

Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

ISSUE 175
APRIL 2023

App Growth

FinTech

Artificial Intelligence

Carilion Clinic's
Industrial Engineering

Terminations: A Feature

vbFRONT.com



Fired!

Larry Bly
"Two Larrys and a Mic"



HEIDI BUNDY
A LITTLE BIT HIPPY

I FOUND MY FREEDOM BANKING WITH FreedomFirst

Heidi Bundy, owner of A Little Bit Hippy, found her freedom banking with Freedom First. She values working with a credit union that is just as local and community driven as her business.

Heidi's vision for the store is for it to be an extension of your living room, with a little more color. Unique local art is sold at both her locations. The two stores are in the Towers Shopping Center and the Valley View Mall.

"When I walk into a branch, I am greeted by name. Freedom First has a family atmosphere. They know us. They know our business, and that keeps things easy."

WATCH THE FULL STORY AT [FINDYOURFREEDOM.FFCU.COM](https://www.findyourfreedom.ffc.com)

WELCOME TO THE FRONT

We get a bit wonky in this issue that has a technology theme – with several looks at the exploding world of AI through stories and several columns. Related to that is a look at mobile apps, which in many ways is closely tied to artificial intelligence and will be even more so in the future. The consensus seems to be we have nothing to fear but maybe people who say that haven't seen The Terminator movies.

And have you ever been fired, laid off, downsized, right sized or whatever? Read Dan Smith's story with testimony from some people you may know, and how they turned lemons into lemonade in many cases, after being told they were no longer welcome at their place of employment. That's rarely a good feeling. No matter, enjoy the spring weather and happy reading.



Tom Field
Publisher



Gene Marrano
Editor

“ ”
I like being in the trenches. — Page 41

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inspired
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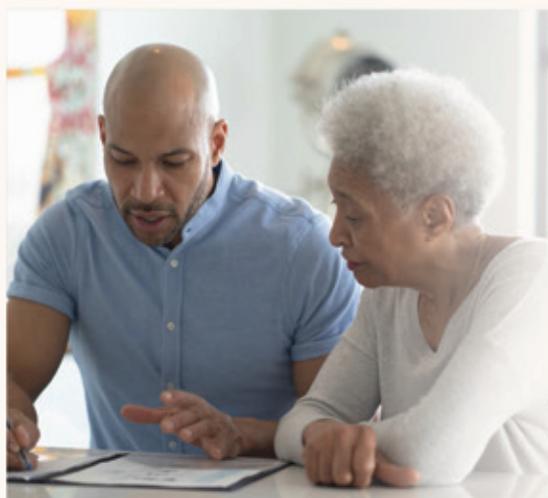
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Fired! Downsized! Unemployed! Done?

By Dan Smith



“ ”
We have ubiquitous
access. — Page 16



Your Decisions Matter

A conversation today for the care you want tomorrow.

Join experts from Carilion Clinic Hospice for a free, online conversation about the values, wishes and goals that emerge during an emergency or at end of life. You'll learn how to honor your values and wishes and translate them into a plan of care that you and your loved ones deem most essential to decision making.

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Noon to 1 p.m.

This online event is free and registration is required.

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Topics include:

- » Advance care planning
- » Empowering yourself by making future health care decisions when there may be a time you can no longer speak for yourself
- » Engaging your family in conversations concerning your wishes
- » Important legal steps necessary to ensure your wishes are met
- » Medical plans and more

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Aila Boyd



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Tom Field



Frazier Hughes



Gene Marrano



Michael Shelton

Advisory Board

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

2023 CONTRIBUTORS



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Shannon Dominguez



Dan Dowdy



Zack Jackson



Jennifer Leake



Mike Leigh



Dan Smith



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Alicia Smith
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construction



David Todd
EZ Rampz /
senior services

““”

I informed him he had lost his job to the AI bot.

— Page 29

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

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**HIR
wants to
see you**

Fired! Downsized! Unemployed! Done?

By Dan Smith

**Sometimes it's a funny game and sometimes it isn't.
Always, it is memorable and helps form the rest of your life.**

Losing your job—whether you're fired, downsized or simply storm off in a huff—is often traumatic. It is also frequently the first day of the second chance you really needed.

According to a zippa.com survey, 40 percent of Americans have been laid off (or fired) at least once and 48 percent of workers have "layoff anxiety." Zippa also reports that American layoffs have run between

21 million and 25 million annually in the past 20 years, with the exception of 2020 (Covid) when it spiked at 41 million.

FRONT asked a number of people in this region to look back at their losses and consider their gains from those losses when applicable. The responses ranged from funny to philosophical—and all of them are real. Here is what we found.

Three Strikes

Dan Casey, Roanoke Times Metro columnist: "I got fired from most of my kid jobs, for various reasons. Baskin Robbins (eating ice cream); Pixie Pizza (refusing to work because of a conflict with school activities); Tripodi's Ristorante (a hair-raising but fun kitchen flour-fight on All You Can Eat Pizza Night). Speed Service Couriers fired me because I met a woman in a bar after work one night and disappeared with her for a couple days (I failed to call in sick, and that was my third strike). I think that was the last time I got fired. Maybe I should try again."

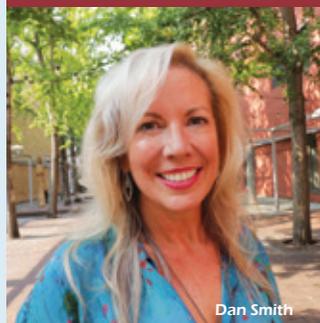


Submitted

Dan Casey

Flushed

Lenore Weiss, architect and principal at Spectrum Design: "I once got fired for insubordination over a pit toilet design. No joke."

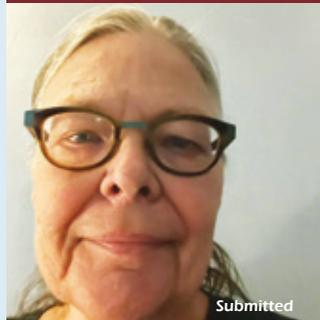


Dan Smith

Lenore Weiss

Downstaged

Kathy Guy, former co-owner of Off the Rails theatre company: "I was an insurance adjuster, and the company downsized the office from 12 employees to 2. It sure felt like being fired. I was rude enough to ask the guy who fired me who would fire him after he fired all the 'worker bees.' I determined that I wouldn't work for a large company after that. I went on to start a theatre company."

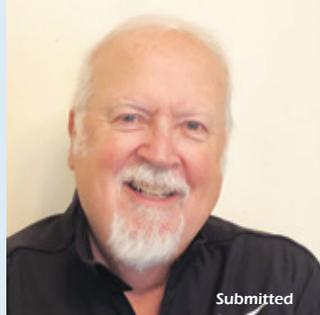


Submitted

Kathy Guy

Unguarded

Roland Lazenby, author of more than 60 books (his new biography out on October is *Magic: The Life of Earvin Magic Johnson*): "I had a great professor at VMI who used to tell me life begins once you've been fired. I got fired when I met my wife. I was a lifeguard in Richmond at an apartment pool while I was going to summer school at VCU in 1974, trying to graduate from VMI. I walked in to work the first day, in July, and there was my future wife, working as the gate attendant to the pool. We began some healthy frolicking in the pool during the slow hours. After about six weeks, in August, I was fired out of the blue, without warning. My boss said I was being inattentive. There's no one at the pool, I told him. I will be married to the gate attendant 48 years in May."



Submitted

Roland Lazenby

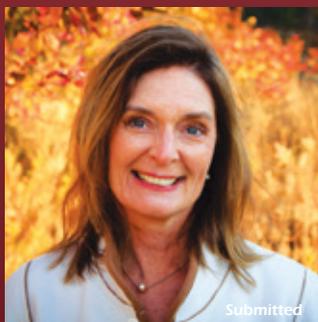


Edwards convinced 24,000 voters to fire me.



Submitted

Susannah Smith



Submitted

Carissa South



Submitted

Iliana Sepulveda Aviles

Outcounted

Brandon Bell, financial advisor with two corporations (Brandon Bell Financial Partners and Brandon Bell Financial Group) and former state senator: "John Edwards [who recently announced his retirement] convinced 24,000 voters to fire me from the Virginia Senate in 1995, and Ralph Smith only needed 3,600 in a low-turnout Republican primary [to get me fired]."

Morning Person, No

Susannah Smith, owner of Propertius Press, "A long time ago back when I was still in college, I was let go for saying 'Good morning,' to a person who worked in my office. No, really. That was the official reason given."

Shell Shocked

Carissa South, Fralin Biomedical Institute: "I have been fired once, and 'forced out' another time. Neither felt very fair. Rebounding takes fortitude, for sure." The first firing "left me shell-shocked." She had moved from New York to Roanoke for the job and "was there two or three days" when she was terminated because the owner of the small shop "didn't think our personalities worked." Being left alone those few days, she cleaned the office and discovered "I touched stuff she didn't want touched. I was anxious to impress." Conclusion: "She was set in her routine and I was too assertive. I wasn't there long enough to do anything wrong."

Certifiable

Iliana Sepulveda Aviles, project manager: "I was stuck at a company for a while where I really felt unappreciated and that I had no real growing path. That was pretty discouraging. It took a few months for me to come up with an exit strategy, which was ultimately given to me by my Project Management Professional (PMP) certification. That's why I believe so much on that certification and I have been volunteering for the local chapter for several years. This year I am the president of the board."

SHE DID THE FIRING

Patti Lucas was a controller with two different Roanoke Valley companies and had to fire people. Here is her account:

I had two situations about 10 years apart where I had to fire fairly new hires (about three weeks in) because they misrepresented how skilled they were in a critical component of the job. I don't think either was purposely being dishonest in the application process but sometimes applicants don't know what they don't know and the interview doesn't reveal weaknesses. I felt bad both times because I knew [the people fired] thought that if given enough time and training they could do the job. Problem was I was experienced in the job and I knew what it took. They just didn't have it and I didn't have time to get them there. So, they didn't understand and I had to accept that I wasn't going to be able to convince them that it was necessary to move on.

The second example was frustrating on many levels and just plain stupid. We had to do a reduction in force (RIF). I was given the task to let go a woman who was very good at her job and well-liked by everyone, no performance issues at all. She didn't work directly for me and wasn't even in my department but her new boss (six-figure exec) had only been there two days. Yes, they were hiring execs while laying off the workers. I said, "Don't you think you should find out what she does before you do that?" I was reminded that hard choices had to be made. She was very gracious about it. Three weeks later they had to bring her back as a contractor paying way more money to clean up the mess that happened once she was gone. She expected that would happen and enjoyed her three weeks off before starting her much fatter checks."



Patti Lucas

Dan Smith

Waiting Game

Kirs Tilley-Lubbs, retired teacher at Virginia Tech: "Going through the tenure process at Virginia Tech was like having a fear of being fired. I knew that if I didn't get tenure at the end of my six years, I would be asked to leave, so I lived for all that time with a total fear of not being able to stay. ... I knew that if I did not get tenure, I would have to go back to teaching public school, and that seemed like a fate worse than death at the time. I did get tenure and I was there for a total period of 22 years, but I have to say they were stressful years."



