

September 2020

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# Next Door Neighbors®

VOL. 14, ISSUE 9

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## The Arts in Williamsburg

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Lisa W. Cumming Photography



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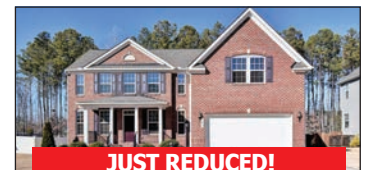
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Meredith Collins, Publisher

If there is a positive side to the challenges we have faced over the past several months, it might be that we have all been given a little more time for reflection and a lot of things to reflect on. While reflection may not get us any closer to knowing where we will wind up, the process is important.

Art has always been a great stimulus for reflection. Music, painting, writing, performing and other artistic expressions can help us focus outside of ourselves, help us see things from different perspectives, and introduce us to other cultures, schools of thought, and attitudes. Often it simply gives us a little escape from the more somber side of reflecting.

While it is unfortunate that several excellent Williamsburg venues for the creative enthusiasts in our community are less accessible and several premier celebrations, like An Occasion for the Arts, 2nd Sundays, and the Williamsburg Book Festival, have been postponed, this issue is proof that the arts are alive and well here in Williamsburg. We have the pleasure of introducing you to a lot of vibrant and enthusiastic people this month who are fully immersed in creating and sharing art with all of us. Their contributions run the gamut from opera to acting to photography and song. We are fortunate to have such a robust and diverse culture here and a such devoted, passionate, and talented neighbors. NDN

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# WENDY MILLER



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

# A Creative Journey

By Alison Johnson

At her home on College Creek, Wendy C. Miller's camera and zoom lens are always at the ready. If she glances out of a window and spots a beautiful bird or a perfectly lit scene, she can be out the door in seconds.

A self-taught professional photographer, Wendy often works on impulse. Her pictures reflect the deep connections that she feels with nature and people.

"This is truly a form of self-expression for

me," she says. "Photography is a way to tell stories and share my feelings, hopes, dreams and expressions of gratitude. It brings me great peace, and I hope my images can bring others happiness."

Wendy, 62, has built a successful photography career later in life, after 21 years as an elementary school teacher. A hobby of shooting wildlife, flowers and loved ones grew into a business, wendymillerphotography, LLC,

launched in 2014. Wendy also photographs events for CultureFix, a local arts organization where she serves as a Board member.

Wendy's job is to record joyful, colorful and candid moments for families, graduates, expectant parents, engaged couples, brides and grooms, and more. She embraces diversity in her subjects, from relaxed concertgoers to passionate marchers at Black Lives Matter rallies.

"I love capturing closeups, facial expressions

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of all types of people, and unexpected moments,” she relates. “For example, when I shoot a wedding reception, I have the most fun getting up on a ladder among guests while they are dancing. It’s a job, yes, but for me it’s all about love.”

The coronavirus pandemic has only cemented the importance of artistic expression in Wendy’s mind. She is proud that CultureFix was able to organize a virtual Summer Breeze Concert Series, online tip jars included, to support musicians and lift everyone’s spirits.

“Music can make you feel happy, carefree, when you otherwise might just be blue,” she notes. “The opportunity to ‘tune out’ from everything that has been happening in the world and just immerse yourself in other people’s performances is so wonderful.”

A Richmond native, Wendy was always drawn to nature as a child but left photography to her mother. “The pictures that I have are full of such fond memories,” she says. “Of course, they’re all black and white because I’m that old, but I’m so grateful for them.”

In college at Virginia Tech, Wendy earned a sociology degree and also met her husband of now 38 years, David. Although she briefly considered a career as a social worker, she ultimately worked for a few years as a paralegal and then chose to be a full-time mom to her children, Kendall, now 35, and Zachary, 33, and later became a teacher.

“Really, I think I just wanted to find a way to help other people,” Wendy explains. “I’ve also always been so drawn to children. I just love the face of a young child.”

The family settled in Williamsburg in 1989 after David was hired by Virginia Power, now Dominion Energy. Once Zachary had started preschool, Wendy went back to school at Christopher Newport University for a teaching certificate. She worked as a second and third grade teacher at Norge Elementary and later at Stonehouse Elementary.

Wendy’s talent as an amateur photographer led to requests for her services from family members and friends. After retiring from teaching, she decided to take a leap and start a small business. She researched quality gear, consulted with other photographers, and bought three cameras and four high-quality lenses: two zoom, one live angle and one midrange. Still, Wendy’s gut is what guides her.

“My gift is my eye, my ability to react quickly,” she says. “The technical skills are harder for me, and I’m always learning. But I do enjoy the editing process. It’s amazing to be able to enhance color, brightness, clarity and saturation, or just click and go from color to black-and-white, which is so clean and fresh. A lot of customers want both.”

Wendy first connected with CultureFix when she volunteered to take pictures of performers and audiences at its four-day Winter Blues Jazz Festival. The organization, founded in 2015, aims to bring unique arts, cultural and educational events and opportunities to the Greater Williamsburg area, as well as support local artists of all ages.

She and David quickly bonded with CultureFix’s founder, Steve Rose, over their mutual love of music and passion for serving others. Both joined the Board in 2017.

“We’ve had such a fabulous time helping to ‘enhance the cultural en-



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ergy and vitality of our community,' as our mission states," Wendy says. "It's not just about holding fun concerts; it's about enriching the lives of everyone, including people who might not have the opportunity to have some of these experiences before."

For example, CultureFix recently awarded grants to help more kids participate in the Williamsburg Youth Harp Society and the Williamsburg Learning Collective's summer camp, which promotes art, music and science education. Another goal is to purchase musical instruments and lend them for free to schoolchildren who can't afford their own.

As for photography, Wendy stresses that fancy equipment isn't necessary, especially given how good cell phone cameras have become. Portrait mode, she notes, can even create the "bokeh" effect of a high-end lens, with the subject in focus and the background artistically blurred.

Wendy recommends for novices to play with angles and just have fun. "Try closeups, or changing where you stand or sit. Experiment. Like if you're with pets or kids, get down on the floor and look at them head on, on their level. It can make for a more interesting view."

Outside photography, Wendy volunteers for the FISH, Inc. nonprofit, where she connects families with needed food, clothing and housewares and helps stock supply shelves. In addition, she and David deliver food every other week for Meals on Wheels.

The couple loves spending time with their children, both also proud Virginia Tech alumni, and grandchildren Daniel, 2½, and Cora. A third grandbaby is due in January. Wendy also is up for almost any outdoor activity, including hiking, kayaking and paddle boarding.

Her favorite vacation was a safari in South Africa several years ago, a trip she'd dreamed of since age 8, where wild monkeys literally came to the porch of her lodge. At College Creek, she is thrilled to live alongside osprey, blue heron and bald eagles.

"Nature soothes my soul," she says. "People would think I'm an extrovert if they saw me at a party, but I think my true personality is introverted. I enjoy quiet places and feeling true one-on-one connections with animals and people."

A huge music lover, Wendy is a particular fan of the Grateful Dead, as is her husband. In fact, she has attended more than 75 of their shows.

"It's an experience like no other," she shares. "Just the communal feeling of it, with everybody bonded in their excitement about music, is so uniting. That's why I still love going to music festivals, because you get those same feelings."

During the pandemic, Wendy has ventured regularly to the gardens at Colonial Williamsburg to take closeups of flowers. She has a few framed prints of her botanical photos hanging in her home, along with a large canvas collage of images taken from her back door.

After six years in the photography business, Wendy Miller's "problem" is that she might love clicking the shutter a little too much.

"My biggest challenge is to not take too many photos at a session!" she says. "I invariably take way more photos than necessary, which leads to more time editing. But once I get into my creative mode, I get lost in the art of my craft. It's just so much fun." NDN



# MARIA ROSE



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

## Midnight Thoughts

By Kristine Hojnicky

For 19-year-old independent singer-songwriter Maria Rose, music is much more than a passion or a hobby. It's a therapeutic form of self-expression and a vehicle through which she navigates complex themes like heartbreak, toxic friendships, anxiety and depression using her sultry, deep register and emotionally charged lyrics.

Her five-track debut album *Midnight Thoughts* dropped in January 2020 and is a compilation of pop, R&B and electronic mu-

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sic including songs titled Fake Love, Heart, Unchanged, and Midnight Thoughts which are designed to create community around shared emotional experiences.

"I'm inspired by many things, but my music has to be something personal. Every song I've written is based on real experiences I've had in my life with real people," she says. "Each song represents a different thought that keeps us up at night like anxiety or insomnia. I decided to make it into art for people to listen and relate to."

Maria's honesty about her own struggles with mental health is what makes her lyrics so relatable to her fans. She admits when she started high school it was challenging for her to connect with her peers, and her anxiety ultimately drove her to make the difficult decision to pursue her studies through homeschooling halfway through her freshman year.

"I decided I wasn't going to determine my success off of other people. I took no breaks, went to school through the summers, and I finished school at 16-years-old, which allowed me to really hone in on my music career and drove me to be where I am now," she explains.

The years since she graduated from school have served as a period of growth for Maria as an artist. She says the lead song on her EP, Scorpio, is representative of that maturation process.

"Scorpio is a song very close to my heart. It's about a toxic friendship that I had, and I started writing the song when I was fourteen years-old. It took me a few years to complete, but it's the song I finished most recently. It represents who I am as an artist sound-wise because it is so different, unique and dark in a way," she says.

