

Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

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Botetourt
Manufacturers

Virginia Tech AI/ML

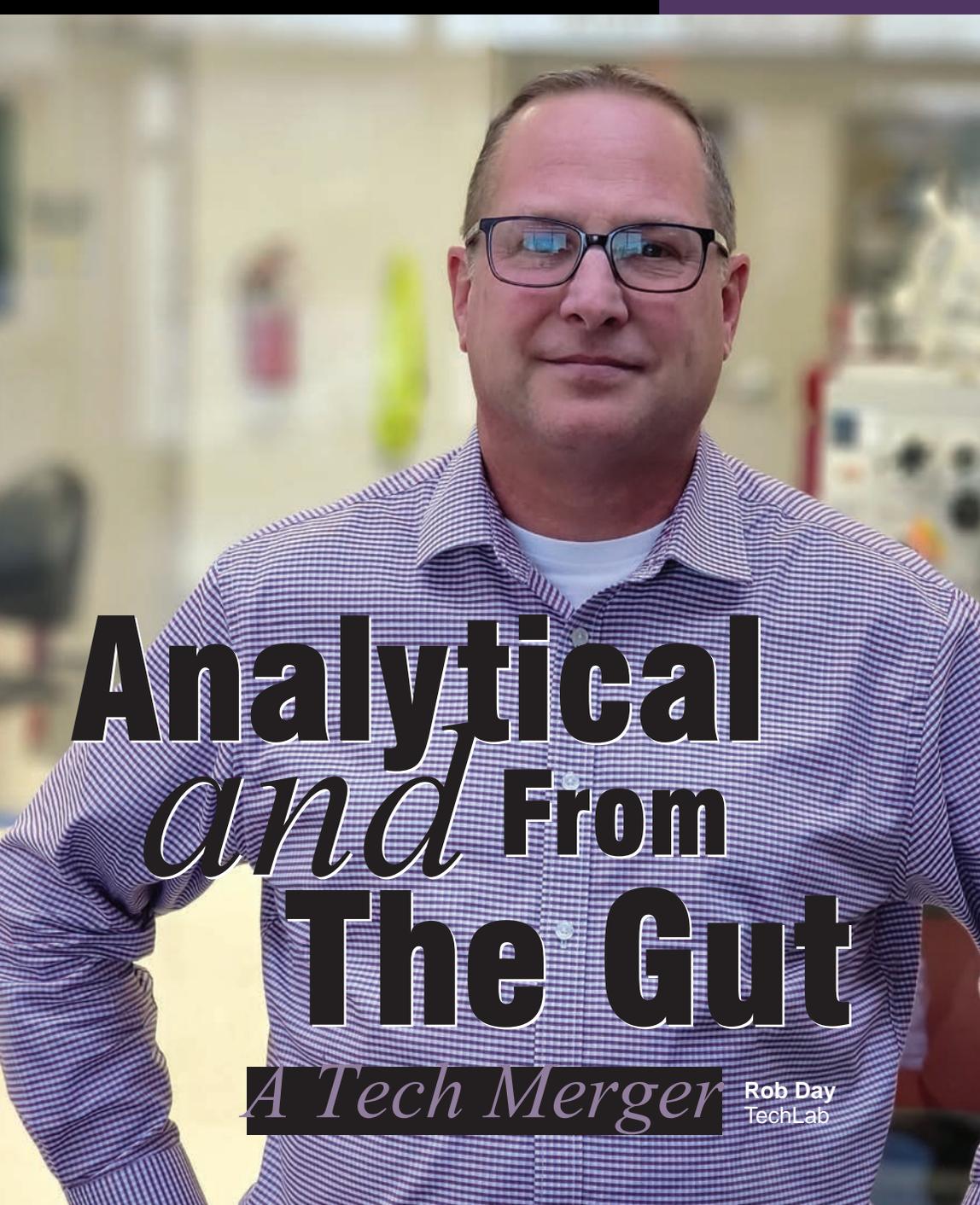
EZ Ramp's David Todd

S-RCCC's
Amanda Livingston

Sarah's BEAM

LewisGale's
Christopher Finley

vbFRONT.com



Analytical *and* From The Gut

A Tech Merger

Rob Day
TechLab



AARON FERNANDEZ
INTERSTATE BATTERIES

I FOUND MY FREEDOM BANKING WITH FreedomFirst

Aaron Fernandez needed a reliable local banking partner for his business, Interstate Batteries in Salem. As a local small business, he knows that a personal touch and commitment to your own neighborhood can go a long way in terms of success.

"I found a great connection with Freedom First in that we both think locally. The way that Freedom First invests in the community, the way that they treat their people, and the way that they treat their clients aligns with the way that I like to do business."

Aaron finds that banking with Freedom First allows him to build relationships that make doing business more enjoyable and convenient. "There's a real person on the other end of the line that will help you whenever you need it," he explained. "Being married with 4 young children, my life is really busy. Freedom First provides me with a trustworthy source to take care of one whole part of my life."

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

WELCOME TO THE FRONT

Scaling Up: it's the big buzz word lately, smaller businesses that have the potential to explode – if they get the right support, whether it's funding, technical assistance and/or marketing. Scaling up is the subject of a new column that debuts this month from The Advancement Foundation, which is also featured in our FRONT Spotlight after TAF opened the Virginia Innovation Accelerator in Buena Vista.

With this month's focus on manufacturing, we'll also look at how TechLab in Blacksburg is scaling – by way of a merger. Virginia Tech is knee-deep in the world of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning; learn about that in this issue as well. And meet Amanda Livingston, David Todd, and Christopher Finley – in a whopping three executive profiles we bring you this month. Happy New Year – hope you've set a few admirable goals for 2023. Maybe that includes keeping up with what's happening on the business FRONT.



Tom Field
Publisher



Gene Marrano
Editor

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TechLab is scaling up manufacturing via merger

By Jennifer Poff Cooper



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Building a Better Future for the Next Generation

While the holiday season may be behind us, at Cox we believe in the spirit of giving all year long. We recently announced the recipients of our Cox Charities Community Grants and proudly awarded 21 organizations with \$5,000 each. These grants were fully funded through the generosity of our employees to help build a better future for the next generation. Congratulations to the following Roanoke-area organizations that were selected:



Boys & Girls Clubs of Southwest Virginia

This grant will support programs for all grades, including Triple Play, Healthy Habits, Passport to Manhood and SMART Girls at their 9th Street Club.



Boys Home of Virginia

This grant will support students' needs from medical, dietary, personal, and recreational which are met 24 hours a day, every day of the year.



Children's Assistive Technology Service

This grant will support the transportation and refurbishment of donated adaptive mobility equipment for children with disabilities from families with limited resources.



Feeding Southwest Virginia

This grant will support the operations of collecting, inspecting, warehousing, and distributing millions of pounds of food annually.



The Wild Way

This grant will cover the cost of enrollment for low-income girls whose families can't afford to pay the program fees which include outdoor recreational guides, equipment rental, and transportation.



Virginia Breast Cancer Foundation

This grant will support the Southwest Virginia Screening and Diagnostic Fund to provide screening and diagnostic breast services for underinsured and uninsured women and men.

At Cox, we're making a lasting positive impact in the communities we serve through community service and volunteering, monetary contributions, digital equity, and sustainability. To learn more about Cox Charities visit www.coxcharitiesva.org.

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JANUARY



Aila Boyd



Erin Burcham



William Hall



Mike Leigh



Dan Smith



Nicholas Vaassen

Advisory Board

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

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Despite national manufacturing job contraction, Botetourt experienced a 10.5% growth in manufacturing jobs.

— Page 16

Biographies and contact information on each contributor are provided on Page 36.

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Tom Field

An example of the core product; how it works is now familiar to more people than ever, thanks to at-home COVID tests (and pregnancy tests). Just look for the line.

TechLab is scaling up manufacturing via merger

By Jennifer Poff Cooper

A recent merger between Blacksburg-based TechLab and the Nordic company SSI Diagnostica will grow manufacturing exponentially in our area. Both companies are important contributors in the global diagnostic market.

Located in the Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center (CRC), TechLab specializes in rapid diagnostics, specifically in enteric, or intestinal, diagnostics that enable health care providers to identify dangerous pathogens and toxins more efficiently. Tests are single-use devices for detection of infectious diseases.

Rob Day, TechLab COO, said the merger will allow for growth in the rapid diagnostics division: "The TechLab manufacturing facility is set for a higher scale."

Its manufacturing facility in Radford currently produces ten million tests annually, using only about 60% of its capacity. With the merger, and TechLab providing manufacturing for SSI's products, "we would hope to ramp to full capacity over the next three to five years to a total of fourteen million or more," said Day.

SSI Diagnostica will launch the Radford facility into manufacturing respiratory rapid devices. Offering new respiratory products creates the possibility of getting a "foot in the door with new customers," said Day.

According to press releases, the founders of TechLab met in the late 1970s at Virginia Tech's Anaerobe Laboratory.



“ ”

The great thing is, there are no competing products between the two companies. It made sense to combine.

- Rob Day

"It's exciting," says TechLab's Chief Operating Officer Rob Day, about technology growth in our region.



With R&D and manufacturing tucked behind a glass wall, the TechLab building on Virginia Tech's Corporate Research Center campus in Blacksburg greets staff and visitors immediately upon entering the front doors with this conference table **and open floor plan**—a design inspired by founder Tracy Wilkins, says COO Rob Day.

Led by Dr. Tracy Wilkins, the professors started TechLab and incorporated it as a private company in 1989, developing the first commercial diagnostic tests for *C. difficile* disease. Since then, TechLab has expanded its operation to include other enteric pathogens and distributes products worldwide.

In 2016, Day said, the founders were looking to divest and the company was purchased by a private equity group, Pharos Capital. When Pharos started marketing the company, SSI, whose parent company is Adelis Equity Partners, appeared to be a good fit.

Said Day, "The great thing is, there are no competing products between the two companies. It made sense to combine."

He said that in the private equity world, taking five to seven years to grow the business then selling it is a "pretty common map." Capital investment is done early for a company to prove itself before the next acquisition is entertained.

About merging, Day said, "Over the past five years TechLab has successfully transferred multiple products for contract manufacturing across a variety of diagnostic types. The successful transfer of multiple products raises both our confidence as well as the investors'. Being successful



Tom Field

“ ”

The main benefits of the merger are... additional products, increased manufacturing, access to capital.

once makes people believe that we can do it again.” Not much will change for TechLab day to day. The corporate location remains based in the CRC, which is where its



Submitted



Tom Field

The main entrance at TechLab's VT/CRC building showcases some of its patents.

research and development occurs. The personnel structure of TechLab did not change either. All that changed was at the board level of the equity groups; TechLab's CEO is on the board of the larger company and will continue to work on a plan to build the business.

In addition to the manufacturing synergy, the main benefits of the merger are access to additional products, increased manufacturing opportunity locally, and access to capital, said Day.

The biggest challenge, he said, is that technology transfer in biologics can be "unpredictable."

Day said the technology transfer of the respiratory tests into a new manufacturing environment is key to success. Additionally, these respiratory tests are relatively new to the North American market, so it is critical to build awareness and interest here.

The merger has implications for the local biotechnology industry. Not only does it allow for the transfer of SSI's respiratory technology to southwest Virginia,

TECHLAB'S LEADERSHIP TEAM



Daniel Delaney,
president & CEO



Dr. David Lyerly,
co-founder and CSO



Rob Day, COO



Greg Stanley, CCO



Kelly Bewick, CFO



Steven Harvey,
VP Manufacturing



Dr. Joel Herbein,
VP Scientific Affairs

it demonstrates the ability to attract an international company here.

Said Day, "It reinforces the idea that you can perform high tech manufacturing in southwest Virginia."

