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August 2020

WILLIAMSBURG'S

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VOL. 14, ISSUE 8

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## Tourism Bill Thompson







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Meredith Collins, Publisher

The longer we live the more we learn that people, trends, opportunities, and challenges come and go. For businesses and a community that is heavily invested in tourism, being in tune to the comings and goings of people, trends, opportunities and challenges is critical. Our economic diversity is both extensive and impressive, entertaining tourists and knowing when and how to best entertain them is at the very heart of what we do well.

That is where the people we have interviewed for this issue come in. I think you will agree that the business owners and managers, community leaders, and history lovers we feature here get a real kick out of showing off the best of what we have to those who visit our area. Whether they are showcasing oddities or marketing the Historical Triangle to businesses or lovingly restoring a family homestead, they all emphasize they get the most out of what they do through interacting with people. A thread of both teaching and learning, and giving and receiving, runs through every story. Its also clear that there is as much for a local to enjoy as there is for a visitor.

The times we are in continue to make things challenging for every business and tourism is no exception, of course. A customer is a customer, so it makes sense that those who are in business are happy to get a new customer wherever they can find one. Tourism is vital to our local economy, but when fewer people are visiting the area, business owners have to develop new strategies to keep moving forward. How long has it been since you visited Ripley's Believe It Or Not! ? Have you thought about taking part in an evening of axe throwing? What about go cart rides for the kids? Aside from a little adventure and a lot of fun, you are certain meet a few of your neighbors. [NDN](#)

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# BILL THOMPSON



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

# Good Things Happen

## Believe It or Not

By Wheston Chancellor Grove

Believe it or not, there are people who love what they do. Bill Thompson is one of them. As manager of Ripley's Believe It or Not!, located on Richmond Road, customers make Bill's day. In fact, as luck would have it, 10 years ago it was a customer at his former job who told him that Ripley's was hiring.

Some young readers may not remember, but once upon a time, not so long ago, stores devoted solely to renting and selling DVDs and VHS tapes existed. Movie lovers actually had to leave their house and drive to the nearest video outlet to check out tapes. Bill was the manager of Blockbuster Video in Gloucester where he grew up. One day, in 2010, a custom-



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er dropped in the video store and mentioned she had heard about a fun job opportunity at Ripley's. Sensing the advent of a new era and inevitable closure of Blockbuster chains, Bill's interest in additional part-time work was piqued. He pursued the lead. Within a week, he was called in for an interview.

The manager of Ripley's Believe It or Not!, Scott Hart, "hired me on the spot," Bill says. For about a year, Bill worked both jobs. Scott was great, working with him to accommodate his schedule whenever he could. In 2011, as video stores started closing, Bill received the call that the Blockbuster he worked at would soon be shutting its doors.

Having made an excellent impression at Ripley's Believe It or Not!, Bill was promoted to supervisor in 2011. Then, in 2012, he became Scott's assistant. Within another year, Scott knew he had found a trustworthy replacement for his position. In 2013, Scott handed over the title of General Manager to his protégé. Scott moved to Texas to work for a different Ripley's franchise as an operations manager.

For the last seven years, Bill has remained

the General Manager of Ripley's Believe It or Not! Much like Robert Ripley, the founder of this interesting tourist attraction, Bill happened upon his success by applying his skills and finding true pleasure in what he does.

There are only 13 states in America that boast a Ripley's odditorium. An 'odditorium' is exactly what it sounds like, a museum-like auditorium with odd exhibits, a theater and strange facts. With the exception of California, Florida and Maryland, the other 10 states have just one Ripley's odditorium.

Williamsburg proudly hosts the only museum in the state of Virginia. The oldest, located in St. Augustine, Florida, opened in 1950 shortly after creator Robert Ripley's death. Worldwide, there are currently 31 museums in operation and our hometown is lucky enough to be represented on the Ripley's map. Originally marketed in 1918 as Champs and Chumps, it was a single spread sports cartoon illustrated by Ripley in The New York Globe newspaper, featuring amazing athletic feats and bizarre facts. Interest and readership spread like wildfire.

By 1919, Ripley changed the name to what it is today. The feature received syndication and thrived during the Great Depression and throughout WWII. Eventually odditoriums opened up, expanding from print to viewable collections. In the 1990s and 2000s, a television show aired.

Ripley was meticulous about the veracity of his collections and facts, working closely with his researcher, Norbert Pearlroth, for several decades. The two confirmed all stories and specimens were legitimate. A world traveler, having visited over 200 countries, Ripley ensured his audience received the truth even when they found it difficult to believe. Ripley created waves in 1927 when he declared that Charles Lindbergh was the 67th person to make a transatlantic flight. Though readers were incredulous and upset, he was absolutely correct!

Williamsburg's odditorium opened in 2006. It has over 11 themed galleries with more than 350 exhibits, including a 4D theater and laser race.

"As a franchise, for the most part we will

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add an exhibit. Only on a rare occasion do we change out existing exhibits. Our corporate office is in Orlando. They have a warehouse with a bunch of different oddities." Every now and again, new artifacts circulate. Many artifacts have been added in the past 14 years to Williamsburg's odditorium.

Bill enjoys many things about his work. "What I enjoy the most are the customers, meeting different people, especially in the tourist season," Bill says. The odditorium is open every day except Christmas. "We don't have a lot of foot traffic like Atlantic City or some places. The people who come to our Ripley's more than likely plan the trip in advance. We have local and military discounts as well as coupons online and in magazines."

One of Bill's favorite exhibits at the odditorium is a comic book. "I love comic book movies," he says. However, there's something unusual about this copy. "It's a Marvel comic book that has some of the author's ashes mixed in with the ink, which is weird and cool at the same time."

Bill was born in New York. His mother re-

turned to Gloucester, Virginia, when he was about two to be closer to family. They've retained those family ties ever since. Bill has visited a few Ripley's locations, but not as many as he'd like.

When thinking about his future, Bill is optimistic. "I definitely feel as though I will be here for the long haul. I love, love working here and what I do. The franchise owners take incredibly good care of me and my staff, especially during this whole pandemic. The owner called me and said, 'no matter what happens in the next coming months, you will be fine. We're still going to take care of you and the staff.' It was reassuring, and we got through it. We're open and we're good. They were true to their word. This is probably by far the best job I have ever had as much as I loved Blockbuster."

Ninety percent of what Bill does is behind the scenes. His work ethic is simple but solid. "I work the place like it's my own." He oversees bookkeeping, human resources and advertising, just to name a few responsibilities. "The only thing I don't do, because I'm not good at it, is maintenance and IT related issues."

One thing Bill sometimes misses is being on the frontline, daily, as he had been at Blockbuster. "As a manager back then, I got to see all the customers." With time commitments, being a manager at Ripley's doesn't allow him to be on the main floor too often.

Bill is upbeat and easily approachable as any manager ought to be. He knows his product and is thankful to have a job he loves and that keeps him in high spirits. In a way, he has Robert Ripley to thank for his current position.

What began 102 years ago as a fun circulation, transformed into a legacy and interactive franchise. When planning a vacation, check to see if a Ripley's odditorium is along the travel route. Ripley's Believe It or Not! continues to thrive the world over because it speaks to the innate curiosity within people.

