

# Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

ISSUE 188

MAY 2024

Goodwill's Zenith

Greg's Consult

RAMP's Director

VT's Ag Guy

Roanoke Regional  
Partnership's  
Record Year

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## THOSE CORPORATE HEAD SHOTS

**Kristina Rose**  
Kristina Rose Photography





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# WELCOME TO THE FRONT

Greetings as we head towards summer, with inflation still checking in at a stubborn three-plus percent (food prices are still steep), gas sitting well above the three-dollar mark per gallon and interest rates still waiting for the Feds to cut the prime. Not to mention the real estate world about to be turned on its head with the standard 6% commission about to become a thing of the past after a court ruling and a massive fine for deceptive practices.

You've come to the right place for some interesting stories on a local photographer, several profiles of people looking to make the region a better place to live and work, and oh yes, a new community theatre group about to open in downtown Roanoke. There's also a trove of information in our Notes, Spotlight and Front sections, and the hiring pace seems to have picked up again. The weather gets warmer, and the business world heats up too. Happy reading.

**Tom Field**  
Publisher

**Gene Marrano**  
Editor

“It's a team sport. — Page 29



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LEAD STORY PAGE 8

# Why Blend In?

By Tom Field



“ ” I can become the voice for the voiceless. — Page 17



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# MAY



Aila Boyd



Jennifer Poff Cooper



Tom Field



Gene Marrano

## Advisory Board

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

# 2024 CONTRIBUTORS



**Carrie Cousins**



**Shannon Dominguez**



**Dan Dowdy**



**Michael Shelton**



**Nicholas Vaassen**

“”  
Things do  
blow up.  
— Page 61

“”  
Yours truly  
is a Bear  
board  
member.  
— Page 34



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Frain & Cawley CPAs /  
finance - accounting



**Kevin Holt**  
Gentry Locke /  
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Biographies and  
contact information  
on each contributor  
are provided on Page 54.

“”  
I like to show my  
authenticity. — Page 14

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# Why Blend In?

By Tom Field

---

Kristina Rose Photography says professional photos are worth it. Project an image that shows who you really are.



Call it “a business decision.”

Kristina Rose is more than accomplished in photographing people, places, things. As a commercial photographer (no weddings, thank you) her portfolio is the kind that solicits calls from all kinds of subjects. Yes, she still does family photo sessions (it’s still there, right on her website); but you don’t have to look too closely to see where her passion lies.

At the top, under “Services” are just three entries: headshots, personal branding, business branding.

The FRONT asked her why she is specializing in this particular niche. In a day where “headshots” are all over social media platforms, in casual and selfie form, isn’t it a bit risky to concentrate on this one area? Stepping in to ask people to step up and go pro with their primary image?

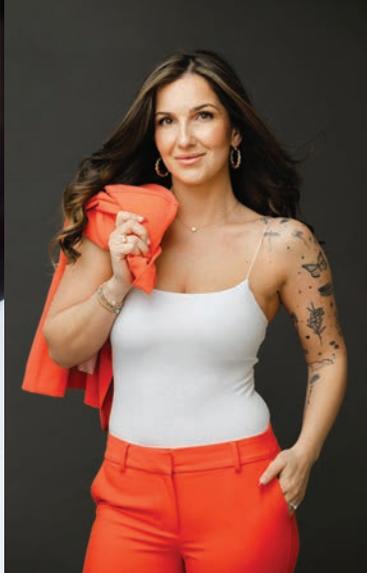
Rose says it’s worth it. True professionals know the value. And their customers, prospects, and other stakeholders will literally see the difference.

But we’ll let her explain.

*Kristina Rose Photography is a commercial photography business serving the region. Owner Kristina Rose is a Certified Professional Photographer (CPP); located in Christiansburg, Virginia. She’s been in business for over ten years, and is now specializing in headshot, personal and business brand photography.*

“”

People are always floored when I compare the selfies that my clients were using next to their new headshot shots.







Radford Highlander Hotel photoshoot.



YOU already know YOU...  
But the rest of us are just trying to judge your book cover.

**You offer most of the conventional photography services; however, your prominent line of work seems to be headshots and business/personal branding. Why is that your strongest offering?**

I am marketing-minded, and I like marrying my love and eye for photography with helping you reach your ideal client. It's not just a smile and look at the camera kind of thing. It's trying to portray who you actually are, with the ultimate goal of letting potential customers and clients know what your business does without having to read much about it. Even a slight head tilt in your headshot might show that you're more approachable. So, we talk about what we want people to think about you, the connection you want to make. THEN we tell that with photos.

**Why are you a good choice for headshots?**

In a world of business, WHY do you want to blend in? I talk folks through choosing their best photos after the session. Studies have shown people aren't great at choosing photos of themselves that genuinely tell who they are. I think anyone swiping through dating profiles could tell you that.

You are your worst critic, and sometimes you get confused about what the photo ACTUALLY says about you. YOU already know YOU, so you are getting the whole story. But the rest of us are just trying to judge your book cover. And if it says the wrong thing, we may not choose to work with you.

**What are some mistakes (or poor choices) you see with corporate headshots?**

This question is a tough one because I think every single corporation is different; and I am all about

authenticity and personality. Many corporations require their employees to have their photos taken. They do it in-house or cut major price corners, and their employees are stuck with photos on their badges or teams that make them want to CRY. Your employees are part of your brand. They should look and feel their best even for internal photos. But if you have terrible headshots on your website of your employees—YIKES! Maybe you don't think it's a big deal. Who cares? But think about how much better your brand as a whole would look if those who represented your company looked their best.

### Any interesting photo sessions?

I photographed the new Highlander Hotel in Radford. That has been the hardest and most exciting project of my career so far. I pulled together models, and we told stories for their marketing. It was a week-long shoot, but at least a month of planning. It's a perfect example of marketing to their ideal clients. I'm very proud of my work there.

**With today's hi-res camera phones, acceptance of "selfies," casual profiles on social media, and DIY trends—is investing in a professional photoshoot really worth it?**

Is professional photography worth it? I say YES. Selfies have their place, and I think learning how to photograph yourself well is essential, especially if you need a lot of content. But if you're running a business—who has time to keep up with all that? I don't even take my own photos, and I know what I am doing! I have a



“ ”

I do not love it when skin color is off.

Kristina Rose does more speaking engagements these days.





vault of professional photos that I can pull from to use for social media or advertising.

I like to show my authenticity in videos on social media. But even I can spend 30 minutes or more trying to get one photo of myself that I like. It's stressful.

I teach a couple of workshops—one for small business owners and one for personal branding. People are always floored when I compare the selfies that my clients were using next to their new headshot shots. That wide-angle lens on cell phones doesn't do anyone justice!

**What do you do when a client has a bad idea or is heading in the wrong direction?**

I feel odd answering this question because I want to brag about myself. This is one of my strong points.

I will not tell you no if you have an idea. We will always execute it to see if it works, then discuss and tweak it. I want you to be happy and have a good experience.

One of my referral requests is "people who hate having their picture made." I'll accept the challenge! And if folks tell me they've always hated their photo, I'll immediately suggest they do hair and makeup—women and MEN! I have a fantastic partner who does hair and makeup for my clients. It helps everyone feel more confident in their photos.

**What is trending now that you like—or, conversely—what is vintage or retro that you like—or what remains classic and a solid approach that still works?**

I think for headshots and branding, it's sort of all about "the trends" with posing and lighting. Sign me up for



all of that! I love to play with studio lighting and different poses to tell your story.

However, the trend that I personally hate the most is different “editing” trends and how they affect skin color. I do not love it when skin color is off. You shouldn’t be orange, green, red, or too dark.

### **In studio? Outdoors? On location? Advantages and disadvantages.**

When you understand lighting, any location is great as long as it matches your brand.

### **What brings you joy in your business?**

I’m practically skipping to the session anytime I am working with another small business owner. I really do find marketing fun, so when I get to have those conversations with people and bring it to life in photos, it’s the best feeling.

### **Ok, we have to ask: What about AI [artificial intelligence generated imaging]?**

As AI becomes more popular, the public will start to crave authenticity. They will want to see more real-life moments and actual people. And as with anything, we will adjust to how it affects the photography industry. I welcome the help and opportunities it will bring. The people who connect with me and my brand will want that personal touch. If they don’t, they probably weren’t my clients to start with and that’s ok. 

“ ”

People aren’t great at choosing photos of themselves.





Goodwill photos

Zenith Barrett

# ***This Zenith is still reaching for the highest point by lifting the underserved***

**By Gene Marrano**

---

**Call Zenith Barrett a rising star in the non-profit world if you will, and an increasingly visible presence in the Roanoke Valley.**

Zenith Barrett has been with Roanoke-based Goodwill Industries of the Valleys for nine years and is now the Vice President of Advancement. She oversees philanthropy, government affairs, economic development and business engagement activities for the non-profit, which has an extended footprint in Central and southwest Virginia, reaching all the way to the Lynchburg area.

Barrett's Goodwill bio says she "utilizes strategic leadership, collaboration, and partnerships to work with businesses and community organizations, focusing on industry-specific needs, emerging trends, community priorities and initiatives." In a word . . . whew! "I'm a purpose-driven leader," she declares.

Barrett also maintains visibility in the community with board positions for the Council of Community Services, the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce (also as a member of the Business Advocacy Committee) and by serving on the Community Advisory Board for Blue Ridge PBS.

Barrett, a Boston native, followed up her Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Virginia State University with a Masters in Public Administration from Columbus State University (GA), so it's not surprising that she values what an education can mean when it comes to career options. She met her husband, a Roanoke area native, at VSU, and they settled here. Her undergraduate degree comes in handy in understanding

human behavior. Working with legislators to secure funding and advocating for the vision of Melrose Plaza is where her Masters comes in handy.

Barrett joined Goodwill when now-retired CEO Bruce Phipps was still there; the entire staff she says helped make the transition to CEO Richmond Vincent (who had Goodwill executive positions elsewhere) a smoother process several years ago. "I think it all worked really well." She cites a great team and partners, and a Board of Directors that all meshes well together. "It's about leveraging resources."

One of her tasks now is helping to get an adult high school, The Excel Center, off the ground on the Goodwill Melrose campus, scheduled to open in 2026, supported by Goodwill Education Initiatives, a not-for-profit formed by Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana in 2010. Excel Center graduates will earn a state-recognized high school diploma and other workforce credentials, as "an entry into the economy." The Excel Center model has worked in dozens of other locales notes Barrett, who discretely describes herself "as under 40." Students (18 and older) will come from outside of northwest Roanoke as well and it "will benefit the entire region."

Melrose Plaza will also be home to the full-service Market on Melrose (opening later this year, operated by trained Goodwill employees) in a part of northwest Roanoke labeled by the USDA as a food desert. The plaza will include a Bank of Botetourt branch and a wellness center; a true "community hub," says Barrett.

Goodwill moved its administrative offices out of its Melrose Avenue headquarters

to downtown Roanoke to make way for that ambitious project, which has received funding from a variety of resources. Other workforce program services are now on Thirlane Road. "A huge transformational project," is how Barrett labels Melrose Plaza, "tackling the social determinants of health." Connecting people with all the resources they need is the goal, by empowering them.

Year-round flexible classes targeting adults will help them finally earn a high school diploma that can lead to bigger and better things, in further education pursuits and career wise. Her resume includes a previous position with the Western Virginia Workforce Development Board – now Virginia Career Works, as the businesses services liaison, "where I worked a lot with our business partners." She was even the interim executive director at one point.

Workforce training for people with disabilities and the underserved, in concert with local business needs has long been a Goodwill staple, fueled in large part by proceeds from items donated to and then sold by the Goodwill thrift stores. "Making sure that I can become the voice for the voiceless, connecting individuals that are looking to work," is how she describes her mission, "making sure there's a great pipeline for us to be competitive in Virginia." In previous positions and now, it was also about working with partners, complementing but not duplicating services in the region.

"It's about helping people reach their fullest potential at Goodwill. It's my purpose and passion. The work we do always aligns with our vision, eliminating poverty - my North Star," says Zenith Barrett. 