With this merger, TechLab joins an international portfolio of companies that help over eighty million patients and counting every year. The Roanoke-Blacksburg region can anticipate adding twenty new jobs in the next year and up to fifty within three to five years, including manufacturing, quality control, research and development, and administration, according to the press release.

Day said the growth plan over time is to continue to increase sales and manufacturing output.

"We're always looking to expand," he said.

TechLab is proud of its 30 years' worth of roots in southwest Virginia, Day noted. He said of the new developments, "It's exciting for southwest Virginia to bring in investment and technology growth." 



Courtesy of Botetourt Chamber of Commerce

Munters held a ribbon cutting on September 28, 2022, at the new facility at Botetourt's Greenfield Center. Left to right: Del. Chris Head, R-Botetourt County; Amy S. White, Botetourt County Board of Supervisors, Buchanan District; Stefan Aspman, President of Data Center Technologies and Group Vice President, Munters; Pat Ohleger, Human Resources Manager Daleville, Munters; Klas Forsström, CEO, Munters; Charles Hodnett, Director of Operations Daleville, Munters.

Made in Botetourt

By Jennifer Vance

Manufacturers are eyeing Botetourt County as the choice location for their main or specialized or satellite locations; and for good reason.

Botetourt County is nestled between the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountain ranges, making it attractive for outdoor activities and beautiful vistas. Its historic roots go back to 1770 when England settlers created the area. Research on artifacts found on what is now the Botetourt Center at Greenfield date back 10,000 years and the area offers a lush history of discovery and settlement.

Botetourt County's new settlers consist of manufacturing businesses that desire a beautiful location and a talented workforce. Surrounded by Virginia Western Community College, Mountain Gateway Community College, and the Botetourt Technical Education Center (BTEC), the County has built a solid foundation to support workforce training for new and expanding companies. They are an engaged

A SAMPLING OF MANUFACTURERS IN BOTETOURT COUNTY



Here's a list of manufacturers that the Botetourt County Economic Development department works most closely with. These are manufacturers that produce a product that is typically sold elsewhere. It's not an exhaustive list, as Botetourt has smaller companies, as well, such as metal fabrication shops, which, of course, are also in the manufacturing sector.

Altec industries

Arkay

Canatal

Carmeuse

Carris Reels

Constellation Brands

Dynax

Eldor

General Shale

Georg

Harkness Screens

Lawrence Companies

Maag

Metalsa

Munters

Pratt Industries

Titan America

Tread Corporation

Virginia Transformer

community, prepared to welcome manufacturing businesses.

Ken McFayden, Director of Economic

Development, states that "Botetourt County is well-positioned for continued manufacturing growth because we have a strong, existing manufacturing



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Courtesy of Botetourt Chamber of Commerce

One of the welding classes—with Gary Young, Assistant Professor at Virginia Western Community College and Travis Tomlin, Production Manager from Munters.

base, available sites and utilities at the Botetourt Center at Greenfield, a growing workforce in the Roanoke Valley, and excellent workforce training programs.”

Favorable performance economic indicators between 2017 and 2021 reinforce this opinion:

- Despite national manufacturing job contraction, Botetourt experienced a 10.5% growth in manufacturing jobs.
- Manufacturing wages have grown 11.6% (average at \$58,330 at \$28 an hour in 2021).
- A private sector job growth of 3.48% as compared to a flat national and Virginia private sector job growth.

- New business starts grew by 4.19% compared to regional growth of 2.16% (845 businesses in Botetourt in 2021).
- A growth in assessed value of 35% for machinery and tools (M&T).
- Despite the pandemic, Botetourt experienced a positive gross domestic product (GDP) growth of .75% compared to 1.69% national growth. Botetourt’s 2018 GDP growth exceeded national, Virginia, and regional growth.

In September of 2022, Munters, a global leader in energy efficient air treatment and climate solutions, moved their Buena Vista headquarters into a new



Courtesy of Botetourt Chamber of Commerce

The new Munters facility in Botetourt County.

365,000 square foot building at the Botetourt Center at Greenfield. This commercial center is in Daleville.

Stefan Aspman, President of Data Center Technologies, and Group Vice President at Munters notes that “As technology continues to enhance the way we live our lives, the reliance on innovative equipment to keep large data centers operating at full capacity will only intensify. This new facility gives us the infrastructure we need to continue providing world-class solutions to our customers, as well as the opportunity to welcome our employees to a facility that’s indicative of the quality of their work.”

Strong partnerships exist between the community colleges and the workforce needs of the businesses. For example, Virginia Western Community College

is partnering with Munters and other manufacturing businesses with their Mechatronics and welding programs. “The Mechatronics program is a vital source of manufacturing workforce in the region and is always ready to engage with our industry partners,” states Amy White, Dean of the School of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

In addition to the educational institutions in the area, The County’s partnerships and talent pipeline include VEDP (Virginia Economic Development Partnership), Roanoke Regional Partnership, Greater Roanoke Workforce Development Board, Virginia Employment Commission, and Goodwill Industries of the Valleys. The County also recently received grant money to expand their welding booths at BTEC. 



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Disincentives

Commissions. Bonuses. Incentive plans. Vacations. Stock options. In their various forms, incentives have been a part of compensation plans for a very long time. There is an assumption that offering rewards (or conversely, punishment) will motivate employees to perform better.

But do they work?

If you've read or studied anything about motivation, you'll know that intrinsic motivation (or self-motivation) is much more powerful and longer lasting than extrinsic motivation (rewards and punishment). In my business, we develop leaders to create a culture where intrinsic motivation can thrive. I think many leaders today understand the importance of self-motivation, but most leaders believe that extrinsic motivation (especially incentives) also works, so why not offer monetary incentives while trying to build self-motivation?

Because studies have shown that incentives have a negative effect on self-motivation and can cause unethical behavior.

To be clear, incentives can create temporary behavior change and compliance. But according to research and an article in Harvard Business Review by Alfie Kohn, incentives are not only ineffective at producing lasting change in attitudes and behavior, but they can be worse than doing nothing at all.

Despite short-term results, incentive programs can cause long-term harm for the following reasons:

- **Pay is not a motivator.** Lack of pay, or the elimination of an incentive, can de-motivate someone. But that doesn't mean more pay creates more motivation, and numerous studies and surveys prove this.
- **Incentives hurt relationships.** If the rewards cause competition, then someone wins and someone loses, and cooperation can suffer. Additionally, management and employee relationships can be hurt if employees hide problems and try to present themselves in a favorable light to maximize their rewards.
- **Incentives ignore root causes.** In some cases, rewards effectively become a substitute for good leadership behaviors. Leaders might be less inclined to ensure workers have what they need to succeed as "pay for performance" essentially becomes the management system.
- **Incentives discourage risk-taking and creativity.** Employees will focus on whatever metric is needed to get the reward and ignore other possible innovative solutions to improve performance.
- **Incentives undermine intrinsic motivation.** The more management stresses financial benefits, the less employees are interested in the work itself. This happens because rewards are meant to control behavior, and the more employees experience being controlled, the less interested they will become in their job. A series of studies has shown that the larger the incentive, the more negatively the work is viewed.

Isn't it time we ditch reward systems? 

BUSINESS OPERATIONS

By Mike Leigh

Executive Summary:
*It's holiday bonus time!
 Did that bonus motivate
 you to work harder
 this past year?*

Send your questions
 or comments to Mike@
 OpXSolutionsllc.com

Virginia's questionable mileage choice program

About six months ago the Commonwealth launched Virginia's Mileage Choice Program. It's now being heavily promoted. When anyone shows such enthusiasm over what sounds like a revenue loser, I feel the need to ask "Why?" The answers are hard to find.

In short, this program was supposedly created to make 2020 legislation fair to low mileage drivers. As fuel efficiency became a thing, the Commonwealth started losing money from taxes paid at the pump. So, the Virginia General Assembly tacked on an additional annual registration fee (\$19-\$109) for electric and 25 mpg or better gas vehicles. It assumes citizens are driving 11,600 miles a year.

There's no information on the website about how the mileage reimbursement is calculated, or what your final savings are likely to be. There is an extensive list, however, of fees that will be levied if you step out of line. This starts with the \$7.50 Late Annual Odometer Image Upload Fee and caps off with the \$95 Failure to Return Device charge.

The program requires a minimum deposit of \$15 and an agreement to get you hooked up to a device that tracks your every movement (mileage traveled out of state is counted to determine what you owe). Your savings? Don't know.

To put this in perspective, I spoke to someone who drives a Kia Soul. My pickup doesn't qualify for the program because it's too much of a gas hog. Her annual charge is \$26 for the highway use fee. Does it make sense for her to jump through the hoops to register for the program, install a device owned and managed by a third party (right, the Commonwealth has delegated this entire program to the private sector), and risk the list of fees to be levied for non-compliance? She doesn't think so. Neither do I.

What concerns me most about this program is the lack of transparency on what appears to be a money loser. What's in it for the Commonwealth? I'll hazard a guess. All that data being collected has a value. The hype doesn't tell you who's paying who. 📉

“
”
Does it make sense...?
She doesn't think so.
Neither do I.



FINANCIAL FIGURES

By Michael Shelton

Executive Summary:
A lack of transparency on what appears to be a money loser.

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



All photos: VT

Naran Ramakrishnan with students

Taming “big data” for AI and ML at VT

By Gene Marrano

Big data, AI, ML, algorithms; get to know the lingo of a brave new world that’s already here.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) that is the result of algorithms turning data into commands and tasks will become more of a factor in the manufacturing world – and in many other business sectors – in the future. The Sanghani Center for Artificial Intelligence and Data Analytics at Virginia Tech leads the efforts at VT when it comes to “big data” research. The Sanghani Center is headquartered in the Washington DC metro area but also has faculty and students in Blacksburg as part of the Department of Computer Science in Virginia Tech’s College of Engineering.

Naran Ramakrishnan is director of The Sanghani Center for Artificial Intelligence and Data Analytics; he was in Blacksburg

for 13 years before heading to NOVA. The center was renamed for a benefactor a few years ago says Ramakrishnan. That big data may come from sensors in a manufacturing environment, from social media, images, text – analyzed by computer scientists and mathematicians, turning raw information into useful tools by the way of programmed algorithms. “The more data you obtain you see much faster progress being made,” says Ramakrishnan. Good, labeled data “that’s been classified by humans,” is a key, helping identify problems more quickly, in the manufacturing sector for example. “That’s always a premium.”

Research into how best to use unlabeled data that is often “plentiful,” says Ramakrishnan,

will further help identify patterns that AI can use to in turn instruct machine learning. "You try to find structure in the data." In a manufacturing plant where a sensor might shut down a line if it detects a flaw or something out of tolerance, structured data can be used for root cause diagnostics. "It could have happened several steps upstream. It's a really small problem [then] but it increases in intensity by the time you observe it ... further downstream." Using data analytics to find the problem origin earlier is a key.

Right now, AI and ML is most widely used in plants where robotics are employed to automate specific tasks says Ramakrishnan, such as for fault diagnostics and predictive maintenance. "Some sectors are further ahead than others," he notes. The Sanghani Center has collaborated in the past with General Motors on fault diagnostics. Algorithms extrapolated from data is designed to pass along vital information from one operator to another as a training tool. VT has also partnered with Rolls-Royce at its University Technology Center, "working to enhance product understanding, control, and life-cycle management through innovation in measurement system technology and to provide effective transition of data to knowledge," according to VT.

Ramakrishnan says the recently released chatbot ChatGPT will answer just about any question you have in a more natural language: "its pretty remarkable," although he notes it still makes the occasional mistake. "These algorithms mine every piece of knowledge that is out there – every website, Wikipedia, news, social media. They're able to solve real problems." That could make ChatGPT a valuable training tool

for businesses, if employees are able to get the answers they need on a timely basis.

