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left his home and family when he was not much more than a boy. After settling in Richmond, he worked for years perfecting his craft as a mason and a bricklayer. Endowed with an aesthetic eye he was able to create imaginative and functional hardscape designs. Plus, he was likable and hard-working. He eventually opened his own business, which is now flourishing, and he lives an American dream with his wife and daughter. But he never forgot what it was like to have next to nothing, so when people, even halfway around the globe, are in need, Victor is there with a helping hand and a strong back. *(continued on page 12)*



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COVER photo by Charles McGuigan

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# Copperheads Are Richmond Natives

by REX SPRINGSTON

**W**HILE PULLING weeds in Richmond's Byrd Park last August, Karl Huber felt a sharp pain in his right index finger.

"It felt like a pin went straight through my finger," said Huber, 70, who lives in the Fan District.

Huber, a longtime park volunteer, had been bitten by a copperhead. The venomous snake had been hiding in a bunch of weeds Huber had grabbed. The snake pierced Huber's heavy leather glove with one fang.

The bite sent Huber to Retreat Doctors' Hospital, where a doctor drained bloody fluid from the swollen finger and prescribed pain meds. Part of Huber's hand turned black from severe bruising, and that lasted about a month.

"I still don't have feeling on the tip of my finger," Huber said. "I don't know if that's ever going to come back."

Huber thought the encounter a freak occurrence -- until he got bitten again in April. Again, he was struck in the park by a copperhead hiding in weeds he was pulling.

A friendly, fit, balding man with gray hair, Huber is a member of the Friends of Byrd Park, a group of park supporters. He had never heard of a confirmed copperhead sighting in Byrd before that August bite.

Now, there have been at least five credible sightings in the past year.

"I've been working over there for 14 years, then I get bit twice in eight months," Huber said. "I was not ever expecting to see another (copperhead)."

Huber's second bite was less serious. The snake struck his glove -- hanging from the glove for an instant -- and apparently injected little or no venom. Some swelling lasted about two weeks. Huber didn't see a doctor.

Both snakes were about 20 inches

long.

"My biggest concern then was, my God, how many of these are there?" said Huber, a part-time state employee.

TV news reports indicate 2023 is an unusually big year for copperheads. "Copperhead sightings on the rise in Central Virginia," reads one online headline.

Recent sightings raise two questions: Are we really experiencing a copperhead boom? And what the heck is going on in Byrd Park?

J.D. Kleopfer, Virginia's state herpetologist, or reptile expert, doesn't buy the idea of a copperhead boom.

Every year, when the weather gets warm and copperheads start moving, multiple news outlets ask Kleopfer if copperheads are increasing. He estimates he has done 100 interviews on the subject -- "head and shoulders above anything else."

"There's no scientific evidence that copperhead populations are exploding," Kleopfer said.

Populations can seem to take off for several reasons, including the rapid spread of sightings through social media, he said. "Everyone has a camera in their pocket now."

As for the cluster of Byrd Park sightings, Kleopfer said he wasn't sure what was happening. "I wouldn't say it's too unusual because there's nothing I can really compare it to... It's definitely kind of interesting."

It's possible that one or two snakes are responsible for multiple sightings, Kleopfer said.

How do you explain Huber getting bitten twice in eight months?

"It could be that he's just very, very, very unfortunate," Kleopfer said.

I started checking into this supposed copperhead boom after stepping within inches of one myself in Byrd Park in mid-June. The snake, about two feet long, lay wonderfully camouflaged right in the middle of a trail I was walking.



*Writer Rex Springston accidentally stepped over this venomous copperhead in Byrd Park on June 12, 2023.*

A seen snake is a safe snake, the saying goes. If you see it, you can keep your distance, take photos and move on. I didn't see this one until I was literally stepping over it and glimpsed something wriggling between my feet. I think we startled each other.

I stepped past the snake, turned and immediately recognized it as a copperhead. Its thick, light-brown body was overlain with darker-brown, hourglass-shaped bands. Some copperheads are brighter and more coppery, and some are almost pink. This snake looked like a glob of dirt and sticks.

Now it lay stone still in a sort of half coil and gave me a cold stare that I interpreted as saying, "Come no closer."

I moved back a couple of steps. The snake never struck. I took photos.

I am outdoorsy, and I like snakes, but the encounter got my heart pounding. I used a long stick to flip the snake just off the trail, to protect other hikers and to protect the snake from any misguided do-gooders.

It is illegal to kill a snake in Virginia unless it poses an imminent threat to you or your property -- say, if a copperhead is in your garage or a rat snake is in your chicken coop.

Some people are scared witless of snakes, even harmless ones. But in a typical year, the number of people who die from venomous snake bites in Virginia is zero. Nearly 1,000 people

die each year on Virginia's highways.

The last death in Virginia from the bite of a venomous snake occurred in Chesterfield County in 2012, and that involved a man bitten by an exotic pet, authorities say.

The Virginia Poison Center at Virginia Commonwealth University has logged about 55 venomous snake bites -- nearly all from copperheads -- as of early summer this year. That closely tracks the past two years, said the center's director, Rutherford Rose. Bites were up in 2020 as people flocked to the outdoors, probably in response to covid, Rose said.

"Our data do not support a boom in copperhead bites this year compared to the last two years," Rose said. The center serves 3.3 million people in central and eastern Virginia.

Kleopfer said people need to chill out about copperheads. "The level of threat they pose to public safety is pretty overblown."

