

Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

ISSUE 196
JANUARY 2025

Montgomery Museum
of Art & History

Hurricane Response

Lotus Cleaning

Carilion Choir

Gauntlet 2025
Entrepreneur Program

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Our sweet venture



Rob & Teagan Jessee
Big Daddy's Munchies

a family business story



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WELCOME TO THE FRONT

Sometimes, we take one of our regular assigned inside stories—and slap it on our FRONTcover. If you look back through our 196 monthly editions, you might be able to figure out when we did that. Usually, our FRONTcover story is a report or a compilation or some feature that warrants extra pages and exposure; but occasionally, our lineup is a collection of stories so unique and diverse, we could just place any one of them up front, and let the magazine just be. A showcase of businesses and organizations and the people behind them. Or as we're fond of saying, "people you know—and people you'd like to know." For our first issue of 2025, we figured it would be nice to be sweet. And so, you have it. A small business, a family enterprise. All of it wrapped up in colorful fashion. Sweet, yes? Happy New Year.



Tom Field
Publisher



Gene Marrano
Editor

“”

The intention is to have fun. — Page 31

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DEPARTMENTS

14 Montgomery Museum of Art & History

by Holly Brinja

18 Hurricane Response

by Jennifer Poff Cooper

26 Lotus Cleaning

by Tom Field

30 Carillon Choir

by Gene Marrano

34 Gauntlet 2025 Entrepreneur Program

by Special Feature

60 Mill Mountain Theatre

by Dan Smith

PERSPECTIVES

16 Lead By Example

by Carrie Cousins

24 Biz Ops

by Zachary A. Collier

28 Small Business Tool Kit

by Shannon Dominguez

REVIEWS & OPINIONS

38 On Tap from the Pub

by Tom Field

39 There's Something Happening Here

by Gene Marrano

40 Reviews

FRONTLINES

32 Spotlight FRONT'n About

42 FRONT'n About

50 Career FRONT

56 FRONT Notes

vbFRONT.com

LEAD STORY PAGE 8

A Sweet Adventure with a Local Twist

by Aila Boyd



“ ”

Oh, you don't want to do that. — Page 38

FRONTcover photograph of Rob & Teagan Jessee by Gene Marrano.



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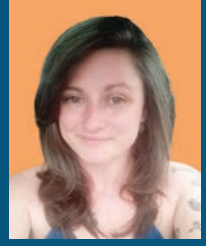
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JANUARY



Aila Boyd



Holly Brinja



Shannon Dominguez



Dan Dowdy



Nicholas Vaassen

Advisory Board

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

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You have to
check your ego at
the door. — Page 61



When
individuals and
local businesses
invest in their
museums,
they're investing
in the economic
growth of their
community.

— Page 15

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

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Submitted photos

A Sweet Adventure with a Local Twist

By Aila Boyd

What started as a practical way to preserve a family garden's harvest has blossomed into a thriving small business offering freeze-dried candies, fruits, and vegetables.



Big Daddy's Munchies, owned by Rob Jessee, is a Roanoke-based venture that blends creativity, family collaboration, and community support into every bite. "We initially bought the freeze-dryer with our garden in mind—it was all about preserving the harvest," Jessee explained. However, an online discovery of freeze-dried candy opened up a world of possibilities. "It was one of those 'aha' moments," he said. "We thought, 'Hey, this could actually help us recoup the cost of this machine!' And here we are—what started as a practical purchase turned into a sweet adventure."

The name of the business, Big Daddy's Munchies, carries personal significance. Jessee, affectionately





Teagan and Rob

nicknamed "Big Daddy" by his six children, saw the moniker as a perfect fit for the brand. "It's a nod to my journey and how far I've come with my weight loss," he said.

It didn't take long for the Jessee family to realize they had stumbled onto something special. Demand for their products quickly outpaced their single freeze-dryer's capacity. "We were running one freeze-dryer 24/7—stopping only for cleaning and maintenance—and we still couldn't keep up with the demand," Jessee said. The solution? A second machine to double their output.

While the business's growth has been exciting, it hasn't been without challenges. One unexpected hurdle has been naming the products. "We can't call them what they really are due to copyright and trademark restrictions, so coming up with creative and catchy names that resonate with customers can be a fun but challenging part of the process," Jessee shared.

Big Daddy's Munchies is more than a business; it's a family endeavor. Jessee's youngest daughter Teagan plays an integral role, particularly at events. "She's our MVP," Jessee said. "She loads the car, chooses her role—whether it's taking payments, restocking, bagging, or organizing—and really takes ownership."

The business has also become a teaching opportunity for Teagan, who is homeschooled. "She's gaining firsthand experience in running a small business," Jessee said.

““”

Coming up with creative and catchy names that resonate with customers can be a fun but challenging part of the process.



"And if I can brag for a second, she can count back change without a calculator—a skill that's becoming a bit of a lost art these days!"

Jessee's wife, lovingly known as Pinki, is the business's behind-the-scenes powerhouse. "She's the organizer and creative part of the business," Jessee said. "She designs all the labels, comes up with product names, and keeps everything running smoothly. Her support and behind-the-scenes magic are a huge part of what makes our business work."

Big Daddy's Munchies is deeply rooted in the Roanoke community. Jessee sources produce from local farms like Wade's Orchards in Woolwine and Ikenberry's Orchards in Daleville. "We are 100% committed to supporting our local community," he said. Even for candy, the Jessees prioritize purchasing from local stores. "It's our way of keeping the money here and giving back to the place we call home."


The product lineup includes a mix of staples and seasonal items, but the standout star has been Texas Peanut Brittle, made with Dr. Pepper. "It has been an absolute hit—we can't keep it in stock!" Jessee said.

Currently, Big Daddy's Munchies products can be found at local partners such as Big Lick Exotix, Aquatics and Exotics, and Winston Ave. Social Club. Jessee hopes to expand their reach. They also sell their munchies at Roanoke RailYard Dawgs games at the Berglund Center.

"We are thrilled to have Big Daddy Munchies as one of our vendors. By offering locally sourced produce from our farmers and supporting local vendors like Big Daddy's Munchies, we at the Historic Roanoke City Market pride ourselves in offering a vibrant and diverse atmosphere for local consumers," Izzy Post, director of marketing and communications at Downtown Roanoke Inc., said.

Jessee envisions big things for the future of the business, including expanding into freeze-dried meals. "We're planning to offer meals tailored for hikers on the Appalachian Trail," he said. Additionally, he wants to cater to the elderly by providing healthier meal options free from additives and processed ingredients.

With a focus on quality, community, and family, Big Daddy's Munchies is redefining freeze-dried snacks while making a positive impact. For Jessee, the journey has been as sweet as the treats themselves. "It's all about bringing convenience and quality to different lifestyles while making a positive impact," he said.

As Big Daddy's Munchies continues to grow, one thing remains clear: it's a labor of love—and crunch—that the entire family can share. 

“ ”

Her support and behind-the-scenes magic are a huge part of what makes our business work.

“ ”

Find Big Daddy's Munchies at Big Lick Exotix, Aquatics and Exotics, Winston Ave Social Club, and Roanoke RailYard Dawgs games at the Berglund Center.



Montgomery Museum

Casey Jenkins

Montgomery Museum of Art and History: A Catalyst for Local Economic Development

By Holly Brinja

Councilman Casey Jenkins, soon to be Executive Director of Virginia Associations of Museums, has spent the past decade, post-graduation from Virginia Tech, pursuing his passion for community and economic development.

Casey Jenkins drive to increase the value of museums and the role they play in the community has developed through his career. At George Washington's Mount Vernon in Mt. Vernon, Virginia, he recognized the value of what it can mean for the community to get diverse individuals to the same table for a common goal;

Then, The Valentine in Richmond, Virginia, impressed the importance of displaying a city's rich history and culture. Jenkins returned to Southwest Virginia and has been the Montgomery Museum of Art and History Executive Director since June 1, 2021. Throughout his tenure, the museum has seen a 280% increase in visitors and become an anchor for downtown Christiansburg revitalization.

Jenkins said, "Museums should reflect their

community. A place where there is something for everyone and everyone feels welcome." The Montgomery Museum strives to remain vigilant and flexible to community needs now and in the future he stresses. To achieve long-term success, the museum couples individual investments and memberships with local business partnerships to provide community members access to the desired resources and education.

In 2023, the Virginia Association of Museums awarded the museum the Innovation Award for its newest program, "Art of Happiness." They'd heard local individuals of all ages seeking self-help mental health services. They pivoted their focus and forged the program to provide community members with a safe place to turn their personal mental struggles into works of art. Sessions included painting, sculpting, poetry, and

more. Met by such large demand, LewisGale Regional Health System stepped in to back the efforts to raise awareness and provide resources for additional classes.


“When individuals and local businesses invest in their museums, they’re investing in the economic growth of their community.” Investments and partnerships also allow the museum to expose community members to experiences they may not have considered or known otherwise. Free and of-charge programs and events give businesses a plateau to reach potential customers and meet community involvement goals. The more businesses involved and investments received, the greater the ability of the museum to reassess its focus to meet community needs when they change and evolve.

Another local business partner, New River Art & Fiber, in Blacksburg, Virginia, takes the opportunity to share their expert knowledge behind different artistic methods and mediums. In 2024, they offered two felting classes at the museum, an art form rising in popularity in recent years. Students made two-dimensional felt-wool paintings and a three-dimensional sculpture of a small gnome. The business aims to ‘supply the material needs of artists and makers and cultivate a friendly and interdependent community through special events and social activities.’ Through the affiliation, they meet potential customers, inform

them of their brand, and bring awareness to their local supply source for personal and professional projects.

Patrons attend classes and events set amongst a unique interactive historical experience at the museum’s new downtown Christiansburg location, the former Bank of Christiansburg. Throughout the ever-evolving exhibits, pieces created by local artists elevate the experience. Marked for sale, the museum provides an avenue for income and exposure to the talent in the New River Valley. The increased square footage also allows the museum to offer micro-retail, community gathering space, and meeting/conference accommodations.

Locals and tourists alike are already drawn to this art and history attraction, conveniently located off I-81, for an array of individual and community-enriching reasons— and now they’re gearing up for the county’s historic Semi quincentennial. Plans are in the works as Montgomery County is the only locality in the commonwealth able to celebrate its birthday alongside the State and the Country.

