

Valley Business FRONT

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Sports Haven

Eric Sichau

LAUNCH

VT's CPD

JOI NEURON

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The MUSIC and MERCH Connection



Greg Szechenyi
Press Press Merch



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WELCOME TO THE FRONT

Welcome to the end of 2023, where at last word inflation was coming down, the employment numbers were still strong and mortgage rates finally started to creep down again as the Fed holds off on another rate hike. Inside this issue you'll find a grab bag of stories about people trying to help researchers turn their bright ideas into commercial ventures, and those trying to set college students on a career path that makes all that debt worthwhile.

A business expansion by a company that found its relationship with FloydFest to be catalyst; and a unique startup company we touched on last month is also in the spotlight. There are ambitious development projects underway in Roanoke that we feature as well, and our usual lineup of outstanding columnists. Starting to get your personal and business New Year resolutions in place yet? Lets all work on that, shall we? Happy reading.



Tom Field
Publisher



Gene Marrano
Editor

discover the college

inspired
by its mission

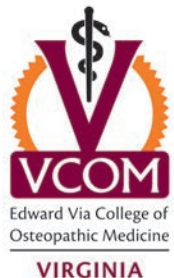


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By Aila Boyd



“”
What if there was a biting incident?

— Page 37



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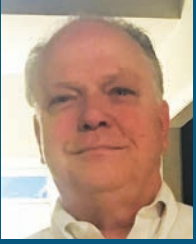


Nicholas Vaassen

Advisory Board

Valley Business FRONT has organized an Advisory Board comprised of a selective group of diverse business professionals who support our mission and have an interest in how our business journal best serves our local communities and region. As a sounding board throughout their term, board members have been given the task of helping FRONT understand the issues and develop coverage. You will note that the Board is comprised of experts in many different business / industry "fronts." This is intentional, as we are reporting on all the areas that affect our regional economy and are important to you. Although the members are encouraged to keep FRONT updated on their own industries and the key players, they aren't limited to their area of specialty, as all commercial enterprises ultimately collaborate to impact our quality of life here in this part of Virginia. An additional contribution by the Advisory Board involves direct input on the various FRONTLists we present throughout the year. In keeping with our policy of being "the voice of business in the valleys" we ask each reader to join us as an editorial partner by contacting us with your ideas. You know more than we know about your business—or you certainly should—and that inside knowledge shared with our readers will make us all better at what we do.

2023 CONTRIBUTORS



Doug Doughty



Dan Dowdy



Tom Field



Mike Leigh



Gene Marrano



Shawn Nowlin

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““ There are a lot of similarities between my experience in baseball and what I do now.

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Zenith Barrett
Goodwill /
community service



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Freedom First Credit Union /
finance – credit unions



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Frain & Cawley CPAs /
finance - accounting



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technology



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finance – banking



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F&S Building Innovations /
construction



David Todd
EZ Rampz /
senior services

Biographies and contact information on each contributor are provided on Page 46.

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Blog: morefront.blogspot.com



All photos: Tom Field

Greg Szechenyi

“FESTIVALS AND BANDS... WE LOVE ‘EM”

The Niche of Press Press Merch

By Aila Boyd

Despite its humble origins as a way for Greg Szechenyi, a traveling musician at the time, to produce merchandise for his band, Press Press Merch has grown into a substantial business over the past 23 years.

Greg Szecheny, 41, originally taught himself how to do screen printing after his mother, a teacher, brought home a small screen printing kit one day. "Some rudimentary tools, a couple of tiny little screens and I kind of took it from there," he said.

After making merchandise for his band, Szecheny's mind for business took over when he realized he could help meet the merchandise needs of other bands as well. His techniques evolved as he met more people who had screen printing experience. The business took off once he started meeting new bands as he toured around the U.S. and Canada. "We'd go out for about 30 days, I'd meet new clients while I was out and about and I'd come home and do work for those clients," he remembered.

He continued doing that for about five years until he got married and had a family when the decision to quit touring and instead focus on Press Press Merch seemed obvious. One of the business's most important partners, FloydFest, started using it around that same time. "We have a very similar background. The people that work here are very similar to the people that work there. We just really hit it off," Szechenyi said. "It's a great partnership we have with them. A lot of the bands they bring in are our clients already."

“ ”

We count ourselves lucky...





Press Press Merch helps with FloydFest's graphic design, merchandise selection and on-site sales. Szechenyi said it was disappointing that the festival didn't happen this year but noted he still has plenty of orders to fill. "It didn't impact the business too much," he said.

"We are grateful to have such a professional resource and partner in our region that we trust as much as Press Press Merch," said FloydFest and Across-the-Way Productions' Chief Operating Officer Sam Calhoun. "From art designs to high-quality apparel, from online store management to perfect print jobs, we count ourselves lucky to have a local vendor that can produce consistent, fast and unique work, all bolstered by quick customer service and trusted attention to detail — two qualities that are cornerstones of our company, Across-the-Way Productions, as well as FloydFest,"

In addition to FloydFest, the business has continued to grow its ties to the music field, including doing work for such groups as the Dave Matthews Band. Szechenyi estimates


that 60% of his clients are not local. The business uses very little marketing, instead relying on word-of-mouth to acquire new clients. "I've been deep in the music industry for so long that we have projects that really fall out the sky," he said.

Even though Szechenyi doesn't have that many local clients, he said he certainly loves the Roanoke Valley. "We still service the Roanoke Valley, but our focus is on driving and growing our music and entertainment sector of the business," he said.

Roughly a dozen years ago, Szechenyi purchased a building at the corner of Albemarle Avenue and Williamson Road in downtown Roanoke which housed the business up until July. "We simply outgrew it. We maybe outgrew it seven years ago. We simply could not continue the business within those walls," he explained. After looking for a new location for years, he finally found the right one at 4721 Starkey Rd. for his 23 employees to work out of. "It's a really, really beautiful fit for us."

The new building has greatly expanded the business's ability to operate, given that it had to move 20-30 cartons of shirts out of the old building each day to simply perform regular operations. The additional space has also allowed it to increase screen printing and embroidery production by 30-40%. Services that have historically been outsourced, like the very popular decal production, can now be done in-house.

"The largest benefit driving the move is a product we have where we warehouse and fulfill merchandise for our clients," he explained. "We build e-commerce websites, maintain their inventory levels, maintain the physical products we produce here for them and then we ship these out individually to their fans." The new building has allowed Szechenyi to dedicate 10,000 square feet to the fulfillment center.

Szechenyi describes the growth of Press Press Merch as being "organic." With that notion in mind, he doesn't necessarily have a specific size he'd like to grow the business to. Instead, he'd like to continue building ties with the music industry. "For me, creating merchandise that has lasting value that helps you remember a great time is so important as opposed to creating branded products that someone could take or leave," he said. "I just know that I love what I do. I'm very lucky." 

AT A GLANCE



Employees: 25
Product: Primarily screen printed and embroidered apparel

Greg Szechenyi's Niche Approach:

My favorite products?

1. Producing for a festival.
2. Producing for a band.

When you do something for a band or festival, it has a lasting impression. It's not like pens [and other ad specialty items] that will end up in a landfill. It's something that is often passed down through generations. You're not going to forget that special time.

What we're doing is special. We're attracting young talent. It's a lot of work. I see us growing significantly in five years.

- TF

“ ”

We have projects that fall out of the sky.



Tom Field

Sports Haven - Salem

A True Haven for the Sports Fanatic

By Doug Doughty

It's hard to say what the most impressive aspect of Sports Haven is—the memorabilia or the displays.

The Sports Haven proprietor is Robin Bennett, who started his business at Happy's Flea Market on Williamson Road. Now he has his own store on Williamson Road in the Hollins area of Roanoke, and another on Main Street in Salem.

"We started doing festivals and everybody loved our stuff," Bennett said during a recent interview, "but as soon as you say, 'We have a shop,' and you tell them that it's at Happy's Flea Market, their smiles turned to frowns."

Bennett had two more years left with Proctor and Gamble, where he was wrapping up a 27-year career.

"I could see the writing on the wall for Happy's [now a storage/office facility] and I said, 'Let's find us a shop, Shane [his assistant]!' If you want to come in with me, you run it and see how you like it. Then, when I retire,

I'll come in there and leave or stay and do whatever you want to do.

"We came in here [off Williamson Road] and the owner didn't want to sit here and might have thought we were going to set up a couple of tables and sell baseball cards."

"When we came in, [the previous owner] was just blown away. We're going on our 13th year."

There is a second Sports Haven on Main Street in Salem, where Bennett has benefitted from knowing such Salem sports figures as Charlie Hammersley and Carey Harvey cutter, as well as Mike Stevens, the former WDBJ-7 sports anchor and now the City of Salem's communications point man.

Clearly, there was considerable interest in Virginia Tech items. "I said, 'Shane, we're



Doug Dougherty
Sports Haven - Hollins

going to offer a variety," Bennett told his assistant, "We're going to have something for every NFL team, every major-league baseball team, the top 90 colleges and universities, especially everything in the state of Virginia.

"People will come in here off [I-81], like when the interstate has a wreck and traffic backs up. We've had people come in from Texas and all over. They're just blown away. We're going to have more for the better-selling teams. People have told us, 'this is the best-kept secret in town.' "

The Dick's Sporting Goods chain, which has a store at Valley View Mall, mostly has

athletic equipment but does not specialize in memorabilia.

"We have a lot of novelties," Bennett said. "Also, we have a lot of autographed items that have been authenticated. Shane was a real stickler on that and said we only wanted to deal with the top [authenticators] and we've stuck to that.

"There a lot of fake stuff out there and I'd be scared to buy stuff off the internet unless it's authenticated."

Along with his son, Joey, Robin Bennett has had a longtime assistant, Don Powell at the Salem store, which like the main

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Photos by Tom Field







Doug Doughty

Robin Bennett

Sports Haven store in Hollins, is full of autographed memorabilia, team jerseys, cards, etc. Athletes stop by on occasion for autograph sessions.

Sixty percent of Sports Haven sales pertains to the NFL. They also sell Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs items – not a shocker since Bennett is one of five local minority owners of the SPHL championship hockey team

"Our NASCAR stuff has really picked up," Bennett said. "It's right there with the

colleges. At one time, NASCAR was worth only four percent of our sales. Now it's up to around 12 or 15. "We did some deals with Martinsville Speedway where you came in and bought a certain amount of items, dollar wise, and you got free tickets to the race."

Bennett grew up off Hershberger Road and played football, basketball and baseball with friends from either side of the road, mostly playing competitively for Northside. Once he had finished high school, he played softball for 25 years.