So, no overall copperhead boom. But in Byrd Park, a natural history mystery.

Byrd, one of the city's most popular parks, sprawls across 287 acres next to Maymont and just north of the James River. It features, among other things, three lakes, tennis courts and a woods at its southern end that is home to deer, owls and other animals. The copperheads have been spotted in and around that woods. Trails in



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the woods are frequented by bikers, hikers, dog walkers and parents with children.

Jym Coleman, a city parks employee who sometimes works in Byrd, said he knew of four credible copperhead sightings there since last summer. Huber's second encounter made five.

Plans call for putting up signs asking the public to "respect nature," Coleman said. There has been no decision on whether to mention the copperheads specifically.

Copperheads -- officially called eastern copperheads -- are common in our suburbs and rural areas but much less so in the city. I had never seen one in Richmond. City parks spokeswoman Tamara Jenkins could find no reports of sightings in the parks.

Tracking copperhead sightings is maddening. Many people don't report their encounters. After all, there is no one place to report them. And many other people see harmless snakes and insist they saw copperheads

Through interviews, social media and the iNaturalist website, where people report various animals and plants, I tracked down a sprinkling of credible copperhead sightings, often with photos, in city locations including James River Park, Forest Hill Park, Powwhite Park, Larus Park and even the residential Bellevue and Windsor Farms areas. Curiously, I could find no reports for the 262-acre Bryan Park.

iNaturalist shows two copperhead sightings in Byrd Park, in April 2019 and June 2021.

Copperheads have shown up a couple of times in recent years in city parking decks after apparently hitching rides on cars.

Rich Young, an amateur wildlife photographer who frequents the James River, said he has seen copperheads in the city about twice a year on average for the past 7 or 8 years.

"My assumption is that they're in every park," Young said.

He admires the snakes' colors and patterns. "They are beautiful."

Copperheads are native animals that belong here and should be left alone, said Ralph White, the former long-time manager of James River Park. "Keep your eyes open, and you'll be OK."

White called the recent Byrd Park sightings "a strange and wonderful oc-

currence" and a sign of a "richer environment."

There are three venomous snakes in Virginia -- rattlesnakes in the mountains and near the coast, cottonmouths near the coast and copperheads almost everywhere. Of the three, you will only find the copperhead in the immediate Richmond area.

The copperhead's venom is the least potent of the three. Death by copperhead is extremely rare. Still, its bite can cause great pain and swelling and, sometimes, more serious problems. If you are bitten on the finger and don't see a doctor fast enough, for example, you could lose the finger.

Copperheads use venom to subdue their prey, including mice and small rodents. The venom destroys soft tissue. If you are bitten and experience swelling or pain, go to a doctor. Don't try to suck the venom out, and don't apply a tourniquet.

If your pet is bitten, keep it quiet and take it to a veterinarian. Copperhead bites are occasionally fatal to pets. The smaller the pet, the greater the risk.

Huber's experience notwithstanding, copperheads are unaggressive animals that just want to be left alone, experts say. But if you get too close, they will strike to defend themselves.


"No snake sees a person as prey or a fight to win," said Travis Anthony, a past president of the Virginia Herpetological Society, a scientific and educational group.

"Their response is usually sit tight and hope the large animal" -- that's you or me -- "goes away, or find the escape route."

I often see Huber and Coleman working in Byrd Park. They have helped turn a section smothered by kudzu, the notorious "vine that ate the South," into a flowery attraction.

Twice bitten, Huber is still weeding away in the park. But he no longer uses a small, three-prong hand tool, which put him within inches of the copperheads.

"I use a big long" -- he stretched out the word -- "three-prong tool on a pole. I've learned my lesson...I don't want this to happen again."

Huber is also on alert for other copperhead reports. "I want to know if this is a real problem or just a chance thing." 



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## DIVERSIONS

# Cruel Summer: Satan's Blow Dryer

by **FAYERUZ REGAN**

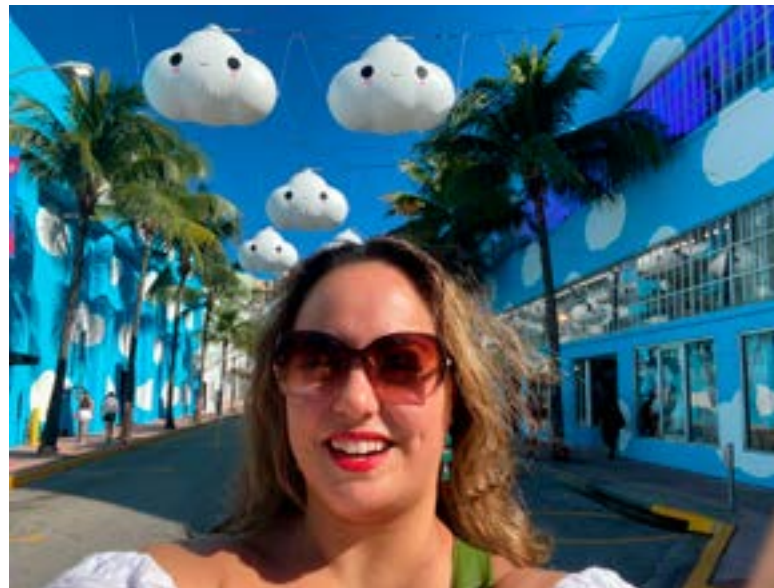
**G**ROWING UP, my neighbor Casey wasn't a "girl next door" (though she physically was). She was an it girl. She had large doe eyes, an immaculate perm, and was a few years older than the other kids on the block. When she jogged around the neighborhood, the boys would follow behind her. They were laughing and too afraid to speak to her directly, but were professing their love nonetheless.

