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swore an oath at age twenty-four “to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.” She made that commitment back in 2004 when she went to work as a federal agent with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, during that era of sealed envelopes containing deadly white powder. A couple years later, again with her left hand palm-down on a Bible and her right arm raised, she would mouth the same sacred words, this time as she joined the ranks of the Central Intelligence Agency, where she and her fellow agents risked life and limb to protect our nation from terrorism, nuclear proliferation and narco-trafficking. Like many American citizens, Abbie is somewhat concerned about the direction our country seems to be taking, and being a patriot hopes this January to once again swear an oath to protect our Republic—this time as the representative for Virginia’s 7th Congressional District.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH by REBECCA D'ANGELO

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Stir Crazy Cafe: A Smooth Transition

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

EARLY SATURDAY morning, a line reaches from the counter all the way back to the front door. Mainly, the orders are for coffee, a few iced teas, breakfast wraps, yogurt parfaits, fruit-strewn oatmeal, bagels, lattes and so on. The din of human conversation is as reassuring as the rote of surface, it rises and falls and scatters and mingles with the music that plays far in the background. Senator Tim Kaine is in line beside me. He orders a large cup of coffee, a supercharge of caffeine, before driving up to Washington to vote against the U.S. Supreme Court nominee. At the farm table near the front door, a group of regulars sits, and one of them hands out square chunks of a sheet cake dedicated to Claire McGowan, the former owner of Stir Crazy Café.

For the third time over the past fourteen years, Stir Crazy Cafe has changed hands, and each time, this neighborhood institution seems to become better than it had been in a former incarnation. Back in 2003, Jerry Bistline first rented the space on MacArthur Avenue. At that time, 4015 was something of a graveyard for old pinball machines and video games; a couple of the storefront windows were actually boarded up with plywood. Within the year, Jerry had completed an extreme makeover of the property, and Stir Crazy was born.

About five years ago, Claire McGowan bought the business from Jerry and began making changes almost immediately. Old furniture subtracted, new furniture added. There was a paint job and a new espresso machine.

“Because you need a good espresso machine to make good coffee,” says Claire, who sits at the farm table in Stir Crazy’s rear. Next to her is the new owner, Vickie Hall.

“Initially, I just came in and tried to learn the people and the place,” Claire says. “We upgraded the menu with more freshness and quality and some seasonal stuff.”

At the time, Claire knew very little about running a coffee shop, but she did know a thing or two about customer service. “That was the only experience I had coming into Stir Crazy,” Claire says. “I learned customer ser-



Previous owner Claire McGowan (right) knows that Stir Crazy will be in good hands with Vickie Hall (left).

vice working in my mom’s company, and my dad’s company.

Claire was fortunate in those early months to have retained Ian McQuary. “He trained me,” she says. “He knew everything about the business.”

Over the next two years she began building a staff that now works together like a family. And that’s not an exaggeration. Today the staff includes Ian, Noah Sheaffer, Art Fedarchuk, Scott Schmidt, Stephanie Yarber, Kai Dos Santos, Catherine and Charles McGuigan, Teddy Schick, Isabel Scarpino, Raye Strawder, Beth Houli-

han, Hillary Kay, Dante Jbarah, Matt Muncy and Jackson Hall.

In time, Claire added beaded wainscoting along two walls, rough-hewn board-and-batten from floor to ceiling along another wall, a long bar made of old doors and architectural accoutrement that runs almost the entire length of a third wall.

Later came the remarkable murals by Ed Trask, including massive panels in the rear sitting area just outside the conference room behind the communal table where we now sit.

Two years ago, Stephanie Yarber joined the staff. She is a jack of all trades, and a master of many. Along with overseeing special events and tending to social media, Stephanie has also expanded Stir Crazy’s catering services. “Stephanie has incredible follow through and organizational and people skills,” says Claire. “She was able to take ideas and make them into concrete reality.”

And then last year, Claire brought on Franklin Massie as general manager. He was a whirlwind of activity at all times, and meshed perfectly with the staff. Last July, in just four days, as part

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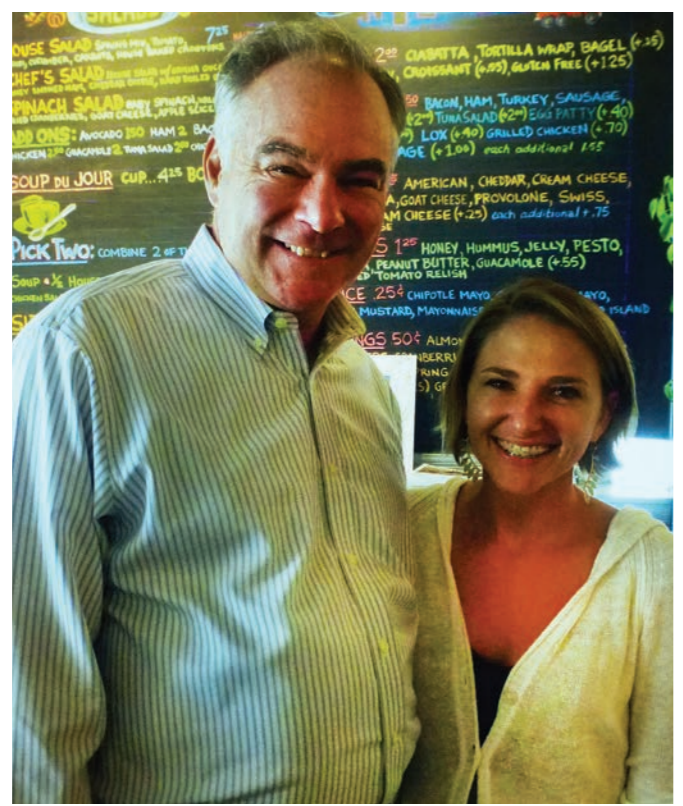
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Left: Senator Tim Kaine dropped by Saturday morning before heading up to Washington to vote against the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.



