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VOL.15, ISSUE 6

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Keith Denny





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Meredith Collins, Publisher

The highest test of the civilization of any race is in its willingness to extend a helping hand to the less fortunate.

-Booker T. Washington

As I was reviewing this issue, *In an Emergency*, I realized that the definition of what constitutes an emergency and the responses needed has become much broader. The emergency services we learn about in these stories are related to what we might normally think of as responding to everyday necessities. Police, Fire, and EMS emergencies are no less prevalent and those who respond are no less heroic. But these challenging times seem to have escalated needs such as housing, food, and medical care to an all new, emergency level as well, and it could expand as we realize the full fallout from the Covid crisis. So, once again we bring you an issue that, regardless of the theme, is ultimately about the giving that takes place in our community.

It also occurred to me that those who are in need and those who provide for those needs are both equally our neighbors. We get to decide how we want to handle that. When there is an opportunity to reach out, assist, support and care, don't let that opportunity slip by. It's just a part of being a good human. NDN

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Finding Shelter

By Alison Johnson



Mason Murawski Photography

From a childhood spent in poverty, Keith Denny has built a career focused on helping others find safe, good-quality housing.

Raised in a Kentucky coal town, Keith and his six siblings lived in a farmhouse with no indoor plumbing or running water. His family burned coal and wood for heat, raised chickens, hogs and crops, and spent their free time fishing, hunting and playing in the woods.

“We didn’t know how poor we were, because we always had food on the table,” he says. “We

had a home. I understand how important it is just to have a home.”

Keith, Housing Manager for James City County’s Department of Social Services’ Housing Division, joined the Army out of high school as a Construction Engineer. Now 58, he oversees the county’s Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8), Homelessness Prevention, Homeownership, Family Self-Sufficiency, and Housing Rehab and Repair programs.

Under Keith’s leadership, the Housing Unit’s

approach is to make each person who walks through the door feel as if he or she has come to the right place.

“Our whole staff takes pride in our customer service,” he says. “If we can’t help, we’re going to pick up the phone and connect with someone who can before that person leaves. Most people don’t have time or gas money to run all over town trying to find the right resource.”

While a shortage of affordable housing is a regular challenge for Keith, the COVID-19

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WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

pandemic also has triggered a surge in low- and moderate-income residents in need.

“We are seeing a greater demand for housing assistance in all of our programs, including homelessness, rental assistance, home repair, and locating homeownership opportunities,” Keith says. “It hasn’t been easy, but being in a position to help is very rewarding.”

Keith has worked hard to get into that position. Born in Pontiac, Michigan, he was seven when his family moved to Pineville, Kentucky, at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains. Most of the town’s residents eked out a living in the coal industry and grew their own food.

“When it was harvest time, it was understood that a lot of kids didn’t go to school,” he says. “When it was time for planting or weeding or other necessary work, it was understood that all the Denny kids would be getting off the school bus in the field, not at home.”

The family had no money for college. When an Army recruiter visited Bell County High School, Keith jumped at the opportunity to bypass a career in the coal mines and delve into the construction field instead.

“I’d always been interested in carpentry,” he recalls. “I liked carving and messing around with wood, and I always enjoyed the feeling of each project completed.”

Keith spent ten-and-a-half years in the Army, with tours in Germany, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Kuwait. In the United States, he was posted at Ft. Eustis and Ft. Belvoir in Virginia, Ft. Jackson in South Carolina, and Ft. Riley in Kansas.

Along the way, Keith oversaw a huge range of building and repair projects, including bridges, waste treatment facilities, offices and warehouses, housing and laundromats, military tank ranges, power transformer stations, helicopter refueling stations and even two prisoner-of-war holding facilities in Saudi Arabia.

“There were a lot more. It’s hard to sum it all up,” he says. “It really was quite an experience. Quite an adventure.”

While stationed at Ft. Eustis, Keith met his wife, Kimberly, a Newport News native, Denbigh High School graduate, and registered nurse at Riverside Regional Medical Center. The couple have two adult children, Ted and Renee.

During a military downsizing in the early 1990s, Keith accepted a bonus and other incentives to leave the service. The move secured money for continuing education for both Keith and Kimberly and gave him more time at home with Ted, then six months old.

Keith, who had taken some correspondence courses while on active duty, earned a bachelor’s degree in Governmental Administration/Public Management from Christopher Newport University.

From 1992 to 1998, he worked as Chief Instructor in building trades for the Peninsula Housing and Builders Association in Newport News. At the time, the association ran a program funded by the federal Job Training Partnership Act.

As Chief Instructor, Keith helped develop and run courses for about 100 adult students each year in construction math, safety, tools and materials, site layout, concrete, masonry, carpentry, plumbing, heating and air conditioning, electricity, and buildings and grounds maintenance.

To help students get hired, Keith arranged internships with local companies and hands-on projects such as building homes for Habitat for Humanity, renovating a food distribution center for the Virginia Peninsula



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Foodbank, and repairing public schools in Poquoson.

In 1998, Keith joined the James City County staff when he became Housing Project Coordinator in the Office of Housing and Community Development. There, he developed grant applications and managed money for work ranging from flood mitigation to energy efficiency to housing repair and neighborhood revitalization.

Keith has held his current position since 2016. In some cases, his office is able to move people all the way from the streets to homeownership, partnering with mental health agencies on hard-to-serve populations such as homeless veterans and civilians with poor credit histories, substance abuse issues, a history of unemployment or other barriers.

The county also aims to transition individuals and families from public housing to permanent homeownership, without subsidies. Additionally, the Housing Office directs funding to rehabilitate or tear down dilapidated properties, sometimes to help very elderly residents.

"I've seen some pretty bad situations," Keith says. "You might not think that happens in

James City, but it does. We might restore heat, replace windows and do other work to make homes safe, sanitary and energy-efficient. These programs are a godsend for our citizens."

This past winter, Keith helped 47 households find shelter in hotel rooms after usual church programs had to close or limit capacity due to the pandemic. The county's winter shelter program typically serves about half that many households at a time, he notes.

Keith's next COVID-related concern is the scheduled expiration of an eviction moratorium for renters, set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, at the end of June. "We're expecting to see a lot of need this summer. It definitely makes us a bit nervous to think about eviction notices coming, but we'll do whatever we can."

Outside of work, Keith enjoys boating on the James River, fishing in the Chesapeake Bay, playing with his chocolate Lab and running at least three days a week. He has been a runner since high school and has done three marathons to date, plus numerous half-marathons, 10ks and 5ks.

"It's one of my favorite things to do," he says. "Work can be stressful, and for me running is a release and a way to clear my head. And I find that once I sign up for a race and pay, I'm definitely committed to training and doing it."

With extensive technical skills in his field, Keith is licensed as a Home Inspector and Lead Paint Inspector/Risk Assessor. He is experienced in construction management software programs, cost estimating, residential and commercial contracting, zoning ordinances, building codes, environmental requirements, and land use restriction.

Keith also has formed solid relationships with local contractors, architects, engineers, surveyors, and federal, state and local government employees. In his eyes, all can be part of a team to assist as many people as possible.

Sometimes, when Keith is hearing about his clients' lives, he flashes back to his years in Kentucky. "I often want to tell them my story," he says. "I usually don't, but I think it helps me to understand what it's like to struggle." And to know, really know, how important it is to have a home. NDN



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WAYNE JACKSON



Mason Murawski Photography

A Pandemic Pivot

By Narielle Living

Wayne Jackson has spent his life helping others. Born and raised in New Jersey, he worked for the Department of the Army for a number of years. “I’ve worked at the military ocean terminal in Bayonne, New Jersey,” he says. “Then in 1998, we got hit with the BRAC [Base Realignment and Closures]”.

When the New Jersey base closed, Wayne and his family were transferred to Fort Eustis. At the time, he and his wife had two young

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daughters. When they looked around at various school systems, Williamsburg seemed like the logical choice for them. “The reason we came to Williamsburg is because my baby girl was five years old, and they had an all-day kindergarten.” Today, Wayne’s daughters are grown and ages 30 and 27.

Wayne worked at Fort Eustis for about 10 years before they decided to once again change his location. “They transferred me out to Scott Air Force Base in Illinois,” he says. Illinois is a long way from Williamsburg, especially when his youngest was in her final years of high school. Because of that, he and his wife decided to do what was best for their kids. “I went out there myself, because at that time, my youngest daughter was a junior in high school. I knew if I took them out there, I would just hear ‘I hate it here, I can’t stand it here.’”

For the next four years, Wayne traveled between Scott Air Force Base and home here in Williamsburg as often as he could. “I came home every holiday,” he says. “Basically, every month. And because I worked for the Army,

the government, we accumulated a whole bunch of leave.” Having this time off afforded Wayne the opportunity to visit home as often as possible. Coming home for a visit also gave him a chance to do what he loved: cook for his family. “Every time I came home, I cooked for the family. I was home for at least five days.” He managed to come home for major holidays, as well, including Labor Day, Thanksgiving and of course Christmas.

After four years of living in two places, Wayne retired from his position with the Army. Once he retired, though, he couldn’t just sit around the house. Instead, he took a job at Colonial Behavioral Health, where his wife works, driving for them. That’s where he met Harold Mason, another driver. Harold told him that The Arc of Greater Williamsburg also needed drivers.

“I was retired, and I got a job with Colonial Behavioral Health driving the bus. I found out Harold also worked for The Arc as a bus driver, and they needed bus drivers too. So I reached out to him.”

The Arc of Greater Williamsburg is a local

organization that supports people with developmental disabilities through programs and advocacy. Bus drivers for The Arc help get Arc clients to educational, vocational and social programs and employment.

“We would drive them to bowling or Busch Gardens, to the local Recreation Center, where they might have yogurt and have parties and things like that,” Wayne says. “We also transport them to William & Mary basketball games, that type of stuff. William & Mary students partnered up with The Arc, so they’re heavily involved.” Wayne did this for four years before everything completely changed. “Then, as you know, last year the pandemic hit, and they shut it down. No activities, nothing.”

For so many of the clients, Wayne says, this shut down was extremely difficult. “They love the activities, they love being social with their friends. Being unable to see them is heartbreaking. And it was tough.”

But the people at The Arc are not only resilient, they also adapt to a community’s needs. Especially during a major health emergency.



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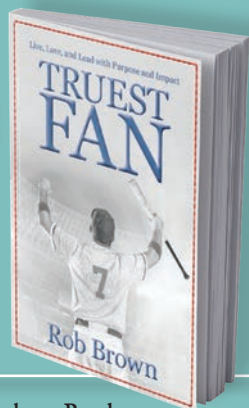


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At that point, The Arc stepped in to help with the food crisis some people were suddenly facing. "The Arc reached out to an organization called Faith in Action," Wayne says. They partnered with Faith in Action to begin delivering food to local families. "They would bring food to people who were in need because of the pandemic," he says. "Folks who lost their jobs, stuff like that. The Arc also gave them an opportunity to use the buses and the vans that we have."