Whether fascinating, macabre, or jaw-dropping, oddities never cease to entertain, unnerve and generate wonderment in the viewer. Bill Thompson knows that for people who want a memorable experience, they will find it at Ripley's Believe It or Not! There is something for everyone right in our own backyard. NDN



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## JANEY SAWYER



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

# Tourists Love the Bazaar

By Brandy Centolanza

When Janey Sawyer retired from her civil service job with the military more than a decade ago, her mother suggested she start collecting glassware from the Depression era as a hobby. This sideline would create a diversion for her during retirement. As she began exploring this new world, little did Janey know that it would lead to a second career as owner of Williamsburg Bazaar in the Williamsburg Premium Outlets.

"I never do anything halfway, so I bought a ton of glassware," Janey says. "I also started collecting old jewelry."

As Janey's fascination with old items grew, so did her bounty. When her assortment of glassware and jewelry became too large, Janey's husband, Danny, suggested she start reselling some of her pieces. Janey agreed, and she began operating out of a trailer at festivals and other

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events across the state. She then moved on to selling her treasures at a local shop in Williamsburg in 2018. A year later, she decided to open Williamsburg Bazaar, which relocated from the shopping center in Patriot Plaza to the Williamsburg Premium Outlets in September 2019.

Williamsburg Bazaar originated in part from Janey's desire to help others sell their own handcrafted, homemade or collection of items as well. "I became really interested in helping others start up their own businesses," she says.

Williamsburg Bazaar sells a variety of items that appeal to any shopper or collector. Currently, 54 vendors have booths at the shop with a waiting list of business owners eager for a space to begin selling their pieces.

"Right now, we have a family of four different vendors who sell things like refurbished furniture, signs, textiles like runners and placemats, flower arrangements and holiday decorations," Janey says. "They do some really cool things." Most vendors are from the Williamsburg area with a handful coming from Virginia Beach.

"Business has been fantastic since we've moved into the Outlets," she says. "I never expected this. I am so happy for our vendors." Tourists can often find unexpected treasures here and leave happy with a day's shopping.

Of course, like most businesses, the pandemic has put a damper on things. Some vendors had to bow out of the Bazaar, while other merchants have used the down time as an opportunity to help others in a time of need.

"Most vendors know that it isn't just about them but also about giving back to the community in which they live, and that makes me feel so good," Janey says. "We have very loyal vendors."

Vendors from Williamsburg Bazaar began making hand sanitizer, face masks, and gift baskets to help those impacted by the pandemic and state mandated shutdown orders.

"They found ways to keep busy during the pandemic," Janey says.

Eventually, business began to bounce back. So much so that Janey and her husband moved forward with the opening of a second location in Norge. They opened on Richmond Road in

the old Candle Factory Shopping Plaza in June. "It was not a spur of the moment thing," Janey says. "We'd been thinking about opening on that side of town for a long time because there really isn't anything there. We found a space for rent and then everything shut down."

During the pandemic and quarantine, Janey and her husband spent the time refurbishing the store, repainting and readying the business for when they could reopen. Currently 16 vendors operate out of the Norge location, which has been doing well despite pandemic concerns.

"We want this to be a relaxing place where people can eat and shop," she says. "It's been quite successful. I'm really glad we did it."

Janey spends her time rotating between both Bazaar locations throughout the week, assisting vendors wherever she can. She helps ensure booths are clean, fully stocked and inviting and appealing to customers, acting as a mentor to vendors who are new to this business or might need a little help once in a while.

"I try to help them with their displays so that they can catch a person's eyes," she says. "I also try to make sure that each display is different so

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that they all can make some money. I just love telling a new vendor when they make their first sale. I get so excited for them.”

Like many business owners, one of her favorite aspects of the job is interaction with the visitors to her store.

“We love talking to the customers,” she says. “My husband likes to take the time to explain who each vendor is and what they do. He has so much pride for them. We get a lot of positive feedback about how friendly everyone is here.”

One of the requirements for each vendor is that they work at the Williamsburg Bazaar a minimum of four hours a month.

“This is just as much their home here as it is mine, and I want them to feel that,” Janey says. “Working here gives them the opportunity to get to know the other vendors and what products they have in their booths. I think that is important. And their own booths actually do much better when they are here in the store.”

Most people who enter through the doors at Williamsburg Bazaar are tourists.

“We moved around a lot while in the military and also traveled a lot to different places

with our sons’ sports, so I am used to meeting a lot of different people,” Janey says. “I love talking to the tourists, relating to them and sharing a good laugh with them. We’ve met so many people in our lifetime.”

Janey and Danny Sawyer met in high school in Indiana. After high school, Danny joined the Army. Janey worked in civil service for both the Navy and the Army before retirement. The pair have two sons; Tony lives in Richmond, while David resides in Florida. They still have family in Indiana, as well, and return to their home state to visit whenever they can.

“We also like camping, but we don’t really have many hobbies anymore.” For Janey Sawyer, her hobby has turned into a life’s calling. “Right now, it is all about our stores.”

The couple have been a part of the Williamsburg fabric for the past 12 years and hope to continue to promote their vendors and grow their business.

“I like Williamsburg because of the people,” Janey says. “We have a great mix of people living and coming here, and we welcome everyone to come visit us.” NDN

## Next Door Neighbors

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# NIKKI MONTERO



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

# Hitting the Bullseye

## On Entertainment

By Caroline Johnson

For Nikki Montero, creating a new way to “throw” a party in Williamsburg is a dream turned into reality. After experiencing the relatively new entertainment phenomenon of axe throwing, she knew it was something she wanted to bring to her hometown. She wanted to offer a different kind of entertainment diversion

for tourists visiting the area, and locals. Ready for a change, she was used to reinventing herself at whatever duty station her family found themselves at, with a husband who is now retired Navy. This axe-throwing venture, though decidedly different from her previous job as a school nurse, felt right. “Williamsburg needed

something new, fun and different to do,” Nikki says. “This venture was one I could fully jump into.”

Once she made the decision, there was no turning back. A self-proclaimed competitive person, Nikki knew she would do whatever it took to bring Axe Republic to life. “From find-



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ing a place and getting a broker to creating my LLC and hiring an accountant, I started in March and by July had the key in my hand,” Nikki says. Their location in New Town is one Nikki can walk or bike to. Take a stroll past and you’ll see visitors with smiles on their faces, hear the sound of axes hitting wooden boards, and feel the energy Nikki has created here. “This location is ideal for people walking by, which is why I left all the windows intentionally clear,” Nikki says. “I wanted the axe throwing and people having a good time to do the advertising for itself. You really can’t get better advertising than that.”

During initial opening operations, Nikki spent time in Florida talking to people with similar businesses, working with the World Axe Throwing League for additional research. Physically, the building had to be completely gutted. Nikki relied on her best friend to help with the demolition and assembling the lanes. Everyone from the builder to her broker to the plumber wanted her to succeed, which gave her that next boost of energy she needed through the lengthy process of opening an entirely new and unique venue. “It was exhausting, and the sweat equity we put into this place made the opening day not just for me, but for everyone who had contributed to it,” Nikki says. “October 25, 2019 was an emotional day.”