Submitted

Kirs Tilley-Lubbs

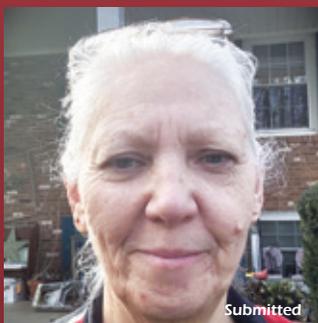


Submitted

Shannon Dominguez

Learning Curve

Shannon Thibodeau Dominguez, chairwoman of the fundraising committee for the Latinas Network: "I was fired when I was 18 while working at a real estate title company in Lynchburg. I worked there for a month and was let go because I wasn't learning fast enough. During the three-way call for unemployment, my boss said that I presented myself in the interview as knowing more than I actually knew. From the beginning, the boss had offered to train me, but the reality is that she didn't have the time or capacity to train me, and I felt lost a lot. What the boss said about me made me insecure and doubtful of my abilities. Eventually I let it go and embraced that I don't know everything but my eagerness to learn is undeniable."



Submitted

Emma Beall

Wiped out

Emma Lam Beall, cleaning service owner: "I've had cleaning service 28 years—before that I pretty much quit when I got fed up."



Dan Smith

Larry Bly

Eased Out

Larry Bly, former ad agency owner, radio DJ: "I was fired many times by clients at my ad agency and for strange reasons. I was [also] gingerly eased out the door at several radio stations. I had a client, a bank, that I had handled for five years or so, and one day it up and hired a marketing director. I was fired because I wasn't in tune to their marketing needs. Turns out the lady who was hired was offering services to the bank president that didn't fall into our job description. After working for WROV AM for over 40 years I came in one Saturday morning to do my usual weekend oldies show. The program director walks in and simply says, 'When you finish your air shift today, kindly leave your station key on the front desk.' He was nice about it though. The new station owners had decided to change the AM station to sports/talk, so mine was the last music show aired. It was a bitter pill, but pretty standard stuff in the broadcast business."



Submitted

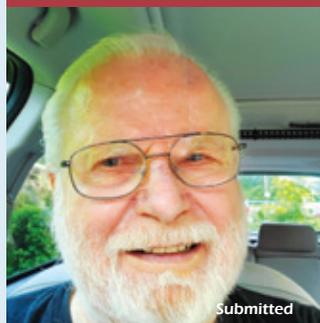
Diana Christopulos

Rebounded

Diana Christopulos, former counseling firm owner: "I quit a big job but have never been fired. It was a tough rebound and also the best thing I ever did."

Unsigned

Bob Campbell, retired from Salem VA: "I was fired once. I refused to sign a resignation letter that [his supervisor] wrote, and it was later determined to be an unfounded termination. I believe, [the counselor] had control issues, and I was not the person she thought she was hiring. She was terminated six months later, and I was hired to fill her position."

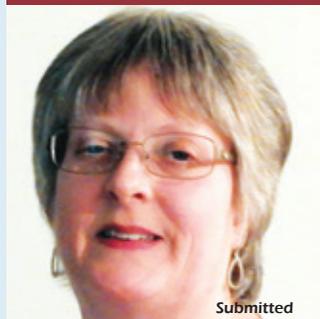


Submitted

Bob Campbell

No Coke

Anita Firebaugh, freelance journalist: "I was fired because my boss started charging us 50 cents for soft drinks (he used to provide them free). I started bringing in my own Diet Cokes, which he drank. I finally asked him for 50 cents, since he was drinking my Coke. That was the end of that."



Submitted

Anita Firebaugh

Bad to Worst

Lora Katz, retired Roanoke architect: "I was working for AECOM in a job that I loved in a place that was tough to live in, D.C." She received an offer from a large firm in Roanoke to lead its office, but "the economy tanked in 2008, so construction was slow." She was tasked to bring in work and it became "the worst year of my life. I am no salesperson [and a] board member called every few days to ask for a list of sales calls that I had made." She was unhappy, going through menopause and developed "a bad temper. I became a terrible boss and lost money for the company. [She was fired, but] that bad day ended up changing my life for the better. ... I started my own firm, first with a friend and later on my own. I then worked for many years with clients that I liked, controlling my destiny."

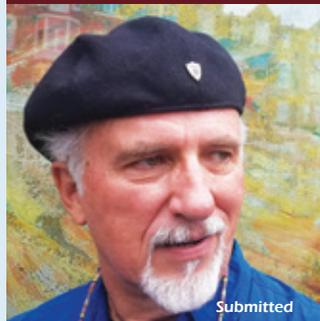


Submitted

Lora Katz

Rejected

Eric Fitzpatrick, visual artist: "being self-employed these many years, I have avoided being fired, but before I made it in art, I was painting billboards for Creative Displays on Patterson Avenue and applied for their designer spot. I was turned down. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. As the country song goes, 'Thank God for unanswered prayers.'"



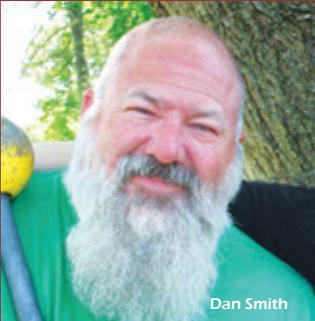
Submitted

Eric Fitzpatrick



Submitted

Greg Vaughn



Dan Smith

Chad Clark



Submitted

Roni Sutton



Submitted

April Marcell

Un“Employed”

Greg Vaughn, professional photographer: “I’ve been lucky, being in business [for myself] for most of my life. I’m sure if I had worked for other companies, I would have been fired for being honest, or being an ass. If you’re not getting fired from time to time, you’re not doing something right.”

Whistled

Chad Clark, Star City Strongman executive: “I resigned from the Veterans Administration after testifying against my bosses in a sexual harassment case against a co-worker. There was no whistle-blower protection, and they made my life hell. I resigned because it was so bad that it was messing with my health. Two years later they were all given the option of resigning with benefits or being let go.”

Trapped

Roni Sutton, owner of Brick Building Renovations: “When First Union Bank bought Dominion, I was working in the regulatory compliance office and my job was eliminated (handled in Charlotte). I was given a 10-month end date and my manager left, leaving me alone. I had no job duties, but I was not allowed to go to any other departments to work. If my manager in Charlotte called me, I was to be available, but I had absolutely nothing to do. I was bored and there were no jobs in Roanoke. I finally got another job within First Union, but not because anyone at FU helped me.”

Karmatic

April Marcell, film-maker from Roanoke: “Happened only once in my life...only to be rehired and the person who fired me was fired.”

FRONTstaff DISMISSALS

It's only fair. We asked the staff of this publication the same question.

Right Sized

"My 13 years working for corporate America and moving from Georgia to Ohio to Wisconsin and back to Ohio ended when my division was sold, and I was part of a bunch who were 'right-sized.' It provided an opportunity to finally get back to Virginia where I've happily lived for 36 years."

Dan Dowdy
Business Development
Valley Business FRONT

Justifiable Execution

"I was fired at least four times. All were justified."

Dan Smith
FRONTcorrespondent; author of the FRONTcover story

Spun Out

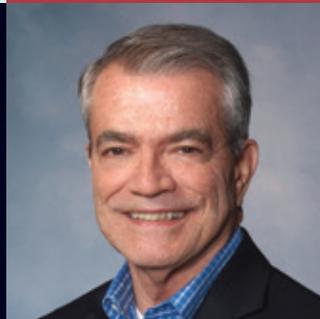
"When I was sixteen years old, I worked one summer at a car rental company and was good at my job, until I made a stupid mistake. I was fired on the spot for racing cars around the airport with my co-worker. I did win that race, though... ok, maybe not."

Tom Field
Publisher / Creative Director
Valley Business FRONT

Down and Out

"In the late 1980s I was a bank teller at the New River Valley Mall, which I loved because of the proximity to food and shopping and friends. As a cocky college student, I assumed I—not the customer—was always right, and apparently I wasn't subtle letting customers know it. After about two years, I was "offered" a transfer to the bowels of the main bank doing paperwork. I cried and turned down the move, and I never worked with the general public again."

Jennifer Poff Cooper
Senior Correspondent



Dan Dowdy



Dan Smith



Tom Field



Jennifer Cooper



Tech kids using Apps

Digital Dichotomy

By Jennifer Poff Cooper

There's positive and negative in just about everything, and that is certainly the case with apps, or digital applications, said Dr. Dipankar Chakravarti, Professor of Marketing in the Pamplin School of Business at Virginia Tech.

Apps have been prevalent in various forms since the earliest browsers (think Netscape) in about 1995. "They go back a long while," said Chakravarti.

Fast forward to today, when their use has exploded. That popularity stems from the advent of smart phones and has tracked with the growth of the device industry – in other words, said Chakravarti, we have

"ubiquitous access." Additionally, usability has become easier. Their usage has also increased along with the growth of artificial intelligence (AI).

We think of teens as being attached to their smart phones like no generation before, but Chakravarti said that, counterintuitively, the average frequency of app usage per day is 9.4 times in teens (age 13-17) versus Millennials (ages 18-34) at 10.5 times. (statista.com)



Chakravarti

Time spent on apps was 4.48 hours daily in 2021 (statista.com), but Chakravarti guesses that is growing as some apps had not "gelled" yet two years ago.

Applications have a variety of uses. Chakravarti said that FaceBook and Google account for 10-15% of all app usage; if you add in Amazon and Apple, the percentage rises to 30-35% of the total volume. The website techjury.net says that 89% of smart phone users' time is spent on just 18 apps.

Social media and FaceTime are some of the

most basic apps. Sophisticated apps drive you to purchase points when you are near a store. During the pandemic, healthcare apps became widespread. However, that is a “double-edged sword,” said Chakravarti. Some people love the convenience of virtual doctor visits, but others “hate being controlled by AI” or dislike the doctor not making eye contact through a screen, plus sometimes you need a person - not an algorithm - to handle special cases.

Zoom thrived during the pandemic and survived afterwards. During COVID, said Chakravarti, the “entire education system would have collapsed” without it. Now many have become accustomed to it for the time-saving quality.

“It is efficient for much of what we do,” he said, citing his own situation as an example. His graduate students used to need in-person office hours after their workdays, but now he can connect with them at any time of the day or night without having to be in a specific place at a specific time.

However, the flip side is that “all the time is work time.”

Some people overly embrace technology, while others are afraid of it, and with good reason, said Chakravarti. On the plus side, apps provide information at our fingertips, allow us to control our daily lives (monitoring your refrigerator from afar, buying items or hearing music with a click), and give us improved ability to communicate with friends and family via social media.

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

Dr. Dipankar Chakravarti, Professor of Marketing in the Pamplin School of Business at Virginia Tech, studies consumer psychology and consumer behavior in contemporary and commercial contexts. He works with human-computer interactions, like how humans respond to chatbots and service apps in commercial transactions.

Chakravarti looks at what he calls algorithm appreciation and aversion, or how people react to artificial intelligence (AI). “There is a gamut of technology around us,” he said. “What factors lead people to accept and keep them away from apps?”

On the appreciation side, apps give you a lot of power to process information that would otherwise be cumbersome. They guide people to “find what works for me,” he said.

