

Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

ISSUE 186

MARCH 2024

VFP

Blue Ridge
Design Build

Dilly Dally

Blue Ridge Marathon

Plato's Closet

Carilion Clinic
Kidney Transplants

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Enclosed in a Legacy

Culture

Scott File
VFP



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WELCOME TO THE FRONT

With inflation still bumping along just above 3 percent it looks like a Fed interest rate cut may not happen until at least June, although some mortgage and car loan rates are already coming down. Look for the floodgates to open and the housing market to heat up again when that happens, despite a shortage of inventory. The call for affordable housing – which includes possible zoning changes in Roanoke City that would make it easier to build townhomes and other less pricey dwellings by right - may be a reality by April. That's also a goal for local developer Alexander Boone – to build more affordable housing going forward. See his comments in our Notes section.

Remember those halcyon days when kids rode their bikes to the corner sweet shop? Its back in Salem with the neighborhood store Dilly Dally. A New River Valley construction company is pivoting in another feature, and a trio of thirty-somethings are helping to fight inflation in Roanoke County. Plus, several interesting guest commentaries and much more. We promise. Happy reading.



Tom Field
Publisher



Gene Marrano
Editor

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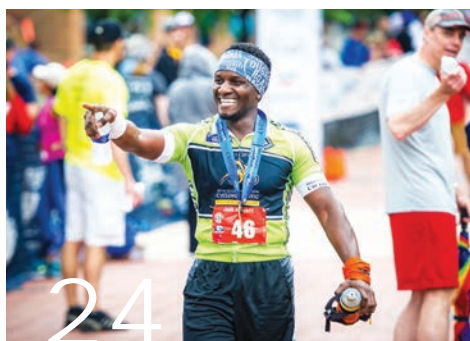
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VFP secures utilities— AND—employees

By Kathie Dickenson



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my own business. — Page 20



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MARCH



Aila Boyd



Jennifer Poff Cooper



Dan Dowdy



Tom Field



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.

2024 CONTRIBUTORS



Carrie Cousins



Kathie Dickenson



Doug Doughty



Gene Marrano



Shawn Nowlin



Michael Shelton

“Smooth talkers did a good job making valid points. Or more accurately, making points seem valid.

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Micah Fraim
Fraim & Cawley CPAs /
finance - accounting



Kevin Holt
Gentry Locke /
legal



Jeff Merritt
Cox Communications /
technology

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finance—credit unions



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construction

Biographies and contact information on each contributor are provided on Page 54.

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Blog: morefront.blogspot.com



Submitted photos

VFP Inc. built its Duffield manufacturing facility in 1998 and expanded it in 2021. The 50-acre site includes four buildings totaling nearly 400,000 square feet. About 350 people are employed there.

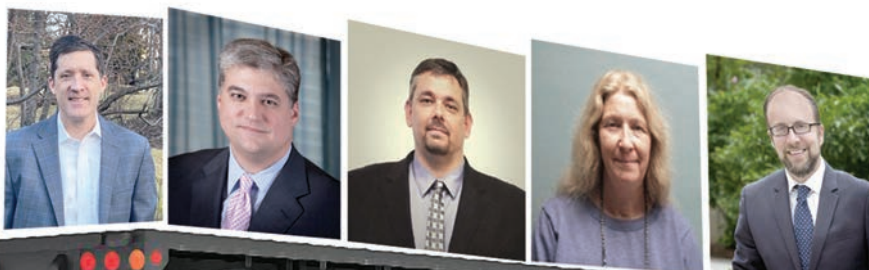
VFP secures utilities— AND—employees

By **Kathie Dickenson**

When Scott File first came to VFP Inc. he was a Radford University student, working summers. When he graduated and they offered him a job, he thought, "Well, I'll get a couple years of experience and move on." Thirty-two years later he's still with the company, where he has been CEO since 2021. "I'm not the longest-tenured guy in the building," says File. "This tends to be a

place where people come, and they turn it into a career."

VFP makes protective concrete and metal structures to house utility components, public safety communications and, increasingly, data centers. The long-time Roanoke Valley company was founded by Frank Van Balen in 1965 as Virginia Fiberglass Solutions; the



VFP's Scott File, Steve Jones, John Clark, Donna Rose, and John Hull of Roanoke Regional Partnership.

name was shortened to VFP during the 1980s.

When File started, VFP was making 8' x 12' fiberglass buildings, primarily for satellite and microwave telecommunications; in 1998 it expanded into concrete and metal products. The move to concrete, in particular, was made because unlike fiberglass, concrete products can be made highly resistant to ballistics, weather and wind without adding anything to the material.

The company opened a new manufacturing facility in the Scott County town of Duffield to make concrete products, while its factory in Botetourt County made fiberglass and metal products. In 2004 fiberglass production was phased out and all production moved to Duffield.

Although the Botetourt facility was closed and sold, VFP kept its headquarters in the area. After leasing space for several years, in 2019 the company purchased the Cox Communications building in Roanoke County, and "we sort of put a flag in the ground where our headquarters will be," says File.

At about the same time, VFP made a strategic decision to add larger, more specialized buildings to its product

“ ”

This tends to be a place where people come, and they turn it into a career.

—Scott File, VFP





The purchase of Cox Communications' building in 2019 gave VFP Inc. a permanent headquarters in Roanoke County. Cox leases part of the building from VFP.

line. File explains part of the reasoning: "If we make a \$10,000 building, freight is a huge percentage of the cost — say \$5,000 to send it to Northern Virginia and \$25,000 to California. The customer is going to look for a company that's closer. If we make a highly complex, larger, million-dollar building, the shipping will cost about the same, but it's a much smaller percentage of the total cost." With this vision, in November 2021 the company began an expansion of the Duffield facility, which now comprises nearly 400,000 square feet in four buildings on 50 acres.

The rapid proliferation of data centers is generating an increasing market for VFP's products. Linked to data center growth, adds File, is an increasing demand for power, which also means growth in the company's utilities market.

Today VFP's market extends to all 50 states, 82 countries, and all seven continents, including two projects in Antarctica, and still includes local customers, such as Roanoke Valley Broadband.

According to CFO Steve Jones, VFP's revenue has doubled over the last two years to \$100,000,000. In that time, the number of employees has more than doubled, from 200 to 425. About 70 work in the Roanoke headquarters and about 350 in Duffield.

Finishing Foreman Donna Rose has worked at the Duffield facility for more than 23 years. Starting as a finisher in October 2020, she made foreman about

“ ”

It's a future that
you can count on.

—Donna Rose, VFP

four years later; now she is one of three foremen supervising nearly 30 finishers.

Rose likes her work and the family atmosphere of the place and values VFP's employee benefits. Since 2017 the company has been 100 percent employee owned. Alongside the 401K program, "it's a future that you can count on," says Rose. "Me, in particular, at my age I've been able to diversify some of that money." She explains that at a certain age employees can choose to sell some of their shares back to the company. "Because of that, right now I'm pretty much debt free. Young people don't think about it. I tell everybody, right now it's 'virtual money' in our minds, but it's real money when the time comes."

To John Clark, Director of Engineering and Field Service Operations, employee ownership means "we all pull toward a common goal. If we can make a good product and provide good customer service, it's good for everyone."

Clark came to Roanoke from San Antonio, Texas, more than four years ago, and he plans to stay. Having lived in Austin and outside San Antonio, he calls big cities "cumbersome." Roanoke, on the other hand, "is a good size. It has everything we need, but it's very comfortable. I didn't know I liked mountains until I came here, and my wife loves them. I don't think we'll ever move; I don't think my wife will let me move."

“ ”

We all pull toward a common goal. If we can make a good product and provide good customer service, it's good for everyone.

—John Clark, VFP





VFP can build an entire structure in the factory, have relevant inspections conducted on site, and deliver the product ready for use

Unlike other companies where Clark has worked, "at VFP I've been able to try new things, to push the envelope." For example, "we've spent the last couple of years implementing a new engineering software, Revit, so that we can do things more efficiently and more accurately. Although it's a




small company we're breaking new ground."

"A company like VFP that sells its products throughout the nation generates new wealth for the region," says John Hull, Executive Director of the Roanoke Regional Partnership and of the Western Virginia Regional Industrial Facility Authority.

"We look to be locally focused as much as possible," says Jones, the CFO. "Four of our top five vendors are located in either the Roanoke or Scott County region. Our insurance brokers are in Roanoke; our main banking relationship is with a local community bank based in Abingdon; our corporate attorneys are local."

The company partners with trade schools and community colleges for workforce training. For example, says File, "we developed a program with Mountain Empire Community College to train students to build EMT conduits. A number of those students have come to work at Duffield."

"Legacy employers like VFP that have operated in the region for multiple decades provide a stability to our region's economy," says Hull. "I think the region's blessed with a large number of these employers that have operated for a substantial time, and I think that contributes to our region's resilience." 

“ ”

Legacy employers like VFP that have operated in the region for multiple decades provide a stability to our region's economy.

—John Hull, Roanoke Regional Partnership





Submitted

New Year New Brand

By Jennifer Poff Cooper

After 44 years in the New River Valley, Blue Ridge Home Improvement, a home remodeling company in Blacksburg, recently announced its rebranding to Blue Ridge Design Build.

The business is responding to the evolving requirements of its community. Logan Lawrence, Production Manager, said the company discerned the increased need for professional services in both designing and building for remodels by being part of the community for so long. As a result, it knows both what area houses need and what local customers want.

In Blacksburg, for example, many desirable neighborhoods are built out.

“Space is filled up, so there is not an option besides reviving existing houses,” Lawrence said. This opens the door for whole-house remodels and other large remodeling projects.

It was important to Blue Ridge Design Build

for the new brand to represent its continued focus on personalized service. A longtime competitive advantage Blue Ridge touts is the lead carpenter model of project delivery, where there is one point of contact who is only responsible for one project. There is something happening at all times on the site. This contributes to organization and timeliness. The lead carpenter does physical work, as well as communicates with the homeowner, subcontractors, and other Blue Ridge employees.

“The lead carpenter becomes a friend,” said Lawrence.

The rebranding also reflects changes in the company. “Home improvement” no longer captured the scope of the company’s offerings

with its design build project approach to remodeling. Blue Ridge has been working over the past several years on improving its remodeling process, from concept through the final punch list.

“Sometimes people don’t understand how involved planning a [home remodeling] project is,” said Lawrence.

One innovation is that Blue Ridge Design Build has now fully implemented CoConstruct, a custom builder and remodeler project management / client communication tool which offers an app and client portal. From the specifications and selection page to daily job logs with text summaries and photo documentation, it keeps clients informed at their convenience. It also helps clients feel heard with their questions and comments.

Said Lawrence of the importance of the software: “We’re living in a time where

instant gratification is expected.”

The rebranding was about a year’s process. It involved figuring out what the new name and logo would be in order to convey that Blue Ridge is not a new company, but rather that “we are still around, offering better services,” said Lawrence. A week before the rebranding was released publicly, the company held an employee retreat to get everyone on board.

The rebranding involved outside entities as well. The company hired Bellrae Marketing to oversee the campaign, and New River Computing coordinated the IT aspects, including new email addresses for all employees.

As part of the marketing plan for the rebranding, there were social media posts and a press release, as well as a mass email and mass mailing to customers and vendors.



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Blue Ridge has a new homepage and will continue to work on its website in a way that builds on information there, such as growing its online portfolio and including a page that breaks down the design process.

Blue Ridge is also working to expand its target market. It is well-known in the community among locals, with word of mouth and referrals being important marketing tools, but new people moving into the area want to find things on the internet. Lawrence said part of the company's new strategy is to answer the question, "How can we do things to improve our image with people seeking remodeling companies virtually?"

Lawrence said he was concerned the rebranding launch would be overlooked with competition from the holidays, but it has been well-received. "People have gotten the message," he said.

Moving forward, Blue Ridge Design Build has goals for the new brand. One is growing the company by hiring talented individuals. Another is to become known in the community as a voice of help and education about best practices and what to expect with any professional remodeling company.