Named with our area’s history and her family’s military background in mind, Axe Republic is all her own. “I knew my vision, how I wanted it to look, and how I wanted it to run.” Since opening day in October, Nikki’s vision has come to fruition. She created a place for people of all ages to enjoy time together in a way many haven’t before. While booking online or over the phone is encouraged to ensure a lane will be available, Axe Republic also accepts walk-ins depending on availability. Axe throwing lanes can be reserved for two to six people and come with everything needed for a great time.

Upon entering, visitors are assigned to an “Axpert” who leads the group through the proper techniques of axe throwing. Though it may seem daunting at first, it’s all about the technique, which the designated Axpert teaches. With each reservation, visitors get 75 minutes of training and throwing, making it the perfect entertainment to fit into any busy schedule. Whether on a date night, visiting from out of town or just trying to avoid the unexpected rain thanks to Virginia weather, Axe Republic offers a relief from the busy lives of her customers.

Axe Republic also includes a dining option. When creating the menu for Axe Republic, Nikki knew she wanted it to be something people could easily eat at the table at the end of their lane in between throws. She decided on offering air-fried classics like wings, loaded tater tots, onion rings and hot dogs. Along with these delicious bites, she added drink options for everyone, such as beer from Virginia Beer Company and local ciders to soda and tea.

Not only can patrons grab a bite during their visit, people can also stop by just to try the wings with homemade rubs or grab a drink before heading next door to the movies. With ample outdoor and indoor seating areas, Nikki hopes to make Axe Republic the perfect stop for any outing.

While it makes a great activity for friends, families and co-workers, Axe Republic also serves as the perfect venue for birthdays, bachelor and bachelorette parties or any other cause for celebration. In the future, Nikki hopes to add regular live music nights along with special events like glow in the dark throwing, which was a hit last year. She has also created college nights, offering a discount to college students, and an established axe throwing league.



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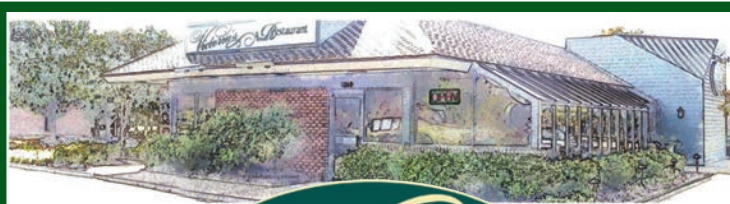
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Since opening day, Nikki has relished in the experiences she has been able to have as owner of Axe Republic. “Anytime I can sit back when it’s busy and see people laughing, singing along and ringing the bell, it’s what makes me smile,” Nikki says. “We even got to help a couple celebrate their anniversary in the winter, staying open late for them, playing their wedding song and giving them a board with their anniversary on it.” These types of moments show what Axe Republic is all about: creating a space that serves the people in our community.

“My mission is that everyone who comes through this door leaves their worries behind and enjoys themselves for 75 minutes,” Nikki says. “Nobody is on their phone, they’re high-fiving, making new friends and just enjoying time with other people of all generations.” Though this mission is accomplished through the unique entertainment and welcoming atmosphere Nikki has created, the heart of Axe Republic is much deeper than that. Before this venture, Nikki was a registered nurse, working as a school nurse for six years. Children, especially those in our community, are part of her passion.

She has chosen to make this part of her mission at Axe Republic, seeking opportunities to help with things like weekend backpack food projects and doing her part in helping children and families in our community who may need necessities like food. “Whatever capacity that Axe Republic can fill to help that need, that’s what I want our legacy to be.” Though she has lived all over the country, Nikki and her family have made their home here. “When people ask me where I’m from, I say Williamsburg now,” Nikki says. “We’ve been here for ten years, the longest station we’ve been at.” Outside of her time at Axe Republic, she enjoys going to Cape Charles, spending hours walking the beach collecting shells. Together with her mother, she created Oyster Culture, a small craft business making everything from handcrafted jewelry to wreathes.

Nikki’s husband, Eddie, works with Nikki raising their two children. CJ, just graduated from UVA, and Hannah is a sophomore at JMU. They have found many ways to enjoy Williamsburg during their time here. Nikki’s parents, Ron and Francine, live locally as well. Each of Nikki’s family members has supported her throughout this adventure, from helping her process her thoughts to the actual work of opening.

“Whatever I decided, I knew they would be there for me,” Nikki says. “Not a lot of people can say that in life.”

Like many local businesses, Axe Republic was hit hard by temporary closure due to the pandemic. Just four months after opening, they had to get creative. “I was never in the mindset that we weren’t going to reopen. I didn’t even let myself think that way.”

Community members and supporters helped through purchasing gift cards and buying t-shirts through the “Here for Good” campaign started by Parkway Printshop. They hosted a “brew-thru” to sell local beers they had gotten in before closing. In addition, Nikki Montero found ways to serve the local community, donating food and volunteering for Meals on Wheels with her daughter.

“The small businesses are here and in need of community support. We’re going to do our best to keep our doors open and be ready when everyone is ready to return and have a good time.” The entire team is prepared and willing to give the Williamsburg community a place to relax and enjoy themselves. For people new to axe throwing or the seasoned Axeper, Axe Republic hits the bullseye when it comes to entertainment in Williamsburg. NDN



## JIM JOLLY



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

# Bringing American History

TO LOCALS & VISITORS ALIKE

By Susan Williamson

Jim Jolly describes himself as “a history guy who loves to talk history,” making his position as one of two of Colonial Williamsburg’s Group Interpretation Supervisors an interesting and fulfilling job. Jim came to Colonial Williamsburg (CW) eight years ago, starting with a position in the orientation department, then moving into the school and groups department, before becoming a group supervisor two years ago. Prior to the pandemic, Jim’s job entailed planning and conducting specialty tours for groups which could range from a small family group to a conference or school group of up to approximately 26 individuals.

“We try to cap out at 26,” Jim says, “but if we have a class of 27 or 28, we could include them all.” When a group requests a private tour,

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they often request a specialty topic for their tour, such as “Religion in the 18th Century,” “The African American/Slave Experience” or a “Christmas Decoration” tour. He conducted a tour on the first topic for the Baptist Convention for Religious Freedom and the second for a family from his home state of New Jersey.

One year, a North Carolina Legal Conference booked a tour, and Jim was planning to take them to the courthouse and other judicial sites when they told him, “We’ve been dealing with law for days, we want to see something fun.” Participants enjoyed learning about candle-making, viewing livestock and seeing the Governor’s Palace.

Jim attributes his father’s love of history for his own enthusiasm for the subject. His specialty is American History. The Middlesex County, New Jersey native grew up frequently visiting historical areas in Pennsylvania and New Jersey such as Gettysburg and the Delaware River Crossing sites. He majored in history at Rutgers University and then completed a Master’s Degree in Education, also at Rutgers, before additional post graduate work at

Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro (MTSU), Tennessee. At MTSU, in addition to being a graduate student, he held a teaching position, and he discovered that he loved connecting with the college students he taught. He found an unusually high percentage of students put off taking history classes until their senior year because their earlier high school and middle school experiences had caused them to dread the subject. He decided he wanted to be the kind of teacher who inspired an interest in history in his students. He also taught at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. He completed an online Master’s Degree in History from American Military University, which is a partner with American Public University. Military affiliation is not required for either school.

