CARPE MOMENTUM • ST. JOHN OF NORTHSIDE • BRICK HOUSE DINER

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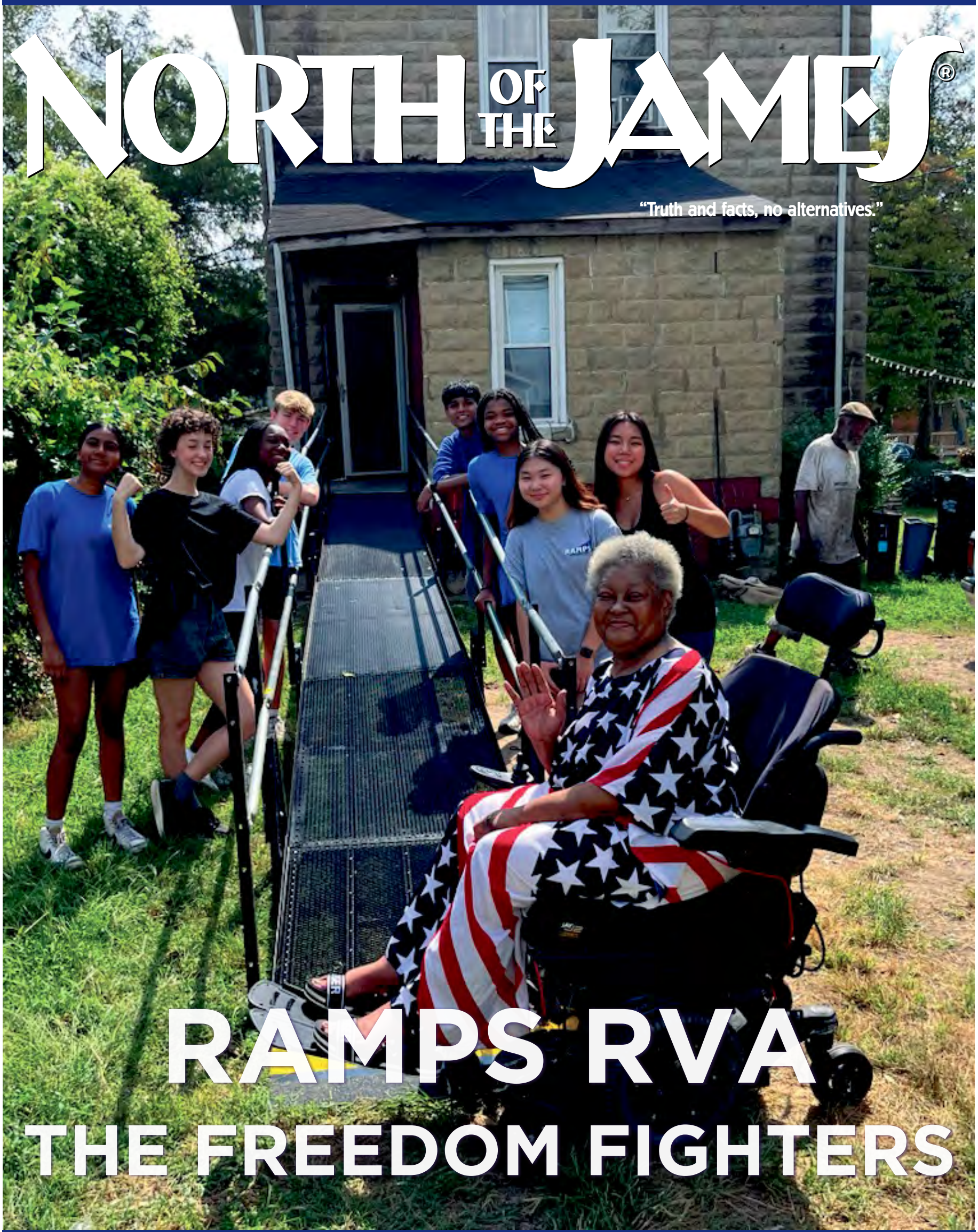
NORTH OF THE JAMES®

"Truth and facts, no alternatives."



RAMPS RVA
THE FREEDOM FIGHTERS

A REGIONAL MAGAZINE SERVING GREATER RICHMOND NORTH OF THE JAMES

www.northofthejames.com

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NORTH OF THE JAMES

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Saint John of Northside

by **CHARLES MCGUIGAN, originally printed in 2015**

Last December, when temperatures plummeted into the single digits, the City of Richmond utterly failed its citizens who have no permanent shelter. The City had said for many months that it would have four shelters in full operation before winter set in. But, of course, the City failed to meet this deadline, and as a result of this poor planning, numerous people suffered immeasurable pain. This piece with St. John of Northside was first published more than eight years ago. John still works his corner.

TO PREP FOR THIS article I spent two nights outside right after the cold weather set in a few weeks back. The first night I made a fire ring in the backyard with loose cobblestones, scavenged fallen limbs from the neighborhood, along the streets of Ginter Park and the median strip on Fauquier, cut the thicker ones with a chop saw and then a built a large fire that I fed throughout the night. I was secure in a sleeping bag but could never really get warm. When you're that cold, you sleep little and then only in abbreviated dozes, stippled with dreams. The longest hours of the night are between two and four, and the coldest hour is right at sunrise. In the morning there was a glaze of frost on my forehead and my hair was stiff. Two nights later I slept in the shed, again in the sleeping bag, but the mercury had dropped off another ten degrees. I lasted until three in the morning at which time the temperature was twelve. That's when I realized I couldn't prep for this piece: I have a safety net; I have a house. John doesn't have this luxury. What he has is a twelve-by-twelve foot garage made of particle board so porous the cold filters through it. He sleeps on a mattress spread across plastic milk crates to keep him above the concrete floor which this time of year is like a sheet of glacial ice.

Every day of the week John stands near the corner of Laburnum Avenue and Brook Road, holding a sign that reads: SMILE IT'S NOT THAT BAD. Just down the street, with its kickstand up in a mound of snow, stands John's mountain bike, his sole means of transportation, one of his few real possessions, of which he says: "My bike is my horse. It's my girlfriend. It's my car. It's my savior. Not to say it's my God, but it's saved me on more than one occasion."