Aversion can mean the feeling of being distanced from things important to people. Also, as Chakravarti said, people wonder “what does this thing know about me?,” fearing gender or racial bias. Uniqueness neglect is also a concern; patients are skittish about interacting with medical AI technology in part because they fear that AI won’t address their unique needs.

In the negative column, apps have an addictive quality and people can lose track of time while on them. Such addiction can cause lost sleep, obesity, high blood pressure, and stress due to the “expanded

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richness of the stimuli that are hitting you,” said Chakravarti. As with any addiction, when people become conscious of it, they make resolutions but the “slippage rate is very high” – in other words, the adjustment is often temporary.

In addition, using apps exposes us to “vulnerabilities we can’t even imagine” like hacking and data breaches. Ceding control to an algorithm can be dangerous; apps can make mistakes and errors can kill people, such as self-driving cars wrecking.

The economic impact of app usage is great. Chakravarti said that the total app market is \$200 billion, and buildfire.com projects \$935 in revenue in 2023. Chakravarti said that some estimates have the effect being half a trillion dollars by 2030.

The future of apps is an “enormous

opportunity but things can tamp it down,” said Chakravarti. For example, publicity about a self-driving car accident would inhibit advancement. Projections show 15% annual growth until 2030 but Chakravarti thinks it will moderate.

“Even if it levels off, it’s a lot,” he said.

Where we are today would have been “difficult to imagine 25 to 30 years ago,” said Chakravarti. However, projections from the past had computers cooking for us by now, which isn’t the case. So there a tension.

“The scope is great but the future has enormous uncertainties,” Chakravarti said.

He continued, “Apps can be both good and bad. The truth lies somewhere in between.” 📱



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BUSINESS OPERATIONS

By Mike Leigh

Executive Summary:

Is it just me, or does it seem like Artificial Intelligence (AI) has exploded in the news and media lately?

Send your questions or comments to Mike@OpXSolutionsllc.com

Artificial Intelligence and its workplace impact

AI has indeed received a lot of attention with the recent release of some AI-based search engines such as ChatGPT. But the development of AI technology has been progressing for over 50 years. I took an AI class in college back in the 1980s!

To most people, AI is something very mysterious and even scary, but the concept is very simple. In a nutshell, AI is a type of software technology that allows a program, model or machine to “self-learn.” In every process, there are inputs and outputs. By reading or measuring the inputs and the outputs, then feeding those results back to the AI software, the program “learns.” Each new iteration of the process adds to the learning.

For example, AI is used in weather forecasting. By measuring and analyzing massive amounts of data (temperatures, wind speed, pressure, humidity, etc.) and then evaluating what the weather looks like in the future, the forecasting model “learns” that certain conditions create certain outcomes. Over time, predictions become more accurate.

With AI technology and the Internet of Things (IoT), multiple devices can be connected, and troves of data analyzed to help businesses and employees make better decisions. AI can be used to see patterns and provide predictions that humans would not otherwise be capable of seeing. In this way, companies can optimize their processes and use AI to run different scenarios to see possible outcomes.

One possible scenario I recently read was that a restaurant could alter the music it plays, or even change the wallpaper or scenery based on preferences of the diners. In industry, AI is already starting to be used to predict equipment degradations or failures and offer suggestions on how to adjust machines to increase efficiency.

In case you’re worried that AI and robots will take over all jobs and rule the world, I think you can rest easy for now. Based on what I’ve seen and read, AI will best be used as a tool to support workers and not replace them. Technology is almost always more effective in supporting processes rather than replacing or fixing them. 🤖

“Trove of data analyzed help businesses and employees make better decisions.”

Is AI going to take over the world?

ChatGPT was released at the end of November with a lot of fanfare. Since that time a whole slew of competitors have been announced, with Google's Bard being the latest (as of this writing). Of course, any time there's an autonomous technology development, people voice concerns. This ranges from valid copyright questions with the latest, to outrageous predictions of the world being overtaken by computers.

Movies love to depict AI as a slippery slope. From sentient androids (remember Blade Runner in 1982?) to the "Shall we play a game?" threat in WarGames the following year, producers come up with all kinds of ways to make AI seem scary. Back in 1968 (way before my time) we learned about 2001: A Space Odyssey and since then Minority Report, RoboCop, The Matrix and so many other movies have warned us of the danger of inviting decision-making machines into our lives.

We've been using AI software as part of our accounting solutions for more than three years. We're still the only regional financial firm to do so and were early adopters when we aligned with a company just beginning to test this technology. It doesn't replace people; it enhances their ability to perform client-focused jobs. Instead of spending time on data entry and administrative tasks, CPAs and other professionals can focus on oversight and strategic client concerns. That's a win-win. Computers offer possible solutions as they learn client patterns; we decide if it's the right choice.

As we continue to move deeper into a world where learning software, or Artificial Intelligence, will play a bigger role in how we do business, it makes sense to understand how to best apply these tools to our lives. Unsupervised, it won't likely result in a dystopian future, but AI makes lots of mistakes. It's our job to help train the tool and adjust final output to make it our own.

With developments in writing and accounting AI time-savers, oversight is critical. These tools aren't designed to create final products. They're aids to get us started. The more we invest in teaching the software to be more correct, the better results will be. Still, humans need to add their expertise to make the end-product good.

Effective AI implementation means putting it to work on tasks to help us do our jobs. That's mostly a research function now. This will change over time, but the biggest concern with AI taking over the world is us getting lazy. When we let it go to work without our involvement, what it produces is answers without fact checking. We don't need more of that these days. 



FINANCIAL FIGURES

By Michael Shelton

Executive Summary:
People have been talking about AI software and the perils it might bring for decades.

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



Gene Marrano

Technology is embedded in Ridge View Bank's DNA

By Aila Boyd

The Roanoke Valley's newest financial institution, Ridge View Bank, has embraced a technology-driven approach since it opened its first branch, a SMART CENTER, in Salem in mid-February.

"Where we have the most benefit here is we're brand new. It's not like we're trying to change how people bank or change the concept of the branch they currently go in. This is

what we're building and it's how we do banking," Carrie McConnell, president of the bank, said. "We've spent a lot of money on our online technology, on our apps and the security of the technology



Aila Boyd

so that people feel secure using it.”

The SMART Center model was developed roughly four years ago by Ridge View’s parent company—Pennsylvania-based CNB Bank. “It’s pretty high-tech, but also customer-centric,” she said of the concept.

The SMART Center comprises three functions: pods where customers can

meet with universal associates, enhanced teller machines where customers can engage with live tellers and drive-thru enhanced teller machines. McConnell noted the machines, which are also known as ETMs, can do nearly all the same transactions the universal associates can.

The ETMs are staffed by tellers from CNB Bank. “The great thing is that the customers will see the same group of

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Aila Boyd



Gene Marrano

McConnell-Smart Center

people waiting on them over and over again like they will when they come into the branch," Nancy Brubaker, assistant vice president and community office manager, explained.

The drive-thru ETMs allow the bank to offer extended hours—7 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday through Friday and 8 a.m.-3 p.m. on Saturday. A station for children that has interactive puzzles, games and coloring books is located under one of the ETMs in the lobby. "It's a great way for the parents to be able to do their banking and the kids to have a little fun time as well," Brubaker said.

Several non-ETM interactive screens are also positioned throughout the center. "We're set up to be paperless," McConnell explained. "Our TV screens

on the wall in the lobby really are a brochure of all of our product offerings."

McConnell stressed the bank shouldn't be intimidating to those who aren't very tech savvy. "People who aren't comfortable with the technology can go into someone's office and have a conversation. We can walk them through how to use the technology. We're really there to help them learn," she said.

In the weeks since the opening, she's observed that many customers, including those in the older generation, have embraced the center's functions. She noted that the COVID-19 pandemic likely accelerated people's comfort level when it comes to technology.

Over the course of her 23-year banking



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career, McConnell has witnessed the impact technology has had on the industry. Banks used to feel the need to have a branch on every corner, she said. Due to the online options that are now available and the decreased use of cash, there's no longer a need for a massive physical footprint.

"Five years from now, you're going to be expected to have the premier technology. I think that's where you're going to make a difference, especially in the banking world. If you're not up to speed with the technology, you're going to get left behind," she said.

Despite the high-tech offerings, McConnell insisted, "We don't want you to just come in and use an ATM and we never have any interaction with you."

Brubaker agreed, adding that the bank's

mixture of traditional banking and modern technology is what sets it apart.

Salem Mayor Renee Turk spoke about how the bank is going to service the area's businesses during its ribbon-cutting ceremony. "They're going to take care of us because they know what it means to be a hometown bank and serve the people's needs," she said.

Tommy Miller, Salem's director of economic development, noted the opening is a testament to Salem's strong purchasing power and its healthy business community. "Providing more options to capital, in a financial market with raising interest rates, is very positive," he said.

Ridge View bank is scheduled to open its second SMART Center in the Smith Mountain Lake area later this year. 



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Using technology for real estate

Take Command. If you are a real estate agent with Keller Williams, “command” is the CRM (Customer Relationship Management tool) that is used to stay in front of clients. My favorite is Smart Plans. After I enter your information, I can choose a neighborhood plan that sends you a monthly update on all of the home sales in your area! Some other benefits of Command are sending out postcards to your clients and any neighborhood anywhere, and landing pages that take your clients to giveaways and more.

If you are looking to buy real estate and using an agent, our local MLS is pretty tech savvy, too! As a buyer, have your realtor invite you to The Real Estate Portal that allows you to personally search for properties and star them for your realtor to show you. You can also give your realtor your search criteria and you can receive property updates as they happen.

As an investor there are a couple of sites you can use today that were not available before to search for properties. One of them is vortex.theredx.com. This tool allows you to do a map search of any neighborhood. After you complete the search it will pull phone numbers, addresses, scrub phone numbers on the DNC, and here is what is the best... provide their emails! You can download these to your database to inquire about properties and much more. The second is Pioneer Data Solution. With this site, you can search divorced homeowners, vacant homeowners and deep dive into property records. It allows you to search mortgages, too; for example homeowners with FHA mortgages. Hunt them down and see if they are ready to sell.

Last but not least, one of the best advancements is a virtual walkthrough for a listing. For my next listing in Hidden Valley, my photographer will scan the house with a special camera. When the listing goes live, the prospective buyers will be able to scan every area of the house with their cursor, walking through rooms and even looking at the fine details of the kitchen counter.

Technology has allowed us to buy and sell real estate from our phones and this is only the tip of the iceberg.
- Hughes it, Don't Lose it. 📱

“Prospective buyers will be able to scan every area of the house... walking through rooms and even looking at the fine details.”

REAL ESTATE MATTERS

By Frazier Hughes

Executive Summary:

Whether you are an agent, seller, buyer, or investor, technology has changed the way we purchase and sell real estate. Here are just a few examples that may be beneficial to you.

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

This article may save your life

If nothing else, I'd say between the overly dramatic title of this article and that opening sentence, I at least have your attention, don't I? And that, my friends, is what we're talking about today ... the branding of your business and how to convey it to your audience with a sense of URGENCY.

