

# Valley Business FRONT

VIRGINIA'S BLUE RIDGE BUSINESS JOURNAL

ISSUE 200

MAY 2025

Mountain Gateway  
Community College

TAP People

Visit Virginia's  
Blue Ridge Plan

RBTC Startups

Blackford Barbell  
Strength & Combat

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the value of  
outdoor  
space

*meet me on  
the patio*



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# WELCOME TO THE FRONT

Welcome to the 200th edition of Valley Business FRONT. Thank you for stopping by. Let us take this opportunity to thank you for your patronage as a reader. Whether this is your first issue, the 200th issue, or somewhere in between, we appreciate your enthusiastic acceptance and the encouragement and support you've provided in our mission to advocate for business (and general well-being) of this local and regional market—our favorite place to report.

Thank you to our advertisers, current and past. You've made this endeavor entirely possible. One hundred percent, to be accurate. We're particularly proud to have a mix of the leaders (those in front)—we have the best businesses and organizations in our lineup.

And thanks to our contributors. Our writers, correspondents, columnists, and photographers who present individual voices and vision to this product month after month after month. Of course, our staff—which has been small but mighty for over 16 years... your efforts are much appreciated, whether behind the scenes or right there on the page.

We invite you to carry on with us.  
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Publisher



**Gene Marrano**  
Editor






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By Tom Field



“ ”  
It's the gig she's dreamed of for years. — Page 34





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# MAY



Dana Ackley



Aila Boyd



Dan Dowdy



Emily Field



Gene Marrano



Shawn Nowlin

## 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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**Daniel Colston**



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construction

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We need  
to be kind.  
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Biographies and  
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on each contributor  
are provided on Page 44.

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It's fun to have your space  
grow along with you.  
— Page 13







Tom Field

Randy and Julie Beckwith

# *All About That Outdoor Space*

By Tom Field

"A lot of us grew up knowing about home décor. But we don't think as much about outside."

That's how Julie Beckwith describes one catalyst for her newest venture: Living On The Patio. She and husband-business-partner Randy Beckwith have produced a micro-business (as they call it) that helps people with planning and celebrating life outside—specifically at your home.

Living On The Patio (LOTP) isn't primarily about adding value to your home by constructing or improving your patio, deck, porch, garden, or whatever square-footage you have around the perimeter of your home's exterior—although that certainly is a beneficial and measurable outcome—it's more mission-oriented than that.

"There are so many health benefits to having an outdoor space you engage regularly," says Julie, who gives talks on the subject. "Being outdoors can improve productivity, too. Just 29 minutes outside," she cites with specificity, "can yield a 45% increase in productivity."

But you need to "consistently schedule that time," she advises. Julie says you can enjoy the benefits of outdoor space with something as simple as placing a chair and table in a good spot. "Just having a plant to look at... decreases blood pressure. Watching a bird feeder or bird bath or butterfly bush... seeing the show... it's so good for you.

"If all you have is a small balcony—set it up!"

There were three other main reasons why the Beckwiths launched LOTP: their move to a new home; the global pandemic; and the rise in the remote workforce.

## BENEFITS TO BEING OUTSIDE

- Minds and Bodies relax in a natural setting
- Boost in creativity and problem-solving abilities
- Reduce cortisol levels, muscle tension
- Vitamin D improves bones, blood cells, immune system
- Decrease anxiety, lowered risk of depression
- Improve concentration and attention
- Better sleep (improved sleep/wake cycles)
- 5-minutes: stand with sun on your face; grass between your toes
- 25-minutes: take a stroll; deep breaths; eat lunch or take calls or meet outdoors

—UC Davis Health

The Beckwiths parlayed their past corporate marketing experience into branding this new venture







Julie Beckwith and LOTP merchandise at Farmers Market in Vinton



Jane Daller

Former FRONT account executive Jane Daller's space at her previous home in Mississippi



Tom Field

Courtyard of Banner household in Salem showcases stone and plants (impressive even out of season, before plants thriving and fountain activated)



"We lived in Denver, Charlotte, Minneapolis, and Florida—and now, Virginia," says Randy, "and we've always enjoyed the outdoors." Each of those places had their own unique environments and characteristics, he says, and he likes helping people capture the best.

With LOTP, "we like to help people understand how to use the space." Randy says he once had a landscape architect come onsite; and though he felt the contractor's work would be fine, there wasn't any real consultation or advice on what and where to configure or build. It was essentially a walk-through where the contractor agreed to build whatever you want, wherever you want it.

And yes, the budget for making your outdoor space is super important for these projects, both Beckwiths say.

"You don't want to spend beyond what you have or what is needed." There are suggested formulas for what percentage impacts your home's value, too, they say.

LOTP has produced handy tools for homeowners' outdoor spaces. Currently, that includes a six-page Research, Prep, and Design worksheet as well as a most informative, interactive 17-page Guide.

LOTP helps people "think through" the planning, Julie says. She tells the story of a neighbor who put in an above-ground pool that was hardly used at all; then the next summer, a deck was built all around it, but still not used; followed by year three, when the whole installation was torn down and hauled off.

Randy describes another example where municipalities implore residents to not install their fences right on the property line. What happens is you can be trespassing on your neighbor's land if you're simply painting or doing any kind of maintenance on the other side. So, rather than simply coming off the line at some indiscriminate distance, Randy says you might want that distance to be one lawnmower's width.

Smart.

Repurposing wine bottles adds ambience to your outdoor space—whether for lighting or structural components



LOTP



Tom Field



Patio life is better when you craft your popular (or signature) refreshments and libations



A little protection and a lot of ambience is what this decked structure provides for one homeowner in Vinton



LOTP

Don't skimp on seating; quality, durable chairs are worth the investment



LOTP

Whether built-in permanent or movable (like the Beckwiths), a fire pit is always a winner



LOTP

The Beckwith home in Vinton is "just getting started" with this sitting and entertainment space as the rest of the back yard prepares for more



Much of LOTP's education involves details like these.

"We're navigators," Randy continues. "We enjoy helping people through the process of creating their ideal outdoor space," which, by the way, can change from season to season.

You don't have to build everything at once, thinking this is the final and finished environment. In fact, it's fun to have your space grow along with you.

Having an outdoor space is enjoyed by homeowners for a myriad of reasons; but it's also an excellent idea for the remote, at-home worker. (The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports incredible growth in the remote workforce since the Covid pandemic... as high as 46.5 % in some professional sectors and 62.5% in computer sciences sector. In 2019, the average of remote workforce across all industries was 6.5% in the private business sector.)

"Some people deny themselves [from spending time outside] because they think 'I'm supposed to be working,'" Randy says. "But that's just it—you ARE working" when you set up the right space.


The Beckwiths hardly limit their discussions on "patio life" to grills and furniture and pergolas and fire pits and steppingstones and planters and lighting and hardscapes and fountains and flowers and plants and bird and butterfly habitats and ... (the list goes on-and-on for fabulous products and structures). Enjoying your space—by yourself or when entertaining family, friends, and guests—that's what matters most.