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## FINANCIAL FIGURES

By Michael Shelton

### Executive Summary:

*Annuities are a cornerstone of retirement planning, providing a consistent and reliable income stream that supports your post-retirement lifestyle.*

*Michael Shelton is a financial retirement counselor. Reach him at [Michael@360WealthConsulting.com](mailto:Michael@360WealthConsulting.com)*

# Annuities and retirement planning: securing your future income stream

Annuities offer security and peace of mind, particularly for individuals concerned about the risk of outliving their savings. Let's discuss how annuities can be effectively integrated into your retirement strategy. They provide a guaranteed income stream crucial for covering essential expenses such as housing, healthcare, and daily living costs. Lifetime annuities offer continuous payments throughout your life, safeguarding you against longevity risk—the risk of exhausting your retirement savings.

Incorporating annuities into your retirement portfolio diversifies your income sources beyond Social Security and other investments, offering a buffer against market volatility. Annuities act as a financial safety net during market downturns, helping preserve other investments when their values are low.

Annuities provide customizable options tailored to your retirement needs, including immediate or deferred annuities, fixed or variable returns, and various payout periods. Riders such as inflation protection, long-term care benefits, and survivor benefits enhance the utility of annuities in retirement planning.

Deferred annuities enable your investment to grow tax-deferred, postponing taxes on earnings until payments begin. This advantage can accelerate the growth of your savings over time, potentially building a larger retirement nest egg.

When selecting an annuity, evaluate your retirement income goals, including essential expenses, lifestyle aspirations, and healthcare costs. Analyze your existing income sources and identify any gaps an annuity could fill.

Choose an annuity type that aligns with your financial objectives. Fixed annuities provide guaranteed returns and predictable income payments, making them suitable for conservative investors seeking stability. In contrast, variable annuities offer the potential for higher returns through sub-accounts linked to market performance, though they entail greater risk. Understanding the fee structure of any annuity is crucial, including surrender charges, management fees, and other expenses. Ensure the potential returns and benefits justify the costs.

Inflation protection is another key consideration, as inflation can erode the purchasing power of annuity payments over time. Look for annuities that offer inflation adjustments to maintain your standard of living.

Consulting a trusted financial advisor can help you navigate the complexities of annuities and retirement planning. An advisor can design an annuity strategy tailored to your unique financial situation and long-term objectives.

Annuities can be a valuable part of your retirement planning, providing stability and peace of mind during your retirement years. By carefully evaluating your retirement needs, understanding the various types of annuities available, and seeking professional guidance, you can make informed decisions aligned with your financial goals. 

“Annuities act as a financial safety net during market downturns...”



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Submitted photo

Gentry Locke Consulting: Abigail Thompson, Chip Dicks, Carlos Hopkins, Patrice Lewis, Greg Habeeb, Zach LeMaster

# PIT OR LADDER

## Consultant advises businesses to stay ahead of the game

By Tom Field

**Whether businesses face a hostile or supportive environment isn't the issue so much; it's how they respond.**

Your choice.

That's what Greg Habeeb more than implies when discussing our current environment for business in Virginia.

He references a character in Game of Thrones who tells his adversary that chaos isn't a pit but a ladder to advance one's interest.

And you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who doesn't see our political landscape as chaotic.

Our Commonwealth is currently a split government between opposing powers in the General Assembly and executive branch. While the democrats [generally]

fight for pro-labor policies and republicans [generally] fight to preserve pro-business positions, chaos reigns until a victor emerges. In one recent battle, the governor draws his pen (mightier than the sword) to veto a record number of bills in one session alone.

"You can view all of this chaos as obstacles and barriers—or as opportunities," Habeeb says. "I advise business leaders to anticipate change and thrive in it."

Greg Habeeb is... a lawyer. But also, a consultant. How so? For Roanoke-based, but Richmond-office Gentry Locke, he's an attorney and Chair of the government and regulatory affairs practice group. He's also a former member of the

Virginia House of Delegates, where he served on the Courts of Justice, Rules, Commerce & Labor, Transportation and Privileges and Election committees. He's a litigation partner, formerly on the firm's executive board.

Habeeb is also the president of a separate entity, Gentry Locke Consulting. This group operates as a full-service public affairs, strategic communications, and marketing firm.

"There is the law, regulatory, policy, lobby, communications... I'm in the middle of all that," Habeeb explains.

A big part of this "game" as Habeeb sees it, encompasses this popular ranking of Virginia as being a state that is "best in business."

"Virginia's business reputation [often ranked number one], is largely a republican talking point," Habeeb says. "Some democrats would say maybe it's great for business, but not great for employees. That leaves us with a question: is 'best' flowing through to employees?"

It doesn't have to be what's best for business or workers. These ideas don't have to be mutually exclusive."

The real question, Habeeb maintains, is this one: "is there a space to advance a worker-friendly environment in a thriving business?"

"Do you engage politically?" Habeeb posits to his clientele. "Do you adapt to prepare?" he queries. He cites specific examples, like how NAFTA impacted domestic manufacturing, the explosion of gig workers, how a company turns to more automation, or a California pizza business firing its drivers and using GrubHub to comply with minimum wage hikes while staying in business.

And then, there's Buc-ee's (the convenience travel stop store chain expanding now in Virginia).

"Buc-ee's proudly displays its employee compensation—above minimum wage.



## Is what is best for business flowing through to the employee?

They came up with a model that works. (Habeeb gives a nod to employee satisfaction as a significant contributor to that performance.)

"I actually appreciate the interjection in the debate on the business or worker-friendly issue," he says. "It's a fascinating moment to exist."

Even as Habeeb mentions restrictions and regulations and... "the things that business told us would raise prices... it's coming," among a host of cloudy sky forecasts, he still champions optimism.

"My job is to advise business. I tell [business] to predict next year based on today's failed bills. The pendulum swing [more attention to workers] is coming fast."

Habeeb offers how his own firm, Gentry Locke, looks for the ladder rather than the pit.

"We talk honestly and openly with our employees," he says, including non-revenue staff. "I sit down, we look over everything, from overhead to profitability to all the finances. Some [law firms] keep that hidden; but we have a different take.

To share success, you have to understand it."

Habeeb says he hopes the General Assembly next year will bring in more creative leaders.

That's who will reach for the ladder. 



## LEAD BY EXAMPLE

By **Carrie Cousins**

**Executive Summary:**  
*Advice and feedback  
from last month's  
blogging workshop.*

# You can blog like a boss

After writing some 1,500-plus posts for a variety of clients, I can almost claim to be an expert blogger.

I've written about nonprofit fundraising, retail business, website design, a variety of tools, outdoors and tourism, photography, and plenty of other things. Some posts were better than others but they all served a common purpose – to help users find the website for which they were written while telling a good brand story.

I recently spoke on this topic with AAF Roanoke and a class at Virginia Tech and thanks to their feedback, I'm sharing it with you.

Blogging and storytelling plays a huge role in your website's search engine optimization strategy and even business success. And while there's not a one-size-fits all solution, I have learned a few things that you can replicate if you want to blog like a boss.

First and foremost, a solid blogging strategy is rooted in good storytelling. As you continue to tell your story over time, that content creates a strong foundation for your website and helps search engines better understand your brand.

This doesn't happen overnight, and it's not necessarily easy. But blogging can be rewarding in the long run and can be a vital part of a long-term digital marketing strategy.

Here's how you do it:

- **Do Your Homework:** What story do you need to tell? What should readers do after they engage with your content? You need to do some legwork and set a goal for every piece of content you plan to create. Know who you want to talk to, what keywords are important, why they should care, and what users should do next.
- **Tell a Story That Humans Want to Read:** Every story has a formula – it has a beginning, middle, and end often with conflict and resolution – and you've crafted something people want to read. AI also has a pretty distinct formula that can't get close to the authenticity of human copywriting. (Plus, using AI could lead to duplicate content issues online!) Margaret Atwood said it best: "You're never going to kill storytelling, because it's built in the human plan. We come with it."
- **Think Keyword Times Three:** Every keyword needs to be used a minimum of three times in a blog post – in the title, in the first paragraph, and in a subhead. You can use it more, depending on the length of the post, but not more times than feels like natural reading.

(When it feels natural delete one instance and then you should be safe.)

- Write Short Paragraphs with One Thought Each:**  
 Themed paragraphs should be short and sweet, with just a couple of sentences each. Consider this formula for blog paragraphs: Statement of fact for what this paragraph is about. Supporting facts, metrics, or information to solidify the thought. Finish with a strong statement or quote to support the idea.
- Optimize Blog Post Length:** Google recommends a blog post length of at least 300 words. That's a realistic minimum to say something meaningful. What's more interesting is that most of the top-ranking blog posts in Google search can actually top 2,000 words! That doesn't mean you have to wax poetic every time; write to the length that your story needs to be effective. Then check the word count. If your story is super short, you might not have enough content right now and should come back to the idea later. If it is exceptionally long, is all of the content valuable as a single post or would it make sense to break it into multiple, shorter posts? It's ok to incorporate and interchange short-form and long-form content in your blog strategy.

This is just the tip of the iceberg; you can download the rest of the slide deck with the more technical tips at [leadpointdigital.com/aafroa](http://leadpointdigital.com/aafroa). I hope it tells a story that resonates with you. 



Write to the length that your story needs to be effective.



A solid blogging strategy is rooted in good storytelling.

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# When Intellectual Property and Capital Meet

By Aila Boyd

## A hometown kid returns to take the helm at RAMP

While it's common for people to move away from their hometowns for college and work, not all of them end up returning. Roanoke native John Hagy was given the opportunity to return home for the first time in well over a decade in January after being selected to serve as the new director of the Regional Accelerator and Mentoring Program, also known as RAMP.

Hagy's return to Roanoke comes after educational and professional pursuits in Richmond, Washington, D.C. and Durham, North Carolina.

After graduating from Patrick Henry High School in 2009, Hagy went on to the University of Richmond. His first job involved working in national security for the government in Washington for five years. He then moved into consulting for Deloitte, where he worked in its strategy practice. He later worked at a geospatial analytics startup.

With some experience under his belt, he decided it was time to continue his education, so he enrolled in the Master of Business Administration program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "I had a government skillset, and I wanted to be able to quickly get the kind of

commercial toolset that I needed and be more marketable," he said of his decision to enroll. "I had gotten very interested in entrepreneurship and venture capital."

While at UNC, he gained valuable experience by working for the Carolina Angel Network, which brings together the university's entrepreneurial community and alumni network to empower early-stage startup ventures. He led the investment team that found companies, vetted them and brought them forward for investments.

When he spotted the RAMP position, he quickly jumped on it. The opportunity to work with founders was a driving factor for why he wanted the job. "What attracted me to the role is that I get to be hands-on with early-stage companies, helping them solve pretty foundational business challenges," he said.

Upon returning to Roanoke, Hagy observed that quite a lot has changed, especially in terms of growth.

He reports that settling into the job has been enjoyable. "It's been quite a lot up front, but it's been good. The team made it really easy to onboard and they're just really exceptional," he said.



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He now oversees the programs that fall under the RAMP umbrella, including On RAMP, RAMP-In-Residence and Exit RAMP. "My job is primarily to make sure everything's running smoothly and to work hands-on with the entrepreneurs and the founders to help them through the programs, get them connected with mentors, industry partners and investors," he explained.

He's also responsible for RAMP from a strategic standpoint, which involves building out new programs and building networks that are beneficial for the RAMP ecosystem. An example of a new program he pointed to is the possibility of establishing a defense tech meetup for entrepreneurs who are focused on defense technologies. For networking, he explained, he's focused on building out an investor network that includes venture capitalists from Virginia, North Carolina and Washington.

In looking forward, he's focused on what needs to be done to achieve the organization's vision of establishing the region as a nationally recognized innovation hub. "The way I view it is that it unlocks the potential of the region from a technology and biotechnology perspective," he said of the importance of RAMP. "It's a catalyst for the region."

He noted that a lot of innovative research is being done at Virginia Tech, the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute and Carilion Clinic, but there is a need to transition that intellectual capital into economic value. "There are really bright minds solving real problems, but a lot of times a business or



Courtesy photo

John Hagy

entrepreneurial skillset can then align with those founders who already have the technological expertise to then be able to take those programs to market," he said. When novel intellectual property is effectively commercialized, it then creates an economic value for the region, he explained.