After a divorce, Jim left Murfreesboro to relocate to Chattanooga, Tennessee where he worked for Eastern National, a nonprofit co-operating association which supports the interpretive, educational and scientific programs and services of the National Park System. There he met his wife, Amanda, a native of

Ohio with a passion for nature and the environment. The couple frequently visited Williamsburg in the winters and had relatives in northern Virginia, but did not want to live in that urban area. They decided to relocate to the Williamsburg area. Jim researched jobs and found openings at CW. Amanda works at York River State Park.

Jim and his wife purchased a home in the Norge-Croaker area three years ago, which they share with three cats, a goldfish and a White’s tree frog. Landscaping their new property has become an unexpected hobby. Another hobby is Jim’s Lego collection with a dedicated room in their home for his 1,000 mini-figures and buildings. They also enjoy traveling, visiting museums, attending concerts, hiking and biking. He says, “We love living out in the country but being so close to work, and we love the local libraries, especially the James City County Library, which is so close to us.” They enjoy the many outdoor activities available in the Williamsburg area, and the proximity to Richmond provides them with a city experience.

When Jim came to work at CW, he already



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knew he liked connecting with college-age students and adults over history. “What I didn’t know,” he says, “is how much I would enjoy interacting with younger students. I like seeing these kids light up when I talk about something.” Jim’s informal and enthusiastic presentations often appeal to middle school students. During one tour, he came across a former college student, a reconnection he enjoyed.

As in all tourism-related businesses, the pandemic has changed many day-to-day operations in Colonial Williamsburg, but not its purpose. Limited programming began on June 14 in accordance with Phase 2 guidelines. During the shutdown, Jim worked a certain number of hours per week on various projects. As re-opening continues, furloughed employees are gradually being called back to work. Designing virtual tours and creating more of an online presence is a way for CW to continue its mission, despite the decrease in tourism. Hospitality venues such as Williamsburg Lodge are re-opening according to demand.

“Many of our historic buildings are very small, so we must limit capacity inside. We

do more interpretation outside where there is room to social distance. In larger buildings, attendance is limited to ten people every ten minutes with all interpretation conducted outside. Since many of the hands-on activities are forbidden by state guidelines, and many facilities are too small for social distancing, a variety of tradespeople rotate through open areas such as outside the armory.” Zoom and Microsoft Meeting platforms are used to create continuing support for teachers. As teachers work to create quality remote learning, CW’s living history museum offerings become ever more valuable. A founding father interpreter recently connected via Zoom with a classroom in Hawaii. Scheduling with schools is particularly challenging, due to uncertainties about dates and conditions of re-opening.

A map on the CW website, [www.colonial-williamsburg.org](http://www.colonial-williamsburg.org), shows where different outdoor activities will be held each day and gives updates of current open buildings and areas, as well as programming. Many aspects of CW have been restructured so that doors, faucets and other high traffic touchpoints are now

touchless and staff have undergone extensive training. Employees conduct enhanced cleaning protocols in all CW owned buildings. Staff members wear masks. Guests are required to wear masks inside buildings and are strongly encouraged to do so outside as well.

Welcome zones are set up to explain the new procedures, to remind guests to wear masks and social distance. Although as of July the carriages are not taking passengers, the horses and carriages are out on the streets with the drivers available to talk about colonial means of transportation and answer questions about the horses and vehicles.

Jim says, “Having the mile by half-mile area of Colonial Williamsburg as my office is wonderful. I’ve been with CW for eight years, the longest I’ve worked at any job. My past experience has been to stick with a job until it’s not fun anymore, and that hasn’t happened here. History is my passion.”

As visitors return to Williamsburg and online educational opportunities increase, Jim Jolly’s passion will continue to bring American history alive for people of all ages. NDN



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# VONCILE GILBREATH



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

## Greater Williamsburg is Open for Business

By Harmony Hunter

On the surface, Williamsburg might seem like a town designed to run on tourism. And it's true; from mighty rivers to splendid battlefields and roller coasters that kiss the clouds, there is a richness of experience that draws folks here and keeps them coming back.

But Voncile "Von" Gilbreath, Executive Director of the Greater Williamsburg Partnership, knows that for a town to thrive, it needs a steady undercurrent of multiple business streams, so that no single aspect of the economy carries the welfare of the community alone. It's called eco-

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conomic diversification, and Von thrives in its creation.

When she took the helm at the Greater Williamsburg Partnership in October 2019, she accepted its mission “to market the Greater Williamsburg region as a preferred business location; facilitate new business investment and high-wage job creation; enhance industry diversification efforts and overall increase economic prosperity for citizens in the communities of Williamsburg, James City County and York County.”

The translation of this high-minded mission? Williamsburg is not just great for tourism; it has a lot to offer high-tech business in some unexpected sectors. As a “preferred business location,” Greater Williamsburg is an entrepreneurial sweet spot that allows investors to draw labor, skilled talent, sophisticated transportation infrastructure and working space from the same well.

Von likes to point out that some of the same factors have made Williamsburg a premier location for entrepreneurs for the last 400 years: our strategic location between two metropolitan areas to move people and product; our close proximity to the Port of Virginia; our access to multiple airports; our educational partners William & Mary and Thomas Nelson Community College; and a skilled workforce.

Current events have underscored the importance of not placing all bets on the tourism sector. The COVID-19 crisis has hobbled many of the visitation workhorses that budgets have banked on for vital tax revenue. But while the virus pandemic is new, it always has been good economic practice to encourage multiple business branches. Whether through a natural disaster or a year of bad weather, on-the-ground tourism can be vulnerable to a variety of setbacks.

However, Greater Williamsburg was not caught completely unaware by this year’s health crisis. Von says, “One of the things that COVID-19 has shown us once again, we do have to lessen our dependency on tourism. The good thing is, we have this targeted industry analysis that gives us a strategy for how to focus that on the sectors that are predisposed to generate economic diversification to our sub-region.”

In addition to long-term plans to strengthen the economic undergirding of the town, the Greater Williamsburg Partnership was on hand for immediate relief in the early stages of COVID-19 closings and limitations that put many businesses at a disadvantage. The Greater Williamsburg Partnership worked tirelessly to secure some relief for those businesses most affected. The creation of the Greater Williamsburg Small Business Relief Fund launched May 4, 2020. It saw an increase from \$10,000 to \$563,000 in just 30 days, with seed funding provided by the three Economic Development Authorities: City of Williamsburg, James City County and York County in a true regional effort.

Planning for future economic stability in a plurality of markets, Von has steadily endeavored to strengthen conditions for business growth in five sectors identified for their potential to exploit the unique assets of the Greater Williamsburg Region. They are: advanced materials and components, food and beverage, professional and technical services, tourism, and defense. Some of the team’s farther-reaching efforts have taken them as far Germany to court business in specialized manufacturing.