And those entertaining details include everything from light to sound to food and beverage and refreshment.

A popular entry on the LOTP blog?  
Patio Food.

Julie and Randy continue to develop their LivingOnThePatio.com site, even as they're still building out their own backyard at their home in Vinton. The site features information and currently has a Starter Kit (\$38), gardening and landscaping books, and other merchandise for homeowners—both DIY and those looking to bring in help.

It's nice when someone opens the front door to welcome you inside.

But walking around to the patio?  
That could be even better. 



AI-generated images  
of ideal patio / outdoor  
spaces... not bad





Courtesy photos

# Upping Its Game:

## *How Mountain Gateway Community College Is Raising the Bar*

By Aila Boyd

---

**Mountain Gateway Community College (MGCC) in Clifton Forge is evolving into a robust engine for regional workforce development, skill-building, and career readiness.**

---

Under President Dr. John Rainone, who assumed his role in 2013, the college emphasizes student success by blending academic rigor with hands-on training and industry-aligned innovation.

“At Mountain Gateway Community College, our main goal is student success,” Rainone said. “We are committed to providing a supportive environment where students can earn a degree, certificate, industry credential, or simply expand their skills. As a community asset, MGCC plays a vital role in workforce development—partnering with local businesses and industries to meet evolving employment needs.”

### **Demonstrating Success: Measurable Outcomes**

MGCC defines student success as both graduation and securing a family-sustaining

wage. The college monitors retention and graduation rates, gathers student and employer feedback, and uses this data to improve its programs. Between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 reporting years, graduation rates increased, and retention rates have been consistent since fall 2019.

The college integrates experiential learning through programs like its nursing offerings, and emphasizes apprenticeships, internships and industry training across its curriculum. It offers both Practical Nursing and Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) programs. The Practical Nursing program prepares students to become Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) by providing essential care such as taking vital signs, administering medications and supporting patients through treatments. Completing this program readies students to sit for the NCLEX-PN, the national exam for LPN licensure.

The ADN program provides the education and training needed to become a Registered Nurse (RN). Graduates of the ADN program are eligible to sit for the RN licensure exam. This program equips students to provide skilled, compassionate care and addresses the increasing complexity of healthcare needs by emphasizing key nursing competencies and a patient-centered approach. A college spokesperson noted the focus on hands-on learning opportunities. This focus on student outcomes has contributed to improved graduation rates, with recent data showing nearly 40% of students completing their program within three years.

## Responding to Industry Demand

The programs it offers, the college said, are developed so that they aligned with labor market needs. New initiatives, driven by partnerships and data analysis, address regional employment trends. Examples include the medical laboratory technician

program, developed with Virginia Western Community College and supported by Lewis Gale Hospital Alleghany, and FastForward workforce programs offering certificates in skilled trades like electrical, HVAC and plumbing. The MG-TEC IT Academy introduces high school students to emerging technologies like virtual reality and drones.

## Community-Driven Collaboration

MGCC collaborates with local chambers of commerce, workforce development boards and employers to ensure program relevance. A partnership with Rockbridge Area Transit, where students helped repair an ambulance, exemplifies community involvement. "Employer feedback is crucial in shaping our programs and curriculum to meet workforce needs," a college spokesperson said. The college regularly solicits input from local businesses and industries to ensure its academic offerings align with current workforce needs. This feedback helps



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MGCC design programs that equip students with the specific skills and knowledge employers are looking for, enhancing students' employability upon graduation.

### **Supporting the Whole Student**

MGCC offers resources such as career counseling, resume workshops, job fairs and mentorship programs. Recognizing the needs of non-traditional students, the

college provides flexible scheduling, online courses and part-time options, along with services like evening classes, childcare assistance and academic support. Financial support is available through state and federal aid, and the MGCC Educational Foundation raises scholarship funds.

### **Strengthening Transfer Pathways**

The college facilitates transfer to four-year



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universities through TransferVirginia and Virginia Community College System agreements. The college provides extensive support for transfer-focused students. MGCC celebrates National Transfer Student Week in October with information and help sessions. Students interested in transferring can join a Canvas group with relevant resources. Admission counselors from four-year schools visit the MGCC campus to meet with students. MGCC advisors participate in transfer advisor peer group meetings and an annual transfer advisor retreat to stay updated on transfer requirements, guaranteed admission agreements and transfer guides, of which there are over 400, a college spokesperson explained.

## A New Chapter in Liberal Arts Education

The college has put resources into building up its humanities-based offerings through its Associate of Arts in Liberal Arts degree program. The two-year program offers a

foundation in subjects like English, art, theater, music and dance, developing skills in writing, communication, and problem-solving.

Under Humanities Program Head Josh Hagy, the program prepares students for transfer to four-year institutions in fields like education, journalism, philosophy and social sciences. The curriculum includes core courses and electives for individualized learning. Small class sizes and faculty support are emphasized.

“The Liberal Arts degree at MGCC is perfect for students looking to explore new interests and develop valuable skills in subjects like English, art, theater, music, and dance,” Hagy said. “This flexible, creative program provides a strong academic foundation while helping students build essential skills in communication, problem-solving, and creative thinking — skills that will serve them in any career.” 

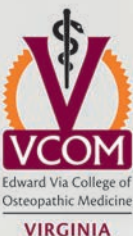
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## LEAD BY EXAMPLE

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

**Executive Summary:**  
*Curiosity may have killed  
the cat, but it works when  
it comes to marketing.*

# In marketing, you can't put a price on the value of curiosity

A job candidate recently asked me: "What's the most valuable thing you look for in an employee?"

I didn't even have to think. Almost all of our employees have three key things in common:

1. Self-initiative and drive
2. Strong communication skills
3. Innate curiosity

Let's sit on that last one for a minute. What does it have to do with marketing and advertising?

StrengthsFinder classifies this skill as a "Learner." (Coincidentally, that is my top strength from the assessment multiple times.) They describe this trait like this: "You are energized by the steady and deliberate journey from ignorance to competence. It enables you to thrive in dynamic work environments where you are asked to take on short project assignments and are expected to learn a lot about the new subject matter in a short period of time and then move on to the next one."

That last little bit explains why curiosity and learning are so important. As marketing and advertising pros, we are expected to learn a lot of different things – understanding in fairly great detail the complexities of a variety of businesses – on the path to creating great user experiences and conversions.

We have to understand a variety of people and audiences and wants and needs. Layer that with the creation of creative materials that speak exactly to those audiences and meet business goals. And we don't have much time to figure it out.

Curiosity drives this process and doing this work well. It drives us to think about client needs in combination with their audiences and users.

When I think more deeply about how curiosity impacts




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marketing, those with the greatest inclination to learn often excel in these areas at LeadPoint Digital – making these folks a great asset on your account!