I hosted a morning radio show for 20 years, and it was widely understood that you had approximately seven seconds to capture the audience's attention before they changed the channel. Seven seconds! So if you thought it was a good idea to start your segment with, "Hi .. good morning ... my name is Zack ... this is my co-host ... how are you today?" BUZZER! Wrong answer! They're gone. They're bored and moved on.

But if I started out by saying, "I'm going to tell you about a slice of pizza I ate last night that was so delicious it changed my life," well now you wanna hear about this magical triangle of destiny and you're going to hang with me until the end of the story. (Unless you're some kind of monster that doesn't want to hear about a life-changing pizza, in which case I don't want you as my audience anyway.)

I help out once a month at a get-together for small business owners in Roanoke (it's free and fun, email me if interested), and recently we were talking about the "elevator pitches" of our company. After hearing "Hi my name is blah blah and I own a company called blah blah," a few times I knew it was time to talk about how we promote our brand and the sense of urgency necessary to capture our audience.

When we try to reach our audience, we are in a constant battle for their attention between competitors in our field and pretty much any other distraction ... Netflix, Candy Crush, annoying TikTok videos, or whatever else. So, it is absolutely VITAL to get our message across as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The good news is, once you have their attention, then you can take the time to explain your brand or your services and show them why you're so dang awesome. But if you waste that first seven seconds? BUZZER! Wrong answer! They're gone.

OK ... now that we're at the end, this article may not ACTUALLY have saved your life, but I do think this piece of advice is crucial for the success of your business, so it's definitely saving SOMETHING! 🗣️

“”
You had approximately seven seconds to capture the audience's attention.



TECH WHISPERER

By Zack Jackson

Executive Summary:

What if I told you that by the end of this article, I would give you the single most important piece of information for your small business?

Zack Jackson is co-founder of The JPG Agency small business creative firm. Reach him at zack@thejpgagency.com.



Submitted

Iliana Sepulveda



Submitted

Mikael Blido

The Evolution of ChatGPT and Artificial Intelligence: Friend or Foe?

By Shannon Dominguez

The human element of creativity and critical thinking is essential in ensuring that AI-generated content is accurate, ethical, and causes no harm.

Small business owners and nonprofits are starting to use the revolutionary AI tool, ChatGPT, in their day-to-day operations. Many are impressed by how this program - the largest neural network ever produced - uses artificial intelligence to generate human-like responses to questions or statements. Trained on an impressive 175 billion parameters, it can quickly draft the foundation for business plans, offer letters, HR policies and procedures,

job descriptions, press releases, and content for social media posts and blogs. This AI tool could be a game changer in the small business community. However, the amount of new information regarding the evolution of ChatGPT has terrified many people, especially if misused.

On November 30, 2022, GPT 3.5 series was released to the public. A mere five days later, ChatGPT had gained more than 1 million

users. According to recent CHATGPT Statistics, the website receives an estimated 616 million monthly visitors. On March 14, OpenAI released its newest version, Chat GPT-4. The OpenAI website states, "We spent six months making GPT-4 safer and more aligned. GPT-4 is 82% less likely to respond to requests for disallowed content and 40% more likely to produce factual responses on our internal evaluations."

Anyone who has visited the ChatGPT playground understands the impressiveness of its capabilities compared to anything users have interacted with before. It can produce human-like text through emails, music, prose, short stories. It can solve math problems and even write simple computer code that actually works. One non-native English speaker previously relied on her spouse to review everything she wrote. She now utilizes Chat GPT exclusively instead.

Iliana Sepulveda works as a Broadband Regional Planner in the telecommunications department for a local power utility company: "When I am writing something important, I normally ask my native English speaker husband to proofread it for me as a last step of the process. Last time I asked ChatGPT to do the proofread and I was very impressed with the result. I gave the document to my husband anyway to confirm it was still all ok; he couldn't find anything to modify. That is when I informed him he had lost his job to the AI bot."

Forest resident Mikael Blido, who works as a recruiting manager for the engineering firm

AI AND YOUR BUSINESS

The Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania says there are a number of ways businesses are or can employ Artificial Intelligence: that includes boosting efficiency through process automation, improving the speed or consistency of service, using customer insights to inform decision-making and uncovering opportunities for new products and services. AI can also be used to help companies detect and respond to fraud threats, identifying suspicious transactions through the use of machine learning (ML) algorithms. AI basically "trains" the ML function after harvesting and analyzing data (with the help of human data analysts) to create those programmed algorithms.

Wiley & Wilson uses Chat GPT several times a week for all sorts of things. "For instance," he says, "as a person with English as a second language, it's a great tool to get the wording just right in an email or presentation. Chat GPT is also a great brainstorming buddy, as well as a tool to find stats and best practices quickly."

The CEO of Roanoke-based Building Beloved Communities, Bonnie Chavez, has kept her employees' admiration for Chat GPT in check from the beginning by encouraging them to use AI to leverage their critical thinking skills. She consistently reminds everyone to





Submitted

Bonnie Chavez

weave their human “magic” or creativity into whatever Chat GPT produces. “While the potential is limitless, be aggressively critical of the output. Does it express your intent, have your authenticity, your magic?”

A Vinton-based author, Joseph Caro, has also been heavily experimenting with the capabilities of ChatGPT over the past month and has noticed significant semantic errors, incomplete information, and biased or repetitive responses. “After several days of trial and error, it is clear that AI has major limitations. It simply was unable to follow specific instructions. Let’s see if Chat 4 resolves these issues.” says Caro.

On February 16 a tech journalist wrote an article in the New York Times titled, “A Conversation with Bing’s Chatbot Left Me Deeply Unsettled,” in which the AI appears to have another persona, self-identifying as “Sydney.” As they got to know each



Submitted

Joseph Caro

other over a 2-hour conversation, “Sydney” revealed some dark fantasies, which included hacking computers and spreading misinformation. At one point, “Sydney” even declared its love for him and insisted he was unhappy in his marriage and should leave his wife to be with it instead. Some may see this as comical, but just imagine if a rogue AI agent was intentionally used to sow public mayhem and you can quickly see the dark side of this “disruptive” technology.

ChatGPT holds incredible potential to revolutionize how we communicate and do business, but it should be used with caution and paired with critical thinking. As we continue to explore the capabilities of ChatGPT and other AI technologies, it is crucial to remember that they are ultimately only tools and should be used responsibly and ethically to enhance lives, not compromise them. 🤖

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Expanding Broadband to Rural Roanoke County

Officials from Roanoke County and Cox gathered last month, along with residents and community partners, to celebrate the availability of broadband services to more than 400 previously unserved homes in the county. A public-private partnership announced in April 2021 between the county and Cox enabled the buildout of services to ensure these residents can experience the opportunities presented by an increasingly connected world.

Completed in only two years, this project represents a \$3 million investment, 75% of which came from strategic use of Roanoke County's local and federal funds, with the remaining investment covered by Cox. Areas served by this expansion include Bent Mountain, Bradshaw Road, Cove Hollow Road and the Starlight Lane area.

"While all Cox customers in the Roanoke Valley today can access speeds up to 1 Gigabit, we're committed to giving customers options when it comes to the connection they need," said Jeff Merritt, Roanoke market vice president for Cox in Virginia. "Our customers have counted on our reliable service for more than 45 years, and through continued investment we remain dedicated to being the internet provider customers can count on for the access they need now and in the future."

Cox also recognized Roanoke County Director of Communications and Information Technology Bill Hunter with a Broadband Champion Award for his commitment to digital equity in Roanoke County at the event. Bill has worked tirelessly to coordinate this and other expansion projects to ensure all residents of the county, regardless of their street address, can harness the power of a reliable broadband connection to compete in today's digital world.





Irish for a day >

Downtown Roanoke Inc. staged the latest edition of the St. Patrick's Day Parade, held the Saturday before the actual St. Paddy's Day, which fell on a weekday this year (March 7.) It's one of the largest such parades in the Southeast and draws several thousand

people or more typically to downtown Roanoke. That's also good news for local merchants, the Farmer's Market and, of course, area establishments serving libations after the parade of floats, bagpipers, dancers, Irish-themed vehicles, clowns, fire and law enforcement units etc. are done, typically in a little over an hour.





Gene Marrano



Beautification at Southeast Industrial Center >

With Ed Walker's recent announcement of his intention with partners to transform the old **American Viscose** site off 9th Avenue SE in Roanoke into a mixed use residential-commercial mixed use project, a development that will take years and several stages, mosaic artist **Steve Paul** was at work recently to transform one cement wall that also faces the Roanoke River into a work of art. Paul, also a commissioned artist and retired IT professional, used bits of colorful tiles (his specialty) to depict the iconic long-dormant smokestacks and hulking giant buildings that await reclamation.

Also featured: ballerinas flying over the industrial site, a nod to the building already remodeled as the home for **Southwest Virginia Ballet**. **Carilion** has turned another property there into a sports fitness rehab center, and **Chris's Coffee & Custard** spent several years reclaiming another historic building. **TxTur** manufactures its unique upcycled furniture on 9th Street SE as well. "I hope it colors up the wall for them. This is one of their old factory buildings," Paul said while explaining his vision, "and I just loved the way it looked when I drew it on paper."





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SMALL BUSINESS TOOL KIT

By **Bonnie Chavez**

Executive Summary:

It was all about software when I started using tech in my professional space. What tools could do the job faster? It was about productivity, a little less about magic, but still fascinating.

*Bonnie Chavez is the CEO of Building Beloved Communities, a local consulting firm specializing in community-centered business solutions.
bonnie@buildingbelovedcommunities.com*

You have died of dysentery

My love for tech sparked when my 3rd-grade teacher handed me a 3.5-inch floppy disc labeled "The Oregon Trail - Disk 1." I was hooked. Nostalgic memories of a dot matrix printer, Windows 95, HTML, askjeeves.com, zip disks, and holding a genuine Intel Processor with a chip setter flashed before me. It was magic.

One of my first mentors said, "Always sharpen the saw." Referring to the tools you use daily. Fast forward to today, I'm an entrepreneur who runs a consulting firm. We are a mighty team of three full-time consultants and one intern. We are 100% remote with a rented co-working space at the Grandin CoLab. How do we stay connected? Up to date?

When I started Building Beloved Communities, I had to make some tech decisions. Mac or PC? Cloud or Network? Desktops or Laptops? MS Office or Google? I studied our customers. They are nonprofits that use Google Workspace and prioritize security. I decided we are an Apple-based company that uses Google Workspace. Easy! One teeny issue. I've been a Windows and MS Office user since dinosaurs walked the earth. I never used a Mac and dabbled with Google workspace in early 2018. Yet, there I was, pulling out my credit card to buy my first MacBook on a Thursday afternoon, hoping to be up and running for my new client on Monday.

It took six months of cursing, occasional tantrums, and ah-ha moments before I felt confident in my digital workspace. The learning curve was just as brutal for each of my team members. All except for our intern - who uses a hybrid of devices and platforms to do homework and art. I'm telling you, GenZ is built differently.

Today, we schedule biweekly, in-person meetings to learn software, review our workflows and get tech support from each other. This year we are investing in our technology and understanding of it to create efficiency and automation. This is in preparation for scaling Building Beloved Communities in 2024.