We thought she "worked at a bar" though it was likely a T.G.I. Fridays. Then she moved to California and became a jazz singer. How do you compete with that?

I'll tell you how. You find out years later that she loves humidity. It makes you rethink your entire version of this person. I was visiting my parents a few years ago, and saw Casey sitting on her parent's front porch. Let me preface this by saying the night was so muggy that my shades fogged in the car. It was gross. Yet Casey sat on the steps with her chin tilted toward the sky. I'd guess she was looking at stars, but it was too hazy. "Hey Miss California!" I called to her. We both lived there, but would run into one another back in Virginia on major holidays.

She beamed at me and said, "Isn't this great?" I looked around. I didn't see anything. "The humidity," she explained, "It's so steamy and sensual!" She raised her arms to her sides, palms up, and sucked in a lot of air through her nose. She noticed my horror. "It's so sexy. Plus it's great for your pores. The people who live in humid countries have the best skin."

So I tried to embrace humidity. It was Casey, after all. I had recently moved from L.A. to Richmond, and figured if I couldn't beat it, I could pretend it was a sauna. I loved a good eucalyptus steam session. And I tried, I really tried deep breathing and imagining my pores opening. But there was no smell of eucalyptus. Just the faint whiff



*In Miami, smiling through the pain.*

of dog poop baking in the sun two yards away.

Then I tried to embrace humidity as sexy. We often see gleaming skin in music videos and love scenes. People were especially wet-looking in 90s Cinemax ("Skinemax") movies. And boy did I glisten. But how could it be sexy if I was ready to punch anyone who even thought about touching me?

Determined to beat this, I found another person who liked humidity. My sister-in-law Rebecca claimed she liked it because it beat the cold. I told her to take cold out of the equation. She had a hard time doing this. I discovered it was because she's cold all the time. For her, humidity is associated with heat, which is just a respite for her chattering bones. Hence, it doesn't count. Unlike my sociopath neighbor Casey, who actively seeks out steamy weather, Rebecca does it to not have the same blood temperature as a reptile.

I'm not alone in my loathing. One of my favorite Southern writers, Pulitzer Prize-winning Rick Bragg, likens humidity to a wool blanket. And as much as he makes the South sound folksy and full of heart, he even acknowledges the scourge of the Southern summer.

I love the way my skin dries instantly

when stepping into air conditioning. Or a crisp, dark movie theater on a sweltering day. But I haven't given up hope. Readers, please impart that priceless insight that will allow me to embrace the hell that takes place when rain water evaporates back into clouds.

The humidity starts with a standoff. At stage one, it's me against spring's dreaded retreat. I'll keep the windows open through the balmy weather, and act like I don't notice when our rugs start to smell like the animals they're woven from.

Then there's stage two: the standoff with my husband. You've entered this stage when it becomes uncomfortable to sleep. But who will call it first? We pretend that the cooler nights make up for the mugginess that makes our pajamas stick to our skin. Though it's never said aloud, the person who calls it first is ultimately the spoiled one, the one that can't handle "warm weather," and is thus ending the nice break we had on the electricity bill.

As of last night, I became the spoiled electricity bill-ruiner of 2023. We closed our squeaky windows and pressed the tiny button that chased away Satan's blow-dryer. Happy summer y'all. **NEJ**



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# In the Heart of the Chickahominy

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

*This cover story first appeared in June 1999, four years after the founding of NORTH of the JAMES magazine.*

**I T IS A RIVER YOU WANT TO** wrestle one on one like a crocodile in an old Tarzan movie, but a small dagger will never subdue the upper Chickahominy. You need to climb inside it, plod through the heart of its secret interior. It is not the sort of river you can paddle down with leisure. Though the water is flat, it is obstructed, and its spongy shores—swamps a mile wide in some places—flutter and slither and creep with an abundance of hidden life that waits in silence to make its move. It is unlike any other river in all of Virginia.

I saw the Chickahominy as a salvation of sorts, a way to make sense of the events of the past year, the primary one being a divorce. It was an entire year of uncertainty and inner terror, of grieving and sleepless nights and nameless dread. A time when reality was as horrifying as a nightmare, when dreams no longer offered relief but merely inflamed sore spots in the psyche. Nausea and headaches and seasick giddiness. Save for my daughter and her continued growth and health, it was not the best of times.

And now it was spring, edging close to summer, and I wanted some of these things put to rest. It was the time of new beginnings even after terrible ends and deep winters.

So on Shady Grove Road I unleash the canoe from the top of my car and put in just to the west of the bridge to explore the headwaters, nothing more than a trickle surrounded by the towering futility of Wyndham. The water is sluggish and not particularly deep. For the most part I pole my way along with a single paddle. On the north shore grows a stand of jack-in-the-pulpits, flanked on three sides by arrow arums and lizard's tails. It's serene, but even this far upstream there is evidence of the most dominant large animals on the Chickahominy—beavers. Their population over the 35 miles stretch of the river that I paddle must be staggering. When I can go no further west I turn around and at the bridge carry the canoe across the road. I make it downstream about a

mile but the beaver dams and fallen trees are so thick I turn back and put in on Staples Mill Road.

Here the water is flat and deep and clear. It has an amber tint to it, and along certain stretches you can see clear to the heavily pebbled bottom. I scoop up a handful of water. It's the color of weak tea.