- They get into the depth of understanding your audience, from the big picture to small details. (Every account manager will be your business partner here.)
- They jump into using new tools wholeheartedly and will quickly abandon those that aren't successful for ones that facilitate their roles. (That's why we're developing in-house AI tools for our team at LeadPoint.)
- They aren't stymied or frustrated by testing and optimizing campaigns to make them better. (No account is left behind with continuous improvement as a guiding principle.)
- They are driven by unique ideas and angles. (This can make for super creative thinking!)
- They excel when engaged collaboratively. (Learning together, sharing information, and asking questions is at the core of who we are.)

I'll leave you with a challenge: What are you doing to encourage your sense of curiosity? 

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Richmond Vincent, CEO, Goodwill Industries of the Valley; Angela Penn, CEO TAP; Tribune Associate Editor Stan Hale, and Harrison Museum of African American Culture Past President Charles Price, from left to right.

Shawn Nowlin

# Future celebrated, past honored by TAP

By Shawn Nowlin

**In March, this year's Annual TAP Black History Month Celebration was held at St. John's Episcopal Church.**

Sixty years ago, Total Action for Progress (TAP), previously known as Total Action Against Poverty, was founded by Cabell Brand. Over the last six decades, the community action agency has effectively served eleven localities with more than two dozen programs, including ones that specialize in employment training and family services.

Music, guest speakers and interpretative dances were all part of the gathering which culminated in an awards ceremony. Everyone joining in singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was how the event concluded. Said TAP President and CEO Angela Penn, who succeeded Annette Lewis in the role, "TAP is honored to host this free community event every year that brings people together to celebrate the rich history of Black Americans, both nationally and locally."

Added TAP Housing Counselor Angelica Wagner, "Black history is a living testament to resilience, excellence and progress. We want to ensure that the aspirations and dreams of today will become the milestones and triumphs of tomorrow." Themed "Exploring the Past, Present and Future of Roanoke's Black Community," the 2025 honorees were Roanoke Tribune Associate Editor Stan Hale, Harrison Museum of African American Culture Past President Charles Price and Richmond Vincent, CEO of Goodwill Industries of the Valleys.


Accepting the award on behalf of his more than 1,000 Goodwill team members, Vincent said, "The City of Roanoke has been a major investor in everything that we do. While developing the Market on Melrose, we truly stood on the shoulders of giants. When I think about the Harrison Museum and the

Roanoke Tribune, we are truly here because of you."

Of the many things that Stan Hale loves about the City of Roanoke, he puts the people near the top of the list. His worldview perspective today was shaped by countless years of various experiences. "I stand before you all today as one of the most grateful people on the planet. Once you fully embrace the power of gratitude at its core, it will empower you to heights unimaginable. Gratitude is truly a force unlike any other." He added, "I am someone who was born with a job. We are talking about 70 years now. If I ever get a little burnt out, all I have to do is look across the room at my mother, Claudia Whitworth, who at 97, is living on the top of life."

Since its inception, the primary mission of the Harrison Museum has been to ensure that Black history is uplifted beyond just the month of February. "My love for Roanoke

knows no bounds. Since 2009, when the museum moved to the Center in the Square, we have flourished. We intend to relocate to the Melrose Plaza in Northwest [in 2025.] If it weren't for volunteers in the community, we wouldn't be here" Charles Price said. E.B. Smith succeeded him as President of the museum early this year.

Had it not been for a collection of life decisions, the 2025 honorees could have very well ended up in other professions. Despite their relative ages, Hale, Price and Vincent show no signs of slowing down anytime soon. Speaking to the impact of writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin, Penn explained, "If you know what you claim, there really is no limit to where you can go. We take tremendous pride in celebrating Black history. A tradition that honors the profound contributions, struggles and resilience. As we reflect on the past, we must also acknowledge how Black history continues to shape the present." 



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## BIZ OPS

By Zachary A. Collier

**Executive Summary:**

*It is important to note that uncertainty is not always necessarily bad. There may still be hidden opportunities.*

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


## Nurturing talent: helping your team grow this spring

It seems like the only constant in business right now is uncertainty. Recent announcements of tariffs, for example, introduce uncertainty into many aspects of business operations. What will our raw materials cost? Can we find other sources of supply? Should we hold onto extra inventory? Is there a more cost-effective way to manufacture our products?

Decision making would be easy if we could see into the future with certainty. But in the absence of a crystal ball, the best we can do is to make decisions with the limited information we have at the time. In other words, managers need to understand how to make decisions under uncertainty.

Uncertainty, according to the Society for Risk Analysis, is the state of “not knowing the true value of a quantity or the future consequences of an activity.” It involves lacking information or knowledge about something relevant to our decision-making process. Some uncertainty is associated with a pure lack of knowledge – this is known as knowledge, or epistemic, uncertainty. There are many things we might not know, but in theory we could look them up, and they would no longer be uncertain. On the other hand, variability, or aleatory uncertainty, represents uncertainty due to the natural variability and heterogeneity of the world. This type of uncertainty cannot typically be reduced through additional research.

Understanding what type of uncertainty your organization is facing can help management devise a plan for how to effectively navigate it. Knowledge uncertainty may require additional research, while variability may require advanced probabilistic modeling techniques and forecasts. If uncertainty is too deep, the best approach might be to implement scenario planning exercises. Scenario planning involves a process of thinking about plausible futures, the outcomes of those futures, and what actions we should take to best achieve our objectives (or to at least minimize our risks). Thinking through scenarios is a helpful way to identify important uncertainties and allocate resources toward appropriate contingencies.

It is important to note that uncertainty is not always necessarily bad. While there are certainly risks associated with uncertainty, there can also be hidden opportunities. Coming to terms with uncertainty involves understanding what factors are important for achieving your own business objectives and figuring out how to build flexibility and resilience into your business operations. 

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Jennifer Hayward

VBR partnership summit 2025

# VBR's Spring Marketing plan targets familiar, new locales

By Gene Marrano

**A multi-market initiative was unveiled at Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge 2025 Partnership Summit meeting.**

Northern Virginia, Washington DC and Richmond are familiar targets for campaigns that will go increasingly digital this year. New is the Sarasota-Bradenton market, which is now reached via non-stop flights from ROA via Allegiant Airlines. The hook – Floridians who want to beat the heat can come north for a long weekend and enjoy the cooler climates, especially if they head to the mountains in Virginia's Blue Ridge.

David Aldridge, VVBR's Vice President of Marketing, gave an overview of the spring campaign to an audience of interested stakeholders at the Holiday Inn Tanglewood in late March. "We are partnering with the Roanoke Blacksburg Regional Airport and [the creative firm] Access that is promoting the new air service to the Sarasota-Bradenton area. Cool down ... a metro-mountain experience. Get away from the hot, sunny [summer] days in Florida."

The 12-week campaign runs through June, with the theme, "The Vacation Starts with

VA's Blue Ridge." Visit VBR will showcase "the region's unique blend of scenic beauty and outdoor recreation ... combined with vibrant communities, attractions and businesses that make up the local downtown districts and towns throughout Virginia's Blue Ridge."