Right: Vickie packing box lunches for a catering job at Stir Crazy.

of an "aesthetic revamping", the staff completely redid the interior, including a new counter and countertop, which was hand-painted by Franklin's wife, Emily, who worked as a scenic designer for Virginia Rep. "Each night we were cleaning and had everybody come in for a pizza party, which was fun," said Franklin, at the time. "What we wanted to do is create a nice flow through the café, and to do that we had Mike (Dunigan) come in and build the new counters to match the pre-existing counters for a fluid motion across it."

"Franklin also helped with the follow through of things like the build-your-own menu," says Claire. "He's made a huge difference."

Not long ago, Claire decided to sell Stir Crazy. "I was really young when I bought it, just twenty-three," she says. "I didn't know if wanted to sign on for another five or ten years. I cried every day for a while."

Fortunately, Claire knew Vickie Hall. "Claire had brought the idea up a few time over the past year or so, and I kind of chuckled when she said, 'Hey, do you want to buy a coffee shop?'" says Vickie.

But then things changed. The online retailer she worked for closed up shop, and Vickie realized she was looking for a complete change. "I didn't want to sit behind a desk again," she says. "I wanted to be around people and do customer service, and I've loved this

coffee shop for years and it was just a good fit at this time in my life."

Vickie has a long history in the food industry. "I've been in the food business here and there over the years," she says. "I have a lot of catering and food experience, and actually twenty years ago I had my own catering business for a short time. It was called Creative Tastes." And her husband, Tre, along with a business partner, own a catering company called Anything Goes.

Add to that her years of management experience, and the coffee shop was a natural fit. The transition from one owner to the other has been seamless. Vickie meshed well with the enthusiastic staff at Stir Crazy.

"Everybody works together as a family," Vickie says. "Everybody seems to care about each other, and they have a good time. If you're happy where you're working, you're going to want to stay."

Vickie's already making some changes. "We'll be doing a little bit more of a seasonal menu, and beef up the catering," she says. "And moving forward we'll be doing more with the music nights, and become more involved with community events. We just did Oktoberfest at Benedictine."

Eventually there may be another Stir Crazy. "A second location, or a mobile coffee business," says Vickie.

And Vickie wants to always preserve the vibe at Stir Crazy.

"This place has become an extension of other people's families," Claire says. "This place ended up being a safe spot, a comfortable place for a lot of people going through rough times in other parts of their lives."

"That's one of the things I love about these two community tables," says Vickie. "Anyone can sit there and start up a conversation and everyone is pleasant. They talk to another. They don't mind sharing the table."

Later, at the community table out front, a woman with a three-month old infant in a baby carrier sits across from me, and we begin talking. Turns out she and her husband live on Church Hill, but she loves visiting Stir Crazy. Her name is April and her husband is a professor of psychology at VCU. April is doing graduate work in non-profits. She likes the feel of Stir Crazy, and she introduces her very young son, whose name is Atlas.

And I am reminded of what Vickie Hall had said to me a little earlier: "I feel like she (Claire) entrusted me with her baby and I want to help that baby continue to grow. I'm incredibly happy to be here."

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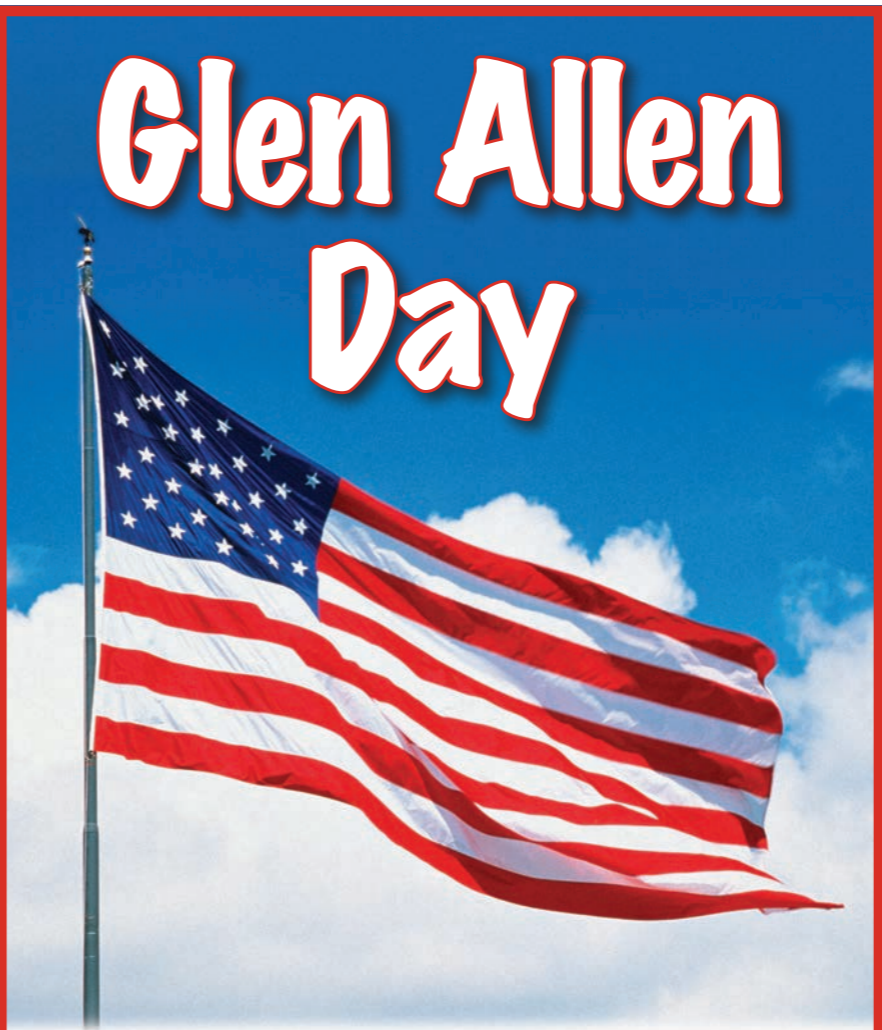
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MSNBC on Location at Lakeside Farmers' Market

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

KYLE ANDERBERG leaves no carbon footprint at all when he brings his produce to market. What he does leave are his own footprints—about 700 of them—from Lakeside's Tiny Acre to Lakeside Farmers' Market. Kyle grows a full assortment of produce on the acre-plus parcel, which is a scant 272 feet from North Side's preferred source for local produce. Truly, farm to table.