Said Lawrence, "The average homeowner

doesn't know where to start when it comes to a remodel, and there are a lot of ways to do it wrong. We have always felt that we want to be a source of knowledge for those who find themselves in this situation, and we've put a lot of work into refining our design build process to help facilitate that." 



2023 Cox Roanoke Community Investment

At Cox, corporate social responsibility is more than a trend, and philanthropy is more than a buzzword. Both are steeped in our company's purpose and offer us the opportunity to use our time, talent and technology in ways that strengthen the Roanoke Valley. Here's how we supported our company's goal to empower 34 million people to live more prosperous lives by 2034 this past year.



Cash & In-Kind Contributions

\$500,000+

Through strategic partnerships, we invested in nonprofits and community organizations throughout the Valley that align with our company values.



Diverse Spend

80%

Nearly 80% of our cash contributions supported organizations committed to inclusion, diversity and equity.

Closing the Digital Divide



11,800+



More than 11,800 households in Roanoke were connected to the Internet through our digital equity products like Connect2Compete and ConnectAssist, and the Federal Government's Affordability Connectivity Program. Additionally, we extended the reach of our network to provide broadband access to 400 previously unserved homes in Roanoke County.



Employees with Heart

300+ Hours

In addition to volunteering more than 300 hours to support local organizations, our employees in Roanoke also supported 5 nonprofits through board service and leadership.

**Compiled by
Gene Marrano**

Executive Summary:

The year is off to an impressive start as RAMP, the Regional Accelerator and Mentoring Program, welcomes a new director and unveils a new look and a new website, and will welcome a new cohort this spring.

New happenings at RAMP

RAMP is part of the Verge alliance, which also includes the Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council, established to grow the region's innovation economy.

RAMP Hires New Director

John Hagy, managing director of the Carolina Angel Network, the University of North Carolina's early-stage investing organization, came on as RAMP's new director on Jan. 8. Hagy brings a unique mix of experience to RAMP. Before becoming involved with investment, he was a business development director at a geospatial intelligence startup, a strategy consultant at Deloitte, and an intelligence officer with the CIA.

"RAMP has built an unmatched reputation as a champion for entrepreneurs and companies in Virginia's growing technology and health and life sciences sectors and ultimately for the ideas and innovation so critical to the region's economy and job base," he said. "I am excited to join the team and helping to continue this forward momentum."

"Our region is lucky to have someone with John's experience to help accelerate tech startups," said Erin Burcham, President of Verge. "Not only does he understand the needs of young companies, but he's also got insight into how to help them generate funding and build foundations for prolonged success."

New Brand And Website


RAMP just launched a refreshed brand identity, including an updated logo and website that captures the motion of activity that happens within RAMP's mentoring and training and showcases the people and accomplishment of its programs. The refreshed look and feel, made possible through the generous support of Buzz4Good and LeadPoint Digital, also will align RAMP with the branding of Verge and the RBTC.

The effort includes a new tool kit for alumni of RAMP's mentoring programs that includes a badge alumni can add to their websites and other resources to help them to share their RAMP experiences with their communities.

More Staffing News

Jessica Dunn was recently promoted to RAMP's Program Coordinator. She'll be working with entrepreneurs on programming and working with in-residence cohorts. Sarah Spotswood is moving into an Alumni Relations role, where she will work with companies who have completed the RAMP program.

Spring 2024 Cohort

The newest group of startups will join RAMP this spring as part of the Spring 2024 Cohort. You have an opportunity to meet each of the companies at Meet the Cohort on April 11 or hear them pitch their ideas at Demo Day on May 22. More information and details at ramprb.com. 

Leveraging virginia tax credits: a roadmap for small businesses to boost the bottom line

These credits not only provide financial relief but also incentivize growth, innovation, and community engagement. Let's explore how small businesses can strategically leverage Virginia-specific tax credits to maximize their profitability.


Major Business Facility Job Tax Credit: Expanding small businesses that generate new employment opportunities stand to gain advantages through the Major Business Facility Job Tax Credit. By meeting job creation requirements and making substantial investments in a major facility, businesses can not only contribute to the local economy but also qualify for tax credits that directly impact their bottom line.

Green Job Creation Tax Credit: By creating new full-time jobs in areas such as renewable energy or energy efficiency, businesses not only support sustainable practices but also enjoy tax benefits that directly contribute to their financial well-being. **Biodiesel Blending Facility Credit:** This credit encourages environmentally friendly practices while providing financial relief to small businesses engaged in biofuel initiatives.

Neighborhood Assistance Program (NAP) Tax Credit: Small businesses committed to community development and engagement can benefit from the NAP Tax Credit. By making contributions to approved neighborhood organizations or nonprofits, businesses can not only support local initiatives but also enjoy tax credits that positively impact their financial standing.

Research and Development Expenses Tax Credit: Innovation is at the heart of many small businesses, and the Research and Development Expenses Tax Credit is designed to reward exactly that. By engaging in qualified research and development activities, businesses can receive tax credits based on their eligible expenses, fostering innovation while reducing tax burdens.

Worker Retraining Tax Credit: Companies that prioritize employee development can utilize the Worker Retraining Tax Credit. By offering retraining opportunities to workers, businesses not only enhance their workforce's skill set but also qualify for tax credits that support ongoing training initiatives.

Small businesses in Virginia can significantly boost their bottom line by strategically leveraging state-specific tax credits. Beyond the immediate financial advantages, these credits foster innovation, job creation, and community engagement, creating a win-win scenario for small businesses and the local economy. By embracing these opportunities, small businesses can navigate the intricate tax landscape and pave the way for sustainable growth and success. Taking advantage of tax credits requires careful consideration and planning. It is always wise to consider working with a professional for guidance. 



FINANCIAL FIGURES

By Michael Shelton

Executive Summary:
Small businesses in Virginia have a golden opportunity to enhance their bottom line by taking advantage of various tax credits offered by the state.

Michael Shelton is a financial retirement counselor. Reach him at Michael@360Wealth Consulting.com



Courtesy photos



Rebecca Mason, Dilly Dally owner

No lollygagging for owner of Dilly Dally

By Aila Boyd

Rebecca Mason is marking her first two years as owner of the celebrated Salem business Dilly Dally this month.

The Roanoke County resident isn't new to the entrepreneurial game, having owned the fast casual restaurant Elderberry's on Electric Road in Roanoke and West Main Street in Salem for nearly nine years. Smoothies were the specialty there.

"I always wanted to own my own business. I got to do that with Elderberry's. I wasn't really looking to own another business or brand, but when I saw Lisa Garst post that she was looking to sell the Dilly Dally, I just jumped on it because I liked this business," she said.

She sold the Elderberry's locations to her best friend in July, making Dilly Dally her sole focus now.

The more than a century old building that houses Dilly Dally has a lengthy history of serving the Bowman-Front community. Throughout the years, it's been a neighborhood grocery and convenience store.

"There's a lot of people around here

who remember coming down to the Dilly Dally when they were kids, riding their bikes, getting candy," she said.

Luckily, Mason said, local children still ride their bikes and scooters to the store to purchase candy and drinks. In fact, they often sit in the backyard picnic area while enjoying their purchases. "That's childhood memories, that's not just getting the product. It's the destination. It's enjoying doing it," she stressed of the old-timey feel.

Despite many of the patrons being residents of the neighborhood, Mason said she has plenty of regulars who cross rivers and train tracks to get to the store.

The current iteration of the business was brought to life in 2020 when Garst reopened it after performing an extensive remodel. While Mason has changed many of the products that are sold in the store, Garst's concept has largely remained intact.

"I don't think anyone would notice a



dramatic difference in the change of ownership,” she noted. “Our brand is very nostalgic, very laid back and fun. It’s an experience. It’s something to come and enjoy. It’s more than just purchasing a product.”

It’s now divided into two sides—a country store and café.

The store sells an eclectic assortment of items, many of which are made in Virginia and even in Salem. Locally produced items include Cuddle Corn and Blue Ridge Bison. “I really love local things that are made by our neighbors, so whenever I can get it local, I do,” Mason said. She also makes custom gift baskets. Vendors are spotlighted throughout the year via special events that are held in Dilly Dally’s backyard.

The café serves Nathan’s Famous hot dogs, ice cream, barbecue sandwiches, pimento cheese, potato salad, Swiss cheese slaw and its venerated homemade chicken salad in a grab and go format. The store-made items can also be purchased to take home and enjoy.


Eight employees, including Mason, work at Dilly Dally.

Despite taking over Dilly Dally two years into the pandemic, Mason said it still had a significant impact on the business. “There were so many ripple effects from the pandemic. Things like good costs, supply costs and availability. Sometimes that means making modifications to the menu because you can’t get a

certain item or a certain ingredient has gone sky-high in costs,” she explained. Minimum wage increases also impacted Mason’s business decisions. “You have to play that game to keep your business healthy and profitable. You’re chasing profitability but not just from a lining your own pocket standpoint but keeping your business healthy.”

“My hope for the future is not a whole lot of changes. I like it how it is,” she said. However, she hopes to see the business grow in its sales volume. “I like the smallness of Dilly Dally because it’s a historic building and country store. I don’t want to have a Dilly Dally franchise. This is Salem’s Dilly Dally.”

Amanda Livingston, executive director of the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce, described the store as being “iconic.” “Dilly Dally is a treasure trove of local delights and everyday essentials. Serving delectable lunches, artisanal snacks and selling locally branded gifts, the Dilly Dally is a cozy hub where community meets convenience,” she said.

Tommy Miller, Salem’s economic development director, agreed with Livingston when he said, “Dilly Dally has become an institution for residents among the historic Bowman-Front neighborhood, while also becoming a destination for those visiting the region. Their unique ambiance, collection of Virginia made products, and friendly staff provide a one-of-a-kind experience.” 



Who says you can't have it all?

- Matthew T. Holt, Department Head and Professor, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at Virginia Tech - www.linkedin.com/in/matthew-holt-prof
- David Ramadan, served in the Virginia House of Delegates from 2012-2016, and is a Professor of Practice, Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University - www.linkedin.com/in/davidiramadan/
- Melissa Vidmar, Communications and Marketing Manager, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics at Virginia Tech - www.linkedin.com/in/melissa-vidmar

Are you looking to enhance your job knowledge or get that promotion you've been working toward? You're not alone! Many working adults are seeking online certificates and degree programs to help answer these questions. The keyword here is online, and for good reason. Online learning offers the flexibility needed to balance work, studies, and life's demands.

Online education merges flexibility with a broad spectrum of certificates and degree programs, making it ideal for employees with personal commitments and employers aiming to upskill their teams. From business, marketing, and economics to quantum computing, it caters to every learner. This approach allows for lifelong learning at one's own pace and from any location, eliminating commutes.

Online learning removes geographical barriers, allowing learners to access quality education from any location, and eliminating the need for time-consuming commutes. This accessibility not only benefits students but also provides employers with a cost-effective and efficient way to consider higher education institutions as partners in employee development. Investing in online education demonstrates a commitment to workforce advancement and skill enhancement, fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional growth.

According to CNBC, 48 percent of employers said they offer undergraduate or graduate tuition assistance as a benefit, according to the Society for Human Resource Management survey. So, don't hesitate to further your education... ask your employer about their policy.

Steps to research online degree programs

1. Define your needs and goals – where would you like your career to be in five years?
2. Know your budget and evaluate financial options; search in-state for lower tuition rates; talk with your employer for assistance; identify tradeoffs between cost and value
3. Search online degree programs that meet your goals and needs
4. Review application requirements
5. Narrow down your choices
6. Apply

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

**By Matthew Holt,
David Ramadan,
Melissa Vidmar**

Executive Summary:

Online learning is opening doors for professionals to enhance skillsets and accelerate career growth.

Glossary of online learning terms

Asynchronous Learning: When learners participate in an online learning course at different times, it is known as asynchronous learning. Asynchronous learning allows learners to go through a course at their own pace and on their schedule.

