

November 2020

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VOL.14, ISSUE 11

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# Thankfulness

## Donald Dinse

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Meredith Collins, Publisher

Are you ready for some uplifting stories? We wanted to interview a few locals who would be willing to share with us some of the things they are thankful for. We got that, and more.

When you read this issue, you can enjoy learning about many fascinating backgrounds, personal inspirations, and ambitions that brought our interviewees to where they are today. When they share their successes they are quick to express

their gratitude for the many blessings in their lives.

To be perfectly honest, some of these stories also left me exhausted. Where do they get the energy? Inside these pages, we meet a local gentleman who has been playing softball for sixty years straight without missing a season! Then there is a delightful lady who has been a legend selling real estate here since the 1970s! Every person featured is enthusiastically involved in multiple organizations and activities, any one of which would engage most mere humans full time. I'm ashamed. It's all I can seem to do to publish one magazine a month!

The common thread we often see in these stories, is that people are grateful just to be living here. They remind me once again that we never have to look very far to find a neighbor we can be thankful to have in our lives. NDN

## Inside

- 5. Donald Dinse
- 9. Mildred Walker
- 13. Ethell Hill
- 18. Melissa Gauvin
- 21. Jennifer Mitchell
- 24. Patricia Lambert
- 27. Kasie Ballard
- 29. Tyler Brooks
- 33. Christian Pascale
- 36. Brittany Ghio
- 39. Ben Woodhouse
- 43. Matthew Williams
- 47. In the Neighborhood

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# DONALD DINSE



Lisa Lee Photography

## Taking Care of Us

By Narielle Living

Donald Dinse is grateful for the people in his life who have been there for him through the years, the people who stood by him and worked with him. “I could never have done this alone,” he says. Donald is a retired firefighter who is now president of the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) 2498, the union that represents career professional firefighters, EMS (EMT, Paramedics), and dispatchers in York County, Williamsburg, James City Coun-

ty, and Poquoson. His “retirement” has come as somewhat of a surprise to him. “I thought when I semi-retired, I was no longer having to fight fires, and that doing this full time would be a piece of cake, a walk in the park. Turned out to be totally the opposite of what I thought it was going to be.”

Donald grew up on the Jersey shore. Becoming a firefighter was a sort of family tradition.

“My father was a firefighter in New Jersey.

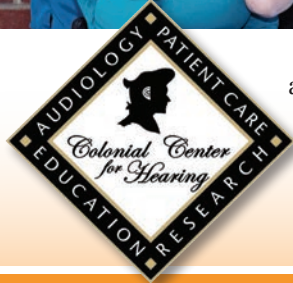
My uncle was a firefighter in the South Bronx. I have a cousin who was a firefighter in Flushing, Queens. I have several family members that are law enforcement in New York. I guess it was in the gene pool.”

As a teenager, Donald worked as a lifeguard in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, then at a grocery store called Pathmark. “That was a union job, which meant I got overtime. I got extra money on Sundays. I had holiday pay. That was my



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first union job.”

When it came time to settle on a career, Donald decided to join the military. Both his father and grandfather had joined the military and Donald knew it would help him reach his goal of becoming a firefighter. “They were always talking about their service. I wanted that as well, being the oldest son in the family. So, I joined the Navy and I did six years.”

His last two years in the Navy were at the Naval Weapons Station in Yorktown. At that point, he met a man who was a volunteer firefighter for York County Fire Department. “He would tell me to join the volunteers here and see if I liked the paid fire departments in Virginia. It sounded reasonable. So, the rest is history. I became a volunteer firefighter while I was in the Navy and I got hired in 1990 by York County.” Donald loved the department from the time he started. “The people were great. It was a bedroom community, a small department. Everybody knew each other.”

The same year he left the Navy he met Teresa, who became his wife. “We hit it off and got married, and then five years later, she was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer and given a year to live. She had just turned 40.” Despite the devastating prognosis, Teresa decided that was just not in her plans. “Her attitude was that wasn’t going to happen to her, and she fought that cancer for 17 years.”

Despite the medical miracle, her fight was difficult. As a firefighter, Donald had the opportunity to choose to retire. Firefighters can have an early retirement in Virginia at 50 years of age after 25 years of service. “Toward the end, in the last five years, [the cancer] had gotten into the bone and we knew that she only had a few years to live. So, I made the decision to leave the job with an early retirement after 25 years of service so I could be at home with her. And that’s how it ended, at home, where Teresa wanted to be.”

Donald is grateful he was able to retire to be with Teresa. “She deserved that. She gave me a great 25-year marriage.”

When Donald initially got the firefighter’s job in 1990, the union president approached him to ask if he wanted to join the union. In New Jersey, this was unheard of. Everyone simply joined if they worked at a union job. “I was never asked that before.” Of course, he joined, and it wasn’t long before he was approached again, this time about taking a position within the union.

“About a year later, I became a junior union officer.”

At that point in time, the union was very small. “Probably 40 percent of that department was union. Most of the firefighters saw no use for the union.” But once Donald committed, he decided he was going to be all the way in. “I decided to get involved, 100 percent. I started going to Washington, DC. I learned how to lobby on the hill. I went to Richmond and learned how to lobby in Richmond at the General Assembly. Eventually, working with the union became Donald’s passion. It is because of his efforts that the local chapter now has four localities that it covers.

“I became a knowledgeable President with some wisdom and experience, and Williamsburg wasn’t having success with their union getting things done. So, they dropped their charter and asked to merge with



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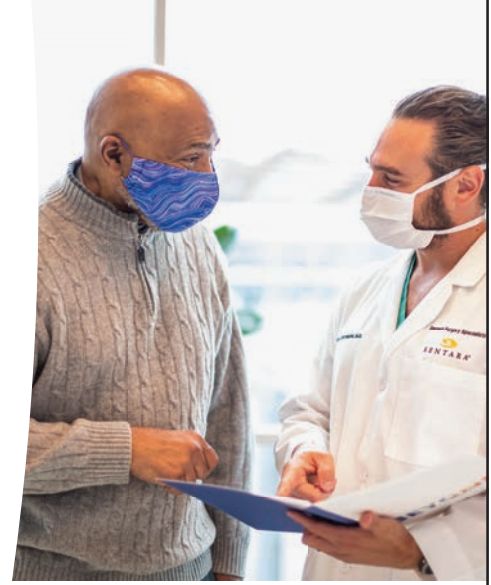
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York County, which they did. Then Poquoson said they couldn't get anything done and they liked what York County and Williamsburg were doing. So, they joined us a few years later." It was only a matter of time before James City County joined the party, too. "And that's it. We drew the line. And now I'm the president of all four localities."

Donald's time is never really his own these days. As union president, he deals with four city councils, four fire chiefs, and four city managers. "You can't begin to imagine."

Despite life's hardships, sometimes amazing things can happen afterward. "I don't know how things happen, and I don't know why things happen. I believe it's all for a reason." After his wife passed away, he began talking with an old friend from New Jersey on Facebook. She was a surgery nurse. "She was my childhood sweetheart in fifth grade. I'm married to her now."

Donald is truly grateful for the love he has found with Beth and the life they have built together. "The first thing she did was embrace

the union and embrace my guys and girls. She's now the auxiliary president. My wife, Teresa, created the auxiliary to bring firefighters' families closer together. When she got sick, nobody wanted to take on that job. Imagine a woman with stage four cancer, creating an organization for others and building unity. And then it went away when she got very ill. And then Beth comes into my life. She came to my office and saw a plaque and wanted to know what the auxiliary was. I never asked her."

Donald is adamant when he talks about what he is most thankful for. "My wife," he says. He states that if his wife didn't support what he was doing, then there is no way he could be the union president. "It's never ending," he says about his job. "They're on the job 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year." Because firefighters are always on call, so are the people who work to protect them. "They're getting hurt. Exposed. Injured. All those days, all those hours, means I have to be available. There's not a day off, Saturday or Sunday. There's no holidays. If somebody gets

hurt on Christmas Day, I have to be involved in it. That's what I'm grateful for, having somebody in my life. I thought when I lost Teresa, no one in their right mind would put up with this. I thought it was time for me to retire and move on. And just the opposite happened."

Although Donald's work gets political, he understands that people are people and politics does not always define who a person is. Sometimes it's simply about a person's upbringing. "I don't look at people as black, white, Republican, Democrat, I just look at people like we're all on the same boat. We just had different experiences. If somebody's really honest with you, and you sit down with a Republican or Democrat and learn about their upbringing, you find out why they are who they are and then you understand it."

While Donald Dinse has much to be thankful for, so does our local community for the tireless efforts of our first responders who spend their lives ensuring we are safe and healthy. And for men like Donald, who devote themselves to taking care of those who take care of us. NDN

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# MILDRED WALKER



Lisa Lee Photography

# Living Life to the Fullest

By Alison Johnson

Not many people get a street named in their honor. Mildred T. Walker has two.

“Mildred Drive” and “Walker Drive” in the Forest Glen subdivision recognize the lifelong James City County resident and tireless real estate agent for selling about 200 homes in the first two sections of the neighborhood in the 1970s.



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Many of those buyers were black families who had struggled for years to find decent, affordable housing. Forest Glen offered brand new three-bedroom, one-bathroom homes on crawl spaces for only \$19,900.

"People came running when they heard about this chance, and I was so blessed to be able to help them," Mildred says. "Those homes were selling like hotcakes! There were many, many tears of gratitude and joy. I still get emotional today just thinking about it and how much it meant to them and to me."