"Kyle is an urban farmer, and he uses only organic practices," Sharon Francisco tells me. She's standing near the entrance to the Farmers' Market on this clear Saturday morning in late September. The grounds teem with people shopping the dozen or so vendors who supply the veritable food desert of North Side with the best selection of fresh vegetables, meats, poultry and other food products you'll find anywhere. Among the shoppers is a camera crew and a pair of reporters from MSNBC.

"We have heard that MSNBC wants to highlight a local farmer, and how a farmer in a retail district is a benefit to the community, and how he benefits from being in a retail location," says Sharon. "And Small Business Saturday is coming up, and they want to tie it in with that."

According to Sharon, Kyle studied environmental science at VCU and, before starting his own urban farming operation in Lakeside three years ago, worked for Tricycle Gardens and Broadfork Farm. "They will be highlighting Kyle because he is a for-profit farmer," Sharon says. Lakeside Farmers' Market will also be featured prominently in the MSNBC piece.

Sharon and her husband Peter built Henrico's first permanent farmers' market more than a decade ago at a cost of about a half-million dollars. "At the time we built, Stoney Point and Short Pump Town Center were coming up, and every bit of attention was put on those places," Peter told me awhile back. "Lakeside is a shopping district that could have been easily forgotten, and now we're known as a

place to go to find certain things, and the community comes here to shop."

When Sharon considers the Farmers' Market, she also mentions the businesses here which are locally owned and operated. "We have 150 small, independently-owned businesses on Lakeside Avenue," Sharon says. "So it's a natural fit with our Farmers' Market, which sells local produce."

As Sharon moves off to join her husband, one of the MSNBC reporters begins interviewing 2nd District Councilwoman Kim Gray.

"On City Council," says Kim. "We put money in the budget to offer grants to encourage more farmers' markets. We want everyone to be able to access fresh food in our food deserts, areas that don't have grocery stores and don't have fresh food in the corner stores."

Kim says City Council has also backed the acceptance of EBT cards at farmers' markets in Richmond. "I think everybody appreciates and understands that having good nutrition is important all the way around," she says. "I spent eight years on the School Board... we brought in salad bars and fresh fruits and vegetables. I think that it's something that we can all embrace. I think we're all very supportive of farmers' markets, and the acceptance of the EBT cards. Making sure that our children are getting good nutrition has always been a focus for me."

Kim always tries to shop locally. "I go out of my way to make sure I'm going to an Ellwood Thompson's, or a local restaurant in the area," she says. And, of course, she buys much of her seasonal produce at area farmers' markets.

As the camera crew wanders around the Farmers' Market, checking out local produce vendors, Sharon and Peter Francisco join me again.

"This is our eleventh season," Sharon says, surveying the crowd. "We are really getting on everybody's radar, apparently. We've had several events here this year, and, of course, the pavilion helps considerably with that."

Peter told me years ago about how the



Top: Lakeside's Tiny Acre farmed by Kyle Anderberg.
Bottom: Sharon and Peter Francisco with MSNBC reporter and camera crew.



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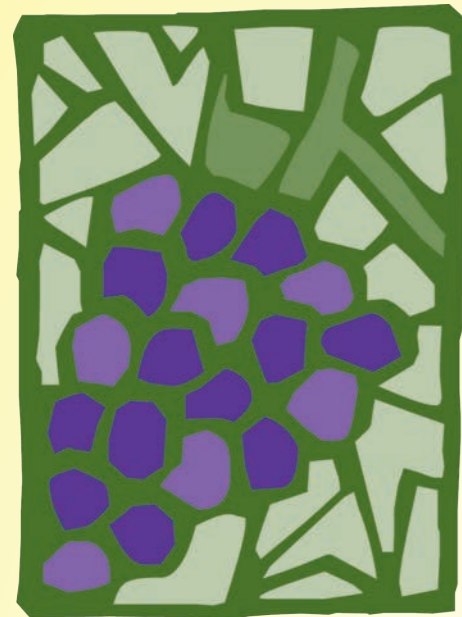
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FEATURE




Second District Councilwoman Kim Gray talks about Richmond's commitment to farmers' markets.

seed of Lakeside Farmers' Market was first planted. "Back in 2004 we met out here for a business association picnic and two of our guests were (Fairfield District Supervisor) Frank Thornton and his wife, Betty," he told me. "Betty looked at the garden spaces behind Lakeside Towne Center and said, 'Wouldn't this be a beautiful place to have a farmers' market?'" The Franciscos regarded one another, then looked back at Betty. "She really sparked our interest, so Sharon and I decided then and there to go ahead and move the thing forward," Peter said.

During that same interview, Sharon said: "We like fresh fruits and vegetables, and we wanted to do something for the community, as well. We like to help the farmers, and we believe in homegrown security from the ground up, which is protecting our food source, and we're interested in that, too."