During this initial phase of the pandemic, when everything first shut down and Wayne was at home with his wife, Pam McGregor, the Executive Director of The Arc, called him to discuss their next steps. "She asked me if I would be willing to transport food to the needy," he says. At this time, everything was shut down completely and people were struggling with trying to better understand how Covid-19 was transmitted. "I thought about it for a minute, especially back then when everybody didn't know what was going on or how to catch this thing. So, I'll be honest with you I was hesitant at first."

As he considered this, he realized there would be no direct contact with people. Instead, his role was to pick up food from a variety of sources, including the local food banks at Saint Bede Church, Williamsburg House of Mercy, the Salvation Army and Grove Christian Outreach. "I pick up the food from the food bank and I take it to people's home, but usually I just drop it off in front of the door." Wayne would approach the door, ring the doorbell, and people would come out to get their food. In this manner, he did not have to have any direct contact with others that might put him or anyone else in harm's way.

Being able to participate in helping others during an emergency offered Wayne a sense of purpose. Rather than staying home, he was safely able to assist in the efforts to feed the community. Fortunately, Wayne also had a chance to see The Arc clients as well.

"You know, The Arc is wonderful. With the William & Mary students, they make gift bags for the clients for Easter and special holidays," he says. "We have like 250 clients, and they make 250 bags. We transport those gift bags to the clients who have been home during this pandemic." Handing out the gift bags allowed Wayne the opportunity to see his clients from a distance in the same way he saw the people he delivered meals to.

During the height of the pandemic, Wayne delivered food to people five days a week, Monday through Friday. "I would go to at least four or five homes a day. But now that things have cleared up a little and folks have gone back to work, I only deliver about three days a week, which is a good thing."

People have been extremely appreciative of Wayne's deliveries during a time when food, for some, was hard to get. One family in particular has stayed in his heart because of their caring reaction to him. "I really get joy and satisfaction when I think about this particular couple that I dropped food to every week. They are so appreciative of it. They love me, and they pray for me, every week."

For Wayne, it is a privilege to be part of The Arc community and work with the clients. "I'm honored and happy to be part of that program," he says. "And that's what it's all about, as far as I'm concerned, because they need the help. And I'm more than happy to help them. They're so appreciative, it is unbelievable. They just love it." NDN



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SHENEE GRAHAM



READY FOR AN EMERGENCY

By Lillian Stevens

Ever wonder what a day in the life of a police officer might look like?

For Shenee Graham, Master Police Officer, no two days are the same. However, each day carries a mission to be responsive to the needs of the community she is proud to serve.

Working out of the police department's community services unit (CSU), Officer Graham's focus is on the needs of citizens, neighbor-

hoods and businesses within her assigned zone.

"Whether it's a call for service or connecting citizens to valuable resources that the county provides, we stand ready," she says. "I am assigned to Zone 1, but if citizens are interested in knowing which zone they are living in, they can check the community services unit webpage for that information."

With a concentration on community polic-

ing and crime prevention efforts and activities, the CSU collaborates with citizens to improve crime prevention effectiveness and to strengthen relationships between the community and police. The work she and her colleagues do is often in response to emergencies, and they have to be prepared for anything.

Emergencies, of course, can take many forms. Officer Graham stresses the importance

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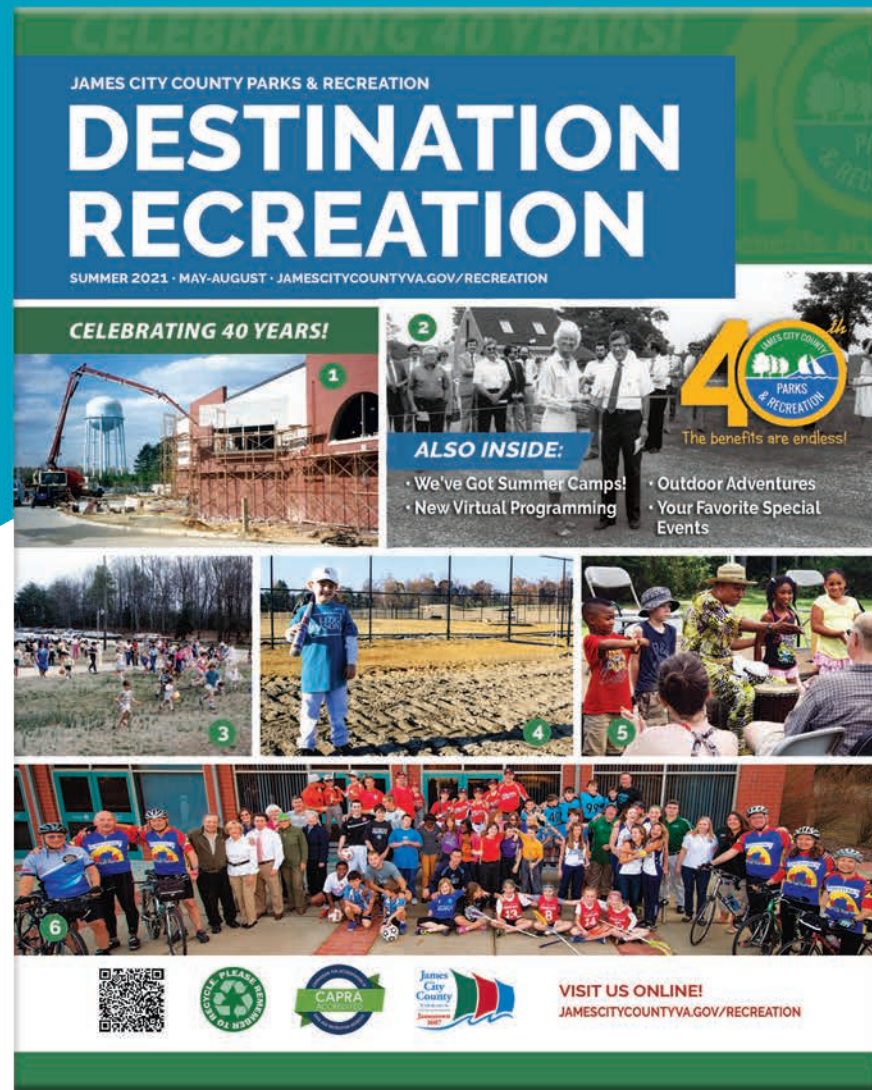


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- James City County and Williamsburg libraries

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of remaining alert and aware at all times.

“It can be easy to feel as if we are in a place where bad things rarely happen,” she says. “But you still have to be vigilant. There can be crime spikes anywhere, and sometimes in places that people never imagined.”

Being proactive is key and, as the saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

“We offer free crime prevention services such as external house checks when citizens may be traveling out of town, as well as home security and lighting surveys. All you have to do is ask, and officers will come to your home or business and offer tips on how to secure your property.”

One visible and highly effective crime deterrent is the Neighborhood Watch program. Created by the National Sheriff's Association in 1972, it's a fairly well-recognized program and is fully supported by local law enforcement who will attend meetings on request. Officers also support community events like National Night Out, which Officer Graham oversees for James City County.

Ultimately, the goal of programs like these is to provide not just outreach, but also a means by which citizens can get to better know their neighbors and work together toward a proactive approach to potential crime.

Did you know that the James City Police Department hosts a variety of safety and self-defense courses for citizens?

“You can sign up for these classes and learn about safety and also receive crime prevention tips,” Officer Graham says. “These are free classes! You can also register for a firearm safety class and learn about the safety and mechanics of firearms and how to stay safe at home.”

There are even self-defense classes for women known as RAD (Rape Aggression Defense). RAD training focuses on practical, simple techniques that can be readily applied by women when confronted by an attacker.

These are just a few of the services the department provides at no cost, designed to heighten people's awareness and keep everyone safe.

It bears noting that a majority of the County's CSU officers are certified by the State as certified crime prevention specialists. Officer

Graham is also certified as a basic and advanced RAD Instructor.

As a young girl growing up in nearby Surry County, the master police officer says she couldn't get enough of the criminal justice shows on television.

“I grew up watching Law & Order, Court TV, Forensic Files, all of those!” she exclaims. “I still watch them.”

Her interest in law enforcement was sealed with a forensic science course she took in high school. In that pilot class, which she describes as very hands-on, Graham learned the different aspects of forensic science and how science can be used to solve a case.

“That class really piqued my curiosity for forensic science and criminal justice,” she says. “From there, I was hooked! I wanted to learn about criminology, which combines criminal justice and the science behind why people commit crime and how to prevent it, as well as how to solve crimes through science and criminal justice.”

That forensics course led her to study criminal justice as an undergraduate college student.

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From there, she earned her Master's Degree in Criminology. Her first job in the field was that of a dispatcher. Several years later, she would become a police officer.

"I was hired in James City County in 2014. I started midnight patrol for about three years before coming to the community services unit. Honestly, it has been great. We are fortunate to be a very progressive agency. We have the resources and technology we need, and there have been opportunities to grow career-wise. Our department is pretty proactive."

Officer Graham says that a good community makes for a good police department.

"People are very supportive here," she says. "It is not unusual to come in and find someone in the lobby with a 'thank you' banner, or pictures that children colored for us. I'm grateful for that connection because not every department has that, and it means so much as we push through these rough times."

It's been the perfect fit for the young officer who feels best when she is helping people, especially children, who are usually fascinated by police officers and their cars. The officers are

generally prepared with swag.

"For the kids, I keep things on hand like stickers, pencils and bike reflectors. The pandemic has made it hard for us to do some of that outreach, though."

Though the pandemic has blocked some collaborative efforts that would normally be occurring, especially spring and summer events, she is optimistic for the future. Whether up close or from afar, Officer Graham hopes that she and her colleagues have had an impact and, where possible, she avails herself of any opportunity to shine a positive light on law enforcement.

"Sometimes you meet people who may not have experienced a positive interaction with law enforcement," she says. "That's why it's important to take time with citizens during interactions and show them that we're here to help. Every single citizen contact is an opportunity to make a positive impact on our community. I think that something as simple as just being personable and approachable can help change someone's perspective."


Police officers are, after all, people. They are

people with families and friends and hobbies. When she's not working, for example, you might find Officer Graham training for a body building competition.

"I do have interesting things that I do outside of work," she says with a laugh. "For one, I enjoy competitive natural body building."

In 2019 and 2020, she competed locally in the OCB Body Sculpting Open, and each year she was able to obtain Professional Athlete status with Organization of Competition Bodies (OCB) in two different categories: Figure and Women's Physique.

Physical conditioning is important and impacts every other aspect of her life, including her work as a police officer. Therefore, Master Police Officer Shenee Graham takes her health very seriously.

In recent years, she has become a certified fitness trainer and a nutrition coach, making it her mission to learn more about her body and how best to care for it. "Our physical and mental health can be impacted being in law enforcement. It's important that we take care of both to be fit for duty." 




