Her parents don't want her to talk about her devastating experience, and she cannot find relief from her horrendous nightmares. She turns to the VA offices for mental health support, only to discover that these groups are just for men, as there were “no women in that war.”

Lost, Frankie spirals further and further out of control, until she hits rock bottom. It is only then that she finds the help she needs. Afterward, Frankie finds a way to support other women who were traumatized mentally, emotionally, and physically by their time in Vietnam.

I was afraid this would end up being a story where Frankie needs the love of a man to have a happily ever after ending. Fortunately, Hannah does not fall into that trap, but instead uses Frankie's struggles to explore the wider message of how these servicewomen were traumatized by what they saw, and how little support, appreciation, and acknowledgment for their service they received.

Though the U.S. exited this terrible war that brought so much suffering to our military personnel as well as to the Vietnamese people in 1975, it was not until 1982 that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was erected in Washington D.C.

There was no Vietnam Women's Memorial at all until 1993 when one was finally raised, also in Washington D.C. A photo of this beautiful sculpture is included in the back of the book.

“The Women”

By *Kristin Hannah*

\$30.00

St. Martin's Publishing Group

464 pages

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