Margo Garcia, professor of environmental engineering at VCU, had told me the water in the Chickahominy, save for two trouble spots—one near Upham Brook and the other near Tyson's Food—is reasonably clean. She told me this river's watershed embraces some 300,000 acres, 46,000 of which are in Hanover and 74,000 in Henrico. "It is a fabulously interesting river on all levels," she said.

A mile east of Staples Mill the Chickahominy becomes serpentine. It slithers through the flat terrain, winding its way southeast. This is a remote section of the river. There is no development, no hum of traffic. The surrounding woods are alive with insects, frogs and birds. The only two bird calls I can identify are those of a blue jay and a morning dove. In this part of the Chickahominy sound dominates everything, it saturates the air. About 200 different types of birds have been spotted along the Chickahominy.

"It's really a productive river," Bryan Watts had told me. He's director of the Center for Conservation Biology at William & Mary. "It's one of the most pristine tributaries of the bay. You can see that in the water bird population."

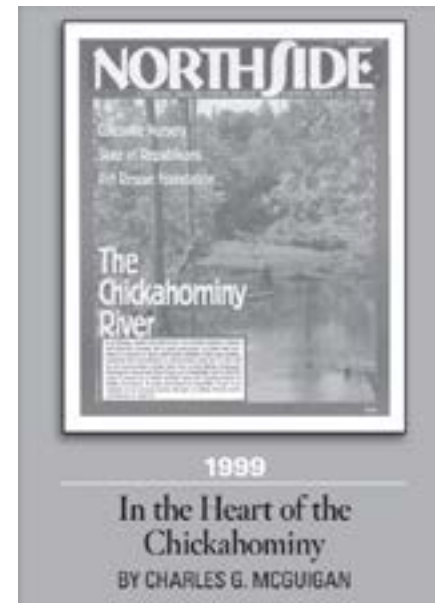
I pass under Route 1, the fall line, and here the river changes. It spreads out somewhat, but on the other side of Meadowbridge it becomes a totally different river. The main channel is hard to keep track of because there are streams that radiate from it like phalanges. And more than once this second day I mistake these lesser streams for the real river. This part of the river is lush. A palpable fecundity electrifies the soil, charges it with life. This is what attracted American Indians centuries ago to its shores—

Pamunkeys and Rapidans, but also tribes from as far north as New York and as far west as Ohio. They would winter here, setting up temporary hunting villages. They hunted turkey and deer, fished for snapping turtles and catfish, and harvested hazelnuts and dug the potato-like roots of the tuckahoes, what we call Arrowhead plants today.

In some ways, for the east coast at any rate, the Chickahominy at that time a sort of Manhattan or ancient Alexandria, at least during the winter. "There is a 12,000 year history along the Chickahominy and its tributaries," said Dan Mouer, a professor of archaeology at VCU. "All along the margins of the swamps and the confluences of the tributaries there were hunting camps. It is an edge area between the coastal plain and the Piedmont and people have been making and breaking points there for thousands of years."

Below Mechanicsville Turnpike the river spreads out even more and there are swamps, some a mile wide, flanking its shores. Diane Dunaway, who works the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, wants people to understand the damage they can do by ignoring the watershed they live in. "Everything that everybody living in the watershed does has an impact," Dunaway told me. "Think of a watershed as a tree. Creeks and streams are the xylem and phloem that flow down into the trunk of the tree with food and water. And each one of us is a leaf of that tree, gathering sunlight. Everybody needs to believe that their leaf has an impact on the Chickahominy."

This part of the river is a vast savannah. Trees killed over the years as the river widened into a swamp stand leafless and colorless like bleached bones. It's what naturalists and hydrologists call "deadening." It's a result of the beavers that have built more than 45 dams and lodges between Meadowbridge and Mechanicsville Turnpike, I counted them, I portaged over them. "Beavers alter the water regimen," Gary Speiran, of the U.S.



Geological Survey, told me. "They're natural engineers and take advantage of what's there."

The Chickahominy is smorgasbord of fish variety. I've caught bass and pickerel, walleye, large mouth bass, catfish, blue gills, pumpkin seeds, herring, shad, carp, even those most primitive of fish called grinnel. But the river teems with smaller fish, some of which are exceedingly rare, including black-banded and blue-spotted sunfish, the swamp fish, a dozen types of minnows and shiners and so on.

"The Chick is a good habitat," said Greg Garman, director of the center for environmental studies at VCU. "It's about as close to a natural coastal river as we can get. As long as we don't destroy the wetlands and riparian areas we'll be able to maintain a clean river."

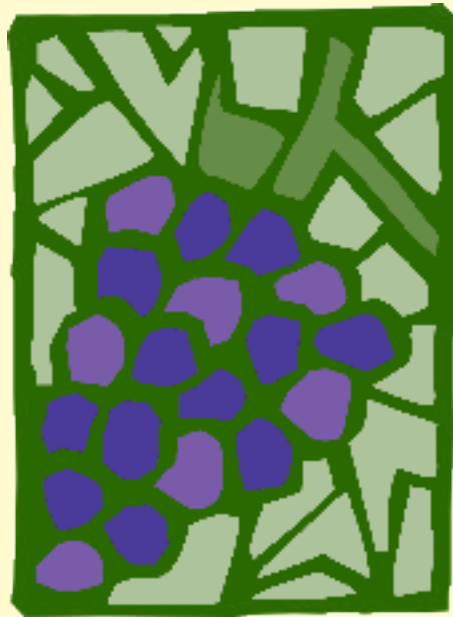
Directly to the north of me, somewhere in that quagmire, there is high ground where Chief Powhatan kept his treasures in some 40 longhouses. No one knows quite sure exactly where it was, but it was called Oropax. "We do know that Roanoke beads [trading beads] and food was stored there," Greg Garman told me. "It's a very important site and would be a great find. Powhatan had a confederation of chiefdoms and Oropax was the capital of that confederacy."