Hybrid Courses or Programs: When learners participate in both asynchronous and live online classes. Hybrid courses aim to take advantage of both online and in-person teaching methods. They often leverage the flexibility and accessibility of online learning for lectures, materials, and assignments, while reserving in-person online sessions for discussions, practical applications, and assessments that benefit from direct interaction.

Graduate Record Examination or GRE: This may be an important step in the graduate school or business school application process. The GRE is a multiple-choice, computer-based, standardized exam that is often required for admission to graduate programs and graduate business programs globally. Additionally, many law schools in the United States will accept a GRE score for admission. In recent years, more schools have made the GRE optional.

Accelerated: Many institutions offer accelerated courses which allow you to complete your degree or program sooner by covering the same material in a shorter period, though these courses can be more intensive.

Capstone: A capstone project is a multifaceted assignment designed to integrate the knowledge you've gained, and is the high point of, an academic program or learning-pathway experience.

Cohort: A cohort of students start a degree or certificate program at the same time and are in the program together until completion. Being in a cohort builds comradery and expands your professional network, although start times may be more limited.


Stats and further reads

The World Economic Forum projected in its 'Future of Jobs Report 2020' that half of all employees worldwide would need reskilling by 2025. www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf

- You can view their most recent report here: www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023/digest/

Pew Research reveals that 87 percent of today's professionals see ongoing education as imperative for success. Forward-looking employers are responding by investing in internal training initiatives and incentivizing skill growth. www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/05/03/the-future-of-jobs-and-jobs-training/#:~:text=Jobholders%20themselves%20have%20internalized%20this,with%20changes%20in%20the%20workplace

Forbes reports that 33 percent of companies will increase their learning and development budgets and 75% plan to create customized learning programs for employees that are tailored to the skills their business needs. www.forbes.com/advisor/business/hr-statistics-trends/#sources_section

Cracking the code on digital talent; April 20, 2023. www.mckinsey.com/industries/technology-media-and-telecommunications/our-insights/cracking-the-code-on-digital-talent 



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Submitted photos

The Blue Ridge Marathon at 15: the iconic course that makes it a must run.

By Shawn Nowlin

Which city in America can definitively say it has the country's toughest road marathon? As surprising as it may sound, the answer is actually Roanoke. It's a big boost for the local economy as well.

The Foot Levelers Blue Ridge Marathon (BRM in shorthand) has built quite the race culture since its inception 15 years ago. The duo of Roanoke Outside Foundation Events Manager Kait Pedigo and Molly Bullington, owner of Blue Ridge Racing, LLC., are among those responsible for the event weekend's success. "The race was designed to showcase some of the best parts of the Roanoke region. You just can't do that without serious elevation,"



Kait Pedigo

Bullington said. "I pretty much handle everything from the start line to the finish line with our courses, and Kait handles everything else."

Bullington's Blue Ridge Racing company also designs courses for the Salem Half Marathon and

8k races in the Fall, the shorter Blue Ridge Marathon races (the half marathon and 10k) and in recent years she's been involved with the Rescue Mission's Drumstick Dash 5K on Thanksgiving, which has tweaked its downtown Roanoke course over the past few years. Bullington is credited with adding or adjusting some of the tougher legs of the BRM – so blame her perhaps while you chug uphill.

On her BlueRidgeRacing.net website, Bullington states her goal is to, "bring you the highest quality event that you can expect on race day. That means a well-organized check-in, knowledgeable volunteers in all the right places, a well-marked, accurately measured and breathtaking course, awesome medals and awards, and a race experience that you will want to repeat year after year." Bullington offers race management and consulting as well for other events.

Every April, thousands of runners from all over the country – even the world - participate

in the marathon experience that involves volunteers on the course at water stations and as course marshals (with the help of local law enforcement at busy intersections), along with supporters and onlookers cheering the runners on. Pedigo estimates as many as 10,000 people, runners and families from the region, dozens of states and a handful of countries come to town every year for the Blue Ridge Marathon weekend.

“This is America’s toughest road race because it has the most elevation change of any road race in America,” Pedigo said. What makes it tough? Depending on the race chosen, runners will climb Mill Mountain, the Roanoke Mountain loop and towards the end, when the legs are feeling it, the south Roanoke Peakwood neighborhood before heading down to flatter terrain.

Beginning and ending in downtown Roanoke, participants in the two longer races traverse a segment of the Blue Ridge Parkway where those three (or two in case of the half) challenging climbs and descents await them. The course “begins easily with one mile of rolling hills, before taking its first turn upward as runners begin the two mile climb up Mill Mountain.” Next, the race enters another phase with the upcoming



Race volunteers at the Star before runners got to the top





miles consisting of numerous challenging and lengthy hills. It is normal for people to share videos and picture montages of their journey on social media. The 10K heads up to the top of Mill Mountain as runners pass under the Star before heading back downtown and the finish line, where an afterparty that includes free food, a complementary beer and massage stations awaits all participant.

“Roanoke Mountain ascends approximately 780 feet in two miles with multiple switchbacks. Runners see magnificent views of the region’s mountains and valleys as they pass the numerous overlooks and are rewarded with the best view at the top,” the BlueRidgeMarathon.com website describes. “The terrain [eventually] flattens out as people make their way through Old Southwest, along the Roanoke River Greenway and Wasena before heading downtown to the finish line at Elmwood Park.”

Despite thunder and lightning forcing an early cancellation last year (the second time that’s happened), the spirits of many runners were not dampened. Many chose to keep going and received a medal from hardy volunteers at the finish line anyway, although their clock time was considered unofficial. “You can’t control Mother Nature. The last thing any race director wants to do is cancel a race once it’s started. Getting the runners and volunteers safely back to the start line is no small task. I couldn’t be prouder of how our staff, volunteers, public service partners and the community responded when lightning struck an hour and a half into the race,” said Pedigo.

Explaining the event’s economic impact, Pedigo said, “individuals by the thousands

come in to town and stay at our local hotels, eat at restaurants and do other things like purchasing souvenirs, which is money [from] out of the area coming into the area. To date, we have had over \$9.2 million in economic impact.”


The Freedom First Down by Downtown Music Festival is held in conjunction with the Marathon weekend every year; there is live music at more than a dozen venues in downtown Roanoke spread over four days. The ticketed feature concert on April 19 at Elmwood Park this year features singer-songwriter Margo Price on the Elmwood Park stage. Opening will be soul rock band Caitlin Krisko and The Broadcast, and local Americana singer-songwriter Corey Hunley.

On multiple occasions, the Blue Ridge Marathon has appeared on the Runner’s World Toughest Races list. There is even a double full marathon (more than 52 miles of running) for a small group that begins the first full around 2am or so (using headlamps to light the course), before finishing and lining up for the 7:35am start of their second full 26.2 mile marathon - and the half or 10K others will run.

Foot Levelers and Anthem, Altra and Carilion are race title sponsors this year for an event also dubbed “America’s Toughest Road Races,” for the full/half/10K. Every finisher earns a commemorative medal; the top three runners in their respective races (female and male) each receives a hand-welded trophy. In addition, the top three finishers male and female by five-year age groups also receive an award. There’s also the non-competitive America’s Slowest 5K the day after and a 1-mile kids Fun Run.



From experience, local runner Tracy Smith knows that the marathon is not as hard as some may think. "For a variety of reasons, most noticeably being overweight, I thought doing this was indeed a laughable concept. Everyone was so supportive though. Not only did I end up exceeding my own expectations, but I was able to create a memory that I can cherish forever," Smith said. Local running gear stores like Fleet Feet

and Runabout Sports sponsor group runs for distance training in preparation; others get together on their own with friends and tackle the Mill Mountain and Peakwood inclines, getting their distance running done on the greenway or local streets. When this year's race happens on April 20, Tracy Smith says she will be at the starting line again, waiting for the horn to go off, along with several thousand others. 

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PLATO'S CLOSET



Inflation Buster Roanoke's "resale retailer" serves market niche

By Gene Marrano

A thirty-something owner and her twenty-something management staff have themselves a thriving secondhand apparel shop at Plato's Closet – you can tell by an often-jammed parking lot and busy store aisles.

Jessica Maes went from going "job to job," to working at the Plato's Closet store on Route 419 in the Tanglewood area of southwest Roanoke County at age 21, before she and her husband purchased the local franchise from the former owner almost a year ago. Now with two 28 year old women managers

and the rest of the staff they run a retail operation crammed full of clothes, shoes, sneakers and accessories, almost all pre-owned and sold to the store by people ready for a new look perhaps.

Winmark Corporation also operates Once Upon A Child (there's one next

door to Plato's) and Play It Again Sports (also next door in the same shopping center.) The Plato's Closet in Roanoke County opened in 2006. "I found my niche and liked it - I like fashion" says Maes, now the owner with her husband Kevin (he did a lot of the remodeling) while also rearing a young child together at home.

The Plato's staff purchases their own inventory and there appears to be an endless stream of apparel and shoes being turned in at the front desk, separated and categorized. Some of it – the "hot" items of the day - may go right out to the racks and shelves, other items are cataloged and put into storage.

The parking lot in front and the store interior itself are often busy with patrons looking for those jeans, tops, shoes or accessories – bargains that make their day. 98 percent of it is pre-owned says Maes, who became a manager in 2014 and is closing in on her first year as owner this June, after the former owner sold it to the Maes'. "We were talking one night and said wouldn't it be funny if? ... and then it kind of just fell into place."

Being the owner at a young age (Jessica

ABOUT THAT NAME ...

Amber Porter, the assistant manager for the Roanoke County Plato's Closet franchise, says the original Plato's Closet owners named it that before selling it to the current owner, Winmark, because their son was doing a paper on the ancient Greek philosopher – who apparently was an advocate for recycling. Winmark states on the corporate website that its mission, via the franchises it operates that, *"For more than 30 years, Winmark has been at the forefront of the sustainability movement by guiding entrepreneurs interested in opening one of our retail resale brands: Plato's Closet®, Once Upon A Child®, Play It Again Sports®, Music Go Round® or Style Encore®. We have made resale retail our business by selecting franchise partners that believe in the model of buying and selling locally sourced, quality used products that bring value to their communities."*

never made it to college) is different than her more hands on role as store manager, before the day to day operations were passed on to assistant manager Amber Porter and store manager Julie Chumbley; it was "my baby, but now I'm doing the boring stuff – payroll and bills," she notes with a smile. "The success on the floor is what's exciting."



L-R in photo assistant manager Amber Porter, owner Jessica Maes, store manager Julie Chumbley.



Porter has worked at Plato's Closet since 2018 and is now Maes' right-hand person. She enjoys the training and teaching aspect for employees, who are often high school and college students. As for whom shops there, it's not just mostly women either: "we get everyone. Young, old, men, women. [But] we definitely have more women's [inventory]." Men can wear the same clothes "for 15 years," she adds. (Maes observes that men's apparel coming across the counter definitely shows more wear consistently.) "Fashion and women's styles change more than men," adds Porter.

It's not unusual they say to see what's the rage today become someone else's bargain in just a few months. Also says Porter, people that need some extra cash now will part with some of their belongings when necessary. There are people with things to sell coming in all day. "Gen Z is very thrifty," is how Maes sees her customer base; "they [often] will shop secondhand before full retail. I think they just find the thrill in the hunt." Clearance cycles drives down prices even further. A rewards club means special deals for regular patrons. Sounding older than she is, Maes says "our younger employees help us out a lot," in staying on top of what's trending these days," what should be on the store racks first. A marketing agency they utilize also helps track what's hot and what's not – TikTok trends for example.




Plato's inventory is categorized and numbered for easier access in the back storeroom

In the middle of the day, however, Maes says they may be the youngest people in the store – retirees perhaps looking for their own bargains. Its changed their mindset to an extent; Plato's Closet is not just for teens and tweens says Maes – who met her future husband when he worked at the store while attending college. In fact, Jessica says it was actually Kevin who encouraged her to think about buying the franchise.