John has worked this corner for years now. He stands six-foot three and sports a gray beard. His dark brown irises bleed a bit into the surrounding sea of sclera, which is slightly yellowed like aged parchment. John's eyes never leave yours when you're speaking with him, they move with your eyes, turret-mounted guns trained on a target.

"I've been homeless for a few years," he says. "That's part of life. Survival is a daily issue."

It wasn't always this way for John, but something happened about thirty years ago—a bad decision he made as a young man that would brand him for life.

Back in the 1970s John's future gleamed bright. "I worked for a bookkeeping and tax firm, year round, and it was great," he says.

After putting in eight years at the same company, John took an unauthorized loan with every intention of paying it back. "I was unable to repay the loan prior to the auditors catching up with me," he says. "It ruined everything."

John served little time, but he carried a suspended sentence with him. "They gave me the installment plan," he says. Any minor infraction would land John back in jail. "Each time, they would say, 'You've got to serve three months.' Just long enough to lose your house, lose your car, lose your job."

John rubs his forehead with a gloved hand. He shakes his head. "Some small thing happens and your house is gone, your car is gone, your job is gone," he says. "Again. Again. Again . So hell, you don't even try no more."

But John didn't give up. He relocated to another city, out of state, and built a career in traffic engineering. He reclaimed his life, owned a car, had a job he enjoyed. Then he was summoned back to Richmond to care for aging relatives, an aunt and uncle. He threw himself into it, became their live-in caretaker. He lived off his own savings. And then both his aunt and uncle passed. "Relatives came out of the woodwork, scraped up everything, left me on the side of the curb with two plastic bags in my hand. I was homeless."

John makes his way over to a minivan at the traffic light. His shoes crunch through the snow that is glazed with ice. The woman on the passenger side rolls down her window and John thrusts his hand into the warmth, nodding his thanks, then folds two crisp dollar bills in half and thrusts them in the cargo pocket of the navy blue parka he wears.

When he rejoins me, John says he had no idea that returning to Richmond years ago would end in homelessness. "It was my downfall," he says.

Before John arrives at this corner each day, he's generally already worked a job. "People will say come over here or come over there and take a look at the job," he says. "I call

it a looksee."

And he can do pretty much anything. "I'm not above going on top of the house or under the house or painting, cleaning, fixing, or moving," he says. "People look at me as very cheap labor."

Which is why John works this corner. If nothing more, he'll be able to scrape together a few dollars for food and cigarettes. "I can stand here for two hours and get twenty dollars," he says. "It just depends on the day and the generosity of the person and the flow of traffic."

As a car pulls over to the curb, John goes to work and I leave him to his business.

Three days later I pick up John, strap his bike to the back of my JEEP, and we drive over to Stir Crazy for lunch. As we sit down at the table in the conference room, John removes his coat, a large blue parka with a fur-lined collar. "Let me tell you what I wear every day when it's so cold," he says. "I wrap up my core. I have a T-shirt, a shirt, a crew-neck sweater, a lined hooded sweatshirt, a lined Levi jacket and this bear (parka). I have on three hats, a skull cap, an Alaskan dog-eared cap and then another skull cap on top of that to cut the wind. I have on two pairs of jeans and a pair of thermal underwear. I have on two pairs of socks and an old pair of toe warmers."

When his meal arrives, John peels his gloves from his hands and invites me to take a close look at his fingers. The skin above his finger joints is the color of cream-lightened coffee, but the fingers are dark black. "I'm approaching frost bite on my hands, on the fingers," John says. "Cold is hardest on the extremities. I also worry about my toes."

He picks up his knife and fork and cuts a thin wedge off the meat and cheese filled wrap on the plate before him. He forks the food into his mouth and chews slowly.

"A lot of people look at me like I'm crazy cause I've been out there for so long," John says. "But I don't have any options."

He takes a few more bites of his wrap. He swallows, dabs his lips with a paper napkin. "There is a routine I have every day," he says "I have to go get kerosene. I usually use a gallon to a gallon and a half per night just to stay warm."

John doesn't lie down on those brutally cruel nights. "You have to set up," he says. "If it's that cold you don't go to sleep because you might die in your sleep."

The winter nights are long, almost unending, and that's when John is completely alone with himself. "Your depression kicks in, your pain kicks in, your anger and your dissatisfaction," he says.

And the main thing, after the long night, is coming back into the world. "The first thing you got to do is to get up out of bed and be functional," John says.

So in the icy morning John heats a can of water on top of the Kerosun and bathes himself with a washcloth. "It's painful," he says. "Exposed skin will freeze below thirty-two if its wet."

Once he's finished washing himself, John bundles up and rides his bike over to a nearby McDonald's.

"During the winter you cry a lot," he says. "When it's really cold, that's when you drink a four-hour cup of coffee at McDonald's."

After that, and perhaps a stint of day labor, he's off to his corner at Brook and Laburnum. And it really is John's corner. "People have told me that they saw somebody else on my corner one day and they rode right by and didn't give him anything," he says. "They waited for me to return."

As we leave Stir Crazy, John stops just past the threshold and turns to me. "I was believing that that warmth inside would last forever," he says. "I forgot all about winter."

There's no trace of the sun, and the sky is gray and heavy. A few snowflakes fall, interspersed with a little sleet like pellets of Styrofoam, and then we're in the JEEP headed over to Laburnum and then east.

During that last interview with John I had been thinking about St. Francis of Assisi, the Fool of God. I considered the story of how he stripped out of his clothes on a cold winter's evening and bedded down for the night in a drift of snow. I've heard different explanations as to why he did this and I never really bought any of them, but after getting to know John, I think I understand why Francis had done this. He wanted to know the elements and embrace them. He wanted to know what it was like to be without clothes, without shelter, wanted to know what it was like to be at the mercy of the elements, wanted to understand what even the smallest of animals must go through when the weather grows frigid.

Gusts of warm air from the dashboard pelt John and me as I pull over to the curb on North Avenue. I release the Velcro-tipped tethers that secure John's bike to the rack on the back of the JEEP. I lift the bike and hand it over to him. That's when he tells me the story of the birds he has come to know.