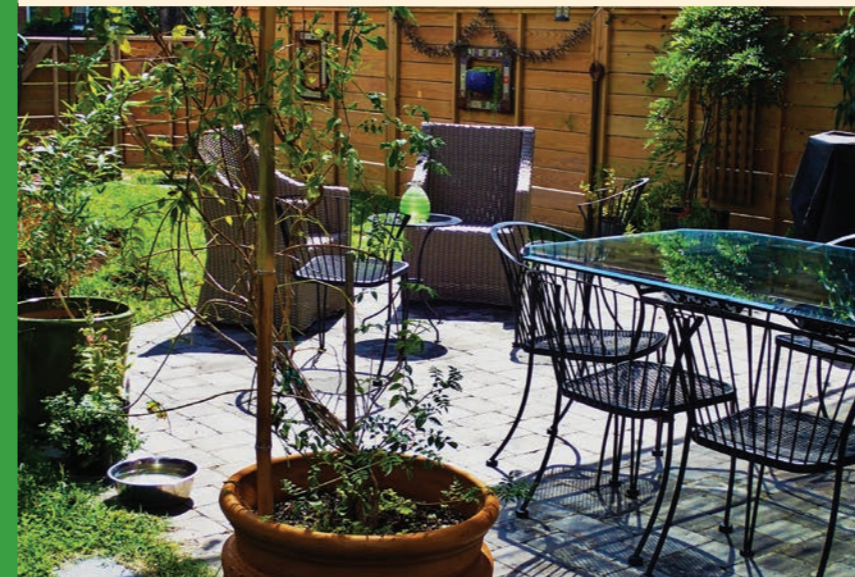
Now, as Sharon takes in the crowd at the Farmers' Market she and her husband created, she smiles.

"The Urban Farm Tour will come back here for dinner tonight, and their chefs will be preparing food from the local foods sold here," she tells me.

In a few short hours, swarms of bicyclists will begin arriving here at the Lakeside Towne Center. "Break-away RVA will be here later this afternoon, ending up at Final Gravity," says Sharon. "Things just continue to grow on Lakeside and at the Farmers' Market." 

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ARTS

New Paintings by Tim Harriss at Eric Schindler



WITH HIS NEWEST GROUP of paintings, Tim Harriss takes machine-aided abstraction to an extreme level. His interest in the Hockney-Falco thesis regarding the use of lenses to create optical distortion has long been at the root of a desire to create contemporary paintings. He references the history of painting, transforming, through current technology, known

works into something entirely novel. His intent is to celebrate painterly traditions, rich colors and textures of the past, while unabashedly warping the imagery to the point of abstraction. Opening reception 7-9pm October 19; exhibit runs October 17 through November 13 at Eric Schindler Gallery, 2305 East Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23824. (804) 644-5005.

Above: After Eugene Delacroix-Orphan Girl by Tim Harriss

Right: Last Bough by Tom Chambers

Below: Ballydavid, Ireland by Sonja Moore



Tom Chambers and Steve Hedberg at Glave Kocen Gallery



For over 25 years Tom Chambers has been telling stories through photomontages. These stunning images, blending the everyday with the fantastic, are inspired largely by travel in places as varied as American west, New England, Mexico, Italy, and Iceland. Chambers uses photomontage to present unspoken stories that illustrate fleeting moments in time and are known for being extremely evocative, eliciting feelings ranging from tranquility to turbulence—and all the points in between.

An Artist and the James River merge.

Carrying 100 pounds of gear mounted to his 12-foot kayak, Richmond artist Steve Hedberg set course in September 2017 to paddle the 320 navigable miles of the James River. Hedberg's mission was to immerse himself within the falls, bends and tides of the James, and to tell the story through his artwork. This fall, the artist will present a series of paintings, photographs, riverbank sketches and a multimedia installation in his sixth solo show here.

Both exhibits run November through December 1 at Glavé Kocen Gallery, 1620 West Main Street, Richmond, VA 23220. (804) 358-1990

Sonja Moore at Stir Crazy

Five years ago, Sonja Moore joined a local hiking group, Central Virginia Trailblazers, and renewed her love of the outdoors. In recent years, she has combined her love of hiking and photography. This exhibit, "Visions from the Trail", features photos taken over the last two years while the artist hiked two long-distance trails—the Dingle Way, a 106-mile trek along Ireland southwest coast; and the West Highland Way, which meanders 103 through Scotland. Through November at Stir Crazy Café, 4015 MacArthur Avenue, Richmond, VA 23227. (804)864-0264



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Abigail Spanberger

DEFENDING HER COUNTRY YET AGAIN

EARLY ON A SATURDAY AFTERNOON in September at Hatcher Memorial Baptist Church in Lakeside the smell of roasting pork lures hundreds of people to an array of tents and tables set up on the grounds. There's live music, kids playing corn hole, and plenty of barbecue of every conceivable style—all part of the McShin Foundation's annual Recovery Fest & BBQ Cook Off. Wandering among the people here, periodically stopping to chat folks up, is a blonde-haired woman who's running against the Tea Party incumbent for Virginia's 7th District seat in Congress. Over the past several months, Abigail Spanberger has done well over a hundred meet-and-greets and stump speeches through this massive district that runs from Orange to Powhatan, with a large suburban swath of Henrico and Chesterfield. We talk, as she mingles.



I worked the entirety of my time with the agency, to nuclear proliferation cases, narco-trafficking cases, and political and economic reporting.”

As she moves off to join John Shinholser, I leave, and await a lengthy interview the following week at the candidate's campaign office on Parham Road.

We sit around a long table in a long room, and I ask Abbie about the clownish attack ad created by a Super PAC that refers to a school where Abbie taught as “Terror High”. It has the feel of the front page of The National Enquirer.

“I was a long-term substitute teacher at the Islamic Saudi Academy, an embassy school for Saudi Arabia in Alexandria,” says Abbie. “I taught ‘Wuthering Heights’ there, I taught ‘Hamlet’, using the same sort of giant purple textbooks that I had used in Henrico County public schools.”

She pauses for a moment, then smiles. “Those attacks that they’ve come out with are silly,” says Abbie. “If they had something to run on, they wouldn’t need to run these ridiculous things.”

“My opponent is driven much by ideology, which does not represent or address the concerns of people living across this district,” she says. “When you’re driven by ideology, it’s harder to find solutions, because you’re not listening, you’re not engaged, you’re not working to really try and understand all sides of an issue.”

