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20 ART Famous Duos: New Work by Darryl Starr and Wolfgang Jasper

Sound of Music Studios is proud to announce "Famous Duos", the upcoming art opening of Richmond artists Darryl Starr and Wolfgang Jasper. Each has been working on a body of new work, and plans to show these pieces along with work from previous series. Starr and Jasper have been partners in crime for nearly forty years, and have decided it's high time they exhibit together in the city where they met, and got their start.

21 BOOK REVIEW Building a Life and a House

Cara Brookins, author of "Rise: How a House Built a Family", is a strong and capable woman who decides to build her own house after leaving her husband. Reading her story is an inspiration to women everywhere who think they can't rise above their circumstances, follow a dream, wield a hammer. Or, construct a house.

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COVER PHOTO by REBECCA D'ANGELO

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Brook Hill Festival at Emmanuel Episcopal

THIS TWO-DAY EVENT in late April highlights one of Northside's most iconic structures—Emmanuel Episcopal Church at Brook Hill.

The festival kicks off Friday from 6-8 pm with a candlelight dinner catered by The Speakeasy Grill. Tickets are \$50. Edwin Slipek, senior contributing editor for *STYLE*, will speak. There will be a strolling violinist serenading the diners. Throughout the evening candlelight tours of the cemetery, and tours of the historic church will be conducted.

The fun continues on Saturday from 10 to 4 with opening remarks by Fairfield District Supervisor Frank Thornton. There will also be an eclectic car show, vendors of all kinds, Jonathan the Juggler, Acca Temple Shriners car patrols and clowns, the Midnight Ukulele Society, the Richmond Urban Dancers, singer Olivia Morgayne, the Neons, the John Marshall High Ca-



det Alumni Band, and more than fifty vendors sell wares of every description. Plus: a Drum Circle led by drummer and guitarist Cory Blake.

And, of course, glorious food, including Red, White and Blue Brunswick stew; Route 1 hamburgers and hot dogs, bake sale items and Gelati Celesti ice cream.

The event will be held 5-8 pm, April 28, and 10-4, April 29. Emmanuel Episcopal Church at Brook Hill, 1214 Wilmer Avenue, Richmond, VA 23227.

CSz Richmond/ComedySportz Hosts Annual Shave A Life to Benefit St. Baldrick's Foundation



St. Baldrick's annual Shave A Life at CSz Richmond, home of Comedy Sportz.

This annual fundraiser for the St. Baldrick's Foundation just keeps getting bigger and better! Join CSz Richmond as two teams of improv heavyweights battle it out for points and laughs in a comedy match with raised stakes — somebody's going home bald, along with a bunch of loyal fans. Hosted by CSz Richmond — Home of ComedySportz, Shave a Life 2017 will be held Friday, April 28 from 8-11 pm at 8906 W Broad St, Richmond, Virginia 23294.

Come and watch the show! Just being there helps the cause! Make reservations for the event at www.cszrichmond.com/tickets

Shave your head with us after the show and actively help us raise funds! You know you've always wanted to do it! Now's your chance to go bald and have it help children in need at the same time! Visit our event page on the St. Baldrick's website to sign up! www.stbaldricks.org/events/cszrva2017 and click on JOIN US!

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And if you can't shave your head, and you can't come to watch; you can still help! Please visit us online and help us raise a record breaking amount to help fight childhood cancers. Go to www.stbaldricks.org/events/cszrva2017 and click on DONATE!

For more information call (804) 266-9377 or write us at cszrichmond@gmail.com

Local Athletes Return Home from Special Olympics World Games



Local speed skating medalists, Christina Dryer and Craig Licorish.

Two local speed skaters returned home last month from the Special Olympics World Winter Games held in Austria with more than just incredible stories. They brought home the Gold, the Silver and the Bronze in speed skating competitions.

Craig Licorish took home bronze medals in the 777M, and the 500M. A 10-year veteran of Special Olympics, Craig couldn't wait to attend his first World Games, travel abroad and learn about other countries and people.

Christina Dryer earned gold in the 333M, and the silver in the 222M. Christina, 27, has been involved in Special Olympics for 16 sixteen. This was her first time participating in World Games.

"My family and I are so very proud of Craig and his awesome accomplishment!" Craig's mother, Lyndrea Munnerlyn said. "His journey to Austria to compete in the World Games gave him the opportunity to not just be a part of a worldwide event, but to take another step towards becoming an adult by travelling abroad without his family, by having to be responsible for important documents, such as his passport, and learning how watch out for his fellow teammates."

In addition to the two local athletes, the Virginia team included Law Enforcement Torch Run Final Leg Runner, Christiansburg Police De-

partment Investigator Maureen McClanahan; medical team volunteer, Dave Pawlowski, Special Olympics Virginia's vice president of programs; speed skating coach, Kurt Krumreich of Virginia Beach; Sargent Shriver International Global messenger David Egan; and Global Messenger mentor, David Thomason.

Two other Richmond-area nonprofits also participated in the Games' opening and closing ceremonies — Miracles in Motion and SPARC the School of Performing Arts in the Richmond Community. Taylor Carpenter, one of two local athletes who danced with Miracles in Motion, also is a Special Olympics Virginia basketball player. She earned a silver medal at the Games. Additionally, Mechanicsville-native Jason Mraz performed during the Games' Opening Ceremony.