The heavy emphasis on digital advertising includes psychographics, which classifies population groups according to variables like consumer attitudes, values, interests, lifestyles and personality traits that influence purchasing decisions. The promotion of regional events including last month's Blue Ridge Marathon weekend, VBR Restaurant Week in early May (which will include more than just Roanoke City) and this summer's USA Cycling Mountain Biking National Championships.

VBR, which has been questioned in the past by Roanoke City Council members for not being specific enough about the numbers, will analyze Key Performance Indicators like visitor spending, room demand and

revenue, and web traffic/digital engagement.

Target audience includes “Thrivers,” profiled as health-conscious mothers focused on career and family, aged 25-49 with children, socially active and connected, with household incomes of \$100,000-plus. The LGBTQ+ community will also be targeted through events and digital channels.

“We’re really focusing on various digital programs and opportunities where we can be really targeted and strategic with the audience that we are trying to reach, and with various messages that can connect.” That can be evaluated to see how effective that messaging is, says Aldridge, who has been with VBR for 15 years.

Platforms to be employed include Google Performance Max, Amazon, YouTube, Expedia and the old standby in recent years, advertising on DC Metro buses/trains and Amtrak’s Northeast corridor regional train. VBR statistics show steady visitation growth and climbing hotel revenues year over year, back to or above pre-pandemic levels. “We’re focused on the visitor and showcasing the great experience for a vacation – but a lot of this ties together with the quality of life for our residents and how we benefit them. Being on the same page. Present the right message to the right people.”

The message for some of the 1600 partners VBR says it has in the drive to increase visitation, conveyed to those who attended the Spring Summit according to Aldridge: “Letting them know about the resources and some of the exciting things happening in the area as it



Courtesy photo

David Aldridge, VBR

relates to tourism, economic development and how so many different organizations are working together throughout this region. We saw record hotel numbers in 2024. We’re off to a good start in 2025.”

Visit Virginia’s Blue Ridge seems to have a good handle on building brand awareness for the Roanoke region, and an increased digital approach could see those visitation numbers on the rise once again in 2025. “There’s just really a lot of positive momentum that’s happening in the region. We want our partners and our local businesses to know about that and think about ways they can tie in to capitalize on it.” It’s all about “having a collaborative mindset,” adds Aldridge, “[and] how we can work together to support each other.”

<b>MAY 3</b>	<b>MAY 9</b>	<b>MAY 17</b>	<b>JUNE 7</b>
<b>MELLEN COUGAR</b>	<b>BOTTOM OF THE BARREL</b>	<b>BELOW ALABAMA</b>	 <b>daleville town center</b>





## BUSINESS CENTS

By Daniel Colston

### Executive Summary:

*The headlines are loud.  
Markets are shaky. Tariffs  
are back in the spotlight.  
And understandably,  
investors are nervous.*

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# Why now is not the time to panic about your investments

As a financial advisor, I've seen a noticeable uptick in calls from clients lately, all asking a version of the same question: "Are we going to be okay?" It's a fair question - especially when the financial news cycle is in full-blown frenzy mode. But the answer, in most cases, is a reassuring yes. This is not a moment to panic. In fact, for long-term investors, it may be one of the most promising windows in years.

## Bonds, Then Stocks: A Strategic Shift

In anticipation of volatility, I had many clients' portfolios positioned conservatively, with a healthy allocation to bonds. Bonds tend to hold their ground better during downturns, which helped buffer the recent market swings.

But now, those same portfolios are shifting. Why? Because stocks - particularly quality ones - are undervalued right now. Markets have pulled back, and that creates opportunities. We've been using the proceeds from bonds to buy stocks at discount prices. For investors with a long horizon, this is how wealth is built: buying low, staying patient, and letting time do its work.

## Tariffs, Tumult, and Transformation

The reintroduction of tariffs under Trump's administration has added a layer of uncertainty to the economic landscape. In the short term, they may cause discomfort—supply chain adjustments, higher costs for some goods, temporary market unease. But the bigger picture tells a more optimistic story.

These measures are nudging industries to return operations to American soil, potentially reshaping the economy into one that's more self-reliant and sustainable. Like pulling off a band aid, there's a sting - but also a necessary healing process underneath.

## Eye on the Long Game: Could the Dow Hit 50,000?

Some market watchers are predicting the Dow could soar to 50,000 points by the end of Trump's term. That's a bold projection, and whether it hits that exact number or not, the takeaway is clear: long-term optimism remains strong among many experts.

Markets move quickly. Rebounds often happen before the average investor feels ready. That's why staying invested is key. Sitting on the sidelines means risking the loss of those big upswings when they do arrive.

### Inflation Easing, Prices Falling


There are also encouraging signs in the day-to-day economy. Inflation - a persistent thorn in our side since 2020 - is finally starting to ease. Oil prices have dipped. Eggs and other groceries are becoming more affordable. These shifts may seem small, but they signal broader momentum in the right direction.

We are currently in one of the biggest housing affordability crises of our time. With valuations still high and interest rates high as well, many millennials and young people are finding the prospect of buying a home well beyond their reach. Inflation, interest rates, and housing prices will need to come down considerably to make the American Dream a reality for younger generations again. How this will happen and how new generations adapt will be very interesting to observe.

### Keep Calm and Stay Invested

Investing is emotional. It's natural to feel uneasy when the market dips or headlines suggest chaos. But history has consistently rewarded those who stayed the course during times of uncertainty.

This moment—right now—could very well be the kind of temporary storm that long-term investors later look back on and say, "I'm glad I didn't panic."

So, whether you're managing your own portfolio or working with a financial advisor, take a deep breath. Stay calm. Stay smart. The fundamentals of long-term investing haven't changed—and this might just be one of those rare opportunities to lean into them. 

“

Like pulling off a band aid, there's a sting—but also a necessary healing process underneath.

MAY 2

MAY 16

JUN 6



**80-NATION**  
**80'S**  
**PARTY**



**On The Border**  
The Ultimate Eagles Tribute



**The Ultimate 90's**  
Country Experience

**FIRST FRIDAYS**

















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OCTOBER 2008—MAY 2025

## FRONT Cover Fun Facts >

112 men    90 women  
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43 characters\*    16 parodies\*\*  
6 children    4 (real) animals  
total of 205 local, live, real subjects

## PRODUCTION

83 Photographed in studio    112 Shot on location  
5 submitted (due to logistics)

**No.** No one can reserve or pay to be on the FRONTcover (in case you were wondering)    **Yes.** We heard you look forward to our FRONTcovers as much as we enjoy producing them (Thanks!)

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headhunter • Superman • frat boy • biker • teacher old school • tree hugger  
pan handler • protecto-suit • stereotypic tourist • showtimer • angel  
\* queen of hearts • storm captain • crazy football fan • complaint agent • umpire  
Lucy juggler • gas attendant • beer maid • protestor • race car driver • 60's clerk  
wine connoisseur • country club snob • fashion model • scibner 19th Century  
grocery clerk • Uncle Sam • military field general • playing doctor • fighter ace pilot  
ringmaster • rock climber • gold rush cowboy • boxer • peddler • dancer

\*\* Assassination of Caesar • All Creatures Great & Small • Rosie The Riveter  
American Gothic • Hee Haw News • Chiaroscuro • Little Rascals • Star Trek  
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# Hotel Roanoke expansion >

More details are emerging about expansion for the **Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center**, which is planning to add more meeting and event space - helping to keep up with competitors. At a 30th anniversary party celebrating Hotel Roanoke's reopening last month, the Richmond-based architect firm Baskerville showed off renderings that includes a new 7000 square foot ballroom. Hotel general manager **Brian Wells**: "we'll have this exciting new venue." He adds that the atrium ballroom will feature plenty of natural light.