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"I'd just as soon go to work and have a car," he admitted. He's been at Sports Haven for 13 years.


"When we first got started, Shane and I scrapped metal, we cut grass; we did everything we could to make money to put into this," Robin Bennett said. "We'd get in our pick-up truck. We'd see washers and dryers that people were throwing away.

"Our Covid year was probably our best year because we did stay open. There was a limit on the number of people who could come in."

Bennett has noticed that there are more UVA items at Sports Haven than there are at other outlets -which have more Virginia Tech material because Blacksburg is closer than Charlottesville and has a larger following in these parts.

In 2020, following the 2019, then Virginia quarterback Bryce Perkins stopped by Sports Haven on his way back to Charlottesville following the Orange Bowl. He had earlier received the Dudley Award as the best college football player in the state.

"Outside of Charlottesville, we've got more UVA stuff than anybody," Bennett said. With Roanoke College about to return to football for the first time since the 1970s, there's another market around the corner.

"Paige Moir got us hooked up with the [Roanoke College] bookstore right now and we've got about six items of their athletic stuff in our store and we're going to have the football [items] in there, too." The Maroons will start Division III ODAC football play in 2025. Robin Bennett and his staff at Sports Haven will be ready. 

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PARK AT THE BRIDGES



BUSINESS OPERATIONS

By Mike Leigh

Executive Summary:
*Sales. Service delivery.
Supply chain. Office
supplies. Payroll.
Insurance. Strategy.
Scheduling. Financing.
Operating a small
business is complex.*

Send your questions
or comments to Mike@
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Small business productivity

There are many tasks and responsibilities to carry out, but often only a handful of employees to do them. Small business employees do indeed “wear many hats”.

With larger companies and payrolls, employees are more specialized in their responsibilities. Staff members might specialize in only marketing or finance, or even a subset of those areas. But with small businesses, that is not usually possible. The “Office Manager” in my business is responsible for marketing, supplies and materials, payroll, HR, and all AP/AR processes!

With a small team and many tasks to complete, it's imperative that each employee's responsibilities are clearly defined and prioritized, and an appropriate amount of time is expended on each task. Just keeping everyone busy isn't good enough. To be productive, expending only the appropriate amount of time on each task is necessary. And more time should be spent on the most important of those tasks.

To increase a team's productivity, these simple steps can be taken:

1. Each team member creates a list of their five most important tasks or activities.
2. Review each employee's list with their manager. Does the manager agree? Are there gaps? It's not unusual for an employee and a manager to differ on their opinion of what should be on the list.
3. Each employee should now schedule one week to track how each minute of each day is spent. Tally how much time is expended on each task.
4. Compare the important task list with how much time was expended on each task. Is there good alignment?

Inevitably, when an employee does this, there will be a mismatch. Too little time will be spent on the important tasks, and too much time on less important tasks. If this is the case, adjustments are needed. Time spent on less important tasks needs to be reduced through delegation, process improvements, or by eliminating the task altogether. To spend more time on the important tasks, schedule calendar time each week dedicated to that task and stick to it!

One of my many hats is a cheesehead (I'm a Green Bay Packers fan.) I enjoy wearing it, but that doesn't mean I should wear it all the time! 🧀

“”
Keeping everyone busy
isn't good enough.

It's true: the customer is always right

I mean, when customers are in the wrong, they are in the wrong man!" Right? Then I became a professional salesperson. A pro. Dale Carnegie Trained. Thousands served. Not all sold but touched, helped, spoken with, and hands shook. I am not running for Mayor; I just want to be a great realtor. Although, I'd be a great Mayor. I am for the people, and I am for my clients.

Here is where I have changed. I feel my clients may not always be right and I feel that they can always teach me great things. All of them. No person is always right. Not even the mayor. We are human beings so how can we always be right?

I don't cater to just one zip code or area. I love to sell every neighborhood in our area. Therefore, I deal with all incomes, all price points. I have sold homes over one million and property less than six thousand. I have the opportunity to work with many different clients and I try to learn from all of them new ways to behave, listen, and negotiate.

I try to see where the client is right. Even if it drives me crazy. Pros know not to argue with anyone, especially your client. Dale Carnegie said 'You can't win an argument. If you argue, rankle, and contradict, you may achieve a victory sometimes; but it will be an empty victory because you will never get your opponent's good will.'

Some clients are angry, some are anxious, some are nervous about people in their homes, some text all hours, some are analytical, some are scared, some are micro managers, some are patient. And it's all good. They are all good. It's great to have clients. I welcome all of them. They are great teachers. Love is the answer.

We are all trying to achieve good will, right? If you are not, then you won't have much luck with sales or many relationships. Do your best to see where the client is right and I promise, you will learn from all of them, and become better at your craft. 📌

“ I have the opportunity to work with many different clients, and I try to learn from all of them...



REAL ESTATE MATTERS

By Frazier Hughes

Executive Summary:
When I was younger, I'd hear "The customer is always right" and get angry thinking there is no way the customer is always right.

Frazier Hughes is with Keller Williams Realty. Reach him at frazierhughescom@gmail.com



Hoprich Photography

Eric Sichau

Roanoke Regional Chamber President has his eye on future

By Shawn Nowlin

Eric Sichau, 32, loves getting asked, “Can you explain what the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce is?”

As president of the organization since 2019, Eric Sichau’s responsibilities include promoting, stimulating and improving business by influencing public policy, making connections and helping small businesses grow. “My job essentially is to support our mission and work with our team, the Board of Directors and Executive Committee. Also, to keep the chamber’s brand and integrity strong when it comes to policy work,” he said. “We champion economic and workforce development as well as education. We want to make sure that we are

improving the current generation for future generations.”

Currently, the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce is comprised of around 800 members, including a coalition of 75,000 employees, across a wide variety of industries. The organization’s bylaws state that business and work can be done outside of the Star City or elsewhere in the region. A local business license is the only requirement to join the chamber.

“There is a myth that we are just the

Roanoke City Chamber. In no way, shape or form is that true. We are the chamber for the entire region,” he said. “There are many ways in which we connect with the community. We have a robust calendar of events throughout the year. Everything from our sold-out annual golf tournament to various policy events. We can’t do everything, but we do our best to support local diversity and growth.”

Born in Baltimore, Sichau was raised in Ocean City, MD. Until he moved to Roanoke four years ago, he had never lived out of the state. After graduating from Stephen Decatur High in 2009, Sichau attended Wor-Wic Community College. After earning all his credits in two years, he transferred to Salisbury University to finish his undergraduate degree in marketing.

After college, Sichau worked for eight years in Minor League Baseball. He started as an intern before working part-time in sales before being promoted to a full-time community relations position. While working as an employee with the Delmarva Shorebirds in 2018, Sichau met his future wife, Jessica.

“There are a lot of similarities between my experience in baseball and what I do now. Building relationships is a huge part of the gig. There simply is no substitute for it,” he said. Sichau’s predecessor, Joyce Waugh, retired last December after serving in the role since 2008. “She is just incredible. Genuinely, a calm, cool and composed individual. I remember vividly when Joyce interviewed me,” he said.

“One of her questions was, ‘If we were to hire you, what do you want to do in your first 90 days?’ Being new to the area in 2019, I was honest and said I didn’t know a soul. She helped introduce me to the community, learn how to be strategic and understand the importance of patience. I could not have asked for a better mentor.”


While the chamber does not endorse candidates, the organization does take nonpartisan stances on issues and works



Gene Marrano

Eric Sichau (center) at yet another ribbon cutting

with both sides of the political aisle. “The regional business leaders really respect what we do and our impact. Not just locally, but regionally and even across the state. I’m grateful that the community supports what we do. We have had some of our best-attended events in recent months. No one affiliated with the organization takes our relationship with the community for granted,” Sichau said.

The opportunity to leave Maryland to first become the Vice President of Membership Services for the Chamber - and eventually to serve as President of the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce - was too good an opportunity for Sichau to pass up. Asked to identify five regional businesses that have distinguished themselves under his leadership, he diplomatically replied, “I don’t think it would be fair to do that. Overall, the tourism, retail, healthcare, education, technology and manufacturing industries are all big factors in what we do. Our estimated payroll [for Chamber members] is more than \$1.5 billion.” Founded in 1889, for the most up-to-date information on the organization, visit roanokechamber.org. 



BEST JOB EVER

By Jennifer Leake

Executive Summary:
Not everyone is alike. We have different ways of communicating and making decisions. We approach tasks with different perspectives.

A personalized guide to understanding employees

What if your needs were obvious to others? If you knew one person wanted more independence, while another person needed more reassurance? If one employee loves to plan, while another hates to plan – would you manage differently? Would it change the way you worked together? It probably would ... but that's not the way people manage or work together. You need a decoder – and the right “decoder” makes everyone's needs more obvious. This knowledge makes it easier to work more effectively together, be more productive, and have more satisfied employees. It helps leaders create a positive work culture that fosters collaboration and innovation.

Decoding can be challenging because employees are different. They have different ways of communicating and making decisions. They approach tasks with different perspectives. There is a tendency to manage others in the same way we like to be managed. But not everyone is like us. Learning DISC behavior styles is an easy way to “decode” – to better understand and manage both yourself and employees.

DISC is a popular behavior style assessment that categorizes people into 4 main styles: Dominance (D), Influence (I), Steadiness (S), and Conscientiousness (C).

When leaders and employees understand and utilize this knowledge, both self-knowledge as well as others, they create a workplace that experiences:

- **Better communication.** Styles differ on how they prefer to communicate. One style might prefer direct and to the point while another style needs a more supportive and patient approach. Tailoring communication to your employees' preferences leads to more effective interactions.
- **Stronger team dynamics.** A well-balanced team has members with different styles, bringing different skills and perspectives to the table. This diversity can create challenges if the behavior of each style is misunderstood.
- **Conflict resolution or prevention.** Conflict is inevitable in the workplace, and style differences contribute to this. A greater understanding of styles helps team members recognize and appreciate these differences, creating a more harmonious workplace.
- **Increased employee engagement.** When employees understand their unique contribution, and a key role they may play, they're more likely to feel engaged and motivated in their work.
- **Adaptable Leadership.** Certain team members may prefer detailed instruction, while others thrive on






recognition and collaboration. Leaders who use behavior style knowledge to tailor their leadership approach contribute to higher employee satisfaction and retention.

Using DISC is like having a personalized guide to understanding employees better. You can foster stronger connections and boost teamwork. It's a game-changer for building a happier and more effective work environment.