More than 2,700 athletes and 1,100 coaches representing 107 countries, along with 3,000 volunteers and thousands more spectators, participated in this year's World Winter Games. This was the second time Austria has hosted the World Winter Games, having also staged the event in 1993. ESPN was the official broadcast partner of the 2017 Special Olympics World Games, allowing millions around the world to watch the competitions. Special Olympics World Summer Games 2019 will be held in Abu Dhabi.

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2828 Story of a House

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

ON DUMBARTON Road, 2828 is something of an anomaly. A large brick American four-square with a broad front porch, and the neat symmetry of abundant windows, all topped with a slate roof. It's a durable structure built to last from the early years of the last century, and set back from the roadside on a sizable chunk of land—about an acre and a half, an unusually large lot for Lakeside. Often, particularly on the weekends, an old pickup would pull into the gravel drive and a group of men would descend from the front porch of the house and gather around the driver and then move to the bed of the truck where they would begin unloading furniture, washing machines, refrigerators, cardboard boxes, and assorted junk. This happened regularly, and the items were either hauled into the house, placed on the front porch, or taken to the back yard. I had seen this play out dozens of times over the years, but never knew who lived in this house.

Back in late February, Carter and Tip McClure, co-owners of The Estate Experts, invited me over to 2828 to see for myself what the place—inside and out—was like before they tackled it, and sold or scrapped its contents, which the owner had accumulated over a lifetime. Through it all I would learn something about the life of the man who lived there.

That day, I followed Tip and Carter through the house from room to room. Carter held the face mask of her cupped hand over her nose to filter out the dust and mold spore. Clouds of dust rose wherever we walked, tiny bursts that looked like wisps of smoke. Every room was packed with furniture and mantle clocks and books and artwork and clothing and comforters and Depression glass and china and towers of cardboard boxes, which together formed a sort of helter-skelter skyline of a city run amuck. Some rooms you could not navigate through, the debris was that thick, and in every corner of every ceiling, ancient spider webs hung like hammocks, weighty as raw wool, laden with dust, soot, cat hair, and flecks of human skin and animal dander shed for many long decades by



Above: Carter and Tip are able to relax a bit after readying the house for the sale. Below: Paths had to be cut through the detritus in the back yard. Bottom: One of the rooms in its original state.



the occupant, and his pets and tenants. Though outside it was a bright and sunny afternoon, the house, despite its profusion of windows, was dark as a tomb. Clutter blocked many of those windows, and the panes of glass in the unobstructed windows were coated

with grease and grime, as if they were cut from sheets of beeswax so the light that filtered through them was the color of amber.

The second floor was less cluttered. There were several bedrooms up there where renters had dwelt. One

renter was still there that day, but we never saw him, though we could hear him moving around behind his locked door. It was a shuffling sound and I could hear faint music. All four bedrooms radiated off the hub of a slipshod kitchen of sorts that was absolutely filthy—cigarette butts, ashes, pizza boxes, beer cans on the floor—and there was the stench of roaches and rotting food.

Both the basement and attic were choked with so much debris that it was all but impossible to enter. Carter begged off these explorations, but Tip and I waded through the flood tide of one's man's past, and when we found a suitable shore he began opening cardboard boxes that had been stored there for God knows how many years. Sometimes, when Tip opened a box, the cardboard crumbled like crushed graham crackers in his hands.

After touring the interior, we made our way to the back yard, which was a marriage between a municipal dump and a scrap metal yard—appliances large and small, outdoor furniture, piles of trash, garbage bags filled with aluminum cans, outbuildings bursting at the seams with junk, a fleet of rusted lawnmowers, an army of squat outdoor grills, and even kitchen sinks. No rhyme or reason to this collection of refuse, and no order to it. Through it all, grew vines and bamboo, as if the earth, through its vegetation, were trying to capture and to crush and to engulf these manmade intrusions. Shoots of bamboo grew through the housing of stoves and washing machines. Trumpet vines and honeysuckle smothered lawn chairs and slabs of picket fencing. It was an urban jungle back there.

What we had here was a hoarder of near epic proportions. Nonetheless, Carter and Tip assured me they would have the house ready for an estate sale in a couple of weeks, and I smiled and nodded. But as I pulled out of the drive, tires crunching through gravel, I said to myself: "No way."

The day before the estate sale, I visited 2828 again, and sure enough Tip and Carter had cleaned up the house, created inroads through the back yard, and, in Carter's words, "staged it" for the sale. And I chomped on my own words of doubt.

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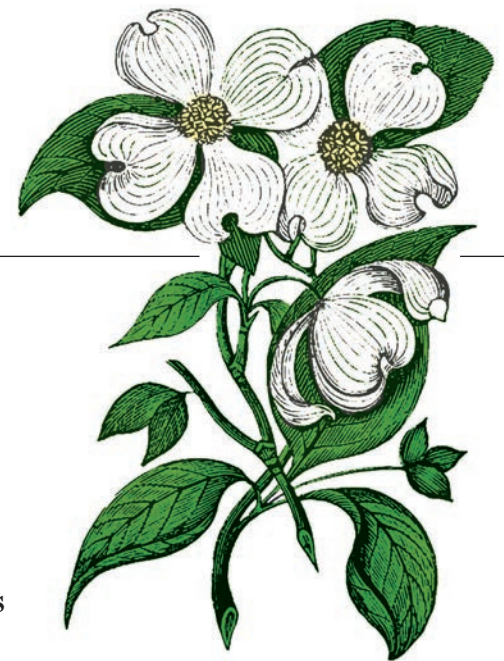
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FEATURE

"I've been doing estate sales now since 1986, I got my start in Washington, D.C.," Tip said. "So I've seen a lot of stuff. This was by far the nastiest."