COVID-19 has made efforts like these trips overseas especially timely. Von says, “What COVID-19 has exposed on the US level drills all the way down to the state level and also to Greater Williamsburg. We, in the US

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and each state and region, need to also look at re-shoring opportunities, bringing back critical manufacturing and operations that have been overseas. If we can bring some of that back now to the US, we control more of our global supply chain." Williamsburg is an attractive site for many of these endeavors, boasting a sophisticated transportation infrastructure and the skilled workforce produced by regional educational institutions.

Pairing Williamsburg's technology, transportation, and talent assets bears fruit for manufacturer and location at once. A success Von celebrates is the deal with tech manufacturer Navien. She says, "Shortly after my arrival, James City County Economic Development engaged the Greater Williamsburg Partnership to help close a deal to locate Navien to our region. Navien will invest \$77.5 million and create 180 new jobs in James City County and Greater Williamsburg over the next 3 years. Navien will establish its first U.S. operation and produce water heaters and boilers. This project is the personification of economic diversification."

New business is critical to a healthy economy, but there is good news for older properties and investors, too. Von celebrates the exciting opportunities presented by the July 2019 award of a \$600,000 Brownfields grant from the Environmental Protection Agency. "This is a great tool that we have been awarded," Von says. "We can go out, and if there is a perception that a property built in the sixties might have concerns about, for example, lead-based paint or asbestos, we can demystify that through testing."

The grant does more than provide testing for toxic substances. "We can correct issues on a property and permit it. Therefore, if a property is underutilized, now we can clear up any of those myths or misperceptions and get those properties marketed to particular investors or developers. If there is a regional opportunity to have synergy and re-energize or revitalize properties, this is a great tool that we have been awarded."

Clearing the reputations of older, underused properties can be the key to enticing new investors and new businesses to put down roots in sectors that are ripe for revitalization. Von is excited about the potential this has to restore useful life to some of Greater Williamsburg's empty properties. Entire communities can be buoyed by the cascading effects of reinvestment in fallow fields. "We can get those properties that are underperforming back to performing at a higher level in generating more tax revenue for the communities at large," Von says.

The Greater Williamsburg Partnership knows that for these efforts to succeed, all the region's citizens need an equal share in the opportunities that new business brings. Von's philosophy on including minority business and creating jobs is rooted in fairness. She says, "It is all of our responsibility to create an environment of economic equity where minority businesses can thrive and diversity and inclusion is an organic element of our business community."

Voncile Gilbreath's investment in Williamsburg goes beyond the professional drive to see a region poised for scale-up growth taking full advantage of existing assets and new partnerships. It's also her home. An avid long-distance cyclist, she enjoys seeing the scenery of rivers and trails from the two-wheeled perspective. More than that, she says, "The people bind us to the area and the welcoming community. We love the natural beauty and history of the Williamsburg area and the willingness to innovate and try new concepts and models." NDN



# ANGIE KANE



## A WORK IN PROGRESS

By Ashley Smith

Lisa W. Cumming Photography

Nestled in a gentle curve of Jolly Pond Road sits an unspoiled natural wonderland that has been preserved and stewarded by generations of the same family. Jolly's Mill Pond and the accompanying 100 acres of tree farm have been in the Kane family since the 1950s. The current owners, Angie and Bill Kane, are working to restore the antebellum home situated on the property and provide a rustic retreat for tourists. Although visitors are able to use the land and house for events, it is still a work in progress.

Angi Kane calls herself "Brooklyn's acciden-

tal farmer," which is also the title of her podcast about Jolly's Mill Pond. The sobriquet fits the energetic woman whose ownership of this property has been a journey of discovery and growth. Angi grew up in Brooklyn, the quintessential city girl, and she never imagined she would become a farmer. As a young girl she would take the train into Manhattan, and as she recalls, not once did she imagine she would leave the city. She began a career as a web developer and even did freelance work in marketing while still in New York City.

In 2005, Bill decided he wanted his children

to experience the freedom and unrestrained opportunity to explore the woods as he had done as a child when the property belonged to his great uncle and aunt. He and Angie began to make regular trips from New York to help his father with the property.

In 2011, the Kanes moved to Chesterfield County, Virginia and became the third generation of Kane family stewards of the Jolly Mill Pond and farm, including 100 acres of land, the 50-acre pond, and the house that sits on the property. Although the farm needed quite a bit of work, the immediate needs of the family



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came first. Bill's father had died and left quite a few antiques, many of which were stored at the house at Jolly's Mill Pond. Angi describes the house as being "completely lined with furniture and sideboards." The kitchen brimmed with tchotchkes hanging from the rafters, making the room feel like a closet. Once Bill gave her the go-ahead to begin sorting through the household goods, she jumped in with both feet, diving into the world of antiques and through trial and error, learned more than she ever thought possible about 17th and 18th century antiques. She held yard sales at first, but eventually held booths at the Williamsburg Antique Mall under the company name of Church & Snyder. There were some pieces that she kept as part of the estate, including a glider from the 1940s, and memorabilia from the home's time as a hunting and fishing club. Over the doorpost of the living room hung three photos of sportsmen from the past with their trophy catches. "That is not my thing," Angi says, "but every outdoorsman who comes to the house stops right there to admire them, and if Bill hadn't insisted on keeping them, I'd have passed those on as well."

Despite the work to sort through the assets of the estate, the Kanes settled their three teenagers in school and established new careers in Virginia. Bill's background in geographic information systems eventually led him to a position with Colonial Williamsburg, while Angi continued to rehome and restore antiques.

As the bulk of the inventory began to dwindle, however, Angi focused on a childhood dream. "As a child, I always wanted to be a filmmaker, but I didn't have the confidence to do it."

After her experience with antique dealing, Angi felt that if she could succeed there, she could take on filmmaking. She joined various filmmaking groups in the local area and began to flex her marketing skills in that arena. The company she established to help market the antiques, Church and Snyder, became a filmmaking venture for small businesses and nonprofits. She has been the producer and director of "Discover Evergreen," a documentary on a historic African American cemetery, and her current project is a documentary in partnership with PBS on public housing, titled "Heard." As part of her investment in

small businesses, she also hosts marketing and branding workshops for business owners. Due to Angi's efforts, Church and Snyder was recognized as Chesterfield County's 2018 Small Business of the Year.

Although Angi has found success as a filmmaker and continues to pursue projects, much of her time and that of her entire family, is focused on the tree farm. "There's an environmental and a family legacy here that took generations to shape and our focus is on building on that legacy for the next several generations."

Angi and Bill are committed to authentic yet practical restoration of the house. Their desire to retain the character of the home juxtaposed with the need to install modern amenities such as indoor plumbing and air conditioning has led to an incredible depth of research. Every decision is weighed and measured with the greatest deliberation and care.

For an example, Angi points to the original horsehair plaster on the walls and the patches of exposed timbers. As she talks about the possibility of restoring the original plaster, she asks, "If we want to restore it, can we find someone trained in this technique? How long

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will it last and how difficult will it be to maintain?" Another example that stands out is the juxtaposition of the home's wi-fi connection combined with the lack of running water.