A ball of positive energy and enthusiasm, Mildred is so grateful for a life filled with family, faith, good health, gospel music, and community service that she frequently bursts out with her favorite expression of delight: "Wow Wee!" Her text messages often arrive with capital letters, exclamation points and hand-clapping emojis.

"I just keep on tipping around in my 6-inch heels every day, with a big happy smile," she says. "My plate is seldom empty, and I feel like I'm walking on air."

Mildred declines to give her exact age, but she has been an active dynamo since childhood. She was delivered by a midwife at her childhood home on Barnes Road in Toano. One of four sisters, she loved being outdoors and by age two was tagging along with her grandmother into nearby fields where they picked snap peas for hours.

"Now I have a great-granddaughter who runs all the time, and I see myself in her," she says. "As my daughter-in-law points out to me, 'Well... you're still running!' I always had a different kind of energy. I wanted to get out and do what others were afraid to even try."

At age three, Mildred sat down at an old piano in her family's home and began plunking out notes. She was so small that a family member had to tie her to the bench so she wouldn't slip off, but she quickly picked up skills and a deep love of gospel music.

By six, Mildred was playing for Sunday School sessions at nearby churches. On Sunday evenings, family and friends gathered in her backyard to sing gospel as she banged away on the piano, everyone rejoicing until darkness fell.

Those carefree childhood days marked the start of decades of Mildred playing and singing gospel music for area churches and, for 41 years, the James City County Men's Chorus. A member of First Baptist Church on Scotland Street, one of the oldest black churches in America, Mildred also performs at banquets, revivals, funerals and nursing homes.

"I am grateful to God for so much, including the gift of being able to share such beautiful music and teach others gospel chords," she says. "It has always been an important way for me to answer God's calling and be of service to others."

A member of the class of 1960 at Bruton Heights School, which operated as a segregated program from 1940 to 1966, Mildred has worked as a life insurance agent and as a manager at a Goodyear Auto Service store, along with her years in real estate.

In the 1970s, she attended classes at Thomas Nelson Community College with plans to become an attorney when she separated from her husband. Her two daughters were grown, but she still had five teenage boys at home, the youngest only in sixth grade.

"I wasn't about to let my beautiful sons down, so I stopped those classes to give them what they needed," she relates. "I kept them and their friends in line. Guess what? Those boys all graduated from Lafayette High School

A portrait of Sonia E. Hepburn, MD, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a white lab coat over a purple top, smiling. The background is a clinical office setting with a sink and cabinets.

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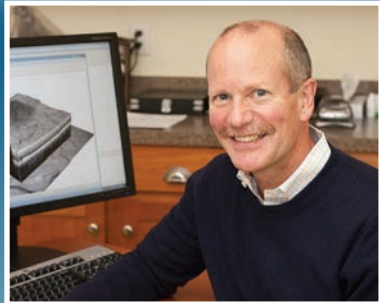
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and got some kind of college scholarship. I feel like shouting from the rooftops, 'If life throws you lemons, you make the best lemonade you can!'"

Mildred had a job in life insurance when the owners of Colonial Contracting Company, which was developing Forest Glen in the Centerville area, approached her to work as their sales representative. She doesn't know how they got her name, but she leapt at the opportunity and applications soon flooded her desk. During one three-week period, Mildred sold 19 homes.

"I was excited beyond words," she remembers. "What a wonderful thing for these families. God blessed me to bless them, and they loved me for it. Many of the original families and homeowners are still living in Forest Glen. If the parents have passed, sometimes the children are still there. This is true history!"

When the developers surprised her with two street names out of appreciation, "it felt great, but it didn't have the significance in my mind that it does now that I'm older," she says. "Now I think, 'Wow, that is kind of a big deal.'"

In the 1990s, Mildred dove full-time into real estate and became a successful agent for various companies that served the entire Peninsula. At one point, the Virginia Peninsula Association of REALTORS nicknamed her "Million Dollar Mildred."

"I absolutely went crazy," she says. "I was selling everything in sight and was an advertising nut. I was simply on fire! I went on to become a Platinum Award Winner for many years, and I became the first black agent to reach that status."

Mildred also has been a member of the Newport News branch of the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Club, Inc., for more than 35 years. She has won Business Person of the Year and community service awards from the organization.

Semi-retired today with Keller Williams Realty, Mildred mostly handles referrals from past clients who ask her to help their family and friends. One recently called her from Las Vegas to sell a home in Newport News.

"She said, 'No one else is going to sell our home but Mildred Walker!'" she says. "I can't stop moving. I put on my high heels, a hat, and a suit every day of my life. My grandma started me doing that, and I have no reason to quit."

Mildred now gets to pass advice along to nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, ages 3 to 12; she also is close with her one surviving sister who lives in North Carolina. She loves to cook and bake in her spare time, with specialties such as sweet potato pie, rice pudding with raisins, and chicken Brunswick stew. She also enjoys dancing and playing bingo.

"I feel great," she notes. "My great-grandma lived to be 107, and my grandma was 94. So, who knows about me? I could live to be 115, 116, 117, 118, right? I don't drink or smoke, and I never have in my life. I just stay active and focus on having so many blessings in my life."

Driven by her love of people and God, Mildred T. Walker has had a hard time staying home during the coronavirus pandemic. Yet her positive outlook on life, and on the community that she has helped to shape, has never wavered.

"I am at tremendous peace, because I trust God for everything, really," she says. "All that I am and ever hope to be, I owe it all to our God." NDN



Lisa Lee Photography

# Grateful for a Legacy

By Ashley Smith

Ethell Hill has had a diverse and varied life, filled with challenges, growth and opportunity. She is grateful for it all.

She grew up in Blackstone, Virginia, at a time when schools were still segregated. Despite the challenges for African American students at that time, Ethell went on to Virginia State University and earned a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education.

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Shortly afterwards, she married, and the couple moved to Germany. "Germany was like the United States, but full of beautiful architecture and scenery. I loved it!" she says. Ethell spent two years soaking in as much culture and as many experiences as she could. Though her marriage did not last, her memories of Germany remain vivid and happy.

Upon her return to the United States, Ethell spent time traveling. First, she stopped in New York to visit her mother-in-law. Then she continued to Miami, Florida and spent the summer with her uncle and his wife. "I almost stayed for a teaching job," Ethell says. "In the end, I decided I was a Virginia girl and I came home in the fall."

Instead of returning to Blackstone, she moved to Williamsburg with her aunt and cousin, with whom she had spent her childhood. Once settled, she got a job at Eastern State Hospital.

At Eastern State Hospital, Ethell started as an office clerk, typing up reports for Social Services. One day, she discovered Eastern State Hospital had its own school so she applied to work there and became a teacher immediately. She began teaching a class of students with challenging behaviors. While some days were mentally and emotionally exhausting, she recognized that her students needed and wanted what all children do: to learn. This experience of working with students with disabilities and mental health challenges led her to pursue a special education certification. At that time, in the late seventies and early eighties, special education was still in its infancy. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) passed into law and several landmark court decisions soon followed. In Virginia, teachers willing to study special education could receive a significant discount on tuition. Ethell took advantage of the opportunity and earned her Master's in Education Administration.

Once her graduate work was complete, she was hired as a Student Services Coordinator for Williamsburg-James City County Schools (WJCC). Ethell believes they took a chance on her because of her credentials and the critical need for someone to implement the new special education laws that continued to reform education for students with learning difficulties.

In her new position, she advocated for buses to receive aides and cameras as well as training for both drivers and aides regarding student disabilities. She even rode school buses to find out how to shorten the ride in response to parent requests. Ethell also earned the trust and respect of the WJCC Special Education Committee, made up of parents of students with disabilities. "They felt they had not been heard in the past, and I had to prove myself to them," she says with a smile. To engage the committee and earn trust, she created agendas with their input and included the committee on special education policy decisions. "It took us a year to review three policies, but we did it and presented it to the School Board together." She also showed them the "book" of special education laws that the division received every six months. "That really won them over, when I showed them I was willing to be transparent and figure these out with them." Empowering parents to advocate for their students and take ownership in the policies and procedures that govern their children's education remains a significant but still a small part of Ethell's legacy.

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T.W. Taylor  
Owner & Pharmacist



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“As we age, our hormones change,” says T.W. Taylor, pharmacist and owner of Williamsburg Drug Company. “In order to have an optimal healthy life, you want to have balanced hormones. As women get older, they hit meno-

pause. Men begin to produce less testosterone. It's health to maintain these levels. That's our job as a compounding pharmacy; we can test your hormone levels and work with your physician to make the hormones that you need to stay balanced. We're not artificially creating a different 'you.' All we're doing is getting your cells back to what is normal for you.”

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Call or visit Williamsburg Drug Company at their 1310 Jamestown Road or 240 McLaw's Circle locations or call 757-229-3560 to talk with a staff pharmacist and learn more.

## Deb Prosek, Pharmacist

Deb Prosek has a passion for using science to help patients feel their best. At Williamsburg Drug Company, Deb specializes in hormone replacement therapy. She oversees the custom compounding of precise individual doses for her patients based on their unique hormone levels and their doctors' recommendations. Hormone replacement therapy has suffered from negative press in the past, but Deb emphasizes that Williamsburg Drug



Company compounds bio-identical hormones which are entirely different from commercially available synthetic hormones associated with the negative side effects and press. “With bio-identical hormones, the molecule itself is the exact same molecule you were born with. We were all born with estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone, and we lose it over time. Bio-identical hormones are the exact same molecules your body would make,” Deb explains.