Traffic has picked up since the pandemic and the inflation that followed. "COVID changed us," notes Porter. "The best thing that ever happened for us [numbers-wise]," adds Maes; "prices went up everywhere. We were able to keep our prices the same as in 2019. That's been huge for us." COVID was also advantageous for Plato's Closet since at the height of

the pandemic the supply chain for new apparel retailers slowed considerably; meanwhile Plato's saw a steady stream of inventory walk through the front door every day. They often sense which regular customers might like a particular new arrival.

Porter says they often relate their story to customers and employees about what they are doing, how they can realize their own dreams of business ownership. "We talk to people about that stuff all the time. I think it's a cool story. Its inspiring for a younger generation, even if they work here. Like, this could be you in ten years." Maes adds: "do your research. It's a leap of faith [to become a business owner]. I'm not just gambling with my life. Its my whole family." That gamble has paid off and then some it would seem. 



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RAM House on the move with a boost from Virginia Transformer >

It may take up to 18 months but **RAM House** on Campbell Avenue celebrated its future new home on Elm Avenue recently with an event at the current day shelter site on Campbell Avenue SW in a 100 year old former church it leases. Development director **Candace Bell** says the new location for RAM House will make it easier for shelter guests to find other services: “an organization that provides assistance to people that are drug addicted [is] right next door. We’re across the street from A Place of Their Own [living spaces]. We are more direct in terms of people coming from the Rescue Mission – they will not need to go through downtown to get to

us.” RAM House's new home as the Jain Care Center will feature showers for the first time; mental health and substance abuse counseling spaces, as well as a computer lab where visitors can look for jobs.

The new day shelter on Elm Avenue, which runs largely with a loyal core of volunteers and serves lunch daily, will be called the Jain Care Center, named after the family that donated the building - the Jains own Virginia Transformer. RAM House is conducting a capital campaign and is about halfway to reaching a \$4 million-plus goal, according to executive director **Melissa Woodson**. That campaign will also allow RAM/Jain Care Center to add a 1600 square foot commercial kitchen at the new location. “Now is the time to strike,” says Woodson, “now is the time to make the changes so that we don’t become another Richmond, another DC. That’s what our board and I want to be a part of and solution to.”



Gene Marrano



Gene Marrano



Gene Marrano



Mack Trucks will expand Roanoke County plant >

Mack Trucks, part of Swedish-based Volvo Group and one of North America's leading producers of heavy-duty and medium-duty trucks, will invest \$14.5 million to expand its western Roanoke County manufacturing operation at Valley Tech Park. The company will build a new 70,000-square-foot production facility to increase capacity for its medium-duty truck line and an emerging medium-duty electric truck line. Virginia successfully competed with Pennsylvania for the project, which will create 51 new jobs.

"Mack Trucks' expansion further strengthens Virginia's manufacturing industry ecosystem, which is a core focus of the Commonwealth's economic development strategy," said Governor **Glenn Youngkin** at the groundbreaking last month. "We are proud that Mack Trucks' initial investment in a new Roanoke County operation four years ago has yielded a second major investment. **Phil North**, chair of the Roanoke County Board of Supervisors, added that, "their continued commitment to investing in our community not only bolsters our local economy but also underscores the growth potential of our region.

John Hull, executive director of the **Roanoke Regional Partnership**, noted that, "this impactful project further develops the region's rich automotive manufacturing cluster [including the Volvo truck plant down I-81 in Pulaski County], which benefits from a supportive workforce development system as well as geographic advantages relative



to customers and the overall automotive industry." The Regional Partnership estimated an annual economic impact of \$72 million regionally from the expansion. A \$255,000 grant from the Commonwealth's Opportunity Fund will assist Roanoke County with the project.



LEAD BY EXAMPLE

By Carrie Cousins

Executive Summary:

When it comes to online real estate – your website, social presence, email, and more – where your assets live can make a big difference.

Do you rent or own your digital home?

Renting versus owning your digital home can impact everything from control of your brand and assets to search engine optimization. Just like with real estate, owning your assets provides protection against market fluctuations and the peace of mind that your content is truly yours.

What is “Renting” an Online Presence?

When you rent your online presence, you are using someone else’s tools or platform as a home for your brand, content, and information. This topic has gained importance recently as Google announced that all business profiles using the free website option lose those websites on March 1.

That’s rented real estate and you have no choice but to move – quickly.

While most of you probably don’t have a free Google website, you may be doing this same thing with other platforms.

The most common rental is social media. Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, and others are all valuable places to put business information, but you can’t control the delivery of the content or if the platform will even exist tomorrow. (Yes, a social media channel could shut down and all your content goes with it.)

Other “rental” solutions include popular website platforms like Squarespace or Wix, where you build a website in a builder that includes your domain registration and hosting. If that platform were to shutter, where would your content be? (The answer is likely nowhere or in the hands of the owner that is most likely going to make major changes to the platform.)

Yes, renting a digital home is easy and somewhat effortless, but you are at the mercy of the provider any time something changes.

- Your website provider has a rate increase?
You have to pay it.
- Facebook knocks your content out of their algorithm unless you pay for ads? You have to find additional budget to reach the same customers.
- Your website platform discontinues service?
You have to rebuild fast.

Why “Owning” is a Better Investment

When you own your online presence, you have access to all of your digital assets that can’t be revoked or taken away by a third party. Elements like your logo variations, photos, and video fall into this category if you store the files using a physical or cloud server. (Plus, a backup is recommended.)

Other things you can own include your domain name, website, and email list.

Generally, you know a digital asset is owned because it likely includes an upfront investment of time, setup, and/or money. Just like owning a home, these investments can increase in value over time. (Did you know search engines value domains that have been around a long time?)

What's probably most important about owning your digital assets is that you have control to change, move, or transfer digital assets between accounts or even marketing agencies on your own. Any reputable partner will work with you on accounts, ensuring that both parties have access to everything. It's a red flag if someone won't give you access to your business account information, such as a domain or website access.

Rent vs. Own

Rented assets are quick, cheap, and don't come with any maintenance. The biggest risks are closure or cost inflation. Use this option for things that don't generate much revenue for your business or if an ownership option is not available.

- Rent: Social media, email marketing provider, review sites or maps (such as Google My Business or Yelp), digital advertising platforms, licensed media or tools

The benefit to owning is that you are building brand and online equity at the same time. You have control of your online presence and assets and can even monetize them. You should own all revenue-driving aspects of your business (such as a website that's driving leads or sales for your business).

- Own: Domain, website, media storage, email list, analytics or historical data, your created content (blogs, photos, videos)

Owning your digital house is a worthwhile investment. Think of it as your company's dream home, providing long-term value as you grow your business. 🏠



Renting a digital home is easy and somewhat effortless, but you are at the mercy of the provider any time something changes.

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Carilion Clinic's kidney transplant services

By Gene Marrano

It would be the first of its kind in the region – Carilion Clinic intends to start an adult kidney transplant program at Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital.

“The need is clear and we’re fortunate to have the talented team required,” says CEO Nancy Howell Agee. One in seven U.S. adults has chronic kidney (renal) diseases according to the CDC. It’s the tenth leading cause of death each year and is projected to grow more than 25% by 2025 – a whopping 32% each year for the next ten years in Carilion’s service area alone.

First comes the approval process through Virginia’s Certificate of Public Need process. Dr. Tony Sepaul, the chief executive physician for Carilion, notes that, “our demographic data also shows that renal disease disproportionately impacts patients of color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This new program will be a lifeline.”

If the COPN is approved Carilion would be Virginia’s eighth transplant center and the only one in western Virginia. Existing operating

rooms at Carilion Roanoke Memorial would be utilized for those kidney transplants. The surgeon who would lead the transplant team is Dr. David Salzberg, a fellowship trained transplant surgeon, who says that as many as 5000 people in the region are experiencing advanced stages of kidney disease – more than in any other part of the Commonwealth. Currently, Charlottesville is the closest transplant center in Virginia. Winston Salem is the closest out of state.

Salzberg specializes in minimally invasive pancreatic surgery – and has practiced transplant surgery in the past. COPN’s are often required when looking to add another service – like an additional operating room. Salzberg says it may take about six months to find out whether this Certificate of Public Need will be approved, but with no other adult kidney transplant program within several hours reach it seems like a good bet. “We should hear back from the state in July.” While Carilion may start seeing patients this fall (those with renal failure often need dialysis treatments as much as three times a week) the first transplants may not take place until next year or even in 2026.

“There’s a giant gaping hole,” contends Salzberg when it comes to patients in the region who may need a kidney transplant, often a life or death scenario. Those stricken with kidney failure have a condition “that can go on for years without being treated head on.” COVID delayed some from getting their transplant and now those needs “have piled up.” He says there are more end-stage renal disease patients in rural southwest Virginia “than there are in the rest of the state. I think its related to demographics ... in this part of the state. We have patients that have trouble getting from home to




Dr David Salzberg

the doctor. Their lives are a little bit different than perhaps you live in DC." That can make those issues even more complex.

Carilion has been planning to make this move for about a year. With many more needing a kidney than there are donors having a surgical center in the region can also raise awareness about joining an organ donor database, those willing to donate one of their [two] kidneys. Salzberg says they are planning an outreach campaign to the local community once [if] the COPN is approved. "We need to approach the community to educate them on the real story about donation and how it can literally save lives."

It can also be a teaching tool for residents at the hospital and students at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine right around the corner in Roanoke. "It will not

only create jobs, but educational opportunities we didn't have before." Salzberg is also a robotic surgeon – almost 2000 such surgeries to date – and that will be one of the techniques he will use during a kidney transplant procedure. The implantations can be done robotically, he adds – as can the donation process. "In time we will be doing that at Carilion. "I think it's going to be a good opportunity for our region. I think it will elevate ... our service to the community."

Salzberg says the patient suffering from renal disease benefits the most: "it would be so much more convenient for them and would actually cut down on complications. The kidney transplant itself would be lifesaving," says Dr. Salzberg, "there's no question about it. Accessibility to that transplant is the biggest deterrent factor in a donor kidney getting to a recipient. We've been talking about this for some time." 



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Wasena Bridge rebuild will disrupt businesses, residential life for two years

It's been talked about and been in the planning stages for years and now it's about to happen - the Wasena Bridge will start coming down in May after more than eight decades of service, outdated and in need of a replacement cycle that might take two years. Project manager Josephus Johnson-Koroma, who works for the City of Roanoke, says they know being without this bridge for around two years as it is torn down and then replaced will have a major impact, but he notes, "we have done several repairs ... it's about time for us to get a new bridge."

The new Wasena Bridge will feature bike lanes, wider sidewalks, lookout seating and improved lighting. Johnson-Koroma says the current bridge lacks safety features found in more modern structures. The City will put signage out to inform motorists on the best ways to reach the businesses in the Wasena neighborhood once the bridge demolition gets underway, as the 85 year old Wasena Bridge that connects to old southwest Roanoke is demolished and then rebuilt to today's safety standards.

Johnson-Koroma, a Sierra Leone native from West Africa who has worked for the City of Roanoke for almost 20 years, says the outdated bridge lacks the redundancy built into more modern spans to deal with structure failure. He also says a public "Ways to Wasena" campaign is designed to support small business owners (like RND Coffee, Bloom, The Wasena Tap Room & Grill, etc.) in the Wasena neighborhood: "we've engaged the neighborhood groups and the business owners here, very early on about the project – since 2018, as we moved through the study and design of the project."

The Roanoke River Greenway will be rerouted on to local streets to get around the demolition and rebuild. The price tag is just over 50 million dollars, 42 million of that for the actual construction. The Wasena Bridge starts coming down in May. Many in that neighborhood no doubt are already counting down the days to the ribbon cutting. 

THERE'S
SOMETHING
HAPPENING
HERE

By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:
Roanoke City promises it will do what it can to make that lack of access as painless as possible, as it replaces an outdated and corroding 85 year old span that connects two neighborhoods.



Wasena Bridge

Gene Marrano

Neither wrong nor right?

This is fun.

As a bit of an ad agency (along with our publishing, marketing, communications suite of services), I get regularly solicited by creative services providers. One of those areas includes voice over production.