To learn more about using DISC in your business, contact me at 540-420-1004 or email me at Jennifer@AssessmentPros.com.

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Roberto Melendez

Helping to LAUNCH great ideas at VTC

By Gene Marrano

LAUNCH: Center for New Ventures serves Virginia Tech's research community and is focused on transitioning discoveries to market through "new venture creation." That's where you'll find Roberto Melendez rolling up his sleeves and getting to work these days.

It's all about promising new technologies that can generate value for a broad range of stakeholders as Virginia Tech sees it. Dr. Melendez (Ph.D.) is a relative newcomer to Roanoke after spending time in the Raleigh area and in San Francisco, living in downtown

Roanoke, riding his bike. Tech has always had a transfer office to help take something from research to the market, but it's been rebranded in recent years and now he says it's all about Link, License and Launch. The Link part is about locating the funding.

Generating commercial opportunities for researchers is at the heart of what Melendez does now as the associate director for LAUNCH, drawing on his own background as a Scientific Consultant and grant specialist, helping scientists and entrepreneurs locate funding for R&D and commercialization. He works with both students and faculty on their research, on “how to bring it to market.”

A handful of companies have already been spun out from the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC (FBRI), where Melendez spends much of his time these days. Rob Gourdie’s Tiny Cargo company profiled here previously (minute compounds found in milk that can deliver medicine to the heart) is one of the spinoffs he’s working with. In other cases, Melendez is dealing with a researcher who still has a way to go. “I’m here helping them through this whole model!” Time elsewhere teaching medical courses in college and a neuroscience background makes him comfortable with the lingo.

“It’s almost like an early course in business development,” says Melendez, who spends one on one time with the researchers as they explore the commercial viability. Then he helps them find the grant funding that helps make it all work. Consolidating everything under the Link, License and Launch model is a fairly new approach at FBRI, says Melendez, but it’s in line with the vision of Executive Director Dr. Michael Friedlander and his desire to see more spinoffs coming out from the labs.

Interfacing with real world established companies (like Novo Nordisk, a global healthcare giant) can result in partnerships where FBRI researchers can do the testing early on and if a player like Novo Nordisk

sees the potential for scalability, they can take it from there with a greater access to resources. “The goal is to get an exit strategy as well. You don’t have to develop [a new drug for example] to its final stage. You can sell it ... halfway through it.” That includes selling off the Intellectual property (IP) protections for the biopharmaceutical sector.

Another alliance with Johnson & Johnson through the Jlabs program, the pharmaceutical company’s incubator program, will help create the new wet/dry lab shared space being built now for research purposes. That could result in other spinoffs that Melendez can help guide through the LAUNCH program. Grant funding can help move research projects off campus but not too far away notes – like to the Corporate Research Center in Blacksburg and the new shared lab space in Roanoke when it opens – it may be 2025 at this point. Melendez says that lab can become an important economic driver – and timing is important. It’s a competitive field and he says other localities are building lab spaces, so “the sooner the better.”

After working with early stage companies in the Bay Area and the Research Triangle, Melendez says he is encouraged to see how the Commonwealth is supporting researchers by making grant funding available. “That’s a good thing. We’ve seen this ramping up of funding opportunities [in recent years].” With more affordable prices here for housing and workspaces than in California or even in Raleigh, and with the advent of remote working, Melendez says the Roanoke and New River Valleys could see a migration of talent coming here to do their research. That’s where he says LAUNCH comes in for members of the VTC family. “We’re just getting more and more people involved. All of the ingredients are here.” 



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SMALL BUSINESS TOOL KIT

By Sam Sokolove

Executive Summary:

Southwest Virginia's nonprofits are making significant progress in serving local communities during tough times.

*Sam Sokolove is the Senior Consultant and Director of Government Contracting for Building Beloved Communities, which works to help non-profit organizations grow.
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Optimizing operations: best practices for nonprofit success

The more than 5,000 registered nonprofits across forty counties and cities in Southwest Virginia play a considerable role in our region, with 1 in 8 people turning to them for basic needs. These nonprofits support everything from putting food on tables to preserving local culture, with the top focus areas being human services, education, health, and arts/culture.

Unfortunately, too many local nonprofits struggle with funding, with 57% operating on less than \$50,000 annually. Support from foundations and government grants has decreased, while demand for services has increased. This makes running efficient, cost-effective operations more critical than ever.

For nonprofit managers, the end of the calendar year is a great time to review how solid business operations practices can help their organization thrive and make an even more significant impact with limited resources. Here are some best practices to consider:

Stay focused on mission and strategy: keep your mission front and center when making any business decisions. Develop a 3-5 year strategic plan to guide your goals and objectives. Figure out what makes your nonprofit unique to share your story with funders and the community.

Invest in leadership and staff: your team is your most valuable asset. Create an organizational chart and update job descriptions. Offer professional development and leadership training. Recruit board members who are pumped up about your cause. Provide competitive pay and benefits to attract and keep great talent.

Streamline processes with technology: upgrade old systems and use CRMs, cloud-based tools, and apps to work smarter. Go digital to cut down paperwork and streamline communication through email and shared drives. Use data to measure impact and outcomes.

Diversify funding sources: actively look for and apply for grants matching your programs. Cultivate individual donors through appeals and events. Partner up with corporations. Managing a mix of funding gives stability when economic cycles fluctuate.


Watch financial health: produce monthly financial reports to closely monitor cash flow, budgets, and reserves. Build up an operating reserve equal to 3-6 months of expenses. Use accounting software and

controls to reduce errors and misuse of funds. Keep overhead costs in check.

Share your story far and wide: spread client success stories, program data, and organizational milestones on your website, social media, newsletter, and annual report. Take pictures at events and activities to showcase your impact. Promote your cause locally by partnering with media outlets, businesses, and government.

Adapt programs based on data: regularly evaluate program data and feedback from the community. Ask clients what additional services they need. Adjust programs and operations to meet the community's changing needs better. Show funders how you're addressing gaps and making a difference.

Collaborate to maximize reach: explore partnerships with other nonprofits to share resources and avoid duplication. Join local nonprofit networks and associations. Develop corporate volunteer programs. Advocate together for community causes. Look for ways to combine back-office functions across organizations.

Southwest Virginia's nonprofits are making significant progress in serving local communities during tough times. Solid business operations practices can help organizations cut overhead, improve efficiency, demonstrate outcomes, and gain stability. Even if funding and resources are limited, nonprofits can keep pursuing their mission by working smarter, collaborating creatively, and telling their story in compelling ways. With solid operations supporting programs guided by the community's voice, nonprofits will keep making a difference across Southwest Virginia. 

“
Solid business operations practices can help organizations cut overhead, improve efficiency, demonstrate outcomes, and gain stability.”



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Melrose Plaza breaks ground >

Thirty million dollars, assembled from Roanoke City, grants and tax credits, and including 8 million dollars from **Goodwill Industries of the Valleys** in donated property will lead to the **Market on Melrose** grocery store in that northwest neighborhood, a wellness center, a **Bank of Botetourt** branch and a free public high school for adults with on-site daycare. Construction is scheduled for completion late next year. At a groundbreaking ceremony last month for **Melrose Plaza**, Roanoke Mayor **Sherman Lea Sr.** said, "remarkable things can happen," when the public and private sectors work

together to make a community better.

"Goodwill Industry's dedication to our community exemplifies the strength of partnerships that enables our city to function at its very best. The Melrose Plaza project is of utmost significance to our city," said Lea, "it not only pays homage to the rich legacy of northwest Roanoke, but it also provides essential resources."

"Investing in the Melrose Plaza project is investing in the future of the Northwest Roanoke community," said Richmond Vincent, President & CEO of Goodwill Industries of the Valleys. "This initiative will create a hub of needed services for learning, working, and community engagement that will empower individuals to break the cycle of poverty and achieve their fullest potential."



Submitted photos



Culinary Olympic team holds dry run at VWCC >

Virginia Western Community College hosted the national **Culinary Team USA** last month, as team members continued to fine-tune their techniques before competing in February 2024 at the IKA Culinary Olympics in Stuttgart, Germany. Chef **Ted Polfelt**, a faculty member in the Al Pollard Culinary Arts Program at Virginia Western, was named to the team for the four-year cycle leading up to February's global competition. Team members prepared a three-course meal for 110 dinner attendees on both days, mirroring the tight time requirements and rules that will govern the Olympics in Germany. In Roanoke, dinner was served to students and pre-selected guests. The menu consisted of a seafood appetizer, entrée and dessert.

This team was sponsored by the American Culinary Federation and has prepared for the Olympics with practices held around the country, including at Virginia Western in early 2022. Rehearsals took place at the **Claude Moore Education Complex** on Henry Street in downtown Roanoke. "We are proud to host Team USA's chefs as they are in the homestretch of prepping for the Olympics," this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for many students to see this level of culinary expertise."

Approximately 1,800 participants from 67 nations are slated to take part in the 2024 Culinary Olympics from Feb. 2 through 7, with 8,000 menus cooked and 100,000 visitors from around the world. As supporters to Chef Polfelt, Virginia Western will send Chef **John Schopp**, program head Chef **James Zeisler**, and a couple of VWCC students to observe, with funding assistance provided by the Al Pollard Foundation.



Va Tech photos

Not Your Father's Placement Office

By Jennifer Poff Cooper

While career exploration, internships, and job placement will always be the “bread and butter” of Career and Professional Development (CPD) at Virginia Tech, the center is evolving under Dr. Matthew Paul Cowley, who was hired in July as Executive Director.

Its mission is to “make sure we are supporting career success for all students,” said Cowley. Serving both graduate students and undergrads, CPD provides everything from “101 career coaching,” to career fairs, to resources for students pursuing graduate school admission.

Cowley said, “We want to make sure we help students no matter their post-graduation plans,” assisting them in making the best choices for themselves.

CPD works to build an employee pipeline

into the workforce. It boasts an experiential learning team, which consults with employers to help stand up internship programs, and an employer relations team to make sure folks from various arenas are connected.

“We are a hub in the middle of the wheel,” Cowley explained, with spokes to campus partners like faculty. Often prospective employers reach out to faculty they know, which only exposes them to a small subset of qualified students; CPD encourages faculty



Matt Cowley

“We want to help students no matter their post-graduation plans.”

to refer these employers to CPD for a wider array of hiring options.

The center started years ago as the placement office, then moved to service-oriented work like résumé reviews and interview coaching, and finally transitioned to the “wraparound career services” it offers today. Now there is a “360-degree look at who

comes in contact with students,” said Cowley. For instance, he said it is promising to see academic advisors empowered to have career conversations with students.