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NATALYA DENNETT



Family First

By Wheston Chancellor Grove

Mason Murawski Photography

Natalya Dennett's passion for her work starts at home. "Family is my first priority," she says. Natalya is a divorce attorney who regularly gets called to emergency hearings for her clients. She also represents clients in criminal defense cases. She opened her law office in October 2020. Despite the closing of courts, as per pan-

demic mandates, Natalya's practice has thrived, resulting from years of experience leading up to establishing her own firm. "I relate to each of my clients, whether it's a female or male client. I have a huge diversity in my practice, from doctors and very wealthy people to those living hand-to-mouth who don't have a lot of funds. I

work with them on a payment plan. I can relate to all of them."

Natalya makes it a point to make the process as easy as possible because she empathizes with her clients who are going through a divorce. She serves as guardian ad litem for minors in custody hearings. "It's my purpose in life to



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fight for what is right and to give my clients the best outcome.”

Natalya’s professional track began in Russia where she was born and attended school. Having grown up in an oil production area northeast of the Ural Mountains, with extreme Siberian temperatures and short daylight hours, Natalya secured a full collegiate scholarship in St. Petersburg more than 3,000 miles to the west. She candidly reports facts when she says that as a child, “I was always one of the best students. I value education a lot. I graduated with the highest academic honor in my local school” before moving to St. Petersburg. In Russia, outstanding scholars are given a tangible gold medal. In college, Natalya started out studying international relations. She was surrounded by peers pursuing government leadership degrees. She briefly worked for the national government administration. Always interested in other cultures and countries, Natalya came to the United States where she met her spouse in 2005. “I’ve been here for a long time now and I love it.”

Natalya attended law school at Regent University in Virginia Beach, receiving her degree in 2013. She also took a few classes in Hawaii. Her ex-husband was posted on the island by the military for three years. Natalya loves warm climates. While pursuing a career as an attorney, she also became a mother. In 2014 she had a son, Maximus. Two years later her daughter, Mariela, came along. “When my children were born, my mom came to help. She stayed with us. And then I had an au pair from Latvia.” Natalya’s children speak Russian and continue to take language lessons.

Balance is important to Natalya. Despite making herself available to her clients seven days a week if they need to speak by telephone, Natalya loves being a mother as much as she loves serving clients during difficult times in their lives. A divorcee herself, she knows it’s a delicate process, especially when children are involved. Thankfully, she and her ex-spouse share a good rapport.

Natalya and her children are quite active outside. She truly loves traveling with her children, going for walks and watching her son play soccer at WISC. She does her best to provide healthy meals for Max and Mariela, who both attend Walsingham Academy. “It’s a super good education. I also get together with a group of moms for coffee and playdates for our children.” Another blessing is that Walsingham Academy, with a smaller student population, had the ability to maintain its schedule and reopened on time in August 2020. Children stayed on task with a normal routine and no loss in educational instruction while parents working from home weren’t burdened.

Natalya thoroughly enjoys walking in Colonial Williamsburg and visiting Aroma’s coffee shop. She is active in yoga at Body Balance and takes fitness seriously. She wakes up in the morning eager to start the day because her work is her passion. Many people never find their niche. Natalya was fortunate enough to discover her prowess as a divorce and custody attorney while working as a legal aid in Williamsburg several years back.

Natalya is a spiritual person and admits, “I didn’t just fall here. It’s God



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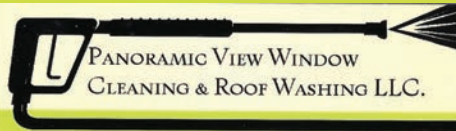
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who brought me to where I need to be, where I am right now, who shows me the way to help others and to be happy and balanced.” This is another reason Natalya supports the education at Walsingham Academy. They integrate spiritual values with top notch curriculum providing a strong foundation for students.

Natalya recalls fondly the support she received while attending Regent University, a Christian college. The camaraderie of others and prayer made stressful times manageable. “The law school experience is difficult. I still talk to some of my alumni, and sometimes [back then] they’d just pray on the phone with me.” Faith and family are Natalya’s guiding principles in life.

When going to court to represent clients, Natalya strives to settle cases with minimal stress for her clients. If there is no contestation, she will not go out of her way to prolong the process. “I love battling cases, too, but making experiences less painful and less expensive is my goal. I know that people are looking

for finality and of course it can be confusing, so I like to get things done for my clients. At home, I think about the cases. It’s very difficult when people go through a divorce and custody battle. I understand why they get so emotional and upset. Sometimes I get yelled at by my clients.” Afterward, they may call and apologize. Natalya understands that they’re not mad at her but frustrated with court decisions or the situation. She doesn’t take it personally. “Most of the time [clients] are grateful for what I’ve done for them in a custody case or a divorce case.”

Some days are longer than others. Many clients want someone to metaphorically hold their hand throughout the entire process. “I don’t let that hand off. I hold them. I walk through the hearings with them.” Most clients have never been through something like this. The stakes are high and children are emotional. Natalya does her best to be honest and provide an accurate timeline.

During the shutdown, only emergency hear-

ings regarding protective orders were conducted. Fortunately, the court system is fully open again.

“I have a good relationship with the Williamsburg Bar. It’s incredible. I’ve been doing this for a long time and we are all good friends. It’s a union, not a competition.”

Even though fellow colleagues may oppose each other in the courtroom, as attorneys they are not adversaries. They’re doing their jobs, representing clients to the best of their abilities. “It means a lot to be in a good relationship. And even though we go to trial, we still respect each other and leave with dignity.”

As an attorney, continuing education is required. Natalya never ceases to hone her skills and knowledge. She plans on expanding her practice. Presently, she has a full-time paralegal who is also a single mom.

One thing’s for sure, Natalya is passionate about being there for others. She leaves herself open to possibilities and is grateful for the blessings in her life, especially her children. NDN

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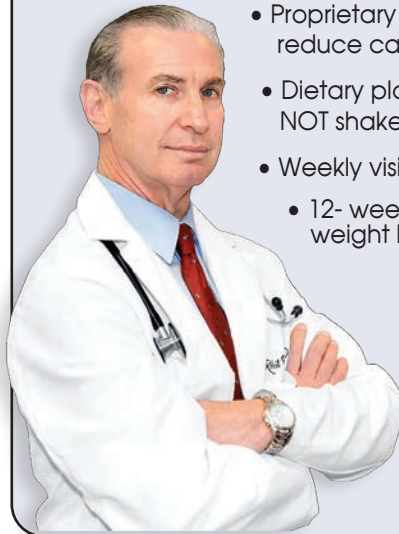


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Elizabeth's Blessings

By Narielle Living



Mason Murawski Photography

Darla Frost grew up in a large, close-knit family in New York. She remembers her grandparents treating everyone with kindness, which made a big impression on young Darla. "There was never a stranger," she says. "If somebody was hungry, you fed them. If somebody was cold, you clothed them. That was just the way it was."

Today, Darla runs Elizabeth's Blessings, a

program that provides food, baby formula, diapers and an assortment of necessary items to people facing an unexpected crisis. Her emergency pantry has helped scores of people in times of need.

When she was younger, Darla's father had his own business. He was strong and capable and had even built their house. Then disaster struck in the form of her father getting hurt. At

that point, he was unable to continue his business. Their middle-class lifestyle disappeared.

"We went from having everything being okay to my mom crying two days before Christmas because we didn't have food, let alone gifts under the tree." This was not good news for Darla and her siblings.

While the family waited for the outcome of a disability claim, it was difficult for her parents



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to pay the bills. Times were tough, and Darla's mother was devastated. "I remember my dad taking my mom up to my grandmother's," she says. Darla stayed at the house that day to care for her younger siblings. Then, something happened that would change her life. "This woman came to the door. I don't know whether she was from the church or the school or what, but somebody had signed us up. They gave us a box of food, and they gave us gifts."

And just like that, Christmas changed. "When my mom came home, I told her what happened. It meant the world to her. The next day, somebody else came and brought food." Her mother politely refused the food from the second person, saying they had already been blessed. "She told them, 'Somebody else needs it more than we do,'" Darla says. "I just remembered that the little they had given us meant so much."

That life experience led Darla to always try to look after others, and that is something she has tried to instill in her own children. "After

that, I'd always been involved in things, even in New York. I brought my kids up to take care of others. We always adopted families for Christmas," she says.

While living in New York, Darla wound up being a single mom of three kids. Her mother ended up getting cancer, and Darla became a caregiver to her, as well. The bright spot in her world was a man she had met and fallen in love with, Chris. "The best part is, he is absolutely fantastic with my kids." After her mom passed away, she decided it was time to move and be with Chris, who works in this area.

Chris supports Darla's continuing efforts to help others in the community. When she moved to Williamsburg, she became involved with several groups doing community outreach. After a while, she started Elizabeth's Blessings, which is named after her mother.

"He knew how important this was when I came down here to be with him," she says. "I got involved in a lot of other groups, and I was always giving things away and always do-

ing things." She had shared the story of her family journey with Chris, so he completely understood how important it is to Darla to be able to help others. "I have to say he is absolutely fantastic," she reiterates about her husband. There have been times, she says, when he has come home after a 15-hour workday and helped her go to the storage facility for Elizabeth's Blessings because someone was in need, or he helped her clean or pick up a donation. And it's not just Chris who helps; her entire family works with her in some form or other. "My kids are older, and they are fantastic," she says. "They've helped put together birthday bags. They've helped with Christmas, with all kinds of things."

A birthday bag is something that Elizabeth's Blessings offers to parents who might not be able to afford birthday gifts for their children. Birthday bags come with a wrapped present for the child from the new toy supply they have on hand, and when available they can also provide balloons. If requested, Darla can provide cake

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mix and frosting if she has it available.

Under Darla's guidance, Elizabeth's Blessings has provided families with a number of things, including a baby pantry stocked with diapers, formula and wipes. In addition, they have food items in the emergency food pantry that consist of a variety of staples and canned goods. The birthday bags are a wonderful gift to parents who may find themselves struggling with how to create something special for their children, and she also works on putting together school packets in the fall for back-to-school items such as notebooks, pens, pencils and general school supplies. Larger items, such as furniture, are accepted for donation as well.

"We will try to pair people with a donor who has the needed item."

Darla remembers what life was like when she was a kid and her family struggled. "One of the things for me was that no one should have to be embarrassed," she says. Anonymity is an important aspect of what she has created. "No

one should have to put their name out there if they don't feel comfortable." She says that although most people are good people, things can sometimes get complicated for those asking for help. "Unfortunately, there's a few people who are going to make judgments."

To avoid potential shame issues around lack of resources, Darla has put applications on the Elizabeth's Blessings Facebook page and has an email address to send the applications. "They fill that application out and send it, either by private message or they can copy it and send a private message, write to me or send it to the email which is listed on the application." This system allows people to maintain their dignity at a time when life is a struggle.

Donations are accepted either at Darla's house or at the storage facility on weekends by appointment. She says that the one donation they are always looking for is supplies for babies, as that can be a critical need. "We always need diapers, wipes and formula."