Our compounded bio-identical hormones are used to treat typical symptoms, like hot flashes, sleep, and libido issues. But there are many more benefits to balanced hormone levels. Estrogen, for example, has over 400 functions in the body. Did you know women even have estrogen receptors in their eyes, and the loss of it, could predispose them to glaucoma? Hormones are also important for brain, bone, and heart health during the aging process. Not to leave the men out, they have testosterone receptors in their eyes, too! Balancing male hormone levels is imperative to their overall health and well-being.

“So, where does someone begin the journey of balancing their hormones? In a word: testing. If testing is done through your physician, or by us at Williamsburg Drug Company, we consult and collaborate with the patient and their prescriber to determine the best course of therapy. This relationship, known as the triad in patient care, offers the most optimal outcomes and is a top priority at Williamsburg Drug Company,” says Deb.

For people who find that hormone imbalance was the missing puzzle piece to their wellbeing, the changes are profoundly positive. “I hear things from our patients like ‘life changing,’ and simply, ‘I just feel so much better.’ I encourage anyone to call, or stop by, Williamsburg Drug Company and start a conversation about hormones,” says Deb. She chuckles and says, “It's my passion and goal to have all the men and women in our community hormonally balanced. Come see us to start your journey!”

Call or visit Dr. Deb Prosek at Williamsburg Drug Company at 757-229-3560 to explore hormone treatment options.



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As Coordinator of Student Services, Ethell was also responsible for Adult Education. She recalls, "I didn't know anything about Adult Education, and they hadn't done much with it at that point." Ethell took the same thorough approach to the GED program that had been so successful with special education. During the time Ethell administered the program, the graduation ceremonies outgrew the School Board meeting room and moved to the library. As the graduation ceremonies and recognition programs became more significant, so too, did the impact of the Adult Education program. Ethell even authored the first grant WJCC Schools ever received. The grant and support from charitable organizations in Williamsburg-James City County fall significantly.

Ethell's contributions to her community extend well beyond the school division. She was on the Board of Big Brothers, Big Sisters during the first Bowl for Schools' Sake. Four of the seven schools participated as well as the central office for the school division. Busch

Gardens participated that inaugural year as well. The next year, Busch Gardens challenged the school division and won. "I hope there are those who remember," Ethell says. "It was so much fun."

Ethell also sat on the founding Executive Board for Hospice House. With amusement she recalls, "The members of the Executive Board decided that we should each contribute financially toward the project. I was out of town at the time. My friend took me out to lunch and told me, so I just wrote a check and dropped it off. I got a call the next week, 'Ethell, you didn't have to pay it all at once!'" She served on the Executive Board on and off for several years, but nothing quite compared to the initial excitement of the beginning stages. Ethell remains proud of her contributions to Hospice House, both financially and personally.

Though she is proud of her other contributions, the 2016 Unity March was Ethell's bailiwick. Organized by the Historic First Baptist Church of Williamsburg and the Colonial

Williamsburg Foundation, the march drew over 800 hundred participants, mostly from churches across the region. Ethell estimates that 45 churches took part. Each church carried a banner and the procession started at Scotland Street and made its way to gather under a large tent. The surrounding community fully supported the event. Ethell has held gratitude in her heart for the more than 800 people who came despite the fact that they were only able to advertise through the churches. She also remains thankful for the support of the Williamsburg community for the march and the other programs she has brought to the area.

And if that isn't enough, Ethell has worked tirelessly for at least 30 years with the Williamsburg-James City County Regional Library and their Cultural Heritage Series has been a contributing factor. Ethell credits Hattie Sasser as the visionary who started the series. Ms. Sasser, a well-known civic activist in the Williamsburg community, asked the library for the space to hold a small program.

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At that first event, they had given her a small stand and ten chairs. Forty people showed up. Afterwards, the library found a bigger space to give Ms. Sasser, and the program has continued ever since. "I can't take credit for this. Hattie taught me how. You know, back then, when somebody asked you to do something, you said, 'yes ma'am.'"

Thirty years later, Ethell has created an enduring Cultural Heritage Series that has enriched and elevated her community. Each

February, the Williamsburg Regional Library Theater hosts a guest program on Sundays. Speakers range from musical performers, religious and government leaders, to successful leaders of color. Ethell even hopes to have a successful jet pilot attend in 2021.

Ethell is most grateful for the support that many community organizations have historically given to the Cultural Heritage Series, as well as the volunteers who have worked alongside her to support this vision.

For most, a life that had accomplished half as much would be well-lived. Yet this is not the sum of Ethell's service to her community. Because of her love and gratitude for the community, she still volunteers at the polls every election and is the past Vice President of the local NAACP chapter. She has created a legacy of education, activism, faith and volunteering that has had an immeasurable impact on the Williamsburg community. And Ethell Hill is not yet finished. NDN

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# MELISSA GAUVIN



Lisa Lee Photography

## A Warm Welcome to the 'Burg

By Kristine Hojnicky

In a season that is meant for reflection and expressing gratitude, Melissa Gauvin is feeling particularly thankful. In the last year, she reconnected with a past love, and in late February, she moved to Williamsburg from Rhode Island to pursue the relationship. The coronavirus pandemic made it challenging for her to thoroughly become acquainted with her new community, but a simple act of neighborly kindness

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bestowed upon her car in September made her proud to call Williamsburg her new home.

On September 7, Melissa posted a photo on the Williamsburg News and Notes Facebook Group page. It was of a plastic garbage bag taped over the open window, secured with yellow washi tape. A note in a sealed plastic bag read, "Hi! You left your window open and it started to rain. I taped the garbage bag with washi tape, so it won't damage your paint."

Over the weekend, she and her boyfriend had gone for a drive and taken advantage of the cooler weather by putting the windows down. They forgot to put the windows back up when they returned to their apartment, and Melissa didn't drive her car for several days afterwards.

Within hours of her Facebook post, she had over 800 likes and nearly 50 comments from fellow Williamsburg residents commending Melissa's neighbor and expressing how they too were proud to be a part of this community. For Melissa, who says she didn't know a soul here except for her boyfriend when she moved from

the Northeast, it solidified for her that Williamsburg was a community it claimed to be: one filled with kind and friendly people.

"People aren't like this in Rhode Island," she says. "We're in such a tumultuous time right now with current events and the division in this world. I needed to put something out there to show there are good people. I'm grateful for what I have."

Melissa eventually met the neighbor who saved her car's interior from the rain several weeks later on an evening walk through her apartment complex.

"Ironically, that person approached me the night before this interview. Up until then, I had no idea who it was but I'm glad I had the opportunity to thank them. It was a very, very nice thing for them to do," she says.

Melissa's move to Williamsburg back in February was a result of her rekindling her relationship with Roger Pelletier, a songwriter-producer and owner of Colonial Capital Home Improvement, a local home remodeling and

repair company.

"It's quite a story in and of itself," Melissa says. "We were together 25 years ago. He moved from Rhode Island to Williamsburg, and we eventually went our separate ways. We remained friends but we lost touch. I had this recurring, strange feeling that I should reach out to him so I sent him a message on Facebook."

Melissa's message sparked a conversation, and she and Roger reconnected over an overseas vacation to London and Paris. She says Roger made her a promise at the top of the Eiffel Tower, and she moved to Williamsburg shortly after they returned home to the United States.

"It's been a complete joy to reconnect and get back together," she says.

In addition to traveling, Melissa says they have a shared love of music, painting, playing cards and indulging as "foodies" by trying out different spots around town. They're slowly making their house a home by adding local



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art, like blown glass pieces from the Jamestown Settlement to the interior and a backyard birdfeeder from Wild Birds Unlimited to the exterior, with hopes of attracting surrounding natural wildlife to their apartment balcony.

But despite starting a new chapter of her life in Williamsburg, Melissa remains very close with her family who live up and down the east coast. She has two sisters, one who lives in New York City, the other who lives in New Jersey with Melissa's two nieces. Her father and his wife live in Bluffton, South Carolina, and her mother lives in Rhode Island, as does her 25-year-old daughter Remy, who runs a successful lash extension business.

"I'm so proud of her. She is just a powerhouse of beauty and grace, and she is my best accomplishment," Melissa says.

They overcome the geographic separation by scheduling frequent Zoom calls, especially between Melissa, her sisters, and her mother while her mother was hospitalized in late August with COVID-19.

"The four of us get on Zoom, and we talk

to her and get to see her. This has got to be the scariest thing she has ever gone through and hopefully these chats give her hope. We are very pleased, happy and grateful as it looks like she has come past and survived the virus," she says.

As Thanksgiving approaches, Melissa is thankful for the health of her loved ones and family in addition to her own, for her daughter, and to have the love of her life in her life. She's looking forward to enjoying the holiday, which she says is her favorite, and partaking in their family's traditions.

"Family gathers, they express what they're grateful for, we eat a feast, and there is no stress in regards to the pressure to buy presents," she explains. "In our family, the stuffing is a big deal. We have to have a specific recipe and everybody has to take some home."

Looking ahead to 2021 and beyond, Melissa says she has some very specific personal and professional goals. She and Roger would like to travel back to London and get married at the Old Marylebone Town Hall, a place that

unites their love of the UK with their love of music and the Beatles as it's the location where Paul McCartney married his first wife, Linda in 1969.

A long-term goal Melissa has is to work hard and help Roger grow his business.