Maria's musical ambitions began at an early age, and it is something she incorporates into many of her creative pursuits. In addition to writing and recording music, she is an accomplished dancer, pianist, actress and painter. She has sold some of her work locally and online, and she's participated in several musical theater productions.

"Those experiences really catapulted me further by building my love for performing. I saw that I could be an artist that is a reflective part of my identity rather than creating a character," she says.

Musically, Maria cites Prince, Lady Gaga, David Bowie, Whitney Houston, Britney Spears and personalities dominant in the LGBTQ+ community as largely influencing her career because they pushed societal and creative boundaries.

"They really showed me growing up that I could be whoever I want," she says. Like many teens, the music from these artists helped her through some difficult life moments. "The posters on my wall of these people that I looked up to helped me through some of the loneliest times."

While the role of celebrity has certainly had an impact on who Maria is today as a performer, her biggest fans and supporters are the members of her large, extended family in Thessaloniki, Greece.

"Sadly, I'm not able to see them very often but everyone is very supportive of me," she says. "Here I have my mom, my uncle and my grandma, and they are my cheerleaders. They have always been there supporting me for all of the auditions, every music video... anything I need, they are there for it. They are also the people who introduced me to some



**T.W. Taylor**  
Owner & Pharmacist

# Three Kinds of COVID-19 Testing and Much More

Williamsburg Drug Company is a pharmacy like no other, which means they can help in a crisis like no other. In the current COVID-19 pandemic, owner T.W. Taylor and his staff are supporting their customers with three types of testing: a 15-minute rapid test, a nasal swab which gives results in three days, and an antibody test that determines whether a patient carries protective virus antibodies from a previous infection.

It's rare to find all three testing modalities under one roof, but it's no less than local citizens deserve, as Williamsburg Drug Company sees it. "There are maybe a handful of independent pharmacies nationwide that do this. We work hard at it because we want our community to have all the resources. If we can provide them, we're here for them," T.W. says.

Williamsburg Drug Company's support doesn't end with test results. T.W. says, "What goes along with that testing is – negative or positive – what are your next steps? The pharmacists here

know that the healthier an individual is, the better positioned they are to fight a pathogen when they encounter it. A person might seem healthy on the outside, but T.W. and his staff look for the real story in a unique hematological cross section of a patient's biochemical profile.

Working with a variety of tests, Williamsburg Drug Company can identify what nutrients the body is deficient in, as well as what additional supplements might support ongoing health issues. They also offer an "immune support package" specifically designed to provide immune-boosting support for general health. Putting it simply, T.W. says, "The better and stronger your immune system is, the less likely you are to get COVID, and the milder your case can be if you get it."

Come see Dr. Jaime Reid at Williamsburg Drug Company to see what nutrients are keeping you from having your best immune system.



**Jaime Reid, Pharmacist**

Jaime Reid works to make immune systems stronger and smarter. She graduated with a Doctor of Pharmacy degree from the University of Maryland Baltimore in 2008. She has worked in the independent pharmacy industry her entire career. Having become an American Academy of Anti-Aging Functional Medicine (A4M) practitioner, she has since concentrated on discovering new tests available to address the root cause of patient concerns.

Outside the pharmacy, Jaime enjoys reading, running, and spending time with her husband. The couple shares four lovely children and Jaime serves on her kids' school board.

Jaime's expertise allows her to approach illness from a different angle. "As a pharmacist, I know that prescription medications may not always be the cure for chronic disease in our society. Instead, as a Functional Medicine Practitioner, I believe that pharmacists are in the perfect position to help patients get to the root cause of disease -- in particular, how specific nutrient deficiencies relate to your ability to fight viruses, particularly COVID," she says.

The key to wellness lies in peak immune function. Jaime says, "How do you best prepare your body in the event you are exposed to COVID?" Since 70 percent of immune function comes from the gut, her advice for a strong system includes pinpointing specific probiotics to achieve optimal immune function. She also counsels that supplements like zinc can slow a virus' ability to replicate inside the body.

Jaime thrives on connecting with her patients. She says, "I would love for people to call and ask questions any time, we're here to help our community."

Visit Williamsburg Drug Company at their 1310 Jamestown Road or 240 McLaws Circle locations or call 757-229-3560 to talk with Dr. Reid to learn more.



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of my favorite artists, movies, books and things that inspired me throughout my whole life.”

A self-proclaimed “nerd,” Maria also enjoys studying classical art, music and history, making the Williamsburg native’s proximity to all the local sites in the Historical Triangle ideal.

“I love Williamsburg. It’s so full of history and it’s so beautiful,” she says.

Her primary focus remains on building her career as a pop artist. In addition to releasing *Midnight Thoughts*, Maria has produced several music videos, worked on a few collaboration projects, and is in the process of writing a full-length album.

She says it has been somewhat challenging to debut as an artist in the midst of a pandemic with many performance opportunities canceled or postponed, but she’s persevered and built a strong fan base leveraging her Instagram account *MariaRoseMusicOfficial* and her YouTube channel as a way to connect her listeners with her music, videos, interviews and more.

“I’m honestly taking every opportunity that I can and pushing myself as far as I can,” she

says.

With nearly 35,000 monthly listeners on Spotify and fans downloading her songs off of iTunes, Apple Music and Google Play streaming platforms, Maria has certainly found an audience for her empowering and encouraging messages. She’s currently working on a top-secret project she hopes will catapult her career to the next level and help Maria Rose achieve “world domination.”

“There are people in the world who are struggling with mental illness or insomnia or a heartbreak or a bad friendship. I hope that through my music and through my artistry, now and forever, they can relate and feel a lot less alone. I can’t talk about my next plans right now but it’s going to be very big and I think will boost me online and everywhere else that I decide to perform and go in the future.”

Maria Rose’s decision to become a performing artist might very well lead to a local teenager having her picture on their wall, listening to her music and feeling a little less alone in the world. NDN

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# Purposing Pallets

By Harmony Hunter

Chris Prince is a man of few words, but where his voice is quiet, his hands are eloquent in their expression. In the last year, he's established a new woodworking business that combines a carpenter's eye and a scavenger's skill.

Chris grew up in rural Lanexa, Virginia, a small town roughly 20 miles north of Williamsburg. His childhood was spent on a family homestead and held its share of hard work, but he remembers his years in the country with great fondness.

"We lived on a small farm, so there were always weeds to pull and animals to feed. Me and my dad would go into the woods and make trails," he says. The earthy pastimes of farm life were appreciated fully by the young Chris.

He and his family have now settled in town, and he, his wife and son take great pleasure in Water Country, Busch Gardens, bowling alleys, and all the other amusements a city has to offer. These recreations aside, Chris would be right back in the woods of his youth if he had his druthers. Without hesitation, he says, "I'd rather move back to the country where I can do my thing."

During his time in the country's sweaty summers and chill gray winters, he absorbed the resourcefulness and resiliency that resulted in the character and values that still guide him today. Looking back, Chris



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

says, "My grandfather, he taught me to use everything. And he saved a lot of stuff to use later: stuff like nuts, bolts, washers, boards, right down to electric motors." Like his grandfather before him, Chris admits that he also has a stockpile of bits and pieces that may prove useful one day. "I save everything, too," he says. This packrat's habit proved useful when Chris turned to a path in handcraft earlier this year.

In his career, Chris has dabbled in a dizzying variety of professions, working in movie theaters, operating heavy equipment, driving a school bus, making balloon animals, and as the owner of a food truck called "Poor Boy's Burgers." He accepted some of these jobs for practical considerations, and others he took for fun, but woodworking was the one true calling he had never

been in a position to answer.

Opportunity knocked with the onset of safer-at-home directives in the spring of 2020, and, with his wife's encouragement, he at last embarked on the one job he'd always wanted to do: woodworking. "I went to school for carpentry. I enjoy building things, and I like working with my hands. It's the satisfaction of a job well done," Chris says. As they do for most craftspeople, a project's flaws glare hardest in their creator's eye. Chris's meticulous nature won't allow him to send out a piece until

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it's absolutely right, but he wouldn't have it any other way. The history of this timeless craft is a tradition that Chris honors in every piece he makes.

This quest for hand-built perfection starts with a decidedly imperfect material: wooden pallets. These pallets generally are built for utility and left for trash. But Chris saw possibility in this ubiquitous yet disregarded resource. Piled in stacks behind warehouses and grocery stores, these discards are often free for the taking with permission from managers. With his scavenger's instinct, Chris wondered what might be made from with this rugged scrap wood.

It turns out, many of the properties that make good pallets also make good furniture. Sturdy working woods like oak, pine, and poplar reveal a rustic beauty with a bit of effort. "It takes a fair amount of sanding, but the end product turns out beautiful, so it's worth it," Chris says. Breaking down pallets and getting them into shape for carpentry has become a family affair. Chris' 10-year-old son is no stranger to sawdust, often working alongside his dad as they rip pallets apart, pull nails, and sort boards.

The work of getting boards into shape for use was especially time consuming at first. In the early days of the effort, he would rip pallets apart by hand. He soon realized he could avail himself to some technological assistance. Specialized tools did just the job he needed and made this step much less burdensome. Evolutions like these come often as Chris navigates the scale and pace of a new endeavor.