The Chick played an important role in protecting another capital of another confederacy. Union General George MacLellan called it that "confounded



Chickahominy” and it served as a sort of moat around Richmond, the crown gem of the Confederacy.

Well below Cold Harbor Road, as I approach the New Kent county line, I decide to better know this inscrutable river. The polyethylene husk of the canoe has kept me untouched by the Chickahominy, so I give myself over to it in a baptism, a dunking, a total immersion. My heart freezes as I hit the water and everything in front of me is the color of strong tea. As I drop deeper something moves past my face—a bass, judging from its length and shape—and then something soft, like the pelt of an animal, touches my calf. I drop in slow motion all the way to the bottom and the only sound is the pulse in my ear. But there is no fear of anything left in me. It is a relief, a lifting of a great weight. This is the thing: The Chick is only the present. There is no leaden past, no unpredictable future. It may be an infusion of ancient Pamunkey wisdom that has silted the river, sifting down through the slow stratas of dark water for a thousand years. The motes now drifting by my eyes may have started their downward journey a thousand years ago like light from a distant star just reaching the cone cells of our eyes after a millennial-long journey. It is the motion of the water itself whose past is too long ago to remember, whose future never seems to come. Not like a tidal river or a fast moving mountain stream. The Chickahominy is filled with present water. I stand confidently on the floor of the river, sinking my heels in. Then something moves under my left foot, and, in a start of panic, I bring both legs up and spring for the surface, frog-like in my movements. Snorting out water through my nose as I break through the surface, I do not get back into the canoe, I simply float there, treading water. I’ve been to the bottom, curled my toes in the primeval ooze, and I’ve earned this time of floating on the surface. As the ripples from my eruption settle down and as the surface calms, the river comes to life. A common water snake passes by, its slowly slithering body forming a perfect metaphor for the river it calls home. It doesn’t even startle me. 🍷



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# VICTOR AYALA ON THE ART OF GIVING

## SOME PEOPLE TAKE AND TAKE AND TAKE

and take. Consider how just a handful of American billionaires, in their excessive greed, possess the vast majority of our nation's wealth. It is a pathology consistent with psychopathy.

Fortunately for us all, there are people who give for one reason and one reason only: It's the right thing to do. Giving, even when you have very little yourself, ensures the preservation of the best angels of our humanity.



*An eight hour boat trip up the Rio Platano takes Victor and his team to a remote area of Honduras called Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve.*

Many years ago when Victor Ayala was no more than a boy he left his home in Guadalajara—the Pearl of the West, second largest city in Mexico—and crossed the Rio Bravo into the United States. Soaking wet, he and two of his friends plodded along in the deadly heat for two hours until they came to a freeway. Parked on the shoulder of that

highway was a massive boat of a car, a Cadillac, with its trunk sprung open. The three boys climbed into the trunk, and moments after the driver slammed it shut, the boys could feel the car begin to move, and the air became dense and the heat unbearable. A short time later, the car pulled into a service station and the driver opened the trunk

and tossed in a bag of ice along with several Gatorades. There was a brief hyphen of sunlight and then darkness returned as the driver slammed the trunk shut. For more than three hours, the boys basted in their own sweat, until finally the trunk popped open, and Victor and his friends jumped out like captive animals released from a trap.

Victor would eventually board a Greyhound bus in a Texas podunk and make a three-day trip across the country to arrive in Richmond, Virginia where he would begin his quest for a slice of the American dream. He worked in Mexican restaurants, learned the art of landscaping, and then a man named Gary Daniels, a seasoned mason, took a shine to Victor, and began teaching him all the finer points of the craft. “He was a good man,” Victor once told me. “He had a gift to push people to do more, and to learn.” In those early days, anytime business went slack in either landscaping or masonry, Victor would take whatever job he could find. “Charles, you know how it is for us immigrants, we have to hustle,” Victor said. “Sometimes they tell you, ‘We don’t have work and you have to wait for two weeks.’ So you don’t stay home and wait for that two weeks, you move on and find other work.”

After working several years for a local landscaping company where he produced all of the hardscape, Victor struck out on his own and created My Outdoor Project. Today, he is considered one of the finest hardscapers in the metro area, and he can work in any medium on any outdoor project—from brick and cobblestone patios and paths,

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN  
PHOTOS FROM VICTOR AYALA





*Helping rebuild Puerto Rico less than a year after the devastating destruction unleashed by Hurricane Maria.*

to raised beds and fire pits of river stone or limestone. Anything, really. Steps, stoops, outdoor kitchens, columns. You name it, Victor can create it.

I've known Victor for well over a decade now, have had the pleasure of spending time with him and his wife, Gasmin, and their daughter, Dhiana. His story is similar to those of many other immigrants. The struggles are the same—being a stranger in a strange land, having to contend with a language barrier, and, all too often, the xenophobic reactions of narrow-minded nativists. All Americans, if they go back far enough, can mine the same kinds of stories from their own family annals. That is, after all, what it is to be an American.