Collaborations will continue, and unique opportunities to work with the areas government agencies seized as the museum works to put Montgomery County’s art, history, and local businesses on the map. 



2024 Community preservation Award from Preservation Virginia Casey Jenkins at center



LEAD BY EXAMPLE

**By Carrie Cousins,
Vice President at
Lead Point Digital**

Executive Summary:
*Marketing considerations
for the New Year.*

7 Marketing Resolutions for 2025

I've been on both sides of the marketing equation. I've been on an in-house marketing team that needed the help of an agency to get everything done efficiently and effectively and now I'm that marketing partner for teams that can use the help.

If you want to make the most of that relationship – or are thinking about working with a marketing agency for the first time, this is the moment to think about how that relationship can benefit your organization.

What better way to think about it than with a few marketing resolutions for the coming year.

1. **Tell Better Stories:** Few things will benefit you as much as a solid brand story. Look at your strategy. Is it time for a refresh?
2. **Aim for a Marketing Media Mix:** There's no one marketing tactic or magic bullet. Even with a smaller budget, you can include a mix of marketing channels and efforts with a goal of creating touchpoints with as many potential customers as possible.
3. **Pick One Social Media Channel and Do It Well:** Social media is time consuming and can be costly to do well. But you don't have to do everything. Pick the channel that's most useful for your business and commit to doing it well.
4. **Plan for a Website Investment Cycle:** You should always be budgeting for and thinking about website upgrades. Technology is moving at pace that almost requires companies to build a new website every three to five years. Keep that in mind for multi-year budget planning.
5. **Make Return on Ad Spend and Transparent Reporting a Priority:** Do you know where your budgets are going? Are digital ads returning traffic or actual results? If it is not the latter, it's time to ask questions.



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- 6. Find a Partner Who Cares About Your Business: You can't always put your finger on this one, but you should connect with your marketing partner. They should be asking you about your business goals, development, and growth. Your success is their success!
- 7. Have Fun: Marketing and advertising is fun. (Yes, I know this is a purist concept.) Remember why you gravitated toward this industry and make it a point to remember and reintroduce that joy into your work life! 🎉

“Pick one... and do it well... you don't have to do everything.”



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Cornfield flattened in Grayson County

Helene: the Economic Effects of Extreme Weather

By Jennifer Poff Cooper

In September 2024, Hurricane Helene brought physical and psychological devastation to southwest Virginia. In the wake of the storm is a Virginia Tech economic analysis suggesting that the financial consequences are severe as well; losses will fall between \$416 million and \$630 million.



VT photos

Those big numbers are according to John Bovay, Associate Professor of Agricultural and Applied Economics and architect of the study. The study looked at losses throughout the state, but in reality, said Bovay, all losses were west of Roanoke except for \$35,000 of damage in Pittsylvania County.

Bovay said Virginia Tech has been conducting damage assessments for some time. In this case, Virginia Cooperative Extension agents documented in a report the damage done to timber landowners and farmers, looking

at infrastructure losses and current year lost sales. The Virginia Secretary of Agriculture then reached out to the head of Virginia Cooperative Extension asking why this assessment was so much lower than a damage assessment for North Carolina. When given a second look, the report was found to be missing two elements: future lost sales, and ripple effects. Bovay said that *for every dollar a producer loses, two to three dollars are lost for the wider community.*

A main goal with Bovay's additional analysis



John Bovay

was to inform federal and state relief so it would adequately compensate affected farmers and communities. Gov. Glenn Youngkin cited that cost range in a letter sent to Pres. Joe Biden requesting federal disaster aid, according to The Roanoke Times.

Extension agents were tasked with contacting

farmers to tally losses. In those conversations, lost sales and damage to buildings were estimated. Repair versus replacement was considered; fixing a barn has a lower cost than rebuilding a new barn. To assess the full economic picture Bovay employed a list of crops damaged and livestock killed, and extension agents followed up with farmers



Damaged hay in Wythe County

to calculate future losses. Bovay used age to estimate value. Young livestock that can reproduce for years are more valuable, while mature trees are more valuable because young apple trees, for example, take years to grow to maturity.

The Department of Forestry provided aerial GIS data from a couple of weeks before and after the hurricane to help with estimates. The composition of tree stands was considered as some types of trees are more valuable than others. Bovay said trees that fell during the hurricane are unlikely to be sold as timber due to lack of workforce and "difficulty removing water-soaked wood from the forest."

Storm recovery depends on the amount of capital available for producers to spend to repair damage, Bovay said. Downed fences would need to be reinstalled to

contain grazing cattle, for instance. Some fields are unable to be rehabilitated and will be taken out of production. In some cases, the flood damage suffered by crops and buildings will be severe enough that it will not make sense to resume operations. Bovay noted that farming is a part-time endeavor for many in southwest Virginia; those farmers may now rely more on their day jobs. For others affected, this may prompt early retirement or looking for other forms of work. "People are going to have to make difficult decisions," Bovay said.

Bovay also documented a ripple effect that agricultural losses will have on the regional economy. This is an indirect effect of Hurricane Helene, capturing the idea that farmers will spend some portion of the money they make on goods and services in their region. When farmers lose income, that loss is "multiplied many times in the local community," he said.



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Debris River Ridge Farm in Grayson

He added that the economic hardship is mostly local, in that most of what is produced “doesn’t end up on people’s plates outside the region.” An apple orchard disappearing in southwest Virginia will not affect apple supply or cost in Richmond or Washington, D.C., he said.

The locality suffering the most damage was Grayson County, followed by Wythe County and Smyth County. “It will take

them a long, long time to recover,” Bovay said.

Future losses must be considered over all the years farmers will be without income. Perennial crops such as apples, blueberries, and Christmas trees take five to eight years to come back into full production. For beef cattle the timeline is twelve years, though it is less for other animals.


Timber was by far the most affected sector



within agriculture in terms of lost sales, Bovay said. Other highly affected categories were vegetables (pumpkins, hay, feed corn, and the aforementioned fruits and Christmas trees), livestock (especially beef cattle), and facilities, land, and infrastructure.

Looking forward, Bovay said climate change is making hurricanes more intense so anything farmers can do to be resilient is helpful. One blueberry farmer, he said,

is adapting by planting on acreage farther away from the river to avoid flooding; however, the soil could be less hospitable there. He concluded there is little that can be done to prepare for future such events.

Bovay emphasized one take-away: "People should be mindful that it is going to take years for farmers to recover fully. Keep supporting them with charitable contributions and volunteering when feasible." 



BIZ OPS

By Zachary A. Collier

Executive Summary:
Mitigating risk in your business requires a more comprehensive approach than you might realize.

Zachary A. Collier is Assistant Professor of Management at Radford University.

Is your risk management like Swiss cheese?


For the day-to-day operations of any business, effective risk management is a must. Managers need to make decisions about what safeguard to put in place to lower risk. As a simple example, fire extinguishers are safeguards that companies can use to reduce the risk associated with fires.

Unfortunately, having only a single safeguard in place may be insufficient to reduce the risk to an acceptable level. Multiple safeguards might need to be implemented at the same time. In addition to fire extinguishers, a business may also have sprinkler systems and fire alarms. They may conduct fire drills so that employees know what to do in the case of an emergency.

Implementing multiple layers of protection simultaneously is sometimes called “defense in depth,” and the logic is that if one of the safeguards fail, there will be others in place to stop an accident from occurring, or at least to lessen the impacts if it does occur.

Safeguards are rarely 100% effective. Professor James Reason, in his book *Managing the Risks of Organizational Accidents*, described how risk management safeguards are metaphorically like slices of Swiss cheese. The holes in each slice are called “latent conditions” - examples include poor training, procedures, equipment, maintenance, and supervision. Hazards are normally blocked by the first line of defense. But when defenses are weakened from latent conditions, which can go undetected or ignored, a hazard can penetrate every line of defense, causing an accident to materialize.

The first lesson is that risk management is an ongoing process. Processes can be ignored, controls can be loosened, and equipment can degrade. All of this weakens the defenses that could otherwise prevent an accident. Ongoing diligence and continuous improvement are needed. Second, risk management requires looking at problems through a holistic lens. Effective risk management is not just about implementing advanced technological safeguards, but also requires risk-informed business processes and organizational culture. Layered safeguards enhance “defense in depth.”

Don't let weakened defenses catch you off-guard. If your lines of defense look like Swiss cheese, it may be time to rethink your risk management strategy. 

“Multiple safeguards need to be implemented.”



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Brett and Lia, Lotus Cleaning Services

Your Workspace is Our Workspace

By Tom Field




“

We gained lots of real-world cleaning experience.

Tom Field

What if your workspace was the work (or living) space for everyone else? That's the case with Lotus Cleaning Services in Salem that serves the Roanoke and New River Valley markets. Owners Brett and Lia go onsite for a different “workspace” each time, whether it's for deep cleaning or move-in/ move-out cleaning or specialized services.

They mostly service homes; and their offerings—even routine maintenance—are clearly identified on an extensive list. Their reviews are top notch, they don't mind pets at all, and Lia says she and Brett have ten children between the two of them, so “we gained lots of real-world cleaning experience... over 20 years!” [lotuscleanva.com] 



SMALL BUSINESS TOOL KIT

By Shannon Dominguez,
Senior Consultant
at Building Beloved
Communities

Executive Summary:

*You can do a lot for
community impact.*

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New Year, New Ways to Do Good: Small Biz Edition

As we kick off 2025, let's talk about how small businesses can crush it in the community impact game. At our BBC annual retreat, we got fired up about our primary mission: "to do good in the world." Because here's the real tea: you don't need to be a big shot to make a difference. Small businesses can be mighty forces for good, too.

Here's how you can join the party and start making waves:

- 1. Team up with local nonprofits or schools.** It's all about that community love. Volunteer, sponsor events, or share your expertise.
- 2. Go green! Cut the waste, save energy, buy local.** Mother Earth will thank you, and so will your wallet in the long run.
- 3. Treat your people right.** Fair pay, safe vibes, and chances to grow. It's a win-win that creates a loyal, motivated team.
- 4. Choose suppliers who share your values.** Support the underdogs and eco-warriors. Your supply chain can be a force for good.
- 5. Keep it real.** Share your good deeds and goals. People appreciate authenticity, and transparency builds trust.