"Right now, I work with him and have a couple of specialized duties. He's teaching me new things every day," she says. "But my plan is to move into home cleaning projects and start a housekeeping business. I'm looking at moving forward to try to build this business up really, really big."

As she works towards this goal, Melissa Gauvin is planting firm roots in Williamsburg. From exploring William & Mary's campus to enjoying the gardening of Colonial Williamsburg to popping into Busch Gardens during a special event. There are a lot of activities in the area she looks forward to experiencing.

"You cannot help but get up in the morning and love your community here," she says. "It was extremely good for my soul to move down here, and I enjoy it very much." NDN



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# The Importance of Family & Community

By Caroline Johnson



Lisa Lee Photography

When it comes to the long list of things Jennifer Mitchell is grateful for, her family is at the top of her list. Family means so much to Jennifer that it brought her across the country, moving right next door to her in-laws. After relocating to Williamsburg from California in 2017 with her family, Jennifer hit the ground

running, making their new house their home and investing in their local community. As she builds her business and seeks new ways to support others while making time for her family, she feels grateful for the life she has been given.

“God, family and business are how I encompass my life,” Jennifer says. “God really

has blessed me with the best family I could have.” As a REALTOR®, serial entrepreneur and philanthropist, Jennifer finds balance and gratitude amidst even the busiest of times. Jennifer and her husband, David, have two children, Eve and John, and a “fur-baby,” Zoey. With family taking precedence in all she does,

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she never forgets they are what matters most.

After a cancer scare in 2009 that ended up being benign, Jennifer is continually reminded about the importance of gratitude. "As I get older, I've found there are a lot of things that happen that make me appreciate the little things and the huge differences they make," Jennifer says. "It's not always the big things that matter the most."

With an immediate and extended family who have always been a consistent source of support, she doesn't have to look far to find encouragement and love. And while her mom and sister still live in California, their bond goes far beyond the distance. She works to do whatever she can to bring the type of support she was shown into her own family, emulating what she learned from her mom as she raises her kids. "My mom has always been there for me as a supportive person, and I wish I could be more like her," Jennifer says. "When you have a strong and supportive family, you feel like you can do anything." This support has been especially paramount as she continues to grow her career.

Born in Korea, Jennifer came to the United States when she was two and lived in California until 2017. While in California, she obtained her real estate license and began practicing real estate after years of previous jobs with no work-life balance. With a history of working in insurance, banking and the auto industries, she found herself being pulled in too many directions that took her away from what mattered most: family.

"I noticed the jobs I had before led me to miss a lot of time with my kids," Jennifer says. "With real estate, though I still work hard and have long hours, I have the opportunity to say no." She recalls a time in her previous career where she was asked to miss both her and her son's birthday. After this, she decided to resign and pursue real estate.

When the taxing process of transferring her license to Virginia from California was complete, she was thrilled to utilize her expertise and love for the community to serve Williamsburg as a REALTOR®. While many industries are finding now to be a slow time, Jennifer has been staying busy working to help others buy and sell their homes. "It's a weird market right now, but a seller's market," Jennifer says. "There's not as much inventory since many who wanted to sell are holding back, so more people are looking to buy than there are selling."

While in California practicing real estate, Jennifer became fluent in using technology to promote the homes she was selling and connect with her buyers. Because of her experience hosting webinars and taking her business online, she has been able to stay productive during a time of so many unknowns.

Before the pandemic, she found herself busy and beginning to burn out in the evenings. As a REALTOR®. She works around her clients' schedules, often requiring evening hours or being flexible. Because of the unexpected shutdowns of schools and life as we knew it, Jennifer found gratitude in her newly available time with her kids.

"I've been able to reconnect with my kids more," Jennifer says. "While we're still all connected on the internet as we were before, we're also now taking walks more and reconnecting with one another." Her focus on

her family remains paramount, taking the time to slow down after being forced to by the pandemic. These unexpected blessings helped her feel especially thankful for the kids she gets to call her own.

“I couldn’t ask for better kids,” Jennifer shares. “They’re intelligent and wonderful, and I’m here to do what I can to support them and help them along as my mom did for me.”

Though life right now looks different than anyone could have prepared for, Jennifer still makes the time to look out for and serve others. “I’m all about giving back,” Jennifer shares. When she lived in California, she helped establish a nonprofit called PUSH Matters. “I knew when I got here that I wanted to continue that type of work.” She asked around, going to businesses, nonprofits and county offices to try to find out how she could help locally.

What she found was that there were many organizations in need of help all at the same time. Though their needs differed, she knew there had to be a way for her to help as many organizations as possible all at once. This past June, she brought PUSH Matters to Virginia with a mission of promoting and providing positive understanding, support, hope and education for the underprivileged or under-represented members of our community.

Dedicated to removing nonacademic barriers to education for children and adults by providing them with information and resources, her vision is to bring our community together to help fulfill the identified needs. With planned projects like backpack, coat, glove and toy drives in the works, she looks forward to touching the lives of Williamsburg neighbors and giving back to others.

Locally, Jennifer finds gratitude in her REALTOR® friends and the Car and Motorcycle Enthusiast clubs she is a part of. When thinking about local educators, law enforcement, first responders and medical professionals, she is especially grateful. “With all that’s been going on during these crazy times, I’m especially thankful for them and how hard they have all been working.” In July, WJCC Police and Fire Department, along with members of Cars and Coffee Williamsburg, took time out of their day to drive by for her son’s birthday, showing how much they care.

Along with special moments like that, she has seen firsthand how hard teachers are working to figure out what schooling looks like as they engage students within the WJCC school system. “I really appreciate all they are doing,” Jennifer says. “They are all truly heroes to me.”

As a REALTOR®, one specific experience reminds her about why she loves living in a town like Williamsburg. Like many things in her life, this is a small thing that makes a big impact. Because of her job, she finds herself driving through a variety of Williamsburg neighborhoods, often in places she doesn’t live. What she notices sets the standard for what being a good neighbor is all about. “No matter what neighborhood you’re in, people wave at you as you drive by,” Jennifer says. “You don’t get that in most of California.” It’s moments like this that make Jennifer Mitchell grateful that she chose Williamsburg to be her family’s home. NDN



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# Finding Hidden Opportunity

By Narielle Living



Lisa Lee Photography

Patricia Lambert is a busy woman, especially now that she and her husband recently moved across the country to settle in the Williamsburg area. As an entrepreneur, she focuses on two businesses: a dance program for kids, Swing-Kidz, and women’s achievement coaching. She is also working on publishing a 2021 planner that is complete with penguins, which she adores. Part of the proceeds from this will go to charity. Somehow she has managed to maintain a positive attitude and juggle all of this, even during a pandemic.

Originally from New Jersey, Patricia’s family moved to Montana when she was 14. She attended both high school and college in Montana. “I initially I got my degree in English education,” she says. “Then I decided that being an entrepreneur and doing a bunch of different things was so much better for me. So I run two businesses. Currently, I run Dancing with Patricia, my partner dance business where I focus primarily on West Coast Swing, and I also work a lot with wedding couples preparing for choreography, or lead-follow dependent on

their songs and their vision for their dance.”

Within the West Coast Swing dance program, Patricia also has a swing kids’ program, where she works with people ages three to 24. “A lot of my dance stuff is online right now, partially because I moved 2,300 miles from Montana and partially because of COVID.” Many of her dance classes are done via Zoom or private groups on Facebook where she can post the curriculum. She expanded the kids’ program this year to include dance with some sign language and some science and history projects,



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in an effort to support the homeschool community. “This way the kids get extra exposure and they don’t necessarily know they’re doing homeschool, because it’s dance.”

Patricia has always been the type of person who works hard to achieve her goals. “When I was student teaching, in my last semester of college, I did a five-year degree in four years and really pushed through. In that last semester, I was overwhelmed with the number of restrictions [related to teaching]. I’m a little free spirited. I recognized the fact that even though I loved the teaching aspect, I wasn’t getting to impact people in a way that I felt good doing because I had to do everything under certain guidelines. Also, I didn’t have time for dancing, which was really important to me. I had been able to impact people in a different way through that. So, I started working at the university as an admin.”

Working at this job was a great experience. Patricia says her employer was amazing, very flexible and understanding of everything she was trying to accomplish at that time. “I worked in that position while I started to build my dance business.” But the strain of working both jobs was huge, and she gradually came to realize

this was not healthy for her. From that point, she made her decision. “I put in my resignation and became a full-time entrepreneur. And three months later, I married my best friend.”

Things were going well for Patricia and her husband. They both had jobs they loved, and they both had goals. Then COVID hit. The world shut down. “I moved everything online at that point. Overnight, we went from having an event one night to sending out a newsletter that all the classes were being offered virtually. My husband’s company works primarily with oil companies, and with the restrictions on travel, they weren’t producing as much. So, they needed to downsize. And I said, well, dear, do you want to apply for the one job in your field in the state of Montana or do you want to go on an adventure?”

They chose the adventure.

Patricia and her husband came out to Virginia in June to explore the area. “We visited Williamsburg,” she says. “I had been here when I was very young and we just we fell in love with the area.” This location worked well for them also because they wanted to be close to the water. “I’m a mermaid at heart.”

As part of the Swing Kids’ program she continues to teach, Patricia participates in monthly service projects. “This month was ‘choose a spot in your home community that you love and want to clean up.’ My husband and I cleaned up Yorktown beach.”

