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*continued on page 18*



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Cover photograph by REBECCA D'ANGELO

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# Thanksgiving at Albert Hill

## Food and Fellowship

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

**H**ERE IN VIRGINIA people claim the first Thanksgiving was held down at Berkeley plantation back in 1619, two years before the Pilgrims hosted their notable banquet at Plymouth in the far north. But I think the image of Pilgrims with their blunderbusses and buckled hats will always be the icon we collectively conjure as a culture at the mention of Thanksgiving. Indians from Virginia to Massachusetts got screwed in the end, were not invited back to the table, were massacred, robbed of their lands and so on. The Pamunkeys, and some of the other tribes in Virginia who still are not recognized by the federal government, pay tribute to the governor on about Thanksgiving with wild game. In Plymouth, Indians hold a ceremony of mourning on this national holiday.

For every American family Thanksgiving traditions and memories are different. But one thing unifies them all—a feast with family and friends, a day to count your blessings. As a people we seem to do an awful lot of bitching: Consult Facebook at any given minute. But on Thanksgiving we take stock. My grandfather Cosgrove used to say, ‘What’s he got to complain about, he’s got a loaf of bread under one arm and a ham under the other.’ He was first generation Irish and ate oatmeal three times a day, sometimes sweetened with lard. That’s true, too. They didn’t have a pot to piss in when they arrived in Philly. My grandfather McGuigan, third generation Irish, would say this when he heard someone he knew complain about life’s short comings, ‘He’s got three squares a day and a roof over his head, what more does he want?’

Rachel Siddall, a teacher at Albert Hill Middle School, started a tradition a couple years back by holding Thanksgiving in her classroom. It has all the trimmings, too. A big affair, serving thirty people, kids and adults alike. And everybody helps out.

In years past Rachel sometimes bought the turkeys with money out of her own pocket. She’s a teacher and doesn’t make that much to begin with. Plus, she already buys a lot of stuff for



her kids. Things the kids don’t have; things the school district doesn’t supply. I know scores of teachers in our city schools who do the same thing. They buy books and supplies for their students with their own money and they’re never reimbursed.

Thanksgiving at Albert Hill was held at one in the afternoon, the last day of school, a Tuesday, just before the holiday began. I joined Rachel at her table near the head of the class. The room around us had been transformed into a dining hall with folding chairs and draped folding tables and clever turkey centerpieces made of toilet tissue rolls wrapped in construction paper with a colorful sunrise of turkey feathers fashioned from pleated coffee filters that had been folded in half. Each pleat was stroked with colored marker to describe the feathers.

“We got our turkeys from Tim McCafrey who is owner of The Cottage Gardener,” Rachel told me. “He has never met us as far as I know. I had never met him. But he heard we were in need of two turkeys, and there they were one day last week on my front porch.” Rachel lives in Bellevue, not far from The Cottage Gardener. She surveyed the room, taking in the guests who were huddled over their plates, eating and chatting amiably. And listened to the swell and fall of voices murmuring in

their circles, talking about the impeccable quality of the food.

This entire feast was orchestrated with help from parents and kids alike, and, of course, Rachel Siddall, who brandished a figurative baton.

“It’s generally funded by some parent contributions, and we get some gift cards and things from Martin’s,” she told me. “So we sort of pull it all together. It’s still pretty piecemeal.”

Rachel decided to host this annual feast to ensure that all her kids would get a taste of Thanksgiving. “We just wanted to make sure that everybody has a chance to experience Thanksgiving the way we do in some small way,” she said. “And honestly I just love Thanksgiving. It’s an excuse to have the meal twice a year. That’s half the reason. Also, it’s a lot of fun to get hands on and get messy in the kitchen with these kids who don’t get a chance to do that at home very much. It’s a two-day production.”

The results were palpable and plentiful. “We had turkey,” Rachel said. “We had gravy, we had four different kinds of stuffing, we had rolls, we had cranberry relish, we had candied yams, we had some carrots, we had lima beans, and mashed potatoes, green beans and broccoli. Pumpkin pie and apple pie and cranberry pumpkin muffins to top it off.”

A great teacher can turn anything into

an opportunity for learning.

“We went on a field trip and did grocery shopping,” Rachel said, smiling at the memory of the class expedition to Martin’s. “We had the kids help me decide on the menu, cut the food, and then we all prepared it and cooked it and served it up to y’all like you saw today. We worked on life skills and we worked on a lot of measurement, basic cooking skills, independent living skills, just being in the kitchen, being around equipment, how to use a knife, how to use a vegetable peeler, how to interact with pots and pans and things that are hot, how to be responsible for a dish when it’s cooking so it doesn’t burn. It was all heavily supervised.”

Though the kids didn’t pray over the food before they ate it, they had given thanks in their own way. And they were really honest about it. “Well we did no prayer because it’s obviously a public school so it’s a secular establishment,” Rachel told me. “So we just took ten, fifteen seconds to think about what we were thankful for. A couple of them told me they were thankful for their families. Others said they were thankful for this opportunity to miss class and fool around in the kitchen instead of doing work sheets and stuff.”

Rachel excused herself from the table so she could prepare catering trays for a



And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow,  
stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without  
ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or  
bags. And he puzzled and puzzled 'till his puzzler was sore. Then the  
Grinch thought of something he hadn't before. What if Christmas,  
he thought, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas,  
perhaps, means a little bit more."

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bit more and that the joy and happiness that Christmas brings will live in  
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*Tim McCaffrey – The Cottage Gardener*

## CELEBRATION

couple of the families who were about to leave. "We certainly have a lot of leftovers so we're going to load them up," she said.