"The birds are pretty cool in my area and I feed them and they walk on my house," he says. "At the first hint of daylight the birds come out and sing. That's how it is in the summer and the spring and the fall. I'm kind of in touch with them now. I like the fact that there're no intruders because the birds make noise even though they're the lightest creature you've ever seen. They can walk on top of the snow; they can pretty much walk on water if they want. But they'll make noise and shake tree limbs if they hear somebody coming. There are a couple cats around and I chase the cats away so that they don't try to attack the birds. I don't know if the birds recognize that I do this, but the cats know not to get too close when I'm around. It may sound crazy, but I talk to those birds."

"And they listen," says John. NB

Love Makes A Perfect Landing

by **ANNE JONES**

I ONCE READ THAT IF you're asked what made you fall in love with someone, and you immediately list some specific reasons, it's not true love. That sounds about right. True love is ineffable, right? And since it was 2:43 am and I had recently discovered Chat GPT, I had to ask it "write about how you can't write about love." No sooner had I typed that last e, than a list of pretty good reasons populated my screen scarily fast, defying its own premise, sort of. My favorite was that it's like "trying to paint the wind." And so it goes with music reviews, and with trying to describe a band I've been in love with for almost 50 years. I can hardly do them justice with dissection and words, but I'll try.

I fell in love with Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen the very first time I heard them, when my brother brought home Lost in the Ozone and Live From Deep in the Heart of Texas. I mean, what was not to love? As a sheltered, un-cool 14 year-old I might not have understood then that they were some of the original architects of Americana, that they brought together hippies and rednecks, that they mingled hard-core blood-and-guts country with rock'n'roll and folk, and consequently were at least as groundbreaking as the Byrds or the Flying Burrito Brothers, that they threw in Texas swing and Bob Wills just to make me love them more, and that they played with such a mix of musical virtuosity and reckless, kick-ass fun that they were impossible to resist. I just knew I loved them. I couldn't paint the joy.

Fast forward 50 years and I'm still in love. Though they disbanded in the late 70's and everybody forged their own musical and professional paths, and though the Commander departed the planet a couple of years ago, the Airmen never really left, at least not in the hearts and psyches of their fans. And through the years, on various stages in various iterations the Airmen have come together - at the Birchmere in DC or in upstate New York, or most frequently at their old stomping grounds in Berkeley CA. That's where I saw Bill Kirchen, John Tichy, Andy Stein, Buffalo Bruce Barlow, and Bobby Black together again, playing "My Window Faces the South" and "Wine Do Yer Stuff," and "Back to Tennessee" and so many more, aad it was literally the stuff of dreams, a religious experience. And now, those Airmen have bottled that lightning, that magic, that unmistakable sound with the release of their new reunion CD, Back From the Ozone, out 10/27 from The Last Music Company. It's their first release in 52 years. And it's not just a nostalgia-fest; these guys are some of the best musicians on the planet, at the top of their game, a true supergroup. It's all we could ask for.

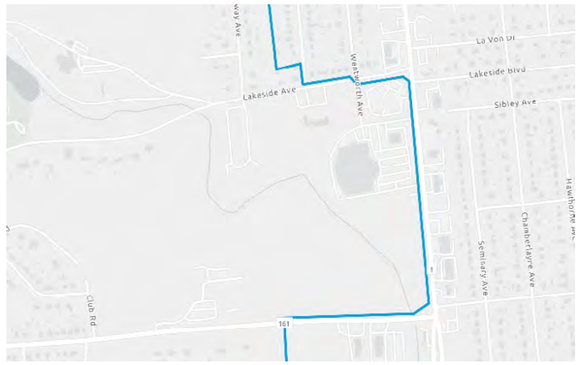
I could tell you about how they managed to capture the old appeal by sounding better and fresher and tighter than ever with their classics, like the three mentioned above and Git It, and Oh Momma Momma and Ain't Nothin' Shakin' on the opening track with John Tichy just taking off from the get-go, and they're off and rockin' and swingin' before you can grab your hat, or how the second track is a new one by Kirchen (and his wife Louise, also on vocals, and Austin de Lone) - Out of My Mind, with clever words and Bill's old country, kinda Bakersfield voice that'll break your heart, and make you feel like you've heard the song your whole life, and make you believe the wishful thinking that you really might recover from a broken heart, or how Tichy, whose nickname is the Rockin' Professor because he was head of the Mechanical, Aerospace and Nuclear Engineering Department at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy and whose idea it was to begin with to do the CD, has written two songs (Feel Like I'm 21, and I Can't Get High) that honor the old LPA classics and manage to lament and ultimately celebrate getting older all at once, and how My Window Faces the South is so great it's unbearable, and how Andy Stein, a composer of symphonies and 20-plus year veteran of Prairie Home Companion, plays sax and fiddle throughout with equal measures of soul and skill, and how Bobby Black on steel guitar is the oldest, and perhaps the most gentlemanly Airman with stories and chops from the beginnings of country music, and how honorary Airmen Paul Revelli, Peter Siegel and old pal and songwriter and producer Austin de Lone, on drums, steel guitar, and piano, respectively sound like they were there from the beginning, and how there are some song lines that are standalone works of art - like from Kirchen's other new original - Olivette: "hope springs eternal in the hillbilly heart," or from the oldie Back to Tennessee: "next time you look at me cross-eyed I'm headin right out the door," or in real-life cowboy Buffalo Bruce Barlow's original cowboy song that trots and yodels and eases us to the happy end of the CD, "my best friend - that's my horse!" But if I told you all that I'd just be trying to paint the wind, or the joy, and you'd think it isn't true love, which it is.

So instead, to steal another great line from the old and beautifully rearranged Little Bitty Record, just go downtown and "buy a little piece of happiness" because it turns out it is for sale. NJ

Get your copy of Back From The Ozone at the Tin Pan in Richmond on November 28 - at Bill Kirchen's Honky Tonk Holiday Show - Bill's with the Silent Knights, his all-star Texas band with Rick Richards and Jack Saunders.