One of those production companies regularly sends me samples of talent. My, so many great voices—and you can immediately associate the best fit for your product or service, whether you want a super professional feel, comfortable or relaxing or reassuring, a demographic or regional connection, or even the hard-to-pin, neutral voice (that you might as well use AI for).

This time, the voice over company sent “political voices” as its featured playlist. You know, the voices you’re supposed to gravitate to in support of a candidate or cause or political plank.

I couldn’t resist.

I listened to the playlist. (As I was working on other things, of course. Who has time to scroll through voice overs or waste hours like we used to back in the day, flipping through stock photography?)

Admirably, this producer provided both Democratic and Republican scripts.

My takeaway reassured me about the power and influence of... quite frankly, marketing. And advertising. And public relations. And spin. And talking heads.

Our smooth talkers did a good job making valid points. Or more accurately, making points seem valid.

My listening jam that afternoon reminded me of something I learned in philosophy and rhetoric and apologetics and forensics many moons ago.

When it comes to polarizing voices (in this case, Democratic and Republican); when a point is made on one side that conflicts with the other side: they can’t both be right.

They can’t both be right.

I had to say it again; because there is a contingency that likes to claim that our two political parties are basically the same.

But guess what? They can both be wrong.

They can both be wrong.

continued on Page 41



ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By **Tom Field**

Executive Summary:
*Listening to political
ads scoring points.*



GUEST COMMENTARY

By Amanda Livingston

Executive Summary:
Reflecting on my journey as Executive Director over the past 16 months, I can confidently say that I have learned so much about the dynamic role of a chamber director.

Chamber turns 90: from the executive director of saalem-roanoke county chamber

Stepping into the position of executive director was both thrilling and challenging and I have gained invaluable insights along the way. My timing could not have been more perfect, diving in during a period of unprecedented growth, investment, and expansion in our region. It's exhilarating to witness firsthand the recognition of our area as a top destination to live, work, and raise a family.

Realizing the full potential of our chamber is reliant on building relationships within the community. Over the past 16 months, I have forged connections across sectors, from local businesses to government officials and nonprofit leaders. Collaboration is key, and it's heartening to see how various groups and organizations share the same goal of growing our economy and attracting talent. The culture of collaboration and cooperation in our region is tenable. It has been a privilege to work with Economic Development in both Salem City and Roanoke County. The Roanoke Regional Partnership and Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge have been generous with their time to update our members and allow our members access.


The Roanoke Regional Chamber has been a great partner, and we have collaborative events planned for this year. We have had the opportunity to work with small businesses to assist them with their initiatives, as well as many nonprofit organizations. I'm very proud of our relationship with the boutique consulting firm, Cortex Leadership Consultants. As a result of our connection with Lynda McNutt Foster and her team at Cortex, we collaborated on a 5-month online leadership program EPIC designed for emerging leaders. We are launching our second cohort this May.

Effective communication and marketing have been

instrumental in conveying our initiatives and engaging stakeholders. Our marketing coordinator, Lucie Benevise, has been pivotal in revitalizing our branding and outreach efforts. From social media to billboards, we've ensured transparency and clarity in all our communications, resulting in a remarkable 30% increase in membership and an impressive 200% surge in member engagement in 2023.

Learning about the power of networking has been eye-opening. Engaging with a chamber of commerce can significantly impact business success. Time and time again, business owners and professionals have shared with me that investing their time in networking events is the number one key initiative to grow their business/career. Actively participating in chamber events and programs will grow your business, increase your sphere of influence, and ultimately positively impact revenue growth. We like to say, "join our chamber and grow your business."

This year we are looking forward to celebrating the Chamber's 90th anniversary! We plan to commemorate this milestone anniversary this spring at the Chamber in Longwood Park. The Chamber has undergone a renovation, and our space is now updated and refreshed. We created a co-lab working space to allow members space to work at the Chamber. Our beautiful conference room is also available for our members to use by appointment. The renovation of the chamber was a pathway to create working space and open our chamber to its members for their regular use.

We are looking forward to another year of growth for our chamber and added value to our members. Whether it's through our signature, annual events or our networking programs, professional development seminars, there is so much upside to engaging with us—the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber, where everyone is welcome. 

Amanda Livingston is Executive Director for the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce. Reach her at director@s-rcchamber.org

Field / On Tap

from Page 39

In matters both domestic and international, both can offer solutions that are not the best. Both are equally proficient at getting us in a war, for example. Both have proven records (bad ones) with regard to our pressing issues of the day, from crime to inflation to jobs to housing to healthcare to education to economic sufficiency.

What we need is new talent. New voices.

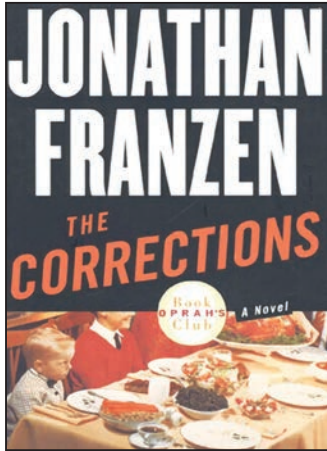
Send that track on over to me, will ya? 

CLARIFICATIONS:

The Claude More Education Complex is part of the Roanoke Higher Education Center's campus and also managed by RHEC. That distinction was not made in the "Most Tasty Olympics" story about Virginia Western Community College's Al Pollard Culinary Arts Program and the National Culinary Olympics team (Feb 2024). Also, Brady Allman is a sponsor listed in the story; his name was misspelled.

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.



Spoiled but not rotten

Although the story peters out in the end, you're faced with that inevitability—even though you thought perhaps, just perhaps the grand convergence of the family at Christmas would produce some miracle. That's the brilliance of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). Well, the lack of resolution and how this telling imitates life is one brilliant thing. The other brilliant thing is the writing itself. I don't know which is superior, our narrator's character development (three adult children, two aging parents) or the unfolding details of their lives. Such specificity (in their professions alone). Such independent nuances. Utterly mesmerizing storytelling. Franzen places you squarely in the scene. I'm still disappointed in the petering out. I feel like I was set up (after all my investment in the lives). And indeed, set up I was. Life can do that.

—Tom Field

MMT goes to The Mountaintop

There's a lot of good cultural stuff in this town, and I came to some of it later in life (at least in greater appreciation), so you can too. But I always thought the arts was a good escape. And lots of creativity. I really enjoyed *The Mountaintop* of Mill Mountain Theatre's more intimate Waldron Stage last month. It's the fictional last night of Martin Luther King Junior's life in Memphis at the Lorraine Motel, and he's uneasy. Enter the only other character in the play, the maid Camae. They bond, maybe flirt, she's sassy -

before dropping a bombshell on him about who she really is. Then Camae prepares him for what's ahead and MLK thinks about passing the torch. *The Mountaintop* actually debuted as a staged reading at MMT in 2017.

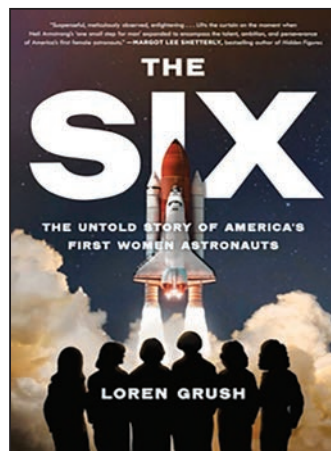
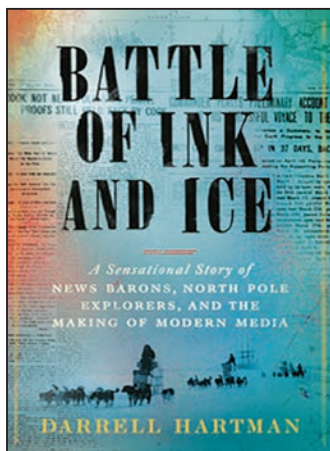
E.B Smith (also a Hollins professor) is the civil rights icon; the striking Shannon Sharkey is the maid/? Its her first role in Roanoke and I hope she returns to MMT. The point is, check out other offerings from the Fringe Series this year on the Waldron Stage, or a big show upstairs in the newly remodeled Trinkle Main Stage auditorium. Better seating, railings etc. (Escape to Margaritaville is there this month). The Mountaintop got Mill Mountain Theatre off to a good start in 2024.

—Gene Marrano

RSO's something for everyone

That's what folks are saying about the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra's Winter Romance concerts at Jefferson Center last month. I was there and I agree. Dvorak, Mozart, Telemann and Strauss waltzes – with dancing couples from Southwest Virginia Ballet on stage during some of those waltzes. And the amazing part was guest Ashley Hall-Tighe, a trumpet player who just joined Canadian Brass (which I hear is a big deal), wowing the Jeff Center audience with some very nimble playing.

"The best trumpet player I've ever heard in my life," wrote Rupert Cutler. Good call Rupe. Hall-Tighe grew up in Wytheville and played with the Roanoke Youth Symphony, so this was a homecoming event. Her parents were



there, and she dazzled. Go check out one of the remaining RSO concerts this season, even the Pops one with Pink Floyd music in June. Shine on you crazy diamond.

—Gene Marrano

When newspapers were king – and kingmakers

Two different North Pole Explorers claim they were the very first to the very top of the world. The emerging *New York Times* and the established power *New York Herald*, waging war for several years in print by taking opposite sides in the debate. It's all detailed in *Battle Of Ink And Ice: A Sensational Story of News Barons, North Pole Explorers, And The Making Of Modern Media* (Viking, 2023) by veteran journalist Darrel Hartman. In those days newspapers even sponsored trips to the north and south poles, to Africa in search of the Nile River's source, etc. – in return for exclusive story rights. It was a cutthroat competition at times.

Battle of Ink and Ice is a fascinating look at the influence broadsheet newspapers had in the late 1800's and into the early 1900's. That was the internet of the day; some papers would print afternoon and even additional copies in the same day. What also stands out is the sheer bravery (foolhardiness?) of men like Robert Peary and Frederick Cook, who both (along with their crews and sled dogs) battled the cold, poor instrumentation, loneliness, and the threat of starvation in their quest to be first at the North Pole.

It's part mystery, thriller, and adventure.

—Gene Marrano

First there were The Six

Six elite women were selected by NASA in 1978 to become the agency's first female astronauts. Their colleagues were mostly men, jet pilots who were not all on board with sharing their space shuttle cabins with women at first. But *The Six: The Untold Story Of America's First Women Astronauts* by Loren Grush (Scribner, 2023) is a story of determination, grit, working harder than 100% to show the boys – and yes, of balancing acts as some of The Six had babies while they waited many years in some cases to get their first – and sometimes only – flight to space.

The Six included The First, Sally Ride, and Judy Resnik, whom everybody seemed to love and who perished on her second flight aboard Challenger in 1986. Writing *The Six* was a natural for author Grush; both her parents were NASA engineers and she "grew up surrounded by astronauts and Space Shuttles," according to the jacket notes. Written in a very conversational, unscholarly way (not an insult), *The Six* is a good quick read with great nostalgic photos of the Space Shuttle era.

—Gene Marrano

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



Emily Field

Brazil? Who knew? >

Gladheart Wine & Brews shop in Roanoke—like many boutique wine vendors in our area—hosts wine tastings all the time. However, on a brisk Friday at the end of January, Gladheart’s wine tasting featured a collection from Brazil, a country/region not immediately associated with wine production. The Familia Salton “Intenso” grouping of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cab Franc, Brut Rose, and Pinot Noir both surprised and delighted guests at the tasting as evidenced by bottles snagged from Nicole and Philip.

VCOM’s PR recognition >

Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine (VCOM) received a silver award from the Blue Ridge Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) for its VCOM View magazine: Spring 2023 edition. The publication includes stories about VCOM’s mission in the communities it serves, and how it provides healthcare to those who need it most. The magazine reports activities from the Auburn, Carolinas, and Virginia campuses; and the editor, Amy Ostroth encourages anyone who has a VCOM story to reach out to her.