Thanksgiving dinner at Albert Hill was winding down. Kids nursed cups of apple cider and forked chunks of pumpkin pie into their mouths, stuffed as fully as the turkeys had been an hour before.

I wandered around the room and talked with a number of the students. Jordan told me he loved passing the

pies around and that he was thankful for Mrs. Siddall, though he still calls her by her maiden name, Miss Parnell.

Next I visited with Andy who used one word to describe the meal and the fellowship. "It was awesome, the food was awesome, the guys are awesome, pretty much everything was awesome," he said.

At the table behind me there was a trio of boys all anxious to talk. "My name's Dumante," said one of them. "I helped

break the broccoli apart. We all worked together. We took the skin off the carrots. Cracked eggs and filled the apple pie."

When I asked Dumante what he was thankful for, he said, "I'm thankful for my family. I'm thankful for food, the clothes that I put on my back, the shoes that I put on my feet, and I'm thankful for my mom and dad."

My son Charles sat among them and when I asked him what he was thank-

ful for, he spoke in a quick flurry of words. "I am thankful for my family, my home, my toys and especially I'm thankful that I'm going to do a Macy's Day Parade this holiday. And I'm thankful for all of my friends who are here as a family at this Thanksgiving Party. We're having a great time. I helped make the cranberry relish."

That parade Charles mentioned lasts much longer than the Macy's parade. It begins in our kitchen, moves through



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## CELEBRATION

the dining room, into the hall, visiting the bedrooms and ending in the living room. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of participants. Toy soldiers and x-men and stuffed animals and plastic lizards and frogs and dinosaurs and balloons that fly above the parade as it twists through our house. Charles moves each piece slowly, six inches forward at a time. One year it took nine hours to achieve completion.

At another table I sat with a woman

and a boy I assumed was her biological son—they look that much alike and they interact like mother and child. Of all the stories I heard that day hers was the one that struck me deepest. It was the one that best exemplified Thanksgiving, in my mind at any rate. The one that illuminated the common thread so that it shimmered like a rare metal.

“Last year I was his foster mom,” this woman told me of the boy sitting next to her. “And now I’m just his friend.”

The boy had been in her care for nine months and I asked what it was like now. “It’s a mixed bag because it’s not chaotic and I can take care of myself,” she said. “And I can come in late and don’t have to put somebody to bed. But also I just have my cat at home now. His family wants me to keep in touch with him so I picked him up Saturday for a few hours and we went to a movie and he told me they were having a Thanksgiving party and he wanted

me to come and I said, ‘Are you sure?’ He was like, ‘I’m allowed to invite two people.’ And then last night his mom called and said, ‘He really wants you to be there, are you going?’ And I’m here.”

We talked a bit about the notion of giving thanks for what we have and about not worrying about what we don’t have. “I am thankful for being part of people’s lives,” she told me. “Especially his life.” And she looked over at the boy who could be her own son. **NJ**



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# Original Gravity/Final Gravity North Side's Microbrewery Coming Soon

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

**O**RIGINAL Gravity will soon also house Final Gravity Brewing Company. The logos of these twin components of the business interlock like a yin yang for fermentation and its ultimate objective—home-brew. A balance that when struck to perfection is spiritually sublime.

Just a week after his third anniversary, this past Black Friday, Tony Amendolia, owner and founder of Original Gravity, opened in a new and vastly expanded storefront at the Lakeside Towne Center, a few doors down from his former shop. This new space has given him the ability to expand his product line for the home-brewing and wine-making supply shop. What's more he will now have the opportunity to realize a long standing dream by opening a micro-brewery in the North Side.

"I think every home-brewer has the dream to open a brewery," says Tony as we stand on opposite sides of the copper clad counter, where one day soon people will line up to drink brews of his concoction. He might be able to open the brewery in as little as three months. Tony's been filling out the paper work for the federal government, specifically the TTB (Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau). He also needs approval from the Virginia ABC and the state's department of agriculture. "So it could be as early as three months," he says. "But I'm trying to be conservative, so it will probably be six months."

As soon as the final approval comes, Tony will brew his first barrel (that's about 31 gallons) of beer. Within several weeks the beer will be ready for tap. "You're looking about six to eight hours in just the brewing of it," Tony says. "And a couple weeks of fermenting and then carbonation that I think we will be able to get done in a couple of days."

The day after he brews the first barrel he will begin a second brew session. "I could do one, one day and then one the next day and one the day after that and so on," he says. "I can have as many as I'm capable of producing and serving."

Tony's ultimate goal is to have at least



Owner Tony Amendolia and Sean Florin.

six beers on tap at any one time. "All of them will be the beers we produce here on site and here is the only place you'll be able to get them," he says. "We're not distributing at all. It's all going to be sold right here at Original slash Final Gravity."

As in life, variety keeps a brewery interesting. "There will be probably two or three regulars that will always be here," Tony tells me. "There will always be an IPA and there will always be something accessible to people like a pale ale or maybe something even lighter, fresher, crisper. We'll probably have a Belgian dark strong on tap or maybe something like an American amber ale. So that's three of them, the other three are yet to be determined. And we're going to change them all the time."

Tony looks down the length of the counter. "This is a micro-brewery that happens to be in a home brew store," he says. "We'll be able to seat eight to ten people. I envision my regular customers probably enjoying a beer or two when they come in to get their

ingredients to brew their own and I also envision people from around the area coming in to try the beers as well. When the [Lakeside] Farmer's Market is happening there's lots of foot traffic and people walk around and check out what's here and a lot of people like to drink beer."