He also stressed that anyone can get involved with RAMP. "There's a place for everyone in the ecosystem," he said. He pointed to the Roanoke Blacksburg Technology Council's TechNite on May 8 as an opportunity to see what RAMP is about. RAMP Spring Demo Day, on May 22, is another opportunity to see RAMP's work in action. As part of the event, companies will pitch their ideas to a group of community members, mentors and investors. 

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## SMALL BUSINESS TOOL KIT

**By Shannon Dominguez,**  
**Senior Consultant**  
**at Building Beloved**  
**Communities**

**Executive Summary:**  
*Navigate trauma dumping*  
*with empathy, boundaries,*  
*and the wisdom to know*  
*when to step away.*

# Vulnerability vs. oversharing: finding the balance in trauma-informed spaces

At a recent writer's conference I attended, I experienced "trauma dumping," firsthand. As I engaged in conversation with a fellow attendee, they suddenly began oversharing deeply personal and traumatic experiences without warning or consent. The encounter left me feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to respond, and it prompted me to reflect on the importance of boundaries and trauma-informed practices not only in the workplace, but in all social settings.

I must admit, I've been guilty of trauma dumping myself. To anyone I've inadvertently subjected to my own emotional baggage, I sincerely apologize—and if you're reading this, please know that my therapist thanks you for your unwitting contribution to my personal growth.

This experience at the writer's conference was an apt reminder that trauma dumping can occur in any environment, and it emphasized to me the need for increased awareness and education on the topic. While my particular encounter did not take place in a work setting, the lessons learned from this experience can easily be applied to the workplace, especially in nonprofits where employees are often drawn to the mission due to their own personal experiences with trauma.

As organizations increasingly recognize the importance of creating trauma-informed workplaces, it is important that they also provide education and resources to help employees navigate the complexities of trauma and its impact on interpersonal relationships. By covering topics like trauma dumping in educational series and training programs, nonprofits can equip their staff with the knowledge and skills to establish and maintain healthy boundaries while fostering a supportive and empathetic work environment.

Avoid going "deer in headlights" as I did—when faced with trauma dumping, respond with empathy and validate their feelings, but also set gentle boundaries to protect your own well-being. Suggest professional resources or support if appropriate and remember that it's okay to redirect the conversation or politely excuse yourself if needed.

Trauma-informed workplaces are essential because they acknowledge that many individuals carry the weight of traumatic experiences with them, and these experiences can manifest in various ways, including trauma dumping. By promoting awareness, offering resources, and encouraging open and honest communication, organizations can create a culture where employees feel supported and empowered to share their stories in a safe and appropriate manner.

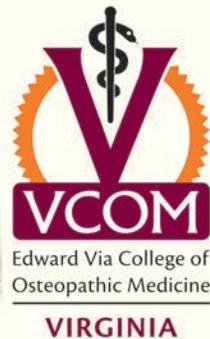
Ultimately, my experience at the writer's conference, coupled with my own self-reflection on times I may have trauma dumped on others, serves as a powerful reminder that we all have a responsibility to educate ourselves and others on how to navigate these challenging situations with compassion, empathy, and clear boundaries. Here's to embracing personal growth and vulnerability while maintaining healthy boundaries—a delicate dance we're all learning to navigate in one way or another.

*For a deeper dive into trauma-informed workplaces, boundaries, and self-care, "Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others" by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk is on my must-read list.* 

“Avoid going 'deer in headlights' as I did.”

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Tom Field

John Hull, Roanoke Regional Partnership

# A RECORD YEAR

By Tom Field

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On its 40th anniversary, the Roanoke Regional Partnership reports a successful performance in all its metrics; year 41 is still pedal-to-the-metal, it promises.

The Roanoke Regional Partnership has stepped up its branding in the past few years. More people are aware of the economic development organization; and if not RRP directly, then its “sister organizations” the Roanoke Outside Foundation and Get2KnowNoke and the activities they host. The most popular events are GoFest (outdoor recreation festival), Experience (career development, networking, and learning conference), OnboardROA (summer internship and onboarding), and the new Talent Summit (workforce development and recruiting).

## What is Roanoke Regional Partnership?

There are essentially four kinds of economic development organizations operating in our Commonwealth. There are the municipal departments (connected to a city, county, town); there is the state agency, Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP); there are independent, private and self-operating programs (such as chamber initiatives and institutional entities like Virginia Tech’s recently renamed Center for Economic and Community Engagement and funded programs like GO Virginia).

And then there are regional organizations—like the name says—for Roanoke Regional Partnership. In our part of the state, the regional development orgs include Roanoke Regional Partnership (Roanoke City, Roanoke County, Salem, Vinton, Botetourt County, Franklin County, Alleghany County, Covington); Onward NRV (New River Valley); Southern Virginia Regional Alliance; Lynchburg Regional Business Alliance; and Shenandoah Valley Partnership. Across Virginia, there are about 17 regional economic development organizations.

“Roanoke Regional Partnership began in 1983, so we just celebrated our 40th anniversary,” says John Hull, executive director. And that last full year, 2023, was “a record year for us,” he says. “Our activity reflects a 133% increase over 2019.”

The annual report touts \$537 million in new investment; a 15% increase in per capita income; \$197 million in new annual consumer expenditures; and 3,255 direct and indirect jobs from the “Accelerate 2022” campaign launched five years ago.

## “IN BRIEF”

**NAME:** John Hull

**POSITION:** Executive Director

**ORGANIZATION:** Roanoke Regional Partnership

**EDUCATION:** Roanoke College, University of Oklahoma Economic Development Institute, Roanoke College Management Institute, Council for Community and Economic Research certified professional

**PERSONAL:** Married (Lindsey); two children: Alex and Kaitlyn

**INTERESTS:** Completed more than 15 half marathons, a full marathon, and a 24-hour ultra marathon

**OUTTAKE:** My passion is the economic development of this region; finding ways to generate opportunities for the region’s residents and businesses to share in greater prosperity and overall economic growth

In the conference room, there are four large canvas paintings depicting scenarios that illustrate the four key priorities of RRP: economic growth and innovation; talent attraction and workforce development; commercial real estate and infrastructure; and placemaking and livability.

“What I appreciate is the wholistic approach [to economic development],” says Stephanie Long, director of marketing. “What we have here is unique. You’d be hard pressed to find an organization that gives equal value and attention to, for example, talent attraction AND placemaking.”

## How does RRP fit in with other economic developers?

Both Hull and Long mention teamwork... frequently.

“It’s a team sport,” says Hull. “Our business is one of generating leads, developing jobs, investments, and residents.” He says RRP works with all entities to make the results happen. Long chimes in that she is “impressed with how well we’re all working together.”



Tom Field

RRP's John Hull and Stephanie Long

"We don't have a 'win' without a local partner," Hull explains. That covers at least seven municipal economic development departments, as well as the independent and institutional operators.

"We're able to do all the things we do thanks to private—not just public—funding." That breakdown of operational revenue is about half public, half private, he says.

### What are some of the wins?

The first company that Hull cites is Wells Fargo. That makes sense when you realize that company move (to Hollins area of Roanoke County) will mark the County's largest employer once it's fully in place. The Mack Trucks production expansion (also in Roanoke County) is another favorite success story, as is Eldor (electric, hybrid, ignition, and automotive systems) in Botetourt County, and STS (composite hard trim parts for trucks) in Salem.

Since 2018, RRP cites around 20 "major" projects, including Munters, WestRock, A Duie Pyle, Cardinal Glass, Pratt Industries, Apex Systems, Atlantic Credit & Finance, Metalsa, Stik-Pak, Traditional Medicinals, Empire Foods, and SchaeferRolls, among the mix.

Although Hull hesitates to single out any priority industry and refuses to identify

companies RRP is actively courting—we do hear references to automotive manufacturing, logistics, and technology ("chips" is the hot topic in the news today, as the federal government considers subsidizing semiconductor factories).

### What is the RRP model?

Hull mentions the team approach when Roanoke Regional Partnership works with other economic development entities; but internally, there is also a team approach.

"We [currently] have nine on staff," Hull explains. And then he rattles off the specialties of each team member, such as Pete Eshelman for outdoors, Stephanie Long for branding, Ann Blair Miller for business relations, and Matt Miller for research, as examples.

Likewise, all the other stakeholders act as teams. The Executive Committee and Board of Directors look like a lineup of power hitters from leader organizations in our region, including area colleges, all the municipalities and chambers, and some known business champions from sectors as diverse as construction, finance, healthcare, utility, legal, and retail.

Planning and goal-setting are obvious tenants of RRP. That makes sense, with a \$7,200,000 tag for the total five-year budget. Hull says "engagement and accountability" are promised to RRP stakeholders in order to "grow jobs, population, and prosperity for the region."

It could be easy to think of Roanoke Regional Partnership as an insular entity—driving economic success to our communities; but Hull and Long do not hesitate a second when asked what individuals can do outside of the organization (other than write a check):

"We all can be ambassadors," Hull begins, followed by specifics like supporting and going to local events, speaking positively about the Roanoke Region, and sharing good news. Long agrees, speaking like a brand manager: "we got to make people want to live here." 

# TECH CHECK: OUTDATED EQUIPMENT SLOWING YOU DOWN?

Tips to get the most from your in-home Wi-Fi

## GET THE SPEEDS YOU'RE PAYING FOR

Similar to your cellphone, your Wi-Fi equipment should be upgraded regularly to ensure you're getting all the benefits from the service you're paying for.



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## MORE THAN JUST SPEED

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- ensure compatibility with your newest devices
- provide a more stable internet connection



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Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge

## VBR targets DC-NOVA again >

Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge (VBR) has unveiled its spring 2024 strategic marketing campaign. The 12-week campaign, running through June, will target the Northern Virginia area of the Washington, D.C. DMA (designated market area) - a key feeder market for the destination.

After the 2023 campaign concluded, Virginia's Blue Ridge saw a 7% increase in visitation from the Washington, D.C. area. Visitors from the D.C. area spent 20% more each day than in the previous year and accounted for 11.8% of total visitor spending (a 26% increase over 2022.) The 2023 campaign was partially supported by a \$20,000 Virginia Tourism Corporation Marketing Leverage Grant.

Visit VBR will target individuals that live in the Northern Virginia area of the Washington, D.C. metro who display interests in travel, outdoor recreation and road trips. Overall, the campaign aims to build brand awareness for Virginia's Blue Ridge as a unique, metro mountain destination. It will also position Virginia's Blue Ridge as an accessible and convenient vacation destination for travelers from the Northern Virginia and greater DMV area, offering close proximity via Interstate 81, passenger train service via Amtrak, and direct air service via Dulles International Airport.

The advertising package will include prominent messaging and creative in Metro stations strategically chosen based on the highest visibility; as well as branded displays on DC Metro buses and materials that will display on mobile devices. New tactics for 2024 include an advertising "takeover" at Amtrak's



Union Station in Washington, D.C. as well as posters and digital advertising on Amtrak's Northeast Regional Train that provides twice daily service to VBR. Cars (Lyft, Uber, DoorDash) will be wrapped with campaign messaging and seen in targeted markets and specific events such as the National Cherry Blossom Festival and Nationals games.

Campaign-specific messaging will also be promoted through advertising with paid social/digital, YouTube, and streaming TV along with a series of targeted marketing e-mails deployed to one-million prospective visitors in the Northern Virginia market. The campaign will also feature a digital display and video advertising program that focuses on retargeting people who previously visited the destination within the past 5 years.

Visit VBR will utilize spaces in the Northern Virginia/D.C. market to host special functions and events. **Landon Howard**, President of Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge, shared his excitement for the campaign: "Our marketing team has done an incredible job of creating and managing the campaign in-house, allowing us to invest more of the budget into programs in the target market instead of paying fees to an outside agency."



Gene Marrano

## Warner gets snapshot of FBRI work >

A glimpse of the biotechnology ecosystem in the region was on display last month when U.S. Sen. **Mark Warner** convened many of its tech sector leaders at the **Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC**. The Research, Innovation, and Economic Development in Biotech event highlighted progress and potential as well as Virginia's proposed "research triangle," which primarily includes Virginia Tech and the research institute, the University of Virginia, and Virginia Commonwealth University.