CPD has hosted roundtable discussions in the Roanoke/Blacksburg area, inviting employers to convene for hearing what resources are available on campus, as well as for CPD to listen to their needs.

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Job fair

These conversations are especially targeted at local businesses in order to help them compete with larger companies.

“Employer engagement is as important as student engagement,” Cowley said. “We want to be connectors and conduits.”

Feedback from businesses, whether positive or negative, is important so that the institution can “lead changes from within.”

Promoting understanding of what is available to both students and employers, as well as building those relationships, takes intentional work, said Cowley.

One tool is Handshake, a portal for “all things career,” he said. It connects students and recent graduates to employers, and much more. Employers can decide which schools to recruit from, or can connect to talent across multiple institutions with one profile, making it an “easy lift.”

How to communicate offerings with students is a bit of a conundrum, said Cowley. CPD tries to “meet students where they are.” This includes social media platforms. CPD sends out “job blasts” in a targeted way. Cowley discounts the common

notion that students don’t read emails.

“They read the emails they want to read,” he said. A big part of success is using a subject line and a conclusion that grab attention. CPD also relies on campus partners, with the idea that a student will be more likely to open an email from a familiar source. Word of mouth is also important.

These days, students’ majors may be “dynamic,” Cowley said. Students often major in something other than what their career aspirations are – like a biology major wanting to work in public health. Because of this fluidity, CPD is focusing on broader competency development and transferrable skills.

Cowley gave the example of AI (artificial intelligence) literacy. Despite not knowing the ultimate impact of AI, having some knowledge of the discipline will make students more employable.

Of importance to Cowley is creating equitable access for all students, meaning asking what each student needs then working with the individual to achieve that. It involves providing openings for relationship-building, or social capital development, since networking is a “big

chunk” of finding job opportunities.

“We want the same opportunities for students no matter their connections,” Cowley said.

CPD works with the Virginia Talent + Opportunity Partnership; VTOP has a staffer on campus at Virginia Tech, and CPD has representation on VTOP’s strategic planning committee. GO Virginia economic development initiative provides matching funds so employers can support staffing needs, especially small businesses that would have otherwise been challenged to fund internships.

Also exciting is that there is “a lot of energy around work-based experiential learning,” said Cowley. Campus leadership is prioritizing this concept.


Cowley touted CPD’s Career Champions, a training program for Virginia Tech faculty and staff recognizing the importance of the many career-related conversations they have with students. The purpose is to share tools and referral resources so faculty can feel more confident engaging on career subjects with students. It leverages CPD’s expertise with campus

partners and builds a coalition across campus.

Because, as Cowley said, “Career happens everywhere.”

Cowley said he brings to a new job five tenets: listening, learning, honoring, visioning, and aligning. At this point at Virginia Tech, he is still in the listening and learning phases, ascertaining needs. He wants to honor what has been done. Visioning and aligning involves dreaming about the future and making the changes needed to get there.

As the future unfolds, career planning will be more dynamic, Cowley said. Non-traditional students need access to services 24/7. Career changers need to find the right fit. Transfer students will comprise a bigger part of CPD’s clientele. Leveraging more partners will be important in meeting needs, as well creating competencies based on research the university receives.

Cowley said, “I am delighted and excited to be part of the CPD team at Virginia Tech. I want businesses to know am open to collaborative conversations to build toward a better future.” 






Some see an eyesore, but others ...

Slowly but surely the 9th Street industrial park is being cleaned up, the first rung in a long-term redevelopment project that could create a unique village of sorts in Southeast Roanoke. Now, "Riverdale" has taken the next step. Developer Ed Walker - who along with partners plan to spend at least 50 million dollars over the next decade-plus to transform the 9th Street Southeast Industrial park into a mixed-use project on more than 100 acres - is thankful for the support from Roanoke's City Manager: "all this progress that we've made so quickly begins with a conversation with Bob Cowell. It would have been really, really easy for him to say nah, I'm not interested." Walker said he told Cowell that "it could be a spectacular long term investment." (At an event last month Cowell joked that Walker "might be crazy.")

In mid-November, Walker introduced the Richmond-based architectural firm that will do the "master planning" for Riverdale. Chair Burt Pinnock with Baskervill says they are excited about the challenge: "I am a lover of existing fabric ... there is a quality in these kinds of places that we don't necessarily build from scratch anymore. We can't recreate it. I'm a great lover of sort of hanging on to it and reimagine what it will be next."

Pinnock said Baskervill hopes to have a draft Master Plan ready by next spring - after it receives public feedback on what local residents say they envision for the Riverdale retail and residential project. Baskervill has collaborated with Richmond developer Bill Chapman on several of his projects in Roanoke - now comes Walker's mixed-use development at the 9th Street SE, industrial park that was once home - many decades ago - to American Viscose.

The master plan could include residential spaces, retail options, outdoor amenities and affordable artist's lofts. Tom Barnes is the director of Planning for Baskervill. He was in Roanoke for the first time last month and called the Riverdale proposal "a hundred acres in Roanoke which can change the city, [and] give it so much more vitality is exciting. There are challenges to this site ... but there are comparables that have surmounted those challenges and redeveloped communities that benefit from that approach."

Historic tax credits will help defray some those development costs. Already Walker says some two million pounds or more of debris and rusted, idle equipment has been moved off site. He's also waiting for word from the Minnesota developer ArtSpace about acquiring and redeveloping one of the 9th Street properties as affordable work and living space for artists. The transformation is underway, although Walker also said last month that he hopes some of the long term industrial tenants stay onsite, saying they are still welcome there. 

THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:
Ed Walker's Riverdale project in SE Roanoke begins to gain some momentum.

A spark, rather than bonfire.

Falò delle vanità.

Basically, Italian for throwing your possessions in the fire.

We don't go quite that far. But we are—here at Valley Business FRONT—a little less inclined to leverage vanity as part of our work. We have certainly published our fair share of “best of” lists over the years—especially in the olden days with the original business journal—but also in the past 15 years at the FRONT.

It's a publisher's dream come true: the power of vanity and special recognition and personality elevation. We do love to celebrate our best in business (and all the industry “fronts”), best small businesses, best restaurants, women leaders, black leaders, minority leaders, “x” under 40, “x” over 50, and best new thing, best old thing, best, best, best.

A dream come true, because the people and organizations that make it on the list, will share the news. And if you're especially savvy, you let the candidates and winners know ahead of time, so they can place ads to applaud the recognition. (We never executed that one.) In most cases, there is a lot of campaigning to make that list; so there's a whole extra layer of attention.

There's nothing wrong with this approach. I'm not bringing this up to pat ourselves on the back. We have engaged our version of “FRONTlists” and, in fact, it's the “best of” idea that we sort of present each and every month. We just select whatever business or organization or individual is interesting and has a story.


That's a kind of “best” if you will. A “best enough of a story to report on” so others can relate or react.

So, though you'll not see our “Best Proctologists” issue during colon cancer awareness month (dang, that's actually not a bad idea...); and though we don't publish a Best in Business every single year or any one of our FRONTlists on any kind of a regular or predictable periodic basis, we're banking on the notion that a lot of you are ok with that.

A mad bonfire does draw a lot of attention, I'll grant you that!

But a spark... that little flame... that catalyst to what could be... will it be snuffed out? will it continue to be a small flicker? will it light something else? will it grow into a hearty fire? or will it blaze out of control and burn down Chicago?

That's for readers to speculate.

We hope you are looking forward to the New Year. And I hope you have your own spark to carry. 



ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

Executive Summary:

It's December, where's that “best of” list?

FRONTReviews >

Readers and patrons of the business journal are invited to submit reviews (along with an optional photo) to news@vbFRONT.com. We've expanded our reviews to include books, music, art, performances, culinary—with a preference for local productions. Reviews must be original, include the author's name and location, and should be brief, under 350 words.

War stories from a true survivor

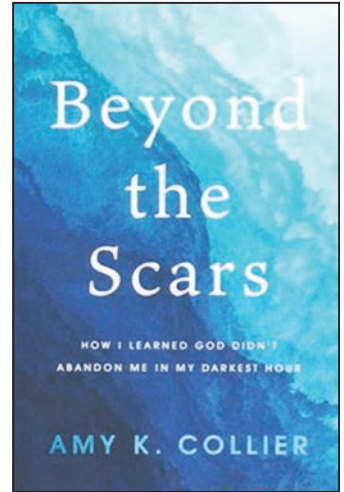
Its hard to say that a memoir about someone's life that was so tumultuous for so many years is a page-turner, but that's what *Beyond the Scars: How I learned God Didn't Abandon Me in My Darkest Hours* by Amy K. Collier (Iron Stream, 2023) is. Mostly feeling unloved as a child, a broken home, molested as a young teen, a first abusive marriage and feelings that maybe she deserved it all led Collier to thoughts of suicide and episodes of self-harm. There were brief, unhappy stays in mental health facilities as well.

All the while Collier, who lives now in Huddleston in a long term second marriage that survived a separation, was raising children, praying they did not fall prey to the life she had lived for decades – which included a mugging outside a Walmart. It is an amazing story, and at the end Collier finally stopped blaming herself – and God – and found happiness and peace. She now runs several successful businesses including a family farm. While there is a spiritual aspect to *Beyond the Scars*, you do not have to be a person of faith to appreciate Amy Collier's unrelenting struggle to find happiness and peace at last. In the end it is an inspiring story and I'm glad that I met her in person as she told me her story. Rock on Amy.