On the other side of the conference center on the front lawn, recreational amenities

and an indoor room for smaller events are being added. Wells says after reopening in April 1995 after five years of remodeling, change has always been a constant, with regular room and amenity upgrades since Hotel Roanoke passed from Norfolk Southern to the Virginia Tech Foundation more than 30 years ago. The Hilton Curio chain is responsible for daily operations.

Wells says a shortage of space has meant pushing out dates for weddings and conferences or losing them altogether. "There's new venues constantly, we have two new casinos (Danville, Bristol) that have meeting space here in Virginia ... things like that all contribute to competitiveness." The new project will go out to bid for construction; Wells says they are shooting for a late 2026 completion date.



Submitted



## New Carilion tower close to opening >

The new Crystal Spring Tower at **Carilion Roanoke Memorial** will feature expanded Emergency Department and is scheduled to sometime this spring after construction delays paused its anticipated launch last month. When it does open Carilion says it will be one of the largest in the state, with the 500 million dollar expansion helping to meet a growing demand for emergency care.

Senior Director of Trauma Services **Dan Freeman** notes the addition includes five new trauma bays – including one devoted to pediatric cases – will be a first for the region: [the bays] are bigger, they're more strategically based. Some of the top reasons why we expanded ... was to increase access for patients and increase our efficiencies to provide trauma care." Staff input helped decide where equipment in the new trauma bays should be placed. There will also be 125 beds in the new tower for patients.







Podcaster Elizabeth Walker in her trademark red overalls.

## Exposing Excellence with Roanoke Valley Leaders

PODCAST  
MAGAZINE

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Scott Perry  
John Lusher  
Katie Zawacki  
Liz Long  
Katie Beach  
Kris Simko  
Gene Marrano

Limited Series  
Dear Business Coach Podcast  
Roanoke Valley Area Leaders and  
Elizabeth Walker



# Red Overalls and a Podcast

By Dan Smith

**After a long, bumpy road, the podcast seems to be the logical way home for Elizabeth Walker.**

Elizabeth Walker's professional beachball has bounced around so frequently that it has finally developed a flat side, and she is tentatively anticipating that first big step. Heaven knows, she's ready.

Walker has lived and worked in Floyd for most of her life. She has enough education (Virginia Western Community College, Marymount of Manhattan College, Hollins University and Roanoke College—eight years to a business degree) and experience (from film and voice works, to waiting tables, to inside sales, to managing a "green room" for broadcasting, to working a call center, to pharmacy technician, to a slew of part-time gigs, to ... well, you get the idea) to give it her best shot, projecting that "this is my retirement."

The latest self-created opportunity for the 41-year-old single mother of a 17-year-old

teenager is podcasting for businesses. It's the gig she's dreamed of for years, but the payday has been so iffy that she couldn't dip a toe in. Until now.

It's early-days for her nascent company, Dear Business Coach Podcast, which includes a slick, introductory magazine that explains who she is and what she's about to introduce you to. It is titled *Exposing Excellence with Roanoke Valley Leaders*, "which transforms our engaging audio conversations into a tangible celebration of our region's visionaries." (Note: one of those eight "visionaries" in the first edition is FRONT editor Gene Marrano.)

The magazine seeks to amplify the podcast that you can find on Spotify, Apple, YouTube, Amazon, iHeart Radio and other platforms if, indeed, you listen to or watch podcasts, which an increasing number of business people do.

For Walker, her podcasts and magazine combine her favorite pastimes with a profession that, she believes, can only grow, especially as podcasts become more widely followed. "Monetizing" the pursuit is the first significant challenge, but advertising and enlisting businesses for the exposure of a widely-heard podcast seem to be the best options.

She is in a good position to experiment, since an inheritance from her mother, who died in 2016, gave her a sense of financial security. Her mom, she says, "was amazing and my best friend." So much so, in fact that she adopted her mom's maiden name, Walker. She has also adopted as her podcast costume red overalls like those her grandfather wore as a traveling telecom salesman.

Her father is a big band musician and singer who also ran Walker and Associates, a telecom group founded by Walker's mom, who was on the board. She is divorced and shares custody of her daughter. It has been a challenge to find the right job for her mom schedule, but her mother advised her to "invest in real estate," before her death. "Now, I'm able to podcast all day," says Walker with a twinkle.

"I enjoy the medium of podcasting so much that sometimes I listen in my sleep. My favorites are comedy podcasts." That has worked to her advantage, since she likes to work comedy into her podcasts and seminars. Recently, she featured professional New York-based comedian Clayton Fletcher in a workshop at the Jefferson Center that

was centered around working comedy into speeches.


"There is a crossover between entertainment and providing [professional] value," she says. She has filed for an LLC for her budding workshop business.

"There is an art to speaking and presenting," Walker continues. "I love people who do improv. I've wanted to be an actor since I was 10. I've been trying to figure out how to put interviews on my website, doing a 'how-to guide' on it. I have been fumbling through. My first one was on Spotify and I didn't think I would care so much, but it made me want to do more.

"My goal right now is in several years to spread to several cities. I'm shopping it to executive groups. I'm trying to bring generations together, learning human connections. I have a pretty good background in marketing and sales and I'm hoping to be comfortable bridging the gap and putting together older and younger people. It is a fun theatrical world, impacting business leaders."

But why podcasting?

"Some see it as an extra thing that you have to do, but my project is something I enjoy tinkering with," she says. "I enjoy it when people get involved in conversations they didn't expect."

One of the lessons she has learned to apply: "Don't do what's comfortable," she says. 

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Hank Ebert

Closing Arguments



Submitted

David Walton

# Enter, Community Players, Stage Center

By Hart Fowler

**Roanoke's Newest Community Theatre concludes its first season and looks ahead to the next chapter in its journey.**

Creating something in a space where once there was nothing is the work of the entrepreneur, founder, inventor, all artists, and anyone who has completed the formidable task of bringing a creative vision to light in the public space.

It's not a natural act, tireless and full of doubt, endeavoring to build something new. But earned with experience comes a confident know-how, and with support from colleagues and community new ideas gain credence, making the most difficult of endeavors do-able.

That gathering of expertise and support came to fruition in Roanoke in the newly formed "Exit, Pursued by a Bear" community theater group. Bear Theatre, for short, opened their inaugural four-show season last summer. During the third of four shows

into a successful first season that attracted both local talent and promising attendance figures (including near sellouts for Arsenic & Old Lace last fall, they recently announced there will be a second season.