Since business began this year, Chris has fulfilled orders for headboards, tables, benches and shelves. "The way pallets sit out and get weathered, they get a farmhouse look that people really like," says Chris. Where his customers appreciate the simplicity of the style, Chris enjoys knowing that he's made a keepsake from something salvaged.

Though the original material comes from a humble source, through Chris' painstaking reclamation process, noble woods are restored to a second life. His tables are made to support generations of family gatherings. His headboards are crafted with the knowledge that they will become one of the truest comforts of home, and all of his creations are rendered even more meaningful by the virtue of rescuing a material that still has lifetimes of use.

The rare luck of starting a new business and seeing it boom almost instantly has ruled out experimentation with new forms for the present time, but he's always thinking about what he might try next. "I've taken a lot of snapshots of things I'd like to do. I find them on various websites and think, 'Hey, that looks interesting, I'm going to try that,'" he says. Outdoor furniture is at the top of the list as soon as there is a break in new orders.

Other goals for the business revolve around improving the working infrastructure. Chris makes do with an open-air workspace at present, but this means a rainy spell can set progress back considerably. A dedicated workshop is a definite need. More hands on deck would be a boon, too. "I'd love to be able to hire a couple people to help me out, and have a storefront to be able to make this a real solid business," Chris says.

For now, Chris is content to enjoy the rare felicity of holding a job he enjoys and answering to no one but himself. He says, "I enjoy it. I have satisfaction in knowing I've done something that's productive. Generally, I figure if I do a good job with my work, it will talk for itself." **NDN**

A portrait of Sonia E. Hepburn, MD, a woman with long dark hair, smiling. She is wearing a white lab coat over a light-colored top. The background is a light blue textured wall.

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# AMY SNOWDEN



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## Portraits in Watercolor

By Brandy Centolanza

When it comes to art subjects, watercolorist Amy Snowden has always been drawn to the human face. “There is just something intriguing to me about capturing a person’s face, their expressions,” Amy explains. “A person’s face and expressions say a lot about who they are as a person. I find it fascinating.”

Since taking up watercolor painting 11 years ago, Amy has painted roughly 70 portraits ranging from young children at play to men and women in their prime to older gentlemen with

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decades of life experience. What started out as a hobby simply for personal pleasure has turned into a business for Amy, who works from her home studio as a commissioned watercolor portrait artist.

Amy's interest in art began in childhood. Growing up in the military and moving around a lot, she found joy in art.

"I've always loved art," she says. "I drew a lot. I was very fond of a pencil and sometimes charcoal. In middle school and high school, I drew a lot of portraits."

Though she took a few art classes, she mostly found inspiration in flipping through old magazines. Amy's hope was to one day attend art school, but for practical reasons, she chose a career path in business instead, shelving her passion for artwork for many years. After graduating from high school in Enterprise, Alabama, Amy earned a marketing degree from Troy State University, also in Alabama, and later went on to receive an MBA, also in marketing, from Golden Gate University in California.

Amy spent most of the 1990s and early 2000s working in the business world while raising a family. She has three children: Shelby, 25; Syd-

ney, 22; and 13-year-old Owen. Amy has called Williamsburg home since 2005.

Though creating artwork took a backseat in her life for more than 20 years, Amy's love for it never waned. She made a commitment the year she turned 40 to resume painting portraits.

"It always remained in the back of my mind, in my heart and in my soul," Amy says.

After her son came along, Amy was at a charity fundraiser one day when she had a conversation with a tourist who had won a raffle for a free art class. The class was held at what was then called This Center Art Gallery, which is now the Williamsburg Contemporary Art Center. Since the tourist couldn't use the prize, he passed it along to Amy, who took it as a sign.

"I thought, 'This is the time,'" Amy says. "I took a watercolor class, and I absolutely became obsessed."

Amy started painting vigorously during Owen's naptimes. Then, over Christmas, Amy's parents gave her some money as a gift so she could study watercolor under famed international watercolor portrait artist Ted Nuttall. In 2010, she signed up for a workshop Nuttall was conducting in North Carolina. He's been a

mentor ever since.

"Ted Nuttall's workshop changed my life," Amy says. "It really resonated with me. I love his style."

Amy takes a week-long class each year with Nuttall and seven other watercolor artists.

"It's like a semester of art school in one week," Amy says. "His passion for art and for people is contagious, and I am lucky to be influenced by him and the other watercolor artists. To be told by someone with his success and experience that I was good gave me the confidence to take the leap and put myself out there."

Thanks in part to Nuttall, Amy decided to start a second profession as a watercolor portrait artist. Her first commissioned portrait of two children won an award at the Virginia State Watercolor Show. She's racked up several other awards, including an honorable mention in the Women in Watercolor International Exhibition for a painting of an older Native American man at a Powwow that she entitled "Wisdom."

"That was a really exciting moment for me," she says.

Amy, who is a signature member of the Virginia Watercolor Society, had another painting,

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a portrait of a little girl, featured in the magazine Splash.

Currently, instead of skimming through magazines for subject ideas, Amy heads out of the house with her camera to find her muse.

"I like to take out my camera and see what inspires me," she says. "I like to photograph my own subjects. It allows me to connect with them, learn more about them, learn more about their personality and their spirit."

It takes Amy a few months to complete a project, depending on the size and detail as well as her schedule. Amy works during the day at home in her upstairs studio while Owen is in school. She relies on social media and word of mouth for clients.

"Art takes me through the full range of emotions," Amy says. "The white paper is intimidating and scary. The first layers of color are exhilarating and so exciting. Then, with every piece, I get to the hard places and feel defeated, often ending with tears. Digging deep for the resilience to keep pushing becomes necessary. Usually only after I have had a finished piece matted do I finally get to that wonderful feeling of accomplishment. Joy is kind of scattered

throughout the process."

In addition to her work as a watercolor portrait artist, Amy recently teamed up with her sister, Anna Lee, to start a line of hand painted and hand-crafted jewelry. The sisters launched their new business in March 2019 and named it Mary Maveline Originals in honor of both of their grandmothers.

"I had this idea of turning tiny paintings into jewelry and shared it with my sister and she said she would help me," Amy says. "The business has taken off like crazy. It's really surpassed our expectations."

Amy watercolors the designs for the necklaces, earrings, and jewelry sets while her sister, a metalsmith, assembles the pieces. Painted necklace designs include flowers, birds, butterflies, dragonflies, horses, sunsets and beach themes including sea turtles, crabs and sand dunes. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Amy and her sister sold their jewelry at art shows and festivals such as the 2nd Sundays Art & Music Festival and Art on the Square in Williamsburg and at shows in West Virginia and the Outer Banks. Mary Maveline Originals also has an online shop.

"Making the jewelry is different than doing portraits because I get to play around with different subjects for the little paintings," Amy says. "I do a lot of still life. I also like it because it is something I can do at night while I am watching TV with my son."

Amy currently has a handful of projects in the works and is also enjoying mentoring a student in watercolor. Teaching watercolor is an area she would like to delve into someday. Amy is a member of Williamsburg Contemporary Art Center, where her work has been on display in the past. Williamsburg Contemporary Art Center has expressed interest in having Amy instruct some workshops as well as The Charles H. Taylor Visual Arts Center in Hampton whenever it is safe to resume in-person art lessons.

Painting and caring for her son keep Amy Snowden busy, but she does find time to enjoy the scene in Williamsburg.

"The Greensprings Trail is my favorite place in Williamsburg," Amy says. "I really enjoy the art community here, and there is always something to do. I also love the proximity Williamsburg is to both the beach and the mountains. It really is a nice place to live." NDN

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# TANYA SONG



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

# Music for Youth

By Susan Williamson

Tanya Song does not come from a music background, but two of her children joined the Williamsburg Youth Orchestra (WYO) as violinists. “I became involved vicariously through my children,” she says. Tanya volunteered as a parent and then a board member, which led to her filling a vacancy to become the Executive Director of the organization. Now serving her fourth year in that position, she describes her role as wearing many hats. Recruiting students, coordinating with conductors and students, working with board members and donors, grant writing, managing events, budgeting and marketing are all within her job duties. She says, “I am the face of WYO.”

Today, Tanya’s work with the orchestra is an integral part of her life,



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and she is passionate about the history of the organization and the enduring music they perform.

The Youth Orchestra began in 1995 as a sister organization to the Williamsburg Symphony, which helps to provide education to the youth orchestra members who range in age from fourth graders through high school seniors. When activities shut down in March due to the pandemic, there were 110 members. Keeping the students engaged in their music during the pandemic has proven challenging, but members of the Williamsburg Symphony are offering free one-on-one master classes for the students via Zoom. There are online music appreciation activities as well. And the WYO's three conductors have volunteered to work with small chamber groups in their homes. But online music participation can be a challenge. "It's hard to play music together using Zoom and other platforms that are available to us," Tanya says.

Youth Orchestra members are selected through an audition process and anyone interested should contact Tanya through the WYO

website, [www.wyomusic.org](http://www.wyomusic.org). The minimum grade level is fourth grade, and applicants should have completed at least one year of music instruction and be able to read music. Once a student joins the WYO, he or she is asked to join band, orchestra, choir or some type of music activity in school and, if possible, to take private lessons as well. A student with an especially heavy class load, such as taking several advanced placement classes, may be excused from taking band class for a semester.