So, will AI and ML replace human beings on a larger scale, on the manufacturing floor, at call centers, or elsewhere? "I don't think that's the right question to ask. Humans that work with this type of technology will be more competent than those who cannot. Think of it as something that's augmenting your intelligence—something that might have taken you five hours to do may now take you one or two hours." That's a huge productivity gain of course. Algorithms that collect and disseminate big data are also learning in some cases to configure machine learning routines themselves (AutoML), lessening the need for expensive programmers to perform those tasks.

Tech students in the DC area and in Blacksburg are studying all aspects of data and AI; there are data analytics programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Even in fields of study like mechanical engineering and chemical engineering, Ramakrishnan says there is a focus on AI and ML. "You learn about machine learning in the context of [chemical] reactions," for example he notes.

"The best technologies are those that disappear," says Ramakrishnan, quoting a famous computer scientist, "they become so prevalent and ubiquitous that you really don't think about them. They're everywhere." With all of that data being collected from a myriad of sources people – and businesses – will realize they need to mine it with the help of algorithms, to look for patterns or trends that can lead to process improvements. The era of Big Data/AI/ML may have just scratched the surface at this point. 





Electric Iris

Getting down to business

On February 7th The Advancement Foundation (TAF) will launch the 9th Annual GAUNTLET program, Virginia's Largest Business Program and Competition (Applications now being accepted at www.TheAdvancementFoundation.org). Through the Gauntlet program over \$2,000,000 in cash/in-kind awards have been invested in entrepreneurs. The program provides a platform that engages community business leaders, mentors, industry experts, economic developers, higher education and resource organizations. A diverse group of entrepreneurs join the Gauntlet program, including main street, product developers, food/beverage, and those who consider themselves hobbyist. Equally diverse are the levels of business experience, education, wealth, and ages of participants.

Each year we identify an average of 20% of Gauntlet participants as high growth potential. High growth means: a company with potential to grow at a rate of 25% per year, attract 50% of revenues from outside the region/state, and ability to produce higher wage jobs. Some entrepreneurs may not understand the concept of scaling, lack the experience to explore the opportunity, or hold back for fear they will make a wrong step. TAF and its partners; SBDC, SCORE, RAMP, and Universities, work to engage entrepreneurs and provide roadmaps.

Today, more than ever, small business can scale with affordable access to operational systems, internet platforms, fractional professionals and capital. TAF is working to address the scaling challenges to increase high growth companies that is outlined in the Teconomy Report.

"Virginia needs to continue to upgrade its research commercialization efforts that lead to high-growth potential innovations for new business startups. Relative to other states, Virginia has a weak culture of innovation and insufficient support for entrepreneurial ecosystems. Virginia does not dedicate sufficient, focused resources to the formation and scale-up of high-growth startups and industry clusters that are essential to retaining and attracting talent."

TAF sees firsthand the incredible talent in every corner of our region. The Associate Pastor in the Alleghany Highlands (IVO Limited), now leveraging his innovation to help NASA with satellite propulsion; our Floyd County company, (Kengkashi) that harvests microbes from the blue ridge mountains, to brew and format for use in Bokashi composting, foliar spray and treatment of soil and compost beds to improve the health of soil and the "egg lady" (Electric Iris) in Grandin Village designing and selling Incubation trays for quail, goose, turkey and pea fowl that improves yields significantly. Through bold efforts to foster scalable Innovation, we are seeking product developers to explore the possibilities, connect with a tribe of diverse entrepreneurs and engage business leaders.

Where are they now: IVO continues to scale in Covington, while Kengkashi and Electric Iris are benefiting from services offered in the Virginia Innovation Accelerator Center in Buena Vista, a recent project launched by The Advancement Foundation to provide commercialization services, fractional expertise, connection to resources, creation of business funnels, development of SOP's, use of feedback loops and manufacturing/packaging spaces for up-and-coming companies. The services and connections made possible through Go Virginia funding for efforts to increase the funnel of high growth companies scaling right here in Virginia. 

SCALING UP

By The Advancement Foundation

Executive Summary:
The first entry of a periodic column on growing businesses exponentially from Vinton-based The Advancement Foundation, creator of the Gauntlet competition.

Creating culture that keeps employees

A great culture in my opinion is supported by three key components. First is a genuine care for your employees as people and not numbers or headcount. Second, is a strong commitment to fostering a dynamic DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion) program in your business. Lastly, a great balance of support/challenge.

For a great culture, all three must be present.

The first two go hand in hand. To truly have a genuine care for your people means that you support them and who they are. It also means that you understand their goals and passions and how those can be supported through the position that they have or want to grow into at the company. To deep dive into that space with them, we must build trust with our people. They must feel able to share their authentic self without fear of judgement or being treated differently. When you achieve that, two things will happen. One their buy in to your business will become exponentially stronger. Second in building trust with them, they will become more loyal and tied to your company, as their company and that's when the magic happens.

In the third part of that support/challenge, we as business owners, managers, leaders, must understand when our team needs supported and when they need challenged. So often managers/owners only challenge their teams when they have deficiencies or issues that are occurring. Where the ball is dropped most of the time is in support. We forget to celebrate successes. We forget to ensure that they have the tools they need to complete the job that we assign. So, it's not only about correcting our issues internally but celebrating that fosters a culture of inclusion and belonging.

Now I understand this can feel like a foreign concept to some and that is where we can assist. A good DEI program doesn't have to cost thousands of dollars for your team; however, the investment will produce results well beyond what you can do without it. We can also help in training you on support/challenge and how to foster healthy relationships with your teams in those conversations. Both are great foundational keys to building a healthy culture that fosters inclusion and will support retention.

Especially, now in times where hiring is hard and every employee is more valuable today, as their replacements aren't waiting in the wings. 🦋

“We must understand when our team needs supported and when they need challenged.”



AshleyEaglesonPhotography

BEST PRACTICES

By Will Hall

Executive Summary:

One of the major factors in maintaining high retention rates is culture.

It's an important part of the HR process in business - not only supported by leadership and the company but also embraced by the employees.

William R. Hall III is Chief Executive Officer for Beacon Partners Consulting in southwest Roanoke County. Reach him at will.hall@partnerwithbeacon.com

Giving Back What's Missing

By Dan Dowdy

Valley Business FRONT welcomes David Todd as a 2023 Patron Advisory Board member representing the region's senior/services sector.

Todd is the owner and president of EZ Rampz/Mobility Solutions based in Roanoke. He started his business in 2008 and currently has a staff of 35 who primarily service clients in Virginia and North Carolina with occasional jobs as far away as New York and Texas.

Todd's inspiration for this business grew out of helping his grandfather, a WW II veteran and POW, who lived in a ranch house with an 8-inch step that he couldn't manage. Todd installed a ramp, even though the VA would have done it. His grandfather played golf into his late 80s. He fell at age 94 and broke his hip; he never recovered. Todd recognized that his grandfather's need was shared by many others, and he saw that as a business opportunity.

EZ Rampz (note that the "z" in cleverly-spelled Rampz looks a little like a ramp) provides mobility solutions to help people live their lives to their fullest capacity, as stated in the company's mission statement. EZ Rampz rents, sells, installs, and services products that resolve mobility issues by enabling clients to get in and out of their homes and to function as normally as possible while in their residences. "We give back to people part of what they're missing in their lives—they go back to church, get their mail, and go to the grocery store," says Todd. He helps restore an important element of independence.

Most people with mobility limitations are afraid to go out of their homes for fear of falling when going in or out. They might sleep downstairs because they feel uneasy about climbing stairs. They often sponge bathe due to concerns about getting in and out of the shower or bathtub. Statistics bear out this fear: around 80% of fall victims who have to be hospitalized or are required to



David Todd

temporarily live at a rehab facility never make it back home, generally because of infections.

He explains that his products are not a luxury purchase, such as buying a new car which can be postponed. His clients' needs are usually immediate: a sudden need for a ramp, for example. Because of this urgency, most products are installed within five days of purchase and even faster if needed. The company offers a 48-hour guarantee to service their installed products. If there is a problem they can't fix within that time frame, they'll install a loaner unit until the client's product is fixed. A lifetime warranty ensures that what the company sells will be maintained as long as needed—something not offered by EZ Rampz's biggest competitor. Todd's words reflect the company's core value of focusing on families: "We do for our clients what we would do for our parents or grandparents."

A story of one happy customer was when Todd was installing a ramp off of her front porch. The client kept coming out to check on progress, with reminders each time that she needed to stay inside until the work was done to avoid an accident. She explained that she had not been able to go out to her mailbox for two years, and she was too excited to just sit and wait. She got her wish!

There are two primary concerns regarding in-home mobility issues:

1. Negotiating stairs (remedied by installing ramps, stair glides/chairs, or vertical platform lifts)
2. Getting in and out of a shower or tub (mostly resolved with a tub cut that permits going in and out without having to climb over the side of a tub. EZ Rampz installs 50-100 grab bars per month.)

EZ Rampz's principal market consists of people over 60 with some mobility challenges related to everyday living. Todd explains that often the person making the decision about products to help with mobility issues is not the person who needs help.

"IN BRIEF"

- Bachelor of Science degree from Virginia Tech in hotel, restaurant, and institutional management
- Married with three children
- Enjoys cooking, golfing, and the fun and pleasures of cruise excursions
- Recently traveled to Scotland
- Favorite quote: "Life can be hard, but you don't have to make it harder on others. Be kind, be compassionate, and strive to leave things better."

For example, a daughter recognizes the need for assistance for her parent who might actually be saying "I don't need help." This is a challenging part of the business.

While most of the company's customers are in Virginia or neighboring states, occasionally EZ Rampz, the biggest ramp installer on the east coast, gets called to help





non-compliance. These situations represented a new niche for the company. But indicative of its ability to respond quickly when needed, EZ Rampz jumped in feet first.

elsewhere. When the state of New York got sued for ADA non-compliance at its voting sites at election time, the state searched and found EZ Rampz/Mobility Solutions. Of the 700 ramps installed in New York City alone, EZ Rampz put in 100, and they had to be installed and removed within 48 hours of election day. The company similarly came to the rescue of Harris County in Texas, home of Houston, which also was sued for ADA

When asked about one of the most rewarding projects he's undertaken, Todd related an incredible story about a woman, Anna, who was pinned between two tractor trailers in a horrible crash and was paralyzed from her waist down. She desperately wanted to live in her own home and not have it look like a hospital or rehab facility. EZ Rampz made it happen. Much of the house had to be gutted and retrofitted to accommodate Anna's mobility issue—her need to get around in a wheel chair. From cabinets that drop down to roll under counters to a shower that enables her to tell Google to turn on whichever of 18 shower heads she wants and at what temperature she wants the water, and a blow dryer that

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dries her and her wheel chair, Anna's needs were met and brought her much-needed happiness to function normally in her own home. You can see a brief video of this amazing success story at <https://youtu.be/i2jAgGac0mQ>

Approximately 15% of EZ Rampz's business is rental. At the time this profile was written, the company had temporary ramps at Roanoke's downtown skating rink and eight scooters at Explore Park's Illuminights. Ramps also were installed temporarily at voting sites during the recent elections.

EZ Rampz has a showroom at its Hollins Road location that allows customers to "test drive" products they are considering, such as a mobility chair or scooter, stairlift, lift chair, ramp, etc. The company has broken ground on a new facility across the street from the VA Center in Salem that will triple



the size of the showroom and increase its working space from 12,000 to 33,000 square feet. It's expected to be open in Spring of 2023.

EZ Rampz was voted Platinum in the "Home Health Services/Aging at Home" category by readers of Home Magazine in 2020, 2021, and 2022. It was nominated for Small Business of the Year in 2016. 

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INNOVATION

By Erin Burcham

Executive Summary:
Site readiness, market accessibility, workforce and talent needs, strategic incentives – all in the mix.