Her opponent has fully embraced the Tea Party ideology. “It’s representative of disruption,” Abbie says. “Disruptions can be good when they are aimed at being productive, but the problem with the Tea Party is that when they got to Congress . . . and then they morphed into the Freedom Caucus, they continued to be disruptors, but that action was turned into obstructionism.”

“All sound and fury?” I ask.

“Absolutely,” she says.

Which brings us to the current state of affairs in our country.

“The president has set a tone for this country and

the trajectory that we’re on right now is incredibly detrimental to our communities, to our country, to our place in the world, and to our overall future,” she says. “I’m talking about everything from the inappropriate way in which our president talked about people of different backgrounds, be they disabled, be they women, be they of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds. This is when he was a candidate, and it’s only continued.”

That tone she speaks of does nothing to unify us as a nation. “We’ve seen him focused on issues that are divisive,” Abbie says. “We’ve seen him continue to tweet in a way where he’s prioritizing himself and his own reputation over the reputation of this country. That’s the bigger issue. That we’ve arrived at a place where some people don’t care about facts, and across the board having people in Washington who don’t care about facts, who are focused on crowd size, are focused on other things that are just inconsequential, and arguing about things that are provably true, or provably false.”

Last summer, Abbie had one of the fondest recollections of her early adulthood forever changed. “One of my most vivid memories was of my college graduation day when we all stood waiting to proceed down the lawn as part of our graduation procession, and we stood at the base of the Rotunda at the statue where you later saw people bearing torches,” she remembers. “I stood there with my closest friends from college in what was one of the most exciting days in my life until that point in time. And so watching people hold torches and shout things that are so objectively offensive and wrong and hateful in a place where my memories are about the gift of learning and the opportunity of an education and being there with friends in this celebratory place, was such a juxtaposition of how I remembered that exact place and then how it was being shown to the world.”

And though the place of this outrageous gathering of Nazis was in her beloved Charlottesville, the location was immaterial. “The issue is that we had people on the streets in a city in the United States saying horrifically racist things and chanting Nazi slogans,” she says. “And for any American, particularly those

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN
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who have spent any time studying history, those images should have been shocking and easy to denounce. And we've created an environment culturally where some people aren't standing up for what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in a society such as ours."

Abbie is sometimes alarmed at the current administration's apparent lack of understanding about international relations. "As a CIA officer I learned the United States has a very interesting role in the world in terms of being a stabilizing force, being a voice of reason, being a dependable partner to our allies, be it in negotiations related to trade, or environmental policy or national security issues, or intelligence sharing," she says. "I worry about the fact that the current administration seems unwilling to recognize the value of so many partnerships. And when we overlook the challenges that are presented by adversary nations like Russia and North Korea, I feel there is generally an oversimplification or a lack of understanding of the threat that those nations actually pose to our country."

Some Republicans are not at all happy with the current leadership as Abbie learned firsthand while traveling through the 7th District. "I encounter men and women who have tradition-

ally been Republican, telling me they will vote Democrat this year," she says.

She recalls one event hosted by a couple living in the district. "The husband, when he introduced me, said, 'I'm a Republican, I've always identified as a Republican, I've stood still in what I believe, but the Republican Party has left me, so I don't know what I am anymore, but I'm voting for her.'" He gestured toward Abigail Spanberger.

"We've encountered a number of people who are still consistent in what they prioritize, which is general fiscal responsibility, a functioning government, and planks that have been historically owned by the Republican Party," Abbie says. "There are people feeling adrift and are more identifying as independents, or looking to vote based on candidate, and so while they might be willing to vote for me in this race, that doesn't make them a Democrat, and that doesn't mean they would support all Democrats. I think there are people who are focused on evaluating who is going to put the priorities of the community and the priorities of the country above anything else."

She considers some of language used about immigrants by the current administration. "It's a similar attack on



every other group," Abbie says. "It's just bullying behavior. I think left out of that conversation is that we are and became the greatest country in the world because we took people willing to leave everything behind and try new things and come to this country on a boat with nothing."

In attack ads, claims have been made that Abbie supports open borders. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"I am not in favor of open borders, remember I worked drug-trafficking and terrorism with the CIA," she says. "Conflating border security with im-

migration issues is an oversimplification, and it's a way to foment fear. We can have strong borders, and well-monitored borders and they are things we should prioritize. But that doesn't mean that anyone who wants to come to this country has ill-intent."

One of the many things that concerns Abbie is how healthy and ardent debate has left the forefront of American politics. "No matter what your ideas are, no matter how strong you think your opinion is, if you can't stand up to someone challenging you, then your idea probably isn't that strong, because in being challenged you are

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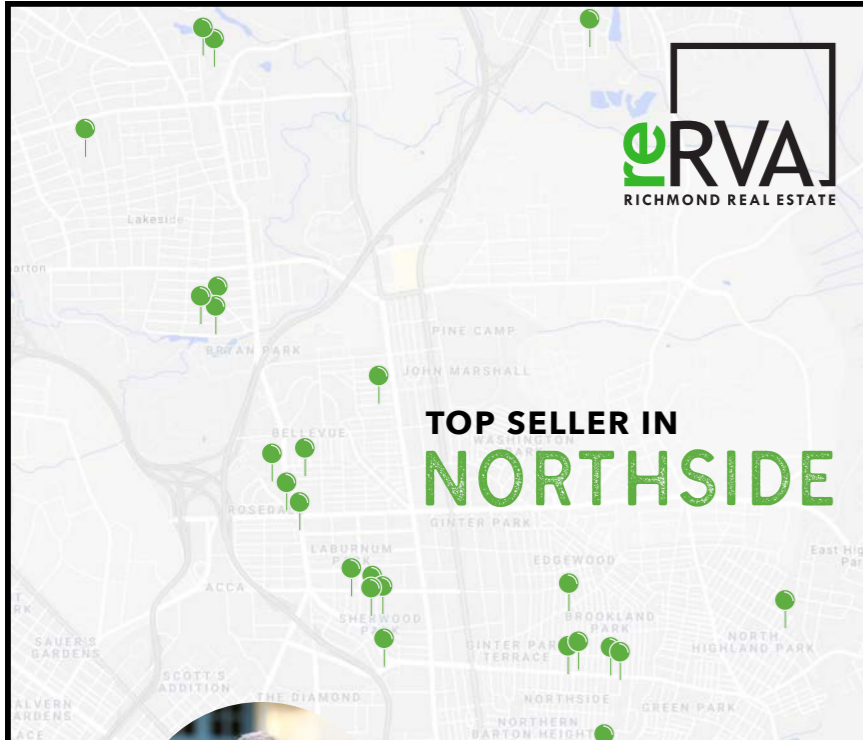
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forced to evaluate what it is you believe and it's through that evaluation that you can strengthen your opinion, you can strengthen your argument, or you might be forced to take on a new perspective that you hadn't previously understood," she says.