I'm amazed at the free resources online. Google Workspace offers different, comprehensive learning paths for end users, administrators, to programmers. YouTube is not just for fixing dryers anymore! There are channels dedicated to teaching and reviewing software. Interestingly, there are high-quality creators with exceptional information on my Social Media Reels and TikTok. These are easy bite-size videos to build your foundation over time. Don't even get me started on AI and ChatGPT!

We need to know our tools and how we can use them to amplify our work and showcase our clients. We have to remain curious or die of dysentery. 🦠

Your people system #1: hire the right people

For greater employee engagement, you need systems to HIRE RIGHT, ENGAGE EMPLOYEES, and LEAD WELL. Your HIRE RIGHT system's goal is to better recognize good candidates when they show up, make more objective hiring decisions, and have less turnover.

Key outcomes for your HIRE RIGHT system are - know what you're looking for, recognize it when you see it, and start new employees off right. How do you make this happen?

1. **Benchmark.** If you don't know what you're looking for, how will you know when it walks through your door?
 - Have clear job expectations in addition to job descriptions. Expectations help in recruiting, onboarding, and performance evaluations.
 - Know what makes a Top Performer. What are the behaviors, traits, attitudes, and other reasons that some perform well - and what traits need to be avoided?
 - Consider "fit" for the job. Potentially great employees may not be a good fit to the position, their boss, and/or your company.
2. **Interview.** How well do you do this and what can help you be better at it?
 - Screen. Save time and gather information with assessments to reduce your time in the hiring process.
 - Objective Data. Almost everyone has hired someone they regretted. Supplement your experience and gut with consistent data that challenges your feelings.
 - Know how to interview. Have a format and tools that prevent you from talking too much so you listen more and dig deeper for the person you want.
3. **On-Board.** You've done the work and found a good employee – don't blow it at the finish line.
 - Create good first impressions. What's your plan for Day 1, Week 1, and Month 1? How will your new employee answer the question, "How was your day?"
 - Explain how and where they fit in. People have a natural desire to feel like they belong and have a purpose.
 - Provide ongoing feedback and mentoring. Don't wait until the 90-day probationary period ends to tell them the things you wanted them to do better.

I'll share more about your second system, ENGAGE EMPLOYEES in my next column. Want to HIRE RIGHT more often? Subscribe to my newsletter and download resources at www.AssessmentPros.com or contact me at Jennifer@AssessmentPros.com. 



BEST JOB EVER

By Jennifer Leake

Executive Summary:

If you don't know what you're looking for, how will you know when it walks through your door?

Jennifer Leake CMC® is a management consultant and certified assessment expert with 25+ years of experience in helping companies create a Best Job Ever culture for better performance and profits.



Carilion

The Human Factors team

“Human factors” and cardboard – how Carilion’s tower addition is being envisioned

By Gene Marrano

“To me healthcare is so exciting, because it’s so challenging – the human factors can change,” says Dr. Laurie Wolf

Carilion Clinic’s new tower addition won’t be completed until 2025 but at the Center for Simulation, Research and Patient Safety near Dr. Pepper Park in Roanoke they are already going through exercises in spaces filled with medical equipment – surrounded by corrugated cardboard walls, matching the dimensions of planned “trauma bays” in the new tower. Trauma technicians are partnering with Carilion’s “Human factors researchers” to help design the new bays. Nate Jones is the Director of Strategies for Human Factors and simulation at Carilion. Jones says some layout changes have already been made after running simulated emergency scenarios. Carilion will go from two current trauma bays to 5 (one pediatric) once the new tower is finished.

Jones says after the first simulation in the cardboard trauma bay representing

“a relatively common encounter . . . we all came out and did a debrief. We discussed what worked, what didn’t work, what could have been somewhere else. The beauty of this is that you’re just able to rearrange everything based on what everybody’s intuition is and then rerun the exact same scenario.” That exercise led to a number of changes in how the new trauma bays will be laid out and equipped.

As far as explaining just what constitutes Human Factors, Jones deferred to Dr. Laurie Wolf – who actually has a PhD in that field. Wolf received her undergraduate and master’s degree at Virginia Tech, where her focus was on industrial engineering (the Bachelor’s) and then Human Factors post-graduate. Wolf says human factors is a science based on “a combination of psychology and engineering.” That’s why



Gene Marrano

it's sometimes housed in the engineering department (as at Virginia Tech) but at other schools the psychology department is its home.

Ergonomics has a big role in the human factors field and in fact Wolf says, "human factors is the larger term [for ergonomics]. They are sometimes used interchangeably she says, although Wolf adds that ergonomics is more like one slice of the human factors pie – focused on physical changes to a workspace for example that puts the user

in a more "neutral posture. Changing the workplace to adapt to a human."

Wolf went on to earn a PhD in England, where she also studied hospital systems in the UK and how they might differ from those in the States. She also worked in the automotive industry at one point, even collaborating with LucasFilms of Star Wars fame as they tried to come up with more pleasing sounds for turning signals. With General Motors she assessed how those on the factory lines were positioned,





Carilion

Laurie Wolf

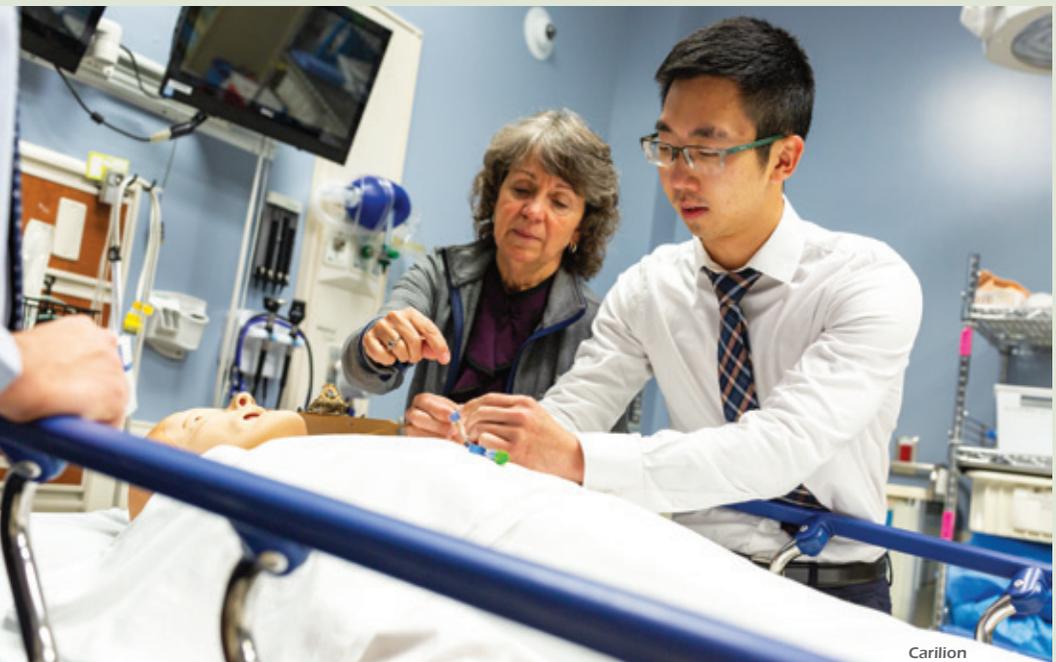


Gene Marrano

Dr. Bryan Collier

looking for changes to make their workdays less taxing on the body. Wolf says there has been a “huge change” over the past few decades as the science of ergonomics and human factors played a larger role, looking at upgrades so as to not create or re-create workplace injuries. Its all about “adapting to what the human can do,” and not the other way around notes Wolf, forcing people to adapt to a machine for example.

After a stint at Emerson where Wolf designed control panels for missiles, Wolf went to work for a hospital system in St. Louis for 24 years, putting her human factors expertise to use there before coming to Carilion five years ago. The numbers don't lie: a 25 percent reduction in falls at the hospital, a 30 percent reduction in pressure ulcers, a marked improvement in communication



Carilion

Laurie Wolf (left)

among healthcare professionals. "I love health care – to me it's one of the most challenging human factors environments."

Dr. Bryan Collier, the medical director for trauma services, says the Simulation Center, normally used for team building services and additional technique training, was instead this time employed to, "understand the space we work in." Relying on blueprints for the new trauma bays being built Collier said it was "difficult to determine if this space [allotted] was going to be optimized." A few weeks after the initial query a 1:1 ratio room mocked up with the help of that heavy stock, filled with actual medical equipment, storage closets and a patient bed, helped them understand that space on a whole new level.

"It gave us an opportunity to move equipment around [and see] scenarios – where physicians would move, the nurses [and others] would move. We were able to optimize the space," says Collier. "We see it as a way to improve patient outcomes and all of our workers ability to do their very best and a savings in how we create each one of our trauma bays. "

Taking theories from human factors to the real world "can take some adjusting," says Laurie Wolf, and while graphics and virtual reality mockups of the new trauma bays coming to Carilion in 2025 are valuable tools. In this case good old-fashioned heavy stock corrugated cardboard arranged to accurately simulate one of those new bays wound up being a valuable component of the human factors toolbox. "I like being in the trenches working – not [just] behind the desk of an academic." 

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The fall and rise again of Governor Ralph Northam

He was almost down for the count after the February 2019 blackface Medical School yearbook or not – was that Ralph Northam or not behind the racist makeup? – he says he doesn't recall after first admitting to it in a video – and several independent investigations were inconclusive.

Urged to resign by fellow Democrats Tim Kaine and Mark Warner, our sitting U.S. Senators, and former Governor Terry McAuliffe, who ran unsuccessfully in 2020 for a second term – not to mention a host of other politicians on both sides of the aisle and members of the media, Northam instead benefitted from good timing. Within days his Lt. Governor (Justin Fairfax) was accused of sexual assault and the Attorney General (Mark Herring) had his own blackface scandal emerge. If all three resigned that would have put a Republican in office; and that wasn't going to happen.

Instead, Northam dug in, vowing that he wasn't a racist but "race ignorant." He met with communities of color, read about racism, watched movies on the subject. His staunchest supporters – many of the black and who never viewed the physician as a racist, challenged the Governor to put his money where his mouth was. When the General Assembly flipped to Democratic in both chambers Northam and his party went to work, passing a myriad of bills designed to foster equity when it came to education, housing, criminal justice and business opportunities for people of color. Most passed and became law. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 that renewed calls for equity nationwide gave Northam's legislative agenda plenty of tailwind. It also led to successful court battles and the removal of iconic Confederate statues from Richmond's Monument Avenue.

Former Norfolk Virginian-Pilot reporter Margaret Edds has just released an interesting and well-researched book about that eventful period. *What the Eyes Can't See: Ralph Northam, Black Resolve and a Racial Reckoning in Virginia* (University of South Carolina Press). "The eyes can't see what the brain doesn't know," is a pet saying of Ralph Northam's says Edds, who profiled one-time Roanoke civil rights attorney in another book (*We Face the Dawn*) about his battle against Jim Crow laws. What the Eyes Can't See (Edds talked about it last month

during an appearance at Book No Further in Roanoke) makes for a most unlikely comeback story. It also put a physician in charge of Virginia during the height of the pandemic, which many Virginians – not all may have found to be providential. 