Erin Burcham is
Executive Director for the
Roanoke – Blacksburg
Technology Council
erin.burcham@rbtc.tech

What does it take to attract major employers here?

The Roanoke-Blacksburg region has an impressive portfolio of companies. Many of which are revolutionizing their industries and leading the way for innovation globally from right in our back yard. A strong foundation made of multi-organizational collaborations to include higher education, economic development and public sector support is critical to attracting and keeping the region's business economy here and competitive.

When Eldor Corporation, an Italian manufacturing company, began looking for a US location to produce and distribute components that are used in 300 million cars globally, the region did what it does well and came together.

Gary Larrowe, Botetourt County Administrator, recalls the search process from his office, which today overlooks Eldor's US site in Botetourt Center at Greenfield. Larrowe spearheaded the effort of bringing multiple partners together to create an 'impossible to turn down' opportunity for the prospective company – a leader in automated manufacturing looking to bring jobs and heavily invest in the county long-term.

"Shortly after the 2016 announcement, Eldor evaluated the quality of the region's workforce development programs and the proximity of these programs to its new location at Greenfield," stated Larrowe.

Botetourt County worked hand-in-hand with the Roanoke Regional Partnership, which played a significant role in initially attracting Eldor to Virginia. "The region's STEM assets including research and academic programs at Virginia Tech and the mechatronics program at Virginia Western Community College were key to attracting Eldor Corporation," stated John Hull, Executive Director for the Partnership.

Eldor employs a specialized pool of technical talent to operate and run the highly advanced robotics line that automates much of its production. The company is developing cutting-edge technical solutions for producing and storing new energy and as a result, many of their employees must have highly technical experience. Virginia Western Community College saw this as an opportunity and created a mechatronics program in order to strengthen the qualified technical workforce for Eldor as well as the many manufacturing companies here and to come.

"We were excited at the prospect of Eldor coming to our region," stated Dr. Amy White, Dean of STEM for Virginia Western. White added, "our Mechatronics program was

vital in their decision to come to Botetourt County, and we continue to look for ways to support them and their industry," "In particular, Eldor's needs have been addressed by our community college's programs in instrumentation, automation, IT, and mechatronics. There has also been interaction and a stronger relationship formed with the Botetourt Technical Education Center, which has a high school-level program in engineering and mechatronics," stated Larrowe.

Many companies like Eldor have a checklist of needs including site readiness, market accessibility, workforce and talent needs, strategic incentive programs and a location offering a great quality of life. These highly competitive opportunities take years and a skilled collaborative village to land. And do we have a great foundation of leaders collaborating and moving the region in an exciting direction! 



We have a great foundation of leaders moving the region in an exciting direction!

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New Chamber head says it's a good match

By Aila Boyd

Livingston seeks to “promote, develop and support quality business opportunities,” in Salem and Roanoke County.

Amanda Livingston has been on a mission for the past couple of months. Since she was hired as executive director of the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce in October, her focus has been to “promote, develop and support quality business opportunities in Salem and Roanoke County.” She said everything the chamber does, from its programming to events, is geared towards accomplishing that goal.

To do so, she has been working to cement the chamber’s position as “the nexus for business professionals to collaborate and network.” The Rhode Island native was selected from a field of 83 applicants, five of which were interviewed for the job.

“I’m a loyal person. I think they need someone who is loyal and committed to

grow this and really carry out the strategic direction that is being worked on,” Livingston said of why she felt she was a strong candidate. “I’m just delighted they picked me. I love this.”

Earlier in her career, Livingston worked remotely for over 20 years for the corporate office of Jackson Hewitt Tax Service, Inc. A year following the death of her then-husband around 2014, she relocated her family from Georgia to South Carolina. Shortly thereafter, she entered the real estate business.

Coincidentally, her Isle of Palms neighbors also had a residence in Salem. It was through them she met the man she is now married to. She moved to the Roanoke Valley roughly 20 months ago as a result. After the move, she continued her work in real estate at MKB Realtors.

When she found out about the chamber position, Livingston felt her experience closely matched the job requirements.

Despite not having been involved in chambers of commerce before, she said her time at Jackson Hewitt prepared her for the task of balancing the needs of both large and small businesses.

“Working in franchising, I worked with a lot of different business operators—from really large operators that had hundreds of locations across several states and mom and pops that had one or two locations,” she explained. “It was a good match because I’m working with so many different business owners in the chamber—from smaller merchants to larger corporate professionals.”

The chamber currently has around 400 members. Livingston plans to grow that



Amanda Livingston

number. "We encourage everyone to join, whether it's a one-person business or a medium size company or large company," she said. "I believe an affiliation with this chamber is only going to benefit companies of all sizes."

With that being said, she cautioned she doesn't want the chamber to lose its defining characteristics.

"The beauty of this chamber is that it's a smaller-sized, Main Street chamber. We don't want to lose that closeknit unity, but we want to add as many businesses as possible. We want to expand our outreach. That's a big part of our strategic focus," she said.

Although she wants to increase the chamber's footprint, she also plans "to continue to add value to" current members by pursuing efforts that are relevant to them such as leadership sessions and business advocacy programs.

Another growth opportunity Livingston sees for the chamber is "heightening the legislative arm."

"I need to know what's going on with economic development and I need to know what's on the legislative horizon. I need to be able to communicate that to the members of our chamber," she said.

Since assuming her position, Livingston has been pleased with the level of member and community engagement with the chamber.

"There is so much passion, participation and involvement with our board and many of the members," she said. "There are so many people that love Salem and Roanoke County, and they want to work hard, and they do work hard, to make it a better place."

To further facilitate member involvement, the chamber's ambassador program has been relaunched.

Livingston noted the past few months have been quite intense for her. In addition to learning the ins and outs of the chamber, she's had to introduce herself to the various members and give the organization a sense of direction after it was without a leader



Submitted

for a number of months.

Despite all that, she's "loving every minute of it."

"Every day is different. I love working with so many different people with so many different projects. My schedule is just chock-full," she said.

Those who hired Livingston seem to be impressed by the job she's doing thus far.

Allen Lawrence, general manager of the Salem Red Sox and 1st vice president of the chamber, noted she brings a lot of excitement and ideas to the chamber. "She has really hit the ground running and has already met a lot of key members of our local government and business community," he said.

Dee King, owner of Land Records Research LLC and a member of the chamber's executive committee, agreed. "She is warm and approachable and brings energy to match her professionalism," she said. "I am looking forward to seeing the chamber move forward with her leadership." 



TAF takes wraps off Virginia Innovation Accelerator >

A former factory space that used to manufacture cigarette paper in **Buena Vista** – 40,000 sq ft. in fact – is now home to the **Virginia Innovation Accelerator (VIA)**, which will provide a “comprehensive support system for early-stage high growth companies,” according to Vinton-based **The Advancement Foundation (TAF)**, which owns the property. Around eight businesses have committed to the VIA in downtown Buena Vista, which will focus to a large extent on agri-businesses. A \$700,000 grant will help make the VIA facility ADA-compliant and will upgrade other physical parts of the building as well.

That support for early-stage companies with the potential to scale up includes onsite packaging services, help with labor and interns/expertise from the five colleges and university within hailing distance of the VIA. At an open house last month representatives from the City of Buena Vista, the VIA tenants and others from the area curious about the potential for such a facility – which the TAF says may be a prototype for similar projects in the sprawling region it now serves – took tours of the cavernous building, which is directly adjacent to the Maury River. **Steve Redden** is a Gauntlet graduate (the business mentoring/competition held every spring by TAF) and is also director of manufacturing and value-added product development at the VIA: “its more than just a space – we hire consultants ... we’re a place for events, like workshops.”

“We help [tenants] with packaging, so that it doesn’t cost as much” says **Annette Patterson**, founder and president of The Advancement Foundation, adding that the services offered to early-stage businesses in Buena Vista “can enhance efficiencies.” Patterson says a study showing Virginia falling behind in developing more high growth companies points to, “a gap in the services for early-stage potential high growth companies.” That’s why the VIA model if successful – offering that support at

little or no cost so business owners can focus on product development – may be replicated elsewhere in the region.

Kathy Wilson runs Kenkashi Microbes out of her Floyd County home for now but will move some or all of her production to the VIA. Kenkashi blends fermented microbes with hemp, turning it into a product that speeds the composting process. “This [space] is essentially helping us with our scaling and commercial production,” noted Wilson during the open house. “Eventually we might move all of our production here.” The VIA comes complete with “tiny houses” in the back of the building where visitors can stay overnight when working with one of the tenants. Access to the Maury River is also planned as a perk for those working at the VIA and local citizens. A craft brewer are among the tenants looking to move in soon. A shared commercial kitchen space is also in the works. Electric Iris 3-D owner **Natalie Ashton** (products for poultry incubators) says the main reason she is moving her production from her home in Roanoke to Buena Vista is to help with scaling: “in my house I have a finite number of square footage. Here I have the ability to use the resources to grow the business.”

Kristina Ramsey is Director of Economic Development for Buena Vista: “[the City] has been declining economically for many years ... this center coming in, creating a space for business incubation, small scale manufacturing and value-added support ... is going to be a huge asset to Buena Vista.” The city had already been working with The Advancement Foundation as The Gauntlet spread beyond its Roanoke area roots; then Patterson told them TAF wanted to buy the old factory space and turn it into a small business accelerator. “[We thought] wow, this is incredible. We need new businesses ... and a space that reduces the risk for new businesses to get started. We were like – yes! Perfect, right outside of our downtown. It’ll really help get things moving.”





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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]

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.

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Michael Waldvogel is the president and chief executive officer of Waldvogel Commercial Properties, founding it in 2004. With three decades of commercial real estate experience, he was also the founding principal of Waldvogel, Poe & Cronk, a business development director for the Better Business Bureau, and executive director of the Downtown Business League. He is active in a number of business, professional, trade, and service organizations, and is an outdoor enthusiast and runner.

Student success center opens to the public

Since its launch this past summer, the Roanoke Higher Education Center's (RHEC) Student Success Center has become a sought-after tutoring resource for students at their member institutions. Now, students outside of the RHEC can also take advantage of these services. The Student Success Center is currently available to 5th through 12th graders, as well as to adult learners throughout the Roanoke Valley.

"I am excited about opening up our services to the community and being able to help students with their academics," said Dr. Kimberly Mattson, Student Success Center Coordinator.

"There is no doubt that the pandemic has brought disruptions to student learning," Mattson continued. "Tutoring at the Student Success Center will help those who need academic strengthening to get back up to speed—an important service, as students may continue to feel the impacts of Covid for some time."

Highly trained tutors offer subject-specific help in reading, writing, and math. Both in-person and online services are available. Tutoring in math, in particular, has been in demand since the Center opened.

In addition, the Center's regular services continue to be offered to current students affiliated with RHEC. The tutoring program provides course-specific and topic-based tutoring, with a focus on math and science. The Writing Center works with students to strengthen their writing skills for classes as well as polishing business-related items such as resumes and cover letters.

The Center also offers help with improving study skills. Mattson regularly works with individuals and classes on academic-related subjects and also non-course related topics such as developing effective notetaking and time management skills, managing test anxiety and stressors, and maintaining a healthy work/life balance.

Student Success Center services are free for students of the RHEC educational member organizations and are available to members of the public for a small fee. The Center is open Monday–Friday from 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. Tutoring is also available in the evenings and on Saturdays by appointment.

For more information or to request a tutor, please call (540) 767-6014, email rhecstudentsuccess@education.edu, or visit www.education.edu. 

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By The Roanoke Higher Education Center

Executive Summary:

The Student Success Center provides course-specific and topic-based tutoring in addition to help in reading, writing, math.



Dan Smith

Sarah Snider: “What I do is to make sure the company keeps running.”

Making the science work

By Dan Smith

Sarah Snider is bringing science to the real world.