BRIEFS

Fall Line Trail Along Route 1 Makes No Sense



SOME BUSINESS OWNERS along the west side of Brook Road from Hilliard Road north to Lakeside Avenue are understandably upset with Henrico County's recommendation that the Fall Line Trail run beside Route 1, effectively blocking entrances to those businesses.

"It makes no sense whatsoever," says Paul Kashner, who, with his wife Kathy, owns Car Castle at 7300 Brook Road.

And a quick look at the map of the proposed bike trail confirms what Paul believes. There seems to be no rhyme or reason for the Fall Line Trail to make a detour for several blocks along a commercial corridor with heavy traffic flows. Instead, the trail should cut directly through Belmont Golf Course or along the west bank of North Run. That makes sense.

VIRGINIA REP PRESENTS THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

Virginia Repertory Theatre announces its fall children's show, The Emperor's New Clothes, which will run from October 20 through November 12 at the Jessie Bogese Theatre on the Northside. Based on Hans Christian Andersen's classic, this musical version was created by Richard Giersch with music and lyrics by Jason Marks, who is also the musical director of this show. Jan Guarino will direct. The cast includes Ian Page, Corey Powell, Destin Scott, Sawyer Fitch, Audrey Snyder, Clarence Ilanan, Chandler James Pettus, Hannah Chester, Emma Robinson, Joey Gravins, and Erin Chaves.

Tickets are available at VirginiaRep.org, or call the box office at (804)282-2620

Jessie Bogese Theatre

Virginia Rep Center for Arts and Education

4204 Hermitage Road

Richmond, VA 23227


The Emperor's New Clothes at Virginia Rep.

NORTHSIDE ARTISTS SHOW AND FEEDMORE BENEFIT

Local artists, once again, are holding an art event that benefits FEED MORE. Local artists showing at the event donate 10 percent of their sales to FEED MORE. The last event raised more than $1,400 for this worthy cause. Along with the visual art on display for sale there will be two open bars and entertainment provided by local jazz musicians. St. Thomas Episcopal Church, known citywide for its extraordinary food pantry, has opened its parking lot for artists and patrons of the event. There will be art of every description in virtually every conceivable medium from painting and woodworking, to photography and pottery. The show will be held at the Lewis Ginter Recreation Association (LGRA) from 1:30pm till 6:30pm on Saturday, November 11.

LGRA

3421 Hawthorne Avenue

Richmond, VA 23222


Featured work at Northside Artists Sale.

MONSTER MASH ON MACARTHUR AVENUE

Bellevue Civic Association's third annual Monster Mash on MacArthur will be held Sunday, October 22nd from 2-4 pm outside Once Upon a Vine. Costume contests will be held for kids and adults, plenty of snacks and apple cider will be provided, and adult BCA members get two free tickets for beer or wine. Come have Halloween fun with your neighbors, but BCA asks that you please leave your pets at home. NJ

Carpe Momentum

by **FRANCES TEMME**

I TRY TO RELAX ON MY BACK patio on the last day of astronomical summer, but I spy a weed that has emerged between the bricks and bend over to uproot it before it takes a stronghold. A few of the dogwood leaves have gone red, the hostas are drooped and yellowed, and the wisteria that adorns my pergola has begun the slow dropping of its infinitesimal leaves, a process that will take until after Thanksgiving to complete. My garden is not at its best in late September—the vibrant greens of spring are dark, almost black; the perennials are peeled back from their blooming splendor to less than brilliant foliage; and the annuals have gone leggy.

Every year since I've had a garden (37 years in this one place), I've promised myself that I would enjoy and relish every single day in my garden. The gardeners and gardening writers I most admire pay daily homage to the creation that is partially theirs. My impatience for the next event proves my great flaw in terms of appreciating the little part--a mere 1/9th of an acre--of paradise that I have tried to craft. No sooner have the snowdrops blossomed, than I yearn for the bright purples of crocus, to be replaced by the vivid yellow trumpets of the daffodil, then on to the nuanced splendor of my palest pink tulips and the soft beauty of English bluebells, my favorite planting in my garden. For those of you who garden, you know the rotation in which the bulbs and the perennials and the bushes and the trees display their glory—and how brief and ephemeral that beauty is.

And every year, I promise myself I will savor every hour, every day, every week, every experience of my life, as much as I promise myself I will enjoy each individual day in the garden. I fulfill neither promise. I'm always looking forward to the next holiday, the next birthday, the next anniversary, the next dinner with family or friends, the next house project, the next trip, the next visit from my children or grandchildren. I'm not near as busy as when my children were young and my career endlessly demanding, but I still am restless if I'm not moving. For this, I blame my mother.

My mother was most confused by the story of Mary and Martha in the New Testament. Mary got all the credit for sitting and listening at Christ's feet, while Martha bustled around in the kitchen: we were taught to believe that Martha was Mary's inferior. My mother decried this story because she reasoned, logically and intuitively, that Christ (well, maybe not Christ) and his friends would have starved to death if Martha had assumed Mary's posture. She preferred the holy women who worked, St. Frances of Rome and St. Frances Cabrini, to the purely mystic, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Therese Lisieux. I have taken my mother's lesson to heart: keep busy.

I am almost incapable of sitting and enjoying my garden. On a constant lookout for weeds, dead blooms, straggling limbs, I fail to see the overall beauty and, instead, concentrate on attending to the flaws that keep the garden from being perfect in my eyes. Here's the thing: I'm not a perfectionist. I don't believe in the perfect. I appreciate the mess of newspapers and magazines and stacked books in a room: it means the people who live there read. I delight in the too brown edges and the overflow of juices in a homemade apple pie: it means a robot didn't bake it. Shoes that are worn, armchair velvet that is faded, books whose spines are broken—these are the things I relish. So, it's not the perfectionism—it's the keeping busy that prevents me from sitting back and calmly appreciating the garden that has taken me 37 years to design and plant—and a garden that will never be perfect because of its very nature.