He will offer his brews for sale in a variety of ways. "The majority of the beer sales here are going to be by the glass or by the growler so you can get a 32-ounce or 64-ounce growler to go," he says. "I'm also going to get a keg license but I'm not looking to sell lots of kegs. I have this idea that if somebody comes to me and says, 'I'm getting married and I really want to have your beer at my wedding' that I will be able to provide that service. But I'm not looking to sell a lot of kegs by any means."


Beer by the glass will cost about five dollars, growlers around fifteen, for the smaller ones. The brewery itself will be housed in a room within this large room, a sort of independency

that will sport a large window that customers can gaze through. Tony will be able to maintain the correct temperature in that room as the beer ferments and is later carbonated and then kegged. In the rear of the store he installed a large walk-in cooler where the kegs will be stored.

The primary business at Original will always be the sale of wine-making and beer-brewing products. And because of the size of the new store—it went from 1,000 square feet to 5,000 square feet—Tony has been able to stock a lot more of the products needed by the home brewer. "There are items that people have been asking me for that I didn't have that I'm able to offer," he says. "There are a lot more varieties of hops, more varieties of yeast and also the grains. I can also double up on some of the more popular grains."

There is one room with its own air filtration system to keep dust out of the rest of the store that contains nothing but shelf upon shelf of grains. And Tony bought two new refrigerator units to make room for more hops and yeasts.

He also hired his first employee who, like Tony, has an easy manner. His name is Sean Florin, and he's been home brewing for quite some time and had been a regular customer at Original Gravity. "He's got the right demeanor for the kind of person I would like to be here," Tony says. "I don't like it when you go into a store and people jump all over you. Sean can answer your questions and help you with everything you need and he's not going to try to shove stuff down your throat."

After talking briefly with Sean, Tony returns to the counter and tells me that from the first day he opened Original Gravity business has been good. "I had a business plan and I was pretty conservative in that," Tony says. "Right out of the gate when we opened in the old location we just blew away the business plan." 

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# 10th Annual Christmas on MacArthur

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

**C**HRISTMAS ON MacArthur, held the second Saturday of December in the heart of historic Bellevue, is easily North Side's biggest and most popular event, attended this year by more than a thousand people.

But it had extremely humble origins, and that first event attracted fewer than one hundred people. A handful of shop owners got together and on Saturday, December 17, 2005 held what was called Christmas on MacArthur. In the parking lot of Once Upon A Vine, which had just opened a little over a year before, Amy Henderson, sans stage, performed Christmas carols for the kids. It was brutally cold that day, a pewter sky above, and Amy wore black, fingerless gloves. Bob Kocher handed out Christmas treats of one kind or other to the kids and also offered three \$25 gift certificates to Carytown Books (long since closed) for the best hand-drawn likeness of Santa Claus. Carytown Books owner, Rick Zander, invited kids in to decorate cookies and read in the children's room. Stir Crazy offered kids and adults hot cider, hot cocoa and cookies. Dot's Back Inn and Decatur's Garage also handed out treats. And playing Santa Claus that first year was Sgt. Santa, aka Ricky Duling. Kids brought toys for Sgt. Santa to distribute throughout the city to homes where need was keen. Each unwrapped toy allowed the giver to enter a raffle to win a bicycle. Bob Kocher bought that bicycle.

Over the intervening years Christmas on MacArthur has erupted in size and popularity. Early in the morning of this year's event, as the first few vendors began trickling in, Chris Egghart was busy cleaning the gutters with shovel, rake, push broom and trash cans. The new lampposts, each of them adorned with a holiday wreath, gleamed in the morning sunlight, and within the hour all cars were off the street and dozens of vendors, selling everything from painting to jewelry, lined the curbs that were now whistle-clean.

Meanwhile, down at Holton Elementary School acts for the parade began assembling in rank and file. The parade started around 11:30 led by six RPD motor units and the honor guard of Boy Scout Group 498. Woven through the procession of the parade were antique cars supplied by Chris Champeau, Jim Green, Bruce Woodson, and John and Lea Dunham. There were police vehicles and Marine Corps vehicles, Marines from Hotel Battery Third Battalion, Holton's School Band and Choir, Ring Dog Rescue, Huguenot and John Marshall High Marching bands, alpacas, St. Andrew's Legion Pipes & Drums, Benedictine Cadets, the Moore Christmas Castle float, Holton SCA, Indian Princesses and Mighty Waccamaws, Holton Honor Society, ACCA Shriners with clowns and little cars that couldn't quite negotiate U-turns, Holton's King and Queen, Jonathan the Juggler, and riding in the back of Peter Francisco's Lakeside Farmers' Market Trolley Santa Claus himself, aka Joe Stankus of Classic Touch Cleaning. David Hudson, in many ways the very heart and soul of the parade, got stuck in traffic, but arrived later in the day. Throughout

*Below left: Santa listening to a dog's wish list.*  
*Below right: Santos of Zorba's spinning pizza dough in a moving car.*



*Above left: Bellevue Mayor Bob Kocher with First Lady Vera.*  
*Above right: Jonathan the Juggler.*



the afternoon more than one hundred kids (and even a few canines) sat in Santa's lap and told him their Christmas wishes. As in past years Libby Clark photographed the kids with her husband, John, at her side.

Along with the Holton Choir, Amy Henderson, Susie and the G-Tones

and the Soul Proprietors performed on the stage at Once Upon A Vine.