"Sometimes it's hard to believe that our little dream is a reality, but here we are preparing for a season two," said Angela McNeil, president and founder of the non-profit theater group.

McNeil moved to Roanoke with her husband Patrick two and half years ago from St Louis where "the performing arts scene was just thriving. I mean there's hundreds of community theaters, just a thriving population."

Her experience from that vibrant theater scene led her to immerse herself in the local scene upon moving to the Star City,

acting, costuming, running sound or stage managing for Showtimers in Roanoke and Attic Productions in Fincastle, the two non-equity theaters in the area. She also recently directed her first production at Attic, *Sense And Sensibility*.

"I'm used to a lot of cross-pollination, you work with new actors all the time because people are moving around all of these different theaters, so it quickly hit me that there's a lot of talent in Roanoke and there's just not a lot of opportunity."

Not a bad problem to have, an abundance of talented local theater people willing to donate their time and craft to community theater, but not enough local theaters for regular performances.

"It is because of the distance [between] the theaters, and they are very segmented," notes McNeil, "there is a Showtimers core group of actors and audience members,

and there's the Attic actors and audience members, and rarely do they cross."

A year ago, she gathered local friends and colleagues to Mill Mountain Coffee to discuss the enterprising idea of opening a new community theater and found a resounding agreement that there was a need, leaving with a long list of volunteers and contacts. From the beginning, "we really wanted to be a place that is open to all talent, new and existing."

"We held an informational meeting and invited 30 to 40 people, and we kind of did a sales pitch. We shared our vision; we shared what we were thinking. What would they want in a community theater? These are people that we respect in the area, and we got all of their feedback. We reached out to some of the people that expressed a lot of passion and heart for what we were doing at those meetings to join our board." McNeil worked for months to



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Hank Ebert



Courtesy photo

Closing Arguments

Angela Mcneil Bear Board president

secure the non-profit 501c3 designation.

Bolstered with community support, the group caught another break when Community High School, with strong ties to the local arts world, offered the Bear Theatre their auditorium as a home venue. The space is perfectly sized for community play productions, with the Bear's long term goal being to find an affordable theater space of their own as they grow.

With an agreed upon mission to make Bear as collaborative as possible, and a new home in Community High School, next came the difficult task of show selection for the inaugural, often defining, first season.

"We are still learning our process. It's much harder picking a season than I would have ever guessed. We knew that we wanted some show recognition," McNeil said, so they opened with "Crimes of the Heart," the Pulitzer-prize winning play that became an American film classic starring Diane Keaton, Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek, and Sam Shepard. They will close the season with

Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," a timeless well-known theater classic, June 13-22.

"We also knew we wanted to celebrate the writers and so we wanted to do a new work as one of those four shows every year. To celebrate the writers because we need [new playwrights]," McNeil said. That new play was "Closing Arguments," the Bear's third offering in season one that was on stage last month, written and directed by Bedford County's David Walton. "Those of us who write hunger for people to hear and see our stories," the pastor and playwright said while driving from church to the last showing of Closing Arguments on a Sunday in April.

"You know there's always some unexpected nuance or facial expression. It's just something really exciting about seeing a story come to life like that in front of you and with people, to sit in a theater and have a shared experience with an audience and see something original that's done just for your eyes."


As a pastor, Walton knows family dynamics in

difficult times more than most, and showed the true colors often revealed in them in *Closing Arguments*. He tread familiar ground to anyone who has lost an immediate family member, and a realistic portrayal to those who haven't, of how the grieving process sometimes begins with a family's funeral preparations. The play was well-staged and acted and featured nightly cameos by well-known figures in Roanoke (Mayor Joe Cobb, Southwest Virginia Ballet Artistic Director Pedro Szalay among them) for a small part in the closing scene. Something you could only do with a writer/director and a new play that has not been published and licensed.

"This is actually new to me, but because I'm the playwright I could add lines for them. When you're renting or have the rights to use someone else's play you perform it as it is presented in the script but since I'm the playwright, I could

adjust it for that purpose," says Walton.

That kind of creative license and collaborative work exists in community theaters, where everyone works for free. McNeil chose the theater's name. "Exit, Pursued by a Bear," which is an unusual stage direction in Shakespeare's 'A Winter's Tale,' where the revered playwright left it up to the director of the play to decide whether the frantic exit would be for comedic or tragic effect.

Roanoke's newest community theater aims to provoke that spirit of collaboration when performing a play, while providing another stage to attract existing and new local talent to perform and share in that often wonderful and moving shared experience of live community theater. The Bear's second season includes *Romeo & Juliet*, and *On Golden Pond*. See [beartheatre.org](http://beartheatre.org) for more information. 



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## The Strong Place

It's called **Blackford Barbell Strength & Combat** (Cave Spring district of Roanoke) and it's where owner-coach Aaron Blackford (former SWAT tactical operator, sniper, Official Strongman) and partner coach Jake (Shotokan black belt) show up for work—along with strength-building members, both serious athletes and those

who just seek personal improvement and lifestyle conditioning. Annual and month-to-month memberships. "We aimed to create an outlet where people not only come to better themselves physically but also develop disciplinary tools that transcend into other aspects of life. It's home to every demographic you could possibly imagine; but one thing we have in common is respect. Our mantra is 'Be Strong and Courageous!'" says Blackford.

Photo by Olivia Marone










## A few bumps in the road for the Riverdale project

Developer Ed Walker, whose use of historic tax credits in the heart of downtown Roanoke helped launch the transformation of that corridor into a space where several thousand residents now live – turning downtown Roanoke into a much livelier place after regular business hours – has set his sights, along with partners, into transforming the old American Viscose property on 9th Street Southeast into Riverdale. Walker envisioned Riverdale as home to affordable living spaces for local artists, who would pay below-market prices for living spaces and studios. There would also be a mix of retail businesses as well catering to residents and visitors.

A ballyhooed potential partnership with the Artspace group based in Minnesota, who would have purchased a building and built those affordable living units, fell through after more than a year of Artspace assessing the Riverdale property and several other potential sites in Roanoke, with Walker commenting that the Artspace proposal did not meet their “expectations.” Still said the developer, plans and a groundbreaking for 250+ apartments would move forward.

Then in early April came a spectacular late night fire that destroyed one of the buildings there, a structure that was home to the Noke Van Company. Their specialty was converting vans and creating food trucks for local businesses like Chris’s Coffee & Custard – their food van was inside the Noke Van building at the time of the fire and was destroyed. That food truck run by young people with various physical and mental challenges was a centerpiece for the non-profit LoveAble program and will have to be replaced.

Noke Van vows to reopen and put out a social media call last month seeking the donation of tools and supplies that will allow the award-winning small business to get back on its feet. For years I’ve run by the 9th Street industrial park on the Roanoke River greenway and always thought it would be a great opportunity for redevelopment along the lines of what Ed Walker’s group says its is still committed to, a 50 million dollar-plus project that Walker himself says could take several decades to be realized.