FBRI executive director **Michael Friedlander** told Warner about other startups that began at the research institute's Roanoke campus - only to be lured out of the valley to bigger locales like Boston or the West Coast. "To have Sen. Warner here, and this group of stakeholders together, is a special day for us to be able to share our common goals and interests," said Michael Friedlander, executive director of the research institute and Virginia Tech's vice president for health sciences and technology. "What we're building together is attracting the brightest minds in health care, technology, and research who are putting their ideas to work here," said Carilion Clinic CEO Nancy Agee. "It's exciting to think about the cures, therapies, and medications of tomorrow that will be developed here and benefit patients everywhere."

committee, Warner noted that, "national security is no longer simply who has the most tanks and guns and ships and plans, it's who's going to dominate in a variety of technology domains [such as] synthetic biology, bio-manufacturing, and the next generation of biotech," Warner said. "In so many ways, what is happening at Fralin Biomedical Research Institute and at the medical school is really cutting edge." As for what the region needs to start bringing in more of the larger tech or Big Pharma players, with large workforces and good paying jobs, Warner says it needs to land one big fish: "one big winner in this space. You've created the research institution, you've got world quality research being done here, you need a winner so that other startups at least will think hey Roanoke Valley, that'd be a pretty cool place to build life sciences, biotech, bio-manufacturing company."



Chair of the U.S. Senate's intelligence



## I can BEARly contain my excitement

"Exit Pursued by a Bear" or The Bear for short, is a new community theater group located in downtown Roanoke at Community High School, which has a live theatre stage, dressing room – and students who may help out with set design or even as actors. Founders say the goal is not to be competition for the other community theaters but to compliment what others are already doing. Bear vice president Stevie Holcomb says they will call the school's auditorium home. It's not about competition but more about additional opportunities for community theater actors, directors, playwrights, costumers etc. says Holcomb: "we have a great amount of talent and a great amount of [need for additional] theater in the area but we just don't have a lot of space for it," says Holcomb. "We wanted to have another place to play."

The name "Exit, Pursued by a Bear," springs from William Shakespeare's play The Winter's Tale, and a mystifying stage direction when Holcomb says normally Shakespeare offered simple stage cues. Veteran actor Lyle Blake Smythers, also a Director on the Bear's board, says their goal was to bring community theater back to the city and to offer more opportunities for those who love acting, directing or set designing. "We thought this was an opportunity to promote greater cooperation between different theatre groups [including Showtimers, Attic Productions, Little Town Players], perhaps having a master calendar, so that not everyone is doing play productions on the same weekend."

"Roanoke's Downtown Community Theatre," is going to provide more opportunities for performers, as well as provide quality entertainment to our neighborhood here. There is so much talent in this city, and we hope to foster that by celebrating performances both at Bear and at other nearby venues," says Exit, Pursued by a Bear president, Angela McNeil.

The Bear's inaugural season starts July 19 for a two weekend run, with a production of Crimes of the Heart followed by Arsenic and Old Lace in October. Here's a little secret: yours truly is a Bear board member, and a community theatre actor. We made our big announcement during the Daisy Art Parade in April – that's me in the borrowed bear costume, which was a big hit during the parade from the Taubman Museum to Elmwood Park. Support local community theatre, give Exit, Pursued by a Bear – The Bear – a try during a first season that will consist of four plays, one of them a new play, another of the company's goals. We're almost ready to ROAR! 🐻



Angela McNeil photos

# THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

**Executive Summary:**  
*It's been a while since there was a community theatre space in downtown Roanoke – don't say Mill Mountain, that's an Equity [paid] professional theatre.*

## RCP looks at affordable housing

It worked.

The purpose of the Roanoke Collaboration Project is to bring local citizens and stakeholders together to address current issues in a civil fashion—perhaps even bridging polar perspectives. On a stormy late afternoon on April 11 at the Carilion Virginia Tech complex in Roanoke, ideas poured in to match the rain pouring outside—and not a single fight or argument broke out.

The affair worked because of that pledge of civility (a real pledge if you choose to sign it; but a pledge in practice nevertheless) even though the ideas differed. The affair worked because the night's subject at hand, was a complex one: affordable housing in our Roanoke community—and approaches (if not solutions) were proffered. And the affair worked because collecting input was the primary goal (not taking sides) with an opportunity extended for attendees to come back later if they wanted to move forward with proposals.

Those in attendance were individuals you probably know—if you have any connection to the movers and shakers in Roanoke-proper and the Roanoke Region. Plenty of civic employees and appointees, politicians, educators, researchers, developers, and at least one from the media.

The Roanoke Collaboration Project is a good idea. If it only gets some wheels turning without protests and snarky reactionaries on social media—that alone makes it a good idea. But it's possible—quite possible—that tangible solutions to our current real-local-world problems could result. Most likely, that would come from two or more people (from the same or opposite side or somewhere in the middle) coming together to come up with an answer.

Dana Ackley was instrumental in starting this whole “let’s all get along to move us forward” collaboration campaign. The consultant and owner of long-time Roanoke-based EQ Leader was tired of all the bickering (my words, not his, and probably not how he would put it). But it’s true. Ackley knows the power of collaboration and that solutions don’t just come from completely like-minded, lockstep ideologues.

You can realize progress that relies on the conjunction “and” more than “or.”

As in, what’s the better solution for affordable housing: “private enterprise OR government?” Perhaps the solution could be better framed as “private enterprise AND government” this workshop of sorts postulated.



## ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By **Tom Field**

**Executive Summary:**

*The topic at Roanoke Collaboration Project's most recent meetup was a timely one: affordable housing.*



Collecting  
input was  
the primary  
goal (not  
taking sides).

Indeed, this evening, we were introduced to “polarity mapping,” an exercise in constructive dialogue, where ideas (from extreme to more common ground) are graphed to see how they might cross from “or” to “and.” Former City Manager Chris Morrill not only demonstrated how to indulge polarity mapping, he quickly showed slides of two examples he had been involved with: one on community development (tradition vs. progress), and one on public safety (policing vs. engagement).

The format and configuration of the affair was admirable. It’s as if the very structure replicated the mission of the Roanoke Collaboration Project itself. I’m sure that was intentional. Although a lot of information had to be shared by a lot of people, the event was completely managed to the timeline. The seating itself facilitated the presentation as well as the follow-up breakout groups. Even the technology (one virtual panelist; four large screen viewing directions) complemented each component of the meeting. The agenda—well-moderated by Dr. Lee Learman, dean of Virginia Tech School of Medicine—was presented to all, down to the minute—and managed thusly.

No one person talked more than any other person. What a feat.

Panelists included developer Brent Cochran (Renewal2 real estate group); John Hull (Roanoke Regional Partnership); Frederick Gusler (Roanoke Redevelopment and Housing Authority); and Susan McLarty (Greenville, SC Homeless Alliance).

So, with all that power and influence in the great room—what’s the solution? How do we address the real problem of our lack of affordable housing in Roanoke?



We didn't get that answer.

What we did get—was ideas and possibilities, and some wheels turning that progress can happen with people who care about their community—even if their assessment of the challenges and their approaches differ.

It worked (in one more way, too).

RCP woke me up in the middle of my slumber that same evening. Gee, thanks. I thought about a young couple I know, simply trying their best to figure out the affordable housing dilemma. Both are productive, contributing citizens. Both have good, solid jobs. Both are simply trying to buy their first house. Both want to live and thrive in our Roanoke community.

With 7+% interest rates, 20% downpayment, the financial responsibility formula of not exceeding 30% of your gross income for housing—well... it ain't easy. Throw in inflation (on all the other living expenses) on top of a limited housing market... yeah... it ain't easy.

If it's not easy for a young professional two-income couple to buy a home in Roanoke today, think about the single income person, the family of four, the low wage earners, the disadvantaged. The bridge between income and housing can be extraordinarily long and wide.

There's your polarity.

Roanoke Collaboration Project is optimistic that we can solve the affordable housing challenge by coming together.

That... could work. 

“ “ ”

Not one person talked more than any other person. What a feat.

“ “ ”

Progress can happen... even if their approaches differ.



## Your employees are not ok. Should you care?

Inflation, financial uncertainty, record credit card debt, student loan burdens, an affordable housing crisis...it's hard to turn on the TV, open a magazine (ahem), or scroll through social media without being reminded that these are complicated financial times. Many people are struggling financially, and chances are, some of your employees are struggling too. Should you care?

### What is financial wellbeing?

Before we go further, let's make sure we're on the same page. How do we define an optimal financial state? What is the goal? It's financial wellbeing: having an overall sense of satisfaction, security, and contentment with your financial situation. Some factors that contribute to financial wellbeing can be tangible – a person's income, savings, and investments. While others are less so – financial stress, knowledge of money management, and the ability to meet financial goals.

### As an employer, why should you care?

Now that we know the goal, let's get back to the original question.....Should you care if you have employees that are struggling financially? Given the title of this article, this answer should be no surprise...YES!

Financial struggles will inevitably impact people at work in the form of distractions, reduced productivity, lack of engagement, decreased morale, and lower levels of motivation. And guess what, according to PwC's 2023 Employee Financial Wellness Survey, people who are financially stressed are twice as likely to be looking for a new job. In a tight labor market, losing valuable employees can cause major problems.

It's pretty much guaranteed, some of your employees are struggling financially. PwC's survey found that 60% of full-time employees are stressed about their finances. High wage employees are not immune either. Forty seven percent of employees earning \$100,000 or more per year are stressed about their finances.

If you want to retain top talent and let your employees know you value them, you cannot ignore the important role that financial wellbeing plays. The PwC survey also determined that 73% of financially stressed employees would be attracted to another employer that cares more about their financial well-being compared to 54% of non-financially stressed employees.

Another important consideration is your employees' health and wellness. Stress is bad for our bodies and our minds. It can increase a person's risk for physical and mental health problems from high blood pressure and sleep problems to

## GUEST COMMENTARY

By Dave Prosser

**Executive Summary:**  
*As described recently in our FRONT story about its Financial Wellness Center, this local credit union walks the walk when it comes to literacy about planning for the future.*

depression and anxiety. The National Credit Union Foundation notes: "Health and financial well-being are intrinsically linked: financial insecurity is a major source of stress, and stress impacts physical and mental health; poor health impacts the ability to work, or perform well at work, which can lead to financial insecurity."

It's clear to see, many issues can stem from lack of financial wellbeing.

You care, now what can you do?

You've made it here and know that ignoring is not an option. You want to help, but what can you do?

### **Use what you already have.**

Make sure your employees are accessing the tools you have available. If you offer an Employee Assistance Program, encourage employees to use it. Are your employees investing in the company 401k or other retirement plans and maximizing any company match? Allow employees paid time for visits to their healthcare providers for preventative care or therapy appointments.

### **Provide a supportive and non-judgmental environment.**

Open dialogue about financial struggles is often seen as taboo, especially in the workplace. Create an environment where these conversations are welcome and be prepared to provide your employees with resources when those conversations occur.

### **Create an emergency assistance fund.**

Establishing an emergency assistance fund for your employees to access during financial hardships can provide a much-needed lifeline. This can be funded by your company or funded by your employees (or a combination of both).

### **Offer a financial wellbeing program.**

Provide a financial wellbeing program and encourage employees to participate. A financial wellbeing program offers financial expertise and services for your employees. Financial institutions often offer these programs making it easy for you to implement. A good financial wellness program should provide financial education and counseling. Freedom First's Freedom@Work program, for example, offers access to employee education and even one-on-one financial counseling at no cost to you or your employees, even if you don't bank here.

Showing your employees you care about their financial wellbeing and are working to help them goes a long way. It's something you can't afford to ignore.

*Dave Prosser is the Senior Vice President of Community Development with Freedom First.* 



It's pretty much guaranteed, some of your employees are struggling financially.