This past spring, we had to take down a magnolia that was sold as "dwarf" and towered over my yard. Now the southern sun beats directly onto my shade garden. I'm planting new sunny perennials this fall and hoping that I'll still be here when they finally flush out. It takes at least three years for a perennial to look as if it really belongs in the landscape, but I don't want to look that far ahead. I want to cherish the moment—to see the new plants as they struggle to find root in my clay soil and to wonder as they produce their first blooms, not to anticipate the fullness of three years' growth.

I spent so much of my motherhood looking forward to the next phase, the next season, the next school year, that I'm pretty certain I missed out on countless experiences that were there to be enjoyed and savored. I kept busy—I kept my head down and plowed ahead. I oversaw homework, exposed my kids to music and reading and art, chauffeured them to sport practices and games and sleepovers and play dates. I cleaned, I laundered, I cooked, I gardened. I went to sleep every night exhausted. I was busy.

I scroll through my phone and see countless pictures of my grandchildren, feeling regret that I have so few pictures of my own children. I envy my children the astronomic number of photos of their children, courtesy of their smartphones. In my prehistoric time, one had to buy film, load a camera, pose the children, adjust the focus, remove the film while ensuring that it wasn't being exposed, fill out an envelope with all manner of information, and finally mail it or drop it off at the local CVS for development. It took great effort and cost a good deal of money.

I've railed at Instagram and the incessant snapping that seems to occupy the generations below mine, but now I wonder if, in fact, taking the photo demands that one pause and appreciate whatever is worth appreciating. Maybe stopping to film helps the parent to register that particular moment more clearly, whether it's a picture of an infant clutching her baby fairy, a toddler clumsily running for the first time, or a young soccer star, ignoring the game and admiring the trees that enclose the field. Last evening, my youngest granddaughter had her first encounter with pho. She balked at first, twisted a rice noodle around her finger, sucked it into her mouth, and smiled. That wonderful moment is recorded for her mother, lucky woman, and for my granddaughter to view someday, perhaps, with her own child. Making resolutions in the hope of achieving a new personal reality is one of the delusions of humanity. The ideal self and the actual self--I think I know who I am at my age, but I can still aspire. I hereby resolve to treasure every moment yet to be given to me. As a new season beckons, I renew my pledge to enjoy the moment, to appreciate this autumn in my garden, to treasure the present. We'll see. The holidays are coming. NJ

RAMPSRVA
THE FREEDOM FIGHTERS

EAGLES, FALCONS AND HAWKS CAN SEE FAR BETTER THAN ANY HUMAN BEING,

and moths can hear the flapping of a bat's wings from fifty yards. In terms of speed on land and water, animals easily outmaneuver us— cheetahs top out overland at 70 miles an hour, and black marlins have been clocked at swimming 80 miles an hour. In the weight-lifting division dung beetles take the gold, easily pressing over 1,000 times their body weight. And the broad jump goes to the common flea that can leap 220 times its own length. Human beings do have some strengths unsurpassed in the animal kingdom, but only if those strengths are nurtured and encouraged: They are called compassion and empathy.

Mr. H, who lives alone, is thrilled with his new ramp, built by staff and community volunteer Karen Roane

Way back in 2005 a group of Collegiate High School School students got together for a community service project. What they decided to do was build a couple of wheelchair ramps for folks who didn't have the financial wherewithal to build their own. It was the birth of Ramps RVA which to date has installed more than 600 ramps for wheelchair users in Richmond, Henrico and Chesterfield.

It's hard to believe in a country as wealthy as ours, with corporate CEOs making $70 million a year and bloated billionaires amassing unprecedented profits while the world suffered an international pandemic, that we still lack universal healthcare that would cover basic necessities like wheelchair ramps. If one of the nauseatingly wealthy decided to sell one of her $40 million yachts (just one of ten, mind you) she'd be able to purchase ten thousand wheelchair ramps. Just to maintain that one yacht for a full calendar year costs $4 million. But to the greed infected well-to-do cost is never an issue.


Tonya D. cries with joy over her newfound independence.

When Barry McDonald, director of operations for Ramps RVA, tells me the group's annual budget is about $150,000, I'm not at all surprised. Their offices are modest, and housed in a nondescript strip mall in the far West End, literally a stone's throw from the Goochland County line. About the only sign of their existence here is the signature RampsRVA truck parked out back.

Here's something else that immediately struck me: both Barry and his right-hand woman, Anne Jones, absolutely love what they do for a living. They get their hands dirty, helping erect the ramps; love engaging with recipients and volunteers alike. During an interview the pair tell me a lot more about this organization that sprang from the wells of compassion and empathy, those admirable human traits that seem to come so easily to the young and the young at heart.

"When they first started, the group built a couple of wooden ramps, but they thought they weren't sustainable," says Barry. So these high school students began researching ramps.

"That's when they found out there was this product out there called a modular ramp made of metal," Barry says. "And they started using ramps from a company called Amramp." These are the ramps still used by the organization and they're American made, manufactured in Randolph, Massachusetts, with a franchise here in Richmond.


Monacan High School students made the lives of Mr. and Mrs. P. much safer.

"It's a pretty interesting concept," says Barry. "They are permanent ramps, but they're modular. When I say permanent I really mean the recipient keeps it as long as it's needed. Once it's no longer needed, it's recycled. The components are put back in our stock and we reuse them."

Barry invites me to imagine an Erector Set. This child's toy, which has been around for more than a century, features metal beams and rods with regularly spaced holes for easy assemblage with nuts and bolts. "It's kind of like that," he says. "Ramp sections are eight-foot, six-foot, four-foot, three-foot and eighteen inches. And so they fit together. All the holes line up on all the pieces. The same for the railings."

"And then it's all bolted together," says Anne, who has assembled her fair share of ramps. Each

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

Student volunteers are the heart and soul of the agency.

ramp is carefully customized to meet the specific requirements of the recipient's home. "The first thing we do is go to the home and have a little conversation with the owner," Barry says. "We take pictures, we do measurements of the height of the stoop, and if it's going to need a turn. We do some measurements around that, and then send all that information to Amramp and then they do a CAD (computer-aided design), and they send that to us. And in that CAD basically it tells us every piece we need down to the last washer. It serves as a blueprint for the project."