As a teenager in high school, Abbie lived for six months on Capitol Hill where she served as a page in the U.S. Senate. "I was on the Senate floor every day, and so I had an opportunity to see Senator McCain every day," she says. "He was feisty, but he was always engaged with everyone. He fought for what he believed in, and I certainly didn't agree with him all the time, but you always knew he believed it was in the best interest of the country."

She remembers watching McCain tangle with another Senate lion, a man named Ted Kennedy.

"They'd be arguing vociferously and then they'd walk behind the gallery and slap each other on the back and go to lunch," she says. "These people were standing up for what they believed in, and they were stronger for being challenged. And I think we need a lot more leaders like that in Washington today."

Of all the many issues her constituents are concerned about, healthcare tops

the list. And it was personal experience with this issue that propelled Abbie to toss her hat in the ring.

Right after the last presidential inauguration, Abbie began to seriously entertain the idea of entering the race. Friends urged her on. She and her husband, Adam, spent hours talking about it. They're both analytical: he an engineer, she a former intel officer. And then in May, shortly after a Republican healthcare vote that threatened those with pre-existing conditions, Abbie knew what she had to do.

"We have friends who have a little girl with a degenerative neurological disorder," Abbie says.

The day of that vote her friends felt a keen sense of fear and despair. What else could possibly happen? they wondered. Shortly after that, while she was sitting with her husband, Abbie turned to him and said: "They spend every single day fighting for their little girl. And there are people like them all around this country who are feeling a level of fear or anger or concern and they need somebody to stand up for them. They're fighting for their little girl, they need someone to fight for protecting pre-existing conditions, and they need someone to fight for

lifetime cap provisions."

So the decision was made then and there. "They are a driving force for me," says Abbie. "And on days when the campaign gets really hard I think this is nothing compared to the challenges they face as parents, which, God-willing, I'll never begin to know." The Spanbergers have three young daughters of their own.

"They're just emblematic of people across the board who need someone who will stand up for what is right," Abbie says.


When I ask her if she fears for the safety of our democracy, she says, "Where we are is definitely a unique time in our history, but it isn't unparalleled or wholly unprecedented, and I think that we, as a country, have shown that we are a resilient people who sometimes go off the wrong path, but through our decision to engage in our democratic process, and through our commitment to our democratic process, we may teeter and totter a bit, but we will get back on track. And I think that's what 2018 is all about."

Abbie talks about two of the biggest influences in her life, who, like her, served their country.

"My grandfather fought in World War II and he came home, met my grandmother, and they had four kids, and she died at 32 of a stroke," she says. "He was left with four little kids. He worked in a paint factory, he raised his kids, and he was the most hopeful, optimistic person I've ever met. And he always instilled in me this idea that it is what you make it, you have to choose your path forward. He chose to find good in dark places. He chose to do the right thing."

The other influence was her father.

"He was a federal agent with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service," says Abbie. "My parents used to say that there's no greater vocation than service to country. I always wanted to be like my dad. He was a shining example of sense of duty."

"And people ask, 'What does it mean that all these people who are running have a background in military service and federal service?'" Abigail Spanberger says. "For me it's a really easy question to answer. We had previously committed ourselves to this country in a non-partisan fashion, and to see partisan politics ripping it all apart is difficult. Is it too optimistic to believe you can be part of a sea change in Washington? I don't think it is." 



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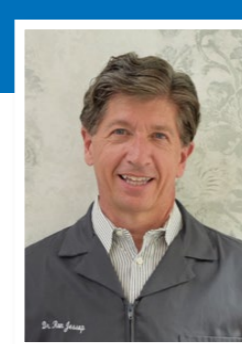
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Zorba's Express Full-Service Italian Restaurant

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

SANTOS CONTRERAS left his home in the coastal city of La Union, El Salvador when he was just fourteen years old. From birth, he had witnessed one dictatorial regime after another intimidate, torture, rape, and murder thousands of liberal dissenters in his homeland. After securing a visa, Santos moved to Dallas, Texas, where he attended school, studying electronics. To make ends meet, he went to work as a landscaper.

Five years after arriving in America, Santos came to Richmond, where he worked for his cousin, Mario Contreras, who owns Anthony's Italian Pizza in Mechanicsville. After three years there, he went to work for Piccola Italy Pizza and Subs where he spent the next fourteen years. And then it was on to Vinny's Italian Grill in Short Pump. All the while, working in the back of the house, Santos was learning everything there was to know about running a successful restaurant.

"I've been making pizzas for a long time," Santos tells me. We sit at one of several tables in the dining room that is dominated by a wall mural featuring a crazed-looking pizza chef. "I've been making pizzas for twenty-nine years," he says.

During those long years, Santos wasn't just making pizzas and other Italian cuisine. When he wasn't working in the restaurants, he was experimenting in his own kitchen, which he turned into a kind of pizza dough lab. He understood that pizzas are only as good as their crust.