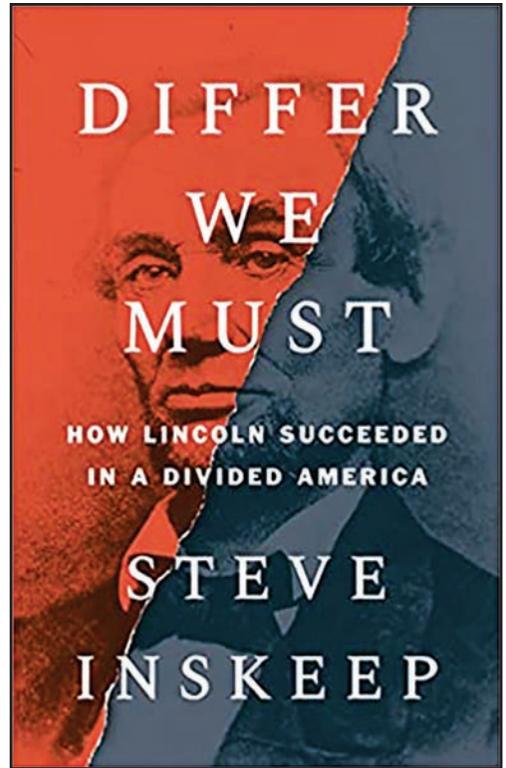


Create an environment where these conversations are welcome.

“”  
He tailored his message to the audience he was with at the time.

## FRONTReviews >

Readers and patrons of the business journal are invited to submit reviews (along with an optional photo) to [news@vbFRONT.com](mailto: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.



### *Pragmatist in Chief*

Make no mistake about it, from early in his life the 16th President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, abhorred the institution of slavery. But during a checkered political career leading up to and during his time as president during the Civil War – Southern States seceded from the Union shortly after he became the Chief Executive in 1861 – he tailored his message to the audience he was with at the time, focusing on preserving the Union with certain people, emphasizing the need to abolish slavery with others, always reading the room and taking a pragmatic approach to win the day.

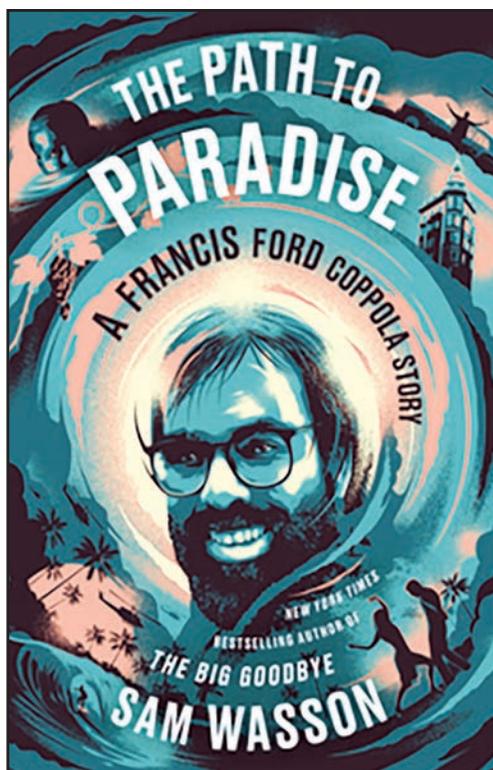
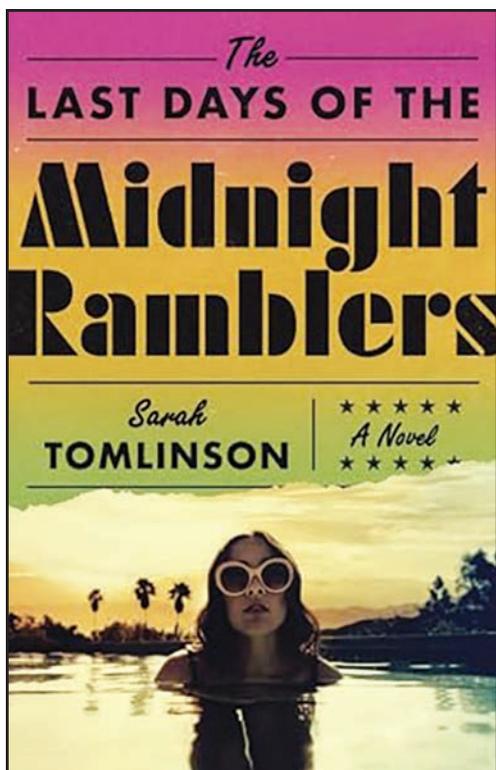
NPR *Morning Edition* cohost Steve Inskeep examines it all deftly chapter by chapter, each a snapshot on Lincoln's approach with 16 different people, in *Differ We Must: How Lincoln Succeeded In A Divided America* (Penguin Press 2023.) Sound familiar, the divided America tag? No one was better at the art of pragmatism than Lincoln when dealing with the likes of activist (and free black man) Frederick Douglass,

Union General George McClellan, assorted politicians – and his mercurial wife Mary Todd Lincoln. A deep dive into how Lincoln thought and most often succeeded in working around those he may have been at odds with at times. All walked away with at least a grudging respect for Honest Abe.

—Gene Marrano

### *A weak concert*

As a fan of the movie *Almost Famous* (and to a much lesser degree, the book *Daisy Jones & The Six*), I was rather compelled to pick up *The Last Days of the Midnight Ramblers* (Flatiron Books; 2024). Sadly, it didn't quite make my audition. Clunky at the get go, it came across like a gossip tabloid of celebrity names, only these were fictional, so that made it all the more difficult to stick with. Yet stick with it, I did—so not entirely unredeemable. There was one element I liked: the chapter titles and the little introductory paragraphs



that would share advice for ghostwriters. Those eighteen, three-minute preludes were quite clever. The remaining story left behind had a few glimmers of worthy character development—but overall, a weak set—to put it in rock band terminology.

—Tom Field

## Reckless genius

First came a book peering into how the *Godfather* saga came to life, now comes the newest book on filmmakers and those in front of the camera focused on the same subject – Francis Ford Coppola. *The Path to Paradise: A Francis Ford Coppola Story* (Harper, 2023) that looks at Coppola's descent into depression and perhaps madness during the filming of *Apocalypse Now* in the jungles of the Philippines, his Vietnam story that even put star Martin Sheen in the hospital with a heart attack.

*The Path to Paradise* is also the story of Coppola's ill-fated Zoetrope Studios, an

experimental, communal utopia established away from Hollywood in the Bay area, where for a while all sorts of people wandered in and out, working on movies that never got made in some cases, burning through huge sums of cash often fronted to Coppola by those who believed in his genius after the success of *The Godfather* and its first prequel, *Part 2*. It's also about his wife Eleanor (who recently passed away), his children (also in the movie biz) and he movie he's wanted to make for 50 years, *Megalopolis*. Not to mention an early mentorship and then partnership with George Lucas of *Star Wars* fame, but Lucas split to follow a more commercial path not favored by Francis Coppola. Wasson has a distinctive writing style and spins a riveting tale for movie buffs.

—Gene Marrano

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



## Bank of Botetourt in Rocky Mount >

In early April, **Bank of Botetourt** celebrated a ground-breaking for its new branch office in the Town of Rocky Mount—a 2,700 square foot office built at 875 Tanyard Road. It includes an ATM, drive-thru, night deposit, and Virginia Mountain Mortgage services. The office will be the Bank's 14th office, and second location in Franklin County.

More than 50 local representatives from Franklin County, the Town of Rocky Mount, local business owners, Bank management and business development, the board of directors, and local law enforcement were in attendance. Contractors include **Hughes Associates Architects & Engineers** and **F&S Building Innovations**. A formal ribbon cutting and public grand opening is planned for the fall.



## New blood partner >

The need for blood never goes away - and a new nonprofit has expanded into Virginia. **The Blood Connection** got up and running in late March - surpassing its initial goal set for their first day in Roanoke. Carilion Patient Experience Manager **Brandon Jones** was there to say Carilion Clinic is happy to have The Blood Connection as a new partner. **Delisha English** is the organizations President and CEO: "we are an independently managed non-profit community blood center. Our sole purpose to collect blood and blood products and make them available where it's needed, when its needed." The Blood Connection has cut the ribbon but for now is operating out of a mobile clinic. The brick-and-mortar facility—where David's Bridal was previously in the Valley View Mall complex—is not ready quite yet.



Tom Field

## Don't be mean >

Seriously: "All You Are Is Mean" was the topic of one presentation at **Gentry Locke's Employment Symposium** held at Hotel Roanoke on April 5 (shown above; a second event also in Lynchburg). **Patrice Lewis** (shown above) from Gentry Locke talked about the impact of microaggression on recruitment and retention. All the presentations played off the Taylor Swift Eras Tour theme as it applied to "the new era of human resources." Presentations (song title parodies) included This Is For The Best (Fair Labor Act, whistleblower protection); Karma Brings You Down (employee dissatisfaction); Next Great American Dynasty (non-competes); and a whole slew of titles from Swift that applied to employee terminations (the pop singer's signature breakup motif). Attendees (who completely packed the auditorium) even picked up customized friendship bracelets.



## Helping cancer patients eat healthier >

**Carilion Clinic, Blue Ridge Cancer Care, and Feeding Southwest Virginia** have opened the first clinic-based food pantry dedicated to serving cancer patients undergoing treatment. Located within Carilion's Cancer Center, the facility is a shared space where patients can consult with top oncologists from both medical institutions. The pantry, carefully curated by Carilion Oncology Dietician **Meredith Kantsios**, will offer a selection of foods chosen to address the dietary requirements commonly associated with cancer treatments. Feeding Southwest Virginia will provide essential food items, including peanut butter, shelf-stable milk, soups, canned fruits and vegetables, pasta, cereal, and beans to stock the pantry. Blue Ridge Cancer Care has pledged ongoing funding to ensure the pantry remains well-stocked. "Surgery, chemotherapy, and other cancer treatments often result in specific dietary requirements," noted Kantsios."



## School renamed for Lewis >

Roanoke's Greenvale School has been renamed to the **Annette Martin Lewis Head Start Center** in honor of TAP's (Total Action for Progress) recently retired president **Annette Lewis**. A ceremony was held April 12 where her 35+ years of service with TAP was noted, and what was described as her advocacy and "visionary leadership and dedication to early childhood education [and that] transformative power."



## Lit walk at Ferrum >

In late March, **Ferrum College** instructor **Aaron Conover** and English associate professor **Allison Harl** led students of the Literature and Environment course on a nature walk that complemented the reading of Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*. Set in the backdrop of mountainous forests and struggling small farms of southern Appalachia, the novel's theme includes exploration of the environment, flora, and fauna of rural Virginia. The walk emphasized the balance of our ecosystem.



Tom Field



## Bye, bye, bridge >

The **Wasena Bridge Bonanza Day** on Saturday, April 13 in Roanoke's Wasena community produced a turnout that probably surprised everyone. Music, beverages, and vendors adorned the surrounding block (Main Street was closed off), but the celebration was primarily a simple open stroll over the historic bridge that will soon be demolished for a new, upgraded pedestrian-bike-car-friendly replacement (that is reported to take about two years). Far more people than the local affected businesses and residents attended the affair to say goodbye to the old, welcome to the new, and we promise to continue to support the 'hood economy, even though it will be cut off from Roanoke downtown via Main Street. Indeed, the closure will be challenging for traffic, commerce, and residential life—but if the Bonanza crowd was any indication of how the process will proceed, Roanoke should come out fine on the other side.



Courtesy photo

## Workforce bill signed >

Governor **Glenn Youngkin** has signed SB 436 to strengthen Virginia's workforce to ensure continued success and prosperity in the Commonwealth. "Not everyone needs a multiyear degree, often it's a credential that's needed to get a good job or to advance to an even better one," said Roanoke County-based Senator **David Suetterlein**, a bill sponsor. "This legislation helps develop more pathways for success by increasing the availability of highly demand, industry recognized credentials through data and a strengthened relationship between industry and workforce education."

## Local law firm recognized >

**Spilman Thomas & Battle** (Spilman) has received the Empowering Women Award from *Virginia Lawyers Weekly*. **Lori D. Thompson**, Member in Charge of Spilman's Roanoke office and the firm's DEI Committee Chair, said that, "Spilman has shown a strong commitment to supporting and elevating women and other minorities in the legal field, not only in our Virginia office, but throughout the firm's nine-office footprint."