Why bother with all this do-gooding? Because it's not just good for the soul, it's good for business:

- Your brand gets a serious glow-up. Customers are drawn to businesses that care.
- Loyal customers stick around because they're feeling your vibe and values.
- Your squad feels pumped to be part of something bigger than just a paycheck.
- You might even save some cash with those eco-friendly practices.


At BBC, we walk the talk and put our money where our mouth is. Our upcoming "Free Non-Profit Fix-It Day" on January 17 is where it's at. We're sharing our secret sauce with nonprofits, no strings attached. It's our way of leveraging our skills to strengthen the backbone of our community.

Remember, it's not about how big you are; it's about the impact you make. Every little bit of good you do can start a chain reaction of awesome in your community. Small actions can create big ripples, and before you know it,

you're part of a wave of positive change.

So, what's your move for 2025? How will you shake things up and do some good this year? Maybe it's starting a mentorship program, sponsoring a local nonprofit event, or launching a recycling initiative. Whatever it is, now's the time to brainstorm and act.

Let's make 2025 the year small businesses show up big time for their communities. It's not just about profits; it's about purpose. It's about weaving social responsibility into the fabric of your business operations. When we all chip in, we create a tapestry of change that transforms our entire community.

So, are you ready to do good and be great? Your community is waiting, and the new year is the perfect time to start. Let's make some magic happen! 



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Trish Winter (L) and Noel Anderson

Gene Marrano

Carilion offers a different take on the Community Choir

By Gene Marrano

Carilion Clinic calls it an intergenerational community choir project designed for those with brain or spinal cord injuries, those with dementia, their caregivers and supportive community members.

Because as Carilion says, The Beat Goes On, which is also the name for a choir that requires no audition, is free to join and offers the opportunity to perform in a community concert with a live band this spring. A Beat Goes On choir was in 2023 by Carilion in Blacksburg on the Virginia Tech campus, while the choir in Roanoke based at the Carilion Mental Health center at Tanglewood Mall is still somewhat in the formative stage.

Noel Anderson is a Board-Certified Music Therapist who works with clients at 5 Points Music Sanctuary in Roanoke, and has another office on Brambleton Avenue for her private Anderson Music Therapy Services, which covers a swath from Lynchburg to Pulaski

County. She has consulted with and helped create the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra's Wellness Arts program that visits senior living homes to play for people suffering from memory loss – where some tunes they may remember from many years gone by helps reconnect them to the world – and their memories.


Anderson also offers free music therapy services to Virginia residents who have experienced a traumatic brain or spinal cord injury. Through Roanoke City's Arts Connect program she's helping to develop a program that will bring music to senior residential homes for people with disabilities and mental health challenges. Music therapy

can release neurochemicals like serotonin and dopamine that help many feel more soothed or motivated. Oxytocin is a bonding chemical “that helps you feel close to other people. When you make music with other people you actually feel closer to them.”

Anderson approaches music therapy with her clients in a variety of ways, depending on their challenges and preferences. Improvisation, interactive experiences – active music making almost always she says, even songwriting to an extent. “It allows them to express their emotions,” even when words might fail. Anderson heard about the choir in Blacksburg and approached Dr. Trish Winter at Carilion to get The Beat Goes on in Roanoke going. Talk therapy has its place says Anderson, but music therapy “allows them to feel, just safer and able to express themselves in a different way – a new modality.” In fact, she says Anderson some clients claim they make more progress in just a few months of music therapy versus years of traditional talk sessions with a therapist.

The group meets every other Tuesday from 5:30-7pm at Tanglewood. A three-year grant Anderson received to support persons with brain and spinal cord injuries from the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services and the Commonwealth Neurotrauma Trust Fund is helping to launch the Roanoke version of The Beat Goes On (and ode of course to the Sonny & Cher tune from years ago.)

Winter is a grants administrator and music therapist for Carilion; she says music therapy is a growing field. “There are a lot more jobs in the field than when I started. In this area we’re seeing a really big growth in music therapy.” Carilion in fact says Winter has five music therapists in its employ, in both behavioral health and hospice. MRI’s say both Winter and Anderson show neural growth and synchrony in brain waves, “while they’re making music.” Winter helped get the choir at Virginia Tech off the ground and is now doing the same at Tanglewood. “That went so well I thought it would be great to expand it to Roanoke.”

The goal is to grow the choir and then stage a spring concert backed up by a rock band, with uplifting pop music from the 60’s through the 90’s on the playlist, with the music all about dancing according to Winter. “There’s ton of audience participation,” she promises. “A lot more loosey-goosey, the intention is to have fun. It’s not your grandmother’s choir. Let your hair down.” Winter studied classical voice and is a vocalist herself, with three degrees in music therapy. Not to mention playing guitar, piano and percussion. Anderson and Winter hope to demonstrate to those participants suffering from physical or mental conditions that despite their obstacles, the beat does indeed go on. “It’s a way for them to have a place to belong,” notes Anderson, “and to connect with other individuals.” 



Submitted

The Beat Goes On Choir in Blacksburg



Submitted photos



Preserved and awarded >

The **Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation** “Kegley Preservation Awards” were presented on Nov. 21 in the sanctuary of the new Belmont Lofts in Roanoke (formerly Belmont Baptist Church). The annual awards recognize notable examples of historic preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, stewardship, education, advocacy of the Roanoke region’s historical, architectural, and cultural heritage. Recognized this year: **Cedar Hill Farm** in Botetourt (stewardship); **Wheatland Manor** in Fincastle (rehab); “**Burell [Memorial Hospital] Day**” (heritage); **LEAP Hub** (rehab); **Factory Flats** in Buchanan (adaptive reuse); **1947 Carvins Cove Water Treatment building** (stewardship); **Roanoke Civil War Round Table** (education); **Boone’s Mill N&W Railway Depot** (restoration); **Belmont Lofts** (adaptive reuse); **Rupert Cutler** (environmental advocacy); and **Thomas Klatka** (lifetime achievement).

Developer **Brent Cochran** took home the adaptive reuse award for the Belmont project. **Alison Blanton**, the Awards Committee co-chair, said repurposing older, unsustainable churches for affordable housing can serve two purposes: “it could mean that some of their elderly parishioners could live there, or they can make that kind of an outreach effort on their own part [to address affordable housing] – a really nice balance. They were architectural and civic and social landmarks; some larger older churches that have fallen on hard times with older, dwindling congregations. You want them to remain but also not be vacant.”

Adaptive re-use is also a way to tackle the affordable housing issue. Blanton says it’s nice to see younger developers like Cochran and Isabel Thornton involved; her Restoration Housing non-profit is converting the former Trinity Methodist church in downtown Roanoke off Mountain Avenue into living spaces as well.



Gene Marrano photos



YMCA at Tanglewood debuts >

A two-million-dollar investment to convert a former upper floor department store space at **Tanglewood Mall** in the **YMCA for the Blue Ridge's** sixth location – the YMCA at Tanglewood – made its debut last month. The Y at Tanglewood features eight indoor pickleball courts (there's already a fundraising pickleball tournament this month), a state of the art exercise equipment room, a free weight room and studios for classes. Hot Yoga is scheduled to start next month. Member in the local YMCA now allows access to six locations in the region. As of early last month, close to 200 new memberships have been opened at the new Y, according to **Amanda Keffer**, operations director for the new Y at Tanglewood.

"Roanoke County is an area that the Y hasn't dipped our toe in yet," Keffer noted, "so we're excited to serve this community [in southwest county]. This is a great spot, a great location [with] all the great things happening in the area. We wanted to hope on that before it's too late." Keffer can envision related businesses perhaps filling some of the empty retail spaces at the once-thriving Tanglewood Mall – workout apparel stores or a smoothie bar perhaps. Carilion already has a sizable footprint with Carilion Children's outpatient services now in what was once a JC Penney department store, and Carilion Mental Health services also taking up space on two floors in former retail outlets. "Pickleball has exploded at all of our branches," adds Keffer. "There's plenty of space for pickleball in here. That was kind of a big draw." The single monthly membership rate at the Y is \$58.



The Advancement Foundation's Gauntlet Awards—always a high energy affair

A CAMELOT FOR ENTREPRENEURS AND INNOVATORS

*VIRGINIA'S EXCITING AND DIVERSE NEW
METRO IS RIGHT HERE IN OUR REGION*

Special Feature

In every community, there lies the potential for extraordinary growth and prosperity. The true power is not just in what we have, but in how we effectively leverage it. Over the last 11 years, The Advancement Foundation (TAF), a nonprofit, and its partners have demonstrated that even in small, rural, and mid-sized communities in Virginia—regions often overshadowed by the more prosperous metros to the east—success can be achieved through collaboration, innovation, and an audacious commitment to progress.

One example of TAF's work is the growth of now Virginia's Largest Business Program and Competition, the Gauntlet which has attracted over 1100 entrepreneurs/innovators, 300 business mentors, hundreds of donors, 50 plus ecosystem partners and communities across our region.

While resources may seem limited, the strength of our people, businesses, and diverse assets is boundless. TAF is harnessing these strengths for the benefit of entrepreneurs across our region.



Rudys Girl Interview

These entrepreneurs are accelerating their businesses, hiring employees, paying taxes and purchasing or leasing real estate. From tech-savvy innovators to Main Street businesses, TAF has engineered a model that has had a profound impact on the identification, acceleration, and success of business development. The lifeblood of our region is business growth, which benefits from this well-oiled ecosystem, connecting the Roanoke Metro to

Rockbridge, Southside, and far Southwest Virginia—a “Super Network” of like-minded, innovative leaders hungry to attract and retain talented entrepreneurs.

Through strategic partnerships, TAF is helping to create a new narrative around our region’s entrepreneurship. Local economic developers, higher education institutions, corporations, and ecosystem partners are collaborating to drive forward

GAUNTLET WELCOMES DIVERSE BUSINESSES (A FEW EXAMPLES)

- Twin Creeks Brewing Company, Vinton 2016 and 2018
- Hamms Fine Food, Roanoke City 2016, 2023
- Richard Mansell, IVO Limited, 2019
- Stoney Brook Vineyards, Botetourt, 2017
- BOCO Wellness, Botetourt, 2018
- Big Lick Screening, Roanoke City, 2018
- Advanced Racking, Botetourt, 2019
- Fyvie Farms, Alleghany, 2021
- The Wellness Bar, Martinsville 2022
- The HomeGrown Company, Bedford, 2023
- Bite Me Confections, Franklin County, 2022
- Love Dee Creations, Alleghany 2020, 2022
- Blue Hills Market, Wise County, 2023
- Gather, Jan Thompson, Wise County, 2024
- The Beeve, Buena Vista, 2022
- Kenkashi Microbes, Floyd, 2022



2023 Winner The Wellness Bar

a vision for the future, where innovation thrives and prosperity is shared by all.