The weight of these decisions does not center on the house alone. The land surrounding the home is just as much a part of the legacy that they wish to preserve. "We've invited naturalists and environmentalists out to the property and their response has been incredible," Angi explains. The Kanes have been able to establish partnerships with William & Mary and other environmental study groups to study both the land, which has remained largely untouched by modern machinery over the last century, and the water quality of Jolly's Mill Pond.

One of the largest challenges has been the responsibility for the pond itself. Jolly's Mill Pond is a municipal sized body of water but since it is privately owned, the financial burden of maintaining it falls to the Kanes. Their ownership extends to the earthen dam built in the late 1700s. A portion of Jolly Pond Road runs across the top of the dam. In 2008, it was discovered that a portion of the dam was damaged and the Kanes entered years of ne-

gotiations with James City County, Virginia Department of Transportation and Virginia delegates to determine the best steps. As of December 2019, that portion of the road has reverted to private ownership, leaving the Kanes with more decisions about the viability of the dam and the future of the road.

Despite the numerous difficulties the family has faced while restoring the property, Angi understands the unique opportunity that they have been granted and the significance of her ownership in the farm. "Today, only three percent of Virginia's farmers are African American," she observes. When she and Bill first took over ownership of the farm, she was surprised to learn that she was not the first African American owner, but the second. During the initial conversations with the county, Angi's father-in-law worked with James City County to establish the historical narrative of the property, and they discovered that a black man had owned part of the property in the late 1800s. He had worked as a broker and often worked with the family of William H. Jolly, for whom the pond is named. "Jolly was also from New York, so I feel things have come full circle."

The heritage and legacy that Angi is striving to provide for future generations goes beyond history and environmental stewardship. Though she says her children are far more involved in the renovation than they would like, the blood, sweat, and tears that the family has poured into the house are an inheritance that Angi does not take lightly. The responsibility can be overwhelming at times, but as she says, "We are the ones crazy enough to do this." Her determination and passion have driven the work and often, she is surprised to find herself here. "This wasn't my background, but I love certain aspects of history, warts and all. And there are things worth preserving." Angi is deservedly proud of the progress they have made but she recognizes that the work has just begun. "Unique opportunities are usually incredibly hard work," she says, and Angi Kane is not afraid of hard work.

As the Kanes continue to split their time between Richmond and Jolly Mill Pond, their commitment to preserving and continuing the legacy of unique history, conservation, hard work, and rigorous attention to detail is a gift to the surrounding community. NDN

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# TERRI GILLEY

# Hosting Hospitality

By Alison Johnson



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

As a student at Lafayette High School in the late 1970s, Terri Gilley went on a class trip to Washington, D.C. to watch Henry Fonda in a play at The Kennedy Center.

Four decades later, Terri remembers that experience clearly and fondly. So, she relishes the opportunity to help create lifelong memories for student travelers around the country in her job with Colonial Connections, a local tour operator.

“The way I look at it, today’s youth visitors

are our visitors of tomorrow,” Terri says. “If they love it here, when they are older and married and have kids of their own, they’ll want to bring their families back. And we also have a lot of visitors who end up retiring here for good.”

As the Vice President of Sales and Marketing for Colonial Connections, Terri handles a wide range of tasks, including writing and implementing itineraries, meeting and greeting groups, building relationships with customers and vendors, and overseeing payroll.

First bitten by the hospitality bug when she worked at a hotel while she was in college. Terri has worked for Colonial Connections for about 13 years. The full-service company can assist with airline and bus reservations, hotel lodging, tickets to attractions, guided tours, meals, evening programs and security requests.

“I know this area so well,” Terri, 58, says. “I grew up riding bikes with my friends on the Colonial Parkway and all over Jamestown Island. We went fishing and waterskiing all the

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time on the James River. I was a teenager when Busch Gardens opened. It's very gratifying to share the town I love so much with so many others."

The biggest market for Colonial Connections is education-oriented student groups, particularly fourth-, fifth- and eighth- grade classes. Terri also organizes trips for adults and performance ensembles in town for festivals, parades or competitions.

March to June is the busiest stretch for student travel. Most groups want to hit the area's historical highlights at Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown Settlement and the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown. Eighth-graders often head to Busch Gardens as well to celebrate their transition to high school.

Students on longer trips might also venture to Washington, D.C.; Charlottesville, home to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello estate; or Norfolk, where Nauticus, the USS Wisconsin and Spirit of Norfolk cruises are popular attractions. Of course, they all love to eat, and buffets such as Golden Corral and Captain George's

Seafood Restaurant are always a hit.

Students travel from as far away as Alaska and California. One school in Bermuda sends a group every year. "To get those repeat customers, you have to work really hard to dot all the i's and cross the t's," Terri says. "You learn to think ahead and pay attention to small details."

Some kids are from low-income communities or big cities such as New York and have never seen the ocean, much less taken a dip in the waves. "We take them over to Virginia Beach and they are just wide-eyed," Terri says. "Kids are just like sponges, and we want to give them a combination of both learning and pure fun."

Terri has always been interested in travel. As a child, in fact, she dreamed of a career as a flight attendant. Most family trips involved two-day car rides with her parents, older sister and younger brother to visit family in Louisiana, and she wanted to take airplanes to see the world.

At Christopher Newport College (now University), Terri landed a job at the Fort Magrud-

er Hotel & Conference Center as a "girl Friday," or a young assistant with multiple clerical duties. That morphed into a full-time front desk position, followed by stints as reservations manager, group sales manager and conference coordinator for meetings of hundreds of people.

"Basically, I figured out that I really like putting a smile on people's faces," she says. "There's always something going on in hospitality: a problem to fix, something to do to make a guest's day, checking them in and giving them everything they need when they come in weary from the road. What's important is to maintain a 'can-do' attitude at all times."

After working at three area hotels, Terri moved to a position with the Greater Williamsburg Chamber & Tourism Alliance. She spent 13 years there, mostly focusing on group tours and the AAA markets for the Historic Triangle.

While serving on various tourism committees, Terri met Sophia Harler, owner of Colonial Connections. Sophia had helped build the company since its 1990 founding. "She started

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saying, ‘Come work with me; it will be fun,’” Terri recalls. “I was excited to try something new but still be able to put all of my experience to use.”

Terri joined Colonial Connections in 2006. The very next year, Jamestown celebrated its 400th anniversary, when musicians and other performance groups flocked to the area for special events. “That was really a banner year for us.”

In recent years, Terri has been happy to see historic sites growing more inclusive, adding stories of the African Americans, Native Americans and women who had a major impact on the country’s history. “We have such great things going on, and it’s wonderful to spread the word about all of it,” she says. “We are evolving and living in historic times ourselves. It’s fantastic.”

Of course, the coronavirus pandemic has totally upended this year’s schedule. Student groups that postponed spring trips to the fall are now also canceling those reservations. Colonial Connections is getting some bookings

for spring 2021, but not at the normal level.

“It’s breaking our hearts to see the cancellations and the hesitation, although we understand completely,” Terri says. “These are challenging times. None of us knows what the future will look like, but we are cautiously optimistic for next spring.”

The Historic Triangle does have some advantages. “It helps that we are perceived as a small town, which also worked in our favor after 9/11,” she says. “People stopped going to bigger places like New York and Washington, D.C., but they still wanted to travel. We can position ourselves as a welcoming and safe community, and the hub of any coastal Virginia vacation.”