Darla's work is a labor of love and a testament to her belief that we're all in this thing called life together. "It doesn't matter how much you have to give, or how little, or whether you're the one that's in need," she says. "If it weren't for every single one of us, those blessings wouldn't exist. None of the groups would exist because we wouldn't exist if it weren't for those who are willing to donate and help, and we wouldn't exist if it weren't for the ones who are being brave and saying, I need help."

Darla Frost and Elizabeth's Blessings have created a space in Williamsburg where people facing emergency situations can go for help. She networks with other groups and does her best to lend a helping hand when and where it is needed. "Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether it's the one who is giving or the one who is asking, we're all on the same level. There's no judgment. I think one of the most important things is that everybody realizes that we all have to exist." NDN

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Providing Care

By Susan Williamson



Health care during this pandemic has been a challenge at many levels, from hospital ICU to doctor's offices to community and public health systems. Often, responses to health crises are emergencies and need to be addressed immediately. For Mary Brown, staffing her Saving Grace Home Health Care to respond to people's emergencies has become the greatest challenge.

Mary has spent her entire career in health care. When she retired from Riverside Hospital in Newport News, she was working as a hospital discharge planner and was well aware of the need for quality home health care. She says, "The caliber of some of the people who would be coming in to assist patients was discouraging. I knew there was a need to provide dedicated and trained employees."

In 2018, she opened her own agency, hiring certified nursing assistants (CNAs), nursing assistants (NAs), and personal care assistants

(PCAs) to service needs in Williamsburg and surrounding areas. When the pandemic hit, demand increased, because many people were unable to visit aging relatives in their homes or residential facilities. Companion care requests increased significantly because family members could no longer visit facilities or even travel to private homes to check on their family members. Covid fears and isolation became as worrisome as the virus itself for many people, particularly seniors.

Saving Grace staff members assist elderly and disabled individuals with bathing, dressing, grooming, providing meals, trips to the doctor, purchasing groceries, companionship and other daily needs. Sometimes clients need reminders to eat or take their medicine. The agency serves a mix of short-term and long-term clients. Hospice and other partnering agencies often send referrals. A Hospice referral may mean needing an assistant to help

families and patients during the remainder of a client's life.

Initially, Mary rented office space in Williamsburg, but the agency has recently purchased a building off Jamestown Road which includes room for a training area.

"Our niche is that we do not require a minimum number of hours per week or per month from a client, although we do require a minimum four-hour shift for in-home services for the benefit of our staff members," Mary says. For them to come in to work and travel to a client's home, she feels they need to have at least four hours of paid work. If the assistant is not needed for the entire four hours, the client may release them, as long as the full shift time is paid.

For the first months of the pandemic, she was able to staff adequately, but since November the agency has been reduced from a staff of 33 assistants to 23. "I will not accept a client

if I can't adequately staff and provide for the patient's needs." Any employee who presents symptoms or who is exposed to Covid-19 at work or otherwise is immediately tested and required to quarantine for fourteen days. This reduces the number of available staff as well as the number of hours in which the employee can work.

All new hires attend an orientation, and Mary also conducts training classes for PCAs. Orientations were normally on Tuesdays, but

because she is in need of additional staff, she is scheduling extra orientations and training classes as needed. "I believe in investing in my staff," she says. She knows the success and reputation of her service depends on good staff, and she tries to hire and train capable assistants. "They know I have their back." She tries to be flexible with both her clients and her assistants' needs as far as scheduling and assignments.

Mary grew up in Hampton and went to

college at Longwood University for a degree in social work, followed by a Master's Degree in Education from William & Mary. She then settled in the Tabb section of York County. After 15 years of living in Tabb, she and her husband, Paul, an engineer at NASA, became empty nesters and decided to move to Williamsburg.

"I love the decision," Mary says with enthusiasm. "This is my forever community." She describes Williamsburg as "having the best

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"She has the mindset of a warrior and is the most inspirational person I know. She inspires me to continue studying and never give up, and I hope her story inspires many others." - Jackeline



When Wendy Romero enrolled at Literacy for Life, her goal was to improve her English so that she could help her daughters with homework and support them in their activities. The more she learned, the more motivated she became.

With her tutor's help, she recently earned her high school diploma through the National External Diploma Program (NEDP), and now she plans to continue her education and pursue a career in health care!

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people who help each other.”

Mary decided to retire from Riverside when her son’s ongoing health issues required absences from work. That’s when she decided to start the agency, now in its fourth year. This was a difficult time for the family, but Mary credits her strong Christian faith with helping her in times of great stress. She and her family believe in prayer before making decisions. As she prayed, she kept thinking about what to name the business. “I thought ‘Saving Grace’ was sort of a cliché, but I’m very spiritual and that name kept coming back to me, so I felt that’s what the name should be.”

Mary joined the Rotary Club in Williamsburg, and when her son passed away two-and-a-half years ago, she approached the club about having a birthday party for him as a fundraising event. She says everyone jumped right in to help, and they were able to raise \$9000 for a scholarship fund.

Mary has a daughter from a previous marriage, and Paul has two daughters. Mary

and Paul now live in Westray Downs with their two Maltipoos. When not working, the Browns enjoy traveling with friends, biking, paddle boarding, camping and riding motorcycles. “We do have fun,” she adds.

Serving her clients in their time of need is extremely rewarding for Mary. “I try to answer all phone calls if I can,” she says, “I feel I owe that to my clients and my staff.” Although she might be worried that there is a problem, the calls are more often from people wanting to thank her for providing a much-needed service. As she reflects on this, she says, “I think that is a testament to the kind of people who live in Williamsburg, that they take the time to say thanks.”

When people are ill and in pain, caring for them can require a lot of patience. Mary works diligently to match clients with assistants. Once in a while, the client and assistant are not a good match. “I try to tell my staff, if you are a good match for the majority of clients most of the time, I stand behind you. No

one can get along with everyone 100 percent of the time.” She also tries to coordinate assignments with the geographical area and shift desires of her staff. She has some staff members who only wish to work part-time, maybe only two days a week, or a mother of school-age children might want to work while her kids are in school. For those who want more hours, she may be able to line up two four-hour shifts in a day, if not an eight-hour shift. Her acceptance of clients in outlying areas may depend on whether she has a staff member who lives in that area or is willing to travel there on a regular basis.

Paul Brown, Mary’s husband and best friend, assists with the business when he can. She also depends on the support of her sister, Suzanne Anderson. “Paul and Suzanne are my rocks,” she says. “Without them, I couldn’t do what I do.”

What Mary Brown does is help people, one at a time, through healthcare emergencies and everyday care. NDN



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Working Against Abuse

By Cathy Sliwoski

Mason Murawski Photography

Leslie Jingluski says her job as Community Engagement Coordinator at the Avalon Center is “one of the best things that has ever happened” to her, yet she would gladly give up her job tomorrow if it meant that domestic and sexual violence would cease to exist. For the past four years, she has been speaking to community groups and the public and fundraising for Avalon, which works to break the

cycle of abuse through prevention, education, shelter and support services in the greater Williamsburg and Middle Peninsula communities.

“I spend my days doing presentations on services that Avalon offers, discussing sexual assault and healthy relationships, discussing domestic violence and the power and control wheel,” Leslie says. “Pre-Covid, I was sitting

at festivals and engaging with the community about what healthy relationships are and what Avalon does to help stop the cycle. I love how Avalon gives women such empowerment. It is important to me that we have the platform to let people know that the only expert in a victim’s life is the victim.”

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a 24-Hour Helpline (757-258-5051), a Toll-free Helpline (833-537-0970), a 20-bed emergency shelter, counseling and advocacy for children and youth who are victims or witnesses of abuse, assistance with transitional housing, individual and group counseling, community outreach and legal advocacy. The pandemic has given rise to other services like remote counseling and a series of Podcasts on the website called *Responding with Hope*.

“The remote counseling has been so beneficial because it alleviates the transportation barrier for some victims,” Leslie says. “I have been given the freedom and blessing from my Executive Director to run with the Podcast. It has been amazing. The conversations are casual, but they are impactful.”

When discussing domestic abuse, the most often posed question is, “Why doesn’t she just leave?” Leslie has a love/hate relationship with that question.

“I think the better question to ask is, ‘Why does he abuse her?’ Having said that, I understand where the question comes from,” Leslie says. “This gives me an opportunity to address

a lot of concerns and give a great education. Abusers are not abusive all the time. The abuse often starts a long time before the first act of physical violence. It usually starts with isolation from friends, then progresses to isolation from family. Once children are added to the equation, their safety becomes a priority. Victims are cut off from finances.”

In addition to her work at Avalon, Leslie and her husband, John, own a small restaurant in Richmond called Honey Whyte’s, named after a jazz song by a band they both loved, that has “a Cheers-like atmosphere with good, simple food,” she says. They’ve been at it for nearly two decades, surviving the recession around 2009 and a global pandemic, making sacrifices to create a “little burger place” that is now a neighborhood staple.

“There were times over the years that we wondered if we would make it to the end of the week, but we stuck it out,” Leslie says. “I am extremely proud of John and the business we built.”

It was through her work in the restaurant industry that Leslie first became aware of the

physical, mental, emotional and economic impacts of domestic violence. She was asked to serve on the board of a different domestic violence center, but it really hit home when a close friend’s seemingly idyllic life began to unravel from abuse.

“From the outside looking in, my friend’s life looked perfect. Her husband was very likeable and charismatic,” Leslie says. “But she came to work late one day with bruises and abrasions, and I realized she was covering for him.”

Some of the domestic violence statistics are gut-wrenching. One in three women and one in seven men are affected by domestic violence and sexual assault. A victim may have to leave the abuser several times before leaving for good. Locally during the pandemic, hotline calls to Avalon were up 50 percent. The lockdown mantra of “safer at home” did not ring true for abuse victims. With the lack of in-person schooling, teachers were less likely to be able to intervene by identifying child abuse cases in their classrooms.

Leslie is eagerly awaiting a return to fund-

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raising efforts for Avalon that get the community back together in one place for important conversations. Ninety percent of funds raised go directly to programs and support services at Avalon with very low administrative costs, Leslie says.

Leslie grew up on a farm in Chesterfield, Virginia. The oldest of five, she loved to ride quarter horses. She calls her childhood on the farm “amazing” with its ample life lessons and learning the value of hard work. “When you get up and muck a horse stall before school, you can appreciate sleeping in,” she says.

As a youngster, Leslie dreamed of being a country singer, with thoughts of moving to Nashville in pursuit of fame and fortune. Her parents suggested a back-up plan, so she attended East Tennessee State University from 1995-1997, and then transferred to Middle Tennessee State University. She met John in 1999 when both were performing in bands. Music is an important ingredient in both of their lives.

In 2015, Leslie founded Virginia School of Vocal Performance with the idea of giving

children a chance to hear themselves in a studio setting, the way other people heard them. She discovered a tremendous desire for such a program in the area.