When Patricia works as a coach for women’s achievement, her goal is to help women reach their goals in a healthy, inspired way. “I work with women on empowering them to say yes to now and deciding what they want to do, whether that’s with passion projects, starting careers, starting businesses, or goals with their families. I do a lot of business coaching and work with private clients, as well as do group coaching programs and run a private community on Facebook.”

Patricia acknowledges that right now, her approach to coaching women is about dealing with a heavier type of life stressor. “A lot of women are overwhelmed,” she says. “I work with a lot of moms who go from having no schedule and no structure because they’re just overwhelmed with the number of things on their plates. We figure out a plan. I’m a huge fan of time blocking and structuring things so

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there's balance between work and play, because the play part of life is what keeps us going."

Patricia is grateful they made the decision to move here. "I love the ocean. I feel so energized by the water, and I can even go and sit by the ocean and record some of my coaching sessions. And I've always really liked history, so being able to just immerse in that is wonderful."

The aspects of her life that Patricia is most grateful for are the people who are with her on her journey. "I am so grateful for my parents. They always encouraged me to do whatever I wanted to do and do what made me happy and not just follow a money trail." She is also grateful that her husband, Jarrett, is truly her life partner. "We met when we were 14 as strangers who were partnered to dance in a school musical," she says. "He's so supportive, even with my craziest ideas. He'll come in when I'm in the middle of a long day of working and just deposit some food and snacks next to me."

When she met her husband as a young girl, Patricia had lived in Montana for less than two months. The choir director at school asked for a volunteer to learn to dance. "I raised my hand," she says. "I was like, sure I want to be a princess

for a day. And that's how we met. We started dancing to 'Tale as Old as Time' from Beauty and the Beast, and we had a Beauty and the Beast themed wedding."

Patricia Lambert has the ability to find gratitude and inspiration all around her. "One of the things that I talk to a lot of people about is finding the opportunity and the blessing, even in tragedy. So, if I look at COVID, it definitely hit me hard. My dance business had to pretty much close immediately. But looking back at the initiation of that, it was an opportunity to realize that everything could be shifted online. Moving was an opportunity that was possible because I wouldn't have considered leaving the community where I had built up dancers. The opportunity where my husband went through a downsizing had an opportunity to think about new options. So, find the opportunity and the blessings in the tragedy, because hindsight is 20/20.

We can always find something positive that comes out of those difficult times and then make sure there's balance and connection in life, moments of happiness and moments of things that you're looking forward to." NDN

## Next Door Neighbors

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# TIME for GIVING THANKS



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# Helping Families Cope

By Lillian Stevens



Lisa Tee Photography

Eleven years ago, Kasie Ballard was looking forward with great excitement to the birth of her son. She was just shy of her 21st birthday. “His name was Landon,” Kasie says. “Everything was normal for the first eight months. And then my life turned upside down.”

During the 34th week of her pregnancy, she noticed that her baby wasn’t moving around as much as normal. “My gut told me something was wrong. So, I called my doctor to arrange

an ultrasound for reassurance of his heartbeat.” There was no heartbeat.

Kasie has little memory of that day beyond the sheer shock of it all. She was sent to the hospital to deliver her son, stillborn. The emotional pain was swift and without mercy.

“I had never even heard of a stillbirth,” she says. “I went from planning to bring a baby home to visiting a funeral home to pick out a casket,” she says. “I kept thinking about all my

friends enjoying beach trips and parties. And I was sitting with a catalog of tiny coffins. I didn’t think that was fair.”

Kasie admits that she dealt with a lot of anger, as could be expected, but she ultimately made a firm promise to her son that anger and grief would not consume her.

“If he can look down and see me, I don’t want him to think that his loss ruined me. I’m still his mother. No, I can’t hold him and kiss

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him, but I can't let his short life be a tragedy either."

It took time, but Kasie went on to focus her energies into a very positive and powerful way, as a legacy to her son. It started with a stuffed, weighted bear that a friend sent her several years after Landon's death.

"That bear was a huge comfort to me," she says.

The bear represented a turning point for her. From that point on, Kasie set out to help others who had suffered the loss of an infant. She became certified as a birth and bereavement doula. As a bereavement doula, her role is essentially to help young mothers set out on a journey that they have no idea how to walk.

"When I meet a new mom, I go in and the first thing I do is acknowledge that she has carried and delivered this child. I shower her with love and support. I tell her what a beautiful baby she has. These moms need to be able to say 'look at my son; doesn't he have my nose?' too."

Kasie draws on her own experience from 11 years ago, thinking of everything she didn't have and everything she didn't do, because she was so immobilized with shock and grief.

"I go in and meet them wherever they are emotionally," she says. "Most mothers get years to be a mom, but these women have this one day to physically mother their child. So, I ask what she wants to do, and we do whatever it is she wants. If you want to bathe your baby, we will do it; if you want to dress your baby in a special outfit, we will do that too; portraits or hand prints on a baseball for dad? Let's do all of it."

The goal is to take this singular, horrible day and make memories that will bring comfort in the days and months to come.

As the hours progress, Kasie gently helps a family prepare for the inevitable farewell, a moment that transports her back in time to her own loss, and also the loss a close friend experienced.

"I had gone in to assist my friend," she says. "Her stillborn baby weighed nine pounds and she had been holding him on her chest for hours. All she could say was how empty she felt. I could see the defeat in her face as the nurse wrapped her baby and took him away."

Kasie accompanied the nurse into the hallway, only to find that the nurse was crying.

"It's hard on them too. They are going from a live birth with daddies and grandmas and aunts into a room filled with sadness and loss."

Kasie went home to her husband Jorge, knowing that he could help her process these new feelings which were bumping into so many old ones.

"My husband is my rock," Kasie says. "At the end of a bad day, he's always there to make sure I have a glass of wine and a hot bath."

On this day, the two brainstormed about ways to channel the waves of grief that never lay far from the surface.

"I told him how I kept remembering handing Landon over and feeling completely empty," she says. "My belly and arms were empty. We'd been one person for eight months and then I was alone."

She reached the conclusion that she would get her friend a weighted animal. "Being wheeled out of labor and delivery with empty arms is horrible. My friend needed something to take home."

With that, the first weighted angel was made. In 2019, Kasie joined forces with other young moms in the community who had experienced similar loss. They formed an organization known as Weighted Angels. Before that time, Williamsburg didn't have an infant bereavement support group.

"A bunch of us got together and had our own unofficial support group meeting at a Mexican restaurant," she says. "That night we learned that the babies we had each lost ranged in weight from under one pound to nine pounds." Thus, each animal represents a different weight class and each of the group's nine members chose an animal to represent the one she lost. The animals represent the space and weight of a lost baby. They are tangible ways of saving space.

"One pound gets a giraffe," Kasie explains. "An elephant weighs three pounds; a bunny is seven pounds. When the animals are donated to local hospitals, there is no guessing game because the staff there know which animal to match with which mom."

The stuffed animals are purchased from several different online vendors. Upon arrival, the

stuffing is removed and the animals are filled with weighted beads or other materials in order to reach the appropriate weight. Accompanying each animal is a handwritten letter from one of their group, as well as a resources list, including contact information on bereavement doulas, group information, memorial items and books.

Kasie has authored a book, *With All the Pieces*.

"When my son died, my heart broke into a million pieces, but they are still a part of me. I tell my sons that I love them with all those pieces."

With the help of her husband and her family, Kasie has been steadfast in her own journey while helping others through theirs.

"I couldn't do it without them," she says. "We joke that our kids have four parents because my mom and younger sister are like parents to them too."

Kasie and Jorge have three other sons, one with special needs. Alexander is ten years old, younger brother Owen is six. Baby brother Eliot is ten months.

"Our son Alexander was born with a genetic disorder called Mowat-Wilson syndrome," she says. "He has a lot of health conditions but he's an incredible boy. Without having lost Landon, I might have found mothering a special needs child insurmountable. After losing a child, though, I knew that as long as he's breathing it will be okay."

Kasie has home-schooled her children since long before COVID-19. That means her sons have not had to make tremendous adjustments school-wise.

The pandemic, however, delivered challenges to her work as a bereavement doula because she cannot offer that same in-person support in the hospital.

"Instead, I'll FaceTime with the families and walk them through the steps of that important day. So much of it is just preparing for what lies ahead."

So many in this community are thankful for people like Kasie, and organizations like Weighted Angels. October is Pregnancy & Infant Loss Awareness month, a time to recognize the unique grief of bereaved parents in an effort to demonstrate support to the many families who have suffered such a tragic loss. NDN

# TYLER BROOKS



Lisa Lee Photography

## Life in Left Field

By Paige Brotherton

There is a quiet hum to life in Williamsburg. But amid the grocery store runs, car repairs, and post office stops, we are all searching for a place where we can simply be happy and grateful for something we love. Tyler Brooks has found that place in the Williamsburg Senior Softball League.

“I was born and raised in Williamsburg, Virginia,” Tyler says. “It’s a great place to live. It’s a beautiful hometown which is growing so fast that it’s not that little anymore.”

Tyler was born in 1951, so he remembers when the town had only two elementary schools. “You sort of knew everybody in town and everybody knew you. When you walked down Duke of Gloucester street, they knew



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whose kids you were and who your parents were. Believe me, you couldn't get away with anything. Step out of line in any way, shape or form, and your mama knew about it before you got home from school."

Despite the growing population, Tyler is grateful that Williamsburg has stayed the same friendly community he has always loved. With his family nearby, and his wife, Cheri, he has the most important parts of life just a short drive away. Though he retired from his family's real estate company in 2017, he couldn't stay away for long. "I got so bored with being at home, and my routine got broken, so I went to work part time for Brooks Real estate again," Tyler says. "But I've made time to play old man's softball." And that, of course, is one of his favorite things to do in the community.