None of this would have been possible without the hard work and commitment of Sydney Cameron of WRIR-TV 8, Mike LaBelle, Chris and Cecelia Rich, Bob Kocher, Rich Richardson, Chris Egghart, Amy Foxworthy and Josh Carlton of the mill, Claire McGowan, Jeff Pride of Samis Grotto, Andrew and Valentina Wisniewski of Tastebuds (who offered boxed lunches to soldiers, firefighters and police), John Whiting, Larry Brown, Joe Stankus, Teri Phipps and David Schieferstein, Santos Contreras, Kim Rayford, and scores of other volunteers too numerous to name.

Generosity poured forth in an endless stream of Toys for Tots, probably close to 3,000 this year. And, as always, Bob Kocher and Tim McCaffrey bought six bicycles for the toy donation raffle. Another six brand new bikes were donated by Elizabeth Kemp-Pherson and her husband. They donated six last year, as well. As the day came to a close, members of the Bellevue Merchants Association were already planning next year's Christmas on MacArthur. **NJ**



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## HIDDEN HISTORIES

### The “War on Christmas”

**T**HE RECURRING THEME of a “War on Christmas” is now a tradition. Annually, stalwart conservatives like Sarah Palin, Bill O’Reilly, Michelle Bachman et. al. will take to the airwaves

and will announce that our Christmas spirit is somehow less than Christian because we say ‘Holiday’ rather than ‘Christmas.’ But the history of Christmas is the story of one makeover after another. In truth, it begins before Jesus was even a twinkle in Joseph’s eye. In those heady pagan days, when the unconquerable sun was worshipped in all its pagan glory and the winter solstice rejoiced at the coming gift of the sun (or ‘son of God’ if you want to be playful) there was an honored period of about 7 days – running approximately from just before the Solstice (Dec 17,18th) through to Dec 25th that became one long party ride, a kind of burning man for the pagan era.

The premise from today’s principle talking heads is that Christmas has always been about Christ, and any sense of holiday or festivity outside ‘Christ’ is somehow an interloper watering down the spirituality of the time. This, of course, is exactly backwards. Most of our cherished Christmas traditions have nothing to do with Christianity—and everything to do with the underlying pagan traditions that celebrated the winter solstice and the return of the so called ‘unconquerable sun.’

The infamous Roman holiday of Saturnalia is really at the center of all this. It was a huge party, a gigantic fair and festival of the home. The ancient Greek writer, poet and historian Lucian (in his dialogue entitled Saturnalia) describes a time of widespread intoxication; going from house to house while singing naked; where, as he said, “sexual license” was taken; and even incidents of human sacrifice were recorded. These incidents were given a culinary representation in human-shaped biscuits, something we still see in traditional Christmas cookies. Remember those gingerbread men?

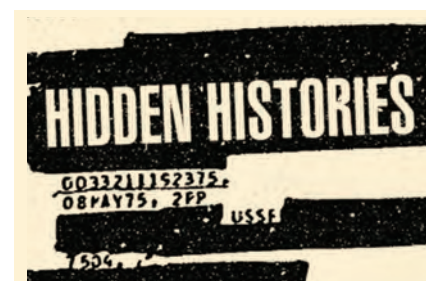
According to Janet Shotwell, lamps were kept burning to ward off the spirits



of darkness. “Riotous merry-making” took place, and the halls of houses were decked with boughs of laurel and evergreen trees that were brought in by the citizenry in the hopes that they would guard the life essences of the plants until spring. As one comic put it, our Christmas tradition is based on an act of sympathetic magic. Schools were closed, the army rested, and no criminals were executed. Friends visited one another, bringing good-luck gifts of fruit, cakes, candles, dolls, jewelry, and incense. Processions of people with masked or blackened faces and fantastic hats danced through the streets. The custom of mummers, visiting their neighbors in costume, which is still alive in Newfoundland, is descended from these masked processions.

But one of the most equalitarian aspects of Saturnalia was a sit down feast shared by masters and slaves. In fact, during the festivities slaves were given the freedom to do and say whatever they liked. A Mock King was even appointed to take charge of the revels, and from this fantastic class reversal developed the so-called “Lord of Misrule” of medieval Christmas festivities.

About 354 AD, Christianity came along and tried to co-opt solstice festivities, but couldn’t really suppress the whole merry making, drinking, gift giving thing. They did manage to make the climax of the winter festivities the official day to commemorate the birth of Christ, however, and, of course, gave it the name we know and love. Christmas. **N9**



**Hidden Histories** is written and produced by Jack R. Johnson and airs every Wednesday and Friday at 10 am on WRIR- 97.3 FM. It is also webcast at [wrir.org](http://wrir.org)

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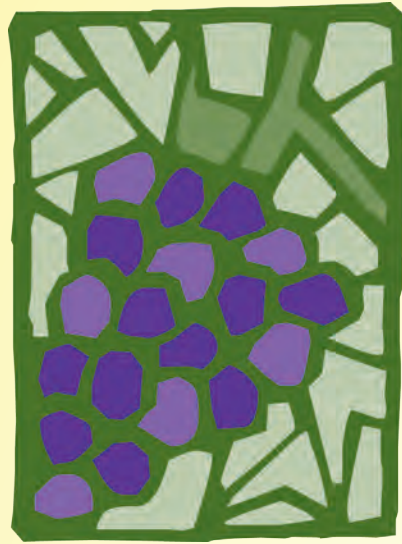
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**BOOK REVIEW**

# Napkin Notes: Make Lunch Meaningful and Life Will Follow

by **FRAN WITHROW**

**L**IFE DOESN'T HAVE  
to be perfect to be  
wonderful.”

—Annette Funicello

What would you do if you were diagnosed with cancer and given an 8% chance of living five years? Writing notes to put in your daughter's lunch box might not be the first thing that comes to mind. Yet that act is the focus of Garth Callaghan's book, *Napkin Notes: Make Lunch Meaningful and Life Will Follow*. Callaghan has faced down cancer four times since 2011, but his true anguish is the thought of leaving his beloved daughter Emma, who was twelve at the time of his initial diagnosis.