And, in a way, The Estate Experts enabled this man Leroy Basham to become a hoarder.

"Leroy had been a shopper of ours since we started our business twenty years ago," said Carter. "He came to pretty much all of our estate sales, and probably others too, but he was kind of hooked on us because he liked us."

Leroy had a particular fondness for canning jars, any make, any model. He also had a penchant for green Depression glass, ceramic cookie jars, statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Victorian pitchers with wash basins, and Victrolas. Those were the kinds of things Leroy would purchase during the first and second days of an estate sale. Then he'd circle back on the last day, typically a Monday, after all the good stuff had been picked over, and he would get down to business.

"He was a bottom feeder," Tip told me. "He would always come the last day and I would give him stuff. At the end,



Tip digging through stacks of crumbling boxes in the attic

I would call it VIP Monday, I would just throw scrap metal on his truck not knowing how much money I was giving him every week. But he would help me clean the house out, and that's the ultimate goal of what we do."

Carter was nodding along with Tip's words. "He would come at the very, very end," she said. "He would get the real leftovers, the pieces and parts."

Remember, Leroy's home was also a rooming house. And on those VIP

Mondays he would stock up on supplies that he'd later sell to his tenants. "So, he would buy all kinds of shampoo and supplies, and dole it out to his tenants, selling it," said Carter.

"Band-Aids too were another cash cow in Leroy's house," said Tip. "The tenants were always getting cut, and Leroy always had Band-Aids for sale."

On those days of leftovers, Carter would tell Leroy where he could find a shoebox, and then he would enter

the bathroom and open the medicine chest above the sink and begin filling the box with shaving cream, razors, aspirin, shampoo, just about anything. And all these items were free. "We'd open the cabinet door below the kitchen sink for him, and he'd get all the Comet and Endust, just clean it out," Carter recalled. "We didn't have to do that, but Leroy was our friend."

Tip saw him as more than a friend. "He was like a brother to me, sure," he said. "I've known Leroy for over twenty years. We shared brotherly antics. I mean, although he was eighty—almost thirty years my senior—we would speak politics, we'd talk, tell jokes, the way brothers do."

Over the years, Tip and Carter began learning bits and pieces of Leroy Basham's life. He was a child of the Great Depression, and grew up in an economically bleak section of our sister state to the west.

"He would not throw anything away, he was incredibly frugal," said Carter. "He came from very poor origins in West Virginia, and he saved everything because it could be reused."

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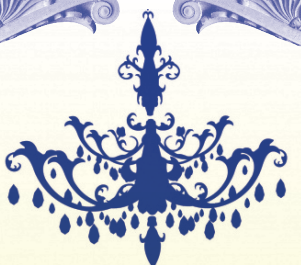
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Leroy even wanted the stubs of candles with their curled, blackened wicks. “He would burn everything, used candles in the woodstove,” Tip said. “He never turned the heat on in his house, so he would just burn all the residue that was given to him. The trash he didn’t throw out. The incinerator would take care of it, and supply his heat.”

Leroy also wanted every remnant of bar soap, even those that were wafer-thin. “That’s how he did his laundry,” Tip told me. “He would take all those little pieces of soap, put them in a nylon stocking and use it as his washing machine detergent.”

“He thought he had had a use for everything so he just became a true hoarder, a true hoarder,” said Carter.

“His estate was so overweight that it needed to go on a diet,” Tip said. “I was probably the first one to throw trash out of that house in about forty years.”

These estate experts, it turns out, are archaeologists of a sort. In a house like 2828, the excavation, because of the sheer volume of clutter, can take some time. Slowly sifting through what amounts to mounds of trash, they will



Just a few of the many treasures found and set out for sale at the house.

unearth rare treasures, puzzle pieces about a past, as well as commonplace implements that successive generations have used in daily life.

“Every time we do one of these sales that has a forty year accumulation like this one, it really is like urban archaeology,” Carter said. “First you have the curlers, then you go to the bobby pins, then you go to the hairnets, I mean it shows the history of America in some ways.”



At times, it’s like a stratified sedimentary rock, each layer representing a different epoch. “The dresser in his bedroom was weird because his stuff was on the top layer in every drawer,” Tip recalled. “And below that was his mom’s stuff—creams and powders. And it was spooky, I’m telling you. It looked like lasagna.”

Carter and Tip also discovered a cache of letters written to Leroy Basham. “He was a very intelligent guy,” Carter said. “He was a guidance counsellor for Moody

Middle School back in the 1970s, and well-known in the community. Many, many of his students loved him. We found letters that said things like, ‘Dear Mr. Basham, How much you’ve changed my life, how much you’ve meant to me.’ He was a very well-respected professional, well-known in the community. But a frugal man, never married, and no children. Leroy was the salt of the earth.”

Having lived a very thrifty life, Leroy Bashman amassed a greater fortune than most people would have suspected. Leroy’s appearance would certainly not indicate wealth. “He looked almost like your disheveled bag person on the side of the street, panhandling,” Tip said, and then Carter remembered an exchange between Tip and Leroy that occurred several years ago. “One day he looked at Tip and said, ‘Tip, you know what I think I’m a millionaire. I think I might be a millionaire.’”