According to Tanya, the group hopes to be able to resume programming in January 2021. Before the pandemic, the orchestra practiced on Monday nights at Berkeley Middle School. There are usually three concerts a year: the Fall Concert, the Winter Concert and the Winter Chamber Concert. There is also the Concerto Competition in which the winner performs a solo at the winter concert. Every other year, the Youth Orchestra plays side by side with Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra. This year's side-by-side concert was scheduled for May but was cancelled. Tanya says, "I am so glad to have the opportunity to tell people about the orches-

tra. Many people are not aware of it, but when they do attend a concert, they are very impressed by the quality of the performance and the talent of the musicians." Once the orchestra resumes performances, she hopes to do more marketing to increase audience attendance.

The orchestra members try to give back to the community with service events. They work with the Arc of Greater Williamsburg to do arts and crafts with developmentally challenged adults, and they perform for senior living facilities.

Orchestra members may apply to become Student Ambassadors who help to promote the WYO and serve as mentors for younger members. There are two social activities, a pizza party and an ice-cream social. In addition to helping students to further their musical education and talent, Tanya says that many students form friendships through the organization.

"My son and his friends formed a quartet for two years. They were paid to play at events and volunteered in the community." She knows the students miss being together and particularly feels for the graduating seniors who did



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not have the opportunity to say goodbye. She is working on a tribute video for them. "I hope we can find some way for them to get together, with masks and social distancing," she says.

Many of the students go on to major in music or music education in college. Others may select different majors, but continue to be involved in music throughout their college careers. Clarinet player Hunter Lafreniere received a music major scholarship from the Williamsburg Music Club and will major in music education at James Madison University. Keri McCourt, French horn, will attend the University of South Carolina. Alice Leruth is going to Virginia Tech Honors College on the Pamplin Leadership Scholarship. Bass player Hannah Weiss will attend the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. The WYO harpist, Sydney Harris, plans to major in music and pre-med at Davidson College. Louanna Colon, violinist, will major in classical vocal performance. Two of this year's seniors, Zachary Barbarji and Ishbel Newton, also violinists, will remain in Williamsburg to attend William & Mary. Clearly,

the time and energy these students have put into their music has been well spent. Thanks to the help of parents, board members, donors and staff, Williamsburg youth have the opportunity to engage in a deep and rewarding orchestra experience.

Student tuition makes up about one third of the income for the operation. The balance is funded through donations, ticket sales, grants, advertisements in the annual program and a spring raffle. Among the major sponsors are the Junior Women's Club of Williamsburg, the Williamsburg Area Arts Commission, the Williamsburg Community Foundation, the Charles S. and Millicent P. Brown Foundation and the Virginia Commission for the Arts. A large part of Tanya's job is grant writing. Need-based scholarships are available to cover student tuition.

Tanya moved to Williamsburg eight years ago when her husband, Bongkeun Song, accepted a job as a professor at Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS). A native of Northern Virginia, she loves the scenery and peaceful-

ness of the area. "Whenever I drive somewhere else, I feel at home as soon as I return to the Williamsburg area. We have young families here as well as so many retired people who support education in the arts." She hopes to be one of them someday and has no plans to move anywhere else. Tanya enjoys nurturing youth. She and her husband have three children and she home-schooled them when they lived in the Wilmington, North Carolina area. In addition to working with WYO, she is the youth leader of New Life Presbyterian Church in Yorktown. "Some of the orchestra members are also in my youth group," she says.

She loves gardening, but with the orchestra and her church work, she doesn't find much time to enjoy it. "I love to cook and try new recipes," she says of her additional hobby. Even as circumstances have halted normal operations for the Williamsburg Youth Orchestra, Tanya Song is working hard to encourage its members and keep them in contact with the conductors and music education opportunities for now and into the future. NDN



Helena S. Mock, Esq., Managing Attorney

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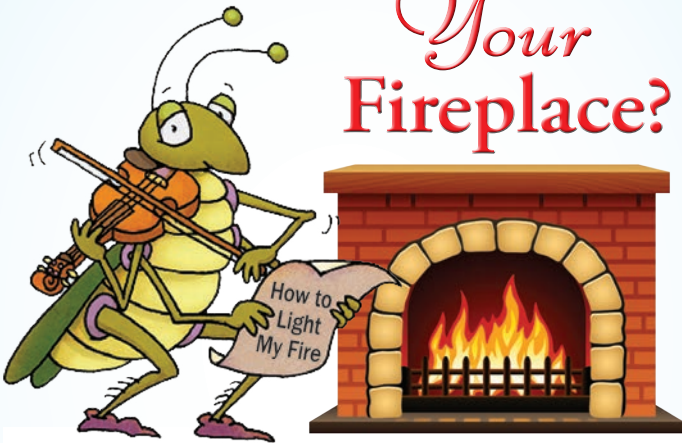


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## NAAMA ZAHAVI-ELY



# World Class on a Small Scale

By Wheston Chancellor Grove

Growing up in the fertile crescent where ancient civilizations converged, Naama Zahavi-Ely did not imagine a little town on the eastern coast of the U.S., Williamsburg, would one day become such a big part of her life. "I was born in Israel, and so were both my parents. I never expected to live anywhere else. I came to the USA for graduate studies in European History, married an American fellow student, and stayed because of him."

As young adults having lived in Princeton, New Jersey, and Hamden, Connecticut, Naama and her then-husband, Melvin Ely, decided to move to Williamsburg when Melvin received a position with the History Department at William & Mary. "Mel was born in Virginia and very much wanted to come back. Both of us loved the area." A year after Mel's posting, Naama was asked to teach Hebrew for the Classical Studies department. She used the Hebrew Bible and other ancient source materials to explore a variety of topics including Greek, Latin, Sumerian, Acadian, and Egyptian texts and art. She loved teaching literary aspects of the Bible and went on to instruct courses in Mythology.

Though far from home, her roots were very much alive in her academic field. Meanwhile, Naama earned a PhD in Biblical Studies at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. She candidly recalls how she was the only Jewish student at seminary. From 2005 onward, she

taught a full load of classes at W&M.

Naama and Mel had two children, Oren and Kinneret, and shared many years together before divorcing. "Mel is still with W&M and a terrific professor. We remain good friends."

Throughout her life, Naama has cultivated a love for the arts. "I never was a performer or a singer. I am not a musician; I am a music lover."

She grew up with classical music. Her mother would play it on the radio all day long. As a child, Naama went with her to concerts. "I have always loved opera, but for many years it was a potential rather than an active interest. I had very few opportunities to see it."

Unlike today, Israel didn't have a great opera house back then. None of the towns Naama lived in as an adult offered any venues, either. "We started going to opera regularly in Virginia after some years, and that was only the four operas a year put on by the Virginia Opera." Naama's daughter, Kinneret, who was taking singing lessons, developed an aptitude for opera singing. "You can say that her interest in opera and in singing it, and my interest in watching it, developed together. We visited New York and went to the Metropolitan Opera

and loved it."

Shortly thereafter, Naama was on her own. Both children were grown, and she was single again. "I decided right away not to let being alone stop me from going places. I could do what I wanted without worrying about anybody else's plans. I found myself going to many more concerts than I did before without worrying whether it would be too much for anybody else. I found that I was much more likely to regret not going to see a performance than going to see it. My rule became 'when in doubt, go!'"

There aren't many places in the world where one can see four high-quality operas in a weekend. New York City is one of them. "I would come for a weekend to New York, see the opera on Friday night, Saturday's matinee and night, and take in the Sunday matinee."

Naama had friends in Williamsburg who would go to movie houses to watch the Metropolitan Opera performances. "I had a group of friends in Williamsburg who were going to see them together. In July 2011, I was sitting in Tel Aviv at a performance of 'The Elixir of Love' and thinking this is really good, I wish my friends in Williamsburg could see it, when

I suddenly thought why not? Opera in Williamsburg is the result of that 'why not?'"

Soon, Naama was on the road to creating her own small opera company. The idea of starting Opera in Williamsburg manifested in July 2011 and actualized itself when the first production of Menotti's "The Telephone" was performed at the Kimball in May 2012. "We have been producing and performing two operas a year ever since. Our most recent opera, 'The Pearl Fishers', was our 17th production and 15th original production."

Naama has a definite view of the arts. "They have to be experienced rather than talked about. I am a connoisseur, not a creator, and my standards are very high. My experience of music is from the audience's point of view, which is why the audience's experience is so important to me in Opera in Williamsburg. The audience is the focus. They are the people that we create the operas for."

In ninth grade, Naama visited Italy with her parents and sister. They found themselves in Verona. An opera performance at the Arena di Verona was scheduled. They purchased tickets high up on stone benches. "I still remember it 50 years later. It was Verdi's Don Carlo. Eliza-



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both of Valois was performing with a broken leg, using crutches. And I still see the duet of Carlo and Rodrigo. What I didn't know then, and only found out over 40 years later, was that it was an unusually terrific cast of singers even for the Arena di Verona." For non-operatic aficionados, the Arena di Verona is a major opera company among the first in the world. Elizabeth di Valois was Montserrat Caballe, and a young Placido Domingo was Don Carlo in his first year at the Arena. "I didn't know that I was watching an unusually excellent performance, the kind that people talk about years later. It made a real impression on me as a young teenager."

Naama has a number of hobbies. "I paint, which is an activity I got into late, in the last decade. I love touring and exploring and have guided tours in the past. I used to garden, but I don't have a garden anymore. I used to knit and embroider. I am a pretty good adventurous cook. I am a nature-lover, a voracious reader, and I love spending time with my friends in Williamsburg."