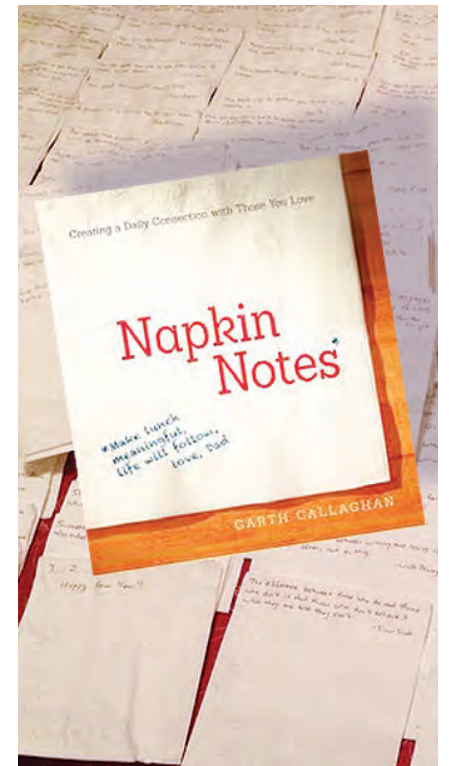
The main focus of this quick read, which Callaghan wrote in a mere 80 days, is not cancer but the way he has used “napkin notes” to connect with his daughter. Callaghan has packed Emma a handwritten note on a napkin in her lunch since she was a second grader. He has calculated he will need 826 notes in order for Emma to have one every day until she graduates from high school, and he is stockpiling them in the event that he does not beat the odds. At the time of the publication of *Napkin Notes*, he had completed 740 of them.

Samples of the quotes he has used are sprinkled throughout the book, along with major life lessons he wants to impart to her, such as “become a lifelong learner,” “learn basic car functions,” and “don't eat ice cream unless it's your favorite flavor.”

*“When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.”*

—American proverb

Callaghan's premise is that we can all use some napkin notes in our lives, and he uses the book as a platform for inviting readers to reach out to their loved ones through handwritten notes. The end of the book contains many thoughtful ideas for those who feel intimidated by a blank sheet of paper (or napkin), including how to write to a child who might be embarrassed to find a note at



school, how to find good quotes and how to make your writing personal.

*“Dear Emma,  
Make your life story worth telling.  
Love, Dad.”*

Callaghan, who lives in Glen Allen with his wife Lissa, and Emma, hopes to be one of the eight percent who survives his cancer, and despite the grim diagnosis, his book has an upbeat, positive tone. The main theme—we need to connect regularly with those we love—bears repeating, since most of us live as though we have all the time in the world to reach out to others. As Callaghan says, “This book is a call. To wake up. Connect. Share your feelings. Make that phone call. Write that note. Because I know all too well the fragility of life and how important it is to take the time to connect with those we love while we're still here, while we still can.”

Words to live by, I believe. Now where's that pack of napkins? I have some notes to write. **NIJ**

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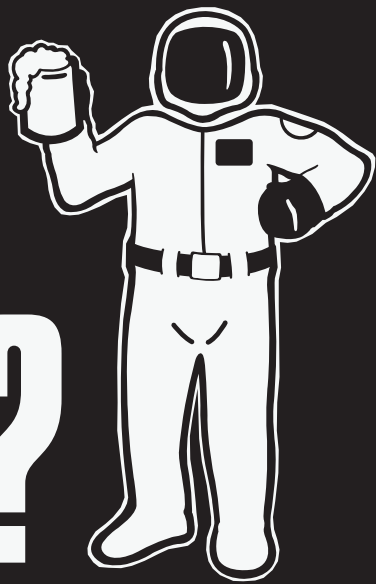
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# Melvin Major

## FATHERS & CHILDREN

### ARISTOTLE SAID IT BEST: "NATURE ABHORS A VACUUM."

Whenever there is a void in our lives we fill it, consciously or otherwise. Too often, people try to fill that hole with anything that's available, things that can create a deeper hole, a hungry mouth that demands to be fed but regardless what and how much you feed it, it is never sated, for it is an abyss, a vast yawning gap, without end. But sometimes, if we're lucky enough, the very thing that replaces the emptiness is what we needed all along and we can actually become the very person that was missing from our own life. Through that transformation we are then able to fill the voids in others and become truly human.

Melvin Major sits at his desk in the rear office at Fin & Feather, the last independently owned full-line pet store in the region where customer service is flawless, where all sales associates have deep knowledge of the products they sell, which are generally less expensive than they are at the big boxes or grocery stores.

Melvin's beard and hair are white and his eyebrows form perfect arches like circumflex accents above his eyes. He is telling me about the Lakeside of his youth. There were three grocery stores, two full-service hardware stores, three pharmacies, two of which housed lunch counters, and an array of other shops and restaurants. It was a village unto its own, a sort of Mayberry—slow-paced, easy going, and everyone knew one another.