Whether or not he was a millionaire, Leroy did possess a fairly large estate upon his death just this past November. Along with 2828, Leroy also owned three or four rental homes in Lakeside, each of which presumably produced revenue. He left the rental properties

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FEATURE



Carter always has a smile for estate sale shoppers on the weekend of the sale.

to his executor, and 2828, along with its contents, to an old friend he knew from his guidance counselling days.

“And so we got the sale because the executor knew us because Leroy would speak highly of us,” said Carter. “Leroy said, ‘The Estate Experts have to do my estate sale because I trust them, because he knew of us throughout the years.’”

Before they began the long task of sorting through the contents of the house, they went on a treasure hunt. Along with his rental properties, Leroy also left the executor his coin collection. A small safe containing the silver coins Leroy had collected for decades was hidden somewhere under the staircase.

Tip found the safe and handed it over to the executor who didn't seem too thrilled with it. He just stuck it in his own back yard, where it sat for a day or two, and then, a friend, armed with a Sawzall, attacked the steel sheathing of the safe and a steady stream of silver flowed.

“It came to be eighty pounds of silver coins, equaling twenty thousand dollars,” Tip said. “The executor told me if he would have known there was that much in there he would have been a little more quick to open it.”

And then Carter and Tip began sorting, separating grain from chaff, and the piles of refuse grew. They filled two thirty-yard dumpsters with junk bound for a landfill. Another two thirty-yard dumpsters brimmed with steel—lawnmowers, refrigerators, washing machines and so on—that was sold to a scrap metal yard. It amounted to eight full tons of steel. In beer cans alone Tip salvaged two hundred pounds of aluminum, again for scrap, and another thousand pounds of aluminum cookware.

“And that just scratched the surface,” Tip told me. “There's probably, on the property, another ten more thirty-yard dumpsters worth of trash on the whole property. Tires and wood, garbage.”

The interior of the house had been transformed for the sale the following morning, and I strolled through each room, with Carter telling me how she and Tip had staged it all. When I left, I waved and told them I'd return the next day.

That first time I toured the home of Leroy Basham, well before Tip and Carter had staged it for the estate sale, one image struck me more than any other—it was the room where Leroy slept, which had probably been a living room in the earlier years of the house. It had a fireplace and sliding wooden doors. Off to one side was his bed which was surrounded by piles of junk. There was a dresser stuffed with clothing, and a number of bow-fronted china presses weighted down with Depression glass and china. On a table top one shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary, another one to a couple of bloated Buddhas. Tons of other superfluous stuff.

At first I thought it was like the tomb of some misguided ancient royalty, an Egyptian gone mad. And then I thought of a cocoon that Leroy Basham had spun for himself with his web of possessions, wrapping himself in a kind of insulation that kept him warm in a world that might have seemed cold. It finally struck me that more than anything else, the tiny cell in which this man slept for forty years, buffered from the world by layers of material things, may have been a sort of womb that he tried to crawl back into. But you can never really go backwards, not once you emerge, and the only exit comes at the very end.

I ended up going to the estate sale, which turned out to be a booming success. By the end of it The Estate Experts had raised fifteen thousand dollars. The client was satisfied beyond his dreams, and those carrying purchases to their cars seemed ecstatic. Each one of them had something they wanted. And what had once belonged to Leroy Basham would now work its way into a new home. The only thing I carried back to the car was myself. **NJ**



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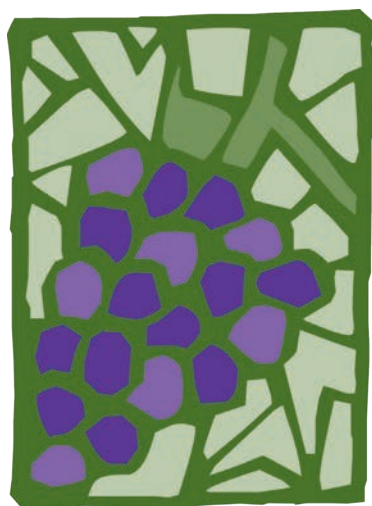
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© 2017 NORTH OF THE JAMES Magazine. Map not to scale. **NORTH OF THE JAMES**

Rob Ullman

AS A KID HE HEARD THE STORY OVER AND OVER AGAIN.

During the Second World War the Defense Department built a massive plant in northeast Ohio, a place called the Ravenna Arsenal, an important cog in the machinery of the war, ensuring a steady output of ordnance. It sprawled over 20,000 acres and was virtually in the back yard of the town where his mother grew up, not far from his own home. The story goes that the government decided on this northeast corner of the Buckeye state because it was the most overcast place in America, and that permanent and impenetrable cloud cover would conceal the arsenal's existence from possible enemy airstrikes. This boy could vouch for that. Northeast Ohio seemed to be the grayest of all places, where the sun was an infrequent visitor, and the winter held the countryside in its grip well into spring.

ROB ULLMAN not only grew up there, but ended up going to college not far from his hometown of Newtown Falls, and lingering in that general area, a captive of his own inertia. Until one morning, halfway through April, when he woke, to the world covered in fresh snow. "I was like, 'I got to get the hell out of here,'" says Rob. "I got to go some place warm."

That October, on the day of the OJ verdict, he moved south to Greensboro, North Carolina. He remembers that first January in North Carolina. He was sitting on the front porch, the temperature hovering at 75 degrees, and he was soaking up the sunlight, relishing the warmth. "I thought, 'This is the life. This is the absolute life,'" Rob says. "I never ever once regretted moving away from Ohio. It's a great place to be from, but I never thought, 'You know, I should really move back.'"