“Within six months I had more students than I had time to coach, so I started a group performance program,” Leslie says. “The company morphed into a youth show choir, which was close to my heart because I had been in a show choir in high school. Unfortunately, the program lost steam in 2020. We had 58 performers ready to do an annual show and had sold over 600 tickets. Two days before the show was scheduled, Virginia shut down due to COVID. It was a devastating blow to those kids who had worked an entire year.”

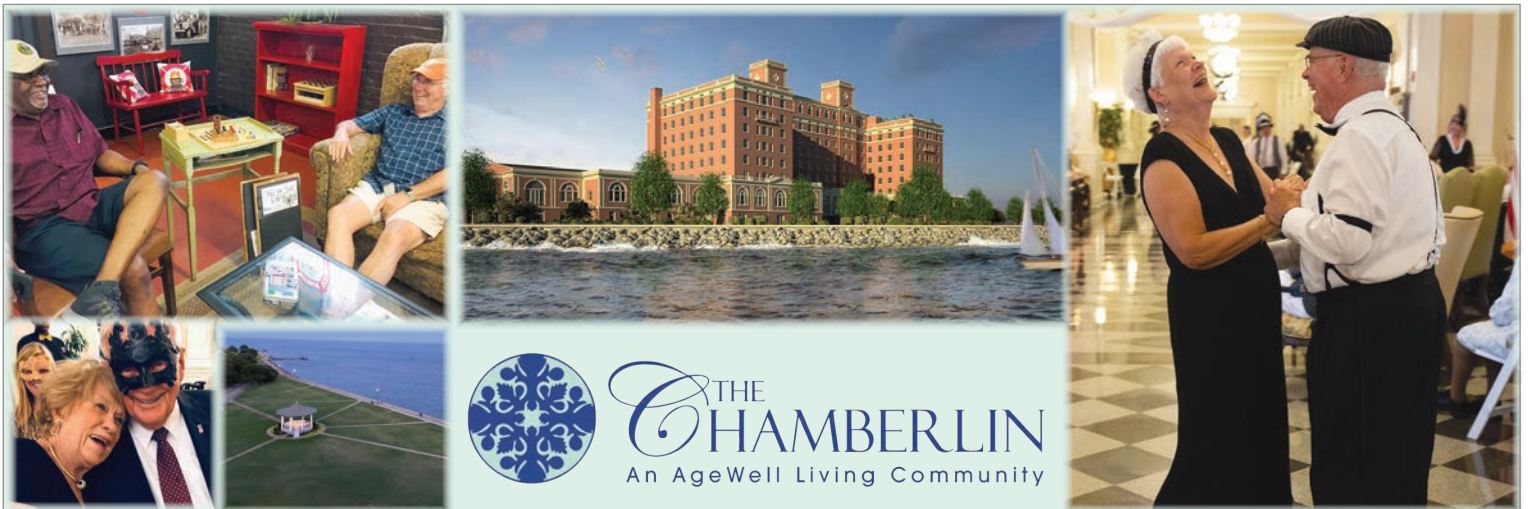
The Jingluskis have three children. John Michael, 15, a black belt in Tae Kwon Do and aspiring Olympian; Amber, 13, a competitive swimmer; and Wyn, 11, a soccer enthusiast. Four-legged family members are Betty, a rescued 11-year-old Basset Hound/Corgi mix; Penny, a three-year-old Golden Retriever; and Billie Jean, a 90-pound Poodle mix puppy. Family vacations, especially camping or travel

to the children’s sporting events, have been a source of happiness and adventure for the family. Because the family loves the water, they are building a home along the Rappahannock River.

“I think it’s so important for children to travel,” Leslie says. “We love the beach, and we really love visiting Puerto Rico.” Bucket list travel goals include Hawaii and visiting every National Park in the US. “We are starting off easy and trying to hit every Virginia State Park in the camper in the next few years.”

After her father died suddenly in 2019, Leslie turned to epoxy art as a form of therapy to cope with her grief. She admits that her hobby has become an obsession. “It is a great way to decompress,” she says. “Each project requires you to be very focused, but there is no wrong answer. It’s also very messy, which is fun.” Many of Leslie’s projects will find a way to benefit the Avalon Center by becoming items available in silent auctions. NDN

For more information on the Avalon Center, including registration information for upcoming fundraisers, visit <http://www.avaloncenter.org/>.



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LT. JULIO DASILVA



Spreading Hope through Service

Mason Murawski Photography

By Caroline Johnson

For Captain Julio DaSilva and his wife, Major Luci DaSilva, being in Williamsburg as commanding officers for the local branch of The Salvation Army has been a dream come true. The two serve as a team, overseeing business administration, programming, the church, community center and all operations while serving those living in Upper York County, James City County and the City of Williamsburg. While the DaSilvas have only been in Williamsburg since June 2020, their

time with The Salvation Army has been long-standing.

Both Julio and Luci grew up in Brazil, with Julio in the Northeastern part of the country and Luci in the South. Both lived in lower-income communities where The Salvation Army provided an after-school program. "As we grew up, we both individually felt called for full-time ministry as a vocation," Julio shares. "We each underwent an intensive two-year course in residence at a Salvation Army training col-

lege before becoming commissioned."

Following the army metaphor of The Salvation Army, every three years officers rotate to a new appointment. Before living in Williamsburg, the DaSilva family lived and served in Tallahassee, Louisville, Brazil, Africa and England. "Officers are ministers of the gospel but also wear many hats," Julio says. "We are administrators, teachers, social workers and leaders."

Captain Julio and Major Luci DaSilva were

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commissioned prior to meeting in 2008 in Brazil. “Our ministry has become a family ministry, which makes it easier to be successful as a married couple when we both have the same calling,” Julio says. “We can be in Williamsburg today and in Africa next year, which is why it’s beneficial to both be called to serve in the same way.”

The DaSilvas have been married 11 years and share daughter Rebecca Joy, whom Julio calls the joy of their lives. “What is interesting and beautiful is that she is already following in our footsteps,” he says. “She has a very serving spirit and a sensitive heart, always willing to step in and serve through helping us feed people and making bags during the holidays.” The DaSilvas’ commitment to what they do flows through their family, each playing a vital role in providing emergency support services to those in need.

Though Julio went to training to become a Salvation Army Officer in 1986, this was not his original career path. He worked in Brazil in Human Relations for 12 years and in Pub-

lic Relations for five years prior. After coming to the United States to work a summer camp through The Salvation Army for a month, he received an invitation to stay longer before he decided to attend the training academy. Luci was a childhood education teacher before joining The Salvation Army, making their decision to leave corporate jobs and take on full-time ministry one that was backed by passion.

“We don’t regret for one minute making that decision as it’s more than just a job. It’s a vocation and calling from God,” Julio says. “Some friends and family thought we were crazy for leaving fields we spent so much time studying to be in, but we’re grateful to have picked a calling that is self-sacrificial and brings us fulfillment. We’re a product of The Salvation Army.”

While working with The Salvation Army, providing emergency services for those in need is only part of what they do. Through programs like food boxes, transitional housing programs, case management, assistance with shelter and help with workforce development,

they meet the physical needs of people in our community. More than that, they also have the ability to make changes spiritually for those they serve. They function as a church and worship center and offer opportunities for Bible study and prayer meetings in addition to providing essential services.

“Every day we see people in our community who are ready to improve their lives,” Julio says. “While they have a need for help, they also have a need for hope.” Captain and Major DaSilva both find that their greatest joy in serving with The Salvation Army are the relationships built with those they serve. Through each program and outreach attempt, they help people while also sharing a message of hope, love and care.

“Knowing I am making a change in one soul at a time, not only for them but for generations to come, is my favorite thing to do. It doesn’t get better than that.” This attitude and heart for the work The Salvation Army does was especially needed during the last year of the pandemic. As the reality of the world in-

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cluded social distancing and a new way of conducting business, they saw a 34% increase in services.

In 2020, they provided 7,438 meals to community members, assistance with rent for 108 families, 532 nights of lodging for those in need of shelter, 2,948 boxes of food for the hungry and assisted 330 parents with baby supplies. These numbers are just a glimpse into the important emergency services work Captain and Major DaSilva have led this past year.

“The Salvation Army is uniquely positioned to be a source of comfort to people during this time, providing shelter, food, personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies, but our outreach didn’t end there,” Julio says. “We also provided spiritual and emotional support to those who were discouraged, whether it was kids struggling with food, mothers struggling with shelter or seniors struggling with isolation.”

The DaSilvas dove headfirst into integrating themselves into the Williamsburg community since their appointment here last year, dreaming of opportunities to expand current services while growing The Salvation Army. Goals for their future here include opening a school for the performing and creative arts, creating a developmental health and fitness program on their campus and starting a culinary program to help those looking to gain skills and experience to find jobs in the local hospitality industry. “These are our plans for the near future while we’re here,” Julio says. “We need churches, civic clubs and individuals to partner with us to make these programs a reality.”

For their current programs, the Officers are gearing up to help with back-to-school assistance, inviting community members to apply to receive school supplies and clothing for the upcoming school year. In addition, they hold character-building programs open weekly to community members that include dinner, music lessons, art lessons and tutoring. During the pandemic, the team continues to make calls to isolated people, especially seniors, to encourage and pray with them. The center has helped community members sign up to receive COVID vaccines as well.

With the upcoming launch of their new capital campaign, Captain Julio DaSilva feels optimistic that the community will come together to support these programs to make these improvements for the community a reality. “Never doubt the capability of a small group of community leaders to make big changes in a community,” he says. “We have a very caring and loving community here in Williamsburg.”

The DaSilvas truly believe that the saying “it takes a village” rings true, especially with a community like Williamsburg.

“Every act of compassion that we do here in Williamsburg is through the generosity of our community and is a reminder that there is a community of people who care.”

Though serving during a pandemic looked different from what the DaSilvas were used to, the agency remained open and never closed their doors no matter what. “There was no quarantine for homelessness, hunger and hopelessness,” Julio says. “While we know that COVID is contagious, we know hope is more contagious.” NDN

To contact The Salvation Army for assistance or questions, call 757-229-6651.

Fixing What Bugs Us

By Ben Mackin



Mason Murawski Photography

Dealing with pests is one of the truly unifying experiences for the human race. Most people have had to deal with a pest situation in one way or another. Sometimes it happens upon entering the kitchen in the middle of the night, feeling around on the wall for the switch, flipping it, and the halogen bulb immediately bathes the room in bright white light. At that point, the homeowner's eyes adjust just in time to see bugs scurry for safety under the refrigerator. Or perhaps the air

conditioner in a home abruptly stops working. The call is made for an HVAC technician, who comes out and quickly finds the cause of the power outage. The good news is that the main power cord was disconnected, a relatively easy fix. The bad news is the disconnection was a result of mice gnawing on the cord, and there is evidence that several dozen of them have made themselves at home in the crawl-space. It is times like these when people frantically call pest control companies to deal with

these unwelcome tenants. Owner and operator of Mark's Pest Control, Mark Woodward, and his staff are quite familiar with these calls.