Riverdale could provide the momentum for a change in how people view southeast Roanoke, the longtime home for working class residents dating back to when the city was a true railroad town. Substandard and older housing well past its prime has always been a drawback. Let’s hope that the project continues to move forward, as Walker says it will, despite those recent setbacks. 

## THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

**Executive Summary:**  
*A potential partnership gone awry and a nighttime destructive blaze are new challenges for Riverdale*

## Cover talk

This edition of Valley Business FRONT marks our 200th issue. It's been a fun ride. One of the more public functions of this business is simply—the magazine cover itself. Only it's not really simple. Some of our FRONTcovers take many hours to produce, others not as many, but all covers take a lot of thought.

Dr. Hook and the Medicine Show belted out “the thrill that'll get ya when you get your picture on the cover of the Rolling Stone” in the early 1970s; and indeed, serving as creative director for the FRONTcover gives me a bit of a thrill. Each month.

After all, we've featured every profession from a rocket scientist to a moonshiner. It's quite the eclectic and diverse mix—as you'll see in the two spreads of all our 200 FRONTcovers in this edition.


I often get asked about the process. Here's a brief overview:

First, unlike most magazine producers, we don't plan out our year in advance (or any term longer than the next issue or two). We don't even issue an editorial calendar—because we cover all the “fronts” all the time. Our news-happening-now approach is not an easy one (in the magazine business), but we like how it keeps us on our toes. And keeps our audience guessing what we'll do next.

I do intentionally present variety in our industry sectors (fronts) in each 12-issue volume. You won't see any single industry back-to-back, in successive months—and in fact, we even try not to show the same industry within the year, if possible.

Lastly, our creative approach has varied greatly over the 200 FRONTcovers. We've presented metaphors or parodies or familiar characters. We've shown conventional business men and women portraits. And we've staged models in environments and with props that relate to the story. Asking around, I've discovered people like these approaches... some gravitating to the illustrious, some gravitating to the conventional expectation. (Obviously, I haven't obeyed any law of gravity—though I do tend to run a similar approach within a volume / term / campaign—until I'm ready to turn it all upside down again.)

And speaking of models... we don't use them. (Well, technically, we did use models when the subject at hand was about modeling or fashion, but that doesn't count.) Our FRONTmodels are real people that accompany our real story.

I hope you enjoy our FRONTcovers as much as you enjoy the content inside as much as I enjoy publishing this venture. (Send in your vote for one of your favorite covers to [poll@vbFRONT.com](mailto:poll@vbFRONT.com) by May 15 for a chance to win \$50 in our random drawing.) 



## ON TAP FROM THE PUB

**By Tom Field**

**Executive Summary:**  
*FRONTpublisher  
chats about the  
magazine cover.*



# CONTRIBUTORS

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**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.

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**Daniel Colston, CFP®, CEPA** runs a tax and investing firm in Roanoke, Upward Financial Planning, specializing in helping business owners and retirees. [daniel@upwardfp.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.

**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]

**Emily Field** is the office administrator for Berryfield, Inc. (publisher of FRONT and a media / marketing firm). She lives in Salem with her husband, Tom, and is the mother of three and grandmother of three. [efield@berryfield.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]

**Hart Fowler** is an independent journalist with commissions by the Washington Post, Blue Ridge Outdoors, 100 days in Appalachia and others. He is also publisher of 16 Blocks, a non-profit print and digital arts and culture magazine. [hart.fowler@gmail.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]

**Olivia Marone** is a seasonal contemporary portrait photographer with over two decades of experience. While she has worked in a variety of photographic settings, her true passion lies in the studio. With expert facial coaching and a knack for helping clients feel at ease, she ensures you look your absolute best. [olivia.marone@gmail.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]

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

Institute, and is vice chair of the board of with the Botetourt Family YMCA. A native of Botetourt County, she resides in Daleville with her husband and two children.

**Shawn Nowlin** is an award-winning writer, photographer and content creator. In addition to the Roanoke Tribune, his byline has also appeared in ColorsVA Magazine and the Salem Times Register, among other publications. Born and raised in Roanoke, Virginia, Shawn is a proud product of the Star City. [shawnnowlin1989@aol.com]

**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]

“It's just something exciting about seeing a story come to life. — Page 38

## The ripple effect: personal power in a divided country

What makes an organization successful? What all organizations need is for people to work well together. And not just employees. Organizations have to work well with customers, suppliers, various governments and more.

Our sharply divided country, collaboration is in increasingly short supply. Our political system is dominated by conflict entrepreneurs, politicians and media, from both the Left and the Right, who encourage us to hate our fellow citizens for the “crime” of thinking differently.

The poisonous bitterness of politics is seeping into everyday work life. The onslaught of headlines, news stories, and rage on social media enflames emotions that endanger the collaboration we all need. And worse, research shows that outrage is as addictive as heroin. Outrage provides us with an odd comfort by making the world seem simpler than it is.


The antidote? We need to be kind, especially to those who think, look, and act differently than we do. We don’t have to agree with them. But for our businesses and organizations to succeed, each of us has to collaborate with different people.

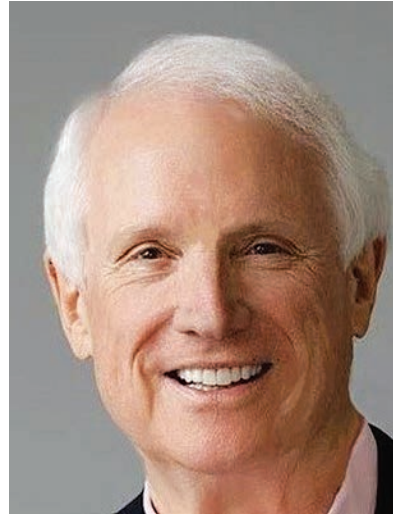
There is power in not giving in to outrage. Self-control creates confidence that enables greater achievements. And there’s more. Kind interactions have a Ripple Effect. How we treat someone not only impacts our relationship with them. It ripples into how they treat others.

When we treat someone with contempt, they not only “return the favor” but are also more likely to treat the next people they encounter with contempt. And then those people are more likely to pass contempt along. This is what makes conflict entrepreneurs so dangerous.

Fortunately, the reverse is true. A kind word, a smile when someone needs it, offering to understand a different idea or point of view - not agree – just understand. All of that gets passed along too, creating an uptick in collaboration.

Imagine the effect on your organization, and our society, if we create enough ripples. Kindness and understanding builds relationships that can stand the stresses inherent in working together. You can start immediately; with the very next person you encounter.

You can learn about overcoming the obstacles by reading *A Little Book to Save Humanity* (<https://theeqpress.com>) I’m proud to report that it is creating enough ripples to be nominated for the Dayton Peace Accord Literary Award. 



## GUEST COMMENTARY

By Dana C. Ackley, PhD

**Executive Summary:**  
*You and your organization will benefit from kindness.*



## FRONTReviews >

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

### *Menu of memories*

This self-published book of *The Roanoker* is absolutely worth a review for at least two big reasons: it describes a small family business that was a foodie staple for so much of our local population—and from our own business journal perspective, many are unaware of the noteworthy business deals that happened here—particularly by business folk at breakfast before commuting into the office. *81 Years of Food and Family* is a compilation of memories (notes and pictures) by Butch and Samantha Craft—edited by Sandra Brown Kelly and designed by Candace Monaghan.