Her son, Oren, is a computer analyst and lives in Richmond with his wife, and their new daughter, Illana, was born in March of this year.


"I was going to see her in April. Everything got canceled [with the pandemic] and travel was impossible. Thank God for Facetime!"

Kinneret is adamant about never taking on roles in operas that her mother produces, though she has always helped and been very supportive. "In the last year she agreed to be in our chorus." Naama can't say enough about the many, many people who make Opera in Williamsburg possible. "I get to work with amazing people, and I have the privilege to offer opportunities to amazing artists. A development that I was surprised by and very gratified with is the community of supporters that has grown around Opera in Williamsburg." People host singers in their homes for weeks at a time, donors give financial support, volunteers put in hours of work. "We can't create our operas without this support, and we appreciate it tremendously. It is a true community."

Naama receives support from the Williamsburg Area Arts Commission and the York County Arts Commission, but by far the majority of support is individual donations from members of the community and hospitality and volunteer work by passionate opera lovers. Naama conveys an outpouring of gratitude

when she says, "Thank you all so much!"

She is particularly grateful to Maestro Jorge Parodi. He conducted "Elixir of Love" in 2012 and has conducted almost all of the operas since. "He is our music director, a superb artist, a terrific person, and a real joy to work with. He is based in New York and teaches at the Manhattan School of Music and at Juilliard. He conducts all over the world." Naama also pays tribute to Ms. Dorothy Norako. She passed away a short while ago at the age of 98. A lifelong lover of opera, Ms. Norako attended many performances at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and listened to broadcasts and recordings. She moved to Williamsburg in 2012 to be near her son. Opera in Williamsburg provided her with an opportunity to see live opera again. "It has been so gratifying to bring the joy of music to somebody to whom it meant so much. Even when her memory was nearly gone, she could still mouth the words to opera arias that she loved together with the singers."

Opera reaches people in many ways, and Naama Zahavi-Ely states that as soon as public venues fully reopen, the show will go on! Stay tuned for updates: [www.operainwilliamsburg.org](http://www.operainwilliamsburg.org) 



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# GILBERT ROSENFELD



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

## A MAN ON A MISSION

By Linda Landreth Phelps

"I'm on a mission to reconcile mankind to God and man to mankind," local author Gilbert Rosenfeld says when asked how he came to be a Williamsburg resident. "God put me here to serve others in 1990 and He hasn't moved me yet." With that mission in mind, he has written and published his first book, a gathering of his thoughts about life, its purpose, and how to live it well. "I'd like to help others avoid the mistakes I've made in the past," he says.

Gil, as he prefers to be called, arrived in our city in his late 30s with his wife, Nadene, and Erin, their only child, to begin the next phase of life. The family moved south from Baltimore, where Gil had been born, was raised, and had worked. Gil and Nadene had fallen in love

# Your Local Real Estate Update

from the Williamsburg Association of REALTORS®



**Frank Hughes**  
President of the Williamsburg Association of REALTORS®

### Fair Housing

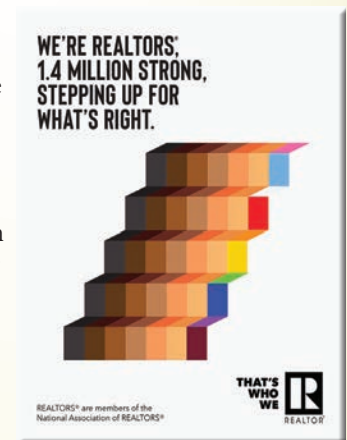
When I first decided to write an article concerning Fair Housing it was both timely and critically important. Yet, I struggled with the term "Fair," not because of its perceived inclusivity, but because I didn't feel it captured the significance or the depth of this fundamental right that we all have as Americans, the freedom to choose where we call home.

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with this area even before they married and honeymooned in Williamsburg in 1978. Years later, when it was time to choose a place to live, Williamsburg was at the top of their list.

Gil's Baltimore childhood was spent as part of a conservative Orthodox Jewish family. His grandfather, David Levy, was a tailor, a Russian immigrant, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the late 1880s to flee the pogroms there. His grandmother, Rose Ostraski, was also a Russian immigrant. Somewhere on Ellis Island, the Levy family name was changed to Rosenfeld. The two young refugees met in Baltimore, married, and raised Gil's father and his seven siblings.

"I grew up right across the street from Johns Hopkins Hospital," Gil remembers. "Many years later, in the room at the hospital where I changed into scrubs, I could look out the window and see the house where I was born." Thanks to his family, Gil says, he was raised in the love and fear of God. But in October of 1984, he crossed a personal line of faith and

there was no going back. "I came to understand and accept that Jesus was the Messiah that had been sent to free my people," he says simply. At that moment Gil realized that his life was not his alone. "God called me to serve Him in our family, our community, and the world," he says.

At the time, Gil was working in private industry in the medical field, selling the very things he had used in his previous career as a cardiopulmonary technologist at Johns Hopkins. These devices are deployed in invasive cardiology, basically introducing catheters into the heart or lungs to evaluate function. In his work, he travels a large territory that encompasses both Johns Hopkins and Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina. He stays busy both selling medical hardware and training others within his area of expertise.

At 66, Gil can look forward to the coming day when he will be retired from the 9 to 5 workday world and have full freedom

to pursue his personal ministries. As time allowed, he has always taught Bible studies and preached everywhere from church pulpits to open-air gatherings in the Baltimore projects. In his quest to share his faith, Gil finds that the Rosenfeld name opens doors for him that wouldn't normally be available to others. He has had opportunities to speak in places such as New York, and even in Israel, where someone named Tim Smith might not. Gil considers himself no less Jewish because he is now a Christian. "That just means I follow Christ," he explains, "it doesn't change who I am. Jesus himself was a Jew who came first to His own people, then to the Gentiles," he says.

Closer to home, Gil has worked with The Salvation Army and United Way to go into Williamsburg's underserved neighborhoods, tutoring and mentoring youngsters and single moms. In the last eight years, he's even brought the gospel to foreign shores, with the help of an interpreter, in the biggest ministry in which Gil and Nadene are currently involved.

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“We are busy raising funds to help the local church in Honduras,” Gil says. “We sponsor kids who used to eat maybe once a week, and who now receive hot meals at the church there, as well as provide uniforms so they can attend school. We’re so proud that one girl in particular who we’ve supported for years is just about to graduate from college and is married now.”

Currently, Gil and Nadene are members of an evangelical, non-denominational church, Christ Fellowship, which meets at Providence Classical School. Pastor Peter Hess leads a congregation normally numbering from 60 to 70 members. “We wanted the original small town feeling that we once enjoyed in church, a place where the opportunities to help and serve our community would be the greatest,” Gil says. One of the ways he is serving more broadly is employing one of the skills he learned during his medical career, writing.

“Technical writing is so different from what I do in my book,” he shares. There was

definitely a learning curve attached to transitioning from technical reports for prestigious medical journals to something meant to show how to apply biblical wisdom to everyday life in a relatable way. The title of Gil’s book is *If You Don’t Like Lemonade, Stop Buying Lemons*. “The reason I wrote my book was to reach out to others, including those in my own extended family, who would benefit by the wisdom I’ve gained through studying the Bible and from the wise and brilliant people God brings into my life. The foundation of the book is to help others to avoid mistakes like the ones I made when I used to follow my feelings.”

Feelings are fickle and can’t be trusted, Gil says. He has learned to let faith grounded in scripture be his guide and go from there. Blind faith and unwise feelings led more than a thousand people to follow cult leader Jim Jones to the grave. “It doesn’t have to be complicated,” Gil says. “Everything you really need to know about successful living can be found within the pages of the Bible, and you don’t

need an interpreter.”

“God gave Moses the ten commandments He had written with His own finger,” Gil explains. “Moses didn’t come down from the mountain, show his people the stone tablets and say, ‘Here’s what God said to do, but in order to understand what it really means, you’d better find a theologian to interpret it.’” When we start writing, commenting and editing, Gil theorizes, we tend to interject extrabiblical content. “It gets kind of hairy from there. When either the laws of physics or spiritual laws are violated, there will always be trouble.”

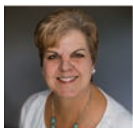
Gil’s already making notes for his next book, a continuation of his thoughts. There are two great events in life, Mark Twain used to say. The first when you are born, and the second is when you realize why you are here. There is no doubt in Gil’s mind about his own purpose. “I’m here to serve God and my fellow man,” he proclaims. Gilbert Rosenfeld is a man on a mission, fully invested in following his faith. NDN



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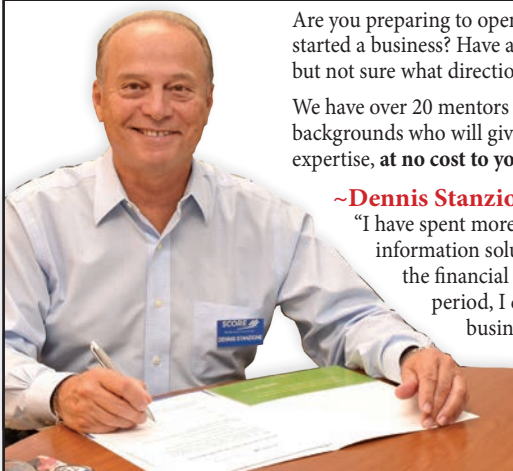
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## SHAUNDA ARMSTRONG



# A Utopia of Creativity

By Ashley Smith

The art scene in Williamsburg is a remarkably diverse celebration of artistic endeavors that encompass music, theater, literature, and of course, visual arts. The breadth and variety of art available in Williamsburg often surprises newcomers and visitors alike, but it is a vital part of what makes this city such a unique community.