He grew up in his grandmother's house where he still lives today, just ninth-tenth of a mile from the front door of Fin & Feather. They kept chickens and ducks, guinea fowl and rabbits, and the back yard was filled with gardens. "We had it all," says Melvin. A man who lived across the street raised chickens from chicks all the way up to broilers and at any one time might have as many as ten thousand chickens in coops he kept behind his house.

Melvin's household was made up of his mother, grandmother, uncle, and, of course Melvin. But his father was not there. He had left his wife while she was pregnant and returned to his home in New Jersey. Melvin would not see this man until many years later. "I didn't know my biological father until I turned eighteen," he says. "I can't really describe how it was. It was nice to meet him but it was no Eureka moment. I saw him four or five times after that

"And she would take a lot of the kids under her wing and take them to her house for dinner. She was one of the most memorable teachers I ever had.

She played a big role she in my life. She taught me and a lot of other people the right way to do things. She showed us the right way."

After high school graduation, still working part-time at the pet shop,



and there was never really any bond."

Just shy of his fifteenth birthday, Melvin applied for a part-time job at Fin & Feather. He was hired to work weekends and began learning the pet shop business. "It was the closest job I could find within walking distance from home," he says. "The only other choices were working for the drug store delivering prescription on your bicycle, or for the grocery stores bagging."

He took to business like a swordtail to water. While still in high school he met a woman, a teacher named Mrs. Humphries, who taught graphic arts and mechanical drawing. "She was from a relatively well-off family and very well educated," he remembers.

Melvin began attending RPI where he studied general business. And then the former owner of Fin & Feather offered to sell the business and Melvin bought it. "It was only 2,000 square feet at the time," he says. "We are now a little over 7,000 square feet. I have owned it for the past 45 years."

In those intervening years, hundreds of young men and young women have worked at Fin & Feather where they found more than steady employment. They found a second home.

After Melvin purchased the property at 5200 Lakeside Avenue, which now houses the Pond Center, he began a ritual that lasted for about twenty

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN  
PHOTOS REBECCA D'ANGELO

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years. "It was originally a house and the building was built onto the front of it as part of a business for the fellow who owned the house," he says. "I used to cook breakfast for the employees there on Saturday and Sunday mornings. It was just part of a perk. I enjoyed cooking and fixing breakfast and giving the employees a chance to get together and just relax before they came to work. One year I cooked an entire Thanksgiving dinner for an employee and his friend that couldn't get away to go home for Thanksgiving. I made soups and stews and barbeque, a big crockpot of stuff so they could eat on it during the day throughout the week."

And it that same house, on the second floor, Melvin created an apartment with two-bedrooms and a bath. "I've let our employees who were college students and needed a place to stay live there. To all my employees I've always expressed how important it is to get a good education and when they started school I would work around their college schedules."

When I ask him why, he grins and uses words he might have heard from his high school teacher, Mrs. Humphries.



"Because it's the right thing to do," Melvin says. "Sometime people don't have advantages that they need and it's just the right thing to do to give them an advantage. I think it helped some of them. It certainly gave them an opportunity to get ahead. And many of them they did." Among those who have worked for Melvin over the years are men and women who are now doctors and lawyers, teachers and engineers.

A few of them even started their own

pet shops. Mark Maphis, who came to work at Fin & Feather as a high school kid, remained working at the store for 25 years. "He lived in the house here while he was going to college," says Melvin. "He lived there afterwards while he was working here and only moved out when he got married and they bought a house." Mark later went on to found Fin & Feather of Ashland, which is not in any way affiliated with Fin & Feather Pet Center in Lakeside.

He pauses when I ask him if he taught all these young people valuable life lessons. He slowly shakes his head. "I don't know that they've learned anything from me directly," he says. "I think they've learned how life can treat you and what you can accomplish in life if you work at it. I don't feel that I'm an instrument of teaching; I feel like I've facilitated their ability to learn."

Melvin does tell me that any time one of his long-term employees leaves the shop, he feels a certain pang. "They become part of the family and when they leave it's like a child leaving your home," he says. "It is hard, but it's also normal."

Periodically one of his old employees does return for a visit. "I see a few of them," says Melvin. "Just recently there was a boy that worked here in the mid-seventies. He's been down in North Carolina for years, raised a family down there, and he was coming through town on business and stopped in the store out of the clear blue just to say hi and talk about old times. I liked that. In all the years I've owned Fin & Feather I've never had a bad kid." He smiles at his own words.

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When I ask if he has any regrets, Melvin says, "I've led a good life. I've managed to run a successful business. I've kept a roof over my head. I think we all could say we'd like to change some things, but it's petty. My one regret is not having kids of my own."

One of Melvin's many "kids" enters the office, and as Melvin exits, I begin talking with him. His name is Darrell Perkins and he is taking over ownership of Fin & Feather. Like Melvin, Darrell came to work at Fin & Feather when he was fifteen years old. He continued working there when he studied finance at VCU where he earned a degree. "I've worked in this shop half of my life," he says. "Even during college I worked forty-plus hour weeks here. When I graduated I didn't really want to leave."

The reason for this was Melvin Major. "He's great, probably the nicest guy you'll ever meet in your life," Darrell says. "He's like a second father to me. He lets you learn the hard way. He won't come out and tell you, 'This is how it needs to be done.' He'll kind of let you do it on your. He'll give you advice and you can either use it or not."

Darrell remembers a few years back when he wanted to try doing of online advertising. "That didn't pan out and Melvin was right from the get go and it didn't work at all and it was a waste of money and that makes you think twice," he says.