For those who have never had to make a panicked call to an exterminator while vermin made their home unlivable, the thought of having a pest control emergency might seem odd, but Mark and his industry are vital to modern society. Historically, up until about 12,000 years ago, Homo sapiens spent most of their time traveling the world while hunt-



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ing and gathering. While all that travel on foot probably did wonders for their cardiovascular system, they grew tired of the transient lifestyle. Luckily, they figured out how to grow crops, make tools, domesticate animals and build permanent structures in which to live. Then about 15 minutes after the first humans built their home and started looking at paint swatches for the living room, cockroaches, rodents and other vermin scurried under the doors and snuck in through open windows, presumably, and made themselves at home. For a few millennia people shrugged and carried on as best they could, because sharing a home with bugs was still way better than following herds of elk and hoping to find berries and mushrooms that didn't kill them.

Fast forward to 2500 B.C.E. and ancient Sumerian farmers decide enough is enough and start using primitive sulfur compounds to kill the bugs that were helping themselves to the crops. Thus, the pest control industry

was born. Four and a half millennia later, the industry has come a long way. Through better understanding of science, and generations of pest control specialists honing their craft, exterminators have played key roles in fighting off dangerous and annoying bugs and rodents, not only from eating crops, but damaging structures, spreading disease and making day-to-day life miserable.

Back to present day, it is people like Mark who carry on that proud unsung vocation. Born in Newport News and raised in Gloucester, Mark got into the pest control business in the mid-1980s because there was, and still is, a high demand for technicians. Before finding work with a company based in Gloucester, Mark had made a living framing houses and doing any construction work that was available. Soon the work proved to be too inconsistent to meet his needs.

"When bad weather hit, they would send you home and I wanted something that had

regular 40-hour pay," Mark says. Then friends recommended that he look into pest control. "Rain or shine, pest control goes on and you can depend on it."

He found employment with a small company in Gloucester and learned the ropes for about a year before moving to a job with James Pest Control in Williamsburg. "I learned a lot from them," Mark says of the company, with which he spent a decade. Through the late 80s and early 90s, Mark honed his craft, learning everything he could, getting the required certifications and licenses. In 1994, he decided to strike out on his own.

As most entrepreneurs do, he started out small. Really small. For the first two years, Mark was the owner and sole employee of Mark's Pest Control. During the early days he would place ads in local newspapers and magazines. Using the cab of his truck as his office, he would often schedule appointments while sitting on the side of the road in between jobs.

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At night, after the physical work was done, he took care of all the necessary paperwork. While it was slow going at first, Mark began to build his clientele enough that he was able to hire other technicians to work for him as well as an administrative assistant to manage the clerical side of the business.

Mark's Pest Control has grown in staff and clients, predominantly in clients. One person on his staff that he credits much of his success to is his business manager and sister, Jill Cox. Jill came to the firm in 2004 from running a medical office in Richmond. "She has really helped me build the business," Mark says of his sister. "At this point she runs the office, which allows me to stay in the field with the guys. She's really good at marketing and billing, payroll and accounts receivable. She does it all, which is a big relief for me."

As the business grew, so too did the need for space and equipment. After 10 years of renting office and storage space off of Long Hill Road, Mark and Jill moved their headquarters

to an old farmhouse-turned-office building on Richmond Road in Toano. While he had worried about moving away from the center of Williamsburg, Mark said that being further up the peninsula has created more business for him in places like West Point and New Kent. Despite his large service area, Mark says that more than seventy percent of his business comes from Williamsburg and James City County.

According to Mark, taking steps to prevent pest infestations is the best way to avoid emergencies. He stresses that everyone should get and maintain a pest control treatment plan for their home. Without one, he says, things can get out of hand very quickly.

Mark recalls a client who called him early one morning. "It was 7 a.m. on a Sunday, and I was fast asleep when my phone started ringing," he says. "The man on the line said 'I've got termites! They are coming out of the walls and eating my house up. You've got to come now.'" Dutifully, Mark got up and drove fif-

teen miles to the customer's home. After making sure that they were termites, he spent his Sunday treating the entire house for termites. As a result, Mark saved the man's house, and the man found a pest control company that he uses to this day.

Although Mark likes the idea of continuing to grow the company, he wants to ensure that does not leave his current clients wanting. "I'm not interested in opening offices in Newport News and Richmond. I'm not about making money," he says. "I want to keep the customers I have happy." He says he'd like to maintain a staff of 10 or 12 technicians to send out into the field while being able to continue giving his clientele personalized service. "After 35 years in pest control, I am still very hands on," he says. "I've seen companies that get big and have to hire managers, and the owners kind of lose touch. Here, I am able to keep the horse by the reins. I talk to all of my customers regularly." And that is the way Mark Woodward plans to keep it. NDN

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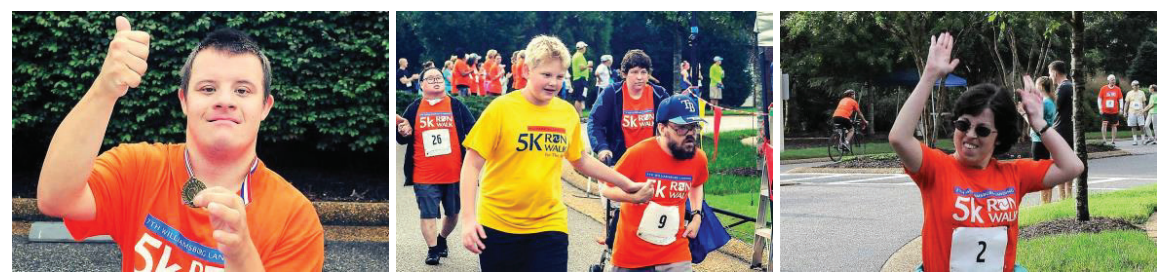
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WORKING FOR THE VICTIMS

By Narielle Living

Mason Murawski Photography

When there is an emergency, the first thing we teach children is to pick up the phone and dial 911. The police are there to assist and help us manage emergency situations as well as keep us safe. Investigator Chris Gibson with the James City County Police Department is someone who responds to citizens who are faced with dire emergencies or are trying to make sense of a violent crime.

For his entire life, Chris has been interested in law enforcement. He grew up in York county and because of his positive interactions with law enforcement officials in this area, he decided that applying to be part of the James City County Police Department would be ideal.

“I applied, and the department hired me and sent me to the police academy,” he says. Chris explains that when hired to work with

the police department, everyone begins as a uniformed patrol officer on patrol shift. That is exactly where he started, but today his job is very different. “I started with James City in 2005, and I went to the investigations [division] in 2012.” To date, Chris has spent his entire career with James City.

When he began working in the investigations division, he started in what is known as

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general assignment, meaning he worked on almost anything. When a call came in for a crime, he was sent to check it out. Today, his role is somewhat more specific as he is assigned to the violent crimes division. This includes homicides, armed robberies, gang related crimes and sometimes missing persons. He is also a member of the Southern Virginia Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, a job which can be grueling.

As he spends his days staring at images that showcase the worst of humanity, it can sometimes be difficult to believe there is still goodness in this world. He says that this type of work is definitely not something everyone can do, but the rewards are enormous. When he and his colleagues are able to bring justice to a victim, that makes it all worthwhile. "No one else is going to be able to do it for them," he says.

Chris doesn't want the public to have to think too much about what he does. "We want people to live their lives and not really be bothered by all the ugly out there," he says. And even though he doesn't want people to worry or be bothered by the crimes he has to see, he wants everyone to know that he will do everything he can to find justice for the victims. "Our main goal is to apprehend the person who has victimized them," he says. "We work with the community to catch these people and bring them to be prosecuted." His job, he says, is to keep everyone in the community safe. "That's always our main goal: to keep everyone safe, so you can leave your home and you don't have to worry."

As an investigator, Chris continues to attend classes and learn as new technology develops. He has had training with the FBI, interview interrogation and has taken a number of classes related to technology. "I'm a digital forensic examiner," he says. "That means I examine digital evidence on cell phones and computers. There's a lot of training involved with that."

Chris stresses that he is continually learning new things in law enforcement. "I never stop learning in this job," he says. "I was a field training officer on the street, and I would tell people, 'you finished the police academy, but you always have something to learn.'" This mantra is especially true in a field like digital forensics investigations, where it is critical to learn about new technologies, software and devices.

In addition, Chris also spends time solving crimes underwater. "One of my collateral duties is that I'm the supervisor of our underwater search and recovery team. It's me plus five other divers." The other divers on this specialty unit are also police officers. He says that his department works with other agencies, including the local fire department. "We work hand in hand with the fire department who also has divers. The Coast Guard is one of our partners." Chris says that part of the reason the dive team was formed was to extend resources for the Coast Guard and the Port of Virginia. This meant if there were to be a major incident, the Coast Guard could call and request additional resources.

In the event the dive team is needed, Chris says it is generally a fast response on their part. "We'll get paged. The fire department will respond with their fire departments, and typically is first on the scene. They have equipment, and they will do an immediate search of an area."



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There is no doubt that Chris has seen and experienced a number of life-changing events related to his job. As someone who works to keep people safe, he has some words of advice. "When it comes to the water, wear your life vest and go in the water with a friend," he says. "Don't swim in unfamiliar areas or where it's posted no swimming. Most of our drownings tend to occur in those areas." This often happens in water near the Colonial Parkway where, despite signage warning people to stay out of the water, people still decide to venture in. "Pretty much every year there would be one or two drownings, even though it's posted 'dangerous waters, strong current.' Then we have drownings where people fell in the water, and they're not wearing a life vest. They don't have swimming skills and they end up drowning. Life vests are not always the most comfortable thing, but it's not worth your life not to wear them."

When it comes to his computer and online investigations, Chris has some advice for parents. "Stay on top of what your kids are doing on the internet. Be cautious how much access to the world and the internet they have. Keep an eye on them, and watch and see what they're doing, see who they're talking to."

It's not just kids who have to be cautious while online. Adults often fall victim to scams and can lose large amounts of money or even get hurt. "Be very cautious of anyone who asks for money or assistance. Always confirm any unsolicited emails or communication you get to make sure it's legitimate."

And what about the used guitar or violin for sale on Craigslist? How can people stay safe and still make that kind of purchase?

"If you don't know that person and you're planning on traveling from somewhere, you should always bring somebody with you," he says. "If you're going to meet them at a location, try to find a well-lit area. Even the parking lot of our police station would work. Try to avoid going to anyone's house if you can help it unless you have somebody with you that can help you out if you need it."

For anyone looking to go into a career in law enforcement, Chris has some words of advice. "If someone is young and at the high school level, they can reach out to us or their local department. We have a police explorer program that gives them a taste of what to expect in law enforcement. If you're an adult, we have a citizens' police academy. They get a real world taste of what police officers do, and we also have a citizens' forensic academy if you're interested in crime scene stuff. But kids - do good in school, get good grades, and keep your nose clean."