Here's something about Victor that has always inspired me: He not only believes in giving back, but he acts on it.

Victor sits at the head of the table in our living room with his wife Gasmin by his side. He tells me about the missions he's gone on with his

church, something he started doing nine years ago in southeast Asia near the border of Bangladesh and India. He and other members of his team worked in an economically deprived village in Myanmar at an orphanage that was founded

by three siblings, all orphans themselves.

A few years later Victor spent a week in Puerto Rico, about a year after Hurricane Maria wreaked havoc on that island nation. The



*A year after Maria struck Puerto Rico, many homes were still without roofs.*

team of twelve that Victor was part of flew into San Juan and then made their way into the foothills near Arecibo. "We went up to the mountains and were shoveling debris out of houses," Victor tells me. "We were cleaning up. Everybody was just scooping it up and putting it in the wheelbarrow and hauling it away."

Another mission trip took Victor to Peru, and still another led him to the Eastern Shore of Virginia to the inhumane migrant farmer camps that take advantage of the poor so the rich can become richer.

Just this past spring, in late March, Victor traveled to Central America. Their destination was a remote village in desperate need of medical and dental care, and some very basic supplies. It was a long and arduous trip that began at an airport in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. The next stop was El Progreso where the group began putting together suitcases packed with medicine and clothing, along with hygienic sundries like toothpaste and shampoo.

In El Progreso they met up with





Mission team members distributed about 10,000 pounds of rice to scores of villages in Honduras.

other members of their team, including three doctors, three den-

tists, and one nurse. That's also where they were joined by an

18-wheeler laden with 10,000 pounds of rice, which the team

of volunteers would distribute to small village churches along the way. After unloading the rice and packing it aboard two buses, the team, along with their suitcases stuffed with supplies, began a four-hour trip to Bonito Oriental, where the hard-surfaced roads ended.

“We drove all night,” says Victor. “In Bonito we switched everything at a gas station. Everybody took the luggage and everything we were going to give away and moved it all to four-by-fours because there were no paved roads ahead of us.”

Their caravan then traveled along the dusty roads east toward the Caribbean coast near Brus Laguna where they found the headwaters of the Rio Platano, the only highway into the rainforest they were about to enter. The largest contiguous tropical rainforest other than the Amazon, Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and home to many indigenous peoples, includ-



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ing Miskito and Pech Indians.

Victor's crew of volunteers, along with the supplies they had brought, loaded up three large canoes propelled by outboard motors and began a seven hour journey up the river, against its flow. It was an endless day under an unforgiving sun, but they all watched in wonder at the coastal mangrove swamps, and the flocks of colorful parrots and toucans. At certain points the river was so shallow that the group had to portage their vessels. Seven hours later, they reached their destination—Las Marias.

"We got up at six every morning," says Victor. "We had three dentists to pull teeth, we had three doctors, and we had a nurse to apply vaccinations. We had an area where we had all the medicine. We brought probably \$5000 in medicine." After three days, the group of volunteers left the village and headed back to the coast.



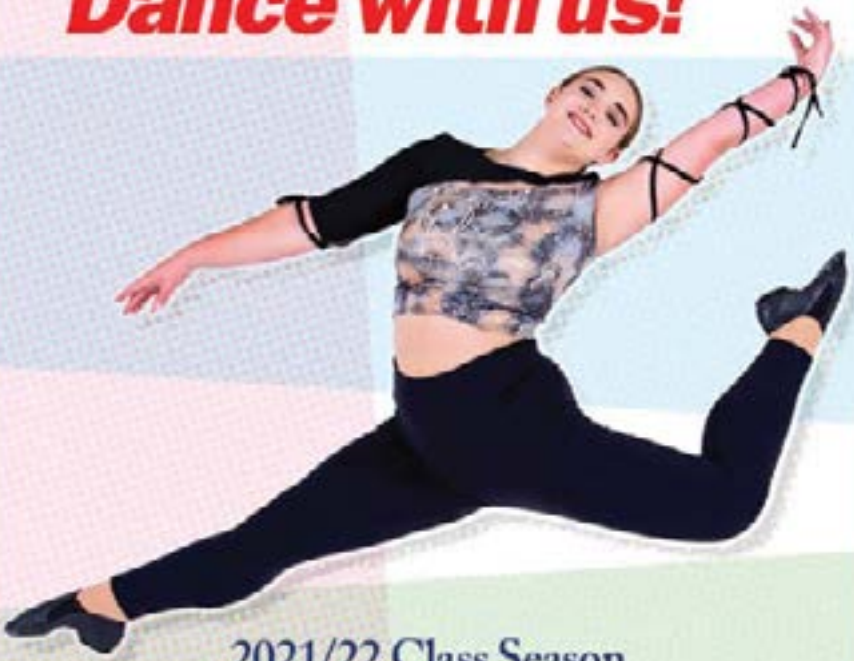
Two volunteers in Honduras sort bags of hygiene products from soap to toothbrushes, sanitary pads to razors.

When I ask Victor why he does it, he smiles broadly. "Because I want

to help," he says. "It's what I do, I help."

He then tells me that as a boy he

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Doctors, dentists and nurses tended to the sick in this remote Honduran village.

often witnessed his father giving to people even when he had little himself. “I saw my dad helping other families,” Victor says. “Sometimes we don’t have much, but my dad says, ‘Okay let’s go help this family.’ And he passes by the store and grabs ten pieces of bread and one gallon of milk, because he knew they were having a hard time. And I would say, ‘Also we are having a hard time.’ My father would nod and say, ‘Let’s go over there and help.’”