Despite the sometimes bleak landscape, it was there that Rob's talent as a visual artist began to emerge. Even as a boy, Rob spent his time drawing. "I could always draw," he tells me. "It was the one thing that I was always good at. I worked on it a lot, even at five or six years old." And at an early age Rob would discover comics which would lead him ever-closer to what he would ultimately become.

We're sitting in his home-studio in the heart of Bellevue. He has nut-brown hair and a carefully trimmed beard, and wears his signature Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap. On the walls there are framed illustrations, and comic books—some containing his own work—are stacked in neat piles on shelving.

"Ever since I was a kid and I started reading comics,

I knew that this is what I wanted to do," says Rob. "I always liked reading comics, I always liked drawing. And I was more of a DC kid than a Marvel kid. For me it was Batman and Aquaman." His first exposure to the Dark Knight was the goofy 1960s TV series with Adam West. "And then as I discovered this more sinister, scarier Batman," Rob says. "The darkness of it got to me."

Many of the Aquaman and Batman comics that most appealed to the young Rob Ullman were drawn by a man named Jim Aparo. "If you saw his art I'm sure that you would go, 'Oh that guy'" says Rob. "It was dark. It was very moody. It spoke to me." His appetite for comics became both voracious and omnivorous. He would devour everything. "Before long I would read any comic I could get my hands on," he says. "Archie, you know, Little Lulu, whatever. If it was comics, I wanted to read it."

Rob picks up a pen, then lowers it. "I don't know where it came from," he says. "I wasn't a particularly athletic kid, but I wasn't a stereotypical milksop. I did have thick glasses. I wasn't quite that pathetic or anything like that. But just something about the way the panels would work together, the way that you could tell a story through a comic. I just came to it at the right time in my life."

When he was about ten, Rob started reading comics that were more advanced. "These books were not aimed for children, but aimed for a more mature audience," he says. "Like Watchman. I read that first issue as it came out, I remember buying them all monthly."

Just around the corner from his father's office at the regional electric power company, there was a book-

store that featured comics. Over the years, Rob spent hours there, perusing and buying. "I read 'Maus' by Art Spiegelman, and that was just a total eye opener," he says. "They called that time the black-and-white explosion when all these black-and-white comics were coming out from all these fly by night companies. You know, none of them could afford color, so they were all black-and-white. All kinds of weird stuff and random stuff." That's when the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles first emerged.

"And, of course, now and then there'd be naked chicks and swearing and people having sex and that kind stuff," Rob says. "That was always guaranteed to get my attention. I still say, to this day, I'm probably seventy five to eighty percent more likely to read a comic book if there's nudity in it. I don't know why that is, but it's true."

He hands me a copy of one of his black-and-white comic books called *Traffic & Weather*—an intermittent series published by Wide Awake Press. They're snippets of real life, short-shorts that last a page or two at the most. The struggles are those of an Everyman, and thus universal in their implications. The backdrop is frequently Bellevue. As I read and view, Rob continues talking about the art of comics.

"It's about unlocking that language, you know, what happens between the panels, what happens in the gutters between the beats of the story," he says. "You don't always need to be told, or to be shown with a comic. A lot of times you can infer what happened. What happened in moment A and what happened in moment C, and you can kind of put together on your own what happened in moment B. And that's the kind of thing I like. There can be just one interpretation of the story. You know what happened, you may not know exactly what happened, but you know what happened."

Though there are similarities between a written story and comics, there are differences as well. "With comics you have the visual aspect, so you can tell a story with no words," says Rob. "But you can't tell a story with no words in a prose novel."

Comics, in this way, are closer in nature to film than any other medium. "You can tell a story without words in film, and you can do it in comics," Rob says. And as with films, most mainstream comics require a fairly large staff to complete a work. "With comics, somebody writes it and then somebody draws it and then somebody inks it and then somebody letters it

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN
PHOTOS BY REBECCA D'ANGELO

A STORY IN PICTURES



and then somebody colors it," he says.

But Rob doesn't like to work that way. "With most of my stuff, I write, draw, ink, letter, and color it," he says. "It's nice having complete control. That would be very hard to do with a movie because you have to have actors, you have to have some sort of a crew, and all that sort of thing."

He remembers making amateur films with friends back in high school "It was always just such a drag getting everybody together on the same page to do this thing," he says.

He pushes himself back in his chair, away from the desk. He brings both hands up to his forehead and through his hair. "With a comic, you've got a stack of paper, some pencils and some pens, and you pretty much can do whatever you want within your own ability or aspiration," he says.

Often I run into Rob over at Stir Crazy on MacArthur Avenue, and most every time I've ever seen him

there, he is hunched over a table, fingers gripping a pen or pencil that glides over a blank sheet of paper in a notebook, and then the sheet begins filling with images. It seems to me this art form is one of the most ancient endeavors of man. I'm thinking of cave drawings that tell a story with images alone. When I mention this, Rob nods, and says, "Or hieroglyphics, it's just a story in pictures. You can understand the visual language."