My touchstone for pizza has always been the fare that comes out of the brick ovens of Marra's at the corner of Pierce Street and East Passyunk Avenue in the Italian heart of South Philly. It's thin-crust pie smeared with San Marzano sauce and topped with a generous portion of fresh mozzarella, all drizzled down with virgin olive oil, which equals ecstasy in terms of taste and texture.

Zorba's Express leaves a streak of 24-karat gold on that touchstone

Which is no small praise.

I follow Santos into the kitchen, where he and his brother, Jose Contreras, begin molding clumps of dough into palm-sized hemispheres that they sprinkle with flour and lower to a large stainless steel tabletop. These half-balls of dough, which look for all the world like giant white mushroom caps, will be coaxied into a thin crust, slathered with tomato sauce, or white sauce, then covered with cheese and an assortment of toppings. But the secret to this New York-style pizza in the crust. And Santos guards the recipe for the dough as if it were a highly classified document.

"I'm the only one who knows how to make it," says Santos. "And I don't let anybody else make it. It was my own idea, and my pizzas are even better than my cousin Mario's. I spend a long time on the pizza dough."

The sauce he prepares is also a family secret. "And we use the best cheeses available," Santos says.

Every day, Santos and his staff will serve up sixty or more pizzas, along with scores of other Italian dishes. "Every morning I make fresh pizza dough," says Santos. "And we cut fresh vegetables every day, just for that day. That's what's important: everything is always fresh."

When Santos purchased Zorba's almost seven years ago, there wasn't much to the operation. "There was only pizza, little salads and a couple of subs," he says. "Not even a kitchen, just a pizza oven."

So the first thing Santos did was create a full kitchen, which allowed him to prepare a vast array of Italian dishes. "We do baked spaghetti, lasagna, fettucine Alfredo, linguini, eggplant parmigiana, manicotti, stuffed shells, baked ziti, ravioli, tortellini," Santos says. "And all kinds of subs, and a lot of salads. And our calzones and Stromboli." A single Zorba's Stromboli, the size of a deflated football, a golden shell of baked dough stuffed with pepperoni, sausage, mushrooms, ham, ground beef, onions and cheese, easily feeds three people with fairly hearty appetites.



Top to bottom: Zorba's Express on MacArthur Avenue, right next door to Samis Grotto; Santos Contreras, owner of Zorba's Express, with his brother Jose, shaping pizza dough. Mural in the dining area of Zorba's Express.



Jose Contreras taking a call-in order.

Zorba's even offer desserts, including cannoli and tiramisu, and, of course, their signature garlic knots. "We are a full-service Italian restaurant," says Santos. "That's why we needed the kitchen."

Shortly after building out the kitchen, Santos constructed a full dining area, with comfortable seating and a rest room. "I wanted people to be able to come in and enjoy their meal right here," he says, while acknowledging that the vast majority of orders are to-go, or for home-delivery.

His staff includes his brother, Jose, who works every single day, and is reluctant to take any time off. "Jose comes in very early, even before I arrive," says Santos. "He never leaves, and when I try to give him a day off he says, 'No.'"

Anyone's who's ever had a meal from Zorba's brought to their home knows Chris, who is the consummate delivery guy. Then there's one of Santos's distant cousins, Nosli, and two of his three children, Marizza and Manny,

who pinch-hit when necessary.

Santos and I step outside the restaurant and take a seat at one of the four tables for outdoor dining.

"The neighborhood and the people here are amazing," Santos says. "They are really good people, and they love my stuff, they love my pizza. I'm happy that I've got good neighbors, and they love the stuff I make. To have people love what I prepare for them, makes it all worthwhile. And there may come a time when I open another Zorba's Express somewhere else in the city. But the Bellevue location will always be my home." ☑

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HIDDEN HISTORIES

Night Witches

BY JACK R. JOHNSON

FOR A SHORT WHILE during World War II, the air over the Eastern front was inhabited by witches. That's what the Germans called them, anyhow: Nachtexen or Night Witches, a German nickname for the Russian female military aviators of the 588th Night Bomber Regiment.

The squadron was the brainchild of Marina Raskova, known as the "Soviet Amelia Earhart." She was famous as the first female navigator in the Soviet Air Force and also for her many long-distance flight records. As the Soviet's losses mounted during the war, Raskova petitioned Stalin to let her form an all-female fighting squadron. Thanks to her efforts, Stalin issued an order on October 8, 1941 to deploy three women's air force units, including the 588th regiment.

But because they were women, the regiment wasn't considered especially important, and their equipment was often second rate. The Soviets provided them with outdated Polikarpov Po-2 biplanes, 1920s crop-dusters that had been used as training vehicles. Byrnn Holland notes on History.com that "These light two-seater, open-cockpit planes were never meant for combat. It was like a coffin with wings."

"Made out of plywood with canvas pulled over, the aircraft offered virtually no protection from the elements. Flying at night, pilots endured freezing temperatures, wind and frostbite. In the harsh Soviet winters, the planes became so cold, just touching them would rip off bare skin."

Luckily, the flimsy and light construction actually assisted them in their missions. The female pilots could operate in stealth mode, idling their engines as they neared their targets and then gliding their way to their bomb release points. As a result, their planes made little more than soft "whooshing" noises as they flew by. That's when the Germans decided they sounded like witches, flying by on broomsticks.

"The planes were too small to show up on radar... [or] on infrared locators," said Steve Prowse, author of the screenplay *The Night Witches*, a non-fiction account of the little-known female squadron. "They never used radios, so radio locators couldn't pick them up either. They were basically ghosts."



Their actual impact was considerably more devastating.

All told, the pioneering all-female 588th Night Bomber Regiment dropped more than 29,000 tons of bombs and incendiary shells on Nazi targets. They were so feared that any German pilot who downed a "witch" was automatically awarded an Iron Cross.