Take, for example, the story of Richard Mansell, an associate pastor from Covington, Virginia, whose hobby turned into a thriving business. Now working with NASA on satellite propulsion and other groundbreaking technologies, Richard's business has achieved a conservative valuation of \$10 million. Through The 2019 Gauntlet program, he has gained the tools to scale his company and today mentors other innovators, sharing his

journey and helping to shorten the learning curve for emerging talent.

Or consider the regional State Farm agents, who continue to support The Gauntlet program as lead sponsors, even as State Farm's corporate office dedicates resources to support hurricane-ravaged communities. This partnership ensures we are not just creating jobs, but fostering a thriving community of innovation. Beyond financial support, State Farm agents are actively mentoring regional entrepreneurs, offering time and expertise to help them succeed.



Nadean Carson, OYA Construction

LOCALITIES

- Alleghany Highlands, Covington, Clifton Forge
- Rockbridge County, Buena Vista, Lexington
- Bedford County and Town
- City of Lynchburg
- Botetourt, Troutville, Buchanan, Fincastle
- Roanoke County, Vinton
- City of Salem
- Roanoke City
- Franklin County
- New River Valley
- Pittsylvania County
- City of Danville
- Henry County
- City of Martinsville
- Southwest Virginia, Wise, Dickenson and beyond

Similarly, the commitment of Gentry Locke's attorneys, Alicia Grubb and Clark Worthy, to regional entrepreneurship has been invaluable. By dedicating their time to mentor growing companies, they help entrepreneurs navigate legal complexities, contracts, and business decisions.

Then there's Nadine Carson, founder of OYA Construction and a 2022 Gauntlet graduate. A veteran and entrepreneur, Nadine turned her passion into a booming business in the male-dominated construction industry. Through The Gauntlet, she gained confidence, mentorship, and the resources to grow OYA Construction, which has quadrupled its sales, created four full-time positions, and added four contractors. Nadine is now looking toward the next phase of growth—expansion and commercial space—positioning her company for continued success.

These stories—of individuals who dared to dream and had the courage to act—are what make our communities thrive. Success in business development is not just about capital; it's about access to knowledge, support, and opportunity.


As we move forward, let our region serve



1st Place 2021 - Beaver Dam Farm Sunflowers

as a model for the power of collaboration—where the resources, time, and expertise we share can fuel business and community development. The opportunities are limitless if we work together.

Together, we are transforming challenges into triumphs and building a brighter, more prosperous future for everyone.

The 11th Annual Gauntlet begins with virtual classes on Tuesday, January 28th 6-7:30pm Consider what YOU might contribute to our ecosystem; entrepreneurial ideas, expert business knowledge, resources, sponsorship? The time is now to invest in our collective future. 

Become a mentor, apply as an entrepreneur, or become a financial or in-kind sponsor at: theadvancementfoundation.org/resources

BIO

Annette W. Patterson is president of The Advancement Foundation, its main office at 214 Lee Avenue in Vinton, and whose mission is: *Engineering Opportunities for Virginia's Entrepreneurial Driven Communities*. Visit TheAdvancementFoundation.org for more information.



ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

Executive Summary:

When seeking advice, never take it at face value.

Best business advice I ever got

The first of the year seems like a good time to share this. We're all thinking about what's in store for the future, while possibly reminiscing about the past. As publisher of a business journal, I'm not sure I ever shared this specific story, which could be useful to this audience.

The best business advice I ever got came from two people.

"Sounds like a good idea."

"Oh, you don't want to do that."

Not kidding. Two pieces of advice; both inspirational.


And yes, I asked both of these fellows for the advice. (I generally pay no mind to unsolicited advice, as those tips usually come from the people from whom you least need or want advice.)

Although I've been employed by a few organizations over the past 47 years of my working life, I've always been self-employed during those stints; and for nearly half of those years, completely self-employed. But 1992 was particularly monumental. That's the year I decided to jump ship from a great position with a Fortune 1000 corporation to go out on my own and start my own advertising agency. I had zero accounts. My wife and I had just recently bought our first house. And it was the year we had our first child.

When you hear of "true" entrepreneurs taking a risk, well, that's about a pretty good example as you can get.

When I told a fellow businessman what I was about to do, his response was anything but encouraging. "Oh, you don't want to do that," he said, without hesitation. I was taken aback. I mean, he was running his own business. He was in the creative, marketing arena. It only dawned on me much later that his negativity was probably related to the fact that he was also my vendor. I still didn't appreciate the advice; and—crazy thing—I didn't use him as a vendor after that (even though my agency expended far more from those same services as my employer).


Jump forward to 2008. When I decided to start this publication, Valley Business FRONT, I also "leaked" my plan to another fellow in the creative, marketing arena. This man, David Mikula (Mikula Harris agency, though it was Inprint back then) listened to my idea; allowed me to clarify a few details; and then simply smiled and said, "Sounds like a good idea."

Ahhh... advice. In business—it's beneficial. What you do with it—is the only part that matters. 

Community Theatre hits a home run

The Theatre Arts Director at Glenvar High School, Steve Franco (friends just call him Franco) came up with the title *In laws, Outlaws and Other People (Who Should be Shot)* while attending Roanoke College, then did nothing with it until he started teaching at Glenvar. He threw out the title to his students, who loved it – and then under pressure in just a few weeks wrote the breezy, comical play about a loud, noisy and often quarrelsome family who gather for the annual Christmas dinner (sound familiar?) Two young men who have robbed a store and are on the lam show up at the doorstep and take the family hostage at gunpoint.

Not to worry, no one gets hurt and the ending is actually kind of sweet. Franco's published and licensed play had been produced in five countries and several hundred times – but never at a community theater in his hometown, except for its debut on the stage at Glenvar High School more than a decade ago. Showtimers Community Theatre in Roanoke took care of that last month – and all eight performances were a sellout or close to it. It was funny, not too long and filled with great performances from a wonderful cast (that included me as cranky old Uncle Leo). If you missed it, or don't attend community, volunteer-driven community theater performance, that's too bad.

This month a much younger community theater company I've been writing about and are involved with, *Exit, Pursued by a Bear* in Roanoke – Bear Theatre for short – will present a weekend of three staged play readings, where actors will move about on stage – but with scripts in hand. Afterwards audiences will have a chance to offer their opinions and suggestions in a talk back session. All of the plays have a local connection; two are written by Hollins University alums, the other by playwright/director/actor David Walton Jr., a Bedford County resident who will also direct his own fully staged play *Closing Arguments* at the Bear Theatre (located at Community High School in downtown Roanoke) this April. "A staged reading ... can be invaluable," says Walton, "at it helps advance the story-telling process." The staged readings this January 17-19 are a pay what you can fundraiser. Support local community theater – and all the arts – its an economic driver and helps make the Roanoke Valley a more interesting place to live, work and play. 



THERE'S
SOMETHING
HAPPENING
HERE

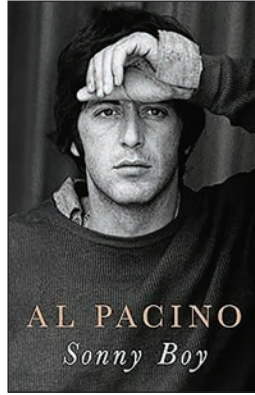
By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:
*Who needs Broadway?
There's good local live
theater right in our midst.*



FRONTReviews >

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



Al Pacino in his own words

Now in his eighties and one of the most iconic actors of his generation, the *Godfather* saga put Al Pacino on the map, after first making his mark on the stage – his first love and one he returned to even after making it big. *Sonny Boy* (2024, Penguin Press) is a riveting memoir of what Pacino calls an up and down movie career when he overspent and had to take some paycheck movies. He had a rough and tumble upbringing on the streets of New York City, with much of his youth spent in the Bronx living with grandparents.

Pacino writes candidly of nearing the end of his career and his life, pondering on what mark he will leave on this world. *Sonny Boy* is also a tale of the love for his craft, for acting, something that at a very young age he knew he wanted to pursue as a career. The iconic role of Michael Corleone made him a household name more than 50 years ago, but he never stopped working – that fear actors have that the next role may be their last as they fall out of favor. A movie buff's delight – especially for fans of Al Pacino.

—Gene Marrano

Good living, eating on display

The *Country Life Vlog* from Azerbaijan on YouTube is fascinating and mesmerizing. On so many levels. First, what show captivates you like this when not a single word is spoken? Second, the couple we see are doing what are essentially daily chores—the very thing I hated as a child, I'm suddenly now enthralled with. And third (which is really the top and number one thing) is the food. Oh, my. How she (Aziza Ramikhanova)

gathers the ingredients and sources—and then what she makes with them, using her bare hands (and often, her outdoor brick oven). And the whole time, we see the bird, cat, dog, rabbit and such frolicking around; in a setting that is bucolic and nearly fairy tale-like. Well-filmed and sound-captured (by her son, I'm told); and well-deserved of its 7-million-plus followers since it debuted in 2019. A kind of rich living not defined by money, but by simple goodness from our land—and I flat out love it.

—Tom Field

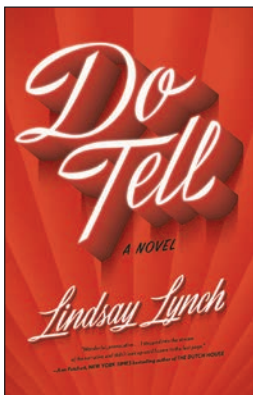
Scary in the 'hood

You've heard of horror stories concerning HOAs (homeowner associations), right? We've reported on HOAs (good, bad, ugly) in various issues, including Dec. 2013 and Oct. 2022. But I had to pick this little fiction up when I saw the premise—an actual HOA horror story! What fun. *Stepford Wives* meet *Desperate Housewives*, I'm thinking. Vincent Tirado's *We Came to Welcome You* (HarperCollins; 2024) paints a scene where all is not quite right in the gated manicured neighborhood of your new homeownership dreams. A bit YA-ish and contrived at times (with the classic horror genre formulas—'did that character really see or not see evil' and the—'you-know-it's-coming' twist), it still confirmed my steadfast rejection of signing HOA contracts.