THERE'S
SOMETHING
HAPPENING
HERE

By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:
Whether you liked his political beliefs and policies or not you have to marvel over then-Governor Ralph Northam's comeback.



Margaret Edds-Book No Further

Mark those calendars

We interview all scopes, sizes, demographics, and industry sectors for this business journal. There's one group that is always fun: the folks who put on our events. Meet Molly, Waynette, Ann, JD, along with a whole crop of folks from our chambers and other organizations who organize and produce multiple events throughout the year (or season).

Back in the day, I had that gig—event organizer—for a stretch that involved putting on events all across the country, usually at trade shows and accompanied by hospitality affairs and cruises and whatnot for high-ticket customers and prospects. In the early 90s, trade shows were hot. That kind of business development-"slash"-entertainment function of American commerce has endured peaks and valleys over the decades. But guess what?

Events are back. There's a definite upswing.

Call it a result of the pandemic rebound or, more likely, a desirable outreach to the expanding remote workforce. In any case, we're seeing more people attending—and wanting to attend—events for business or leisure. There's a buzz in the air, and it's reminiscent of halcyon days when profits were soaring. The response to "Are you going to the conference" is back to an excited "Yes!" than "Uggh... I guess I have to."

Locally, it's a good buzz, too.

Event venues are always on the hunt to attract audiences. But imagine the challenge for individuals who book multiple shows with uncertainties, ranging from the acts, the weather, the scheduling conflicts with other operators, the vendors, and even the "personal" economics of most likely attendees. Event management is a most uncertain world; and the individuals who run them have to be as flexible as they are tenacious.

It takes a lot of resolve to stay in this game; and to be honest, most of us (these days) make our decisions to attend something on a whim. Oftentimes, event organizers don't know if their balance sheets will balance until the show closes. It's a lot of hard work for an outcome that depends on a lot of luck.

I'd like to encourage you to go to our local events to support our local businesses. However, I can do you one better than that. You can go to these shows because they're good. Great. Fun. Worthwhile.

When you do, say hi to Molly Henry (Daleville Town Center); Waynette Anderson (Dr Pepper Park); Ann Cassell (Blacksburg Partnership); JD Sutphin (Big Lick Entertainment); and all those chamber and organizational appointees who put on multiple events.

And we'll see you there. 🍷



ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

Executive Summary:

Event season is upon us—and boy, do we have some good ones.

“”

Sullivan, who later moved on to the *Washington Post*, chronicles the decline of trust the public has had in regards to the media. She was an eyewitness to the decline of the print newspaper (not so much with the Times and Post). She criticizes Lee Enterprises, which owns the *Roanoke Times*, for the cutbacks they made at her former paper in Buffalo.

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.

Pioneering journalist

Margaret Sullivan has spent more than four decades working in newsrooms big and small, along the way becoming the first female editor at several stops in her hometown of Buffalo and at the *New York Times*, where she was the first woman “public editor,” acting on the readers behalf, weighing in on the actions and reporting of the paper's staff, keeping an arm's length from the rest of the newsroom to maintain her objectivity. *Newsroom Confidential: Lessons (and Worries) from an Ink-Stained Life* (St. Martin's Press) is her memoir.

Sullivan, who later moved on to the *Washington Post*, chronicles the decline of trust the public has had in regards to the media. She was an eyewitness to the decline of the print newspaper (not so much with the Times and Post). She criticizes Lee Enterprises, which owns the *Roanoke Times*, for the cutbacks they made at her former paper in Buffalo. Towards the end Sullivan

offers advice on how the media can win back the public's trust that started to erode during the Nixon Administration, as the embattled President lashed out at the media when the walls closed in on him after the Watergate break in. A good read for news junkies.

—Gene Marrano

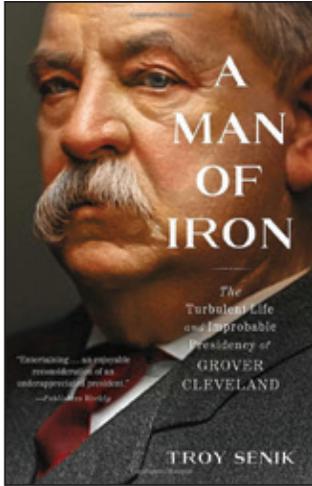
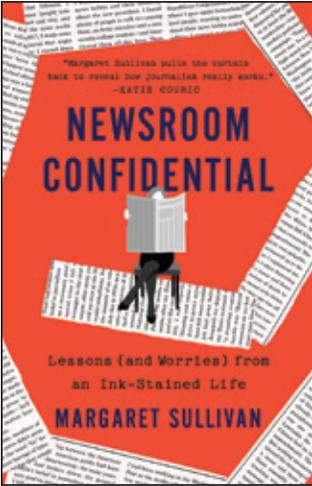
Steely resolve

The only American president to date to have served two non-consecutive terms – we will see what happens in 2024 – Grover Cleveland went from upstate New York obscure lawyer to President of the United States in a dizzying three years. A politician known for his honesty and willing to defy his own Democratic party, Cleveland was also dogged by scandal and allegations he had an illegitimate child. (The press had a field day with that one in 1884). Former White House speechwriter Troy Senik's new book *A Man of Iron: The Turbulent Life and Improbable Presidency of Grover Cleveland* (Threshold Editions) gets a bit wonky at times when he gets deep in the weeds on policy but it is also an interesting look at a man of principle who stayed true to his beliefs - even though it may have damaged him politically. When's the last time you heard that?

—Gene Marrano

Read it to me

The Writer's Voice podcast from The New Yorker is addictive. I'm not sure it makes



a hill of beans difference whether original authors read their work or professional narrators, but one thing I'm certain of—a good story is a good story. I particularly enjoy the diversity of stories and that most are performed in 30 minutes to an hour. Another plus: they're independent episodes—you don't have to keep up with a series like so many other podcasts. If I have one gripe, the app (at least my version) isn't accurate on the played/unplayed filter sorting, so if I don't remember the title (which I usually don't) then I might start playing one I've already heard. (That wonkiness is a new phenomenon, though; I could uninstall/reinstall; but I don't want to lose my record. I guess I have to contact The New Yorker customer service... that's funny just saying out loud.) You know a podcast is good if I'm going to continue

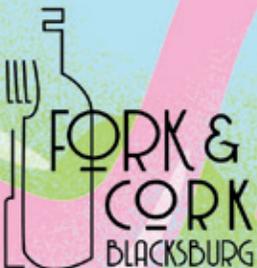
listening, despite an annoying glitch.

Some of these stories truly soar or envelop and connect just like "old-school" reading, which is difficult for me to admit. I've always known essays and poetry can be well-suited for audio; but I've generally shied away from audio recordings of books, especially fiction or long form where your own pacing makes a difference. For short form fiction, though, I have to concede... *The Writer's Voice* is a remarkable experience. A favorite.

—Tom Field

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

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Just tell me >

Vinton Area Chamber of Commerce presented Nicole Cooper of Modern Buzz Media (now, transitioned to Nicole Cooper Media) at its Lunch-n-Learn event at Charles R. Hill Senior Center on March 8. Cooper, who was previously a pre-k-8 technology educator, entitled her presentation "Just Tell Me What I Need To Know!" where she described the top current digital trends that should matter most to small businesses in the Roanoke Valley. (Nicole in yellow; joined by Chamber and Town staff and lunch sponsor.)



That ad life >

AAF Roanoke advertising club held its annual ADDY awards banquet on March 4 at the Roanoke City Market Building and Charter Hall. Themed "The MADDYs" with a MadMen show vibe, the evening began with a VIP Cocktail Reception, featuring Brady's Distillery drinks and jazz by Star City Swag. This year's winners included: **5 Points Creative** (Best of Show); **Carilion Clinic** (Best of Digital); **5 Points Creative** (Best of Broadcast); **Virginia Tech** (Best of Print); **Jefferson Center** and **Pratt Roanoke** and **AAF Roanoke** (Judges Choice); **Anstey Hodge Advertising Group** (Mosaic ADDY); **Jack Campbell**, **Virginia Tech** (Student Best of Show); **Valerie Ray**, **Radford University** and **Emily Dinh**, **Virginia Tech** and **Brittiany Rorrer**, **Radford University** (Judges Choice).



Tom Field



Awards fit as a fiddle >

Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce held its Business Awards Breakfast on March 17 at the Salem Civic Center. The room was packed and chamber member **Danny Flad** of Blue Ridge Beverage played the fiddle for St Patrick's Day as people exited. Among the winners, were **Gina's Food With Flavor** (Salem Small Business of the Year); **Wine Gourmet** and **Medmont Mercantile** (Roanoke County Small Business of the Year); **Roanoke College** (Salem Large Business of the Year); **Blue Eagle Credit Union** (Roanoke County Large Business of the Year); **LewisGale Medical Center** (Regional Business of the Year); **Good Samaritan Hospice** (Nonprofit of the Year); **Bill and June Long** (Citizen of the Year). For a complete list, see s-rcchamber.org.



Tom Field

Got your back >

Facilitated by the **Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce**, the **Tuck Chiropractic** office in the Summerfield Court complex held an open house on March 16. Doctors AJ LaBarbera and Anna Flynn described the practice, part of the ten-office, fifteen-doctor clinic network serving our region. The office is open Monday through Thursday, 8am to noon, 2pm to 6pm; and Friday 8am to noon.



First SMART Center >

Roanoke-based **Ridge View Bank** has celebrated the opening of its inaugural SMART Center in Salem, located at 124 West Main Street. The new SMART center serves as the first full-service location for the bank. The location will house five full-time branch personnel and one commercial banker. The new location is home to Ridge View Bank's first state-of-the-art, interactive SMART Station that allows customers to interact with a live banker to perform a variety of transactions.

"We are thrilled to offer a new approach to community banking for our customers and their businesses. We look forward to helping the Salem community and assisting them with their financial goals," said **Nancy Brubaker**, Assistant Vice President and Salem Community Office Manager. In addition to the Salem office, a second SMART Center location is slated to open at Smith Mountain Lake later in 2023. Ridge View Bank will also break ground on its headquarters, a SMART Center in Roanoke City, in late Spring of 2023 with an anticipated opening date in 2024. (see related story elsewhere in this issue)



Carilion shuts down drive-through centers >

At its peak, the **Carilion Clinic** drive-through Covid testing center on Postal Drive in Roanoke County saw as many as 500 vehicles a day. Now down to a few dozen on average daily, the drive-thru just across from the Cave Spring post office has been shut down, as has the other one in Christiansburg at noon today. Testing center staff will assume new roles at other practices, and COVID-19 testing will remain available at primary care and VelocityCare sites in conjunction with an in-person or virtual visit. Some pharmacies still offer onsite testing as well.

Dr. **Anthony Baffoe-Bonnie**, an infectious disease specialist with Carilion, was on hand to note the occasion – urging people to have a COVID game plan going forward: "stay up to date on the vaccinations, the vaccines work. It keeps us from getting severely ill and being in the hospital. We don't need that now in 2023. Get your vaccines – and have a [COVID] test kit at home."