A newcomer to this thriving scene, Ucartia Creative Studios, has spent the last year establishing a reputation as an oasis of creativity. Owner Shaunda Armstrong is thrilled to bring her vision of a utopia for creative arts to her home city.

As the child of an Army officer, Shaunda spent her childhood traveling the world. By the time she graduated from high school in Virginia, she had lived in Hawaii, Colorado, New Jersey and Germany. In fact, she was born in Germany, and most of her childhood memories are from there. After her father's stint at Fort Monroe, the family returned to Virginia in time for her senior year.

Germany remains one of Shaunda's favorite places. She recalls her fascination with the incredible architecture and beautiful churches. As a young athlete, she played basketball and ran track. Sports allowed her the opportunity to travel to Paris, where another type of artistry caught her eye: hairdressing. One of her strongest memories remains the famous hair show she attended during her visit. One constant in her life was her love for art.

"I've always loved art, ever since I was little. I was always requesting art kits for Christmas."

She even met her husband, Harry, while she was still in Germany. They met at the age of 14 and became best friends. Harry's parents received orders to California, while Shaunda eventually ended up back in Virginia. Despite the separation, the pair were avid pen pals and while Shaunda moved to Atlanta for a brief time, Harry lived in Athens, Georgia. When she returned to Virginia, he followed.

She says with a laugh, "My dad always says you followed my daughter." Her dad now serves as a bishop for a church in Lancaster County, Virginia, while Harry works in IT and occasionally helps out at the studio.

Shaunda obtained her liberal arts degree

and an MBA from Saint Leo University. She also has worked toward her doctorate at Capella University. Though she had a successful career in the corporate realm, the project of which she is most proud remains the Young Business Visionaries program she ran through the PTA at James River Elementary School. The program taught students how to open, start and run their own businesses.

After a while, Shaunda realized she could turn her multiple artistic hobbies into a career. She was already hosting paint parties and loved literature; she was known as the librarian for her library of books. She took her dream from her husband's man cave to the studio in New Town. Though she knew she had the resources and the knowledge to make the transition from drafting contracts to teaching art classes, she was still nervous.

"I had nightmares that there wouldn't be a sink in the space, but the first thing I saw when I walked in the door was the large sink!" For Shaunda, it was confirmation that she was on the right path.

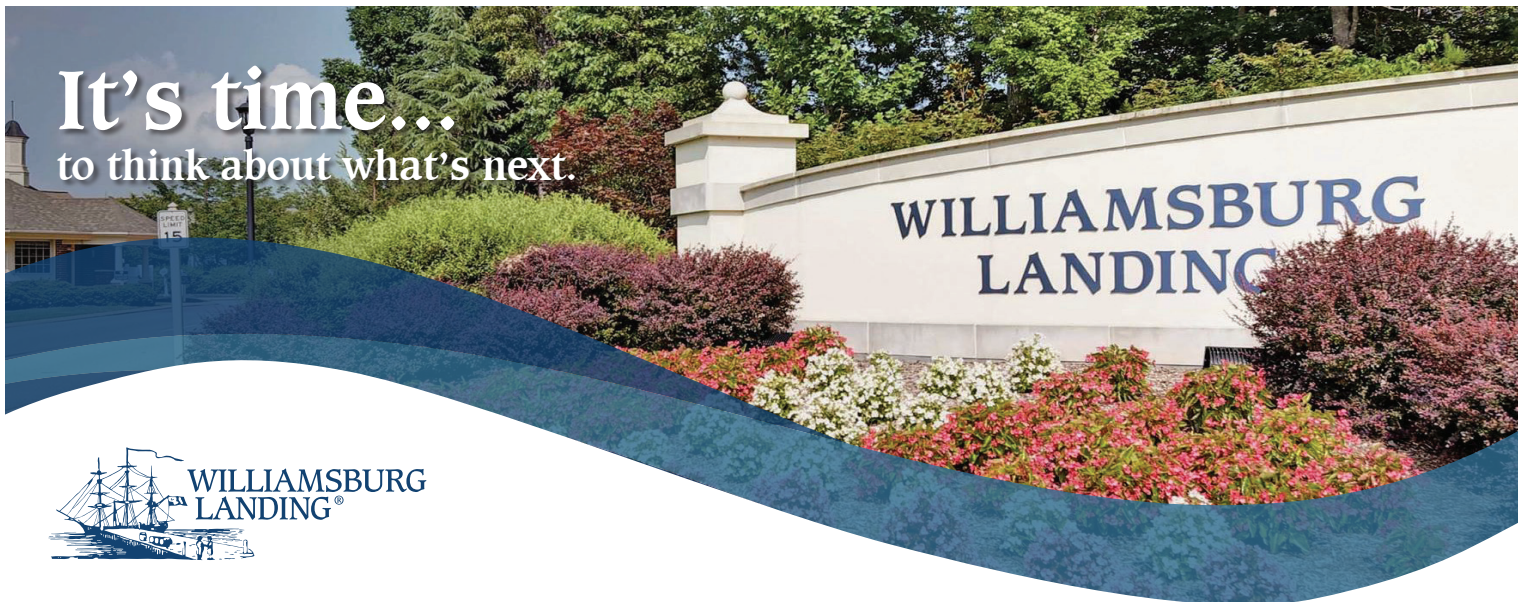
As a creative academic, Shaunda has an unusual view of the advantage that creativity brings to the marketplace. "I believe that cre-

ativity is not just art. It gives you an edge on competitiveness in the workplace and allows for out of the box thinking and flexibility."

To support this vision, Shaunda incorporates creativity into every class, camp and experience the studio provides. Ucartia offers a range of experiences, from art classes in technical drawing, fiber arts and watercolors to a free teen poetry night. The studio specializes, however, in canvas painting and slime-making. The Slime Lab experience is run by characters known as Professor Maddie Slime and Professor Lotta Slime and is so popular that the studio requires reservations.

Another point of pride for Shaunda is the studio's ability to serve people with disabilities. "If a family needs something specific, all they need to do is call ahead," she says. The studio has the ability to lower the lights, play specific music or white noise, and will even schedule open studio time specifically for an individual who may need a calmer space to be creative.

The studio, she says, is a direct reflection of her family in her life. As she turned her artistic passions into her new reality, she was meticulous in her planning. Every wall in the



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studio is covered in a stunning, hand-painted mural that reflects Ucartia's goal of providing a space for all creative endeavors. Every tool in the studio is of the highest quality, from sturdy wooden easels to the excellent paint. It is important to Shaunda that artists have the materials necessary to craft their masterpieces. This commitment to excellence has allowed her to achieve her vision of a "creative oasis", a place for both adults and children to create without the fear of judgement. In fact, the name of the studio itself, Ucartia, is a fanciful word.

"I took the words utopia, Arcadia, and creativity to come up with Ucartia, which means a 'utopia of creativity.'" Shaunda wants the name to communicate to visitors that this space allows for unfettered exploration through art.

She has even brought her Young Visionaries program to the studio. Currently, the program has four participants; one of whom is working on a clothing business, one has an art business, one works to rebuild computers, and another has a real estate business. The teenagers are finalizing their business plans and creating their websites. Even more astonishing, every teen visionary in the program is there on scholar-

ship.

At Ucartia, Shaunda and her hand-picked staff lead classes, encourage budding entrepreneurs, host camps, and lately, run virtual classes for students from as far away as California. CNN even featured the studio in a guide for alternative activities to camp this past summer. The studio has had to flex their own creativity as they pivot to incorporate virtual elements to their core programs. Though they are still hosting socially distanced classes and open studio times, Shaunda believes that virtual opportunities will become a part of their menu for some time. She is also committed to supporting the surrounding community during the current pandemic. The studio has plans to offer one-on-one tutoring with a licensed teacher on staff and a camp with an arts and academics focus.

As Shaunda puts it, "If people need the WiFi, come use it. We have the space and the resources and its important to me that we do our part."

While much of Shaunda's life is currently focused on Ucartia, she also finds time to serve as an adjunct professor at her alma mater, Saint Leo University. She enjoys spending time with

her husband and two children, though she confesses that they often spend time creating art together at Ucartia.

Shaunda has been pleased with Williamsburg's enthusiastic reception to her dream. She continues to explore ways to give back to the community that has supported her. In addition to providing resources for families during the pandemic, Shaunda has partnered with the Skills Bridge Program through the US Air Force, in which business professionals teach veterans new skills as they transition to civilian life. In keeping with Shaunda's assertion that the studio is a direct reflection of her family, her first participant will be her sister, who retires from the US Air Force soon. She is eager to teach her sister and other veterans how to run a small business. She's hopeful that veterans from all branches of the military will soon join the program.