Warren Bickel, a world-renowned behavioral scientist, was direct and unequivocal when he answered the question, “Would there be a BEAM Diagnostics without Sarah Snider?”

“No,” he said, quickly and firmly. Bickel, a researcher at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute, and James McKillop, a professor of psychiatry in Ontario, had this great idea and she seemed likely to be able to carry it through. Their substance use research was ready to move beyond the theoretical and be built into what became Beacon. It fell to Snider, a 35-year-old PhD who worked with

them, to get educated in the business end of the equation.

She did, taking the company and herself through the RAMP regional business accelerator learning process. “She was the driving force in implementing the company,” says Bickel. “The idea rose among the three of us and the theory was strong and concrete in literature, but it had never been translated.” Snider helped translate it.

According to its own literature, BEAM “developed Beacon, a digital assessment

platform that simplifies assessment delivery and equips providers with accessible, predictive technology that improves the proactive quality of care for patients in a time-efficient, cost-effective, and non-stigmatizing manner.”

In essence, patients are given important medical assessments of potential destructive behavior. First was alcohol and opioid misuse. To come are smoking, eating, diabetes, depression, dementia, and the like. BEAM provides hospitals with a digital platform for those assessments, a few questions that help determine vulnerability. It is a huge step forward in working with the addicted and those with substance disorders and other behavioral risks.

Sarah Snider has been an overachiever from the beginning. She is the daughter of a Pfizer chemist in Sparta, New Jersey, (her mom sold Mary Kay and works in a jewelry store) and Snider “knew I wanted to study neuroscience. An advisor [at Allegheny College] introduced me to behavioral pharmacology [which studies] why people take drugs when they shouldn’t”

The product is not yet commercial but is expected to hit the market with a bang in 2023. So far, it has operated on \$2.3 million in grants from the National Institutes of Health and state organizations, among others. The potential is “enormous,” says Snider.

Her vital job has been to “solicit hospitals

to integrate [the program] into their systems,” a big task toward the commercial end. Snider says she and her “team helped build a digital application platform to deliver to [providers] for feedback.”

She has worked impressively across disciplines, but says with a degree of modesty, “my biggest struggle has been ‘imposter syndrome.’” That was eased because “we all learned together.”

It helps that every day is different with fresh challenges, successes and even failures. “I love that role,” she says. “What I do is to make sure the company keeps running. I spend a lot of time with the team, building the culture. I’m also the fund-raiser and like all small businesses, we are looking for revenue. I’m the relationship-builder.”

One of the relationships she built recently—outside the company—was to marry former Marine Brad Wise. The company has five employees, mostly working from home now, and when it launches next summer, it should move quickly toward 25 to 35, Snider says.

Bickel has considerable confidence that the third leg of the partnership, Sarah Snider, will be a smash hit because “she is smart, effective and gets things done. She has been excited about the business potential and jumped in with both feet. She had to learn how to form a company and she has been tearing it up ever since.” Snider, he says, has been responsible for “bringing science into the real world. Research doesn’t do that.” 

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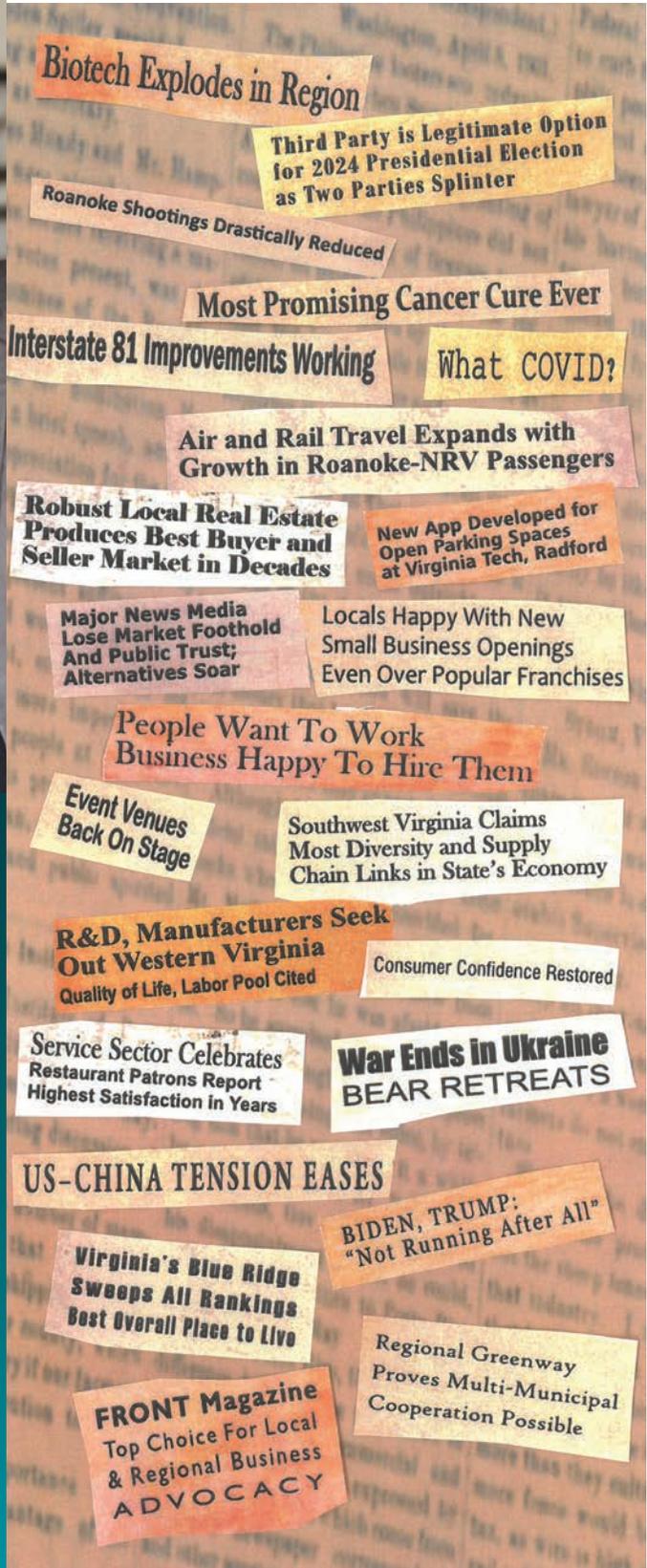


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Headlines I'd like to see for 2023



Biotech Explodes in Region

Third Party is Legitimate Option for 2024 Presidential Election as Two Parties Splinter

Roanoke Shootings Drastically Reduced

Most Promising Cancer Cure Ever

Interstate 81 Improvements Working

What COVID?

Air and Rail Travel Expands with Growth in Roanoke-NRV Passengers

Robust Local Real Estate Produces Best Buyer and Seller Market in Decades

New App Developed for Open Parking Spaces at Virginia Tech, Radford

Major News Media Lose Market Foothold And Public Trust; Alternatives Soar

Locals Happy With New Small Business Openings Even Over Popular Franchises

People Want To Work Business Happy To Hire Them

Event Venues Back On Stage

Southwest Virginia Claims Most Diversity and Supply Chain Links in State's Economy

R&D, Manufacturers Seek Out Western Virginia Quality of Life, Labor Pool Cited

Consumer Confidence Restored

Service Sector Celebrates Restaurant Patrons Report Highest Satisfaction in Years

War Ends in Ukraine BEAR RETREATS

US-CHINA TENSION EASES

Virginia's Blue Ridge Sweeps All Rankings Best Overall Place to Live

BIDEN, TRUMP: "Not Running After All"

FRONT Magazine Top Choice For Local & Regional Business ADVOCACY

Regional Greenway Proves Multi-Municipal Cooperation Possible

ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

Executive Summary: FRONT publisher shares his headline wish list for the New Year.

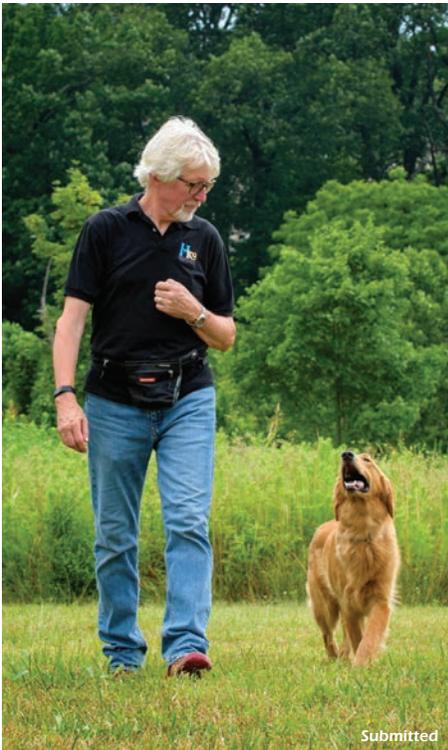
Its never too late ... ?

You may know him by his on-air name David Lee, but David Hamblin has returned to the Valley in a new capacity - as a dog trainer. Hamblin began his career in radio as David Lee in the mid-seventies and worked locally at both K92 and Star Country in recent years, before making the move to North Carolina temporarily to earn a Master Dog Trainer certification. Lee said his life-long love of dogs, and a desire to improve their lives were his main drivers.

"Because I had the luxury of having a microphone [in radio] I started working with local rescues [shelters]. As the years went along, I kept feeling the need to do something bigger. I wanted to make the relationship between people and their dogs so much better." Many dogs who wind up in shelters are there because they were not properly trained early on.

Hamblin offers classes ranging from basic puppy training to behavior modification. See the Highland K9 Training Roanoke, website or Facebook for more details. Hamblin says his wife's encouragement gave him the motivation to chase his dream of improving the lives of dogs and their people - even in his '60s : "my wife always said to me its never too late to be who you might have been. I could have very easily said I'm too old to do this, its too much for me to keep up with. But why NOT do it? What's stopping me? What do I have to lose?"

After six months of intense training in North Carolina, Hamblin began his new career as a contractor with Highland K9 Training. Not long after that though, he began taking clients back in Roanoke. Now, Hamblin says he's bringing it all full circle: "I'm going to be in Roanoke now permanently. Right around Christmas time my gift to myself is to be back home." What's on your agenda this year? Something you'd like to do before the clock runs out. A post-retirement second career perhaps. David Hamblin took the plunge. 



"David Lee with dog"

Submitted



THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:

What's on your to-do list for 2023 – a late career change perhaps that follows your passion?

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.



Pie oh my

I've never seen a car's GPS take over like mine has. When I'm driving past the historic town of Fincastle in Botetourt County, for some odd reason, my navigator always instructs me to turn on Main Street. "Destination is right there, on the corner" Ms. Navigator says, when I reach The Pie Shoppe, only one block in.

Not gonna lie... the pies can seem a bit costly. Doesn't matter. They're that good. We'll devour one of the pies as our dinner-for-two. All of the chicken savory pies are absolutely delightful—and nothing at all like those commercial chicken-pot-pies you got as a kid. They're full of perfect ingredients, full of flavor, not at all soupy, and particularly suited for these cold winter nights. The sweet pies are fantastic, too.

If you see a blue car with VB FRONT license plates parked in Fincastle, I'm the guy in there opening the freezer door with a stack of pies. Oh, and another good idea: they make great gifts for special friends and family. If you can let go of them.

—Tom Field

Have you been sacked?

No kidding, the author of *Fired!* (IBPA; 2022) is a lawyer named Sack.

Also not kidding: it's a pretty good guidebook. The labor and workplace attorney has compiled information for terminated employees to "fight back, cut a deal, stand up for your rights, and firmly land on your feet." The book includes sample letters and forms to use and how you can respond if you are "let go, forced to resign unfairly or illegally fired, or exploited

in any way." Even if you quit, *Fired!* presents information you might consider.