"I've been playing organized baseball or softball since 1960. I haven't missed a season since," Tyler says proudly. Sixty years may seem like an impossibly long legacy of loyalty to one sport, but Tyler remembers it all fondly.

It began when he was nine years old, a stu-

dent at Matthew Whaley Elementary and eager to become a part of what was then a town tradition. "Everybody tried out for Little League. And we used the baseball field back towards the railroad tracks in the Matthew Whaley playground." That lone diamond of dirt on the corner was one of only a couple fields in town; Kiwanis Park had yet to be built. Even with only a few playing fields, Williamsburg still had nine or ten Little League teams each year.

"You went to try out and you got selected, and what a great day that was when you made the team," Tyler says. The players could be anywhere from nine to twelve years old, all vying for the same positions. The director of the league would call all the kids together at the beginning of the season and toss out bags containing the uniforms they reused year to year. It didn't matter that a slew of other kids had dove into the mud and sprinted around the bases in that very same jersey, nor that the team names were those of local businesses who had sponsored the league; to the kid making his baseball debut, it was the best day of the summer.

Tyler laughs when he remembers the uniforms. "It looked like they put a big potato sack on you because you weighed like fifty pounds. So, you ended up with a uniform that was a little baggy on you, but you were proud of it and proud to wear it everywhere." At the end of season, two of the biggest families in town, the Hogges and the Richardsons, hosted a championship game on a field they had built themselves at the intersection between News and Centerville Road. The winners carried their bragging rights for a year.

After graduating from the first league, the players joined the Pony League to take on the next level of competition. As for Tyler, he planned to follow his favorite sport no matter where the bases were set.

"I went to James Blair High School in seventh and eighth grade and played JV baseball. Then I went away to Christ Church School and played varsity baseball there for four years. At the same time, I played Post Thirty-Nine American Legion Baseball for three years." When Tyler went away to Hampden Sydney

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College in 1970, he played for another four years. Returning to Williamsburg, he found adult slow-pitch softball teams and kept the game going. Even as he's grown older, the community continues to support his desire to play.

"Those who wanted to continue to be effective and participate in an organized sport had an opportunity to do it with Williamsburg Senior Softball League. They've done a great job of making it as user friendly and accommodating as possible." With players ranging from fifty-five to into their eighties, the league ensures their members are staying both safe and active as they pursue an activity they love.

"Before the season, we have a couple of weeks of practice and practice games, so everybody gets their feet back under them and gets back into the groove from not playing for four to five months," Tyler says. Once the season gets in full swing, the focus shifts from practice to the game days. The program directors try to even out the skill levels on all the teams so the competition can be both exciting and fun for everyone. So far, WSSL teams play only locally, but Tyler feels that challenging teams in other regions may be on the horizon.

The world of organized sports is a great way

to keep people engaged and active, but Tyler's fondest memories of baseball happened long before electric scoreboards or even little league uniforms.

"You got up in the summertime, you went downstairs, your mom made you breakfast, and she said, 'be home by dinnertime,'" Tyler remembers. "We had the run of the town and everywhere we wanted to go. We didn't have to worry about anything because we had three hundred moms looking out for us and making sure we weren't doing anything wrong."

In the middle of the twentieth century, Williamsburg had no shortage of undeveloped land for a group of determined kids to carve out their playing field. Tyler and his friends decided on the plot of then-empty land where Laurel Lane Elementary school stands today. "We borrowed our parents' lawn mowers and we cut a field in tall weeds, sort of like the corn stocks from Field of Dreams, but it was only weeds." There were no uniforms or umpires; it was neighborhood against neighborhood, each kid swinging for the weeds in hopes of claiming a temporary victory until the rematch the next day.

"The problem was, sort of like the movie

Sandlot, we only had one ball," Tyler says. "Usually that was all we could come up with. So, if somebody had a long ball or it went through someone's legs and into the weeds and we couldn't find it, we had to suspend the game until we could walk up and down the side streets picking up enough returnable bottles. We'd take them to the store and trade them in for three cents apiece. And then somebody had to ride their bike down to Gloucester Street where the sports store was and buy a ball."

Nowadays, Tyler's ball playing has a little more structure to it, with regular Tuesday and Thursday games at Kiwanis while the morning dew is still drying in the outfield. The Williamsburg Senior Softball League is excited to accept anyone with a respect for the game and their safety. It can be tough for an aging crowd to stay in shape without fear of injury, but the league is extremely conscientious of how it takes care of its members. As manager, Tyler is dialed in on all the new changes. However, some things always stay the same.

Tyler Brooks is grateful for a childhood filled with a homemade field and a single ball, and he's grateful to know that he can still play a game he loves that never gets old. NDN

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# CHRISTIAN PASCALE

## Memories Are The Stories We Tell Ourselves

By Susan Williamson



Lisa Lee Photography

Christian Pascale credits God for the happy circumstances of his life, and he says there have been many. Chris is grateful for his wife of thirty-three years, Liria. He met the Brazilian native when a church pastor invited him to come from Brasilia, where he was working, to

Sao Paulo for a conference. The pastor had also invited Liria, who lived in the agricultural region of south Brazil near the Argentine border, many hour's drive away. The couple hit it off, dated briefly, and decided to marry.

Brasilia was one of the many cosmopolitan

cities where Chris was fortunate to live. In addition, Mexico City, Paris, Washington, Athens, and cities all over the world were all home to him. The last sixteen years he has worked as an independent contractor.

Chris grew up in two different neighbor-

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hoods in Brooklyn, New York. When his father was transferred to New Jersey, he went from attending a private boy's school to a public high school, a transition that was far from easy. But the tennis club across the street caught his attention. Tournament tennis was a large part of his life for many years, both as a player and a coach and instructor. He stopped playing in 2008 when he realized that work commitments limited his practice time and that he would not improve. He is still an avid follower, but chooses not to play, because for him it was always about the competition.

In high school, he became an avid reader, enjoying his parents' collection of classic American and European novels, which fueled a desire to know more about and travel the world.

After high school, Chris attended Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, where he graduated Magna Cum Laude with degrees in French and international relations. He began

writing in college and won an English prize for his essays. Even then, his faith was very important to him, and he received the Gilbert Bible Prize for excelling in religious studies. After Lafayette, he went on to American University in Washington, D.C. where he received an M.A. in European Area Studies. He went to Europe intending to travel the continent, but fell in love with Paris. He became a tennis instructor, taught English as a second language and completed a Doctorat de l'universite' from La Sorbonne where he studied contemporary French history.

During summers, between schools and before starting his career, Chris worked at a variety of jobs, serving as an inner-city substitute teacher, a director of studies at a New England prep school, and a political fundraiser. He also worked on various church projects.

Chris and Liria visited the Williamsburg area and fell in love with the town. He says, "It's not often you can find a small town with

a university, an international community and close proximity to cosmopolitan cities." They decided it would be the perfect place to retire. He adds, "One of our sons Michel, a Virginia Tech graduate, lives in Blacksburg, and it's a nice town with a university, but it's so far from any larger cities." Their other son, Raphael, lives and works on the peninsula.

Chris gives thanks for his local church, First Church of Christ, Scientist Williamsburg. He believes that life events can be attributed to luck or faith, and he chooses to believe in faith and the power of prayer. One example involves his son Raphael who also lives in Williamsburg. Chris had a premonition that something was wrong, and he and his wife began earnest prayer. Their son called to tell them he had been in an accident and was in the hospital. They immediately drove to Richmond and found out their son wasn't in a car in the accident but was walking when he was hit by a truck and thrown fifteen feet through



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the air before landing on concrete. The next day, he walked out of the hospital with only a few scratches. Raphael also totaled a car on black ice several years later and again had no significant injuries.

One of the many things Chris is grateful for is his Queens Lake neighborhood. “We are a diverse community in religious affiliation and political views, but we all pull together.” When York County considered allowing Airbnb’s in the neighborhood, neighbors canvassed the community and found eight out of ten people opposed the ordinance. Residents wrote letters, and the York County Board of Supervisors ultimately did not approve the proposal. “York County has no regulations that cover short-term rentals, and without these being in place, there could be problems. Williamsburg, on the other hand, has very specific guidelines for such rentals.” He also enjoys the wooded aspect of his neighborhood and the beauty of the landscapes.

He and his wife continue to travel, and between the two of them speak Spanish, Portuguese, German and French. They visit family in Brazil every two years, and travel elsewhere during the alternate years. Last year they visited Japan with their two adult sons, Raphael and Michel Paul, one of whom speaks Japanese and served as their travel guide. They both have German ancestry and enjoyed seeing the Black Forest area of Germany. The ongoing pandemic makes it doubtful that they will make their semi-annual Brazilian visit.

When the couple settled in the Williamsburg area, Liria trained as an architect in her native Brazil, had the opportunity to use her skills as a project manager in the Williamsburg area. Prior to that, she had only worked temporary jobs when they traveled to Chris’s work locations. She retired in 2015. She paints pastels, and Chris has found a new career as a writer. He recently released a collection of stories, *Memories Are the Stories We Tell Ourselves*,

which contain 19 stories about life, friendship and travel. As a member of the James City Poets, Chris believes that writing is a healing exercise, and he uses poetry to react to what he sees and hears with images and music. Fellow poets often circulate poems of reaction to life or world events throughout the group. He also writes fiction and non-fiction and joins with writers from Chesapeake Bay Writers in a critique group. He admires the work of Ray Bradbury. Chris believes evil in the world can be overcome with humor, kindness and love.