The Empowering Women Award is designed to showcase tangible and innovative efforts by law firms to advance women attorneys in the workplace and community. Firms being honored have a track record of recruiting, hiring, and promoting women in their organization. "We are committed to diversity and inclusion because it is the right thing to do – not for the accolades – but it is great to be recognized for this commitment nonetheless," said **Tai Shadrick Kluemper**, who serves as Spilman's Director of Diversity Recruitment & Development. "We know a diverse workforce creates competent, innovative, solution-oriented teams that serve our clients' needs and deliver the best outcomes."



## Longtime Goodwill CEO honored >

**Bruce Phipps**, the former CEO of Roanoke-based **Goodwill Industries of the Valleys**, has been awarded the prestigious Goodwill Industries International Hall of Fame Award for his outstanding contributions to the Goodwill enterprise. The award ceremony took place in early March as part of the Goodwill Industries International Annual Conference of Executives. Phipps' leadership in the Goodwill network began at Goodwill Industries of Lima in 1978, serving at Goodwill organizations in Ohio, Michigan, Texas, Kentucky, and Virginia. Phipps was named President & CEO of Goodwill Industries of the Valleys in 2003 and led the organization for nearly 18 years until his retirement in April 2021. Under his leadership, Goodwill Industries of the Valleys expanded its services, programs, and locations, serving more than 40,000 people annually in 35 counties in Central, Southwest, and Southside Virginia.

During his tenure at Goodwill Industries of the Valleys, the organization increased the number of persons served from 1,200 to more than 40,000 annually, increased the number of persons placed in jobs from 200 to nearly 3,000 each year and expanded retail operations from 13 to 40 stores. Annual revenue from \$19.8 million to \$56 million. In recognition, Phipps was inducted into



the Goodwill Industries International Hall of Fame. "I have seen countless individuals and families gain greater independence through hard work and the hand up Goodwill provides," states Phipps. "I have seen the dignity that comes from earning a paycheck and becoming more self-reliant. This is the mission of Goodwill."



## Complete makeover >

**107 South Pollard** is a recently opened eatery in downtown Vinton. Hard to believe but this was once a storefront church, and then most recently the Star City Playhouse, which staged community theatre productions there. The area to the left is where the stage used to be; behind the long bar was once a walled-off costume storage area.



## Senator: Gov no big fan of legal weed sales >

The debate and structure for a legal retail cannabis marketplace in Virginia—where it is already legal to possess small amounts of marijuana and to grow it at home—did not get past Governor **Glenn Youngkin's** veto pen last month. Republican State Senator **David Suetterlein** said at a Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce legislative roundup breakfast that he voted a few years ago to decriminalize marijuana possession in small amounts; but as for setting up a legal retail market: "Governor Youngkin does really not like cannabis. He would have not been part of that one third of Senate Republicans that was voting for it. He made it crystal clear that he's against it."

Suetterlein says he would not vote to re-criminalize marijuana possession - as some state lawmakers accuse the Governor of wanting to do (Suetterlein also said that's not true). He noted that Democrats had "the trifecta" when Ralph Northam was governor but failed to finalize a retail marketplace before Youngkin was elected.

Meanwhile former Salem-based Republican delegate **Greg Habeeb** (a law partner in Richmond for Gentry Locke) said the Virginia Cannabis Association is one of his clients; and he went to bat for legalizing a retail marijuana market during the General Assembly session: "this bill did not legalize marijuana, it did not create a market, we already have legal marijuana, we have a multi-billion dollar illegal market. The only thing this bill will try to do was ensure that every product was tested, every product seller was licensed, and every sale was taxed. Very disappointed in the Governor, I think it misunderstands the status quo." The market was already created for recreational marijuana almost four years says Habeeb—when the Democrat General Assembly legalized it for personal use, but failed to set up a retail marketplace.



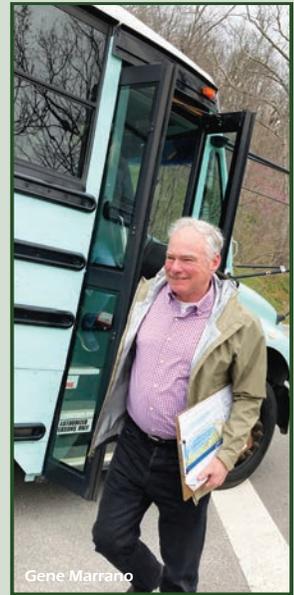
Gene Marrano

## It took a while >

Decades after Starbucks invaded other metropolitan hubs, **downtown Roanoke** has its first Starbucks café, near the corner of Church Avenue and Market Street in the old Norfolk & Western Office building. It's across from a fountain on the pedestrian walkway between Church and Franklin Road. Outdoor seating makes it an ideal people-watching spot as well.

## It takes partners to build a bridge >

U.S. Senator **Tim Kaine** spent part of the Senate recess last month traveling around the Commonwealth, including a stop in **Roanoke County** at the now-closed parking lot on Route 319, where a pedestrian bridge is being built over the roadway so that visitors can access the trail to **McAfee Knob** safely. The parking lot will then reopen but it's full much of the time, so Kaine and Roanoke County officials rode the shuttle that now operates between the parking lot and three stops in Salem between March and November. "To do this project, to make this super iconic part of the [Appalachian Trail] accessible to all but have it be well-managed and well-ordered, you need to have that many partners around the table to figure it out. But that's exciting." Those partners include the County, VDOT, the National Park Service and the federal government. Kaine, who has hiked the AT all the way through Virginia in segments, has just released a book about his outdoor adventures, *Walk, Paddle, Run: A Life Outside*, based he says largely on the journals he kept during his outdoor exploits.



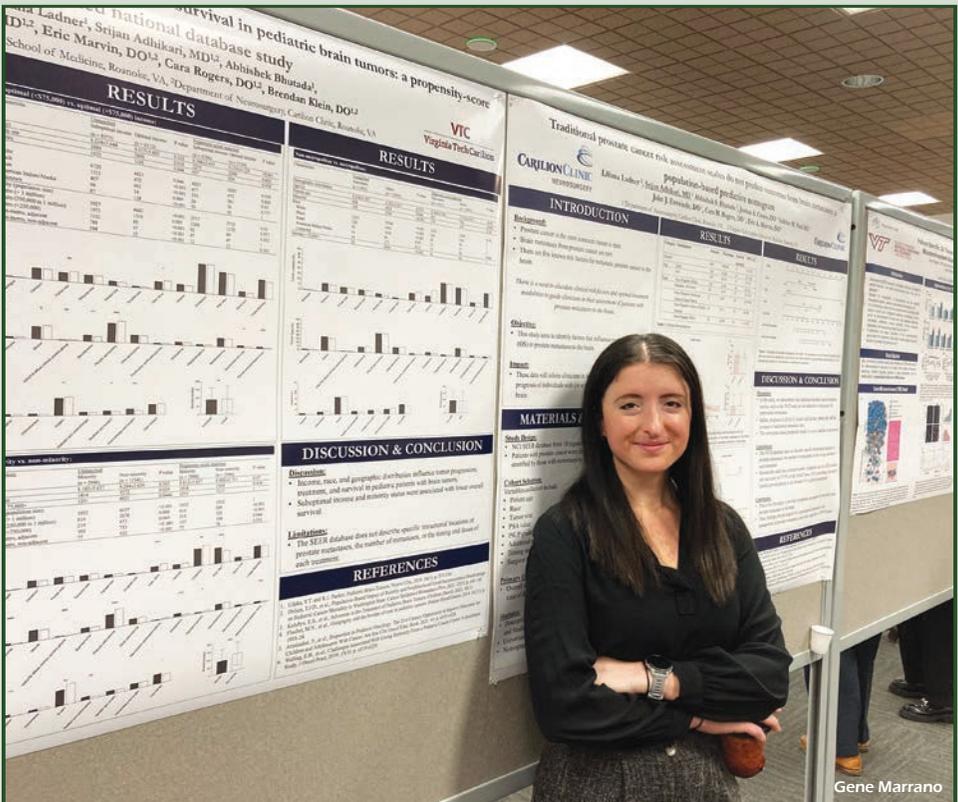
Gene Marrano



Gene Marrano

## Water is life, indeed >

**SERCAP** – the Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project, which focuses on helping with water-related issues but has branched out into community affordable housing projects as well, held its annual Water is Life! awards banquet at Hotel Roanoke last month. Attendees heard from a Roanoke couple that got an emergency loan through SERCAP when they discovered the building their business was moving into had issues with its water supply. Roanoke Mayor **Sherman Lea Sr.** was there, showing his Key to The Town of Vinton awarded to him that morning when Vinton Mayor **Brad Grose** gave his annual State of the Town Address. Lea is retiring as mayor at the end of the year.



Gene Marrano

## Carilion celebrates Research Day >

The Roanoke Valley's reputation as a Life Sciences hub is evident at the annual Research Day held by **Carilion Clinic**, showcasing cutting-edge research from a variety of players. The 17th annual Research Day includes details on a variety of ongoing projects, including treatment for brain injuries, how telehealth works in rural settings, how surgery therapy procedures may encourage opioid use - and so many more. **Francis Farrell** is the senior director of research and development at Carilion Clinic: "you [may] think of lab-based research, but really the lab at Carilion Clinic is the hospital bed. Our research is patient centered. Most of our research relates back to the care and new therapies for patients."

Also taking part on Research Day, displaying their project's goal and progress on poster boards, and then making a presentation, were Carilion partners at the **Radford University Carilion**, **Fralin Biomedical Research Institute** and **Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine**, where **Liliana Ladner** is a 3rd year student who had posters up with four research projects ongoing: "I'm hoping to go into neurosurgery, so a lot of my research is focused on how both predict how well neurosurgical patients will do, as well as contribute to improving their outcomes." 2023 was Ladner's first Carilion Research Day – then she went on to do several national conferences, showing off her work.

Some of those projects highlighted on Carilion's annual research day could be featured in medical journals – and could lead to breakthroughs that benefit a wider audience. The annual event that shows off the region as a hub for research, collaboration, and patient-centered innovation. Farrell says more than 100 project submissions hoped to land a spot-on Research Day.

*Valley Business FRONT is FRONT'n About at many events each month. Check the social media links at [www.vbFRONT.com](http://www.vbFRONT.com) for more coverage.*

## EDUCATIONAL FRONT



Rider

**Nicholas Rider** has joined the faculty at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine as a professor in the Department of Health Systems and Implementation Science. Prior to joining VTC SOM, Rider served on the faculty of the Baylor College of Medicine and was an associate chief medical information officer at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, **Lisa Uherick** served as a pediatric emergency physician at Carilion Clinic. She had the chance to observe the emergency department and realize the care team was struggling. Uherick then created a



Uherick

program called Healthy People Heal People, which encouraged people to take care of themselves and each other, maximizing their capacity to heal others. In her new role as the inaugural chief well-being officer at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine, Uherick is bringing her experiences as a physician and leader in well-being to enhance the culture of caring for students, residents, fellows, faculty, and staff at the school.

**Michael Webb** has joined the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences at Virginia Tech as the new assistant dean for advancement. As the leader of the college's advancement team, Webb will spearhead the



Webb

college's development, alumni relations, and communications operations. He joined Virginia Tech from the University of Tennessee, where he served as the director of advancement for the College of Arts and Sciences and supported the college to record giving. He previously held positions at East Tennessee State University and King University.

The College of Science at Virginia Tech has created the Center for Advancing Undergraduate Science Education (CAUSE), an effort "to enhance educational excellence within Virginia Tech's science community." A vision where educational research informs instructional practices. By integrating research and practice, the center



Johnson

aims to foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in undergraduate science and mathematics education. **Estrella Johnson**, associate professor in the Department of Mathematics and the college's assistant dean for inclusion and diversity, will become a leader in innovative teaching methods in undergraduate science and math for CAUSE.



Brady

**Stephanie Brady** has been named chief advancement officer



# Bank of Botetourt

for Student Affairs at Virginia Tech. As the division's chief advancement officer, Brady will serve as the principal fundraiser for Student Affairs and will lead the Student Affairs advancement team. Most recently, Brady served as assistant vice president with the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia, where she managed scholarship fundraising efforts.