The one thing that Chris Gibson stresses is that he and his colleagues are always available and nobody should hesitate to call. "We are always here to help. Don't ever be afraid to approach us or call or speak to us if there's anything we can ever do. We would always rather that you call and check with us or ask questions, because we might be able to head you off and prevent you from becoming a victim or your family from becoming a victim. Don't wait. Call if you need us." NDN



Mason Murawski Photography

A League of Their Own

By Narielle Living

Tom Garcia loves to embrace life fully, participating instead of sitting on the sidelines. When he saw an article in the newspaper about a senior softball league, he was excited to join a group of like-minded athletes to play the game. An active man, Tom loves both sports and music and has spent most of his life involved in both. "I'm grateful that God has given me the strength to do the things that I do," he says. "I am grateful for that every day."

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(the other Las Vegas), and his family later moved to Colorado. He lived in several places in Colorado but grew up mostly in a town north of Denver called Commerce City. Many of his siblings still live in that area and Tom returns for visits when he can.

After he finished high school, Tom was in a rock-and-roll band. "We were very good and very popular, and we got to back up stars of the era," he says. They ended up playing back up for well-known singers such as Dick and Dee Dee, the Rip Chords and Terry Stafford, who sang the song "Suspicion" that later became an Elvis hit. "There was a really popular band in Colorado called The Astronauts who actually made it big time," he says. At the time, Tom was 18 years old, making a lot of money and having a great time. "We were like kiddie stars."

Then he was drafted. It was 1965, and Tom spent part of his time in the Army here in Virginia. "I really liked the people here in Virginia in the Army days." While here, he met a wom-

an and got married.

After he finished his stint in the Army, Tom considered returning to Colorado with his wife. Instead, his in-laws suggested they stay for just a bit longer. His mother-in-law told him about a physician at Eastern State Hospital who worked in the music department. Since he was no longer in the Army and needed a job, Tom applied to work at Eastern State Hospital. The day he arrived to apply, he had an impromptu audition. Someone brought him a guitar, and he played for them. "I was pretty up on the music because I was in the rock-and-roll band in the Army. Dion was very popular from Dion and the Belmonts, and then of course Elvis and the Beatles were hot. So, I went on the ward and started singing."

Tom was hired on the spot.

For the next four decades, Tom played music for patients at Eastern State Hospital, helping heal and soothe with the power of piano and guitar. It was a perfect fit. Now retired, he continues to practice and play. "I've had great

times singing and met a lot of really good musicians."

In addition to playing music, Tom focuses on a variety of sport-based activities.

"I played in high school and was fortunate enough to letter nine times in sports." He says that sports and music are what helped him during the tumultuous Vietnam era. "Sports was a big thing for me. I played Fastpitch in the Army."

While working for Eastern State Hospital, he did a lot of recreation with patients in addition to music. "We had softball games and everything. My big thing there, besides music, was horseshoes. I grew up with horseshoes."

For almost 40 years, Tom played in various Fastpitch leagues in the area. When he read about the Williamsburg Senior Softball League (WSSL), a league for seniors that had formed to play Slowpitch softball, he was excited. "After I retired, I didn't play much except to teach the grandkids, and I had coached my daughters in Fastpitch. When I saw this in the

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Gazette, I was so excited.” He contacted the group and went to a meeting to learn more about the league. At that time, his hand was broken in three places from some work he had been doing outside. “I went to this meeting and there was such a nice turnout. I got to meet a lot of people and shook their hands, and we smiled and talked about what we’ve done from the past. Finally, I get to play with people my own age.”

Prior to this, Tom had found himself playing with people who were 20 years younger than he was. “That’s what kept me going because to keep up I had to be a better ballplayer.”

Practice started, but when Tom showed up with his hand in a cast, the others had some doubt about how he could play. He hastened to reassure everyone. “I said I can bat one handed. And I did.”

Tom has loved his time with the WSSL. He enjoys the game, of course, but more than that, he loves the camaraderie and friendships. “I met a new band of friends in the same age

group,” he says. “They enjoy playing, we laugh, we shake hands, and it’s really great.”

Now that he has spent some time with the league, he helps to coach the new folks who arrive to play with them. “We had a whole bunch of new fellas come in,” he says. “So some of us who have been there for three years, we kind of coach them to help them with their skills.”

Because many of the newer players have not played the game in some time, Tom notes that it’s important to guide people. “They haven’t played for a while, and they’re giving 100 percent on the first day, which is neat because they want to show their skills, but on the other hand, it’s good that we were there because some were playing too close.” If someone is playing too close and they were to be hit, it could result in an injury. “So we tell them to back up and be careful because we don’t want anybody to get hurt. That’s the most important thing.”

He remembers one woman who had leaned over to catch a grounder. “She was leaning forward the wrong way,” he says. “If you lean

forward with the ball in front of you in the glove, that ball can take a bad hop and hit you right in the face.”

In addition to playing softball, Tom has participated in the Senior Olympics for the past 20 years. “I think I’ve earned 39 medals. And maybe 25 of them are gold,” he says. “And in 2003 I took fourth in the nation in horseshoes at Virginia Beach. I was very fortunate to get in shape to do all these things.”

Today, Tom Garcia is excited to return to the WSSL to play for the season. But the thing he values most about the team is the friendships that have developed.

“It’s really not about winning or losing. It’s brought me closer to a lot of people. When I first heard about it, to me it was like we’re a league of our own. We get to be a team of seniors, women and men. And we get to help each other just like we did when we were young. We cheer each other on. It makes me happy. It’s like my music. It makes them happy too, but when you got a bunch of happy people together, you have a happy time.” NDN

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Mason Murawski Photography

Writing with Sabine

By Ashley Smith

Ashlyn Bowden has been reading and writing stories since she was a young girl. She wrote entire books on her computer to share with her siblings when she was just seven years old. Her first book was about a mouse, and because her dad was able to help her laminate it, she still has a copy tucked away. Though she enjoyed writing the stories, the intricate details of creating a physical book thrilled her just as much. “That’s where it all started,” she says, referring to her earliest works.

Ashlyn was born in Chesapeake, but her family moved to Williamsburg when she was around ten years old. Because she was homeschooled, Ashlyn didn’t have to adjust to a new school and moving to the historic area gave her plenty of inspiration for writing. As a home-school student, Ashlyn was able to delve deeply into subjects she enjoyed, and naturally, she focused on developing her writing.

At first, she was interested in exploring journalism, though she hadn’t decided on which medium when she started college after graduating a year earlier than most of her peers. As

she began plugging through electives at the local community college to figure out her next steps, Ashlyn indulged in a different type of writing altogether when she launched a food blog. She journaled and shared beautiful, simply made gourmet dishes that she loved. Initially, she thought that the blog would help to hone her writing skills and be a good addition to her writing portfolio. However, as Pedantic Foodie generated more attention and a small revenue stream, Ashlyn started receiving catering requests. She developed a working relationship with another local company, and the little blog needed more attention.

As she continued to take classes and maintain the blog, she also worked as a private tutor. Her blog became more sustainable and as a result, Ashlyn decided to pause her higher education pursuits after earning her Associate Degree in Social Science. “My original plan was to transfer to William & Mary, and I do love school, but this opportunity was there, and since I wasn’t sure what I was going to do in school, I jumped at it,” she says.

Ashley has continued to tutor, especially since the pandemic has taken a toll on students,

teachers and parents. As a tutor, she enjoys encouraging students to build their writing skills and empowering them to free their thoughts through written expression. She recently rebranded the blog and it has been renamed Plate Fete. She continues to write on the blog, though at a slower pace in recent months.

Despite the significant number of dinner recipes she shares, Ashlyn is at heart a baker, and she still caters for weddings and events when she receives requests through her blog. “I freelance because I can change what I do day to day, so that I don’t get too bored.”

Though she has been busy as a food writer and caterer, Ashlyn has recently added another title to her growing list, that of published author. Though the seeds were planted early in her childhood, it took a special friend to help that dream blossom. During a bout of health concerns, Ashlyn and her husband, Josh, adopted Sabine, a miniature Bernedoodle. “She was and is just the perfect best friend for me,” Ashlyn says. Partly out of gratitude, and partially to fulfill a dream, Ashlyn decided that the most fitting tribute she could give her new best friend was to write and publish a children’s book star-

ring Sabine.

In writing the story, Ashlyn focused on creating a safe voice and gently introducing lessons and new vocabulary to children. As an author, she wants to remain faithful to those guiding principles as she writes new stories.

Ashlyn & Sabine is a story about heartache and healing, and Ashlyn remains grateful for support of her family and the success that the book has found thus far. The journey to publishing was a long one, as she decided to indie-publish. “I’m a perfectionist, and as I researched the industry, there was so much control that I’d have to give up as an author in order to traditionally publish, and I couldn’t do that.”

Instead, Ashlyn researched and learned how to publish the work on her own. Though it took longer than she expected, she enjoyed the process. “I loved being able to have my stamp of approval be the final word and doing everything in-house.” Her brother, Elijah Ickes, illustrated the book. “It was such a fun collaboration to work with my brother on this project. Now, we can say, ‘Look, Mom and Dad, we do get along!’” she says with a laugh.

The release process was complicated by the

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pandemic, but Ashlyn & Sabine was released in the fall of 2020. For now, Ashlyn has been thrilled to see the reception at markets such as the Williamsburg Christmas Market, and she is eager to meet more people at markets across the peninsula this summer. "It's been rewarding to share and see people connect with it so quickly," she says. "There's an innocence and a sweetness to children's literature, as well as an opportunity to teach. I treasure that as a gift and responsibility." She welcomes future opportunities to speak with students and to help develop writers to encourage them on their writing journey.

Ashlyn's enthusiasm for writing has only grown, and she is already working on a sequel to Ashlyn & Sabine, as well as a second series. "I never feel more myself than when I'm writing," she declares. "It's so empowering to be able to put thoughts on paper." Ashlyn wants to write as much as she can, not only to create a series that connects with children but to have opportunities to invest in the community as well. When Ashlyn & Sabine released, she donated a portion of proceeds from certain purchases to the Humane Society, since the book focuses

on pet adoption. She remains hopeful that the series can lead to more charitable contributions in the future.

The second Ashlyn & Sabine story will have a new starring character, Ashlyn's daughter, Eiveilyn, who recently celebrated her first birthday. Ashlyn loves that writing and publishing leave her daughter a unique legacy that celebrates their family.

Ashlyn, Josh and Eiveilyn enjoy living in Williamsburg, and as an author, Ashlyn wants to reinvest in the community that has been so supportive. "I love the relationships and the potential for relationships that exist within Williamsburg." Ashlyn remains committed to creating stories that resonate with children and encourage them to learn without lectures. Above all, she wants to inspire the same passion for reading that captured her heart so long ago.