According to Atlantic magazine, "Because of the weight of the bombs they carried and the low altitudes at which they flew, they carried no parachutes. They had no radar to navigate their paths through the night skies—only maps and compasses. If hit by tracer bullets, their craft would ignite like the paper planes they resembled."

Each night, about 40 planes—each crewed by two women, a pilot and a navigator—would fly eight or more missions. They had to fly multiple sorties because their plywood planes were only capable of carrying two bombs at a time. The women's uniforms were hand-me-downs from male pilots. And their planes had open cockpits, leaving the women's faces to freeze in the chilly night air. Because of this they sometimes suffered frostbite. Occasionally, if a stalled engine would not restart, the navigator had to climb out on the wing and manually spin the blade to jump start the engine.

The planes traveled in packs: The first planes would go in as bait, attracting

German spotlights, which provided much needed illumination. These planes, which rarely had ammunition to defend themselves, would release a flare to light up the intended target. The last plane would idle its engines and glide in darkness to the bombing area. It was this "stealth mode" that created their signature witch's broom sound.

At its largest, the 588 regiment had 40 two-person crews. The regiment flew over 23,000 missions, dropping over 3,000 tons of bombs and 26,000 incendiary shells. It was the most highly decorated female unit in the Soviet Air Force, with many pilots having flown over 800 missions by the end of the war and twenty-three having been awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union title.

Thirty-two of its members died during the war. Holland writes that despite being the most highly decorated unit in the Soviet Air Force during the war, "when it came to the big victory-day parade in Moscow, they weren't included—because, it was decided, their planes were too slow."

Marina Raskova, the mother of the movement, and the lady who convinced Stalin to let women fly, died on January 4, 1943, when her aircraft crashed attempting to make a forced landing on the banks of the Volga near Stalingrad. She was given the very first state funeral of World War II, and her ashes were buried in the Kremlin. **NE**



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BOOK REVIEW

American Prisons: Hell on Earth

by FRAN WITHROW

WANT A PEEK into what hell might be like? Then sit down with "The Sun Does Shine," and be prepared to thank your lucky stars you are not on death row in Alabama (or anywhere, for that matter). Getting a glimpse into the daily life of those awaiting execution made me an even firmer opponent of the death penalty than I was previously.

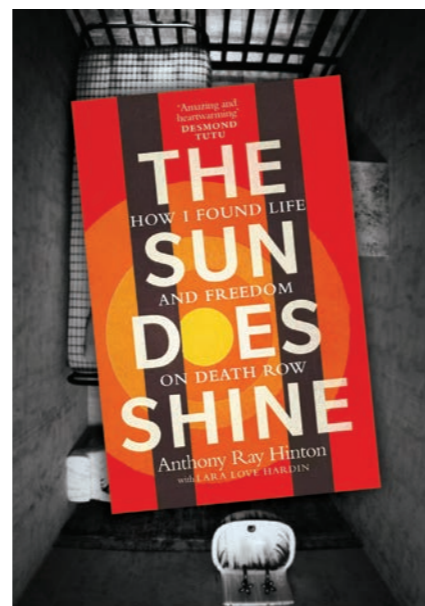
Being on death row is horrendous for the guilty. But studies show that one out of every ten inmates who receive the death penalty is innocent. Anthony Ray Hinton is one of those innocents.

Hinton was a 28 year-old young man, living with his mother and working as an unskilled laborer when a string of robberies and murders occurred in his hometown. As he was mowing his grass one evening, the police arrived and arrested him. One of the victims had survived, and identified Hinton as his attacker. The police confiscated his mother's gun, which had not been fired in twenty-five years, and classified it as the murder weapon.

Hinton received a court-appointed lawyer who had no money to mount a defense. The expert who claimed the bullets fired were not from Hinton's family gun was blind in one eye and did not know how to use the equipment given him. Hinton was poor, black, and had stolen a car once. He quickly found himself in solitary confinement on death row.

Hinton lived in a five-by-seven foot cell for close to 30 years. He was allowed a shower every other day. He could walk outside in a cage for 15 minutes a day. Humiliation in the form of body searches, poor food, and an initial lack of compassion and respect by the guards seemed sure to send him into despair and mental anguish.

But Hinton, for all his hard luck, had some things going for him. He knew he was innocent. His mother and he had a strong, deeply loving relationship. And he had a best friend, Lester, who visited him without fail for the entire duration of his incarceration. Hin-



ton also maintained an optimistic view whenever possible. He daydreamed his way into happier places, allowing his mind to leave his dreary circumstances even though his body couldn't.

Hinton treated the guards with courtesy and eventually received that courtesy in kind. He called out to other inmates, encouraging them. He shouted support for those prisoners walking to the electric chair, which was only 30 feet from his cell.

Hinton even started a book club.

Eventually he connected with an amazing attorney: Bryan Stevenson, whose determination and hard work led to Hinton's release in 2015.

After leaving prison, Hinton developed a new purpose in life: to speak out against the death penalty. At the back of the book is a list of all the current inmates, divided by state, facing execution. It is sobering to read.

You may already have passionate views about this form of punishment. No matter where you fall on this issue, Hinton's book will make you think.

Read it, at least, for the five Virginia inmates facing this end.

Perhaps one of them is innocent. ^{NR}

The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row
by Anthony Ray Hinton
\$26.99
St. Martin's Press
272 pages

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DOUG DOBEY

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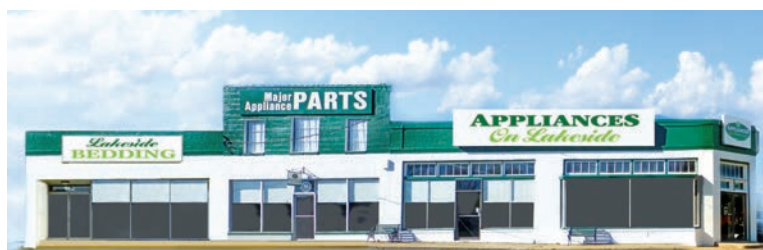


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