More than a boss to him, Melvin has been Darrell's confidante. "I would come to him with any problem I ever had, even if was personal," he says. "Any problem at all and I would come and talk to him. When my wife was pregnant with our daughter he was the first person I told. I told him before I even told my parents. I think very highly of Melvin and I don't know how much he knows that."

What Darrell does know is his good fortune in having connected with Melvin in the first place. "I don't know how it happened," he says. "It just kind of formed and developed and he put a lot of trust in me and I'm very, very grateful for it."

He considers taking over the store in its entirety. "These are some big shoes to fill," Darrell says. "I've been pretty much running everything from day

to day for the last three years. Buying the store is in the works. There is no rush. It's a gradual thing. But I can tell you this: Melvin will be here forever. I'll probably have a La-Z-Boy up front when he needs it and he'll be just sitting right there and saying hi to everybody. He loves seeing the people and talking with them. And they love talking with him."

When I talk with Melvin later and mention the possibility of retirement he shakes his head. "My health is steady so I don't want to stop working," he says. "I don't want to be the old fellow that sits at home and stares out the window. The business is handed over to Darrell, but I don't have plans to get out of it. As long as I'm able to come to work and see people I will always be here. Watching my customers grow up has been a good part of my life. I mean when you start seeing the second and now the third generation come in here, it's a source of pride. I think of my friends that I went to school with that have retired from corporate type businesses and they've enjoyed getting away from there. But the people that I know that I went to school with that

had their own businesses or were doctors or lawyers, they're still working. They don't want to retire. They have a relationship with the people they've served over the years."

Melvin strokes his beard and the underside of his chin and looks to the future for Fin & Feather and the thriving business community that has re-emerged in Lakeside. "Despite the way the world's going with the internet and big boxes I think small businesses of all types are going to survive," he says. "Because there're always going to be people that want personal service and want to see, feel and touch what they're buying." He mentions Early Bird Biscuit Company & Bakery that opened just up the street this past summer. "It's phenomenal," he says. "You go in there and the owner's always smiling. He's happy; his staff is happy. And I get a tickle out of it. They get so many clients in there on Saturday that the owner stands outside, takes the order, goes inside and brings stuff back out. Independently owned businesses treat customers like humans."

And their employees like members of the family. **NE**

# Diamond DOG HOUSE

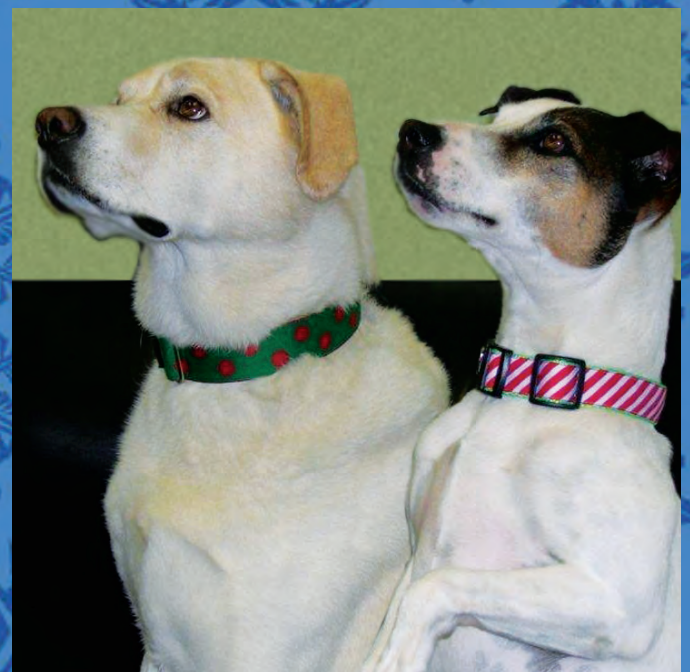
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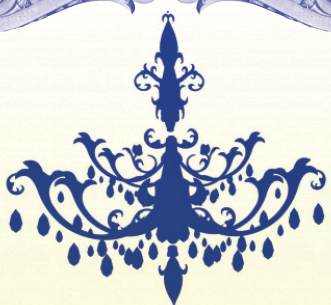
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Open Letter to Dr. Dana T. Bedden,  
Richmond Public School Superintendent

Dear Dr. Bedden,

As you approach the first anniversary of your hire as Richmond Public School Superintendent, I must thank you for your hard work and that of your staff.

By now, I am sure you have realized that you have not only “stepped up,” but also “stepped into” what can be most kindly described as a “hot mess.” It is a sad fact of human nature that folks love to talk about the need for change and accountability, but once it starts happening, they get afraid and invariably some start screaming like weenies roasting over an open fire. They also tell lies and spread rumors that have no basis in reality.

You and your staff deserve praise. Despite the many frustrations and distractions of the past year, you have kept your eyes on the prize and you are bringing much-needed change to our city schools. You, former interim Superintendent Jonathan Lewis, a majority of the members of School Board and your staff, have cleaned house and brought increased professionalism, transparency and team work to the challenge of fixing our broken school system. Some noteworthy accomplishments include:

- aligning and updating the curriculum plan with Virginia Department of Education guidelines when it was discovered that the former Superintendent Yvonne Brandon and her assistant, Victoria Oakley, never bothered to update the curriculum’s academic plan;
- placing the RPS check registry online for all to see where the money is going;
- tackling the facilities issue;
- adopting a zero-based budget;
- working with Richmond’s growing Hispanic citizens to not only improve academic performance, but to address issues of bullying in our schools;
- working with people in the disabilities community to improve educational outcomes for ALL children;
- bringing a new hiring method for administrators that involves a panel process as opposed to simply hiring someone to placate someone’s cousin, uncle, brother or sister (CUBS) request;
- insisting that the budget include money for musical instruments, band uniforms and arts equipment.