The act of giving comes as naturally to Victor as the first breath of a newborn.

“I think when you don’t have anything, you don’t need to wear a mask to hide who you really are,” he says. “And I think you understand more, and people can see you truly for who you are. And being poor, you start having people by your side. You might say, ‘I know you’re suffering and so am I, but let’s share, let’s be friends, let’s somehow make

this time enjoyable. You got me, I got you.”

Gasmin nods. “The higher you scale, the more you have to put a mask on because you’re trying to impress,” she says, “You have a certain reputation that you have to uphold now. But you start losing your values, your friends around you. You think that people are going to take advantage of you. You start losing yourself. You’re left in a mansion with the fanciest things, but you’re not going to take that with you when you die, you’re going to be empty handed just like everybody else. What’s the footprint that you leave before you die? Is your footprint destroying the entire world? Or did you help this person that turned out to be a doctor who helped the world?”

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## BOOK REVIEW

# Bleach Drinking, Laser Lights And Quack Cures

by **FRAN WITHROW**

**O**UR CURRENT healthcare system isn't perfect, and some people are so disillusioned with it they are willing to seek medical answers outside the system. And there are scores of practitioners of "medical freedom" just waiting to take people's money and send these sufferers their own version of the "One True Cure."

In his fascinating book, "If it Sounds Like a Quack," Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling set out to explore fringe medicine: how it arose from our country's bloated, flawed health care system, why people are so easily taken in, and how our country might address it now.

Hongoltz-Hetling talked with several people who have created alternative cures for a variety of illnesses. Each of them is convinced their cure works and each struggles diligently to get their supplements and devices into as many hands as possible. They ingeniously know how to work the system; flying just under the FDA radar or even taking advantage of the FDA's cumbersome procedures.

Larry Lytle is a dentist who helps his community after a devastating flood. This leads him to develop a laser light he says can confer better health on the user. Toby McAdam is heartbroken over his mother's cancer and creates his own supplements to heal her. Robert O. Young is a Mormon offering alkalizing health supplements to those whose acid levels are "off." Reading about



how each of these people came up with their cures is fascinating.

Hongoltz-Hetling's writing is delightfully humorous, despite the seriousness of his topic. I chuckled repeatedly as he described meeting "the alien in Jim Humble's body" who believes his chlorine dioxide bleach-like health drink can cure a myriad of illnesses.

Whoa.

And now we know where the former game show host (Hongoltz-Hetling's description) got the idea for drinking bleach as a Covid cure. Larry Lytle's laser light also gave the former game show host some novel ideas for addressing the pandemic.

One couple's story is more tragic. Pentacostals Leilani and Dale Neumann believed their faith would save their daughter Kara when she slipped into a diabetic coma. Kara died, but her parents were sure it

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was due to their lack of faith. How do you reconcile religious and medical freedom with a child's life?

Hongloltz-Hetling turns serious when he discusses how issues of medical freedom, rampant unregulated cures, and our overburdened medical system have now reached the point where there is no one way to solve the problem. He notes that

public trust in the medical establishment has eroded dramatically in the past twenty years. When doctors can only spend a limited time with each patient, patients feel unheard and unhappy.

Adding to the issue is the fact that some of our most respected hospitals have begun to offer alternative therapies such as herbal ther-

apy, energy healing, and botanical medicines. So while this book was an absolute treat to read, it is also a sobering wake up call for us all. How do we save people from themselves?

Good question. And in this case, unfortunately, there is no One True Cure. **NJ**

*"If it Sounds Like a Quack: A Journey to the Fringes of American Medicine"*


By Michael Hongloltz-Hetling

PublicAffairs

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# National Night Out August 1 on MacArthur

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National Night Out will be held rain or shine from 6-8 pm on Tuesday, August 1 along the 4000 block of MacArthur Avenue, Richmond, VA 23227. One of the largest events of its kind in the Richmond metro area, this annual event drew more than a thousand people in past to one of Bellevue's two commercial strip. Sponsored by the Bellevue Merchants Association and the Richmond Police Department, it is an evening of kid-friendly activities, including the ever-popular misting tents and face-painting booths.

The merchants of MacArthur offer a wide range of taste treats for kids and adults alike—ice cream and popsicles, snowballs, popcorn and more.



*Hampton Choir performing.*

**HAMPTON UNIVERSITY CONCERT CHOIR LED BY DIRECTOR OMAR DICKENSON PERFORMED AT WHITE HOUSE JUNETEENTH CONCERT**

The Hampton University Concert Choir, under the dynamic leadership of Director Omar Dickenson, performed at the White House for a

special Juneteenth Concert on June 13, 2023. This commemorative event took place during Black Music Month where the Biden-Harris Administration uplifted American art forms that sing to the soul of the American experience.

University President Darrell K. Williams said this of the invitation to perform at the White House:

“We are absolutely thrilled and proud to have the Hampton University Concert Choir represent our institution at the White House for this remarkable Juneteenth Concert. This invitation speaks volumes about the immense talent and unwavering dedication of our choir members, as well as the incredible leadership of Director Omar Dickenson. I extend my appreciation to the President and First Lady for hosting this extraordinary event.”

Renowned for their powerful voices and stage presence, the Hampton University Concert Choir has maintained a repertoire of choral masterworks from some of the most prolific American composers from R. Nathaniel Dett to Nathan Carter. The Choir also performs the outstanding work of contemporary composers and arrangers such as Marques L.A. Garrett and B. E. Boykin.