Although he is passionate about his work on comics, Rob is more than that. "Well, I guess I consider myself an illustrator, first and foremost," he says. "That's sort of where the bulk of my work goes. It would all fit under the banner of illustration. I'm a cartoonist as well, I draw comics and that sort of thing, as time allows. As the jobs come in, I also do some design work so I guess I would also consider myself a graphic designer. I do logo design, mainly traditional print design, not web design, brochures, publications, business cards, a little magazine design, booklet design, that sort of

thing. I enjoy doing that kind of thing for print. I've never been very tech savvy on the web side of things, I would always work with someone who handled that. I establish how something looks and how it feels, and then somebody else puts it together online."

When Rob graduated high school he went to college at nearby Kent State. He studied English, studio art, graphic design. And then after three years, he took a semester off. "And I'm still taking that semester off," he says.

He had some serious reservations about art school at Kent State. "I had some of the most apathetic teachers," he says, remembering one instructor in particular who would leave class, sometimes for hours. "We would have these aimless three-hour studio classes, and I'm paying for this? I needed someone to tell me to come in here and do this. I wanted someone to talk with me about some fundamentals."

After taking that semester off, Rob worked retail jobs,

followed the local music scene, drank a lot of beer, and worked on his comics, perfecting his skills as an illustrator. “Mainly, I was self-taught, learning from various sources,” he says. “You just have to do it. Chuck Jones (film maker and animator) said something like this in his autobiography: ‘The first thirty thousand drawings that anybody does are going to be terrible, so just tear through them right away.’ It’s daunting, but it’s the only way to learn. If you’re going to be any kind of success it’s as much hustle as it is talent. I don’t say this as some sort of lame attempt to sound self-effacing, but I am not as good as a lot of people just in terms of pure talent. I would not rate myself as high as a lot of folks who, however, don’t have the drive to be successful. You can be the greatest at something, but if nobody knows your work, if you just sit around doing bong hits all day, and nobody ever sees your work or reads your work, so what?”

When he finally left Ohio for good and all, and moved to Greensboro, Rob continued honing his craft. He eventually got a job at Border’s Books and Music, and began drawing comic strips and an occasional illustration for a local tabloid called ESP magazine, a general interest weekly with a focus on music. “I was working a lot drawing comics, but it was mainly for myself, it was mainly practice for something better,” he says.

Because it’s a college town, Greensboro’s younger population tends to be fairly transient. “So after about three years things were just drying up, and people were moving away and it had just gotten kind of boring so I moved to Richmond with a friend, got a place in the Fan, and transferred my job at Border’s,” he says.

While working at Border’s Rob got a call from a friend of a friend, a call that would pave his way as a free-lance illustrator. “So this guy was a children’s book editor at McGraw-Hill and they had this series of children’s science books that their artist had dropped out of at the last minute and they needed someone right now,” says Rob, snapping his fingers. “And I signed on to do it, having never done a children’s book in my life. Honestly, I didn’t even know how to use a computer when I said yes to the job. So I had a couple of weeks there of just abject panic. But that job enabled me to leave my job at Border’s. And it was a lot of work, and it just threw me right into it. I just went right in to the free-lance life. It was great.”

Two years after arriving in Richmond, Rob returned to Greensboro and took



a job with a graphic design shop while still doing his comics, and free-lance illustrations on the side. At a party he met a woman named Brooke. “I basically bothered her and bothered her, until she went out with me,” says Rob. “And then I just kind of hooked her before she could dislodge the lure.” Two years later they were wed. “We got married the day after Hurricane

Isabelle struck in 2003,” Rob says. Two months later, the couple moved to Richmond and rented an apartment on Stuart Avenue within hailing distance of the VMFA. Eight months later they bought their house in Bellevue.

Over the past twelve years, Rob has cobbled together a successful free-lance business. “I just always want to

keep drawing,” he says. “I’m working on the hockey comics right now, and I really enjoy it.”

He considers the range of his work. “I’ve always done a lot of pinup stuff, ever since I was a kid,” he says. He’ll even do custom work. “It’s kind of a little side project I’ve come up with, but these dudes will order a commission portrait of their wife or their girlfriend in their favorite sports team jersey,” Rob says. “I’ve done tons of them, and it’s a lot of fun. It’s cute; it’s not exploitative. My wife Brooke is totally cool with it.”

Like Rob, Brooke is a designer and when I ask what he loves about his wife, Rob smiles broadly. “I don’t know,” he begins, then pauses for the right word. “She’s a smartass, and she can take a joke, she’s super funny. And this: she is genuinely interested in almost everyone, she can talk to anybody. I think we play off each other very well. She’s curious about everybody’s situation in a very genuine way. She’s one of the funniest people I know.”

Rob looks like he can’t believe his great, good fortune to have Brooke in his life. “She tells me the only reason she even talked to me at that party was because she wanted a job at the place where I was working, and she was going to grill me for the info,” he says. “And she didn’t realize I had my own ulterior motive.”

They now have two children. Max is not quite six, and his sister, Evie, is approaching ten. They both attend Holton Elementary, which is a stone’s throw from their front porch.

“Evie’s a lot more like me, a little more reserved, a little more of a rule follower,” Rob says. “Max is a total smartass. I mean he’s hilarious, but he’s also a handful because he’s really smart, and everything’s a negotiation. You can’t just tell him, ‘Don’t do that.’ He’ll be like, ‘Why can’t I do it? How about if I do it this way?’ And he never forgets anything.” To illustrate the yin and yang of their personalities, Rob says, “Max is in kindergarten and he’s already been to Mr. (Principal David) Hudson’s office three or four times, and my daughter never has been there once, and she’s in fifth grade. It’s wild.”