—Tom Field

Just don't

The only reason I picked up this book was because the title matches the little tagline I have on my



business card for my publishing venture: do tell. I thought it might offer some clever tie-in. I'm sorry to say *Do Tell* (Doubleday; 2023) is a disappointment. It's supposed to be a story of Hollywood gossip and glamour. I couldn't get past 64 of the 338 pages. With references to the media and celebrity interviews and insider information, you'd think I'd be hooked. I'm not exactly sure why, but the only hook I experienced was the kind that yanks you off the stage for underperformance. If you like it, do tell.

—Tom Field

A woman of some notoriety

Pamela Harriman married Winston Churchill's son and became one of the Prime Minister's closest confidantes during the darkest days of World War Two as London was ravaged by the German Blitz. She in fact became Churchill's secret weapon, by wining, dining and often seducing diplomats and generals, looking to win over influential Americans to the British cause - and get the U.S. involved in the war. Author Sonia Purnell lays it all out in vivid detail in *Kingmaker: Pamela Harriman's Astonishing Life Of Power, Seduction and Intrigue* (Viking Press, 2024).

Pamela eventually became Mrs. Harriman (that became her last name when she married former New York Governor and future Ambassador Averill Harriman.) The couple moved to Washington, where Pamela became embedded in Democratic political circles, looking for credibility, all the while fighting her reputation as a social climber, opportunist and yes, courtesan. In the early 1990's she picked then-Governor Bill Clinton out from the crowd

and saw him as the future president. Clinton awarded her support with an Ambassadorship to France, where she passed away on the job in 1997. Think what you want about her history, Pamela Harriman was indeed at the end a Kingmaker.

—Gene Marrano

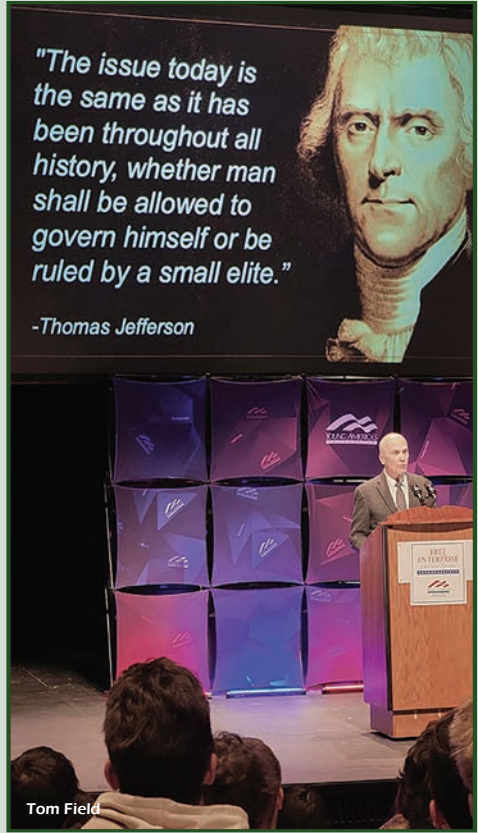
Beautiful, great staging, lots of hard work

Southwest Virginia Ballet staged their annual performances of Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* ballet for the public and school audiences last month to big houses at the Berglund Center. Even though I was in it last year, in the opening party parents' scene, I had not seen the entire production from a seat in the audience in many years, until December. It was great music of course and dancers from the very young to late teens gave their all, with SWVA Ballet artistic director Pedro Szalay donning his dancing shoes once again to play the mysterious, magical Drosselmeyer.

Truly a treat and a great way to celebrate the holidays. If you haven't *The Nutcracker* and heard Tchaikovsky's often-dramatic music in many years – or maybe ever – put it on your to-do list for this December. If you miss this version – Roanoke Ballet Theatre also stages *The Nutcracker* every holiday season as well.

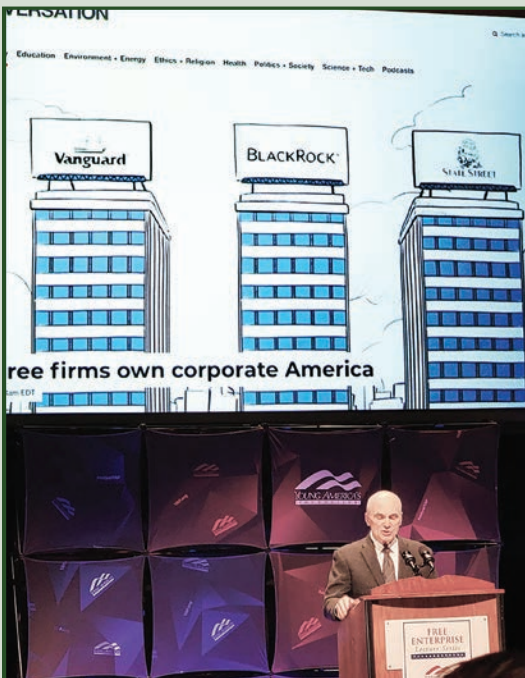
—Gene Marrano

The reviewers: Tom Field is a creative director and also publishes FRONT; Gene Marrano is a news reporter and also editor of FRONT.



Activists behind our money >

Roanoke College hosted a talk sponsored by the **Center for Economic Freedom** (appropriately) on Nov. 20. Andy Puzder—former restaurant CEO (Hardees and others), attorney, and author of best-selling books on capitalism—presented "The Ugly Truth About Stakeholder Capitalism" where he postulates the three biggest asset managers (State Street, Vanguard, and especially BlackRock—and in particular, Larry Fink) step out of bounds from the primary fiduciary responsibility of serving shareholders to lumping everyone (customers, suppliers, anyone who touches a portfolio company, which is practically every product and service and every American) into the all-inclusive "stakeholder" category in an intentional manner to advance social agendas.



Among his points: ESG (environmental, social, governance) policy "is a ruse"; DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) subverts merit and what Martin Luther King, Jr opposed; and—in answering an audience member question: the recent election showed "people—particularly the working class—trust Republicans more on the economy."



Tom Field



Commonwealth economy >

Virginia Chamber of Commerce held its 2024 Virginia Economic Summit on Dec. 6 in Richmond. Among the lineup was a panel discussion with economic development leaders Victor Hoskins (Fairfax County EDA); Doug Smith (Hampton Roads Alliance); Jennifer Wakefield (Greater Richmond Partnership). After their reports on successes the previous year, when asked what they needed most moving forward, both Hoskins and Wakefield said increased marketing (Wakefield citing the example of Michigan), while Smith said site-readiness (for company attraction). Presumptive 2025 governor candidates Winsome Earle-Sears (R-Lt Gov) and Abigail Spanberger (D-US Rep) also addressed the Summit, where Earle-Sears seemed to score higher points with this Chamber audience for her support of Virginia's right-to-work status and top ranking for business. Note: the speaker closest to our region was CEO Anthony Robinson of Framatome in Lynchburg; while Chamber President Barry DuVal admitted this event did not include representations from our regions this time.



Submitted

Griffith lends a hand >

U.S. Congressman **Morgan Griffith** (R-VA) volunteered late last month for the **2024 Food City – United Way Celebrity Bagging Event**. He visited the Wytheville Food City at 155 W Lee Hwy, one of many participating Food City locations, and bagged groceries for local customers. "This partnership between Food City and United Way demonstrates the fantastic charity and generosity towards local communities in the Ninth District," said Griffith. "I am humbled to be a part of the many volunteers who bag groceries at Food City and highlight the great charity work they do for the region. Congressman Griffith has volunteered for Celebrity Bagging on several occasions. Last year, he bagged groceries at the Food City in Weber City.

Big grant for Spin Research >

Lina Quan, assistant professor of chemistry in the College of Science, was recently named a 2024 Early Career Research Program awardee by the U.S. Department of Energy. The award is set to distribute \$875,000 over the course of five years to Quan's research and lab. Quan's research focuses on electron spin, a property that influences magnetic behavior and has the potential to unlock new technological possibilities. Spintronics, or spin-based electronics, utilizes both the spin and charge of electrons and promises better electronic systems with capabilities such as faster speeds, increased data storage, and lower power consumption. A major challenge in this field is finding materials that can effectively control and sustain electron spin over time.



CHA survey says >

A Community Health Assessment survey has revealed where people feel they need more services - providing what one **Carilion Clinic** manager calls "big broad buckets for next 3 years," and an action to improve health and well-being in the Roanoke Valley. **Molly Roberts** with Community Health and Development at Carilion Clinic notes that many of these same issues appeared on the last Community Health and Well-Being survey taken three years ago.

What the latest CHA does is help Carilion shape a next action plan to tackle some of these issues in underserved communities. Roberts says other players - like students at the Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine - will also get involved post-survey: "there's really a place at the table for everybody to work towards improving the health of the community, even if they feel they are doing something that's not directly health related."

Roberts says the new market on Melrose, the Lift health clinic at Fallon Park Elementary, and Morningside Urban farm in Southeast Roanoke were all conceived in part with data from earlier Carilion's Community Health Assessments to support those projects. Survey respondents noted that routine healthcare, emergency care and substance abuse services can be hard to find - particularly in underserved communities. Asked to list the Roanoke Valley's greatest strengths, a good place to raise a family and access to parks were at the top of the list; more affordable housing and working to end homelessness respondents noted would help improve the quality of life.