While Shaunda Armstrong hopes one day to find a larger space that allows for her "utopia of creativity" to expand, for now, she is focused on celebrating the anniversary of Ucartia and continuing to offer an artistic respite for the citizens of Williamsburg to come and express themselves. NDN



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## ROBYN EMERY



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

# An Unstoppable Love for Performing Arts

By Caroline Johnson

After first experiencing the thrill of being on stage at just five years old, it's no surprise that Robyn Emery hasn't stopped since. Born and raised in Williamsburg, Robyn was first introduced to theater through Stage Lights, a community theater group. "I tried out a workshop, got up on stage and looked at all of the people in the audience," Robyn says. "After everyone applauded, I knew I had found something cool."

Her first role, a diva movie star, gave her the opportunity to walk around in a big feather boa and share some sass on stage. Since then, she has played a variety of roles, from Audrey in *Little Shop of Horrors* to Little Red Riding Hood in *Into the Woods*. With a family who enjoys the theater and encourages her to go for what she wants, Robyn has had the opportunity to grow, train and prosper as a performer.

Having attended the fine arts magnet school at Waller Mill Elementary and Queens Lake Middle, she currently attends Bruton High



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where she takes part in the School of the Arts. A member of the theater program, Robyn also takes the time to improve her skills in all areas in the performing arts.

Though much of her time revolves around the theater, she invests time and energy into vocal training and dance as well. She has been working with her current vocal teacher for over two years and has seen how much of a difference it has made in her abilities.

“When I was little, I thought I wanted to go to Hollywood because I wasn’t that strong in my voice,” Robyn says. “Now that I’ve completed lessons and looked more into Broadway, I’ve switched coasts. Now I lean more towards New York City!” If not New York, Robyn is also considering West End in London, though she’ll be happy as long as she’s in theater, wherever that may take her.

Robyn has attended a variety of training opportunities in New York City and locally. Her favorite, Broadway Artists Alliance, gave her the opportunity to learn from and perform in front of professionals in the world of Broadway. “It’s incredible to not only be surrounded

by people who are knowledgeable and want to help you but also to be around people who are like you and want to help you succeed.”

In addition to training for her vocals and on-stage presence, Robyn added dance training to her repertoire. Interested in choreography and how it plays into theater, Robyn has had the opportunity to use these skills as a Student Director for both *Legally Blonde* and *The Little Mermaid* at Queens Lake Middle School.

“As a choreographer, I love moving to the beat, adding in movement that makes a point and directs the audience’s attention,” Robyn says. “The audience isn’t as much focused on the dance as they are on the storyline and music, so dance adds an extra element!”

When it comes to her passion as a performer, Robyn currently finds roles through both the School of the Arts at Bruton and SPARC, a theater company in Richmond. With the School of the Arts, she gets to combine her love of theater with her studies while surrounded by other students who are doing the same.

“The School of the Arts is one big family,

and it’s all about connecting with and being accepting of each other,” she says. “It’s difficult sometimes to be accepted by everyone, but to be able to come to a place every other day and have people you know love and accept you. It’s an amazing feeling.”

Robyn has enjoyed being a part of SPARC; however, shows in Richmond come with an even larger time commitment, with many involving multiple evenings of rehearsal each week. “My days were spent coming home from school and going immediately to Richmond,” Robyn says. “I’d get home late at night, and though it was a lot to throw on myself, I loved it, and I’m so glad to have had this experience.”

Thanks to the immense commitment and support of her parents, Robyn was able to make her connections in Richmond happen, taking part in *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Robber Bridegroom*. It also taught her about perseverance. “I didn’t get the first or second show I auditioned for, but I got the third,” Robyn says. “It was a good reminder of why it’s important to keep auditioning and not give up.”

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each role, with most asking performers to come prepared with either a song or monologue. Robyn has a list of songs she picks from based on the character she's auditioning for. If a monologue is what's needed, Robyn tries to not stress too much. "I've always been okay with remembering lines and try to only practice once or twice," Robyn says. "A lot of directors are looking for a natural monologue, so I practice to the point I'm comfortable with and then walk in and say it like it's off the top of my head."

After the role is secured, the preparation begins. She finds the preparation is different for every role, with most directors setting a date for when lines need to be ready for rehearsal. "I try and analyze what I'm doing and what emotions my character is feeling, and I try to add a little extra," she says. "I stay cautious of how my actions will impact how the scene is done, but make sure to put my own twist on it."

Shows typically run between eight to 11 performances, and at times overlap, which has taught Robyn how to balance her performing arts with school. There was a time in Febru-

ary where she was doing three shows at once, finding herself the most stretched she had ever been. "I remember being stressed and wanting to have a break, and two weeks later, quarantine happened," Robyn says with a laugh. "That wasn't what I meant!"

Her favorite role to date was Audrey in *Little Shop of Horrors*, though she was excited to stretch her abilities as Little Harp in *Robber Bridegroom*. After preparing for the role for months, *Robber Bridegroom* was, like many other shows around the world, affected by the pandemic. "To have invested months into that show, ready to be performed the week before quarantine, it really hurt."

Robyn is aware that the future of theater may look different. "You can't sing with a mask and with social distancing. It's just not safe to be in a theater together. I'm really hoping we can get numbers down and stay safe and hopefully be able to get back into theaters again."

With what little free time she has outside the performing arts, she spends time listening to Broadway musicals, practicing for her roles and enjoying all that Williamsburg has to offer.

Though it's difficult now to be out and about, she loves going to Busch Gardens and Water Country, spending time around Colonial Williamsburg, going to the movies and just having fun with friends. A fan of dabbling in photography, she also enjoys photoshoots with friends as another creative outlet.

Though the pandemic has changed the way arts are performed, Robyn Emery has taken time to remind herself why she does what she does. "Right now, in a time without performance opportunities, it can make you question why you are still doing this," Robyn says. "I've had days where I've been really sad and considered trying things other than theater, but I remind myself that I can't give up." She hopes this outlook will help others who may be in the same position.

"The biggest thing I've been taught and the biggest thing I want to teach others is to not give up if it's something worth doing," Robyn says. "It's going to be a lot of work, and there are so many things that are out of your control, but I always remind myself that it's worth it because I truly love the arts." NDN

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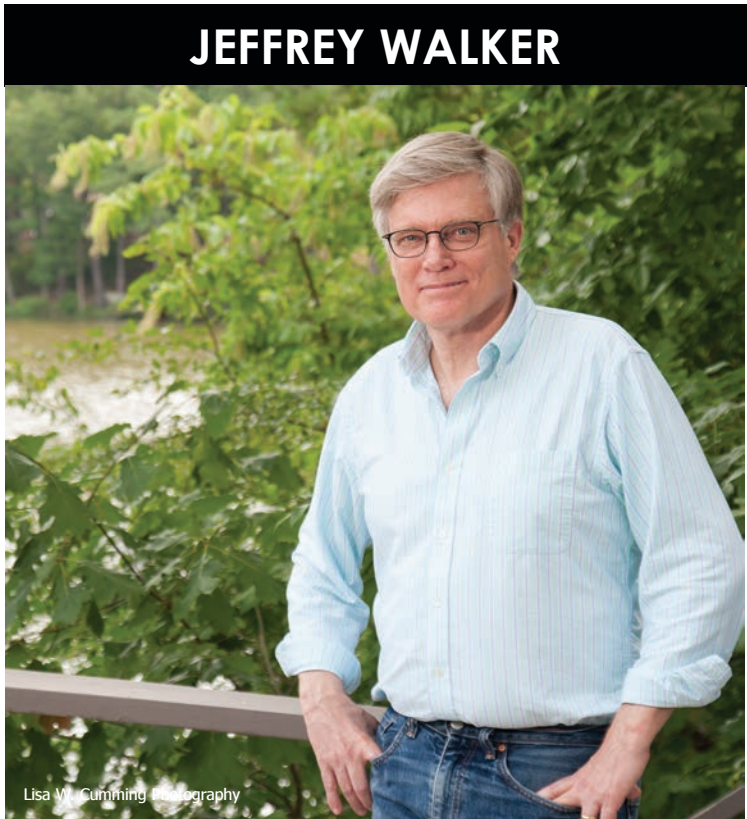
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Lisa M. Cumming Photography

# Modern-Day Renaissance Man

By Lillian Stevens

A modern-day Renaissance person doesn't have to be a Leonardo da Vinci or an Oprah Winfrey. Instead, today's Renaissance person dedicates his or her best efforts to a variety of undertakings that will bring knowledge and skills to enhance the lives of many.

Local author Jeffrey Walker is one such person.

Jeffrey has lived in three foreign countries and traveled to another 70. He is a retired U.S. Air Force pilot and officer, an international consultant, an attorney who holds two law degrees, and a former law school professor and assistant dean who has taught, among other things, law of war, criminal law, and international law at various universities. He also did an early stint as a stockbroker.

"It sounds more exciting than it was," he says with a hearty laugh. More recently, Jeffrey has written three historical fiction novels that comprise *Sweet Wine of Youth*, a trilogy that is set during and after the First World War.

While he plays down his professional careers, his knowledge base has surely played a key role in Jeffrey's artistic undertakings. Through his lens, there are stories and characters that transport readers to a singular time in world history. Although fiction, *Sweet Wine of Youth* brings to life war's horrors and struggles.

"The First World War was a long and bloody war," he says. "It was an epoch of unprecedented violence and social change. The meta-theme I was looking for is this: war breaks everybody and everything somehow. How do we put them back together again? That's the theme that runs through these three books."

In his first book, *None of Us the Same*, Jeffrey really focused on the individual character level. There is morphia (morphine) and alcohol addiction and shell shock which are not unique to any one war or period of history. Also, there is another interesting layer: ennui.