We talk about the periodic joys of parenthood. “I like being a parent more than I thought I would,” he says. “But it’s also a ton of work. Nothing drives me more crazy than when people say things like, ‘Well, yeah, I know what you mean. I have a dog I just can’t keep him off the sofa.’ I’m like, ‘You can put a dog in a crate.’”



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Not long ago, Rob landed a gig that will give him additional exposure. People will literally be wearing his art. For the past few years he had been toying around with the idea of designing T-shirts for the Richmond Flying Squirrels for their giveaway Friday home games.

"I have a friend, David Frost, who is involved in minor league baseball down in South Carolina, and he just knows everybody including (Todd Parnell) Parney who's the general manager of the Squirrels and so he kind of put us in touch," says Rob. That was last summer.

"And I just kept bugging them and bugging them and bugging them, sending them unsolicited designs, just figuring sooner or later they would tell me to buzz off, or they would let me do one," Rob says.

Finally this past fall it paid off, and Rob hit the jackpot. "They called me and said, 'Hey we want you to do all eleven of our shirts this year,'" says Rob. "Which I did not expect. I was expecting maybe one or two. They offered all eleven of the designs, and offered me all sorts of leeway."

Working on a tight deadline, he began work on the eleven designs just after the new year dawned. He hunkered down for a good six weeks. "Some of the designs had a lot of creativity to them," he says. "With a wide open theme, I could go nuts. Most of them were limited to two or three colors, so you have to be a little more inventive, bring a little more ingenuity to the design to make everything work." And in late February in the marble hall of the VMFA, all eleven of his designs were unveiled. "That's probably the only time my work is ever going to be shown at VMFA," he says, tugging the bill of his Pittsburg Pirates baseball cap. "It was the coolest thing, it was pretty great. I can't lie."

His daughter Evie accompanied him to the unveiling and helped drape the eleven design-bearing easels. "It was cool, she was really into it." Rob says of his Evie. "My daughter is very into drawing, she's a very good artist. She's been recognized a couple times for posters at school, and anytime there's a drawing contest she usually enters and she's done really well."

Rob Ullman talks more about his daughter. It's as if he's seeing himself in her. "She's got a really good eye," he says. "I mean she's doing stuff at age nine that didn't even occur to me until I was well into my teens. She's definitely got an eye for it."

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Famous Duos New Work by Darryl Starr and Wolfgang Jasper



Left: Wolfgang Jasper, *New World Order*, 48" x 48.5", oil-wax-board, 2017
Right: Darryl Starr, *The End*, 36" x 48" foam and acrylic, 2017



SOUND OF MUSIC Studios is proud to announce "Famous Duos", the upcoming art opening of Richmond artists Darryl Starr and Wolfgang Jasper. Each has been working on a body of new work, and plans to show these pieces along with work from previous series. Starr and Jasper have been partners in crime for nearly forty years, and have decided it's high time they exhibit together in the city where they met and got their start.

You may recall Starr's work from last April in the mobile "Mayflower Gallery" he fashioned from a semi-rig parked on Broad Street as part of the First Fridays Art Walk. While that venue focused on his paintings, Starr has since been working more on sculpture for "Famous Duos". The self-proclaimed "art hack" has been using duck sauce packets as materials, made a homage to the color he hates, and has been building a topographical landscape for the major museums in New York City. Starr explains, "I don't think the art I see means anything to me, but I accept and acknowledge it. I lived in New York, I saw Godzilla being filmed, I saw those buildings every day, and now their images have returned to my studio in these forms."


Darryl has been a distinctive presence in the Richmond arts community since the early 1980s, first as a VCU student, later as an alumnus professor, and always as a working artist. He has an MFA in painting from Alfred University. He taught at the Pratt Institute, was a resident at the

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and one of the first members of 1708 Gallery.

Wolfgang Jasper, a Richmond painter and photographer who holds a MFA from VCU, taught at both VCU and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The biomorphic clusters he has rendered in pigmented wax recall compressed or melted ideations of Picasso's "Guernica". In addition to these paintings, Jasper also has a number of his earlier, large charcoal drawings

"The paintings and drawings start out as blank surfaces upon which I wrestle my inner subconscious being with charcoal or paint to visually explore who I might be, not just as an individual but as part of the human collective," says the artist. "I try very hard to act as a conduit to the spirit and forces of nature that represent our existence."

Famous Duos runs for two days only as a pop-up event at Sound of Music Studios. Opening night is April 14 from 6-9pm; and the gallery space will be open to the public April 15th from, and by appointment only the following day.

Refreshments served at the opening along with live music from Richmond rockers Gayle and the Nocturnes, and Electric Devastation Orchestra. 

Sound of Music Studios, 1710
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For more information contact
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Building a Life and a House

by **FRAN WITHROW**

IF YOU TOSSED ME SOME tools and told me to build a two-story house, using a crew of three teenagers and a small child, I would laugh in your face and say, "Impossible!"

But that was before I came across Cara Brookins, a strong and capable woman who decides to build her own house after leaving her husband. Reading her story is an inspiration to women everywhere who think they can't rise above their circumstances, follow a dream, wield a hammer.