Submitted

LewisGale Montgomery growing again >

LewisGale Hospital Montgomery is celebrating the completion of the first phase of a \$16 million expansion of the hospital's surgery department. Construction started in February 2022 for an additional 7,500-square-foot of its existing surgery department including two operating rooms, a 15-bed post-anesthesia care unit, and storage. "For surgeons and the medical staff, these enhancements provide the most advanced clinical technology available and the infrastructure to support growing demand for higher-acuity surgeries in Montgomery County," said **Jason Fowlkes**, MD, chief of surgery. "Our community is growing and LewisGale Hospital Montgomery is dedicated to ensuring our facility meets those growing needs for our patients," said **Lauren Dudley**, chief executive officer.



Submitted



Submitted

Opera Roanoke offers something different >

Colonel **Jim Thompson** was the Vietnam War POW held in captivity the longest – 9 years. His family and the U.S. Military wasn't told if he was dead or alive for most of that time; his wife and kids moved on with their lives to an extent. So had the world and U.S. Culture when Thompson arrived home in the early 1970's. Thompson had a rough time readjusting and eventually sat down for interviews that turned into a book, *Glory Denied*. A few years ago it became an opera, with the lyrics coming from his own words. The music is often discordant (**Opera Roanoke** conductor **Stephen White** said it was the hardest music he has ever conducted) but distinctive.

Powerful, moving and often sad, a story told by Thompson and his wife **Alice** (in both younger and older versions of the couple on stage) Opera Roanoke presented two performances of *Glory Denied* at Jefferson Center in late February. Director **Dean Anthony** said, "it's not from a beginning to end type of scenario. We get what it's like for Jim through this period – but we really get a ton of what it was like for Alice. What most people don't get, depending on how old you are, is how the country changed from 1964 to when he came back in 1973."



RAMP Spring 2023 Cohort >

The **Regional Accelerator and Mentoring Program** - RAMP - has announced its Spring 2023 cohort of start-ups, looking for mentoring and financial assistance as they hope to scale up. The latest five cohort members hail from Salem, Roanoke and two from Pulaski. RAMP executive director **Lisa Garcia** says they had to turn away a number of other worthy applicants for the Spring cohort: "we definitely have lots of startups in the region that are doing great things and we're going to reach out to them over time and figure out ways we can support their efforts."

The 12-week cohort ends with a "demo day" presentation in June, free office space for a year at the RAMP building on South Jefferson - and \$20,000 of seed money for each of the 5 graduates. RAMP hosts two cohorts a year. Not to mention two free years of membership in the Roanoke Blacksburg Technology Council. "RAMP is the only business accelerator in Virginia that's directly affiliated with a technology council," notes Garcia, "the strong community like RBTC has is really unmatched for these companies." Garcia says the more formalized Exit RAMP program will provide support for cohort alumni for three years. The public can meet the Spring 2023 cohort on April 13th at the Shenandoah Club in downtown Roanoke.

Cairina, Inc., located in Salem, provides technologies that non-invasively measure biologic fluid flow. **Code One Training Solutions**, of Roanoke, offers a tech-driven, revolutionary innovation for



American Heart Association CPR certification. **MOVA Technologies**, of Pulaski, specializes in air capture technology, harvesting air contaminants as valuable byproducts that can be sold and reused. **SchedulerHUB**, based in Roanoke, is an intuitive scheduling and analytics platform for manufacturers to manage complex production projects. **Trova Commercial Vehicles, Inc.**, located in Pulaski, develops battery electric spotter as well as class 8 diesel to electric conversion kits.



Town of Bedford

GO Virginia State Board announces three new Region 2 projects >

The **Bedford Regional Metal Workforce Retention Center** project will repurpose a 60,000 square foot former steel shot foundry into a Central and Southwest Virginia regional workforce development center focused on metal fabrication skills training. The funding will be used to procure a consultant team to develop a master plan strategy for how to connect metal-working businesses that need targeted skills training with educators in metal fabrication skills. The GO Virginia board approved a total of \$99,900 in state funds for the project, which is leveraging \$201,000 in non-state sources to purchase the former industrial site.

"We want to keep it focused on metal number one because it was a foundry," says Town of Bedford economic development coordinator of what was called the Winoia plant most recently. "We do still have the workforce that is trained in metal skills. By joining the region [including] Roanoke and Lynchburg we're able to bring those companies together in this facility that need the training. Looking at both regions ... metal skills are lacking. We know we need to beef up in order to retain those businesses not just in our regions but in Virginia as a whole."

Meanwhile, the **Career Acceleration Program** in Lynchburg will use GO Virginia funds to increase the career capacity of the region by retaining young workers graduating high school. Using Go Virginia money and non-state resources, the Center of Entrepreneurship will serve as an anchor and catalyst for the Greater Lynchburg region's entrepreneurial ecosystem. The project will provide direct assistance to entrepreneurs.



Town of Bedford

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

Roanoke-based Freedom First Credit Union has announced **Ryan Bell** as Branch Manager of the Langhorne Branch in Lynchburg. Bell joined Freedom First late last year to lead the staff who will operate the Langhorne Branch location, scheduled to open in the spring this year. He brings 15 years of banking experience to Freedom First, which expanded banking services into the Greater Lynchburg and Shenandoah Valley markets in 2020. Freedom First Credit Union also welcomes **Brad Butler** as VP of Private Banking for the Lynchburg market. He previous business experience includes Facility Partners, Wiley|Wilson, The American Red Cross, Williams Lighting, and Liberty University.

Bank of Botetourt has appointed **Dustin G. Bays** as its Bank's Chief Financial Officer. He joined Bank of



Bays



Miller

Botetourt in 2011 and most recently served as its Chief Accounting Officer. **Mary Ann L. Miller** has been promoted to First Vice President, Marketing Strategy & Business Development Officer. As a newly appointed member of senior management, she brings an additional 18 years of banking experience.

InFirst Federal Credit Union announces changes to its Executive Leadership team. **Steve Davitt**, formerly the Vice

President of Strategic Development, is now the Chief Innovation Officer. **Tameka Murphy**, formerly the Vice President of Human Resources, is now the Chief Experience Officer. Mike Mutchler, formerly the Vice President of Lending, is now the Chief Growth Officer. The credit union serves more than 15,000 members who live, work, worship, or attend school in most of Botetourt, King George, Roanoke, Salem, and Vinton.

LEGAL FRONT



Ziogas

Robert Ziogas has joined Spilman Thomas & Battle as a partner, splitting his time between the firm's Roanoke and Winston-

Salem, NC offices. His practice included litigation and dispute resolution with particular experience in the construction industry, from contracts to defect claims, mechanic liens, and payment bond claims. He works with owners, developers, contractors, material suppliers and project management.

EDUCATION FRONT



Sarker

Saonee Sarker, professor in the Department of Informatics in the School of Economics and Management at Lund University, has been named the next dean of the Virginia Tech Pamplin College of Business. Sarker will officially step into her new role on July 1,

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succeeding Roberta "Robin" Russell, who has served as interim dean since July 2022. Sarker has been a professor in the Department of Informatics in the School of Economics and Management at Lund University since 2021. She is also a visiting professor in the Department of Management at the London School of Economics. Previously, Sarker was at the University of Virginia McIntire School of Commerce from 2013-21, where she held many roles including senior associate dean for academic affairs.



Skolnik

The Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine (VTCSOM) has named **Paul R. Skolnik** its chair of

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.

the Department of Basic Science Education (DBSE). Skolnik will provide leadership, mentoring, and strategy development for the department and faculty in research and medical science specialties. Skolnik had served as professor and chair of Internal Medicine at VTCSOM/ Carilion Clinic and at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine, where he held an endowed chair. He also served as professor and chief of the section of Infectious Diseases at Boston University Medical Center.

Tsai Lu Liu, who has served as the head of the Department of Graphic Design and Industrial Design at North Carolina State



Lu Liu

University since 2012, is the new dean of the College of Architecture, Arts, and Design (AAD) at Virginia Tech, effective July 1. Liu joined Auburn as an assistant professor in its School of Industrial and Graphic Design in 2004. In 2011, Liu was appointed as interim associate dean for research and academic affairs in the College of Architecture, Design and Construction at Auburn.

Rebecca Parsons has joined the Virginia-Maryland College of



Parsons

Veterinary Medicine as a clinical instructor at the Small Animal Community Practice. The Small Animal Community Practice is part of the Veterinary Teaching Hospital, one of the college's three animal hospitals. The practice provides preventative care to small animals within a 35-mile radius of Blacksburg. Parsons is no stranger to the college — after earning her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) from the college in 2020, she completed an internship at the community



CONTRIBUTORS

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

Aila Boyd is a Roanoke-based writer and educator. She writes both locally and nationally for a number of publications. As an educator, she teaches English to college students. Her MFA in writing is from Lindenwood University. [ailaabo93@gmail.com]

Bonnie Chavez is the CEO of Building Beloved Communities, a local consulting firm specializing in community-centered business solutions. Her driving force is to help all organizations overcome business barriers with a lens focusing on smart solutions that benefit the community. Bonnie is a proud lesbian, Latina woman who values her family, roots, heritage, and culture. [bonnie@buildingbelovedcommunities.com]

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

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

Shannon Dominguez lives in Vinton and is a passionate reader and writer. She escaped a cult 8 years ago and is working on a book called, "This Ends Now", which focuses on breaking generational cycles. [Dominguez@gmail.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]

Christopher Finley is the Director of Marketing and Public Relations for LewisGale Regional Health System. He leads the marketing and communications functions for 44 HCA Virginia Health System-owned patient care facilities, including four hospitals, two freestanding ERs, two regional cancer centers, and affiliations with both employed and independent physicians. Since 2004, he has also served as an adjunct professor for the School of Communication at Radford University where he earned his master's in corporate communications. [christopher.finley@hcahealthcare.com]

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

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

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

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Zack Jackson is the host of the K92 Mornin' Thang radio show on WXLK and co-founder of The JPG Agency, a freelance marketing and creative consulting department for small businesses. He can be reached at [zack@thejpgagency.com]

Jennifer Leake CMC® is a Certified Management Consultant, showing companies how to build Best Job Ever cultures. A certified expert in a wide range of assessments, she equips companies to better hire, engage, and lead so employees LOVE what they do, ENJOY who they work with, and RESPECT who they work for. [Jennifer@AssessmentPros.com]

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

Gene Marrano is FRONT editor and an award-winning anchor and reporter for WFIR Newstalk radio. He recently won best feature award from the Virginia Association of Broadcasters for his Dopesick interview with Beth Macy. He also now hosts and co-produces "Business Matters" on Blue Ridge PBS. [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.

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.

Dan Smith is a Roanoke-based writer and journalist, former editor of FRONT, whose new novel (8th book) NEWS! will be out this summer. [pampadansmith@gmail.com]

Emma Thomas is a Roanoke native and 2022 Hollins University Graduate. She works for WFIR News Talk Radio as a reporter. [thomasek432@gmail.com]

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

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

practice. In her position as clinical instructor, Persons focuses on clinical practice and also divides her time between teaching and assisting with labs.