Submitted



Courtesy of S-RCCC

S-RCCC’s annual meeting >

The **Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce** held its annual meeting in mid-January. It featured a panel discussion with (L-R in photo) **Landon Howard** of Visit Virginia’s Blue Ridge, Roanoke County director of economic development **Megan Baker**, Roanoke Regional Partnership executive director **John Hull** and City of Salem director of economic director **Tommy Miller**. A recap of economic activity in 2023 and a look ahead were the topics. For the second year in a row Valley Business FRONT editor **Gene Marrano** (at podium) led that discussion.



Remember Superbowl ads? >

In a tradition that goes back decades, the **AAF Roanoke** ad club held its annual Superbowl television ad review session (the day after Superbowl LVIII—perfect timing for “Monday Morning Quarterbacking”). An audience (who was encouraged to weigh in) joined a panel of two and moderated by **Zack Jackson** as the ads played on the big screen. Not a single ad produced 100% thumbs up or 100% thumbs down, verifying advertising effectiveness is often in the eye of the beholder (or at least the target demographic). The general consensus (in Starr Hill Pilot Brewery) was that only a few select ads stood out for this year’s big event.



Murals adorn credit union >

Local muralist **Jon Murrill** has done it again, whose work has been featured several times in *Valley Business FRONT*, has completed two more works of public art, which can be seen at Blue Eagle® Credit Union. Blue Eagle initially commissioned Jon to paint a mural at its newest location in West Salem. Encouraged by community feedback, Blue Eagle CU engaged with Jon again to paint a second mural at its Oak Grove office in Southwest Roanoke County. “Blue Eagle is very passionate about working alongside our communities here in Roanoke. These murals are meant to be a gift to those communities by bringing color to their commutes and providing a unique photo opportunity for friends and family,” reflected Murrill in a news release.

Our impressive planetarium is back >

After a rebuild period that included a new projection system dubbed The Eye, capable of delivering images as crisp as 8K, the **Science Museum of Western Virginia** unveiled the updated planetarium last month. In addition to the usual star shows there will be separate paid events – remember the Pink Floyd laser shows? It can also be rented out for special corporate events. Generous contributions from local businesses and foundations helped make The Eye a reality.





Crypto in Botetourt >

Cushman & Wakefield | Thalhimer announces that **Coastal Crypto, LLC** has leased an additional 46,300 square feet of industrial space at the Old Valley Forge Building, located at 17921 Main Street, in Buchanan. Coastal Crypto had previously leased 36,700 square feet, now completing the long-term lease of the entire 83,000 square foot building. Coastal Crypto provides cutting-edge mining hardware, as well as repair services for mining equipment.



Get2KnowNoke ambassadors >

The **2024 Get2KnowNoke Talent Ambassador** program has launched with 26 young professionals and influencers, "poised to highlight the unique benefits of living and working in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountain metro," according to the Roanoke Regional Partnership that offers Get2KnowNoke, a talent attraction initiative. The 26 new ambassadors were chosen to reflect the region's diverse lifestyle offerings, from Smith Mountain Lake in Franklin County to Botetourt County and everything in between. They work for diverse industries from automotive manufacturing to banking, to local artists and entrepreneurs; and are culturally diverse.

"We had an unprecedented and overwhelming number of applicants this year, which speaks to the growing interest of our talent attraction efforts and the enthusiasm of our young professionals to invest their time in the region," said **Julia Boas**, director of talent strategies at the Roanoke Regional Partnership. "As with previous livability initiatives, the key to success is turning residents into Roanoke Region evangelists." The 2024 inductees will host pop-up events, promote lifestyle stories and attractions on social media, represent the region on campuses, with legislators or leadership, or meet with companies looking to relocate to the area.



Granite in Rocky Mount >

Franklin Monuments in Rocky Mount opened recently to supply upright granite headstones and other types of memorials – along with engraving and installation – at private and public cemeteries in Franklin County and throughout the Roanoke Valley and Southwest Virginia. The company is locally owned by the Ledbetter family, which also owns and manages Franklin Memorial Park.

“There are limited options in Franklin County and the Roanoke Valley where someone can purchase an upright granite headstone and have it customized,” says Franklin Monuments’ Manager **Haley Shively**. “That limited availability – coupled with the extended wait times that

many people experience when ordering memorials from out-of-state suppliers – led us to open this new business.” A wide variety of granite memorial types and styles are available, including flat, bevel, slanted, single, and companion. Premium headstones are also available, such as those with a unique shape, bench memorials, markers with an angel or vases, or ones with heavy customization featuring emblems, verses, photos, or scenery.



Delta Dental check up >

The **Delta Dental of Virginia Foundation** has announced \$622,000 in grants to 10 safety-net clinics in the Commonwealth, addressing oral health care needs for those that can least afford it. Included were four non-profits in Roanoke. **Polly Raible** is executive director of the Foundation: “Roanoke is our backyard; we’re celebrating our 60th year. Certainly we want to make sure that our own backyard is safe and sound and is getting as much [dental care] access as possible to people that need it.”

The latest grant from Roanoke-based Delta Dental of Virginia and the Foundation will also allow the Virginia Commonwealth University dental students that do part of their residency at Bradley Free Clinic to spend time with the other local grant recipients - CHIP of Roanoke Valley, New Horizons Healthcare and the Rescue Mission. New Horizons Healthcare CEO **Jonathan Stewart** on their goal: “[to be] not just a place that provides care [to the under-insured], but also a place that strategically houses students and [dental] residents. We’re growing our practice. We’re going to use that money they’ve provided to us to offset the cost of a new dental provider, who will not only provide care but will also supervise students and dental residents. It’s a tremendous leveraging resource.”



Radford University

Radford U's "new" nursing school >

Radford University's newest college has been a part of campus academics for 50 years. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) recently authorized the new **College of Nursing**, a name change also approved by the Radford University Board of Visitors. This is the only public institution in Virginia to have a separate College of Nursing.

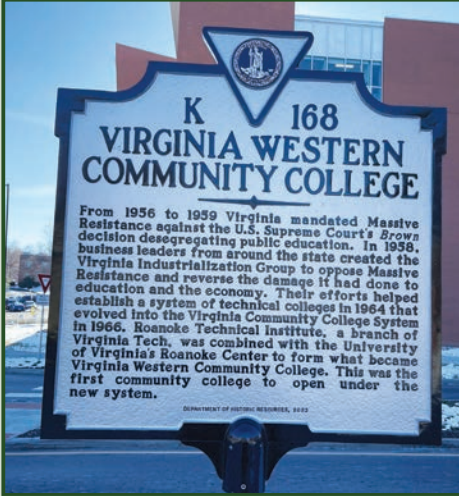
The College of Nursing is led by Interim Dean **Wendy Downey, D.N.P.**, and has learning locations in Radford and Roanoke, Virginia. "This is a monumental achievement for the College of Nursing in a 50-year history where we have been part of a college, but never as one dedicated solely to nursing," Downey said. "Numerous alumni and emeritus faculty have told me, 'This has been a long time coming.'"



Gene Marrano

I wish I was ... >

Spotted in the parking lot at **The Forum** shopping center in southwest Roanoke County – the famed Oscar Mayer Weini-Mobile. The unique vehicle crisscrosses the country for promotional events tied to the famous and venerable hot dog brand, which evokes memories of the TV jingle for many of a certain age.



VWCC's historical marker >

The **City of Roanoke**, in collaboration with **Virginia Western Community College**, unveiled a historical marker commemorating the institution's pivotal role in the establishment of the Virginia Community College System ... Virginia Western Community College, inaugurated in 1966, was first among an eventual 23 Virginia Community College System schools, charting a course that has impacted the lives of thousands of Virginia students.

"Many people drive through our campus daily and do not know about Virginia Western's place in Virginia's educational history," said Dr. **Robert Sandel**, who has served as president of Virginia Western Community College since 2001 and is a tireless advocate for the school's workforce development programs. "The groundwork laid in Roanoke in the 1960s helped create a more equitable system for all Virginians to access higher education, and this marker makes that history known." Local historian and former Roanoke Mayor **Nelson Harris** helped with the research for the marker.



De-fib on the mountain >

The newest edition to the growing number of Automated External Defibrillators - AED's - in Roanoke City public spaces was unveiled at the **Mill Mountain Star**. **Richard Shok** owns the **AED Team**, a Roanoke company that distributes these user-friendly devices, which can help revive someone in cardiac arrest: "defibrillation is extremely important when someone has a cardiac arrest," said the aptly-named Shok,

"being up here at the Mill Mountain Star – this is one of the outlying locations for Roanoke Fire-EMS to respond to. It can take 7-8 longer minutes for someone to get defibrillated when they need it. We know that just takes too long. The heart only has a few minutes of oxygen to be able to survive." The Mill Mountain "De-Fib" is installed outside the restroom shelter near the Star. There are other new AED's in Wasena, Smith, and Elmwood Parks, and at River's Edge North.

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

FINANCIAL FRONT



Alexander

Adam Alexander is the new vice president and business development officer at FirstBank. Alexander has over 25 years of commercial and retail experience, assisting business owners in the Roanoke and New River Valleys. He specializes in assisting closely held companies with lending needs and maximizing cash flow positions through deposit and cash management functions, while also protecting against threats of fraud. He holds a B.S. in finance from Virginia Tech and is involved in the community, including being a board member of the local YMCA and coaching youth sports.



Clark

Freedom First Credit Union has announced **Jaime Clark** has joined the credit union as Vice President of Public Relations. Clark comes to Freedom First after having served as the Vice President of Marketing and Communications with Downtown Roanoke, Inc.

EDUCATION FRONT



Lucero

Jamie Lucero has been named as the project director for the

Alliance to Advance Climate-Smart Agriculture, a record \$80 million U.S. Department of Agriculture Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities grant received by the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Virginia Tech that launched in September. The Alliance will help farmers and ranchers implement climate-smart practices that could significantly reduce greenhouse gasses. The three-year pilot program will be in Virginia, Arkansas, Minnesota, and North Dakota to test the feasibility of rolling out a similar program on a national scale. Lucero spent the previous 17 years as the director of Alumni and Constituent Relations for Virginia Tech's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, serving as the key alumni and engagement officer for the college and Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Robert Jackson, who played on the defensive line for Virginia Tech



Jackson



Brookins

football team in the early-to-mid-1980s before launching an administrative and fundraising career in higher education and medicine, has returned to lead Tech's Advancement Division's principal gifts team. Jackson started last month as Virginia Tech's associate vice president for principal gifts. He most recently served as assistant vice president of development for principal gifts at Penn State. **Lori Brookins**, who previously served



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as a senior principal gifts officer at the University of Virginia and a senior major gifts officer at Harvard Business School, has also joined the principal gifts team.

Alexandra Pirkle has been named director of communications and marketing for the Virginia Tech Office for Inclusion and Diversity, in charge of planning and execution of a comprehensive communications and marketing plan for the office that aligns with university wide strategic goals and initiatives. Prior to joining Virginia Tech, Pirkle was communications manager for the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Joe Knight has been named head of the Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation in the College of Natural Resources and Environment at Virginia

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.



Knight

Tech. Knight brings an extensive background in forestry and natural resources science with a focus on the applications of geospatial analysis and remote sensing in the field. Knight comes to Virginia Tech from the University of Minnesota, where he was a professor in the Department of Forest Resources and director of the Remote Sensing and Geospatial Analysis Lab.

Tom Soladay has been



Soladay

named the director of communications and marketing for Virginia Tech's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Soladay will lead the planning and execution of a comprehensive strategic communications and marketing plan for the college, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station that aligns with and advances universitywide strategic goals and initiatives. Soladay brings years of

experience representing and promoting brands on a global scale, including working as senior public relations manager at Chip Ganassi Racing and communications director at international sports marketing company Circuit Sport. He holds a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Maryland and is a retired professional cyclist.

CULTURAL FRONT

Sherry Wyatt has assumed the position of assistant director and museum curator at the Montgomery Museum of Art & History in Christiansburg. Wyatt, who has over 14 years of experience

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Wyatt

and knowledge as the museum curator, will oversee all museum art and history exhibits.