But before that project launches the receiver of the ramp has to meet certain criteria. "The process is we get a request and then Anne follows up with the person making the request," says Barry. "The initial requirement is that they have to live in the service area (Chesterfield, Henrico or Richmond). They have to meet certain income requirements and we use HUD (Housing and Urban Development) as a guideline."

"It's the HUD low income guidelines, which for a two-person household is around $60,000," Anne explains. But even with incomes substantially higher, the cost of one of these ramps would put an enormous strain on a family's budget. "The average ramp costs about $4,000 and that's a lot of money," says Anne.

Putting the ramps together is a job undertaken by volunteers, and there seems to be no shortage of them. "We have eleven high school clubs but the only one we have in Richmond is Maggie Walker Governor's School," Barry says. "From a school perspective we need more of a presence in the city. Many of our recipients live in Richmond."

At this juncture there are about 60 wheelchair users on RampsRVA's waiting list for much-needed ramps. When I ask what can

Ms. A, living with cancer, and other serious medical issues, takes a test run with her son on her new ramp, built by Deep Run High School Students.

Added bonus you get to use power tools.

be done, Anne says, "Donate. We have volunteers, we need money."

Some local companies also supply both volunteers and funding. "We do some corporate builds," says Barry. "The one we did this weekend was with a company called Burns and McDonnell. They gave us a donation for two builds, and so they did one in July and then one this past week."

There are other corporations that get involved. "Altria is building two before the end of the month," Barry says. "And CarMax built a few earlier this year."

Student volunteers not only help build the ramps, they are also instrumental in securing funds. "We had one student who actually went to a local automobile dealership and got a $6000 gift," Barry remembers.

This is all tied to one of the underlining philosophies of the organization. "Part of that is helping students understand that nothing is free in this world, somebody's paying for it," says Barry. "So the students are responsible for raising a certain amount of money toward any ramp that they build."

Anne tells me a story about a young woman with sickle cell anemia which caused her substantial paralysis. She was unable to get herself out of her apartment on her wheelchair because of the steps, and lived in constant fear of becoming trapped in her apartment in the event of a fire. "She was excited to just roll out of the house," Anne recalls. And when she first saw the completed ramp, this young woman burst

into tears.

And then Anne tells me the story of a young man who had a spinal injury at birth that rendered both legs paralyzed. As he grew older, his mother was no longer able to carry him down the front steps of their home to set him down in his wheelchair. "And he been crawling up the steps and down the steps, pulling himself up with his arms," Anne says. He actually helped build the ramp, securing the final bolt. "The thing that we always hear from people is that they were trapped in their houses," says Anne Jones.

Barry McDonald nods. "Last weekend in Hechler Village the lady we built a ramp for had not been out of her house since March," he says. "We're gonna

A team effort between Henrico High School and Northern Henrico Rotary Club resulted in the 600th ramp for young JM, who has lived with a spinal cord injury since birth.

build ramps for as many folks that need them that we have the money for and the volunteer power for. If we have the dollars that come in we will build whatever we can build."

Here's a letter from one of the recipients of a ramp that expresses it all clear as mountain air. "Dear Team," it reads. "I felt the need to formally thank you all for your extended kindness. Being handicap has been a great cha lenge for me, to enjoy the quality of life has been limited for me. I have never met a group of people that was as considerate and kind as you all. The simple things in life often get

taken for granted, but for me to sit day after day in this house has caused a lot of depression. Today that day ends for me. Thank you all so much for giving me the freedom to get out and live." NJ

If you want to become a real freedom fighter consider making a donation of time and money to RampsRVA by calling (804)282-3605, or visiting rampsrva.org

Of Presidents and Union Strikes

by **JACK R. JOHNSON**

STEVEN RATTNER, A former Obama administration financial advisor, whose net worth falls somewhere between 108 million and 609 million dollars and who led the restructuring of the automotive industry when the UAW accepted painful cuts, is now accusing President Joe Biden of overstepping his authority by supporting a major UAW strike. Rattner, whom the press has nicknamed the "car czar", slammed Biden for joining the UAW picket line in Michigan, saying the president went against years of precedent and tradition.

"For him to be going on a picket line is outrageous," Rattner told NBC News. "There's no precedent for it. The tradition of the president is to stay neutral in these things." His statement is wildly misleading. U.S. Presidents have a long and storied history of picking sides in major strikes, including the work Rattner did himself in forcing UAW to accept the painful cuts on behalf of the Obama administration's bailout efforts.

As another example, one of the defining moments in Reagan's presidency was his handling of the air traffic controllers strike forty-two years ago. For weeks in 1981, the professional air traffic controllers organization or PATCO was protesting what they considered to be unfair wages and long work hours. The airlines refused to concede. Finally, on August 3rd, 1981, they walked off the job. Two days later, Reagan fired more than 11,000 of those who hadn't crossed the picket line. He barred them from ever working again for the federal government. By October of that year, PATCO had been decertified and lay in ruins.

The careers of most of the individual strikers were similarly dead. Bill Clinton lifted Reagan's ban on strikers in 1993, but fewer than ten percent were ever rehired by the Federal Aviation Administration.

Not only was Reagan not neutral, his actions decimated the union movement in this country for decades to come. As Warren Buffett — current estimated net worth $101 billion — has said, "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."

After the air traffic controller's strike, strikebreaking became "the thing to do." According to NPR reporter, Kenny Malone, there was a wave of firing, "Striking copper miners in Arizona - fired. Striking paper workers in Maine - fired. Meat packers, bus drivers - so many strikes in the 1980s were broken to the point where unions realized that employers wanted them to strike so that they could fire them and replace them with non-union workers. And if you realize that your boss wants you to strike so they can fire you and rehire somebody else, that is going to make you less likely to strike, the main piece of leverage unions have."

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The foundation of our Labor Day holiday is yet another example of a president's involvement in striking workers and picket lines. You can thank President Grover Cleveland and the Pullman strike for that.

Because of the depression of 1893, the Pullman Palace Car Company, a manufacturer of railroad cars, cut the already low wages of its workers by about 25 percent. These workers mostly lived in the Pullman's 'company town.' but Pullman refused to reduce the rents and other basic living expenses in the town and as a result, many workers and their families faced starvation.