Please know that your efforts are much appreciated.

Stay strong. Allow me to share a small story with you about something that happened during my first election campaign in the hope that you, your staff and the School Board members who are working with you to bring change will take comfort and be inspired. Two former School Board members and others started making telephone calls to various African-American leaders who had endorsed me in the campaign accusing me of being a racist, a redneck and someone who did not care for black children. One of my campaign supporters told me I should take out an advertisement refuting the accusations. Being new to politics, I was unsure of what I needed to do. Consequently, I asked my good friend, mentor and Civil Rights lawyer and legend, the late Oliver W. Hill, for his advice.

He said that I should feel flattered that my opponent and his friends had realized that they could not defeat me with the truth, therefore they were spreading lies to undermine me. He told me to keep my “eyes on the prize” and never relent to lowering myself to address their concerns. He was right.

Best wishes and many thanks,

Carol A.O. Wolf

Richmond Public School Board member [2002-2008]

## RAINBOW MINUTES

### The Christmas Special

**O**NE MAGAZINE was the first gay publication with a national circulation. Its first issue was published in January 1953.

The December 1954 issue cover sported an illustration of Santa Claus wearing high heels, and floating in the air surrounded by jingle bells and snowflakes.

Inside the magazine, short stories of contest winners were printed, with a list of the winners. First place went to Jody Shotwell, who wrote “The Gateway.” She received a \$25 cash prize. Also in the issue was a special holiday rate for gift subscriptions: two subscriptions for \$4 mailed in a plain unsealed envelope or two subscriptions for \$6, mailed first class and sealed. Single issues sold for 25 cents.

### Alan Turing—Computer Genius

Alan Turing was born in London on June 23, 1912. This year, 2012, marks the 100th anniversary of his birth. Turing studied mathematics at King’s College and wrote an important article called “On Computable Numbers,” which provided the foundation for today’s digital computers. A year later, he came to the U. S. and earned his Ph.D. in mathematics at Princeton.

Upon returning to England, he worked at the British Code and Cypher School, and helped invent the machine that deciphered the Nazi War Code. This

accomplishment directly contributed to the victory over Germany in World War II.

Turing never felt his sexuality was something to hide. Yet in 1952, he was convicted for the crime of homosexuality and lost his security clearance. He was forced to undergo chemical castration in an attempt to cure his homosexual urges.

Two years later he took his own life, rejected by the very country he helped save during the war.

### The Groovy Guy Contest

And just who was the grooviest guy in Los Angeles in 1968? That was settled at the Groovy Guy Contest. Sponsored by the Los Angeles Advocate and the gay bar, The Hayloft, the local contest sought to find the most attractive male by looks, build and other “Groovy Guy characteristics.”

Other bars would hold their own Groovy Guy Contest and enter their winner in the gala Groovy Guy pageant on August 19. At the gala, each aspiring Groovy Guy paraded before the judge twice, first in a bathing suit and then in blue jeans and tee shirt.

The first contest drew seven contestants. About 150 people paid \$2 each to attend the gala contest held in the Hayloft’s parking lot, since the bar itself was too small to hold the crowd.

And the winner was 23-year-old Danny Combs, from Long Beach, California. He was described as a fairly muscular young man with a 28-inch waist, stood 5 feet 9 inches tall and weighed 160 pounds. Other assets included blue-green eyes, a warm, ready smile, and “other things.” Those “other things” were revealed in nude photographs of each contestant contained in the magazine.

Combs was sponsored by The Patch, a bar that had just been raided by the cops two nights before. Combs won a Groovy Guy Trophy, a trip to San Francisco with a night at the Ramrod and a \$25 gift certificate to a local clothing store.

The runner up, Dave Waldor, won a Polaroid camera and a dinner for two. 



**The Rainbow Minute** is produced by Judd Proctor and Brian Burns and can be heard every weekday at 7:59am, 12:29pm and 4:59pm on WRIR—97.3 fm in Richmond, Virginia and webcast at [wrir.org](http://wrir.org). It’s also heard internationally on over 200 stations.



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## CALENDAR

### Music Nights at Stir Crazy



Kevin Caffrey

All shows run on Thursday nights from 7:30-9:30 pm

#### JANUARY 8, KEVIN CAFFREY

Kevin Caffrey fuses elements of rock, folk, and synth-pop to create a melodic brand of emotional, heartfelt music.

#### JANUARY 15, ROBERT MONTGOMERY

Robert Montgomery's rock/blues-based music featuring acoustic and electric guitars; slide; mandolin and the occasional didgeridoo - infused with a good dose of rock and roll.

#### FEBRUARY 5, NATHAN HESS


Nathan Hess' original music has been described as "blues/folk tracks (that) are an in-depth listen in Americana."



### Quilts For Pokes at Stir Crazy Café

**S**TIR CRAZY CAFÉ is proud to host the 4th annual quilt sale to benefit the Potomac Valley Pekingese Rescue. Throughout the month of December, the café is displaying quilt hangings and aprons. Each beautifully detailed quilt hanging, handmade and donated by

Harrisonburg resident Eve Derstine, is available for purchase.

Profits from the sale will benefit the Potomac Valley Pekingese Rescue, its mission to save Pokes from Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina and West Virginia. All donations received by this organization are used for the rehabilitating rescued Pokes. For more information visit [potomacpekes.org](http://potomacpekes.org). 

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