After publishing career announcements for 34 years, we've noticed the preponderance of exits at the end of every calendar year—for whatever reason, whether self-directed or... not. Perhaps during holiday break or at the turn of the year, if you're one who has exited, you can grab a cup of coffee from a barista named Java, curl up by the fire from the "fuel" you bought from Woody, stretch out in comfy pajamas you got from your aunt PJ, and read insights from this counselor-of-the-pink-slip, named Sack.

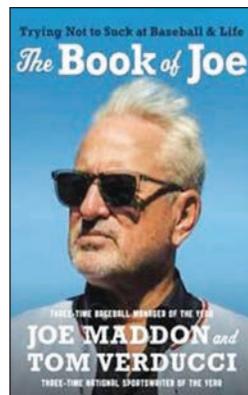
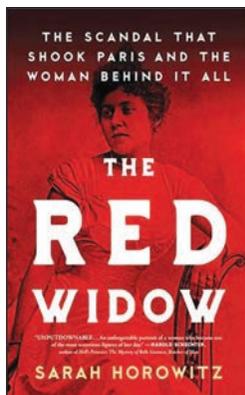
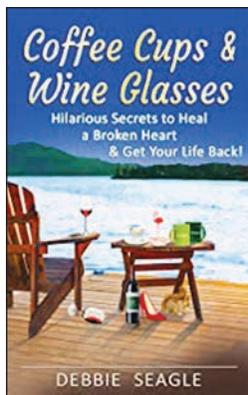
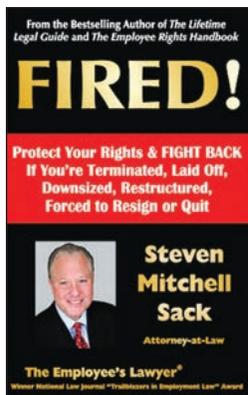
—Tom Field

Laughing with Debbie

Radford's Debbie Seagle has just written a book that defies categorization, "Coffee Cups & Wine Glasses/Hilarious Secrets to Heal a Broken Heart & Get Your Life Back" (DO IT Publishing). It is all that and more.

Seagle, a woman with a gloriously diverse background (which includes Sunday columnist for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, bi-plane wing-walking, floating in the Dead Sea, playing darts with diplomats, rappelling a Mid-East waterfall and a good bit more), suspends considerable energy in the book getting over her ex-husband, Richard Cranium (or more formally, Dick Head). But there's more to life than ex-husbands and she looks at a lot of it, generally with a light touch that will have you blowing coffee out your nose.

"Coffee Cups & Wine Glasses" is the type of book I have often referred to as a "bathroom read" because you can open it anywhere and absorb chapters of a few words or many



minutes, depending on nature's call at the moment. There are even chapters on braille, muddy trucks, starting a fire, and other useful tidbits, including this one, "When laughter is the least suitable for a situation, that's usually when you lose the ability not to laugh."

So, laugh along with this one. It's irresistible.

—Dan Smith

A woman before her time to be sure

The Red Widow: The Scandal that Shook Paris and the Woman Behind It All (Sourcebooks 2022) is a thrilling, saucy look at a scandal that rocked the French establishment at the turn of the twentieth century. Washington & Lee professor Sarah Horowitz details the twists and turns of Marguerite 'Meg' Steinheil's rise and fall through the highest echelons of French society. Meg struggled against an unhappy marriage and her own place in that world. She may or may not have also helped murder her husband and mother, which was the subject of a sensational trial in 1909 that the Paris tabloids had a field day with. She traded sexual favors to those who bought her husband's overpriced paintings, which helped keep them housed. Steinheil was also cavorting with the President of France who had an apparent stroke – and later died - as they were frolicking.

The Red Widow is a rollicking bawdy read, almost like a novel, that also examines classism and a women's place in society then in France, sexual freedom and the like. The story of Marguerite 'Meg' Steinheil's rise and fall (she later moved to England and got involved in charitable causes) is not new and has been made into films before, but Sarah Horowitz no doubt will lift the curtain for many on a most interesting and multi-faceted

woman – who was also a pretty good liar by the way.

—Gene Marrano

Joe is NOT by the book

I'm a big Joe Maddon fan. The three-time Major League Baseball Manager of the Year turned the sad-sack, cash strapped Tampa Bay Devil Rays into the Tampa Bay Rays, a perennial playoff threat and two-time World Series participants. Then he won it all with the Chicago Cubs – their first baseball championship in over 100 years. Alas, his last stint with the LA Angels didn't quite work out but that's baseball. *The Book of Joe: Trying Not to Suck at Baseball & Life* (Twelve/Hachette Book Group 2022) drills down deep into his philosophy about working hard on the playing field but having fun. It also details Maddon's love-hate relationship with analytics and front office interference with player management decisions.

Maddon played football and baseball in college and after a shortened playing career in the minors became a manager before he was 30. He didn't make it to The Show as a full-time manager with Tampa Bay until he was in his 50's. The Book of Joe is co-written by one of the best baseball writers and broadcasters in the business, Tom Verducci. It gets deep in the weeds at times, but baseball fans and Joe Maddon boosters will enjoy it – maybe as a warmup for spring training and the 2023 season.

—Gene Marrano

The reviewers: Tom Field is publisher of FRONT; Dan Smith is former editor of FRONT; Gene Marrano is editor of FRONT.



Tote bags for the holidays >

The **Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP)** of Montgomery County and Radford delivered 120 Holiday Tote Bags to 65 residents of Commonwealth Senior Living and 55 residents of Noble Senior Living last month before Christmas with the help of RSVP Elves. The tote bags were filled by members of the community including Montgomery County employees, Calvary United Methodist Church, Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Church, Retired Educators Association of Montgomery County, and volunteers of RSVP.



Creamery cited for business growth >

The Franklin County Board of Supervisors presented **Homestead Creamery** last month with a Proclamation of Recognition for the 10th anniversary of receiving Virginia's first Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development (AFID) grant award in December of 2012. The initial AFID facility grant award was made to Franklin County on December 17, 2012, in support of an expansion by Homestead Creamery. Since then, Franklin County has also received a planning grant and an infrastructure grant for other local businesses making Franklin County the first locality in Virginia to utilize all three AFID programs. With county support and the grant, Homestead Creamery expanded its operation to meet the growing demand for their products and put an additional 20 people to work.

Said **Ronnie Thompson**, Chairman of the Franklin County Board of Supervisors. "Because agriculture does not fit in many of the traditional economic development assistance programs, the AFID Programs have allowed us to provide much-needed support to these important businesses." Homestead Creamery continues to see growing demand and opportunities. They epitomize the kind of business we all want to see in our community."



Submitted

More downtown living planned with church sale >

Calvary Baptist Church, a landmark building in downtown Roanoke on Campbell Avenue has been sold. The historic sanctuary was built in 1925, and the congregation itself dates to 1891. DoCalvary, LLC, affiliated with **Macado's** restaurant chain owner **Richard Macher**, purchased the property from the church on December 1, for \$1,150,000 with plans to redevelop, reportedly as apartment spaces. (Macher is doing the same with portions of the old Roanoke Times building.) Cushman & Wakefield | Thalhimer handled the sale.



Gene Marrano

More big checks for good causes >

Member One Federal Credit Union called it a "Week of Giving," - gifting TAP last month with \$100,000 for early education programs - and then \$50,000 for the **Bradley Free Clinic**, to support the dental services it provides to those without insurance. **Alex Lucas** is the Vice President of Community Impact for Member One: "any gift actually helps those who are short on financial aid. The size is important in that we are partnering and collaborating with organizations that seem to be focused more ... financially vulnerable. The Bradley Free Clinic has recruited enough new volunteer dentists and support staff to offer those free dental services five days a week.



Funds for welding training >

GO Virginia State Board announced approval for three new Region 2 projects recently. Botetourt Count received one of these grants in partnership with **Botetourt Technical Education Center (BTEC)** and **Botetourt County Schools**, to enhance the region's capacity to train and prepare welders. The GO Virginia funding will help support the installation of ten new welding booths at BTEC's campus in Fincastle. This expansion is projected to deliver forty-five new welders to the regional workforce over the initial three-year project term. The GO Virginia board approved a total of \$166,667 in state funds for the project, which is leveraging \$83,333 in non-state sources.

"The welding program at Botetourt Technical Education Center is one of the very few high school level welding programs in the United States to be certified by the American Welding Society," said **Ken McFadyen**, director of Economic Development for Botetourt County. "This funding will allow us to expand the facility's capacity to train more students in welding skills, who will go on to become credentialed and gain employment in the region, helping to keep talent local."



Submitted

Stepping up for the Mission >

US Cellular surprised the **Rescue Mission of Roanoke** last month by pulling up with a truck packed with \$5000 worth of food, kitchen equipment and paper products to help refill the shelter's pantry. **Nakeita Stewart** is the Mid-Atlantic sales manager for US Cellular – and Roanoke is her hometown: "just the pride in being part of something like the Rescue Mission, the amount of impact that they have every day on different people. Feed them, making sure that they are taken care of. It's so important to me as an individual but also to US Cellular. Some of the items donated to the Rescue Mission included big-ticket items like a natural gas floor fryer and a countertop gas griddle.



Courtesy of Virginia Tech

NIL deal for Tech athlete >

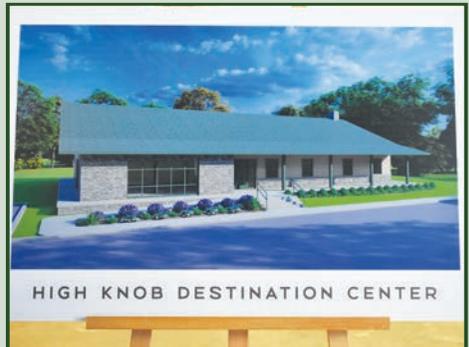
NIL - name image likeness - has made its way to the Virginia Tech Hokies volleyball team. **Dunkin'** - the coffee and donut giant - has announced **Virginia Tech's Cara Lewis** as a new addition to Team Dunkin', a class of 31 student-athletes from colleges and universities. Lewis is a senior middle blocker for the Hokies; she will be part of 13 teams sharing their experiences across social media - with access to exclusive Team Dunkin' merch to sport on and off the field.



REACH comes to Carilion Children's-Tanglewood >

The **Petty** family of **NASCAR** racing fame calls its North Carolina-based summer camp for kids with serious illnesses "Victory Junction," to honor Adam Petty, who used to visit children's hospitals between races. Now **Victory Junction** has come to **Carilion Children's** at Tanglewood - and to Virginia - for the first time with its "REACH" program. **Carrie Mahoney** is a child life specialist for Carilion who has also worked at the Victory Junction summer camp in North Carolina: "It's a camp for children with chronic illnesses and disabilities. They bring camp to the kids [with REACH]; fun activities, arts and crafts. Something to spark a little joy while the kids are here for their appointment."

Adam Petty died during a pre-race practice run 22 years ago. The REACH program will return to Carilion Children's on a monthly basis. "I learned firsthand what a benefit it can be to these kids to meet other kids like them at camp, to build confidence and maybe come to terms with their diagnosis, by meeting kids with the same [condition]. I saw the power of it," says Mahoney.



Digging deep on high knob >

Friends of Southwest Virginia and the **City of Norton, Va.**, held a celebratory groundbreaking on Dec. 16 to commemorate construction on the High Knob Destination Center. The visitor center is being built just minutes from downtown, off Route 619 at the base of High Knob. The Destination Center will introduce and educate visitors interested in exploring the rich natural, historical, and recreational assets of the High Knob Region. Pictured are: Barbara Caruso (Norton Industrial Development Authority); Thatcher Stanley (Congressman Morgan Griffith Office); Bill Hartley (ARC/DHCD), Mayor Joe Fawbush (City of Norton), Fred Ramey (City Manager, City of Norton), Kim Davis (Friends of Southwest Virginia), Bill Thompson (Thompson & Litton).