TECH/INDUSTRY FRONT



Italiano

Joe Italiano was named president of Citizens Telephone Cooperative Board which celebrated several milestones over the past year, including the construction of over 150 miles of fiber (over 650 total miles within Floyd County); 1,500 Gigabit Fiber customers; over 1,600 customer migrations to SFN TV Now platform, and 40% of homes to date (over 4,000 customers) connected to the Citizens internet/fiber service.



Hagy

John Hagy, managing director of the Carolina Angel Network, the



Dunn



Spotswood

University of North Carolina's early-stage investing organization, is the new director RAMP. Hagy brings a unique mix of experience to the Regional Accelerator and Mentoring Program high tech business incubator. Hagy was a business development director at a geospatial intelligence startup, a strategy consultant at Deloitte, and an intelligence officer with the CIA. "RAMP has built an unmatched reputation as a champion for entrepreneurs and companies in Virginia's growing technology and health and life sciences sectors," said Hagy. Meanwhile **Jessica Dunn** was recently promoted to RAMP's Program Coordinator; **Sarah Spotswood** is moving into an Alumni Relations role, where she will work with companies who have completed the RAMP program.

CONSTRUCTION FRONT

Michelle Ramaker



Ramaker

has been names vice president of Build Smart Institute. Ramaker served as the director of development since 2022, connecting industry partners to training programs for the construction industry. She has been the Lead in BSI's venture with Ferrum College to assemble an Associate Degree program for Construction (available Fall 2024). Ramaker also serves as residential coordinator for F&S Building Innovations, tracking billables, quality control inspections, and customer service. Prior to these roles, she and her husband, Mitch owned M&M Services of SML, a Class A Contractor; and she has a background in law enforcement (6 years as a Sheriff's deputy). She has four children and is involved in numerous leadership positions, from BNI president, membership, ambassador to Blue Ridge Youth Camp director, church leadership positions, Middle School girls basketball coach, and trade organizations (board member: National Association of Women in Construction, expo committee member: Roanoke Regional Home Builders).

Leah Kinder has been promoted to community engagement manager



Kinder

at Branch. Kinder will lead the construction company's philanthropic endeavors in Virginia and North Carolina. She joined Branch in 2015 and has played a pivotal role in "Branch Gives," the company's charitable giving strategy and corporate citizenship. Headquartered in Roanoke, Branch reports over \$650 million in revenues and a workforce over 1,200 employee-owners. An ESOP company, the charitable efforts address actions and influence in the communities where the employee-owners live and work.

MARKETING FRONT



Richardson

Marlee Richardson has been promoted to business operations manager at 5Points Creative. Richardson will take charge of the cultural initiatives at the agency. She will also direct the social media services and ensure the strength and effectiveness of the

company's benefits, procedures, support network, and internal interactions. Richardson joined 5Points Creative in 2022 as marketing coordination specialist, where she organized various initiatives while also helping to oversee analytics for the agency and its clients.

SENIOR FRONT



Toney

Warm Hearth at Home in Blacksburg welcomes **Joshua Toney** RN, BSN, as the new Administrator for Warm Hearth at Home. Toney will oversee administrative

and clinical functions of the agency for clients and families. Toney comes from Amedisys Home Health, where he was the Regional Team Lead Remote Clinical Manager. He received his Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing from Mary Baldwin University and his Associate of Applied Science Degree in Nursing from New River Community College.

COMMUNITY SERVICE FRONT



Whitney

Roanoke Women's



Brailsford



Green

Foundation—an organization founded 20 years ago by Ginny Jarrett and Kandy Elliott that connects women and their pooled financial resources to enhance the quality of life in our communities—has appointed officers for 2024: **Betsy Whitney**, president; **Trudy Brailsford**, secretary; and **Ann**



Marques

Green, treasurer.

MUNICIPAL FRONT

Uma Marques is the new Information Technology Director for Roanoke County. Marques comes to Roanoke County from the Virginia Smart Community Testbed in Stafford County, where she served as the Director. Marques follows Bill Hunter, who recently retired after serving Roanoke County for over 20 years.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field

“ ”
It's inspiring for a younger generation.

— Page 31

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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. [cooperjpp1@gmail.com]

Carrie Cousins is the Director of Digital Marketing at LeadPoint Digital in Roanoke. For 15+ years, she has helped businesses tell their stories and get better results online with practical digital marketing strategies. She also an active leader in AAF, serving on the local and district boards, and is an adjunct professor at Virginia Tech.

Kathie Dickenson is an independent writer and editor who lives in the New River Valley. [kathiedickenson@gmail.com]

Doug Dougherty 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. Dougherty 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 Dougherty 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).

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]

Meg Reed is the vice president of business banking at Freedom First Credit Union. With 25 years of banking experience, she ensures present and future

Business Members are equipped to grow their business while helping them financially succeed, catering a financial plan to take the business to the next level. Reed views every business "like a zebra—no two businesses have the same stripes. What may work for one, may not work for the next." [mareed@freedomfirst.com]

Michael Shelton is a Registered Financial Consultant, tax specialist, and owner of 360 Wealth Consultants. His firm specializes in providing retirement planning and wealth preservation strategies for business owners and astute individuals. What really has the locals excited, though, is his groundbreaking, proprietary software, designed to streamline accounting and wealth planning for business owners of medical practices, real estate properties, and construction industry businesses. [Michael@360WealthConsulting.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.

Nicholas Vaassen is a graphic designer with 27 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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Machining in Craig

Salem Specialties—a family-owned machine shop currently in West Salem—is relocating to the former Crown Building furniture manufacturing plant and former Manifold Mining in Craig County. The building was purchased from the Craig County Economic Development Authority. Over 50 years in business, Salem Specialties says it will bring about 20 full time jobs to Craig County.

Trucking in ROCO

Mack Trucks in west Roanoke County is investing \$14.5 million to expand its manufacturing operations. The expansion is expected to create 51 jobs. (See FRONT'n About Spotlight in this issue)

Our first adult high school

In what's been described as a "monumental step forward," Virginia will now have its first adult high school, thanks to Goodwill Industries of the Valleys and The Excel Center (part of the new campus at the new Melrose Plaza development in Roanoke). The Virginia Department of Education approved the high school, which will held adults get their high school diplomas, while simultaneously earning workforce credentials. A report shows that more 670,000 adults in the Commonwealth do not have a high school

diploma. The Excel Center will also address barriers such as childcare, transportation, poverty and healthcare concerns, and college and career navigation.

"We know there are many Virginians who are missing only one or two classes to earn their high school diploma. A GED isn't as logical for these students because of the time and monetary investment required. The Excel Center creates another option for students. Students will take advantage of accelerated coursework and smaller classes to expedite their learning," said Zenith Barrett, vice president of business and community engagement. "This will be the first Excel Center in Virginia, and we are looking forward to expanding the model in other areas where high dropout rates are having an impact on the local economy."

Snuffed out

Korona Candles in Dublin is closing this spring (April—May) which will eliminate about 60 jobs. At its peak in Pulaski County, the Korona plant that opened in 2014, employed nearly 300 people, as a home décor manufacturer owned by Germany-based Gala Group.

More night vision goggles ordered

Israel-based Elbit Systems has announced that the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has

awarded Elbit Systems' U.S. subsidiary, Elbit Systems of America – Night Vision LLC an indefinite delivery/ indefinite quantity contract with a maximum ceiling of \$500 million, for the supply of Squad Binocular Night Vision Goggle systems; spare and repair parts; contractor logistics supports and test article refurbishment. Work will be performed at Elbit's Roanoke plant and is expected to be completed in 2028. Elbit Systems of America received an initial delivery order award under the ID/IQ worth approximately \$127 million.

RVARC survey

The Roanoke Valley Alleghany Regional Commission has released its 2023 Greater Roanoke Region Travel Survey. The survey conducted by a research company involved 1,662 residents. The results highlight the overall satisfaction of the residents with the Greater Roanoke Region as a great place to live. However, the findings also point to areas of improvement. Gas prices, maintenance costs, and traffic congestion were identified as key concerns for residents. The survey also underscored the need for more public transportation options, improved bike paths, and safer, better-connected sidewalks.

Commuting within the region is viewed as expensive and

frustrating; the report suggests that carpooling and vanpooling could offer practical solutions. "This survey highlights the importance of having a robust multimodal transportation network that serves the region's workforce," said Regional Commission Chair Jim Wallace. "Providing more transportation options that both enhance quality of life and provide increased access to job opportunities is a key focus of the Commission's transportation planning and programming work."

NEA grant in Floyd County

Springhouse has announced a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Challenge America award of \$10,000, which will support letterpress workshops and staff salaries at the Springhouse print shop in Floyd County. "The NEA is delighted to announce this grant to Springhouse, which is helping contribute to the strength and well-being of the arts sector and local community," said National Endowment for the Arts Chair Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD.

Blacksburg, Waynesboro banks to merge

National Bankshares, Inc. of Blacksburg and Frontier Community Bank of Waynesboro have entered into a definitive merger agreement for National Bankshares to acquire Frontier. The transaction,

which received unanimous approval by both National Bankshares' and Frontier's Board of Directors, is subject to customary closing conditions, including the approval of the merger agreement by Frontier's shareholders and the receipt of all required regulatory approvals. Brad Denardo, Chair, President and CEO of National Bankshares remarked that, "this acquisition will also help us achieve a higher level of financial performance for our shareholders by gaining meaningful entry into markets with attractive growth opportunities."

Grant will explore buried power line safety

The U.S. Department of Energy Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E) has awarded \$2.5 million to Virginia Tech, through their Grid Overhaul with Proactive, High-speed Undergrounding for Reliability, Resilience, and Security program. This grant will be used to develop a look-ahead

sensing system, which will assist in the undergrounding of power lines.

"This \$2.5 million grant from the Department of Energy will help Virginia Tech develop a real-time, look-ahead sensing system based on integrated electromagnetic and seismic sensors to guide and assist drilling to lower the cost and safety concerns of undergrounding power lines," said Congressman Morgan Griffith, who represents the New River Valley in Congress.

Props for Good Sam

Roanoke County-based Good Samaritan Advanced Illness Care and Hospice was honored as the 2023 Large Non-Profit of the Year by the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce on December 7, 2023, at The Inn at Virginia Tech. The Large Non-Profit of the Year was presented at the Annual Awards Celebration of the Montgomery County

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Chamber of Commerce. Good Sam was selected from among seven finalists, including Habitat for Humanity NRV, the NRV Community Foundation, and the Montgomery County Christmas Store.

"As the region's only community based, non-profit hospice, there is no greater honor than being recognized by the people in our service area," remarks Aaron Housh, Good Samaritan President and CEO. Good Sam is currently building a new inpatient hospice care center and office headquarters in the City of Roanoke.

Southside tourism spike

Visitor spending for Martinsville – Henry County reached \$70.4

million in 2022, a 5.1 percent change over 2021. Tourism-supported jobs in Martinsville – Henry County totaled 787 while local tourism-related taxes were \$2.8 million. According to the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC), overall tourism in Virginia generated \$30.3 billion in visitor spending in 2022, an increase of 20.3% from 2021, exceeding 2019 levels by 4.4%. The tourism industry in Virginia directly supported 210,721 jobs in 2022, an increase of more than 25,000 jobs relative to 2021, but still down about 30,000 jobs relative to 2019.

All data is from Tourism Economics and is based on visitor spending from trips taken 50 miles or more away from home. "Tourism in Martinsville –

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Henry County is certainly rebounding,” stated Kelly Rowland, the Tourism Marketing and Client Relations Manager. “With our diverse venues and attractions, we are crafting a destination that inspires curiosity and leaves lasting memories for all who visit.”

Studying Cannabis - in college

Roanoke College has approved the creation of a transdisciplinary Cannabis Studies Program that will allow students to obtain a Bachelor of Science in either the science of cannabis or the social justice and policy issues surrounding cannabis regulation. Roanoke College will become the first institution of higher learning in Virginia – and one of only a handful on the East Coast – to offer a four-year degree in this rapidly growing field, positioning graduates for career success in an industry that is expected to reach at least \$40 billion this year. A major and a minor will be available beginning this Fall.