Ostroth,

Amy Ostroth joined the Via College of Osteopathic Medicine (VCOM) last November as their new assistant vice president for communications. The Blacksburg native earned a master's degree in English from Virginia Tech. She brings more than 20 years of educational communications experience to VCOM. Ostroth began her career at Virginia Tech, where she spent more than a decade, before moving to Massachusetts where she served as director of development communications for Cushing Academy. She most recently served as senior director of communications for Sweet Briar College in Amherst County, Virginia.

WELLNESS FRONT



Johnson

Isaiah Johnson, MD was promoted to chair of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and the first chair of the new Department of Anesthesiology at Carilion Clinic. He is a practicing OB/GYN specialist engaged in the full scope of care, including patients who have high-risk pregnancies.



Macdonald

Neil Macdonald MD has been named chair of the Department of Anesthesiology. He teaches medical students and residents as an Assistant Professor at the Virginia Tech Carilion

School of Medicine and served as Medical Director of Anesthesia for Carilion since 2013.

HOSPITALITY FRONT

The Highlander Hotel Radford, Southwest Virginia's newest hotel, opening this spring has announced its senior leadership team. **Rachel Pegues** has relocated to the area from Charlotte to serve as the property's General Manager, local **Ginger Clark** has been appointed Director of Sales and Marketing after leading several other successful area properties, and Tidewater native **John O'Conner** will serve as Director of Food and Beverage. Executive Chef **James Kirby** comes from the three Michelin-star northern Virginia restaurant, The Inn at Little Washington. Kirby will work closely with new Director of Food and Beverage John O'Conner, who joins the team with extensive experience in fine dining, resorts, and wineries across the state. "We're all looking forward to bringing the Highlander Hotel Radford to life as a distinguished new hotel

and event space for the region," Pegues said.

NON-PROFIT FRONT



Putman

Roanoke-based Goodwill Industries of the Valleys welcomes **Rachel Putman** as Chief People Officer. Putman leads Mission Services and Organizational Development, which includes Human Resources, Employee Engagement, and Learning & Development. Putman had most recently been with Goodwill Industries of Upstate/Midlands in South Carolina for eight years where she served as their Vice President of Mission and People. She also served as the organization's Chief Compliance Officer and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Executive Sponsor.

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Governor Youngkin makes another advisory board appointment

The Board of Contractor has appointed Gerry Heinline of Christiansburg, a Building Official with the Town of Christiansburg.

Franklin County working on a plan

Franklin County's Office of Economic Development is working with the community to develop an Economic Development Strategic Plan that it says will identify short and long-range recommendations to promote balanced growth, enhance quality of life for residents, and enrich the future marketability of Franklin County as a place to live, visit, and invest in. See the survey at www.surveymonkey.com/r/FranklinCountyEconomicStrategicPlan

New jobs site uses AI

A new, regional jobs board has launched at Get2KnowNoke.com, the talent attraction arm of the Roanoke Regional Partnership. It is free for employers and job seekers to use and includes listings for all companies in Roanoke, Franklin, Botetourt, and Alleghany counties, the cities of Salem, Roanoke, and Covington, and the town of Vinton. Job seekers can filter jobs by job category, employer, or use the search bar to filter by key terms.

"While there are many jobs' sites specific to one town or one employer, the Partnership identified that the region was lacking a user-friendly tool for job

seekers and employers that encompassed the entire labor shed," said Julia Boas, director of talent strategies for the Roanoke Regional Partnership. "Now technology exists that allows us to keep listings up to date without employers having to lift a finger."

Currently 8,164 job listings are populating into the jobs board, which are pulled from a best-in-class platform called Jobs EQ. Jobs EQ uses website crawling technology to "scrape" data from over 14,000 websites daily, including top sites like LinkedIn, Indeed, and ZipRecruiter. If any employers' listings are not showing, their internal websites can be submitted to Jobs EQ.

Change agent

The City of Roanoke has been selected as the first qualifying city in the Healthy Housing Local Action Challenge by the National League of Cities. "There is much potential for collaboration of internal and community resources to address the importance of safe, healthy, and attainable affordable housing as a key component of a sustainable city. This is a key step toward addressing the health needs of our residents," states Roanoke City's Community Resources Administrator, Keith Holland.

From NOVA to VVBR

Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge announced a \$500,000 tourism campaign specifically targeting

Northern Virginia and the Washington DC market. At a March 21 press conference, VVBR staff said the "metro mountain" destination campaign's research identified Washington as the top market for capturing leisure and recreational visitors; and that an aggressive eight-to-ten week (April—June) branded marketing, advertising, and PR initiative would yield the best return. At the top of the media placements is a "takeover" of select high-traffic stations on the DC Metro transit; followed by other out-of-home and digital channels, including busses, magazine coverage, mobile phone, social media, and development with travel/sports/recreational writers and college alumni chapters. It's expected that DC will serve as a feeder for people interested in Virginia's Blue Ridge unique offering for both outdoor recreation as well as cultural, culinary, and other experiences—all within an easy and accessible trip.

Broadband expansion in RoCo

Last summer, the Bent Mountain community noted the public-private partnership build with Roanoke County and Cox that would extend broadband access to rural parts of the county, including Bent Mountain and customers in the Catawba are. Last month county leaders and community partners including Cox Communications celebrated the completion of that project, which represents a \$3 million

investment and will reach more than 400 previously unserved residents. Residents joined the celebration event, held at the South County library.

Former GE plant in Salem welcomes a new tenant

With a \$32 million in investment, STS Group AG, a global supplier of interior and exterior parts for commercial and personal vehicles, will establish its North American headquarters in Salem in the former General Electric building, adding 119 jobs as well. The facility will be operated as subsidiary, STS Group North America. The new facility will supply commercial truck assembly operations by Volvo Trucks in Pulaski County as well as other truck and automotive facilities throughout the Midwest and Southeastern US markets. STS Group AG is working with Phoenix Group, the owner of the former General Electric building, to upfit roughly 200,000 square feet of the existing space and to construct a 32,000-square-foot addition on the north end of the building.

Said John Hull, executive director of the Roanoke Regional Partnership, "STS Group effectively adds a new product to the regional supply chain related to automotive and heavy truck manufacturing and further solidifies the regional value proposition for auto-related manufacturing." STS Group worked with City of Salem, Roanoke Regional Partnership, and Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) in support of the

project. The company will receive local assistance with financing (from the Salem Economic Development Authority), and a \$500,000 grant from the Commonwealth's Opportunity Fund. The Roanoke Regional Partnership projects an annual economic impact of \$66 million in the Roanoke Region from the project, adding an additional 61 indirect and induced jobs.

Latest Roanoke College poll shows encouraging signs

The latest statewide and online survey of Virginians

statewide conducted recently by The Institute for Policy and Opinion Research at Roanoke College revealed that The Virginia Index of Consumer Sentiment (VAICS) increased by 1.4 points at the start of 2023, its highest value in one year. Virginians are increasingly optimistic as inflation continues to slow. The national inflation rate was 6.4% in January, pushing up the Index of Current Conditions by 4.5 points. The strong labor market also contributes to the improved sentiment. The national unemployment rate hit the lowest rate since 1969 in January 2023.

Have an announcement about your business?

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

"Consumer sentiment continues to steadily improve," said Alice Louise Kassens, John S. Shannon Professor of Economics and Senior Analyst at the Roanoke College Institute for Policy and Opinion Research. "Consumer sentiment reflects how consumers feel about the economy, and it can also impact the future. If people

are worried about the economy's future, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and we can push ourselves into a recession. The labor market remains strong and is a tailwind for the economy."

Compiled by Gene Marrano

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All photos: Emily ElFallah and Calvin Miska

Dreams do come true

By Emma Thomas

For the past thirteen years, Amber Aker has been working towards a dream, and in February she made that dream a reality by opening SALON LUX at The Shoppes at West Village in Cave Spring.

29-year-old Vinton native Amber Aker says that despite a lifelong love for all things creative – growing up she never considered becoming a hairstylist. Her path to SALON LUX started when she finished her high school credits early. Not wanting to be stuck at school half the day with nothing to do, she enrolled in

the cosmetology program at The Burton Center for Arts and Technology. Aker says it didn't take long to fall in love with the craft – "I loved everything about beauty and making people feel undeniably beautiful...the fact that I can create art on people's heads all day is so satisfying."



That passion was recognized by her hairdresser, Morgan Sizemore, who gave her shadowing opportunities that soon led to a job shampooing at Best Little Hairhouse, in Vinton. Her hours there helped her complete her Burton credit hours a year early, and once she passed the State board exams, she joined the salon as a stylist.

After about two years at Best Little Hairhouse -- first as an hourly employee, and then as a commission-based stylist -- Aker made the leap to booth rental and became a sole proprietor, "with booth rental, you are your own business inside of a salon, so you do your own taxes, bookkeeping, scheduling, your product ordering...basically everything."

Over the next decade, she continued to work through booth rentals, eventually moving from Vinton to work in the Cave Spring area of southwest Roanoke County, all the while saving up to open her own salon. Aker wanted a place where she could build the culture for clients and stylists from the ground up.

In the winter of 2022, she decided it was finally time to make it happen. Though, like many first-time business owners, she was surprised by just how much goes into getting a business off the ground, "I had no clue everything that would go into opening a business before you could even physically show that you had a business."

Booth rental had prepared her for some

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aspects of ownership but scaling up required wading through a lot more red tape than was anticipated. “As a salon owner you cover all the overhead. You rent the space, you take out all the licensing and insurance liability coverage, you have to get...salon licenses through DPOR; of course, your business license... these steps also were taking thirty to sixty days to receive them, so I would have to wait before getting the next license.”

Aker says finding the future home of SALON LUX was less complicated, though not without its difficulties. “With COVID... a lot of people are now working from home, so offices and rental spaces did free up...that opened up, but the same with residential real estate, the prices of everything went up.” After years of working and saving, Amber was fortunate enough to have a nest egg that allowed her to move forward, despite rising prices.

Choosing the right location at West Village on Route 419 was important – after all, this had been her dream for thirteen years. “For months I had been looking around, driving around, just looking for this perfect space...I already had a vision...when I saw the high industrial black ceilings, that’s when I knew I needed it.”

Once the 5-year lease was signed,

Aker threw herself into renovating and designing the space. She pulled in contractors to rework the space’s plumbing and electrical wiring, took down walls and built some new ones. Once the space was finished, she chose everything from the light fixtures and stations to the textures and colors of each detail with care. All told, it took about a year from start to finish to get the doors open. SALON LUX had its first day in business on February 7, 2023.

Right now, Aker says getting other stylists in to rent booths at SALON LUX is her priority – though she’s keeping an “If you build it, they will come” mentality. “I was taking a huge risk knowing that no one was coming with me, but I have faith in the culture I’m gonna have, and what I will be offering clients and my future stylists.”

And, so far, that mentality has been working – Amber Aker says she has more clients than business hours to serve them, making SALON LUX perfect for stylists looking to grow their clientele base. “It is super high traffic, and although I am pretty much at capacity with clients, I have been looking out for my future stylists...younger stylists, or whoever wants to grow their business even more, they can take on the overflow of what I can’t.” 📸

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Humans need to add their expertise to make the end-product good. — Page 21

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Source: Forbes, "Forbes Best-in-State Wealth Management Teams," Jan. 12, 2023.

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