Although Chris no longer plays tournament tennis, he is still an avid follower on the tennis channel. He and his wife also follow World Cup Soccer and ice hockey. The couple enjoys walking when they can, in their neighborhood, in Williamsburg and on their travels.

Chris Pascale is thankful for a rich life. He is grateful to God for family, home, career, writing, travel, health and the strong faith, which continues to shape his view of the world. NDN

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Lisa Lee Photography

# Grateful for the Journey

By Narielle Living

Brittany Ghio likes to spread beauty in the world, and she manages to create exquisite, handwritten items that are infused with hospitality and gratitude. Her goal is to make her clients feel as if they are coming home into a warm embrace. That is why her business is named Farmstead Design Studio, which is a bit of a play on the word “homestead.”

Both Brittany and her husband, Sergio, were born and raised in Southern California.

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"I went to college in San Diego, where I met my husband." She met her husband through their respective roommates. "His roommate and my roommate met on Match.com, so we met by match.com by proxy," she says with a smile. The match is clearly a good one, as the couple is celebrating their 10-year anniversary this month.

After getting married, they decided to move. California was great but they were ready for a change. "Kind of on a whim," she says. "Across the country to Asheville, North Carolina." They lived there for about five years and then moved to Charlottesville, Virginia for about two years, followed by a move to Jackson, Tennessee. Now the couple is planted in Williamsburg.

Although these moves seem random, they are not. "My husband is the general manager of the DoubleTree Hotel," she says. "In order for him to move up in his career, we have been willing to move around. Now I'm done. I can't do it [again] for a while."

Brittany's business focuses on custom wedding stationery and calligraphy. "I am not about

cookie-cutter anything. I like to really get to know my couples and get to know their story." She says that because the invitation paper is one of the first things that guests actually see, that is what sets them up for the actual wedding.

"Besides the ring and the dress and the pictures, it's one of the only other tangible things that you can, you know, see and feel from the day of. So, I make custom bespoke heirloom stationery that tells a couple's story." Brittany's intent is for the wedding guests to receive the happiest piece of mail that they have ever gotten in their life. "My whole thing is telling stories through pen and paper and making the whole experience unique and detailed."

Brittany did not know this was what she wanted to do with her life until after college. She received a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology with the goal of continuing her studies and aiming for a PhD in psychology. "I started working after I graduated," she says. "I was the project manager for a psychology research project." Brittany quickly realized that this type of work was stifling to her.

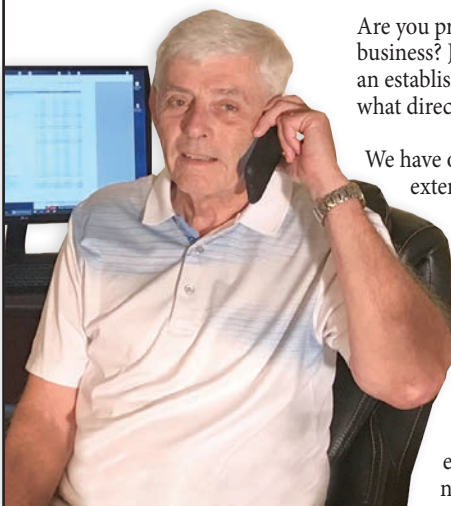
"There wasn't enough creativity. I was doing the exact same thing that the other grad students were doing and I thought, I can't do this for another seven years. So, I got an internship with a wedding planner in San Diego." This internship happened the week after her husband, then boyfriend, proposed. "I was planning my wedding while learning about being a wedding planner. I designed and did all the invitations and all the paper for everything. I pretty much made everything."

She ended up making so many items for her wedding that they had to rent a U-Haul to move everything to the wedding location. "I love arts and crafts and all that sort of stuff." In 2009, she began working in the luxury wedding planning arena in San Diego. When they moved to Asheville, she continued this work but began to focus more on the design aspect of things. "Again, my whole thing was telling stories and telling a couple's story in an aesthetically pleasing way. I am all about the details, and I don't care if anyone else picks up on those details. The couple getting married, they know

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and it's special to them.”

Brittany dove into the world of custom bespoke wedding stationery. She took a calligraphy class and marveled over the texture and tactile impression of a letterpress invitation. When she started offering her design services for stationery, it did not matter that she moved often. With paper and calligraphy, she did not have to be in the same location as the wedding. “It doesn't matter where I am, or where my clients are, so that's awesome.”

Although Brittany previously lived in another region of Virginia, she has only resided in the Williamsburg area for a little over a year. But she loves this part of the world. In other places she has called home, she was not near the water, a detail that was disappointing. After all, she grew up near the ocean. “There's just something about the smell of the salt in the air,” she says. She loves the fact that Williamsburg is the right size. It does not feel like a large urban area but at the same time it's not a small town with nothing to do, which is important for her as she raises her two children. “There's been plenty

of things for us to do as a family.” She also enjoys the proximity to Richmond and the rest of Hampton Roads. “And there's something about being in areas of history that I always find intriguing.” Brittany, who is Native American and was raised culturally as Cherokee, believes the connection to the past is important. “That connection to Jamestown, being one of the first settlements, is very humbling in a way. I always want to pay homage to the first peoples who were here.”

The other aspect of living in this area that she appreciates, especially after spending her childhood in California, is being surrounded by trees and watching them change color in the fall. “We grew up with no trees, and I like seeing the trees change color.”

Brittany weaves gratitude into her daily life. She views the invitations that she creates as a sign of gratitude toward others. “It's a huge sign of gratitude to be able to receive an invitation and to know you have a special enough relationship that they're willing to pay for you to come and experience this magical moment

with them.” And she views the thank-you notes that go out after a wedding as another symbol of connection and gratitude. “It's the thought that somebody took the time to get a pen and paper, write it all down, put it in the envelope, get a stamp... That moment of actually sending it off either at the post office or in your mailbox, with that loving touch because they physically touched it and they put their love into it. Whereas an email doesn't have that same feeling.”

One of the things that Brittany Ghio stresses is that she is thankful for all the adventures she and her family have had and all of the places where they've been able to live. Her son, Grayson, who is seven and in first grade and daughter Emery who is two, have been able to experience a variety of people and places for which she is grateful.

“I see them growing up, but I'm thankful for all the opportunities that we've had. Life isn't easy, but it's kind of amazing for my husband and I to look back and see where the journey has taken us and where we've ended up.” NDN



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Lisa Lee Photography



# Raising Awareness on the Job

By Narielle Living

Every year, the Greater Williamsburg Business Council's Health Committee presents one person with the prestigious health promoter award. The purpose of the award is to recognize individuals, businesses or civic groups that work hard and go beyond the call of duty to create opportunities to facilitate healthy lifestyles for local citizens. This year, the number of nominations received for the award was unprecedented. After much con-

sideration, the committee decided that the winner should be Ben Woodhouse, master police officer with James City County police department, because of his diligence in raising mental health and disabilities awareness among first responders, law enforcement and the community at large.

Ben discovered he had won the award during a Zoom meeting he was asked to attend. "I was actually in total shock when I got pulled

into a Zoom meeting," he says. "I had no idea it was coming."

Currently, Ben is assigned to the Community Services Unit, where he focuses on public education, including speaking with community leaders about current scams and how to keep people safe. "On top of that, I'm a crime prevention specialist," he says. In this role, he does what is called "security surveys." This involves evaluating the security



of an area, home or business. “In some cases, we do home security surveys when we come out. We make recommendations for securing your home better. In other cases, like houses

we give them an idea of where they could use some enhancements and outdoor lighting to make it safer outside.”

According to Ben, his schedule with the de-

partment is fairly flexible, so in addition to his regular duties he is able to do extra things to help others, which is an intrinsic part of his nature.

“We need to continue to educate and reach out and promote safety to all of our citizens and not forget anyone.”

~ Ben Woodhouse

partment is fairly flexible, so in addition to his regular duties he is able to do extra things to help others, which is an intrinsic part of his nature. This past summer, he worked with a program called Cops Camp. “I supported them in their efforts with that camp. It’s just one of the extra things that we do. Sometimes if our patrol units are busy, or they need assistance

of worship or businesses, we go out and recommend enhancements to their security to make them safer and to make them operate maybe a little bit smoother, as far as the security side.” This includes evaluating the presence and effectiveness of equipment such as lighting and cameras. “I typically do what’s called a lighting survey, which is where we use a light meter around the outside of the property and

college led him to choose law enforcement as a career. “It clicked,” he says. “I really wanted to get into law enforcement. My dad had been in law enforcement in Indiana.” When Ben realized he wanted to pursue a career in law enforcement, he began applying to various places for a job. A little over 15 years ago, Ben was hired with the James City County police depart-

on the road, I can help them.” Born in Indiana, Ben moved to upstate New York when he was a child and grew up in that area. “When I lived in New York, I worked in security. I worked very closely with local police departments out there, and I really like what they did.” At the same time, he was a volunteer firefighter, since almost all of the communities in that region rely on volunteer firefighters. The combination of security work, volunteer firefighting and

college led him to choose law enforcement as a career. “It clicked,” he says. “I really wanted to get into law enforcement. My dad had been in law enforcement in Indiana.” When Ben realized he wanted to pursue a career in law enforcement, he began applying to various places for a job.