Ashlyn Bowden has already accomplished quite a lot as a young adult, and she isn't finished yet. Williamsburg will continue to hear from this exuberant and determined young woman as she makes her mark on the literary world. NDN

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TIME TO RELAX

By Brandy Centolanza

Now more than ever, people need to make time for self-care. The current state of the world has made many people anxious and uneasy. Rhonda LaViolette, the new owner of Serenity Spa on Jamestown Road, is more

than happy to help people relax and recharge as they wait for life to return to normal following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although Rhonda is new to owning Serenity Spa, it has been in business for roughly

15 years. They offer a variety of services for all ages including manicures and pedicures, facial and body treatments including microdermabrasion, peels, body wraps and scrubs; massage therapies, spray-on tanning, and

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“Massages are great for detoxing, and facials are big right now, especially with everyone wearing masks and dealing with acne and dryness,” Rhonda says.

Some studies show that massage therapy also has other potential health benefits, including stress reduction and alleviation of anxiety and depression; reduction of headaches, pain and muscle tension; reduction in heart rate and blood pressure; and improvement in circulation, energy and immune function.

Rhonda recently decided to introduce infrared sauna treatments to their offerings. The infrared sauna machine helps with detoxification, pain relief from ailments such as arthritis or fibromyalgia, and skin health. Patrons can also utilize the infrared sauna for cardio and weight loss or simple relaxation.

“We started offering the infrared sauna treatments about a month ago, and clients are loving it so far,” Rhonda says. “It’s really great for detoxing, which we could all use right now with all the germs that are out there these days.”

Rhonda bought Serenity Spa and became its new owner in August 2020, although she has been working at the spa since nearly the beginning. Rhonda, who hails from Massachusetts and has a background in restaurant management, relocated to Williamsburg 15 years ago. The owner of Serenity Spa at the time was a friend and hired her to work the front desk. She eventually became the manager of the spa.

“About three years later, she sold the business, and I became friends with the new owner,” Rhonda says. “I was manager for ten years and then she decided to sell the business. She gave me a deal I couldn’t resist. I always had it in the back of mind that I wanted to own the spa. It was pretty exciting.”

Taking over a business that relies on close contact with customers during the height of the pandemic was a challenge. For many months, she was unable to offer her full range of services. “We still weren’t able to do facials at the time and a lot of people were uncomfortable coming in and having to wear a mask for a massage,” she says. “This past year has been really hard.”

While services are still limited, things are improving and Rhonda remains positive about what lies ahead. Business has been increasing steadily, and she is now looking for additional massage therapists and nail technicians.

“I just love my job,” Rhonda says. “I love meeting new people and making them happy. It’s not that hard because no one can leave a spa unhappy. It’s rewarding to me.”

Though the business sees a few tourists, most of Rhonda’s clientele are locals, including students and staff from William & Mary as well as those who live in nearby neighborhoods. Some people have been coming to Serenity Spa since it first opened. Rhonda credits her staff for that. She works with experienced estheticians, massage therapists, nail technicians and hair stylists. Like her customers, Rhonda has nu-

merous loyal employees who have been involved with the business for a decade or more.

“The people who work here are like family,” Rhonda says. “They are awesome. I appreciate them so much. We enjoy pampering people and making them feel good about themselves when they leave. That’s our goal.”

At Serenity Spa, one of Rhonda’s employees is literally family. Her 34-year-old son, Jonathan, also works at the spa, assisting with marketing and advertising.

“He really wants me to succeed,” Rhonda says. “He is awesome. He is just the perfect son.”

Last year, Jonathan also helped Rhonda with caring for her sick father, Ron, whom she was named after. Rhonda had to move her dad to Williamsburg from the Boston area in the summer of 2020 during the pandemic to look after him. He passed away in September.

“He was always really proud of me,” Rhonda says. “I am just grateful he was alive long enough to see me become owner of the spa because he always knew it was a dream of mine.”

When it comes to her own self-care, Rhonda prefers to play pickleball. She first took up the trendy sport, which is a combination of tennis and badminton, last summer with some neighbors as a way to get outside and get fit while social distancing. Now she plays several times a week.


“I absolutely love it,” she says. “It’s just a lot of fun and great exercise. It’s a great way to be outside. I like it, too, because you don’t have to be athletic to play. Anyone can play and we are always looking for new players.”

Rhonda also enjoys spending time with her fiancé, John, a shift manager at the Surry Power Station. The couple, who met three years ago, enjoy going out to dinner, playing cards and walking their dog, a 155-pound Great Dane named Murphy. The pair also share a rescue kitten named Tito.

Rhonda and John are relishing being engaged and are holding off setting a wedding date until it is safe to gather with friends and family to celebrate their big day.

In the meantime, Rhonda is content with helping others prepare for their special occasions as owner of Serenity Spa. Many people bring bridal parties to the facility to prepare for their big day, and sometimes people even show up for birthday parties or other events.

“We are starting to see more and more clients coming back to see us, which makes me really happy,” Rhonda says. “We are also seeing some new faces, too.”

Serenity Spa currently has a staff of 11, but Rhonda is hoping to hire more employees and expand services. The spa has seven rooms for treatments in addition to the nail services area. She is also in the middle of remodeling the space to give it an updated look. Rhonda is looking forward to continuing growing personally and professionally here in Williamsburg. 



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Finding A Faith Home

By Narielle Living

When people move into a new house, there is more involved in making it a home than just decorating. One of the most important aspects of feeling “at home” is feeling comfortable in the community. This includes not just a neighborhood, but also the spiritual community. For some, home is not complete until a church home is found.

When Frank Jones retired from IBM and moved back to Virginia from New York, he and his wife knew that their home would

not be complete until they found the right church. His career at IBM had taken him to Yorktown Heights, New York. “I spent most of my career managing the worldwide manufacturing organization for IBM that manufactured all their equipment, semiconductors, etc. I was the vice president of our worldwide manufacturing procurement and logistics.”

When it came time to retire, Frank wanted to come home, and home meant Virginia. One of seven children, he grew up on a farm

in the small town of Brodnax in southern Virginia. Every Sunday his parents made sure he went to church, and his children were raised the to do the same. “I was born and raised in Virginia, went to college, undergrad at Virginia State University in Petersburg. I joined IBM right out of college.”

Frank and his wife chose to move to Williamsburg because of the proximity to their grown children and grandchildren. “My son is in Richmond, and my daughter actually

lives in my hometown.”

Once they settled into their new home here, the next step was for Frank and his wife to find a church. Together, they made a list of the churches they wanted to attend, deciding to try them all first before making a final decision.

“One of the first things that we did after getting here is start to visit local churches to try to decide where we would attend,” he says. “We went through maybe four or five churches in the area.” Although they were nice, Frank had yet to feel at home. Then he visited New Zion and heard Pastor Whitehead speak.

Initially, Frank had been living in Williamsburg part time before making a permanent move. “We had built our house in ’99,” he says. “I retired here permanently in 2002.” When Frank first went to New Zion church, he was overwhelmed with the feeling of having come home. At that point, he was living in Williamsburg permanently and felt like he had found a spiritual refuge. “I liked the environment, I liked the people, I liked

the message that he delivered.” Later that day, Frank talked with his wife. She suggested they continue to visit other churches to be certain of their decision. “I said sure, but I want to go back next Sunday. We went back the second time and I told my wife, ‘I don’t know about you, but I’m joining that church.’”

Joining the church was simple. “The process of joining in the black church is called open the doors of the church. That’s the time in the service when they would offer people who are not members, or have never been a member of a church, the chance to step forward and say, I want to give my life to Christ, or in my case, I want to join your church. When he did that, the second time I visited, I got up and went up to the front. At that point, my wife decided to go too.”

The next step for Frank was to attend a new members’ orientation where he learned about the church and how the church functioned. “It was about the membership structure and the organization. That was a great way to learn about the church and get to know people and

how it functions.”

At that point, Frank had the idea that he could ease into being a part of his new church home. Pastor Whitehead, however, had other ideas. “I tend to ease in, and Pastor Whitehead, God bless him, he’s got some instinct. He realized I had a lot of experience in terms of structure and strategic planning and that sort of stuff. I’ve run a large organization. I essentially got involved quickly because within three years I became a deacon.” A deacon has many leadership responsibilities, and after about five years Frank moved into a position called the chair of the ministry. It was in this role that he began to get to know Pastor Whitehead really well and worked closely with him to ensure everything functioned properly, a role Frank relished in his retirement.

While there are many aspects of Pastor Whitehead’s style that Frank admires, the thing he admires most is the pastor’s style of being what he calls a “servant leader.” This, Frank says, is a unique style of management.

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“He personifies servant leadership,” Frank says. “He looks for no accolades of his own.” Franks says that one example of this style is that in most black churches, a pastor and their family typically celebrate a pastor’s anniversary within the church. During that celebration, the pastor and their family will have set aside their seats at a big table in the church or in the hall. Generally, they will be waited upon by parishioners. “Not him,” Frank says, referring to Pastor Whitehead. “He says, ‘I’m here to serve and not to be served.’”

Because of his vast experience in the business world, Frank’s perspective on his church home is unique. He is not surprised that because of his management style and personality, Pastor Whitehead’s tenure at New Zion has led to tremendous growth in the church. According to Frank, church membership has grown from fewer than 100 members to more than 700 currently. Worship services have grown to two on Sundays and attendance at Sunday School and Bible study groups has also increased. Along with the growth in

membership has come a rise in the number of ministries supported by the church, important endeavors that are integral to their mission.

According to Frank, the history of New Zion is unique. They were founded in 1870 by a group of formerly enslaved and free black men. The first building was a log cabin named Brown’s Baptist Church in honor of landowner Richard Brown, who donated the land.

In 1900, the church was rebuilt and renamed New Zion Baptist Church. Throughout its 151-year history, New Zion has been located on the same property and has had six pastors. Pastor Whitehead was installed in 1991.

As a businessperson, Frank understands the importance of networking and making connections in the community. He sees this happening with Pastor Whitehead, who has spent much time and energy devoted to working with underserved populations in this area. In 2020, Pastor Whitehead partnered with Pastor Corwin Hammond and other members

of CBC Ministries to facilitate COVID-19 testing at area churches. A COVID-19 testing event was held at New Zion in December, which was staffed by scores of volunteers and medical professionals.

“In addition to all he does for New Zion congregants and friends, Pastor Whitehead is a member of two local interfaith organizations: Historic Area Religions Together (HART) and the Tri-County Pastors’ Council, both of which promote harmony and understanding among all people in the community,” Frank says.

For Frank Jones, finding a home with New Zion was natural. His admiration of the pastor’s management style is clear. “It doesn’t matter what person is a member of his church or not. I know for a fact that pastor calls every one of his 700-plus members on their birthdays and anniversaries. In my estimation, it’s attributable to his character and the way he handles himself and the way he treats people. He has no favorite, everybody’s treated the same.” NDN

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