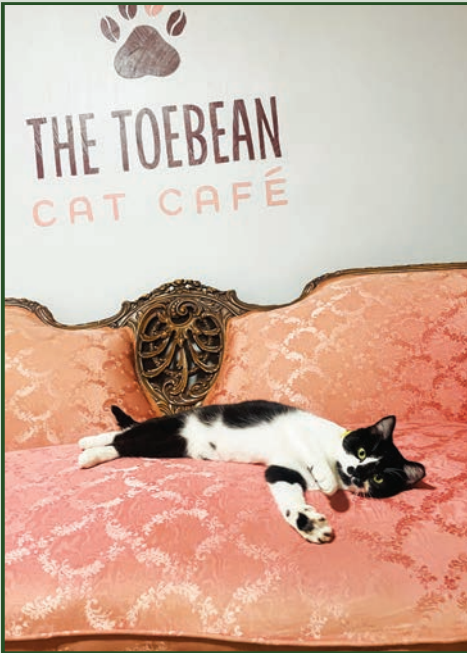
Submitted

AV at VWCC >

Autonomous vehicle technology embodies a forward-thinking mindset. **Virginia Western Community College** students now get to come along for the ride, via a new Career Study Certificate in Autonomous Vehicle Technology. A small cohort of them took the first leg of the journey this spring by enrolling in a new course, UMS 140: Survey of Autonomous Technologies. "Not a lot of people have set the stage for this," said Dr. David Berry, who steers the new program, as associate professor and Mechatronics Program head. Enter "Minerva," a mobile industrial robot. Known formally as the MiR 2000, "it's made to use in an industrial setting, to move parts around in a factory floor," Berry said. "So, you can program it to know where things are, and if something's in its way, it's got enough safety stuff all around it to know to stop and go a different route and think again. And it's web-based," allowing the class to log into an interface to create maps and program missions.

Congressman on farm >

Congressman **Ben Cline** (R-VA) has been named a recipient of the Friend of the Farm Bureau Award for the 118th Congress, given to members who support legislation that benefits agriculture, farmers, and producers. Cline, the 6th District representative, received the award during a visit to Virginia Tech's Alson H. Smith Agriculture Research Center in Winchester. "I am truly honored to receive the Friend of the Farm Bureau award," Cline said. "Our farmers are not just vital to our economy; they are the backbone of our community and the cornerstone of Virginia's Sixth district."



Another cat café >

A new café has opened on Walnut Avenue in Roanoke and the main attraction is not the coffee but the four-legged residents. The **Toebean Cat Café** (named for those little bean-shaped toe pads on the paws of cats) is a place to chill and get your fill of coffee or tea and feline love. Co-owners **Stephanie Green** and **Kelsey Eutsler** say the café is a perfect marriage of their love for cats, veterinarian medicine and their desire to open a café. Space at the café is limited so reservations are suggested. They say the eclectic café is the result of a community effort.

"The vibe is just cozy – just chill and hang out with cats," says Green. Adds Eutsler, "Stephanie and I have a very eclectic style, like a lot of bright colors, funky art and plants, bright neon signs. I think that encompasses who we are as people." The duo also says they have great respect for veterinary services. The Kitty City Cat Café opened last year and was profiled in *Valley Business FRONT*.



HCA-VWCC healthcare grant >

HCA Healthcare in Virginia, which operates **LewisGale** facilities locally, announced a \$50,000 grant last month at Virginia Western Community College, which will be employed to help expand access to non-nursing healthcare fields for students. **Philmika Reed** is Director of healthcare workforce and community engagement with the Virginia Community College System: "in the southwest region there's a constant need for allied health professions to be filled. [What] can we further expand, joint venture-wise to create these opportunities for imaging and surgical techs? That's what we'll be looking at."

The HCA grant from the Healthcare System could be duplicated at other community colleges in Virginia. Dr. **Yvette Dorsey** is associate Vice President of Academic Affairs for the HCA-Virginia Capital Division: "It gives the opportunity for academic institutions such as Virginia Western to really be creative in expanding their academic program offerings. What we are looking for is to be innovative and how to create a sustainable workforce in Virginia." The program is designed to increase diversity in the healthcare workforce as well - and to support "scalable joint venture models."

Picture: From left: Dr. Yvette Dorsey, AVP Academic Affairs (HCA); Collin McLaughlin, CEO, LewisGale Medical Center; Philmika Reid, Director of Healthcare Workforce and Engagement (VCCA); Gina Heckey, Director of Philanthropic Partnerships (VFCCE); Dr. Robert H. Sandel, President (VCCA); Christopher Finley, AVP Community Engagement (HCA). HCA submitted photo.

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



MEET STACIE VEST

ROANOKE MARKET LEADER

We're thrilled to announce that Stacie Vest will be the new Market Leader for Cox here in Roanoke.

A Roanoke native and Virginia Tech graduate, Stacie brings more than 20 years of experience with Cox and a deep connection to her hometown.

In her new role, Stacie will continue to strengthen Cox's partnerships with charitable, civic, and business organizations, ensuring the company's long-standing commitment to the Roanoke community remains strong.

COX

EDUCATIONAL FRONT



Guimont

Corinne Guimont, University Libraries at Virginia Tech's associate director of publishing and digital scholarship, was awarded the 2024 Award for Exemplary Service by International Library Publishing Coalition. Guimont served as a member of the coalition's research committee and program committee, co-authored the digital preservation model policy to support publishers in the creation of preservation policies, and represented coalition on the NASIG digital preservation model license subgroup. She was also a key author of the 2023 Platform Crosswalk, a case study comparing 10 publishing platforms that are academy-

owned and open source. LPC is a network of more than 60 libraries committed to advancing the field of library publishing and marked its 10th anniversary this year.



Byers

Stephanie Byers has been named director of alumni relations for the College of Science at Virginia Tech. She earned a B.S. in communications from Radford University in 2011 and has worked at iHeartMedia, Audacy, and WeWork in Hampton Roads and Raleigh, and was the membership director at Virginia Tech's University Club in Lane Stadium. In her role she will boost communication and engagement with regular updates and networking events and strengthen the alumni

network with mentorship programs and recognitions.

LaKisha Kyle was named the 2025 Teacher of the Year with Roanoke City Public Schools. Kyle is a Career & Technical Education (CTE) teacher at Forest Park Academy.

David Joyce has been appointed president of Averett University. The school's 15th president, Joyce was selected by the board with input from Academic Search firm. He served as presidents of Union College (KY), Ripon College (WI), and Brevard College (NC). Joyce has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Pfeiffer University, a master of divinity in pastoral psychology from Yale, a master's in psychology from NC State, and a doctorate in human resources from Vanderbilt University. He also served as associate dean at Elon University and is an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church.

FINANCIAL FRONT



Scarberry

Zach Scarberry has joined Farm Credit of Virginias Roanoke branch as a commercial loan processor. Scarberry, a native of Roanoke, has six years of experience in the finance industry working for two credit unions.



Natt

Robert Natt has joined Freedom First Credit Union as vice president of public affairs and community development. Natt's background includes

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positions with Carilion Clinic, Radford University, The Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission, and his own firm, Robert Natt Productions. He was also president of the Partnership for Community Wellness and has served with other nonprofit organizations. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Commercial Media and Communication from James Madison University, a Master of Science degree in Nonprofit Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Certificate in Public Policy from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.



Hudgins

Jess Hudgins has been promoted to branch manager of the Rocky Mount office of Bank of Botetourt.

Have a career announcement?

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

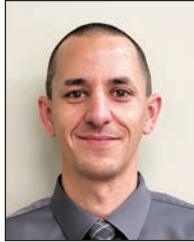
Previously serving as universal banker and head teller at the Salem office, Hudgins has over nine years of experience in the financial industry. A Rocky Mount resident, she lives with her husband, David, and their two children.



Spangler

Lisa Spangler will support business and growth in the area and the Rocky Mount branch of Bank of Botetourt as vice president, business relationship officer. She has been in banking

for more than 33 years and resides in Hardy.



Shelton

Zachary Shelton will serve as universal banker and head teller at the Bank of Botetourt Rocky Mount Office. Shelton lives in Glade Hill and brings several years of financial industry experience. He's an active member of the community and volunteers as a coach for basketball and soccer with Franklin County Parks & Recreation.

Mary Renshaw joins



Renshaw

as retail banking Representative at Bank of Botetourt's Rocky Mount Office. Renshaw has more than 34 years of financial experience and lives in Hardy.

DEVELOPMENT FRONT

Julia Boas has been promoted to director of business investment at the Roanoke Regional Partnership. She previously serves as director of talent strategies, and director of events and marketing

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Boas

for the Roanoke Outside Foundation. Boas also developed the talent portal in Get2KnowNoke.com and revamped the Talent Ambassador Program as well as spearheaded the Talent Summit, Fall Career Expo, and Onboard/ROA programs.

WELLNESS FRONT



Conte

Nick Conte is the new Chief Governance Officer for Carilion Clinic. This new title is in addition to his current role of Chief Legal Officer. As Chief Governance Officer, he will oversee corporate governance, regulatory and compliance policies and practices for the health system. Prior to joining Carilion, Conte was a principal with Woods Rogers PLC, the largest law firm in Western Virginia.

Paul Davenport, R.N., has been promoted to senior vice president at Carilion Clinic. In his expanded role, he will oversee the delivery



Davenport

of outpatient services across much of the health system, as well as operations at the Parkview campus. His career in healthcare began in 1993 after transitioning from his role as a firefighter to serving as an EMS medic at Carilion Radford Community Hospital. Since then, Davenport has held numerous nursing and operational leadership roles, culminating in his appointment as vice president in 2011.



Frost

Tami Frost, R.N., has been promoted to senior vice president and System Chief Nursing Officer at Carilion Clinic. Frost joined Carilion in 2023 to become vice president and Chief Nursing Officer. She previously worked at Trident Medical Center in Charleston, S.C., where she served as chief nursing executive. She has more than 20 years' experience in healthcare.

Shyam Odeti, M.D., has been named Chief Medical Officer for Carilion Medical Center



Odeti

and Carilion New River Valley Medical Center. In this new role he will oversee quality improvement, patient safety, driving efficiency, patient experience and physician engagement, enhancing patient access, care utilization and care integration across the two facilities. Dr. Odeti joined Carilion in 2021 as Section Chief of Hospital Medicine. He previously worked at Ballad Health for more than five years.



Richard

Luis Richard has been promoted to senior vice president of supply chain at Carilion Clinic. He now has responsibility for Real Estate and Property Management in addition to Supply Chain, Dining and Nutrition Services, and Sustainability. Richard joined Carilion in 2023 as vice president of Supply Chain. Richard previously worked in various leadership roles while in Chicago, Illinois, New York and Connecticut.

Wrenn Brendel, R.N., has been promoted to vice president of the Department of



Brendel

Emergency Medicine at Carilion Clinic. She will oversee clinical and service operations, including its Level 1 Trauma Center. Brendel was most recently senior director of Carilion Clinic Emergency Services. She began her career as a nurse at Carilion in 2006 and served in several nursing leadership roles before becoming director of Emergency Services in 2016.