“Students are interested in this industry,” said Biology Professor DorothyBelle “DB” Poli, who holds a Ph.D. in plant biology and led the charge in researching and establishing the new program. “Being the first in the state to approach cannabis from a scholarly perspective is inventive and entrepreneurial. We hope to help bring clarity to tough problems

by creating a truly multidisciplinary think tank.”

Mill Mountain Theatre will search for new leader

Ginger Poole will leave Mill Mountain Theatre sometime in 2024, after leading for 18 years, mostly as the producing artistic director. She’s credited with saving the theatre in 2009 when it shut down due to financial issues (Poole was the only paid employee during that two year period) and following the COVID pandemic. Poole also says Mill Mountain Theatre’s 2024 season theme will celebrate the theatres 60th anniversary by going back to its roots as a professional regional theatre, providing something for everybody. That comes after an all-musical “season of song,” in 2003; Poole admitted then the musicals, which are normally a big draw, helped refill the coffers after the pandemic shutdown. “Mill Mountain has survived. We are here, we are known nationally, for our work. I think I’m most proud of the culture we’ve created. We take care of our people, whether full time or our contract people, our guest artists. People are first.”

First-ever “Talent Summit”

Retaining and attracting talent to the Roanoke and New River Valleys - those efforts have been ongoing for years, but

now a first time “Talent Summit” is intended to help ensure everyone is on the same page. It’s a collaboration between the Roanoke Regional Partnership and Roanoke College - where the one-day event will take place on March 7. Hollins, Virginia Western, Ferrum College, Virginia Tech and Radford are also on board.

The talent summit on March 7 includes a panel discussion on leadership, time for networking and breakout sessions. Julia Boas is with the Partnership and its Get 2 Know Noke program: “It’s all about making sure our education system that includes higher ed, community colleges, even in the career trades [and] training programs at high schools, are developing the talent and the skills that the employers of our region need.”

Novel lodging program locally based

Harvest Hosts helps connect self-sustaining RVers (i.e. no electric hookups or water provided) to a place to park for the night on their trips. RV travelers pay a yearly fee to become a member of Harvest hosts, which has sought a network of businesses willing to lend their land to those on the road, and in return, the travelers are asked to patronize the businesses. CMO Bill Zhang (a Virginia Tech alum) says the program has been implemented internationally. Local participants include

Brady’s Distillery, AmRhein’s Wine Cellars, and Fables & Feathers Winery. “Virginia actually has one of the densest host locations per square mile. It gives me great joy to actually give back to the community a little bit,” says the Blacksburg native.

New location, sort of new name

A well-known place to help grow “tomatoes” (a euphemism for marijuana plants, which are now legal to grow at home) has changed its name a bit to attract all growers. They also have a new location. Blue Ridge Hydroponics is now Blue Ridge Hydroponics and Garden Supply, adapting that new name when it moved from 5th Street in downtown Roanoke to Salem, in the former Back Country building on Apperson Drive. Brynne Bierle is the owner: “with hydroponics [some] people immediately think cannabis – which is fine, I don’t ever want to shy away from that. But there’s so many people that say, ‘oh you sell soil, I had no idea ... you sell flower seeds?’ I figured adding that to the name [Garden Supply] would be a little more inviting.”

Connecting artists to neighborhoods – and gig opportunities

50 free arts-related activities that can be utilized to help connect neighbors and neighborhoods all around the Star City.

All found in one catalog that's just now hitting the streets. Roanoke City arts and culture coordinator Douglas Jackson says The Arts Connect Neighbors initiative and the new catalog that came out of it, highlights dozens of free activities being offered by local artists. Neighbors have to get together through either a formal association or get a certain number of residents ... to say, 'yeah, we want to do a paint night,' for instance. Then they'll go in the catalog – we've got facilitators ready to work with the neighborhood."

Jackson says the Arts Connect Neighbors can also help local artists land paying gigs for other events down the road. Artists listed in the catalog will each receive \$500 to help defray their expenses related to those activities in the catalog, which is available online at roanokearts.org, at the Arts Commission office on Church Avenue in downtown Roanoke and at various other locations.

Franklin County looking to train future paramedics

The Franklin County Department of Public Safety, in collaboration with The Franklin Center, Virginia Commonwealth University, Carilion, Ferrum College and the

Institute for Advanced Learning and Research (IALR), is launching what it calls the first and only Paramedic Registered Apprenticeship Program in the state of Virginia. The program will offer apprentices the opportunity to gain hands-on experience with the Franklin County Department of Public Safety while completing 4,000 hours of paid on-the-job training and more than 280 hours of related technical instruction.

New goal for local developer

Developer Alexander Boone with aBoone Homes has a vision for the Poage farm he intends to purchase from the Roanoke County School Board - transforming it into a Back Creek area affordable housing community with retail options like a marketplace and maybe a brewpub for residents. Boone says he is committed to providing more affordable housing with his future developments. "I know there is significant interest in this project. Poage Farm is a special place [Boone intends to leave a considerable amount of open space undeveloped]. "People who grew up here and live here see it every day. We want to create a really unique community

with a lot of new housing options for the Roanoke Valley." Boone will seek rezoning approval from Roanoke County before he purchases the property.

Gauntlet Class of '24

Home-based startups, early stage hi-tech and tourism-related entrepreneurs. Those are some of the 100-plus entries for The Gauntlet program in year 10. The Advancement Foundation runs the Gauntlet - and President Annette Patterson also says they are bringing back its physical space, reborn as The Hive 2.0 - on Lee Street in Vinton across from the Farmer's Market: "It's open to anyone who needs an office space. We're also going to be doing popups during Mingle in the Markets [the Vinton Area Chamber mixers] if we have some interest from retail [Gauntlet entries]. There's a lot of really nice space on the main floor. It'll be another nice opportunity for us to showcase some of the entrepreneurs that have or are going through The Gauntlet."

The Gauntlet features Virtual business strategy classes, finance workshops and networking events. It has spread far beyond its Vinton roots to the New River and

Shenandoah Valleys, to the Alleghany Highlands and far southwest Virginia. Graduation and awards (cash, in-kind services) will be handed out during the awards ceremony in May after the business competition phase of the Gauntlet is completed.

RoCo appointments by the Governor

Roanoke County Board of Supervisors Chair Phil C. North and Roanoke County Economic Development Director Megan Baker have been appointed by Governor Glenn Youngkin to serve on the Board of Directors for the Virginia Recreational Facilities Authority (VRFA). The mission of VRFA is to provide a high-quality recreational attraction in the western part of the Commonwealth; expand the historical knowledge of adults and children; promote tourism and economic development in the Commonwealth; set aside and conserve scenic and natural areas along the Roanoke River and preserve open-space lands; and enhance and expand research and educational programs.

Compiled by
Gene Marrano
and Tom Field

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City of Salem

Carey Harveycutter & ODAC Commissioner Brad Bankston

It's a Numbers Game Roanoke College football 2025

By Doug Doughty

As Roanoke College was making the move to college football, few people had a better understanding of the process than Page Moir, whom some might view as a "basketball guy." The longtime Maroons basketball coach is now a Major Gifts Officer in the Roanoke College Advancement Office.

"Fundraising for athletics at Roanoke is and has been an ongoing process for years at Roanoke with the Maroon Club," says Moir. "Football is somewhat of a special project and start-up because of the size and scope, but it with more students in both football, marching band, and competitive cheer, the revenue created by 200 more students will pay for itself," Moir claims.

There is work to be done for a program that may play some club level games under head coach Brian Stinespring in 2024, before joining the Old Dominion Athletic Conference in 2025: "we are actively fundraising for a football locker room and renovation of the current Strength and Conditioning facility. The locker room is going into a lightly used spot in the Bast Center [the former basketball arena] that has been underused since the addition of the Cregger Center. The Strength and Conditioning facility serves all athletes including the football program. These

two facilities will cost a little over a million dollars to renovate."

The Maroons won't have to build a football stadium at least. "Having a fantastic stadium like Salem Stadium for games is not only huge savings, but as good a venue as there is in all of NCAA III," says Moir. "No question getting alumni, friends, parents, and local community back for fall Saturdays as well as other athletic events leads to more donations and a stronger community. That is a fact nationwide, and football is proven as a unique entity on the American sports scene."

Moir is the son of the late Charlie Moir, who was the basketball coach at Roanoke College from 1967-73 and later served as the head coach at Virginia Tech. Page Moir (who played for his dad at VT) later spent 27 years as the head coach at Roanoke, whose men's basketball teams won 428 games during his tenure. He stepped down as head coach in 2016 but has

never strayed far from Salem and the Roanoke Valley.

"I came back here two years ago," Moir noted, "when Kim Blair returned as the vice president for advancement [from a Carilion post position]. Things had changed. I'd been away for a few years, and it was a chance to come back, especially for football."

Following the retirement of Michael Maxey as Roanoke's president in 2022, he was succeeded by Frank Shushok, who had been at Baylor and Virginia Tech, two programs with major college football Division One programs, the latter just down the road from Roanoke's campus in Salem. "There was a feasibility study," Moir said. "Part of our advancement office [objective] was to try and raise the money to make it work, but we've probably got to do something similar to that this year so that we can take the next steps."

"We raised \$1.3 million in a month last year, but we've probably got to do something similar to that this year so that we can take the next steps [like hiring a coaching staff]," said Moir. "The plan is hopefully to hire a full staff, starting next July. It was also to get us a strength and conditioning coach. We'd never had that at Roanoke College. We'd missed the boat on that a long time ago." That strength coach – Scott Bennett – is already on board. A longtime Virginia Tech assistant coach, Stinespring is already on board as the head coach; he was considered a master recruiter for the Hokies.

Roanoke's first football ODAC game will be in the fall of 2025 at Salem Stadium, which has served as host to the Stagg Bowl on many occasions, most recently last year between Cortland and North Central, Ill. Carey Harveycutter, director of tourism for Salem, has been involved with the NCAA Division III championship Stagg Bowl since its inception and few possible venues could match Salem Stadium.


"Roanoke College football will be another opportunity for alumna and college friends, parents and fans to visit Salem, to cheer on the Maroons, staying in our hotels, eating in our restaurants, growing tourism in Salem," says Harveycutter.



Page Moir

"We are thrilled to be the home for the return of Roanoke College football. The city and the college have a longstanding collaborative relationship on many fronts, including athletics. We look forward to Roanoke College's success in the ODAC being the next success story for Salem Stadium," adds Wendy Delano, Director of Civic Facilities for the James E. Taliaferro Sports & Entertainment Complex

Moir describes Roanoke's new athletic director, Curtis Campbell, as a perfect fit: "he was at Pulaski County, played high school football," Moir said, "and I think of the five different institutions where he's been director of athletics, three of them had football, so he's well-versed in how to run a college football program." "I know a lot of ODAC people and one of those was a buddy of mine who said, 'I think everybody wants you to have football -- everybody but the [other league] football coaches.'"

"Another Division III coach I talked to one time said this region for Division III is like [the 757 area code around Tidewater for Division One.] There are so many great players in this area. "Roanoke has a reputation of being more of an Eastern school, with a lot of [student-athletes] from New York and Maryland [lacrosse being a major draw there] – but we're 50 percent in state," notes Moir. "This will only enhance that, because there are so many youngsters that you lose out on because you didn't have football." That won't be the case when the Maroons kick off for real in 2025. 

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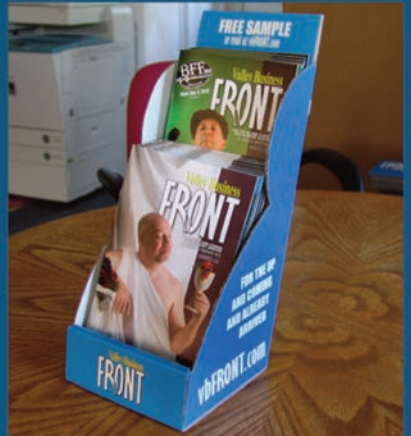
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