When a delegation of workers tried to present their grievances about low wages, poor living conditions, and 16-hour workdays directly to Pullman, he refused to meet with them and ordered them fired. The delegation then voted to strike, and Pullman workers walked off the job on May 11, 1894. As soon as the plant had emptied, company representatives posted signs at all the gates: "The works are closed until further notice."

Eugene V. Debs, through his leadership of the American Railway Union (ARU), supported the effort. On June 27, 5,000 workers left their jobs and 15 railroads were tied up. By the next day, 40,000 had walked off, and rail traffic was snarled on all lines west of Chicago. On the third day, the number of strikers had climbed to 100,000, and at least 20 lines were either tied up or completely stopped. By June 30, 125,000 workers on 29 railroads had quit work rather than handle Pullman cars.

The strike paralyzed the nation and left cars carrying Federal postal mail vulnerable. One car was set on fire by angry strikers. In Washington, D.C., a majority of the president's cabinet supported Attorney General Richard Olney's demand that federal troops be sent to Chicago to end the "reign of terror."

On July 2 Olney obtained a federal injunction that prohibited ARU leaders from "compelling or inducing" any employees of the affected railroads "to refuse or fail to perform any of their duties." Once the federal injunction was issued, President Cleveland treated the strike and boycott as a federal issue, and he ordered troops into Chicago on July 3.

Thousands of US Marshals and 12,000 US Army troops, led by Brigadier General Nelson Miles, took part in the operation. President Cleveland claimed that he had a legal, constitutional responsibility for the mail. His lawyers argued that the boycott violated the Sherman Antitrust Act, and represented a threat to public safety.

During the course of the strike break, 30 strikers were killed and 57 were wounded. Property damage exceeded $80 million dollars, but the strike was broken. Eugene V. Debs and many in the ARU leadership wound up in jail. Debs went on to found the American Socialist Party.

Later, in 1894, in an effort to conciliate organized labor after the strike, President Cleveland and Congress designated Labor Day, on September 1st as a federal holiday in contrast with the more radical May 1st, often associated with the Haymarket riot. Legislation for the holiday was pushed through Congress six days after the Pullman strike ended. This is why we celebrate Labor Day in September rather than on May 1st, unlike every other Western country on Earth.

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There are, of course, U.S. presidents who have sided with labor as well. Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously signed the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in 1933 which guaranteed laborers a right to collective bargaining and he supported the textile workers strike of 1934. When the Supreme Court ruled the NIRA unconstitutional, he later signed the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) into law on July 5, 1935. The broad intention of the act was to guarantee employees "the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid and protection." Additionally, the act created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to arbitrate deadlocked labor-management disputes, guarantee democratic union elections, and penalize unfair labor practices by employers.

Joe Biden is clearly following in Roosevelt's footsteps. During a speech last May at a community college in Cleveland, Joe Biden made a point of bringing up Reagan's anti-union history, "From 1948 after the war to 1979 [Reagan's election], productivity in America grew by 100 percent. We made more things with productivity. You know what the workers' pay grew? By 100 percent. Since 1979, all of that changed. Productivity has grown four times faster than pay has grown. The basic bargain in this country has been broken."

The fact that Biden has decided to weigh in on a labor dispute is not without precedent. It is, however, unusual within the last four decades for a president to favor labor as opposed to management. Maybe someone should explain to Steven Rattner that the times are changing.

NJ

WHAT'S NEW

Brick House Diner
Food for Every Palate

by **CHARLES MCGUIGAN**

BRICKHOUSE DINER, one of Northside's newest eateries, perfectly filled the void left by Kitchen 64 on Arthur Ashe Boulevard, replacing it with a restaurant specializing in the culinary comfort foods of a classic diner. It's a clean, sparse space with a delightful front-of-the house staff, and a menu that will appeal to any discerning palate. And it's open seven days a week for breakfast and lunch (on Sundays breakfast only is served all day long).

Owned by brothers Nick and Vick Routsis, this is the second Brick House Diner in the metro area. The one they own in Midlothian has been in operation for 19 years.

"We're a family-owned and operated business," Vick tells me. "We serve fresh homemade food that we prepare to order. We also grind our own beef. Everything from scratch. We make our own burgers, our own soups, and our meat sauce is made in-house. Our seafood comes fresh from our vendors, and we cut our own fries and our own chips."

And that makes all the difference in the world. Even their beignets, which are killer, are all made to order.

"Our beignets are dropped to order," says Vick. "A lot of places keep them on the warmer all day. We drop ours to order. And they come out hot. So with your cup of coffee, instead of a donut, you can order piping hot beignets."

Vick mentions the restaurant his parents owned down in Chesapeake, Virginia, a place called Four Brothers Steak House. "It was named for me and Nick, and our other two brothers, John and Bill," he says. "My brothers and I grew up in the restaurant business." (All four brothers also own a Brick House down in Virginia Beach.)

Nick's father always stressed maintaining a very clean restaurant that served up only the freshest homemade food delivered to the patrons by an attentive waitstaff. "My dad always said, 'That will take you over. Always stay on top of it'And that's what we do. We have great service and a great kitchen staff and use the best ingredients."

The menus for breakfast and lunch are expansive. In the morning you can choose from their signature scramblers of three eggs mixed with an assortment of ingredients from tomatoes and mushrooms to bacon and ham, all served over a bed of home fries and topped with cheese; or virtually anything else you could desire for breakfast, including pancakes and waffles, an enticing array of eggs Benedict, or even chicken fried steak. And the lunch menu, along with handcrafted steak burgers and fries, offers everything from deli sandwiches to gyros, from paninis to wraps, and a wide assortment of salads and a trio of seafood baskets.