Shannon

Rhonda Shannon has been named vice president of Carilion Clinic's Orthopaedics and Neurosurgery. This is in addition to her role as vice president of Finance. Shannon joined Carilion in 1996 and worked in various leadership roles from financial advisor to senior director of several clinical areas before becoming vice president in 2016.

TECH/INDUSTRY FRONT

Stacie Vest has been named the new Roanoke Market Leader for



Vest

Cox. A Roanoke native, Vest brings more than 20 years of experience with Cox and a deep connection to her hometown. Vest will oversee day-to-day operations, enhancing customer experience, supporting Cox employees, and driving business growth. She will also continue to champion Cox's longstanding commitment to

community engagement, building strong relationships with civic, charitable, and business organizations. Vest has been with Cox since 2000, including roles in public affairs, marketing, and most recently as nationwide director of competitive and retention strategy. She graduated from William Fleming High School and has a bachelor's degree in Communication Studies and a minor in Psychology from Virginia Tech, and a master's degree in liberal studies from Hollins University. Vest serves on the boards of Downtown Roanoke, Inc. and Center in the Square.

ARTS FRONT



Shields

Matt Shields has been appointed the new managing director of Mill Mountain Theatre in Roanoke. Shields served MMT for years, including production director, and he has been overseeing operational efficiency, optimizing budgets, and fostering community partnerships. He was

selected from an eleven-month nationwide search of over 65 applicants.



Wyatt

Sherry Joines Wyatt has been appointed executive director of the Montgomery Museum of Art & History. Wyatt served as assistant director and curator of the museum and has a degree in Historic Preservation from the University of



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CONTRIBUTORS

Linda Balentine is a Roanoke entrepreneur, founder, and owner of Crowning Touch Senior Moving Services as well as its transport, consignment, auction, and real estate portfolio. The business caters to the high growth senior citizen demographic and has been serving our regional market since 1996. [linda@crowningtouchusa.com]

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.

Holly Brinja, a writer originally from Pittsburgh, PA, who now resides in Floyd, VA, is the creator behind HB Creations, where she brings content and creative ideas to life. Her content creations achieve sustainable organic growth for organizations across platforms by growing their brand and strengthening their relations within their communities, industries, and beyond.

Zachary Collier, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Management at the Davis College of Business and Economics at Radford University. [zcollier@radford.edu]

Jennifer Poff Cooper is a senior correspondent for FRONT, and a graduate of the RB Pamplin College of Business at Virginia Tech with a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from Hollins University. She is a native of Christiansburg, where she lives and writes in her family's home place. [cooperjpp1@gmail.com]

Carrie Cousins is the Director of Digital Marketing at LeadPoint Digital in Roanoke. For 15+ years, she has helped businesses tell

their stories and get better results online with practical digital marketing strategies. She also an active leader in AAF, serving on the local and district boards, and is an adjunct professor at Virginia Tech.

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).

Shatenita Horton serves as the Senior Vice President of Retail Banking at Freedom First Credit Union. As a member of Senior Management, Shatenita directs the sales and service efforts through creation, coordination and management of company-wide Retail, Private, and Business Banking programs. She hails from Columbia, Missouri and has lived in Roanoke for the past 3 years. [shorton@freedomfirst.com]

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

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

Mary Ann L. Miller is vice president of business banking and community relations at Bank of Botetourt. A graduate of Bridgewater College, she has been in the banking industry for more than

fifteen years and currently serves on the board and executive committee as past-president with the Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce, a board member with the Daleville Institute, and is vice chair of the board of with the Botetourt Family YMCA. A native of Botetourt County, she resides in Daleville with her husband and two children.

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

Dan Smith is a veteran journalist and member of the Virginia Communications Hall of Fame, a winner of numerous press association awards, the Small Business Journalist of the Year, two Perry F. Kendig Awards and the Arts Council of the Blue Ridge's Literary Award. He is author of eight books, including the recent novels "NEWS!" and "CLOG." [pampadansmith@gmail.com]

Nicholas Vaassen is a graphic design specialist with over 27 years experience. His design projects include logos, magazines, web design, signs, newsletters, postcards, business cards, and any other marketing materials you can think of. [nicholasvaassen@gmail.com]

“”
These stories... are what make
our communities thrive. — Page 37

Georgia. She worked in the architectural history field in North Carolina and Virginia, then moved to Christiansburg and took a role of collections manager for MMAH in 2010.

MARKETING FRONT



Dame

Mike Dame has joined 5Points Creative as director of communications. Dame has over 35 years of experience

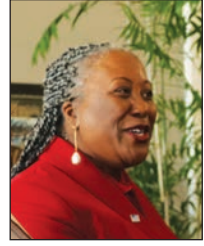
in multimedia communications and marketing across the healthcare, higher education, and news media industries. He serves as vice president of marketing and communications for Carilion Clinic for five years and will now provide strategic guidance for the agency as well as marketing communications, public relations, and stakeholder engagement.

Dan Sullivan is joining the sales team at Wheeler Digital Media, starting in January. Sullivan's career has focused on marketing with an emphasis on Digital Marketing. He recently has been an account manager with Eddy Alexander

Advertising Agency. Before moving to Roanoke Sullivan was with Reingold Inc, in Alexandria VA for ten years, where his account roster included the U.S. Census Bureau, St. Jude Children's Hospital, National Football League - NFL Ops, and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

MUNICIPAL FRONT

Roanoke City Council officially appointed **Valmarie Turner** as the new City Manager. She brings over 30 years of local government experience and leadership to this role. Turner has a background



Turner

in community and economic development, social and human services programs, and public improvement projects. Most recently, she served as the Deputy City Manager for the City of Fairfax, Virginia, where she also held the role of Acting City Manager. Before that, she was an Assistant County Administrator in Loudoun County.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.

“ For every dollar a producer loses, two to three dollars are lost for the wider communities. — Page 19

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ENTRÉ

Local leadership attraction

Roanoke College received a \$1 million gift from Peter and Irene Treiber to create the Treiber Center for Curricular Innovation—a new initiative to “make the Roanoke region the most sought-after educational partner for industry, entrepreneurs, and community leaders.” Peter Trieber is a Roanoke College alumnus, Class of 1979.

What golf season?

Links365—a private, member-based indoor golf space—is planned for opening at the first of the year in the Townside Festival plaza on Franklin Rd in Roanoke.

Paving pitt

Cambridge Pavers (NJ) is investing nearly \$50 million and creating 55 jobs at Ringgold East Industrial Park in Pittsylvania County. The paving stone manufacturer was courted by Virginia Economic Development Partnership, Southern Virginia Regional Alliance, and a \$220,000 grant from the Commonwealth Opportunity Fund.

And restructuring

Roanoke College has also realigned its academic disciplines (in similar fashion with other higher ed institutions) to four schools in order to “promote an intentional interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation” and better match current

occupational demands: the School of Business Economics, and Analytics; the School of Communication, Culture, and the Arts; the School of Education, Government, and Society; and the School of Health, Science, and Sustainability. The new model goes in effect in fall 2025.

Furniture trim

Bassett Furniture is laying off and retiring around 40 employees, reducing its workforce by 11% (to about 1,250). Bassett reports the reduction as part of its restructuring plan that saves the company as much as \$9 million.

Island of misfit merch

Roanoke Treasure Bins has opened on Williamson Rd in Roanoke. The “bin store” is said to be the first such store in the Roanoke market, which resells merchandise at bargain prices where many items are from online purchase returns from retailers like Amazon, Walmart, and Target.

AV tech at VWCC

Virginia Western Community College now offers a Career Study Certificate in Autonomous Vehicle Technology, which includes hands-on learning and field experience that supplement lectures. Registration is open for spring semester; UMS 140 and 162 consists of seven courses.

Bye-bye Glen Lyn

The place many of us simply know as an old power plant off 460 just before you get to West Virginia—has been disbanded. **Glyn Lyn** in **Giles County** dissolved its charter for township and is now an unincorporated community. Only about 100 residents live in Glen Lyn. Appalachian Power shut down the coal-fired plant in 2015 after nearly 100 years of operation.

Add 50

Governor Glenn Youngkin announced an additional \$50 million to support the **Virginia Business Ready Sites Program**. VBRSP was developed by a team of state, regional, and local stakeholders, including VEDP, DEQ, railroad-utility-civil-government representatives to promote development of sites and infrastructure systems in order to attract new and expanding business.

Tourism grants

More than \$581,607 in matching grant funds will be awarded to 108 small businesses, destination marketing organizations (DMOs), downtown business associations, and chambers of commerce as part of the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC)’s Microbusiness Marketing Leverage Program (MMLP). Included in our region: Wind Vineyards (Smith Mountain Lake); Mountain Thyme Honey & GiOs (Botetourt); Floyd County Tourism, Twin Creeks Distillery

and Discover Rocky Mount (Franklin County); Montgomery Chamber of Commerce, VisitNRV (Montgomery County Regional Tourism), Pulaski County Tourism, HMBLE HSTLE Clothing (Roanoke); The Lofts at Downtown Salem, and City of Salem Tourism.

Maternity medals

Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital and **Carilion New River Valley Medical Center** have been recognized as 2025 High Performing Hospitals for Maternity Care by U.S. News & World Report. The rating considers factors such as newborn complications and birth-friendly practices.

Number 1 again

Virginia was selected as the 2024 State of the Year by Business Facilities. It’s the second time Virginia was named best state in the past four years, and the third instance overall. Ranking data included business-friendly environment, workforce development and training programs, site location, and talent acquisition.

Trucks, tires, controls, chairs

Virginia Manufacturers Association announced its Virginia Manufacturing Cup awards for 2024, that included from our region: **TEXTUR Furniture** smoke chair (bronze); **MELD Manufacturing** Machine K2 (bronze); **TW Controls** PLC trainer (gold); **Volvo Trucks** VNL truck (gold);

Yokohama Tire tires (gold). Virginia Tech.

Sad but beautiful

In a “somber but powerful milestone” **Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital** has been recognized for saving the most lives through deceased organ donation (out of any other LifeNet Health partner in Virginia). A total of 47 organ donors saved 119 lives nationwide; and it’s the third year in a row the hospital ranked first.