"I had one of the main characters coming back from war," he says. "And he was bored! On the one hand, he'd never been so afraid, but on the other hand he'd never felt so alive. Once he came home, he was bored out of his mind."

The second book, *Truly are the Free*, explores the social and cultural changes that were unleashed by the First World War. "Everything changed," Jeffrey says. "Think about the 1920s and that generation coming out of the war. Even those who didn't fight in the war experienced it. They were tired of deprivation and death."

With *No Hero's Welcome*, the third and final book, Jeffrey really sought to explore the political aspects. "England was losing its oldest colony, Ireland. I set out to examine those big issues, but they are very much character driven in a very personal manner. I didn't want to be preachy, but having those overarching themes is what you want to demonstrate because it lends coherence to the narrative."

Like many authors, Jeffrey was a voracious reader first. Hailing from a small, one-industry town in Illinois, Jeffrey says he checked out every book he could find in the public library about any place other than his "flyover country" hometown.

"My first exposure to historic fiction was James Michener's *Hawaii*," he says. "I was ten

years old, so the book was probably age inappropriate. But I was completely hooked!"

Eventually, college took him to far-away New Orleans. During his junior year, he met the girl who would become his wife. "Kathy and I attended separate universities, but we actually met during a year abroad at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland," Jeffrey says. "It was kind of a storybook beginning to a romance, traveling in Scotland and Europe. We both went back and finished our senior years apart, but by then we were engaged."

The couple married two months after graduating from college. Three children arrived in five years while Jeffrey's career took the family all over the world. When Jeffrey's last assignment in the Air Force brought him to Langley AFB and their eldest chose to attend William & Mary in 2001, they knew they'd found a special place in which to someday retire, so they bought a townhouse in Williamsburg.

In 2008, Jeffrey and Kathy moved here permanently, establishing their home in First Colony on Lake Pasbehegh. They kept their home in Williamsburg during Jeffrey's five-year stint teaching law in New York City.

In 2016, they moved back for good. "We love it here," Jeffrey says.

Like many others, the family has adapted to the pandemic.

"Kathy may not be an author," Jeffrey says. "But my gosh, is she a story teller! She FaceTimes with our grandson Wesley for hours."

For nearly two months now, grandmother and grandson have enjoyed a running scenario involving dinosaurs.

"My wife found seven or eight big plastic dinosaurs she'd had long since packed away. Since March, these dinosaurs have been on the moon and have visited make believe planets. They've been stuck in a cave for weeks. The cave is under the guest room bed. The dinosaurs have even visited the North Pole."

He marvels at his wife's ability to sustain this and their grandson's complete willingness to engage in remote imaginative play.

After years of talking about writing a book, Jeffrey says his creative and brilliant wife encouraged him to write full time. "I said, great idea!"

By fall 2019, he had written and published the final book in his trilogy.

"As it turns out, Kathy is an exceptionally good editor, proofreader and is great with the artistic decisions. Even more surprising, we work pretty well together and that can be an emotionally fraught moment when you turn over your manuscript and invite someone to please tear it apart."

With the ink barely dry on *No Hero's Welcome*, what comes next?

"Oh, I've got a dozen book projects underway!" Jeffrey exclaims. "But, I am getting out of the historical fiction genre for the upcoming books. The next book is set more in the present day and will be closer to the thriller-mystery-crime genre. I'm also working on another book that will be very character-driven literary fiction."

To round out those projects, he is working on a non-fiction project which started out as a group of blog posts. "I have some blogs that explore what's it like at the age of 56 to declare yourself a writer. I'm collecting those blog posts as the core of a book."

Over the years, Jeffrey has been wowed by the arts scene that has emerged in Williamsburg, from culinary arts to cinema arts and everything in between.

"The whole culture and arts quarter downtown is great," he says.

The arts scene has taken a hit for sure, and Jeffrey Walker misses events like 2nd Sundays, An Occasion for the Arts and also the Williamsburg Book Festival which shines a light on local and regional authors. NDN

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## WESLEY STEVENSON



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

# The Power of Music

By Alison Johnson

The piano came first. At age five, Wesley Stevenson listened to his mother practicing pieces from her lessons, walked over as soon as she was done, plopped himself down at the bench and reproduced the songs note by note. Stunned, his mom promptly transferred her lessons to him. About 15 years later, Wesley picked up the guitar, and a decade ago, he discovered what would become his favorite instrument by far: the ukulele, a small, four-stringed guitarlike instrument of Hawaiian origin.

Now a professional music educator, Wesley strongly believes in the power of songs to promote happiness, unity and diversity as they're shared.

"During these past months, we've seen riots, looting, civil discord unlike I have seen my entire life," he says. "While I'm not as naïve to say 'All you need is love' like the Beatles once sang, I do believe that a ukulele in everyone's arms could be a step in the right direction."

Wesley, 43, teaches private lessons out of his home studio and also organizes free community ukulele classes for a growing number of local enthusiasts. As coordinator of the projects FourFingerFrenzy for kids and the Tidewater Ukulele eXperience (TUX) for adults, "Dr. Uke"

partners with public library systems and has purchased 30 ukuleles for lending.

Light, portable and inexpensive, a decent ukulele can sell for \$50, the instrument is much simpler to handle and learn than the bigger guitar, he explains.

"It's a perfect introduction to music because it's just so much fun to play," he says. "Really, people can start to play songs in as little as three or four days. Since you only have to use four fingers and don't need as much hand strength, kids as young as 4 can start."

In 2018, FourFingerFrenzy won a statewide award from the Virginia Public Library Directors Association. Wesley plans to continue that program plus TUX online this fall, as he has done with his one-on-one lessons for approximately 50 students.

"I absolutely love teaching," he says. "I feel so grateful when I am interacting with my students and developing lesson plans, and I'm so proud to see their joy and relief when they nail the performance of a piece they've been working on for weeks or months."

As a performer, Wesley plays regularly at his church, Freedom Fellowship in Virginia Beach, and at local entertainment venues, sometimes as a substitute keyboardist for the popular funk band Slapnation.

A career highlight was playing piano in a memorial for Katherine Johnson, the pioneering Black NASA mathematician from the book and movie *Hidden Figures* earlier this year. He teamed with Beverly Kane Baker, Principal Viola for the Virginia Symphony, at the Hampton service.

"Amazing doesn't quite describe it," he says. "A performance I'll never forget."

Growing up in Waldorf, Maryland, Wesley took music lessons from a diverse group of instructors and also played basketball and soccer. He attended Liberty University in Lynchburg

for two years, starting a music degree that he is now finishing at Tidewater Community College.

In 2004, Wesley left behind a lucrative but largely unfulfilling job as a sales representative and began teaching at a music store in Norfolk. His student roster grew so quickly that he and his wife, Mari Ann, launched their own studio in 2007.

The couple ran that business for eight years before relocating to Williamsburg to be closer to family when Mari Ann was pregnant with their daughter, Solana, now 10. "This is such a peaceful and family-oriented community," Wesley says. "We've always loved it here."

Shortly after that move, the mother of one of Wesley's students asked him to learn ukulele so he could teach it to her son. Wesley mastered the instrument in about a month by "working my tail off," only to have the mom tell him never mind on the lessons.

"I was a little mad for a bit, but then I realized how much I loved ukulele," he says. "The damage had already been done. It's addictive, and I was hooked."

Today, roughly 30 percent of Wesley's students focus on the ukulele, along with 40 percent taking guitar lessons and the other 30 percent focusing on piano. His weekdays are filled with instruction between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.

While most of Wesley's students are children, he has taught people from ages 4 to 89. He works with total beginners through advanced, collegiate-scholarship-level musicians, covering musical genres that include classical, gospel, jazz and pop.

Wesley also has students with autism, attention deficit disorder and Down syndrome and has led TUX outings to nursing homes, where familiar tunes can spark happy memories in people struggling with dementia.

"I think I'm a natural motivator and en-

courager," he says. "I never tire of steering my students to new discoveries about their instruments, their abilities, or music itself. Navigating all the distinct personalities can be challenging at times, but I embrace that challenge."

Another obstacle is motivating students to strive for excellence through consistent practice, without getting derailed by the pursuit of perfection. At the same time, Wesley has to counter unrealistic internet ads that promise mastery of an instrument in just a few lessons.

"Often a student will blow me away with his/her improvement from the prior lesson but still be overly frustrated by one missing note. It is common for students to focus on a single blemish and ignore their overall progress. Unfortunately, this perspective brings discouragement and inconsistency."

In a world where poor-quality audio recordings flood grocery stores, restaurants, gas stations and other common spaces, Wesley is determined that his young students appreciate the beauty and complexity of music.

"I assign listening challenges which force students to listen to a piece less superficially," he says. "I often choose selections from scores they are familiar with, such as from *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* or *Indiana Jones*. Then we discuss the different orchestral sections and how each section fulfills a specific purpose and how each section works to capture an emotion."

When Wesley isn't teaching or on stage, he enjoys composing music for video games. "It's quite nostalgic and doubles as a great way of maintaining my understanding of music theory," he says.

"Music was and is never meant to be a solitary pursuit," he says. "I am very thankful to be living at a time where technology can bring us together and the arts can continue to thrive despite this global pandemic. The arts have united us since the beginning of time." NDN



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 photograph (top) and the  
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