—Gene Marrano

Old school footballer

A surviving member of the 1972 Miami Dolphins, the storied team that is still the only in NFL history to go through an entire season and the playoffs undefeated, *Head On* (Matt Holt Books, 2022) is the autobiography of one of the toughest guys to ever line up in the backfield. That would be Larry Csonka, who paired with



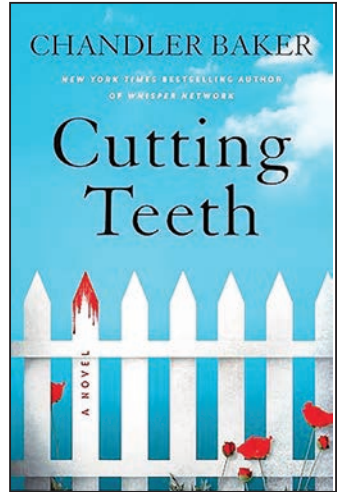
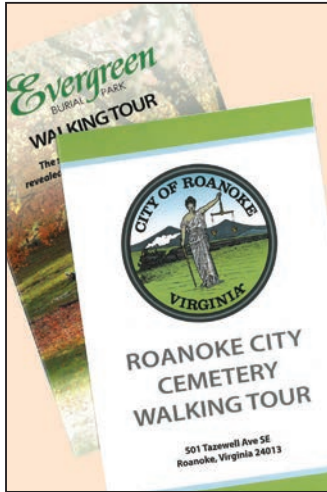
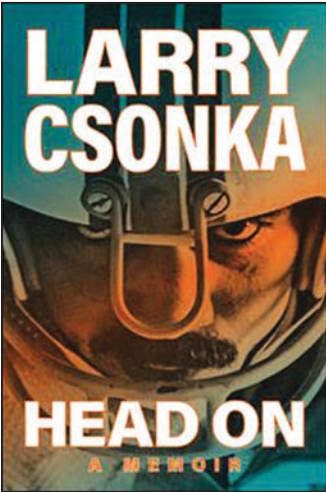
Jim Kiick (they were often referred to as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid). Other teammates included Mercury Morris, Bob Griese, Bob Kuechenberg, Jim Langer, Nick Buoniconti – and kicker Garo Yepremian, who threw an ill-fated Super Bowl pass after a blocked field goal kick.

The legendary head coach Don Shula turned a rag-tag NFL expansion team into two-time Super Bowl Champions – before Csonka, Kiick and wide receiver Paul Warfield jumped to the upstart World Football League where the money was better – until the WFL folded. The Dolphins were a team many followed during their storied run (I did, mainly because my brother played rec football on a squad called the Dolphins that also played in teal jerseys) in the early 70's. *Head On* is a treat for older fans of the game and a history lesson for younger ones. "Zonk" and his life partner now spend their time in Florida, North Carolina, on his Ohio family farm and in Alaska, where he and Audrey Bradshaw filmed more than 300 episodes of an adventure show for TV. A life well lived and a really fun read.

—Gene Marrano

Notable plot(s)

This might be a first for us: a review of a cemetery tour guide. Why—and why now? Well, on Nov. 19, the Historical Society of Western Virginia collaborated with Roanoke's Evergreen Burial Park for a tour of Roanoke's notable (dead ones), along with actors in costume portraying some of the celebrities. There have been a number of these events (many at various venues often do these in October... go figure);



but this review is directed at our business journal patrons.

So, though the tour through Roanoke City Cemetery includes the gravesites of mayors and governors and war heroes and such; what about the merchants? The champions of commerce that served our business interests and advancements?

Okay, since you asked... this particular tour, included the visits to: David Moomaw Armstrong (cooking stoves); Samuel Seldon Brooke (The Leader newspaper); John Anderson Dalby (Roanoke's first real estate agent); Isham Ferguson (tobacco factory); Reuben Harvey Fishburne (tobacco company); Edmund Pendleton Goodwin (Peoples Federal Savings and Loan); Ballard Preston Huff (grocery stores); Charles Lunsford (insurance); Ferdinand Rorer (builder); Peyton Leftwich Terry (railroad; Roanoke's first millionaire); Benjamin Talbot Tinsley (grocer); "Callie" Turner (tobacco factory); Jefferson Hoston Wilkinson (lumber); Richard Samuel Williams (hardware, grocery, coffee). Their lives go from mid-19th to mid-20th centuries.

By the way, you can grab a Walking Tour guide for Evergreen, too—where many more business champions are interred.

—Tom Field

But did it break the skin?

I've often thought about a certain prompt for a writing class. Do you know how some people worry they just don't have anything that

interesting to write about? Well, my assignment would steer toward that seemingly inadequacy, rather than away from it. The assignment, students (I would say) is to select the most ordinary, everyday happening you can think of... random, routine, perhaps even boring. A trip to the grocery store, a haircut, filling your car with gas, running through the drive-thru for a coffee, watching tv, ordering something online, etcetera. Got it?

Describe that most routine activity—and throw in one absurdity.

I can't tell you how many great storylines I've enjoyed that deployed this exact formula. There was a streaming series about a real estate agent who was also a clandestine zombie... just on the side.

And so we have it with *Cutting Teeth* by Chandler Baker (Flat Iron; 2023). What's more ordinary than a day care; and picking your kid up? A pretty boring subject for a novel, wouldn't you say? What if there was a biting incident? Okay, that perks you up a bit; but still... it's not exactly uncommon.

Well, there are ways biting four-year-olds COULD get out of hand. Yes?

Now... NOW... you have something to read.

—Tom Field

The reviewers: **Gene Marrano** is a local news correspondent and editor of FRONT; **Tom Field** is a creative director and publisher of FRONT.



Tom Field



Hemp'd in Vinton >

A sizeable crowd enjoyed **Debbie Custer** and her businesses **The Hemp Mill** and **Buffie's Kitchen** at **Vinton Chamber of Commerce's** Lunch & Learn on Nov. 8. In addition to her story and explanations of the nutritional, wellness, and commercial value of hemp and other botanicals, the lunch itself featured her homegrown and locally sourced organic foods and ingredients, including the popular "thumbprint cookie." Custer thanked attendees for being "test subjects" on the "hand pyes." She said her dream is to see the popularity of pharmaceuticals replaced by botanicals in the same way water is finally outpacing soft drinks on grocery shelves. She also gave examples of her natural products working, such as replacing anxiety meds for a teenager. "I've worked in corporate all my life," Custer said, "and it was never as much fun." Custer mentioned retirement and inferred the public presentation might be her last. She also said her industry would likely be regulated in similar fashion to the state's ABC board via the CCA (Virginia Cannabis Control Authority). The US lags far behind other countries in the hemp industry, Custer said.

BRL gets grant >

Blue Ridge Literacy has received a \$70,000 through **Roanoke Women's Foundation's** 2023 Grant Cycle, part of the Foundation's recent award of \$392,000 in grants to support the needs the Roanoke community in the areas of Education, Health & Human Services, Arts & Culture, Education, and Environment. The grant will help BRL establish "Pathways to Success: A Mentor-Supported ESOL Bridge Program" to Blue Ridge Literacy's English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) curriculum. BRL Executive Director, **Ahoo Salem** says, "Blue Ridge Literacy has experienced an increased demand for ESOL services, serving 486 learners in FY 22-23, up from 365 in FY 21-22."

Salem adds, "We have also witnessed a growing interest among learners participating in our Advanced-level ESOL classes to enroll in Virginia Western Community College. However,



Submitted

limited familiarity with the US higher education settings and academic readiness skills make the transition to community colleges more challenging for our learners." The Bridge ESOL classes will include informational field trips to Virginia Western Community College and help familiarize adult learners with career pathways and certificate courses - with a direct tie to the labor market.



Developers plan hotel x2 >

Poe & Cronk Real Estate Group has announced the sale of 3602 Blue Hills Drive NE in Roanoke City. The property measures 5.43 acres and sold for \$710,000. A real estate developer purchased the acreage and plans to build two premium hotels on the site according to Poe & Cronk. The location sits along the busy US 460 corridor that connects Roanoke to Bedford, Lynchburg and Botetourt County.

VWG's new hq >

Valley Wealth Group, a local wealth management firm, has completed major building renovations, repurposing a thirty-three-year-old building in Southwest Roanoke County, now their company headquarters. The 7,195 square foot building is located at a busy intersection of Electric Road and Chaparral Drive. The original owner, BB&T Bank, now Truist, announced the closure of the branch location and put the space out for bid in March 2021. Jaret Mutter, President of Valley Wealth Group took interest: "rather than building new, I think it's important to be able to repurpose our existing resources when it makes sense."

Mutter and investment partner Neal Keese secured the winning bid in May 2021 and began demolition of the second floor in July 2021. The second-floor renovations were completed within nine months. The second-floor remodel features glass walls promoting an open feel with natural light throughout and includes two large conference rooms, twelve office spaces and a small kitchen. The first level renovations began in the spring of 2023 and were completed this month. The original bank lobby has been converted into two separate office suites, each featuring four private offices with meeting rooms and a generous break room/lounge accessible to the entire building. Some special characteristics of the original bank building remain such as the vault, which gives the space character and preserves its history. Mutter says, "We left the vault mostly because it was extremely expensive to extract but it definitely makes a great conversation piece for clients, so I'm glad we kept it."



VT's new data building >

Virginia Tech's new **Data and Decision Sciences Building** has opened its doors to students, faculty, staff, and industry professionals ready. Completed in the summer, the 120,000-gross-square-foot facility houses multiple colleges, including the Pamplin College of Business, College of Engineering, and College of Science. The Academy of Data Science is envisioned as a hub for collaboration between the College of Science and other Virginia Tech colleges and institutes to develop new data science methodologies and applications.

So far, this collaboration has included the support of academic research through funding opportunities and faculty fellowships along with the design of the new master's degree – a joint effort with the College of Engineering that also features elective courses from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the College of Natural Resources and Environment. "Synergies in data science across disciplines are abundant and growing," said Kevin Pitts, dean of the College of Science. "This physical space will help bring people together from different disciplines, and we are excited to see how we can further capitalize on our campuswide efforts in areas related to big data."



Good talker >

Gentry Locke has announced that **Monica T. Monday**, head of Gentry Locke's Appeals and Critical Issues team, has received the 2023 Edmund Randolph Award for Excellence in Oral Advocacy (the "Silver Tongue Award") by the William & Mary Law School's Student Division of the Institute of Bill of Rights Law. The annual award is presented to an appellate advocate who has dedicated his or her career to improving the standards of appellate practice, the administration of justice, and ethics in the profession. Monday received the award in October at William & Mary Law School in conjunction with the final round of the law school's Bushrod Moot Court Tournament, over which she presided as chief justice as part of her recognition. Monday is an alumna of the William & Mary Law School, as well as the College of William & Mary, and was a participant in the final round of the moot court competition in 1989.



"Monica's exceptional track record of success and leadership in the appellate field throughout Virginia is truly admirable," said **K. Brett Marston**, Managing Partner of Gentry Locke. For 30 years, Monday has represented her clients in Virginia's state and federal appellate courts across a variety of cases, including commercial and business disputes, healthcare, property, personal injury, local government matters, domestic relations, and more.

Academy Sports open in C'Burg >

Academy Sports + Outdoors has opened its third location in Virginia, located in Christiansburg at 2711 Market Street NE. The over 55,000-square-foot store brings a wide assortment of sports and outdoors merchandise to the area. Customers can expect to find an assortment of athletic and casual shoes, sports and outdoors equipment, and clothing. Local Boys & Girls Clubs members were on hand during opening week last month.