Speaking of the coast, Terri is an avid beachgoer and boater. She and her partner, Mark McIlwean, have a 26-foot Baja fishing boat that they often take out on the York River or Chesapeake Bay. Mark is the angler and Terri the reader; she’s a fan of murder mysteries and classic novels such as “Pride and Prejudice,” “Moby Dick” and “A Tale of Two Cities.”

“Sometimes I want something serious, and

sometimes I’m all about mindless,” she says with a laugh. Terri’s other family members are her grown son, William Massey, and her dog Layla, a 14-month-old Frenchton.

Building on her already-strong roots in Williamsburg, Terri has earned the trust of area museums, attractions, hotels and restaurants, particularly those that embrace student groups. She enjoys promoting the Historic Triangle at industry-related trade shows and is proud that local venues sometimes ask for Colonial Connections guides to fill in during busy stretches.

“It benefits everyone to roll out the red carpet,” she notes. “We all have the same goals, which is to make our community stronger. Our area is our product.”

In short, Terri Gilley is committed to sending travelers home filled with new knowledge and unforgettable memories.

“We live in such a beautiful area, so rich in history,” she says. “How lovely is it to think that these kids will look back on their time here as one of their best experiences growing up? That’s the biggest reason why I love my job.” NDN



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# JEFF MILLER



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

## Time to Ride!

By Lillian Stevens

For anyone who has not been to Go-Karts Plus in a while, it's time to plan a visit. With entertainment suited for all ages, the popular amusement center, located on Route 60 in Lightfoot, is the perfect place to relax and have a safe summer blast.

"We have really upgraded the park in the past five years," Jeff Miller says.

Locally owned and operated by Jeff and his parents Bob and Ferne, the park was built in 1989. "We opened our doors on the original

site of what was once 'The Great American Waterslide' on Richmond Road," Jeff says. "My father had the creative vision for both parks."

At that time, the amusement center occupied four acres, on which there were a couple go-kart tracks, bumper boats, Kiddieland, a small arcade and a miniature golf course.

"Since then, we have grown to eight acres and have added many new attractions. My mother and father are in their 90s now and

have worked seven days a week for the last 30 years. It is what has kept them young at heart."

Visitors to the park will find it full of rides, games and other fun activities. There are four go-kart tracks, bumper cars, blaster boats, a thrill ride from Italy called the "Disk'O" and a newly remodeled arcade with all of the latest games. The major go-kart tracks boast brand new go-karts. "We put all new karts on the former Super Stockart Track and renamed it the Indy Track," Jeff says.

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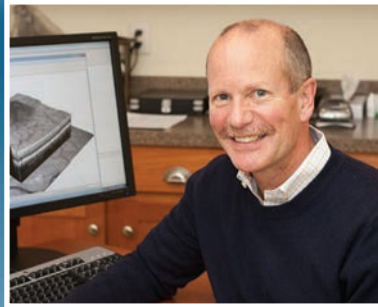
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“The Gold Rush Mini Golf course features an authentic western wagon, water tower and mine shaft,” Jeff says. “It has a mining theme, with mining carts, whiskey barrels, dynamite sticks and other mining props. The dynamite shack on the 19th hole goes up in the air when you make a hole in one!”

The course also offers gemstone panning before the first hole where kids can sluice for gemstones. “It’s a beautiful mini-golf course with waterfalls and streams, with an oasis of shade from old-growth trees on hot summer days.”

For safety purposes, height requirements apply to all rides.

Go-Karts Plus has always attracted the tourists, but the park also enjoys a good amount of business from local families. Located in close proximity to Colonial Heritage, a 55+ neighborhood, Jeff says that they see a lot of traffic from residents who bring their grandchildren to visit.

Prices are discounted for locals with “all you can ride” wristbands and seasons passes. The latter costs \$100 which pays for itself inside of three visits to the park. There are also special offers for members of the military and first responders, as well as discounts for AAA members and a variety of specials each day of the week.

In addition to the wristbands or season’s passes, visitors can also opt for “pay as you go” ticketing. There are newly installed ticket kiosks for both rides and arcade games.

In an abundance of caution, this late-June interview was conducted remotely due to the coronavirus. At that time, Jeff was crossing every finger and toe that the Governor would move forward with Phase Three opening plans for Virginia. Like other businesses, his has suffered during the pandemic.

His team has been busy at work implementing safety protocols that will ensure the safety of guests who are hungry for a healthy, fun-filled day of adventure. Upon arrival at work, every employee’s temperature is taken. As customers arrive, each party will be required to observe the standard six feet of social distancing and face masks are available at a very inexpensive price point.

“Masks are appreciated but not required. Luckily, we are outdoors. We can group families together to play golf, but safe distancing protocols will be in place. If we are able to enter Phase Three, then we can open the arcade using the safety protocols we have established.”

Each guest will purchase all-day wrist bands, swipe cards or a season’s pass. If things go according to plan, and plans are changing constantly amid this uncertain time, Go-Karts Plus will be open through October.

“We’re not a year-round business so it’s always a financial challenge to figure out the five months we aren’t open. We may not be millionaires, but we are having fun.”

With summer here, people are excited to get out again. Jeff and his team are delighted to welcome visitors to Go-Karts Plus for some outdoor fun and excitement.

“I need to make a shout-out to our team,” he says. “They truly make our park a great one. From our front-line staff to technicians and management, I think we have the best employees in Williamsburg. We are lucky to have them.”

Jeff’s enthusiasm, even during this challenging time, is infectious and



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his personality is effervescent. The passion he has for Go-Karts Plus cannot be denied. "I've been doing this for 31 years," he says. "But where we are right now is truly uncharted territory."

Uncharted territory is not a new concept to Jeff. In fact, growing up, running an amusement center was really never something he envisioned as a career. He chose a different path: music.

"My brother, Robin, and I played everything from Motown to the Beatles," he says. "I played keyboards and Robin played guitar. We grew up in Virginia Beach and Norfolk, so I played music there in venues there from the age of 15 to 35. My brother still plays, but I decided to come here and work with our father. I will say that when Next Door Neighbors feature stories about local bands and musicians, I know them all!"

Making the transition from musician to running Go-Karts Plus was a major shift for Jeff.

"I had to learn a lot fast! I was a free-spirited musician moving into a management role. There was no handbook in place to guide me. When you have Busch Gardens and Water Country in the same town, you have to rise to a higher standard quickly."

Indeed, the 66-year-old theme park aficionado considers Busch Gardens the benchmark of a truly great amusement park.

"They set the bar," he says. "That place is incredible. We are a small park, but we have aspirations to be as nice as Busch Gardens one day." As a member of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) Jeff stays on top of news in the industry and participates in networking and other outreach.

"As of today, the IAAPA conference and trade show is still on for November in Florida. Time will tell. I hope it isn't canceled."

On a non-business level, the coronavirus had a tremendous impact on the self-described shopaholic.

"I'm a shopper!" Jeff exclaims. "I love going to Lowes, Home Depot and Walmart. I want to find the cheapest duct tape or Dyson or whatever! At the end of the day, I can always find my 'kumbaya' moment at Target. But it's not as fun shopping lately, wearing these masks and being fearful of touching things."