**Allen**

Following a national search, Virginia Tech has named **Simon Allen** as the next vice president for finance and chief financial officer. Allen had been vice president for finance and chief financial officer of the Ithaca campus of Cornell University.



**Bassett**

**Jim Bassett** has been named the new director for the School of Architecture in the Virginia Tech College of Architecture, Arts, and Design, a position that poises him to expand the school's reach and impact on a global scale. Bassett, associate professor of architecture, has served as the interim director since August 2022.

**Bernadette "Bern" Battle** has joined Virginia Western Community College



**Battle**

as Associate Vice President of Student Affairs. Battle held key leadership positions at Reynolds Community College and Southside Community College, where she led student engagement, retention, and academic success initiatives. She will oversee student support services, including the Hall Associates Career Center, Trio Pathways program, intervention services, financial aid and records, retention and student success, enrollment and academic

advisement, and student engagement programs. Battle is on the Virginia State Historical Records Advisory Board, holds a Master of Counseling from Virginia State University, and has completed coursework toward an Ed.D. in Community College Leadership.



**Fleming**

The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia has announced that **A. Scott Fleming** will lead the agency. SCHEV implements policies and collects data for public colleges

## Have a career announcement?

Send announcements to [news@vbFRONT.com](mailto: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.

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and universities and the higher education landscape. Fleming, a Springfield resident, and a member of the council since last year, was most recently chief strategy officer for Teaching Solutions, an e-learning company specializing in early childhood education. He also has experience both as a staffer to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, and as an executive at the Strada Education Foundation, a nonprofit that seeks to foster connections between education and employment opportunities.

## FINANCIAL FRONT

**Kevin Laine**, an executive vice president at ValleyStar Credit Union has been appointed to the Board of Directors of New College Institute by Governor Youngkin. Laine has over 35 years of experience in the financial services industry, including proficiency in collections, consumer lending, indirect lending, and mortgage lending. He's also on the Foundation Board for Patrick and Henry Community College, holds an MBA from Averett University and a Bachelor of Social Work from Ferrum College, and a graduate of the Southeast Regional Credit Union National Association Management School and has been an active participant in Virginia Credit Union League

events and the Piedmont Chapter of Credit Unions.

**Misty Reed** has been promoted to the position of Chief Credit Officer at ValleyStar Credit Union. She served as Senior Vice President of Credit Administration; and her 22 years of experiences will complement her role in commercial lending, underwriting, operations, and credit administration. She was awarded the 2017 Lending Officer of the Year by Credit Union Times and has spearheaded financial analysis courses in partnership with the Risk Management Association and local Small Business Development Centers. A past president of the Southwest Virginia Chapter of the Risk Management Association, Reed earned an MBA from King University and a BA in English from Lenoir-Rhyne University.



Hostetter

**A. Randy Hostetter** has been appointed to the Board of Directors at Bank of Botetourt. He's the owner and Chief Executive Officer for Randy Hostetter Excavating, LLC in Lexington, Virginia. For more than 30 years, Randy has dedicated himself to establishing his business in the community, a

member of Lexington-Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce and active in community sponsorships. Hostetter grew up in Lexington and is a graduate of Lexington High School.

## LEGAL FRONT



Marston

The Roanoke-based law firm Gentry Locke announces that managing partner **K. Brett Marston** has been named the next President-Elect of the Virginia State Bar (VSB). He will be elected as the 2024-2025 President-Elect of the VSB at the 2024 VSB Annual Meeting in late May. His term as President-Elect will begin July 1.

## CREATIVE FRONT



Thomson

5Points Creative, a marketing agency in the Roanoke region, as announced the promotion of **Adam Thompson** to the position of Senior Web Developer. As

Senior Web Developer, Thompson will lead the charge for continued growth as the award-winning agency elevates its web development work to new heights.

## CULTURE FRONT



Amos

**Courtney Amos** has been promoted to Events and Communications Manager at the Montgomery Museum of Art & History. She will expand the patron services for museum membership and will take on a larger role in managing museum public programs and events. Amos is a long-time New River Valley resident who has worked for nonprofits and public libraries. She graduated with a B.B.A. in Marketing from Radford University.

## SPORTS FRONT



Duffy

**Megan Duffy** has been named the eighth head women's basketball coach at Virginia Tech.

Duffy guided Marquette University to the NCAA tournament in 2024, spent five years in Milwaukee where she accumulated a 110-46 record that included a 64-30 mark in BIG EAST play. Her head coaching career spans seven seasons, five at Marquette and two at Miami (Ohio) and features six seasons of 20 or more wins – leading to an impressive career record of 154-66 (.700). Duffy graduated from Notre Dame in 2006 with a double degree in psychology and computer applications.

**Mitch Stewart**, media manager and play-by-play broadcaster for the Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs hockey team has been named the 2023-2024 SPHL Broadcaster of the Year. He's in his third season with the Dawgs,

manages the social media, coordinates community appearances, and is well-known as "The Voice of the Rail Yard Dawgs." The Award (an inaugural recognition) was decided on by a vote of the league's broadcasters.

## COMMUNITY SERVICE FRONT



Estrada

HopeTree Family Services has appointed **April Estrada** as Director of Foster Care & Adoptions. She has nearly 30 years of experience in foster care

and human services, working with youth, and families in residential and community-based settings. She holds a Master of Science degree in Clinical Psychology from Radford University and has served as past president of the Virginia Association of Licensed Child Placing Agencies, along with serving as a member of Governor Youngkin's Safe and Sound Task Force, the Floyd County Family Assessment Planning Team, and the Piedmont Region Child Fatality Review Team.

## MUNICIPAL FRONT

**Danielle Poe** has been named director of economic development for Franklin County. She has been assistant director of economic development in



Poe

Roanoke County since 2022 where she has been responsible for real estate development, business retention and expansion, and key community partnerships. Before joining Roanoke County, she was business manager for the Roanoke Regional Airport Commission, economic development specialist for Downtown Roanoke, Inc., and worked in real estate and property management.

*Compiled by Tom Field and Gene Marrano*

“ ” The cyclist's constant quest for improvement translated to non-athletic pursuits. — Page 60



# CONTRIBUTORS

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

**Jennifer Poff Cooper** is a senior correspondent for FRONT, and a graduate of the RB Pamplin College of Business at Virginia Tech with a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from Hollins University. She is a native of Christiansburg, where she lives and writes in her family's home place. [cooperjpp91@gmail.com]

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

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

**Dan Dowdy** is the business development director for Valley Business FRONT and owner of The Proofing Prof proofreading services (proofingprof.net). His background includes service in the U.S. Air Force and an extensive career in education, including teaching college-level writing

competency and business courses, and working for a Fortune 100 company. [ddowdy@vbFRONT.com]

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Meg Reed** is the vice president of business banking at Freedom First Credit Union. With 25 years of banking experience, she ensures present and future Business Members are equipped to grow their business while helping them financially succeed; catering a financial plan to take the business to the next level. Reed views every business "like a zebra—no two businesses have the same stripes. What may work

for one, may not work for the next." [mareed@freedomfirst.com]

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

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

**Nicholas Vaassen** is a graphic designer with 27 years experience, specializing in publications. His design projects include FRONT, lifestyle, real estate, municipal, classified sales and cultural organization magazines in Roanoke and southwestern Virginia markets. [nvaassen@berryfield.com]

““”

He's focused on building out an investor network. — Page 25

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### *Get(tier) real*

Roanoke-based real estate company **Damon Gettier & Associates** (30-agent team in the Roanoke, Blacksburg, Lynchburg and regional market) has joined The Real Brokerage Inc—a US/Canada real estate technology platform agency that claims more than 16,000 agents.

### *Zum zum, school bus*

**Roanoke City Public Schools** has contracted with private operator Zum (Redwood City, CA) transportation company for school bus service. Zum claims to be “the nation’s largest mass transit system;” and stakeholders are sure to monitor performance with extra scrutiny following problems with the previous contractor, Durham School Services. The Zum assignment is a five-year, \$77 million contract.

### *Innovative Carilion*

**Carilion Clinic** was named to the Fortune magazine “America’s Most Innovative Companies” list; the only Virginia hospital or healthcare system to be ranked.

### *Burgers in the sky*

**Wing** is expanding its partnership with DoorDash and Wendy’s in Christiansburg. The drone delivery project launched its first US commercial operations in Christiansburg in

2019. These drones fly around 65 mph and complete most deliveries under 30 minutes (the “fastest-ever delivery took just under three minutes.”) The company encourages customers in Christiansburg to share their drone delivery experiences on social with #dronedelivery.

### *UPS down*

The **UPS** facility by the Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport is reducing its workforce by 153 employees according to a notice, citing low volume. Most of the dismissals will affect part-time workers.

### *Fed funds NRV healthcare*

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) has awarded the **Virginia Rural Health Association (VHRA)**, based in Blacksburg, a \$100,000 grant to improve health and workforce outcomes in Appalachia. VHRA receives the funds as a result of ARC awarding a larger project, Help Our People Expand the Ecosystem (HOPEE), whose goal is to address the socioeconomic disparities in fifty-six counties across the Appalachian states of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia. Congressman Morgan Griffith (R-VA) issued the following statement said in a release, “Virginia Rural Health Association’s interest in improving access to healthcare and

workforce opportunities is appreciated by our Appalachian communities.” The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has also awarded Virginia Tech a \$214,505 grant for cancer treatment research.

### *Crooked Road anniversary boost*

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) has awarded a \$64,135 grant dedicated to the **Crooked Road**, Virginia’s Music Heritage Trail. The funding supports a project that commemorates the 20th anniversary of the organization. Congressman Morgan Griffith (R-VA) issued the following statement: “the trail generates major economic activity as their festivals and venues garner thousands of visitors year-round. This monetary contribution by ARC will continue the Crooked Road’s mission in promoting Southwest Virginia’s identity which includes traditional music.”

### *Itus fits in hexagon*

Alabama-based Hexagon has finalized the acquisition of **Itus Digital**, headquartered in Roanoke, a software provider for asset performance management (APM). Itus Digital was founded in 2019 by former Meridium/GE Digital APM executives. The Asset Lifecycle Intelligence division Itus

will be part of focuses on helping clients design, construct, operate and secure more profitable, safe and sustainable industrial facilities. Hexagon says it has worked with Itus Digital previously, and that pre-existing relationship made this acquisition a strong cultural fit. All of the Virginia-based Itus Digital team became Hexagon employees effective and will continue to operate from offices located at 611 S Jefferson Street #7 in Roanoke.

### *Sleek truck*

**Volvo** plant in Dublin is gearing up for production of its new VNL model—a long haul truck with a more aerodynamic exterior and state-of-the-art LED lighting; all part of a \$400 million expansion of the facilities.

### *Iconic Floyd store spins last tune*

After more than 50 years of business, **County Sales** has permanently closed its retail and online operations. County Sales was initially opened as the distribution arm of County Records, a record label formed by Dave Freeman in New York City in 1965. After finding its home in Floyd, County Sales became a premier bluegrass and old-time music record store and distributor. After initially going out of business in 2018, Floyd Country Store owner Dylan Locke took it on

to keep the business going. "Our vision was to connect the important legacy of County Sales with The Floyd Country Store and Handmade Music School in order to tell the story of these important recordings and how the Floyd community has and continues to contribute to the legacy of traditional string band music," says Locke.

*Improved messaging for RVARC*

The **Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission** has announced the launch of a redesigned website, which it says offers improved navigation, interactive content, accessibility options, and multi-lingual support. The user-friendly and inclusive design is poised to promote active participation in local initiatives and bolster RVARC's connection with the community. Jeremy Holmes, Executive Director of RVARC, states that, "this platform represents a significant advancement in our mission to

encourage collaboration and provide essential resources to the residents and stakeholders of the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany region."

*Cool check*

A \$25,000 check was presented between the **Rescue Mission and Moore's Electrical & Mechanical** in late March. This check is for an HVAC unit donated to the Mission.