When you visit this new Northside restaurant make sure to talk with the manager, a personable young woman named Katerina. Like her father, Vick, she was raised in the restaurant business. NJ

Brick House Diner
Open 7 Days a Week
Monday-Saturday, 8am till 3 pm
Sunday, 8am till 2pm
3336 N Arthur Ashe Boulevard
Richmond, VA 23230
(804)358-0064

Tragedy + Time = A Haunting

by FAYERUZ REGAN

THE HENRICUS COLONY was doomed even before it began. The Arrohatek tribe lived on the land that the English were eyeing for a second colony, and their solution was to slaughter the tribe members indiscriminately.

And who carried out these vicious attacks? None other than the militant commander Sir Thomas Dale. He was hired to restore order and discipline to Jamestown, and was such a tyrant that colonists would sometimes flee to native tribes to start a new life. In 1611, the Virginia Company of London urged him to create another settlement.

In response, Dale marched 300 colonists from Jamestown to the woods of Chester, Virginia, over 50 miles away. The spot along the James River was to be called the Citie of Henrycus. The journey was treacherous, as the Arrohatek harassed the colonists along their route in retaliation for the murder of their tribe members.

The colonists arrived at the site exhausted, but Sir Thomas Dale was merciless. He ordered them to start building - around the clock. Within ten days, seven acres of fencing fortified the colony, as well as a church, a hospital, watch towers, and other dwellings. But hard labor weakened the malnourished colonists. When someone was caught stealing food, they were tied to a tree and starved to death. Scholar James Horn quotes Dale in relating the punishments inflicted, writing, "some were hanged, some burned, some broken upon wheels, others staked and shot [and others] bound fast unto trees and so starved to death."

And this was just the beginning. At another point, Pocahontas was kidnapped and held hostage at Henrycus. There were periods of famine and disease. Then there's the infamous end to the 11-year-old settlement. By 1622, the English had developed friendships with some natives, thanks to Pocahontas marrying colonist John Rolfe. The Peace of Pocahontas, as it was called, saw natives going freely in and out of the colony. Some were even employed by the Englishmen.

Period actors at Henricus Historical Park.

This gave natives access for a coordinated attack. Once the tribe members on the inside gave a signal, the others surrounding the site attacked from all sides. Over 300 colonists died that day, and the Citie of Henrycus was burned to the ground.

Given all the horrors that took place on its soil, it is not surprising that many have reported paranormal activity there. Visitors often recount hearing unexplained noises, such as children laughing and footsteps in an otherwise empty dwelling. Others claim to have seen misty apparitions. There have been accounts of objects moving on their own. Outside, people have reported the sounds of cannon blasts and gun fire, despite the fact that no reenactments were being staged at the time.

Like a moth to a flame, I had to visit Henricus Historical Park. This landmark is a replica of the original colony that was burned down, and sits on or near the original site. I was immediately blown away by the detail. The first thing I came upon were two women wearing animal skins, turning a fallen tree into a canoe with a slow, controlled burn. I knew the costumes would be authentic, but the detail in learning how to make a canoe left me gobsmacked.

Men stood in formation, shooting off muskets. For authenticity, even a young boy in full colonial garb participated. I'm sure they were shooting blanks. As we wandered from building to building, we marveled at the real animal hides hanging on the walls, and the men who portrayed Spanish prisoners, suspected by the colonists to be spies. The English officer warned us not to cavort with the "Spaniards" they captured, but while in their presence, one slipped a note to the young boy in our party. It was sealed in wax. The English officers were so convincing, that the boy didn't dare open the note until we left the building. It was blank, but A+ for the drama of it all.

At one point, we looked up to see that dark clouds had gathered. That greyish-midnight blue that tells you to hurry. We ducked into the church just as thunder cracked. Rain fell in sheets. But the sanctuary was dark and hushed. The pitched wooden ceiling felt gothic, and lit candles were everywhere. We spoke in a whisper with the staff about the alleged hauntings. Though we didn't personally see or feel anything that felt paranormal, it no longer mattered. The experience was so immersive and educational, it cannot be missed. NJ

https://henricus.org/

BOOK REVIEW

True Love

by **FRAN WITHROW**

"FRAN, YOU JUST have to read this book," said my friend Nancy, thrusting her copy of "Foster" into my hands. I nodded assent, tucked it into my bag and went on about my morning.

Later that afternoon, I opened her book and fell in. I gulped it all in one sitting and then started over again. Each time I was swept away by the gentle lyricism of this short, sweet novel that is now part of the school syllabus in Ireland, where its author, Claire Keegan resides. And I can certainly see why.

In "Foster," a young girl, never named, is taken by her father from her home in Clonegal, Ireland, to stay with her mother's relatives along the coast in Wexford. She will be spending some time with the Kinsellas, whom she has never met, while her mother juggles her siblings and awaits the birth of yet another child.

When the girl's father drops her off with her relatives, we learn that money is very tight in the girl's home. There's no money to get the hay in and the father has gambled away their cow. Having the girl stay elsewhere will mean one less mouth to feed. The Kinsellas can keep her as long as they like, the father tells them. "She'll ate ye out of house and home," he says as he drops her off. "She'll ate, but ye can work her."

He doesn't even remember to leave her things with her, so all she has is the clothes on her back and sandals covering her dirty feet. Mrs. Kinsella gently bathes her and dresses her in a boy's outfit, though no child lives in the home.

As the summer wears on, the girl discovers that Mr and Mrs Kinsella are loving and kind in a way she has not experienced before. They draw her out and help her feel safe and secure. She especially connects with Mr Kinsella, who holds her in his arms as though she were his own.

Narrated by the girl herself, we follow along as she discovers the tragedy that shadows the Kinsellas and leaves her loving them even more. When she learns at the end of the summer that the new baby has arrived and her mother wants her to return home, the first thing she says is, "I have to go back, then?"

The sweetest part of the book is the ending. What happens when the girl is dropped off at her house and the Kinsellas drive away is worth a whole box of tissues. (Have them handy.)

This gentle treatise on the power of love and connection and how they can transform a child is worth reading more than once, and will be easy to do since this is a slender volume. Claire Keegan writes with gentle beauty, never succumbing to oversentimentality. The power of her work lies in its subtlety, in the emotions that lie just underneath the narrative, and in the honest depiction of the world through the eyes of this resilient, remarkable young girl. NBJ

"Foster"

By Claire Keegan

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