He also misses traveling all over the world with his wife, Gina.

"My wife is a flight attendant with American Airlines, formerly US Air," he says. "She has stayed in the same line of work for over 30 years, just like me. I think that's pretty interesting! Also, like me, she loves her job. Plus, her career has provided us opportunities to take many trips. I do look forward to traveling again."

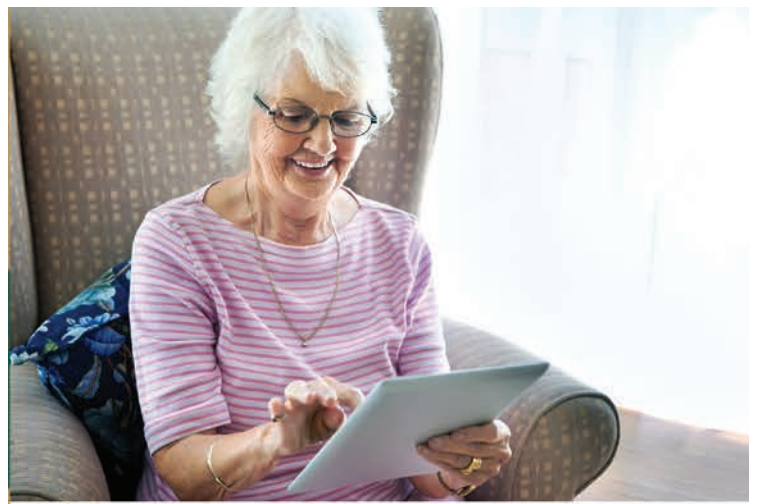
The couple has no children.

"I have about 50 kids working here," he says with a chuckle. "Otherwise, you could say that my real kids are my rescue cats."

At the end of a full summer's day at Go-Karts Plus, Jeff encourages visitors to consider a meal at any number of nearby good restaurants.

"I have to say that this Route 60 corridor in Lightfoot is really taking off. There are so many good restaurants nearby. The New York Deli is iconic; Taco Mexicali is very good; Skrimp Shack is popular, as is Poke Sushi Bowl, Francesco's, so many great places to eat right here along our strip of Route 60."

It's a fun side of town, and Jeff Miller and his family hope to see folks there very soon. NDN



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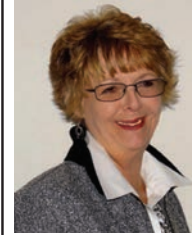
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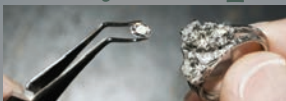
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# JEFF OWENS



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

## Building Business One Scoop at a Time

By Kristine Hojnicky

The Norge Bazaar & Ice Cream Shoppe is flanked by a Pizza Hut and Honey Butter's Restaurant in a shopping center less than two miles from Exit 231A off of I-64.

The shop, which opened in early June amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, is managed by Jeff Owens. Jeff has a solid and unique work history, which includes twenty-four years of food service background. He worked for McDonalds starting at the age of fifteen as a maintenance man and moved up through the company to the role of a field consultant.

Originally from Norfolk, Jeff is a father to three grown children and has four grandchildren. He and his daughter, Sarah, started a father-daughter business making gift baskets and spa essentials. They were initially selling the baskets via an online store through Amazon, but the shipping cost to ensure each basket arrived as a perfectly packaged gift item was really expensive.

He balances his work at the ice cream shop with his civil service position at the U.S. Fleet Cyber Command where he works in project management and engineering. He anticipates he will retire from that role in December of this year.

In the meantime, Jeff can be found most days managing his staff of

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four at the Norge Bazaar & Ice Cream Shoppe. He relies on the leadership skills he honed during the twenty-seven years he spent serving in the U.S. Navy to keep things in order as they churn out Hershey's ice cream cones, blended javas, smoothies, banana splits and more.

"We are a full ice cream shop," Jeff says. "Traditionally you may not see an ice cream shop in a strip mall, but I think this is a unique situation because of the surrounding businesses. We complement each other."

Jeff is excited about this new venture, as he believes they provide a unique offering to tourists. "I think we offer something that no one else does," he says. "You can come in, buy ice cream, and take your time shopping for things you don't see in other stores. We have something for everyone."

Jeff is truly dedicated to ensuring that every customer has a wonderful experience when they visit for a frozen treat. One recent customer came in asking if they carried Superman ice cream, a Midwestern-exclusive mixture of red, blue and yellow swirled ice cream. While

the shop didn't offer that particular flavor at the time, Jeff made sure to order a tub for when the customer returned the following week.

"What's drawn me to this area are the tourists and the families. I enjoy being a part of the overall experience when they come in. It's about making memories, and Toano and Norge are very close-knit communities where people come together," Jeff says.

And despite opening during a pandemic, Jeff was able to get creative to overcome obstacles, which he calls opportunities, to ensure that they opened on time with the required operational licenses.

"Ice cream falls under the Department of Agriculture so we had to go through them for our inspection. Of course, the inspector was working from home too and was unable to come out, so we did an inspection through FaceTime," he explains.

He's also set benches outside of the shop rather than inside to accommodate customers and families who want to savor their desserts on a warm summer day. The outside benches

also accommodate people looking to maintain social distancing.

Moving forward, as restrictions are eased throughout the state, Jeff is also looking to leverage space in the back of the shop as a place to hold meetings or children's ice cream-themed birthday parties. But for now, Jeff Owens is continuing to give back to the community by scooping sweet treats to residents and visitors of Williamsburg alike.

"What we have set up here is kind of special. People will come here at night and the kids are running around the parking lot, and you see people building memories. With Busch Gardens and Water Country closed right now, there's not a whole lot here for kids to do," he says.

"They can come here in the evening and buy ice cream, walk around and see what the vendors are selling. It's kind of special and I feel privileged to be a part of it. I feel like we're giving back to the community in a way by allowing them to get out of the house and enjoy something together." NDN



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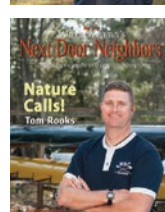


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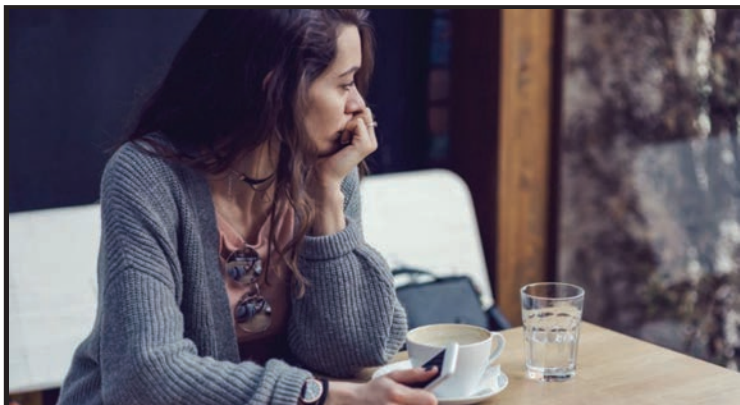
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