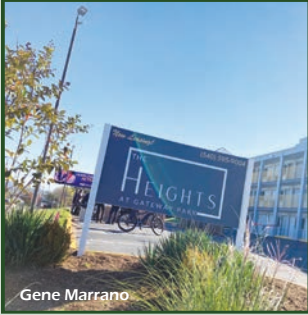
Submitted



Vinton's new gateway eatery >

Vinton town officials hope the grand opening of a new restaurant will help drive more visitors to the downtown area—and lead to more new businesses there. **Pollard 107 South** opened its doors a few months ago—quietly so to work any kinks out, but November's ribbon-cutting marked the official event. It's hard to miss the restaurant as you enter Vinton on Gus Nicks Boulevard, right by the first stoplight off Washington Avenue. **Marshall Stanley** is Vinton's Economic Development Specialist: "It's essentially at the gateway to our town."

Stanley says the official opening of Pollard 107 South marked another step in the continued revitalization of Vinton's downtown. The restaurant is in a building that had most recently served as home to the Star City Playhouse. "We're truly excited to see that space filled up." The owners are involved with several other restaurants in the Roanoke Valley.



Repurposed for one-bedroom apartments >

The former Days Inn on Orange Avenue near the Berglund Center is now **The Heights at Gateway Park**, 88 apartments for rent, mostly 1-bedroom. Roanoke City leaders joined the developers to cut a ribbon last month. **Frank Saul** says his DC-based company **Saul Urban** has done this elsewhere for its "Lodging to Living" initiative, turning outdated hotels well past their prime into apartments. (The former Days Inn had a somewhat notorious history as a haven for drug deals and other nefarious activities according to one person at the ribbon cutting.)

"We try to find older distressed buildings that we can recycle rather than tear down," said Saul, "that allows us to deliver a new unit at a lower price point than a new build – typically a 20 to 30 percent discount. We've got a massive housing problem in the country. The first thing we do is look at the community, diversity of employment, is there economic growth? Roanoke checked all the boxes." There is a shortage of one-bedroom apartments for single people or a couple with no children in the city, one speaker noted. Saul said most units at The Heights rent for around \$1150 per month. They've just started the leasing process.



Best view at Berglund Center's new venue >

Remember that building with the big, slanted glass windows facing I-581 at the **Berglund Center** complex? The remodeled 4th floor is now available for private parties to rent, now called **Bella Vista**. Complete with a full bar and room for several hundred people. General manager **Robyn Schon** says it's been "a long and slow painful journey to get people to come back out," after the pandemic and while they booked more than 350 events in 2022, it was less than the 400-plus before COVID. "We still have a ways to go but the outlook is great. Our bookings [for 2024] are starting to fill up. We're going to have a busy season."

The Berglund Center staff is also remodeling the Star City Café offsite inside the Roanoke City Noel C. Taylor municipal building on the first floor and will manage the public eatery once the doors are open again in early 2024. "It's just an extension of what we do here at the Berglund Center," says Schon, a big time hockey fan who is also pleased to see the **Rail Yard Dawgs** and their SPHL championship trophy back in town for the new season. As for the Bella Vista (beautiful view) room which offers a peek at the Blue Ridge Mountains, Schon says modestly it may offer, "the best view in town."



New grocery choice >

Roanoke restaurant operators and consumers alike can enjoy a new wholesale grocery experience starting this weekend at the **US Foods Chef' Store**. It's one of 89 in the country and the second in Virginia after Lynchburg. Located in the Town Square shopping center near the airport. Anyone can shop there – no membership required – and there are bulk products for restaurants that might need a few items, say before their next bulk shipment arrives from US Foods, which also has a warehouse in Roanoke. **Ken Kenewski** is Vice President of operations for the US Foods Chef' Store: "Roanoke is a great food community. We wanted places that were vibrant and enjoyed food, and when we stumbled across Roanoke it met all those criteria."



Gish Mill project moves ahead >

It's been proposed for several years now, and the first step will involve stabilizing the former Holdren's Country Store, but renovations of the historic **Gish Mill** property in **Vinton** appear to be back on track. An agreement signed between Gish Mill Davii LLC, the Town of Vinton and the Roanoke Country Economic Development Authority (EDA) last month commits the developers – with **David Hill** and **Dave Trinkle** (owner of the Fork Restaurants) at the forefront – to spend 3.6 million dollars towards turning the former mill and feed store into a mixed use property, with one or more restaurants (one with a deck on Glade Creek says Trinkle), a seasonal market, other retail options and upper floor apartments or AirBnB rental spaces.

"A multi-use facility that's going to be enjoyed by the whole region," says Trinkle, the former Roanoke City councilmember. "It's pretty exciting. Gish Mill will be on the water, have the [Glade Creek] greenway go right through it, a park right across the street ... Vinton's happening." A Town of Vinton grant totaling almost \$469,000 and a one million dollar loan from the EDA will support a project estimated to create 37 full or part time jobs. The original building dates back to 1846. At one time Vinton was called Gish Mill; the town bought the property in 2015 with the goal of preserving it.

Valley Business FRONT is FRONT'n About at many events each month. Check the social media links at www.vbFRONT.com for more coverage.

MUNICIPAL FRONT



Barber

Roanoke County has announced **Douglas P. Barber, Jr.** as a Senior Assistant County Attorney. Barber is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and George Mason University School of Law, serving on active duty in the United States Navy for 21 years. He joined the County Attorney's Office in October 2023.



Lanford

The Roanoke Valley Resource Authority

(RVRA) has announced the appointment of **Jonathan (Jon) Adam Lanford** as its new Chief Executive Officer. Lanford has over twenty years of local government management experience and is currently an Assistant County Administrator in Botetourt County.

EDUCATION FRONT



Stinespring

Bryan Stinespring will be the new head coach for the new Maroons football program at Roanoke College. Previously, he was the associate head football coach and offensive assistant at Virginia Military Institute, and he brings more than 30 years of coaching experience, including

26 years under coach Frank Beamer at Virginia Tech. A native of Clifton Forge, Virginia, Stinespring earned a bachelor's degree in political science at James Madison University and a master's in education administration from Virginia Tech.

FINANCIAL FRONT



Windley

ValleyStar Credit Union has announced **Woody Windley** as its new Chief Financial Officer (CFO). With a background in finance and leadership, Windley spent seventeen years with Roanoke Valley Community Credit Union (RVCCU), as President/CEO, adding three additional branches and performing two

successful mergers.



Childress

Freedom First Credit Union has welcomed **Alisha Childress** as the Community Development Coordinator in Lynchburg. Alisha worked 6 years in non-profit management and has over 20 years of combined experience in university administration, emergency management, and business continuity.



Webb

Farm Credit of the Virginias has announced that **Karly Webb** has

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assumed the role of operations support for the Roanoke branch. Webb is a Bedford County native and was involved in FFA and DECA during high school. She grew up and was involved in agriculture through her family's cattle and crop farm.



Franklin

NON-PROFIT FRONT

Children's Trust has appointed **Shawna Franklin** as the organization's new executive director. Franklin joined Children's Trust in 2015 as a forensic interviewer. The nonprofit agency is comprised of five programs: Children First, Healthy Families Roanoke Valley, Roanoke Valley Trauma

Have a career announcement?

Send announcements to news@vbFRONT.com. Photos should be color, 300dpi. A contact / source must be provided. Inclusions are not guaranteed and all submissions are subject to editing.

Informed Community Network, Children's Advocacy Center, and CASA (Court-Appointed Special Advocates).

Kiwanis Club of Roanoke announced its 2023-2024 Board of Directors: **Mike O'Brochta**, president; **Jeanne Bollendorf**,

president-elect; **Joyce Montgomery**, vice president; **John Montgomery**, secretary-treasurer; **Ben Spiker**, past-president; **J. Lee Osborne**, Foundation president. The new board joins directors **Alex Barge**; **David Hartman**; **Kevin**

Reeder; **Bill Bestpitch**; **Greg Lionberger**; **Sheila Umberger**; **Bob Habermann**; **Stephanie Moon-Reynolds**; **Harry Zulauf**.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field



There is a tendency to manage others in the same way we like to be managed. But not everyone is like us. — Page 22



CONTRIBUTORS

Zenith Barrett is the Vice President of Business and Community Engagement for Goodwill Industries® of the Valleys in Roanoke. She has been with Goodwill for eight years. She holds a Masters in Public Administration from Columbus State University and a Bachelors of Science in Psychology from Virginia State University. Zenith is a native of Massachusetts and lives in Roanoke with her husband, Richard and daughter, Lauren.

Aila Boyd serves as the editor of "The Fincastle Herald" and "The Vinton Messenger" and coordinates social media for the Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce. She holds an MFA in writing from Lindenwood University.

Jennifer Poff Cooper is a senior correspondent for FRONT, and a graduate of the RB Pamplin College of Business at Virginia Tech with a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from Hollins University. She is a native of Christiansburg, where she lives and writes in her family's home place. [cooperjp91@gmail.com]

Neal Cummings is senior vice president, commercial lending at Freedom First Credit Union. He brings over 25 years of experience in commercial and retail banking, commercial real estate lending, and small business development. The Commercial Lending team at FFCU provides local underwriting and personalized services that benefit a variety of individuals, operating businesses, and non-profit organizations.

Doug Doughty is retired after spending 45 years at the Roanoke Times. After graduation from UVA in 1974, he was hired as a hockey beat reporter by the Roanoke Times. Many of his early assignments involved covering the Salem Pirates Class A baseball team when he witnessed — and later wrote about — the death of Alfredo Edmead in a collision with one of his Pirates teammates. Doughty later became the UVA beat reporter, covering football, golf, lacrosse and a host of other sports, including the Cavaliers baseball team

when it won the NCAA championship with one of his sons on the team. Doug Doughty is also a member of the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame. [doughtysports@aol.com]

Dan Dowdy is the business development director for Valley Business FRONT and owner of The Proofing Prof proofreading services (proofingprof.net). His background includes service in the U.S. Air Force and an extensive career in education, including teaching college-level writing competency and business courses, and working for a Fortune 100 company. [ddowdy@vbFRONT.com]

Tom Field is a creative director, marketing executive and owner of Berryfield, Inc. in Salem, and owner of Valley Business FRONT magazine. He has written and produced programs and materials for local and international organizations for 40 years. [tfield@berryfield.com]

Micah Fraim is a top-referred Certified Public Accountant and business finance strategist who is well-connected in the regional business community and nationally recognized. Publisher of The Little Big Small Business Book, he also publishes a blog at www.fraim.cpa/blog and is frequently interviewed as a business financial expert in national media channels. [micahfraim@fraimcpa.com]

Kevin Holt is a partner at Gentry Locke's Roanoke office where he has worked since 1998. His specialty practice area is commercial, real estate, intellectual property, and ERISA (Employee Retirement Income Security Act) litigation. He enjoys supporting and attending games of his two sports-active daughters and enjoys traveling (visiting 27 countries and 38 states).