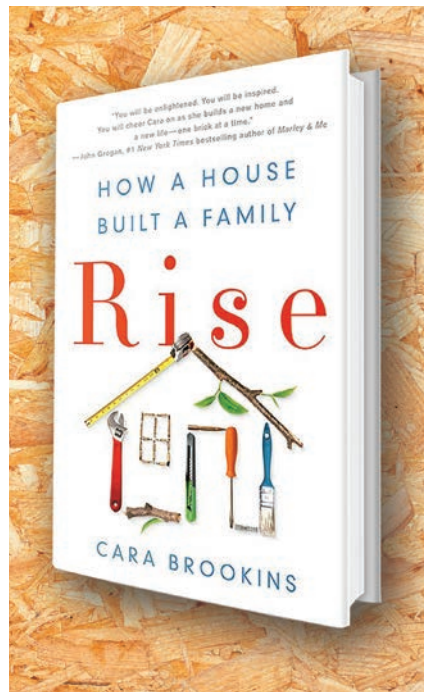
Or construct a home.

Brookins, along with her four children, leaves a horrifically abusive marriage, one that leaves her physically and emotionally shattered. Her husband struggles with severe mental illness and the story of how he terrorizes his family is heartbreaking. Brookins decides that building a house with her children will be a means of rebuilding her family, creating their own safe haven as the walls go up and the roof goes on.

The house she and her children choose to build is no little one-room cabin. I kept staring at the two-story home, pictured on the back cover, wondering how on earth she managed to pull it off. Even after I finished the book, I continued to study that picture in astonishment. What an achievement.

Brookins shares all the gritty details, weaving the sad tale of her marriages (she is twice divorced) into the description of her committed struggle to lay foundation blocks, put in windows, and install plumbing. With the help of YouTube videos and occasional support from her parents, Brookins' many months of determined effort finally pay off. Despite mistakes, injuries and exhaustion, as well as the ever-looming deadline for her bank inspection, Brookins perseveres. "Have I mentioned I'm an optimist?" she queries at one point. Well, yeah, because only an optimist could face a task so daunting and not run quickly in the other direction.

While I found her account of building a house utterly fascinating (pictures



are included and I spent a long time studying them), equally gripping is Brookins' narrative of dealing with her second husband and his mental illness. Chapters alternate: "Rise" chapters focus on house construction, while "Fall" chapters discuss her marriages. As heroic as Brookins is, I was equally impressed by her children, who manage their schoolwork while spending nights and weekends doing this difficult manual labor. I found it uplifting to watch how the children grow stronger in every way as the house takes shape. Particularly compelling to me is the transformation of her son, Drew, who does a lot of the heavy lifting, using a nail gun with increasing prowess and gaining confidence and self-assurance along the way.

Ultimately, of course, this book is not about building a house. It's about never giving up, never losing hope, and the power of love to heal a family. Brookins' story is a testament to what people can do in the face of what seems impossible. Her success will fill you with joy. And you might even be inspired to go out and pick up a hammer. **NB**

Rise: How a House Built a Family
by Cara Brookins
\$25.99
St. Martin's Press
320 pages

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RAINBOW MINUTES

by **BRIAN BURNS** and **JUDD PROCTOR**

Christine's New Life



CHRISTINE JORGENSEN was not the first transsexual to undergo sexual reassignment surgery, but was the most publicized in the United States.

She was born George William Jorgensen Jr. in 1926 and raised as a boy in the Bronx.

After being drafted in 1945 and serving in the Army, Jorgensen's deep desire to be a woman took her to Copenhagen in 1950. There, Dr. Christian Hamburger began treating Jorgensen with experimental hormone therapy.

Then, after two surgeries, word of the brand-new Christine Jorgensen leaked to the press. The New York Daily News broke the story with the headline, "Ex-GI Becomes Blond Beauty."

When Jorgensen returned to the U.S. in 1953, she was greeted by more than 350 admirers, autograph hounds, reporters and photographers. She was likely the most written about person in the press that year. The publicity surrounding Jorgensen's surgery enabled her and medical professionals to educate the larger public about the differences between homosexuality, transvestism and transsexuality.

Dr. Benjamin's German Approach

Dr. Harry Benjamin was best known for his pioneering work with transsexuals.

Born in Berlin in 1885, his two most profound associations were with Magnus Hirschfeld, a German sexual scientist, and Eugen Steinach, a Viennese endocrinologist who in the 1920s experimented with hormone injections.

Dr. Benjamin first became interested in helping a transsexual patient in 1949, at a time when other U.S. doc-

tors refused to do so.

In fact, he prescribed hormones for many early transsexuals, and facilitated surgery for a select few. By the 1960s, he was considered the world's authority on transsexuality.

In the tradition of his homeland, he shifted attention away from judging transsexuals, focusing instead on compassion and the power of science.

Reed Erickson, Transgender Pioneer

Reed Erickson was a female-to-male transsexual and early pioneer for medical transition.

Born Rita in 1917, she became the first woman to earn a mechanical engineering degree at Louisiana State University.

Working as an engineer and living as a lesbian, she later worked for her father's lead smelting business and launched her own company manufacturing stadium bleachers. In 1962, she inherited her father's millions.

The next year, Erickson adopted the name "Reed" and began medical gender transition under the care of pioneering

psychotherapist, Dr. Harry Benjamin. Erickson eventually had three wives.

In 1964, Erickson founded the Erickson Educational Foundation. Using his own fortune, the foundation provided millions of dollars to gay groups and some of the earliest services for transgender people. The foundation also backed the Gender Identity Clinic at Johns Hopkins, where their first sex-reassignment surgeries were performed in the mid 1960s. Other beneficiaries included researchers in homeopathy, acupuncture, dream research, and even dolphin communication studies. **[N]**



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