'Feel good' visualized by ETS >

"In an effort to set ourselves apart and give back through the arts, the President of **ETS Recruit**, **Mark Kennedy**, had a vision to have a mural painted on our building," says Ben Kennedy, recruitment and office coordinator. "The mural depicts the richness of some of the Valley's outdoor highlights. We need as many purposeful 'feel good' narratives as we can get."

ETS Recruit moved to 319 McClanahan St, Roanoke in late September 2022. The physician recruiting firm (etsrecruit.com) partners with local hospitals and practices to help find and place physicians in the community and across the country.

Stirred, not mistaken >

AAF Roanoke ad club held a Holiday Cocktail Party on Dec. 7 at Crystal Spring Grocery. Grocery hosts demonstrated how to concoct the Negroni Spagliato ("spagliato" translates from Italian as "mistake" since prosecco or sparkling wine is substituted for gin, the official Negroni spirit). Club members partook in delectable hors d'oeuvres from the grocery stock, advertising bingo, and spirited conversation.





Bringing awareness to children's cancer – with sneakers >

An event designed to raise awareness for pediatric cancer patients at **Carilion Children's** starts with painted sneakers - and the Hokies basketball squads. Virginia Tech Hokies forward **Justyn Mutts** was at Carilion Children's-Tanglewood last month, painting sneakers in bright colors for his coaches and staff members to wear later this month during a game as part of the "Coaches versus Cancer" awareness campaign: "all the knowledge I've been able to accumulate it doesn't do any good to keep it to myself. [I'm] just trying to give back as much as I can. It's the only thing that really matters to me at this point." Mutts is working on a fourth degree at Tech.

A day later redshirt freshmen guard **Carleigh Wenzel** from the Top 250 ranked Tech women's basketball team was also adding her artistic touch to a pair of sneakers: "when you come out and talk to these kids, you'll never know, the treatment they go through every day and all the hard stuff they have to deal with. Being able to come and just take their mind off all the hard things they have to deal with – it means a lot to us."

Carli Holtzauer is a child life specialist at Carilion Children's Hospital - she noted that kids who have had cancer were also painting sneakers with the Hokies: "this is the first opportunity we've had to get a lot of these kids together and meet each other, being able to connect with other kids going through the same thing – or other kids who have survived [cancer]. It's really been amazing to see. Kids talking and painting together." The Hokies men's coaches will rock their "Shoes for Hope" against Syracuse at home on January 28; the women's team coaches will do so on January 12 vs Louisville.



Lee Friesland for Virginia Tech

Life in a backpack >

Six third-year industrial design students at **Virginia Tech** spent a Friday in Dec. helping UTS Systems LLC manufacture 50 military-grade backpacks that will be given to people struggling with substance use disorder and housing insecurity in Roanoke.

"This is going to be a game-changer for people; I'm blown away," said Lisa Via, manager of the Council of Community Services' Drop-In Center North in Roanoke. "Their lives are in those backpacks, and the students have taken great strides to make sure that population is going to be served by this."

A collaborative design between the students and the company, the waterproof bags include an attached waterproof tarp with grommets that allow it to be hung up to provide shelter. The bags also come with personal hygiene supplies, seasonal clothing, information about community resources, and medical kits designed by the students. The latter includes Narcan, a nasal spray version of the opioid overdose reversal drug, Naloxone, which is provided with required training.

"I always knew I wanted to use design to help people," said Ashley Greene, an industrial design student. "And I was always interested in medical care, and I've always loved soft goods and fabrics, so this was just the perfect opportunity."

A part of the Connection 2 Care project, the bags will be distributed by the Drop-In Center North and the Virginia Harm Reduction Coalition later this month. In January, the students, alongside supervising faculty, will return to ask recipients for feedback on how they worked.



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

EDUCATION FRONT



Ickes

Andrew Ickes '11, has joined who joined the College of Natural Resources and Environment at Virginia Tech as the assistant dean of advancement. Ickes will lead the college's advancement efforts. He began his fundraising career as a district executive for the Blue Ridge Mountains Council of the Boy Scouts of America. Other stops include the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC as director of development before returning to Lewisburg to take on the role of development director with the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine.

Ferrum College has welcomed **Dr. Mirta**



Martin

Martin as interim president, beginning this month. Martin will focus on recruitment and retention; and strengthening the identity and brand of the College. Martin has been involved in both the public and private sectors and has extensive expertise in strategic planning, marketing and brand identity, crisis management, financial, budgeting and risk mitigation, stakeholder relationship management, program innovation, and funding.

Dana Teaford has returned as the Director of Training for HoneyTree Early Learning Centers. She was with HoneyTree for a short period and later became the HR representative for all



Teaford

twelve HoneyTree locations. After five years of continuing education in staff development and HR Practices, she has returned again to HoneyTree.



Johnson

Sylvester Johnson, assistant vice provost for the humanities and founding director of the Virginia Tech Center for Humanities, has been promoted to associate vice provost for public interest technology. In his new role, Johnson will build consensus across disciplines and

colleges for research, teaching, and public engagement to develop and enhance Virginia Tech's impact in public interest technology.

LEGAL FRONT

Gentry Locke has announced that **Jared A. Tuck** and **Aidan C. Williams** have joined the firm's Roanoke office as associates. Tuck is a member of the firm's Plaintiff Practice Group and previously served as a summer associate with Gentry Locke. Williams is a member of Gentry Locke's Commercial Litigation Practice Group where he assists businesses and commercial clients as they navigate litigation across a variety of industries.

DEVELOPMENT FRONT

Charlie Elston has joined McLeod Enterprises in the Elite Home Rentals Group as Director of Construction – Residential Real



- Relationship Banking
- Business Lending
- Merchant Services
- Treasury Management



Elston

Estate. Elston will focus on rent ready properties.



Bailey

McLeod Enterprises has welcomed **Lori Bailey** as the Real Estate Operations Manager, where she will work towards development of an enhanced support system for Real Estate Functions.

NON-PROFIT FRONT

Junior Achievement of Southwest Virginia has hired **Keri Garnett**, former Financial Empowerment Center

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.

Manager at Freedom First Enterprises, as its president. Garnett will manage the organization's work readiness, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy programs that currently reach over 5,000 K-12 students annually in the area. Most recently Garnett served as Manager for the Roanoke Financial Empowerment Center through Freedom First Enterprises where she supported all aspects of the organization. She succeeds Katherin Elam, who recently retired after 24 years as JA President.

MUNICIPAL FRONT

Troy Cole has been named Montgomery County Information



Cole

Technology Director. As IT Director, he will be supporting the software applications and technology infrastructure used by Montgomery County employees and departments. Cole began his Montgomery County career in 2008 as a Technology Support Specialist and then serves as Systems Engineer prior to being named Interim Information Technology Director in September of 2022.

Danielle Poe has been named Assistant Director of Economic



Poe

Development for Roanoke County. Poe comes from the Roanoke Regional Airport Commission where she was the business manager for nearly three years, managing the day-to-day operations within the organization and overseeing risk management strategies in various projects. Poe has over 15 years of experience in various roles including as the Economic Development specialist for Downtown Roanoke, Inc.

Compiled by Gene Marrano



Bank of Botetourt



More scaling up for TAF

The Advancement Foundation based in Vinton with funding from the Alleghany Foundation, has launched The Product Discovery, Development & Scale Initiative, designed to “spur the evolution of value-added product development, manufacturing and commercialization for Alleghany Highlands.” The initiative focuses on the identification of new and existing businesses in Alleghany Highlands that have potential to scale their business or to commercialize one or more value added products.

Innovation Teams to test scaling and commercialization opportunities will be developed to include faculty from Mountain Gateway Community College, Virginia Military Institute, Southern Virginia University, and James Madison University and local workforce and economic development leaders. To assist with the execution of this

initiative, TAF has contracted with Jim Garcia, a lifelong resident of Alleghany Highlands. Garcia is a licensed Realtor and has co-owned Standard Printing & Office Supply, Inc. and had an ownership in a local home health company, known as Highlands Home Health.

More high-speed internet coming to SWVA

Residents and businesses in Bland and Montgomery counties can now sign up for high-speed internet at www.gigabeam.net. On November 30, the SCC approved Appalachian Power’s proposal to attach fiber optic cable on its poles. “The commission’s decision is great news for everyone involved in this project,” said Aaron Walker, Appalachian Power president and chief operating officer. “With SCC approval we can proceed with the next phase of work to make broadband access available to homes and businesses in Montgomery and

Bland counties.” Once complete, the project will make broadband access available to approximately 12,100 homes and businesses in Bland and Montgomery counties.

Gauging impact of new regs

The Governor’s office has released what it calls a first of its kind “Uniform Regulatory Plan” that lists all of the regulatory actions expected by the State government by July 2023, along with a new Regulatory Economic Analysis Manual that guides Virginia agencies on how to review the economic impact of the regulations they issue. Together the Plan and the Manual “will provide unprecedented transparency for all Virginians in the regulatory process.” Both are available to the public through www.townhall.virginia.gov.

Biochar will grow in Floyd

SWVA Biochar, a

producer of biochar in the Southwest Virginia region, will invest \$2.6 million to increase capacity at its operation in Floyd County. Biochar is a highly absorbent, specially produced charcoal with unique properties originally used as a soil amendment and is thought to be the key component in a carbon-negative strategy to resolve several current ecological challenges. The company will make updates to its facility at 209 Sams Road Southeast and add new equipment, including several new kilns. The project will create 15 new jobs for SWVA, founded in 2021.

Props for Friendship employees

Friendship senior living and rehabilitation has selected the winners of its annual recognition awards for 2022. The four awards were presented at the employee recognition awards banquet last month. “We are truly honored and grateful to have so many amazing

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Like a lot of folks, Carla is a frequent donor, sharing her good fortune with organizations that help her community. Carla likes Goodwill’s reputation for treating our employees well and providing lots of opportunities for meaningful work right here at home.

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gracious.



team members at Friendship,” said President and CEO Joe Hoff. “Their hard work is what makes our community the best in the industry and allows us to consistently deliver compassionate care and innovative services to help people thrive.”

Leadership Award: Tashina Adams, Director of Nursing, Friendship Health and Rehab Center North; **Achievement Award:** William Radford, Payroll & Benefits Manager; **Community Award:** Tanya Scott, Director of Social Services, Friendship Health and Rehab Center North; **Clinical Award:** Pamela Blake, LPN, Friendship Salem Terrace.

Manufacturing comeback

Governor Youngkin made a recent stop in Appomattox at the

former Thomasville furniture plant, which will be leased by Virginia MetalFab. That company will invest 9 million dollars and hire around 130 people over the next three years. The announcement gave Youngkin a chance to sound a familiar theme: “manufacturing is on the rebound and Virginia is an important player in the re-shoring of critical industries – back here to Virginia. I’ll say it again, I want made in America to mean made in Virginia.”

The Virginia Jobs Investment Program will support the MetalFab expansion with consulting services and funding, to support employee recruitment and training activities.

Salem artist vies for award

A local artist is up for several awards at a national gospel awards

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show. Long-time Salem resident, Jesse Cann, has been nominated for five awards from the Rhythm of Gospel Awards show for his song, "God Will Be There." He's won two awards at the show in previous years. Cann says he devoted his life and his music to Christ in 1978, and he says nominations for awards like these are more than just recognition for him: "I think for me it's more like an encouragement from the Lord that I'm doing what he wants me to be doing, rather than anything else. [The songs] have meaning to

me in that sense – very deeply." Online voting for the Rhythm of Gospel Awards Show is unlimited now through the first week of March.