A little over 15 years ago, Ben was hired with the James City County police depart-

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ment and began working here.

Ben's decision to move to James City County was based on a couple of factors. "I came here partly because of the weather. And I did a lot of research on the area, and I picked James City County because I thought it was a great community, a great place to live."

Another bonus for Ben when he moved here is his love of American history. "We have plenty of it," he says. "Occasionally, I've run into archaeologists doing digs. And let me tell you, that's one of the coolest things. If you can ever get to an archeological dig and talk to the people doing the work during the day, that's really cool."

The deciding factor in giving Ben the health promoter award was his dedication in spearheading the Autism Awareness Project for the police department. The work he did on this project highlighted the tremendous need for

both mental health and disabilities awareness among first responders.

Currently, the police department has a program called Project Lifesaver, which is a tracking device used for people who tend to wan-

scious, an officer would understand that the child in the vehicle had autism, providing an explanation for behavioral issues that might arise such as not making eye contact or speaking. When the parent asked if they provided

"This (Heads Up Program) gives us an early heads up. It provides officers an early alert, letting us know somebody at this address has autism or dementia or so forth. It's an extra thing that we can add to our toolbox." ~Ben Woodhouse

der, such as those with dementia, traumatic brain injury or autism. While installing a new battery in a Project Lifesaver bracelet, he was speaking with the parent who told him about a program they used to participate in where the police department provided a sticker or a magnet for their vehicle. The purpose of this was in the event the parent became uncon-

the sticker, Ben said no, they did not. But he was intrigued and decided to investigate this program. "I started doing some research and I found that at that time the data said one in 68 people are on the autism spectrum." This number stunned Ben, who then realized this amounted to millions of people. More research suggested that autism is the fastest



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growing disability in our country. He started thinking about a parent getting in a car crash and becoming unconscious with a child on the spectrum in the vehicle, and he considered what the department response might be. From there, he researched the cost of the stickers and additional steps that would need to be taken, such as disability awareness training. “I teach law enforcement about disabilities and things like that. So, I looked at the training I had available to me, and I put all this together.”

He went on to write a proposal for an Autism Awareness sticker or magnet to be placed on a vehicle or the door of a home that would alert all first responders. This allows first responders to approach a situation with a higher level of situational awareness and gives them the ability to take a step back and evaluate the circumstances or change their approach.

“We’ve also worked to promote our Heads Up Program,” Ben says. This program enables parents and people who have disabilities to provide the emergency communications cen-

ter with information about their pre-existing condition. “This gives us an early heads up. It provides officers an early alert, letting us know somebody at this address has autism or dementia or so forth. It’s an extra thing that we can add to our toolbox.”

Ben is thrilled at the response to the Autism Awareness Program. “I’ve gotten feedback from parents and officers over the last few years,” he says. He says the officers often tell him things like, “On the way up to the door I noticed that there their license plate was an autism license plate. When I got to the door, I saw our program sticker.” In addition, he says parents have given him feedback. “They’ve said, ‘I had officers come to my home the other night, and this is an amazing program. The officers were able to speak to my son, and the interaction was a positive interaction.’ What we’re always trying to do in law enforcement is to make that positive interaction.”

Ben has also worked with the ARC of Greater Williamsburg, which serves adults

with disabilities. He taught classes for people who attend the ARC on topics such as internet safety. “We need to continue to educate and reach out and promote safety to all of our citizens and not forget anyone.”

Ben says that he is honored to receive this award. “It’s not something I anticipated. We do things all the time, and we don’t expect to get recognition. At the end of the day, I really hope that by receiving this award I’m able to bring continued awareness and support to a very diverse group of citizens who have disabilities and who live and work in our community. I would love to bring more exposure [to people with disabilities] and get people involved.”

When he was 18 years old, Ben became a volunteer firefighter. “When I moved here, I took a couple years off from being a volunteer, and then I became a volunteer firefighter here. I encourage everyone to get active in the community and volunteer when you can. That’s what makes our community so great.” NDN

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# EVALUATING A HOME

By Dawn Brotherton

For people in the market to buy or sell property, a professional evaluation is key to ensuring the best possible price. Some think of appraisers as the doom and gloom here to kill the deal. “But I’ve approached my business from a completely different perspective,” says Matthew Williams from Premier Home Appraisers. “If you have a question, pick up the phone and call me. Please use me as a resource.”

Lending institutions are not Matt’s sole clients. He also works with retirees, attorneys, wealth managers and real estate brokers. “I’m a resource for everybody in the community who needs valuation expertise



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of their home.”

He isn't sitting back waiting for clients to come to him. He teaches classes on general appraisal practices to various real estate bro-

The connections he makes by walking into over one hundred homes a month gives him fulfillment on the job and makes him feel more passionate about the Historic Triangle.

eral manager in several restaurants, Matt grew quite comfortable in management. Overseeing multiple locations kept him on the road 364 days a year. “I say everyone should work in the

restaurant business at least once.

It was such a great experience. You're an accountant, manager, psychologist, plumber and electrician. I learned so much about running a business.”

When Matt met his wife, Tina, over eleven years ago, they hit it off right away. “We're both very type-A personalities with

“My favorite job in the whole world is being a dad.”

~ Matthew Williams

entrepreneurial spirits.”

kerage houses and lending institutions. “One of my favorite things about my job is getting in front of people, answering questions, going through scenarios, and helping out.”

Matt is a people person. Working hard and helping gives him energy. “I love this community, everything about it. I love that it's small enough that it feels personal,” he says. “I get to touch so many different people's lives.”

Originally from Pensacola, Florida, Matt moved to Virginia to swim for Old Dominion University. After two years, he returned to Florida to get his Associate's Degree in Business Studies from Pensacola State College. He was still working out his future business goals when he returned to the Tidewater area approximately twenty years ago.

Working his way up from bartender to gen-

Their daughter, Mallory Grace, came along and changed Matt's world. “My favorite job in the whole world is being a dad.” While he loved restaurant management, he wanted more time with their daughter.

His brother-in-law was a home appraiser for the D.C., Maryland and northern Virginia area, and he convinced Matt to give it a try.

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“Sometimes when you’re reinventing yourself or trying to figure out what you want to do, you go through one door and see if it fits. There were other opportunities I tried that just didn’t fit. The first day, when I [shadowed him] on an inspection, I knew this is what I wanted to do,” he says.

It took two years for Matt to complete the coursework and apprentice time required for his license. That included many hours driving the I-95-corridor. In 2012, he opened the Richmond-Hampton Roads branch of Premier Home Appraisals, with his brother-in-law maintaining the northern Virginia branch.

Their partnership has worked well for a small business, giving each autonomy for their area, but having support in place when needed. “It’s great to have people to bounce stuff off, because every house is different,” Matt says. They are constantly learning from each

other.

Getting a business license was the easy part. “Once you have this piece of paper, you have to get clients, so that’s really the tough part.” But he has really enjoyed the networking and the chance to meet and assist new people.

“In my work, I focus on three guiding principles: be independent, objective, and unbiased.”

~ Matthew Williams

“The build for me has been the exciting and rewarding part because you start with one small client, and then you jump to another one, then you get another one. And then you get introduced to different people in the community. And that opens bigger and bigger doors,” Matt says.

faction while being true to the market.

“It starts with doing really good work to giving an exceptional quality product that’s compliant. I feel really good putting my stamp on that. If you do a good job, take care of people, and you’re fair, [business] grows from there.”

A normal day for Matt starts at four o’clock

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in the morning with exercise, then he gets right to work. "Once I get home, everything stops because I want to be with my family in the afternoon."

Matt has a lot to be thankful for this season. First, his wife and best friend, Tina. "Without her, I would not be the man I am today," he says.

Next, his daughter. "There are few words that describe the love a parent feels for their child." There are many more things, including his health, his faith, friends and family. But putting his business hat back on, he says, "I'm really grateful for the people who believed in me and took a chance."

When he isn't on the go with Premier Home Appraisals, Matt can typically be found in the pool five days a week. While he doesn't coach his daughter in swimming, he supports her by being on the board of directors for the Ford's Colony swim team and 757 Swim team, in which nine-year-old Mallory participates. 757

Swim recently started a masters' program for older swimmers that was put on hold during COVID, but Matt is looking forward to getting more involved with it when safety allows. He also runs a masters' swim during the summer at the Ford's Colony pool.

"Every Saturday morning from eight to nine throughout the entire summer, we swim as a group. It's probably five to twenty of us," Matt says. Sometimes they play water polo and other times he hands out laminated workouts that swimmers can follow if they want to. It's all very laid back.

As if he didn't have enough to do, Matt felt it was important to get more involved in his community. "I have had the privilege of going through the Chamber of Commerce's LEAD program." Sponsored by the Greater Williamsburg Chamber and Tourism Alliance, the LEAD Program is a community immersion program that provides opportunities for recognized and emergent leaders to col-

laborate on issues of importance to the region. Matt's class initiated the WMBGkind Campaign, affecting meaningful change in local schools, governments and businesses through strong community engagement.

Matt appreciated the program so much he now serves on the board of directors for the LEADership Team, which consists of 22 volunteers. He believes in servant leadership, where he can give back to an organization while expecting nothing in return. He has a strong focus on educating others. "We are one big community, and I'm always willing to help when and where I'm able."

That brings Matt Williams right back to Premier Home Appraisals. He likes to do his part when someone is buying or selling a home.

"It's one of the biggest days in someone's life." He appreciates the opportunity to be a part of that moment with them. "It just feels good." NDN

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