Frazier Hughes was recruited by the CEO of Keller Williams Realty after being named 2017 salesman of the year at Berglund Luxury of Roanoke. He also hosts The Roanoke Real Estate Podcast, is Dale Carnegie Trained, a former radio personality, and is a

Social Media Influencer. [frazierhughes@gmail.com]

Jennifer Leake CMC® is an expert in employee assessment, Emotional Intelligence, and founder of the Best Job EVER company culture system. When you HIRE RIGHT, ENGAGE EMPLOYEES, and LEAD WELL, the results are greater performance by employees, and more revenue and profits for your company.

Mike Leigh is president of OpX Solutions, LLC, a performance improvement company that helps organizations pursue operational excellence. A retired naval commander and former GE manufacturing manager, he has extensive experience in leadership development and process improvement. [Mike@OpXSolutionsLLC.com]

Gene Marrano is FRONT editor and an award-winning anchor and reporter for WFIR Newstalk radio. "Best one on one interview" award from Associated Press of the Virginias for his interview with former Roanoke County Chief of Police Howard Hall. [gmarrano@cox.net]

Jeff Merritt is vice president of Roanoke operations for Cox in Virginia. He is responsible for leading employees and the day-to-day operations across the Roanoke market. He holds leadership roles in a variety of organizations including Boys & Girls Clubs of Southwest Virginia, Western Virginia Foundation for the Arts and Sciences, and Virginia Cable Telecommunications Association. He resides in Roanoke with his wife and two children.

Mary Ann L. Miller is vice president of business banking and community relations at Bank of Botetourt. A graduate of Bridgewater College, she has been in the banking industry for more than fifteen years and currently serves on the board and executive committee as past-president with the Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce, a board member with the Daleville Institute, and is vice chair of the board of with the

Botetourt Family YMCA. A native of Botetourt County, she resides in Daleville with her husband and two children.

Shawn Nowlin is an award-winning writer, photographer and content creator. In addition to the Roanoke Tribune, his byline has also appeared in ColorsVA Magazine and the Salem Times Register, among other publications. Born and raised in Roanoke, Virginia, Shawn is a proud product of the Star City. [shawnnowlin1989@aol.com]

Alicia Smith is vice president of F&S Building Innovations in Roanoke. She grew up in the construction business and has served in multiple capacities, currently managing all sales, design, production and marketing of the residential division. She's also the president of Build Smart Institute and serves on several boards, community and church organizations. Alicia enjoys lake-life living and fun times with her family (husband and two daughters) and friends.

Sam Sokolove is the Senior Consultant and Director of Government Contracting for Building Beloved Communities, which works to help non-profit organizations grow. [sam@buildingbelovedcommunities.com]

David Todd is the owner and president of EZ Rampz / Mobility Solutions, based in Roanoke, and serving Virginia and North Carolina primarily; but also nationally. The business rents, sells, installs, and services products that resolve mobility issues, including walkways, ramps, stair glides, platforms, lifts, chairs, grab bars, etc. He's a graduate of Virginia Tech; married with three children.

Nicholas Vaassen is a graphic designer with 20 years experience, specializing in publications. His design projects include FRONT, lifestyle, real estate, municipal, classified sales and cultural organization magazines in Roanoke and southwestern Virginia markets. [nvaassen@berryfield.com]

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““ he is encouraged to see how the Commonwealth is supporting researchers by making grant funding available. — Page 25

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Grant will help tackle recycling issue

The U.S. Department of Energy's Advanced Materials & Manufacturing Technologies Office has awarded Virginia Tech \$526,336 to advance a new method of paper recycling that will allow water-based inks to be separated from spent paper fibers. The award from the Department of Energy, "will allow Virginia Tech to further develop a way in which paper printed with water-based inks can be de-inked during the recycling process," said Congressman Morgan Griffith. "This new technology will allow for more paper to be recycled, benefitting the environment by further minimizing waste." There is currently technology to de-ink paper from oil-based inks, but that technology fails to remove pigment for water-based inks.

Senators urge leadership on battery technologies

Virginia U.S. Senator Mark Warner (Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence) and West Virginia U.S. Senator Joe Manchin (Chair of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources,) have written to Department of Energy (DOE) Secretary Jennifer Granholm, detailing the need for the United States to establish its leadership in the research, development, production and manufacturing of new battery technologies.

The People's Republic of China dominates end-to-end supply chains they wrote, including the mining and refining of critical mineral inputs for lithium-ion batteries, which are used in the U.S. energy grid, electric vehicles, and military weapons and platforms, among other industries.

In October 2023, China restricted exports of raw and synthetic graphite, critical to manufacturing battery anodes. The move followed July 2023 export controls on gallium and germanium, two components used in the manufacturing of semiconductors and other critical technologies. "The PRC near-monopoly over battery production, and the upstream materials they require, poses substantial defense and economic security vulnerabilities," the senators wrote.

Youngkin Board appointments

Governor Glenn Youngkin has announced additional administration and board appointments. Steve Sandy, assistant Franklin County Administrator, to the Broadband Advisory Council; Jeffrey Hoeflich-Nickels of Roanoke County (owner of i77 Strategies LLC) to the LGBTQ+ Virginia Advisory Board and Lance Toapanta of Salem to the Student Advisory Board.

Second best when they crunched the numbers

Business consulting firm Venture Smarter says it analyzed data from

the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics to discover the business growth rate in each state based on the number of establishments in December 2021, when compared to December 2022. In second place is Virginia, which witnessed a business growth rate of 10.50%; the number of businesses increased from 305,345 in December 2021 to 337,394 one year later. The state offers many small business incentive programs Venture Smarter note, including the Virginia Enterprise Zone, which benefits from tax exemption for rehabilitated structures to tax credits for creating employment. Top of the list is Georgia, with a business growth rate of 13.50%.

Commonwealth issues tourism mini-grants

More than \$757,000 in matching grant funds will be awarded to 131 small businesses, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), downtown business associations, and chambers of commerce as part of the Virginia Tourism Corporation's (VTC) Microbusiness Marketing Leverage Program (MMLP). The program is designed to leverage local marketing dollars with matching state funds to increase visitation and traveler spending in the off-season. Local partners will commit more than \$1.1 million in private-public sector funds to match the VTC funding, providing more than \$1.9 million in new marketing activity

focused on small businesses and off-season visitation. Funding will be awarded to 131 marketing programs, impacting 655 combined partners, and supporting more than 1,300 jobs.

Local awards include City of Salem tourism (\$10,000), Living Proof Beer Company of Rocky Mount (\$2630), Franklin County (\$9300), Magical Mystery Bike Tours LLC in Salem (\$5000), Floyd County Tourism (\$6000), Apple Ridge Farm (\$5000), Floyd Country Store (\$5000), Humble Hstle Clothing-Roanoke (\$5000), Dr. Pepper Park at the Bridges (\$5000), Roanoke Outside Foundation (\$5000), Pulaski County Tourism (\$10,000), Shop Botetourt LLC (\$1600), New River Vendors Village-Pembroke (\$1700), National D-Day Memorial Foundation (\$5000) and Sweetwater Baking Company in Floyd (\$1200).

New blood for Carilion - literally

Carilion Clinic has partnered with The Blood Connection (TBC) for its blood product needs. TBC is a non-profit 501(c)(3) community blood center and the primary blood provider for more than 120 hospitals in Virginia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia. TBC plans to open donation centers locally and will serve the local community though hosting mobile blood drives.

Expanding into the

Roanoke community will allow TBC to increase donor collection opportunities. With this partnership, blood donors can feel confident knowing their donations are helping our community and neighbors. “Carilion is excited about our new blood services partnership with The Blood Connection,” said Carilion President and Chief Operating Officer Steve Arner. “TBC is dedicated to supplying our local blood product needs and being involved in the community. We encourage blood donors to support TBC’s future blood drives to help them ensure our region has adequate blood to help us care for our patients.”

Staunton’s culture

Staunton has become quite the cultural destination, lately. Many already knew this, about Virginia’s independent city in the Shenandoah region, at just around 26,000 population, with its American Shakespeare Center-Blackfriars Playhouse and galleries and studios, historic sites, boutique and classic hotels and bed-and-breakfast inns, and restaurant-winery-brewery scene. Now, you can add to that the renovation of Dixie Theater—an event venue planned for locals and visitors. A \$1.5 million grant from the state’s Industrial Revitalization Fund will fortify the \$3 million project and re-introduce Dixie and its 90-person auditorium, as well as its cinema, film festival, and other

programming. Called the “Arcadia Project,” the renovation work should begin in early 2024 and be completed by 2025.

About that slot machine...

Maybe you noticed more gaming consoles at convenience stores and similar places throughout Virginia. In October, the Virginia Supreme Court voted to reinstate a ban on these games. “Electronic skill games” are the kind of gaming consoles similar to slot machines, but the payouts are not strictly a matter of chance, because they work by the bettor’s action—such as pushing the right button at the right time. Municipalities are having to address the ban; such as the City of Roanoke, which announced it will mostly focus on the venues that “have a history and connection to violent incidents.” The level of what that enforcement might be for businesses with these machines is unclear in most jurisdictions at this point.

Speaking of gambling... here’s Southside

We’ve been reporting on the increased business activity (particularly in Danville) due to the pending casino development. In addition to the casino contribution to the local and surrounding economies, there’s all the peripheral business—from food to lodging to other tourism-related spending. Destination stakeholders have deployed “Visit

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SoSi” campaign (Southside) and reported an increase to \$144 million in spending for 2022. Most statistics indicate that is about a 10% increase. A temporary casino has opened (with over 400 employees already), but the much-anticipated \$650 million Caesars Virginia—with 500 rooms, 1,400 slot machines, live poker, 40,000 square foot convention space, and 2,500-seat entertainment theater—is still under construction. Casino personnel said it should be ready in 2024, but can’t commit to the month.