*Ever-popular misting tents at either end of MacArthur Avenue.*



*Jonathan the Juggler performed at a past National Night Out.*






Gracie Berneche as Hestia in Virginia Rep's *GOLD The Midas Miracle*.

**VIRGINIA REP PRESENTS  
PURE GOLD THROUGH AUGUST 6**

The Jessie Bogese Theatre at the Virginia Rep Center for Arts and Education on Hermitage Road will present "GOLD: The Midas Musical" through August 6.

"GOLD: The Midas Musical" follows the story of King Midas who, after the death of his wife, hardens his heart and turns to greed for solace. When Dionysus, the god of having a good time, offers him the power of the Golden Touch, Midas can't refuse. Only his daughter Lydia believes that the King can return to the man he used to be, and she'll do everything in her power to get her father back. Using contemporary pop and musical theatre styles, this energized and expanded re-telling of the myth invites parents and children to remember that nothing can replace the value of your family. Tickets are \$21. For more information please visit: [https://va-rep.org/\\_gold-midas-arts-and-education.html](https://va-rep.org/_gold-midas-arts-and-education.html) 

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# The Making of the FLSA

by JACK R. JOHNSON

**I**N A RECENT OXFAM SURVEY of member OECD states on worker safety, the U.S. came in dead last (38th out of 38), behind such states as Turkey, Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica and Estonia. Presumably, this was because we fail to provide paid sick leave or affordable care for our children, not to mention our comprehensive failure to provide affordable health care to our citizenry. On the 1-to-100 scale measuring the adequacy of worker protections, first-place Germany had a score of 72.91, while 37th-place Estonia's score was 44.41. Then came the U.S., with "a mind-bogglingly low score of 25.23."

This shouldn't come as a surprise when considering the legislative efforts made by Republicans to roll back worker rights and protections across the country in the last few years. Republican Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders recently signed the "Youth Hiring Act" — a law eliminating Arkansas' requirement that 14- and 15-year-olds get work permits (despite the ten children Federal officials recently found working illegally in Arkansas for a company that cleans hazardous meatpacking equipment.) In early May of 2023, Republican state lawmakers in Wisconsin circulated a new bill that would allow workers as young as 14 years old to serve alcohol in bars and restaurants. Over the last few months there have been Republican-led bills in states like New Jersey, Ohio, and Iowa aimed at making it easier for teenagers to work in more jobs and for more hours a day. A recent Texas state law, which goes into effect beginning in September, will eliminate local government requirements for mandatory water breaks. In the triple digit heat of a Texas summer, these breaks can be lifesaving. Karla Perez, a city construction worker in Dallas, said that without a water break, "Work-



ers are going to die. There's no way around it."

All of these laws seek to whittle away or avoid the federal standards put in place in the United States since 1938 under the umbrella of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).

To gain some sense of the FLSA's impact on the U.S., and ultimately, the world, you have to imagine a time in which millions of children, some as young as five, were forced to work. They toiled in coalmines, glass factories and textile mills, for up to 18 hours a day. Our nation allowed employers to pay workers as little as possible, some less than \$1 per day. Often owners would work laborers 12 to 14 hours a day, six days a week—though some, as in the steel industry, worked seven days a week. No days off.

There were no weekends, no minimum wage, and no safety guidelines, much less legal protections against a hazardous work place. But getting the Fair Labor Standards Act passed took decades. Then, as now, the Supreme Court sided with business owners. For years, whenever state and federal officials passed laws to protect workers, the U.S. Supreme Court struck them down. For in-

stance, the Court declared, in 1905's *Lochner v. New York*, that a law establishing a 60-hour workweek was unconstitutional for violating the "sanctity of contract" and "economic liberty." In *Hammer v. Dagenhar* in 1918, the justices ruled for a business owner, invalidating a federal child labor law and protecting North Carolina's right to set its own child labor laws.

That logic didn't sit well with the majority of Americans, however. Legendary union radical Mother Jones castigated the insanely long hours and the legality of child labor: "Some day the workers will take possession of your city hall, and when we do, no child will be sacrificed on the altar of profit!" A similar struggle for the eight-hour day lasted most of a century. On May 1, 1886, hundreds of thousands of workers nationwide went on strike for the eight-hour workday. There were riots, most notably the Haymarket Riot and bombings. Yet, it wasn't until decades later, during the Great Depression that the Roosevelt administration managed to pass the necessary legislation. In his 1936 re-election campaign FDR declared, "Something has to be done about the elimination of child labor and long hours and starvation wag-

es." He won in a landslide.

Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the first woman to serve in a presidential cabinet, led the effort. As early as 1911, after the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Fire killed 146 textile workers in New York City, Perkins worked with the growing labor movement under the leadership of the AFL-CIO to push for what would become the FLSA.

Resistance to the law was profound. Detractors used exaggeration and scare tactics. The National Association of Manufacturers declared that the FLSA "constitutes a step in the direction of communism, bolshevism, fascism, and Nazism", but they were on the losing side of the national sentiment, and history. The FLSA was signed into law two years after Roosevelt's landslide victory.

We tend to take for granted the weekend, an eight-hour work day, minimum wage, and OSHA rules, but the safe guards put in place through bloody strikes and protests years ago can also be whittled away. Indeed, they are being whittled away. Ask OxFam; or better, ask a Texas constructor worker going without a water break this summer. **NJ**





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