*Pretty expansion in Danville*

**EPL America, LLC**, a global specialty packaging manufacturer, is investing \$37.4 million to expand its manufacturing facility in the City of Danville. The company will invest in building upgrades at its current 200,000-square-foot facility and add new machinery that will allow it to grow into the beauty and cosmetic markets and serve customers interested in replacing existing plastic products with laminate tubes. The project will create 24

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new jobs. The Virginia Economic Development Partnership worked with the City of Danville and the Southern Virginia Regional Alliance to secure the project for Virginia, issuing a \$90,000 grant from the Commonwealth's Opportunity Fund to assist Danville with the project.

*More props for Agee*

The American Hospital Association (AHA) has presented its highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award, to **Nancy Howell Agee**, CEO of Carilion Clinic, a not-for-profit integrated health system serving more than 1 million people in Virginia and West Virginia. Agee received the 2024 award during a ceremony on April 15 at the AHA

Annual Membership Meeting in Washington, D.C. Agee has led Carilion since 2011. Under her leadership, the organization has transformed from a collection of hospitals to a patient-centered, physician-led organization. She helped forge a partnership with Virginia Tech to create the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine, which has graduated more than 400 physicians.

*More local board appointments by the Governor*

Health and Human Resources/Advisory Board on Acupuncture: Luke Robinson, DO, DABMA, of Blacksburg, Physician, Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine. Advisory Board on

## Notable Transactions

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- **Shelor Motor Mile** donated Speedway and Calfe Park minor league baseball stadium to Pulaski County
- **Piney Forest Commons** strip mall in Danville sold to private investor for \$2 million
- **Days Inn** on E Main St Salem sold to Evergreen Hotels for \$3.1 million
- **Roanoke Area Ministries (RAM)** purchased Elm Ave building for \$715,000 from private investor
- **Coastal Crypto** leased former Old Valley Forge building in Buchanan
- **Town of Pulaski** purchased 170 acres adjacent to LewisGale Hospital for development

SOURCES: commercial real estate firms; municipal records; FRONTnews feeds

Radiological Technology: Cheryl Cunningham of Salem, Radiologic Technologist, Carilion Clinic. Maternal Mortality Review Team: Caroline Bones of Salem, Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney, Montgomery County. Virginia Coal Mine Safety Board: Ronald Jefferson of Moneta, retired, Appalachian Power. Statewide Independent Living Council: Garrett Brumfield of Roanoke, Founder, Overcome Yours. Scientific And Technical Advisory Committee to the Chesapeake Bay Executive Council: Dr. John Bovay of Blacksburg, Assistant Professor and Kohl Junior Faculty Fellow, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, Virginia Tech. The Library Board: Malfourd W. "Bo" Trumbo of Fincastle, Retired Circuit Court Judge.

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*RAMP new Spring cohort*

The Regional Accelerator and Mentoring Program, or RAMP, located in downtown Roanoke, has selected 4 new teams to comprise the Spring 2024 Cohort, three from the immediate region. "Bringing together a new cohort is a highlight of our programming," says RAMP Director John Hagy (see story elsewhere). "We're constantly inspired by the tremendous ideas coming out of the region and thrilled to help develop them so they

can be brought to market and make an impact."

**Alice Innovations**

(Roanoke, VA) leverages technology and best in practice expertise to improve operating room service efficiency by applying computer vision models to predict surgical instruments.

**Bacchus Therapeutics**

(Falls Church) exploits cancer's hypermetabolic state by targeting specific cancer metabolic pathways. Their drug targets the cancer-causing gene, MYC which encompass about 50-70% of all cancers.

**Recens Respiratio,**

Inc. (Roanoke, VA) is accelerating hospital discharge for patients with acute respiratory disease by applying machine learning and fluid modeling to nasal cannula therapies.

**Scanlily, LLC**

(Blacksburg) Scanlily provides a revolutionary QR code-based method for managing assets and equipment.

Since its founding in 2017, RAMP – the Regional Accelerator and Mentoring Program serving western and central Virginia – has accelerated 48 companies that have collectively created 800+ new jobs and sell products and services to all U.S. states and internationally. RAMP is an affiliate of Verge, a collaborative strategic alliance that includes the Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council established to grow

the region's innovation economy. During the 12-week cohort program, startups receive \$20,000 in non-equity funding, expert 1:1 mentoring, and free office space with high-speed internet in downtown Roanoke's Gill Building. The Spring 2024 Cohort will conclude with "Demo Day," scheduled for May 22, when the entrepreneurs will present their companies to the region's business leaders and investors.

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*Roanoke City makes affordable housing easier*

It took almost four hours at a public meeting, but when it was over Roanoke City Council voted recently 5 to 2 to amend its zoning regulations. The new "Urban Center district" is meant to allow for the creation of more multi-family and affordable housing within the city with the R-1 residential zoning. Most of the speakers during the public hearing before the vote expressed concerns about the rezoning proposal; advocates said it was an approach other cities across the country are adopting in order to address the affordable housing crunch. Council Member Peter Volosin commented before he voted yes. "Studies after studies have shown that it does not affect property values when we put more dwelling units into a neighborhood. Look at Wasena, Raleigh Court, look at South Roanoke. All of our most valuable neighborhoods in this

city – already have the mix of housing that we're now trying to put in."

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*Coffee and a "silent" movie*

A new truck that's best described as a Mobile Coffee Shop will also have movies for people to view silently - with their Bluetooth ear buds. **Kirsten Turnonis** is the owner of **Kind-Brew-Coffee-Co.**—which offers prepacked foods and ice creams along with coffee. 10 percent of the proceeds will be donated to non-profits. "You're given this frequency, you basically sync to it like your Bluetooth to your phone, It's extremely simple. You have three channels you can choose from, so an event host could actually play up to three movies." Kind-Brew-Coffee-Co will be up and running in mid-May per Turnonis, beginning with an event at Wasena Park in Roanoke.

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*Scavenger on Williamson Road*

**Valerie Brown,** Executive Director of the **Williamson Road Area Business Association,** went before Roanoke City Council last month and provided an update on how the group is working to help business owners located on one of the city's busiest roadways. Brown says to get people out to businesses on Williamson Road the association is hosting a scavenger hunt in November – instead of a Restaurant

Week. "This fun event will include our famous passport and we have begun talking with outside individuals to help make this a collaborative effort. Events like the scavenger hunt will allow us to show off our road and bring shopping traffic our way." Brown says the events like the scavenger hunt allow the association to show off Williamson Road shops and further stimulate the city's economy.

*Vinton looks for new opportunities*

**Vinton** town leaders say they are being proactive when it comes to the community's

development. During last month's State of the Town address, Vinton Mayor **Brad Grose** said while change and growth can be uncomfortable at times, he feels leaders have made the lives of residents better over the past year. When looking toward the future, Grose said the town is planning to work with developers to address a downtown area that was impacted by a fire in 2022. "I can say confidently that we have a staff that is working with the property owners on a daily basis to help with a build back plan. We hope to redevelop this area [at Lee and South Pollard Street] into something that is

ambitious and fitting for our downtown." Grose said the town is also working to revitalize historic Gish Mill, which he said will be quite the undertaking. Grose added that entrepreneurs have a home in Vinton.

*Roanoke County has high hopes for new CTE*

**Roanoke County** education officials are weighing the possibility of establishing a partnership with a local, regional, or a national business that would provide money, and equipment to help students at the new **Career and Technical Education** center to be

built on Peters Creek Road. During a school board work session Jason Suhr, the school district's Supervisor of Career and Technical Education, said a potential partnership would be a long-term process. "We want to partner with business and industry not for just the immediate for when this center is built, but to have their collaboration and ongoing support beyond the opening." Suhr hopes a potential business partnership would also help registered apprentices find jobs post-graduation.

*Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field*

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“Melrose Plaza will be home to The Excel Center, full-service Market on Melrose, a Bank of Botetourt branch, and a wellness center; a true 'community hub.'” — Page 17

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VT photo

Tom Soladay

# SHIFTING GEARS

By Jennifer Poff Cooper

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**The former pro cyclist says his new role in Blacksburg was a good fit.**

Tom Soladay does his homework. He surprised this writer by knowing I graduated from college at his new place of employment. And when he was investigating his new job opportunity, he looked at Fortune 500 companies before deciding that Virginia Tech offered the career development plan and future job support he sought.

“Virginia Tech checked all the boxes,” Soladay said.

But let’s back up. How did Soladay, who started February 1 as the director of communications and marketing for Virginia Tech’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, get to higher education in Blacksburg?

Soladay was a professional cyclist for about 10 years. He said cycling was something he “fell in love with.” He also discovered how the cyclist’s constant quest for improvement translated to non-athletic pursuits. Not only is there internal adjustment by the cyclist, but also adjustment

to the changing outside environment.

When he and his wife were expecting a baby, Soladay’s priorities changed. He still wanted to be a good teammate on and off the bike, but he became curious about end results beyond winning. Soladay’s unique perspective, plus no doubt his degree from the University of Maryland, helped him segue into a sports and entertainment communications position with Circuit Sport, a job which he held from 2017 to 2022. He brought to the job additional strengths, such as an intimate level of access and the ability to move a lot of initiatives quickly.

Next, Soladay took a position with Chip Ganassi Racing, a motor sports Indy car series. Even though the job was also sports and entertainment related, it was different from the cycling world. Cycling’s hub is in Europe whereas Indy car racing is American. Car racing is on TV, reaching a million people in a weekend. There is more danger involved, so Soladay always had to be prepared for crisis communication.

“Things do blow up,” he said.

This job was more hands on, like managing pit reporters, and the stakes were higher. It was “exciting and challenging,” with the level of intensity immediately “dialed up.”

The sports and entertainment business moves very fast. Soladay said you might present your idea to the boss and the next day it’s either approved or not.

When Soladay was ready to make another change, his interest in helping people rose to the top. He had once thought about teaching, or politics. What would that aspiration look like now? The Virginia Tech position was appealing because it is a large organization, highly regarded, having an impact.

It also didn’t hurt that Virginia Tech does not require the nights and weekends of the sports and entertainment world, so Soladay and his wife can spend more time with their two small boys. He appreciates the freedom to pursue outside activities now.

“For the better part of sixteen years, I was traveling with no observed office hours,” he said.

Soladay appreciates that Virginia Cooperative Extension, including 4-H and the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, fall under his marketing purview. With his lack of agricultural experience, his involvement with these initiatives may seem counterintuitive, but Soladay enjoys identifying opportunities for folks, including farmers and community members, to improve their quality of life.

He said, “There is great purpose in supporting the efforts of thousands to benefit millions.”

Soladay has found the marketing MO at his new job to be different: “Virginia Tech is a larger place, more people are involved, more opinions are considered, and timelines are extended.”



The onboarding process in sports and entertainment takes days or weeks, not months like higher ed. This has been a challenge for someone used to moving and acting. Soladay said the patient support of colleagues has eased the transition for him into this new field and higher education in general.

Soladay feels he has brought assets to his new position. For one, he is flexible.

“I don’t put too much energy on exact tactical ways to reach goals,” he said, adding that he wants team members to feel heard.

Also, he learned as a cyclist how to make decisions while incurring stress. He knows how to take in a lot of information quickly and still have a calm demeanor.

Soladay’s vision for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences comms includes stakeholders understanding goals and priorities, a marketing plan with measurable outcomes, and a strategic mindset so “we know at the end of the year what we are being judged on.”

Of the move to higher education, Soladay said, “I can confidently say the grass is greener. I am leaving the excitement of sports and entertainment behind.”

He added, “It will take a number of years to achieve my goals here. I have every intention of staying at Virginia Tech for a considerable time.” 

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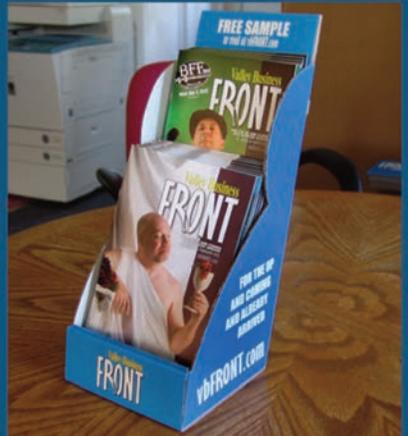
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