The uncertainties of Evans Spring

Just across interstate at Valley View Mall in Roanoke, the 150-acre undeveloped property has gained the attention of a lot of people over the years. Some see it in a commercial area, others see it in residential, and still others see it more as a natural preserve. Roanoke City has contracted Land Planning Design Associates for consulting. Though no voting or decisions have been made as of this date, the consultant proposed a plan that includes commercial development near the interstate, housing closer to existing neighbor-

hoods, and buffers to protect green space and the creek that runs through the property.

A bridge not there

Whoops. It wasn’t an AI-generated pic or anything like that, but a lot of people were excited to see the new pedestrian bridge over US 311 on top of Catawba Mountain, for outdoor enthusiasts to cross the busy and dangerous road so they could hike to McAfee’s Knob. Unfortunately, the bridge isn’t there... yet. The rendering does look promising though; and the good news is the bridge is in the works. The trailhead parking lot will be closed off during the construction (which might take a year); but nearly everyone agrees the bridge is needed (on what has been billed as the Appalachian Trail’s most photographed site) and will provide a much safer experience.

A path is there

Meanwhile, the Roanoke River Greenway continues to expand. The most recent additions, include the connection at Northwest Roanoke City’s Bridge Street (which we’ve reported on) to the Salem section; and now, the next

construction will tackle the section in West Salem that heads toward Green Hill Park, eventually. The even greater vision, is to have this greenway connect Explore Park (eastern edge of Roanoke) all the way to Montgomery County.

More English

Blue Ridge Literacy will offer a new, fifth-level class in the English language, thanks to a \$70,000 grant from the Roanoke Women's Foundation. BRL tutors students in English as a Second Language (ESOL); and BRL executive director Ahoo Salem says this will also help with the influx of people fleeing Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Health insurance Marketplace now Virginian

People enrolling in the Affordable Care Act, or what was known as "Obamacare" will now be redirected, if in Virginia. The state became the 19th to launch its own exchange; which means healthcare.gov is no longer in effect. The new site is marketplace.virginia.gov; open enrollment is November 1 to January 15.

FloydFest filling

The annual FloydFest music festival was

cancelled in 2023, due to its recent move and permitting issues. Subsequently, ticket holders were offered a refund or a "rollover" to the next season. Since the event had sold out (which is always does), to date, over 70% of tickets are already reserved for the 2024 festival (July 24—28). Reservations should be secured even earlier than usual because of this, event organizers urge.

Helping Salem students and families

Salem Area Ecumenical Ministries (SAEM) was the recipient of the 2023 Governor's Volunteerism and Community Service Award for faith-based agency. SAEM provides breakfast and lunch for at-risk elementary school children in Salem and western Roanoke County through the weekend Area Churches Together (ACT) backpacks program that served 145 students, as well as the Summer Feed and Read program that provided more than \$32,000 in Kroger gift cards to over 170 families. "We are blessed to have the support and partnership of many churches, community organizations, local businesses, and community members that support our missions and ministries to the Salem community" says Garry Lautenschlager, Secretary. Board of Directors. "To be

recognized as the statewide recipient for Volunteerism and Community Service is a testament to our commitment to "love your neighbors as yourself."

Leveraging the Clash

Smithfield, the popular ham company with strong historic ties to Virginia, sponsored the Commonwealth Clash (Virginia Tech and the University of Virginia rival Thanksgiving weekend football game) by honoring Feeding Southwest Virginia and providing lunch boxes for staff and volunteers, as well as donating protein to the food bank. Smithfield has done this since the 2014-2015 academic year. Feeding Southwest Virginia alone distributes over \$33 million food and groceries through its 380 partner feeding programs in a 26-county, nine-city region.

And another post-game contribution

Freedom First Credit Union celebrated another of its Play for Purpose Program at Virginia Tech, by presenting checks on Monday after the Commonwealth Clash to NRV Cares (\$1,700) and Literacy NRV (\$2,700). Other nonprofits that received donations this season were also represented,

including Vittles for Vets, Boys & Girls Club of SWVA, YMCA at Virginia Tech, and Sleep in Heavenly Peace. This year's Freedom First Play for a Purpose officially surpassed \$100,000 in giving.

New SML outdoor store rocks

Rock Outdoors has opened at Smith Mountain Lake at 71 Parkcrest Drive, Hardy. This is the third location for the recreational retailer that has stores in North Carolina (Lexington and Winston-Salem). RO carries the major and popular apparel brands for outdoor enthusiasts, as well as gear for fishing, camping, hiking, paddle sports, water sports, and other outdoor recreation products.

5 time record

Virginia Western Community College reports five consecutive growths in enrollment. The milestone is attributed to accessibility, according to college officials—making classes and programs convenient to student available timeframes, whether they are traditional high school graduates, adult students, and those working full time.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field

Check out additional FRONT Notes from Valley Business FRONT on our Facebook site or social media links at www.vbFRONT.com.



34 by 34: Building a Better Future for Millions

We're empowering our people to build a better future for the next generation. Our social impact initiative aims to remove obstacles and expand access to programs to help 34 million people live more prosperous lives by 2034.

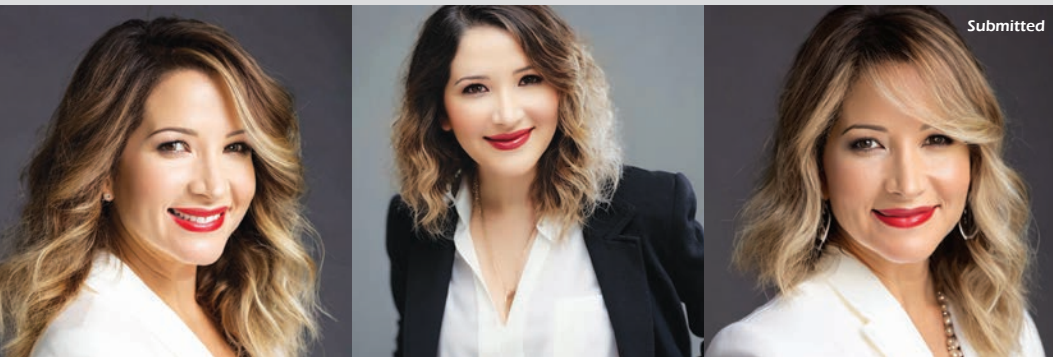
From bridging the digital divide to addressing social equity and environmental sustainability challenges, we're committed to creating a ripple effect starting with our employees. From there, it will extend through our supply chain and out into the communities we serve, growing the good one action at a time.

Why 34 million? We first assessed the societal challenges that we're positioned to impact, and we identified more than 30 million people needing support, growth and development opportunities to overcome those obstacles.

It's an ambitious goal, but one that is achievable over the next decade given the talents, dedication and leadership of our people and partners.

Follow our journey on social media with #Cox34by34.





Carol Joy

A joyful mission

By Shawn Nowlin

A trailblazing entrepreneur is committed to sharing her gifts, inspiring the next generation of happy and healthy people.

Sometimes when she reflects on her life journey to get where she is today, Carolina Smales has to pinch herself. Known professionally as Carol Joy, few things warm the mother of two's heart more than using her talents and resources to make the world a happier, healthier place.

Joy is the founder and CEO of JOI NEURON, a start-up company that offers unique, diverse educational products and tools diligently crafted by a diverse group of employees.

A great deal of strategic development, planning and collaboration efforts are all imperative to the company's success. The required committed hours to successfully operate JOI NEURON can get hectic at times. When such moments arise, Joy takes a deep breath, reflects on how far she has come over the years and allows her intuition to serve as a compass.

"As a mother, I care deeply about children and their well-being. I teach youth from elementary school the art of being happy beyond unhappy and difficult circumstances with techniques that have been scientifically proven. I love to use my creativity, stories, nerdy brain, and music to try to take care of their emotions and mental well-being," she said.

Not everyone is fortunate to grow up in a household with a loving mother and father.

For Joy, her devoted parents William and Vallita, raised their family in Venezuela. As a child, Joy was gifted with some musical instruments. From there, it didn't take long before she was performing original songs in front of live audiences.

"When I started the first grade, I was just four. My mother was my teacher, so I already knew how to read and write pretty well. Being so young, I regularly got bullied in elementary, middle and high school for being nerdy and weird," she said. "From that experience came a resiliency that is still very much there today. My mother, father and great-grandmother (mama Eva) gave me everything I needed to make a seamless transition into adulthood."

Twenty-two years ago, Joy left everything she loved in Venezuela for better opportunities in America. That leap of faith immediately paid off as she found success in the fields of healthcare analytics and neuroscience research, starting at Harvard Medical School. In Boston is where Joy met the love of her life, Erik Smales. The couple share two sons, Jakobe and Josue.

"When I first arrived in Boston, I was heartbroken, depressed and incredibly alone. It initially felt like I was abandoning my family, but they regularly told me I made

the right decision," she said. "Instrumental to my life for the better part of two decades has been my husband's counsel and support, through the good times and challenging times."


She added, "My husband has a background in psychology and is very critical. Whenever he gives me his take on anything, I try to absorb it like a sponge."

Joy has worked extremely hard to get to where she is today. Three years ago, her first JOI NEURON career milestone award came from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) with the PCW for teaching kids about their brain, what causes dependency and addiction and how to protect the brain beyond wearing a helmet.

Joy has written or co-written numerous storybooks. Said books, usually sold in bulks of 100's to different organizations,

offer education through numerous, fictional content in both English and Spanish.

The first in the Discover your Mind Power series, "Don't Panic," includes award-winning content that teaches youth and their families what happens inside the body when dealing with anxiety.

JOI NEURON forms multiple alliances, partnerships and collaborations with non-profit companies that are aligned with their mission. Regular collaborators are Roanoke Valley Television, RVTV; Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine, VCOM; the Partnership for Community Wellness, the PCW; and the Roanoke Public Libraries. To fulfill its mission, the products, content and other services must be provided to more children and families around the world. 

For more information, including all the resources that are offered, visit caroljoycreative.com.

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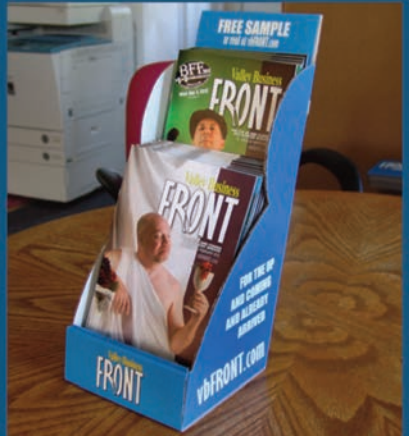
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