In Memoriam: Mattern & Craig Founder

J. Wayne Craig passed away on the evening of December 2 in Roanoke, at the age of 84. Craig and Edwin Mattern cofounded Mattern & Craig Consulting Engineers and Surveyors in 1978. Still headquartered in Roanoke, the firm’s footprint now stretches from offices in Kingsport and Johnson City, TN, Asheville, and Hickory, NC, to Charleston, SC. Craig was a licensed professional engineer and a graduate of

Governor board appointments

Sheep Industry Board: Lee Wright of Glade Spring, Sheep producer; Superintendent, Virginia Tech Southwest Agricultural Research Center; Advisory Board on Genetic Counseling: Lydia Higgs of Roanoke City, genetic counselor, Carilion Clinic; Manufacturing Development Commission: Amy Stinnett White of Botetourt County, Dean of STEM and Workforce Solutions, Virginia Western Community College; Member, Botetourt County Board of Supervisors.

Virginia Recreational Facilities Authority, Board of Directors: Megan Baker of Roanoke County, Economic Development Director, Roanoke County, Dennis Cronk of Roanoke City, Director, Poe & Cronk Real Estate Group Inc., Mickey Johnson of Moneta, Member, Bedford County Board of Supervisors (District 1); Senior

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Account Executive, WFXR TV, Tucker Lemon of Roanoke, President, Martin, Hopkins & Lemon, PC, and Tammy E. Shepherd of Roanoke County, Member, Roanoke County Board of Supervisors (Vinton Magisterial District); Owner/ Broker, Shepherd Realty Group and Dr. Raymond Smoot of Montgomery County, retired CEO, Virginia Tech Foundation.

food systems by investing in new or expanding food retailers that address fresh food access issues in the Commonwealth.

Foodshed Network grant

The **Roanoke Foodshed Network** (RFN) has been awarded a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA AMS) to launch the “Strong Food and Farm Future” project. The RFN includes over 50 partners, community groups, nonprofit organizations, farmers, food businesses, community members, higher education institutions, and government agencies. The RFN is working to build equitable and resilient food and farm systems in Roanoke City, Salem City, and Roanoke, Botetourt,

Fresh food access grants

The application dates for the next round of Virginia Food Access Investment Fund (VFAIF) program grants have been announced (Feb. 3—Feb. 28). Administered by the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), the VFAIF program supports local

Notable Transactions

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- **CookOut** restaurant purchased former Atlantic Union Bank bldg on West Main St Salem for \$1,214,000
- **City of Danville** approved rezoning for spec “resort style” 240 condominium-180 assisted living units on 22-acres on Goodyear Blvd
- **Ridgecrest at Richfield** 106-unit apartment community at Salem campus on Knollridge Rd sold to undisclosed buyer with Friendship Retirement Community for \$5.2 million
- **New London Business Technology Center** in Bedford awarded \$1.5 million from Virginia Business Ready Sites Program for development
- Exit 1 Dev / Nulife Glass VA Realty / United Co / Par Ventures purchased 13-acre site at Catherine St-Gate City Hwy (Bristol casino) for \$7 million
- Dev Greg Kaknes seeks rezone of former **Walker Foundry** (at Greenway) for \$50 million mixed-use community (small houses, rec courts, possible restaurant and performance venue

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

Bedford, Franklin, Floyd, Montgomery, and Craig counties.

Development proposal takes a pause

More than 100 people packed into the South County Library last month to voice their opinions on a proposed development at the historic **Poage Farm** property in Roanoke County. Neighbors raised concerns about traffic, potential school overcrowding, and the character of the area, with some opposing the demolition of the nearly 200-year-old farmhouse (that developer Alexander Boone said experts deemed unsalvageable). "It's not eligible for a listing on the National Register of Historical Places," Boone noted, "[and] it is in such disrepair..." Boone's plans (138 townhomes, 11 single-family homes, and a retail center, with two-thirds of the 55-acre property of US22/Bent Mountain Road preserved) complies with Roanoke County's comprehensive plan to address the local housing shortage, he said; but the rezoning application was withdrawn at this time.

Dairy will expand into butter

Duchess Dairy will invest approximately \$895,000 to expand its dairy processing operations in Wythe County. The family-owned and operated dairy manufacturer plans to grow its operation by adding a production line of churned butter, in addition to its current line of premium bottled milk. The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS) worked with Wythe County and the town of Rural Retreat to secure the project for Virginia, along with a \$25,000 Facility Grant from the Governor's Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development (AFID) Fund, which Wythe County will match with local funds.

Helene relief

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) has awarded Friends of Southwest Virginia a \$1,300,000 grant. The funding will support an assessment of damage to outdoor recreation assets resulting from Hurricane Helene. Major assets included in this review are the Virginia Creeper Trail, Clinch and New

River boat ramps and access points, and multiple other trailheads, bridges, trestles, campgrounds and parks that are also economic drivers for the region.

Downtown Vinton hotel

It's not "new" news, but after many years of visioning and planning for a downtown hotel in Vinton it may start happening next year, at the corner of South Pollard and First Street. **KARA Hospitality** is set to start construction on a four-story hotel with 94 rooms. Completion date is 2026. That syncs up with the Vinton War Memorial renovation that will see the meeting and event center go dark for a makeover in 2025. The hotel should see bookings from some events at the War Memorial once it reopens.

Produce Prescriptions program gets a boost

Almost \$500,000 from the US department of Agriculture will enable "produce prescriptions" to be available for eligible Medicaid patients in the region, those dealing with high blood pressure, diabetes and pre-

diabetes conditions. Carilion Clinic will be writing those produce prescriptions. The three-year grant expands a pilot program launched by Carilion almost ten years ago – when a Mobile Rx program filled those produce prescriptions from a LEAP farmer's market on wheels. Radford University will track data over the program's 3-year span.

ARC grant to Tech

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) has awarded Virginia Tech a \$1,294,605 grant to support preliminary research into the establishment of a leading hydrogen innovation hub in Virginia based on hydrogen production from natural gas feedstocks through catalytic methane decomposition (CMD). Funding for this project is made available via ARC's Appalachian Regional Energy Hub Initiative to help establish a regional energy hub for natural gas and natural gas liquids, including hydrogen produced from natural gas feedstocks.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field

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Dan Smith

Ginger Poole Avis and Matt Shields at Mill Mountain Theatre

From Shop Class to Boss

By Dan Smith

The new managing director at MMT is uniquely qualified to run the show.

Matt Shields' ascension to Managing Director at Mill Mountain Theatre in Roanoke is the very essence of serendipity. It all started in a high school shop class, which was ending.

His shop teacher, taking notice of Shields' interest in building or making-work a variety of items, suggested he enroll in a theatre arts class. The teacher explained that Shields would need a lot of shop skills to work in live theatre and that sealed his future.

Shields, a younger-than-he-looks 29-year-old is one of nine children who grew up in Loudon County and picked up a theatre arts degree at Radford University before setting off on his preferred career. He spent "a couple of seasons working around the

country" and seven years ago landed a job at MMT. Since then, he has done just about everything involved in producing a play except act. That skill doesn't interest him.

MMT searched far and wide for its director, who was just down the hall, as it turned out. Says Ginger Poole Avis, whom Shields replaced in January, "After any change in leadership, it is scary and exciting." Vetting 65 candidates over 11 months was exhausting, but "Matt popped into my head the day I announced my retirement," says Avis, who will remain—at least for now—in an advisory capacity.

"It was a long process, but hiring Matt made sense," says Avis. "He will not try to jam Mill Mountain into a hole that doesn't

exist. He knows what Roanoke expects and he will take us into our next transition” as the theatre’s 60th year ends.

His commitment to a theatre viewed by many as a destination, not a steppingstone, is solid, he insists. “My five months [at the theatre], turned into seven years. I know the team because I’ve been part of the team. I love Southwest Virginia. It is beautiful how supportive the arts community is here.

“I’m from just outside D.C. and we had nothing like [this level of theatre quality] there. It was nothing like this. I love how collaborative we are,” a trait championed by Avis for years.

Much of the education Shields received at the hand of Avis has been financial. “She taught me to save when we can and save when we have to,” he says, noting that the days of a single significant donor no longer exist, as they did at MMT for years because of the commitment of the late Marian Via.

Avis calls Shields “one of the most creative people you will ever meet, and that is true in every sense of the word. ... He checks all the boxes.”

Avis decided to retire for what is an oft-expressed, much more rarely true reason: she wanted time with her family. She says she planned a timeline to retire when her daughter was tiny. Middle school was cutoff and now her young one is in sixth grade. “I’m not jumping to a new job


or career, and I could occasionally direct or consult, especially if there is a financial crisis.” She hopes to consult about 40 hours a month, she says.

One of the significant changes MMT has made in recent years (because of the internet) is that there is no real reason to go to New York to conduct auditions for talent. It is done digitally now and the process, say Shields and Avis, is far better, cheaper and more efficient. MMT gets exposure to more actors who are spread out further—not just New Yorkers. “We see more people at no cost,” says Avis.

Avis’ advice to Shields: “You have to check your ego at the door [in this job]. You listen to the community and supporters, and you learn you can’t shove anything down their throats.”

Shields’ “business insight has been instrumental in optimizing budgets, fostering community partnerships and ensuring Mill Mountain Theatre remains a vibrant cultural hub for Roanoke and beyond,” says Avis.

Says Cynthia Lawrence, a small business owner and chairwoman of the search committee, Shields “has a deep understanding of the theatre’s mission and a proven track record of excellence that will guide us as we continue to grow and inspire our community.”

And one guesses that Shields might spend a little time in the shop occasionally. 

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Adult Care Center of Roanoke Valley ... 59	Entre Computer Center 55
Ameriprise Financial / Christine Smith 59	FirstBank..... 17
Around SALEM Magazine..... 59	Fraim Crawley & Co CPA 61
Berryfield 59	Freedom First Credit Union 2
Build Smart Institute 29	Gentry Locke 5
Community Foundation Serving Western Virginia 25	Lead Point Digital 16
Covenant Real Estate Services 57	Member One Federal Credit Union 21
Cox 49	Ridge View Bank BC
Crowning Touch 58	VCOM 3
Davis H. Elliot Company 59	Virginia Business Systems 63
	Virginia Mountain Mortgage..... 50-51
	Wheeler Broadcasting..... 53



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