Roanoke plans geared towards economic development

Roanoke City Council has voted to adopt both the Neighborhood Centers Plan and Roanoke Opportunities in Action: Economic Development Strategic Plan. In April 2022, the City of Roanoke Department of Economic Development, in



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partnership with Economic Development Authority, engaged with Ernst Young LLP to assist with creating a new five-year strategic plan. The ROA Strategic Plan builds upon previous work and performance, while providing direction toward a more inclusive and equitable economy and community. It provides implementation strategies for business recruitment, retention, and expansion as well as highlighting innovation, community development and financial empowerment in the City of Roanoke.

Meanwhile the Neighborhood centers are urban corridors that can provide services of a social, cultural, or economic nature to the neighborhood in which it is located. For decades, the City of Roanoke has promoted neighborhood centers as important nodes in their network of economic activity. After conducting an analysis of three mature, successful neighborhood centers and examining a variety of corridors, four areas were chosen from dozens of potential centers to serve as

testbeds for revitalization: 11th Street NW, West End, Melrose at 24th Street, and 9th Street SE. This selection was based on a high potential for success, considering activity drivers like traffic, residential density, and amenities like parks. "The Neighborhood Centers Plan will serve as a guidebook for the City and our valuable partners to strengthen the community fabric and enhance economic vitality in four foundational neighborhoods via resident input, deployment of proven planning principles, and lessons learned in redevelopment efforts undertaken in other parts of the City," adds Marc Nelson, Director of Economic Development for the City of Roanoke.

Mayhem in Salem

The Salem Civic Center has hosted a variety of sporting events over the past 50 years-plus, including basketball, boxing, wrestling - even pro hockey. Now comes the Professional Box Lacrosse Association, and the Salem Mayhem franchise that debuted

at the Civic Center on December 30 in a game against the Hampton Hammerheads. George Manias is the team president; the first-year league owns all 9 franchises and will focus on rosters with American-born players: "it's a lot like hockey. It also reminds you a little bit of basketball as well; with setting picks and the transition play back and forth. You have shot clocks as well. It's a fun, really fast, physical interactive game." Season passes and single game tickets starting at 15 dollars for the Salem Mayhem are on sale.

Kudos for diversity efforts

The Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine has been recognized again for efforts to promote diversity and inclusion at the student, faculty and staff level. For a fifth straight year the medical school in Roanoke received the HEED Award - Health professions Higher Education in Diversity from Insight into Diversity

magazine. Angelica Witcher is an assistant dean and the director of student affairs: "we've been working on this for several years. Continued leadership support for diversity, as well as other aspects of the campus diversity and inclusion [efforts] is what they actually look at." Witcher says working for a more inclusive and diverse pool of applicants to pull from - including first generation college students - also helps put the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine on the map.

More funding for site prep?

During a speech to the 13th Virginia Economic Summit and Forum on International Trade, Governor Glenn Youngkin said he was committed to bringing more companies into Virginia by proposing an additional investment for business-ready sites. Youngkin says after signing a budget that included 150 million dollars for preparing business-ready sites, he plans to propose an additional \$350 million

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investment for a total of \$500 million to secure Virginia's position as having the best sites in the nation. The General Assembly will be asked to find room in its next budget for an increase in site preparation funding that can be awarded as grants.

John Hull, executive director of the Roanoke Regional Partnership, says site prep is a competitive must: "certainly having the right zoning in place, having utilities and the right capacities to the site, having

transportation access, pre-grading parts of the site – all the due diligence and the studies that are required. Ultimately, it's about providing a speed to market solution so that companies can scale up. To hear Governor Youngkin proposing a 350 million dollar [additional] level of funding for the program is really what's needed."

Roanoke College survey finds optimism

Consumer sentiment held steady in a 4th

quarter 2022 statewide phone survey after turning a corner in the 3Q from what Roanoke College economics professor Dr. Alice Kassens said had been in freefall since the pandemic started. Don't underestimate consumer sentiment adds Kassens, also a senior analyst for the Roanoke College Institute for Policy and Opinion Research: "consumer sentiment and expectations play a very important role in how an economy does. If people believe that the economy is going to go into freefall, they start getting worried. Maybe

they stop spending as much ... and if a lot of people behave that way and we see consumer spending overall drop, we can push ourselves right into a recession." Kassens says signs that supply chain issues are finally sorting themselves out are hopeful - as were survey responses that in Virginia there is relative optimism about the future - higher even than the national Index of Consumer Expectations.

Compiled by
Gene Marrano

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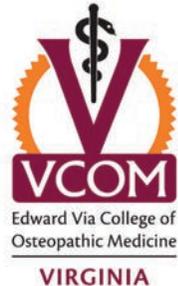


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Work hard, play hard

By Anne Sampson

Valley Business FRONT welcomes Christopher Finley as a 2023 Patron Advisory Board member representing the region's healthcare sector.

Chris Finley describes himself as a firecracker baby (his birthday is 7/4/74). Over a 26-year career in Public Relations, he's tried to live up to the name.

Chris is the Senior Market Director, Marketing Communications for LewisGale Regional Health System.



Submitted

Chris Finley

"In my role, I lead the marketing and communications functions for four hospitals, two freestanding ERs, two regional cancer centers and affiliations with both employed and independent physicians," he says.

LewisGale has a long history in the Roanoke Valley. In 1909, Drs. Joseph Lewis and Sparrell Gale opened a cutting-edge facility in Roanoke City that featured running water and central heating. In the ensuing century-plus, LewisGale Regional Healthcare System has grown to become part of HCA Healthcare, an international company providing healthcare at 182 hospitals and over 2,300 other sites of care, including surgery centers, freestanding ERs, urgent care centers, home health and hospice agencies, and physician clinics, in 20 states and the United Kingdom, according to its website.

"Before joining LewisGale Regional Health System, I commuted for each and every one of my positions," says Chris. "I am a Salem resident so the opportunity to work at our main campus in Salem, (he and wife, Laura, were newly married), and being back to doing a role in a domain that is my first love – marketing and communications – it was an opportunity I couldn't turn down. And, I joined one of the nation's leading providers of healthcare services."

Chris's 26-year career includes a variety

of leadership positions with overlapping skillsets that built naturally toward his current role. He oversaw “financial management, membership engagement, marketing, community development and special events” as executive director of the Smith Mountain Lake Chamber of Commerce. Chris supervised all aspects of communications and community relations for BAE Systems at the Radford Army Ammunition Plant and served as director of marketing and public relations programs for The Willard Companies for 12 years.

With this breadth of experience, it’s only fitting that Chris share his knowledge.

“For the past 18 years, I’ve also worked as a part-time adjunct professor in Radford University’s School of Communication teaching two courses: Writing for Public Relations as well as Business and Professional Communication,” he says.

Chris counts his nearly 12 years with The Willard Companies as among his best. The Willard Companies, including Willard Construction, Westlake Town Center and Westlake Cinema (Smith Mountain Lake), led by Franklin County native, Ron Willard, has spearheaded economic and lifestyle development at Smith Mountain Lake.

“President Ron Willard, Sr. is a mentor of mine who has had a profound impact on my life,” says Chris. “He has a mantra that truly resonates with me: ‘Good enough is not OK. It must be right.’ From a healthy perfectionism approach, it’s important to give your absolute maximum attention and effort to every aspect of your life.”

Chris places a lot of value on that work/life balance we’re all looking for, giving 110% to anything he works on, and rewarding himself after the hard work is done.

“As empty nesters, you’ll likely find my wife and I listening to live music at a local brewery or venue, discovering wineries on Virginia’s Blue Ridge Cheers Trail, or finding our luck at Rosie’s Gaming Emporium,” he says. “I strive to equally

“IN BRIEF”

SPOUSE: Laura Finley. She is the Director of Commercial Operations for Inorganic Ventures in Christiansburg, Va.

“We met when she was an Account Manager for Access Advertising and Public Relations, and I was one of her advertising agency clients. After both going through divorces, we started dating in 2013 and eventually married in 2020 after dating 7 years. We had a big elaborate wedding planned with 200 guests and along came COVID. We pivoted to a small oceanfront wedding at Topsail Island, NC, where I’ve vacationed since 1996. It was very intimate, with 25 of our closest family and friends (that was the maximum group size allowed by law at the time). We also became engaged at Topsail and continue to vacation there with our family every July.”

CHILDREN: Son, John Ryan Finley (from first marriage). He’s 24 and works for UPS in Bristol, Va.

Stepsons: Andrew and Adam Wood. Andrew is 29 and works at Weathertop Farm in Floyd, Va. Adam is 25 and is a bartender in Richmond, Va.

HOMETOWN: Martinsville, Va.

EDUCATION: Master of Science – Communications – Radford University, Radford, Va. Bachelor of Arts – Communications – Lees-McRae College, Banner Elk, NC.

MOTTOS: Work hard, play hard!
Good enough is not OK. It must be right.
(Ron Willard, Sr.)

prioritize the demands of my career and the demands of my personal life. Work hard, play hard!”

To relax and stay fit, Chris pursues a lifelong interest in running, which began in elementary school. As both a primary and middle school athlete, he competed in the Hershey’s Track and Field Games, a national competition sponsored by the Hershey Company since 1977, and he ran cross country in high school and college. He still runs almost every day, but he says, “It’s definitely harder to maintain speed when you’re approaching 50.”

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

Chris also played intramural volleyball in college, and now plays on a team with the Roanoke Valley Volleyball Association. "I've really enjoyed getting back into the sport, meeting new friends and staying active," he says.

Through Chris's strong belief in giving back to his community, he has accumulated many leadership positions over the years. His service includes current directorships of three separate boards: United Way of Roanoke Valley, Brain Injury Services of Southwest Virginia, and Lees-McRae College's Alumni Board. He's a past-president of the Blue Ridge Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America and a former director-at-large for the Radford Chamber and the Smith Mountain Lake Regional Chamber, as well as serving on the Marketing and Communication Council for Virginia's Blue Ridge and as Public Relations Chairman for the Roanoke Regional Homebuilders Association.

The Chamber at Smith Mountain Lake was able to thrive through the challenges presented by the pandemic, as Chris launched the inaugural SML Leadership Academy, secured grant monies, enrolled a record-breaking number of participants in the 2021 Chamber Champions sponsorship platform, and developed the

infrastructure for SML Restaurant Week and a SML Getaway Sweepstakes Campaign.

Chris is "incredibly proud" of the contributions he's been able to make at LewisGale and HCA so far, which he describes as a "privilege."

For instance, he launched Sarah Cannon, the Cancer Institute of HCA Healthcare, which offers access to cutting-edge therapies to patients and families at the Salem and Pulaski hospitals. (Sarah Cannon was entertainer Minnie Pearl's given name, which she offered for the promotion of research and education when she was treated for breast cancer in Nashville in 1993.) He oversaw the opening of LewisGale's second freestanding emergency room, Blue Hills ER. And he led the community celebration of LewisGale Montgomery's 50th year, as well as the groundbreaking ceremony on its \$15.9 million surgery department expansion earlier this year.

"I play a critical role in representing the voice of our customer," Chris says. "In 2023, my priority is to drive community and customer engagement to heighten our positive reputation within the communities we serve. At HCA Healthcare, we are driven by a single mission: Above all else, we are committed to the care and improvement of human life." 

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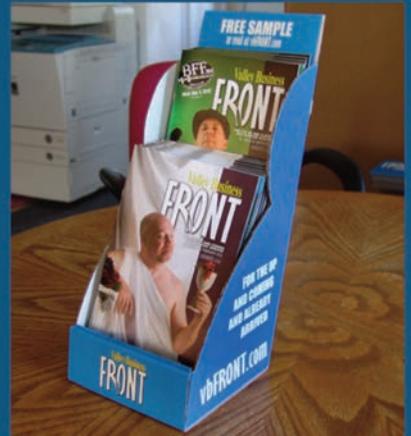
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