And what a fantastic hometown business it was. So many of us couldn't possibly give an accurate number of the times we've dined here. We were truly saddened to see it close in 2022.

Here you'll get a timeline of the business and the family behind it; interesting mementos like vintage menus; news clippings and milestones (including an honest explanation of the closing); celebrity moments; and even—get this—shared recipes of *The Roanoker's* popular dishes.

The Roanoker was a legacy, a landmark, a legend.

—Tom Field

### *Another trippy Robbins story*

Wait—didn't I already write two reviews last month of books by Tom Robbins? Yes. I can't

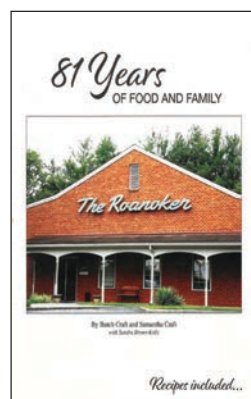
help myself. The craftiness of this writer—is addictive, regardless of the story. *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* (Bantam; 1995) is proof. The story goes sideways so much, and the plot itself bogs down a bit at times—but the friggin' storytelling... a reader-addict's nirvana! One reviewer describes Robbins as "the master of metaphor, the sultan of simile—the man is like Jackson Pollock with a word processor." Yes! (And trust me, it took a lot for me to quote another reviewer in my own review; I think that's a first for me.)

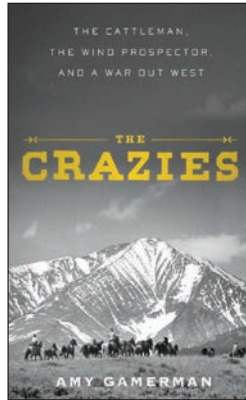
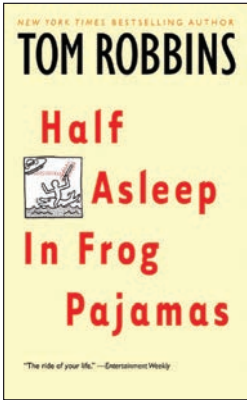
This book is about... well, let's just say this book has: a crashing stock market; a missing monkey; and an audacious psychic. Oh, and there is heady, funky dialogue on an origin of life theory (the title provides a clue). "Listening" to what our protagonist thinks, in full candor, embarrassment, and relatable context is quite simply, a trip. This selection would never be considered a top choice from the Tom Robbins collection. It doesn't matter.

—Tom Field

### *A taste of Argentina*

Downtown Roanoke's Campbell Avenue is now home to Familia Argentina – a new eatery featuring those tasty fried dough empanadas (filled with a variety of cheeses and meats) that are a favorite these days. The menu also features Argentinian grill items like chorizo, beef skirt steaks, pasta dishes and desert specialties, along with sandwiches and a lunch menu. Its right next door to long time favorite Alejandro's, the





Mexican hot spot – hopefully, those with a yen for Hispanic foods will give Familia Argentina a try as well.

—Gene Marrano

## *The war over wind power*

Lots of people say they are all for developing cleaner alternative energy sources as a way to help wean the world away from more greenhouse emitting forms of power generation - they just don't want to see them, whether it's the neighbor's solar panels on a rooftop – or those giant wind turbines. That includes in the wide open spaces on Montana properties measured in (many) square miles. The battle over where those turbines should be allowed to go up on private land is the subject of a new book, *The Crazies: The Cattleman, The Wind Prospector And A War Out West* (Simon & Schuster, 2025) by Amy Gamerman.

The Crazies is what the locals call a mountain range that looms over some of the most beautiful landscapes in the country. Gamerman's book not only goes through the legal battle between a fifth-generation rancher just trying to make ends meet by allowing a wind farm to be built on his property, and wealthy neighbors – many of whom are only part time residents – its also delves into the history of that land dating back to when native Americans from driven away by the U.S. government and white settlers from the east. Texas oil tycoons, a roguish wind prospector and a Crow activist fighting for tribal rights to the mountains

they hold sacred – its all in the mix. The battle over wind power – not in vogue for the current White House administration for example – is played out again in the author's page turning work.

—Gene Marrano

## *Last hurrah for Pedro*

Act 2 from Tchaikovsky's classic *Swan Lake* and his original, imaginative and humorous choreography in *Under the Tent* – inspired by the book, the movie and the ensuing musical play *Water for Elephants* was a final act staged at Mill Mountain Theatre for Pedro Szalay, the artistic director for Southwest Virginia Ballet over the past 18 years. The pre-professional company and the school housed in the same building (not impacted by the April fire at the 9th Street industrial park in Roanoke now being turned into the Riverdale mixed use development project that destroyed one building, home to the Noke Van company) is perhaps best known for the annual Nutcracker show at the Berglund Center every Christmas season. Szalay is moving to Scotland with his husband Mark and has already lined up teaching gigs there. Szalay expects a successor to be announced before he leaves at the end of June, leaving him time to help with the transition.

—Gene Marrano

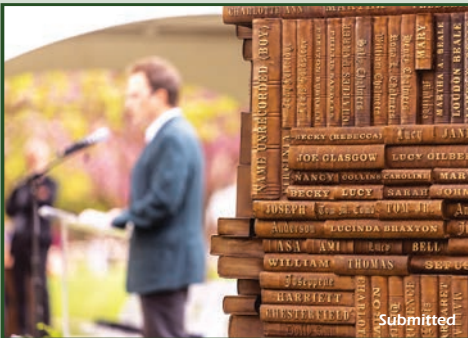
*The reviewers: Tom Field is a creative director, writer, and publisher; Gene Marrano is a news reporter and FRONT editor.*





## Pounds of peanut butter >

The **Phi Theta Kappa Alpha Eta Omicron** Chapter at **Mountain Gateway Community College** collected 204.59 pounds of peanut butter as part of a community service initiative. PTK was founded in 1918 and is the largest honor society in American higher education, recognizing the academic achievements of two-year college students. Co-advisors Lee Anne Bowling and Rachael Thompson help guide the chapter, which offers opportunities for growth through leadership and service. Pictured from left to right: VP of Communications, Cat Young, and members Christine Rothwell, Kabreya Henderson, and Kyleigh Mills.



## Block o' books >

A striking sculpture depicting a massive stack of books entitled “Authors and Architects” was dedicated on the **Roanoke College** campus on April 4. The work, by Richmond artist **Sandy Williams IV**, memorializes the contribution of 829 enslaved laborers who helped build the college (founded in 1842). President Frank Shushok Jr. called the cube a “meaningful tribute and a powerful reminder... [of the] great sacrifice” and that “all community members, past, present, and future have benefitted” from the lives of those individuals.



## Daleville Munters expansion >

**Munters Corporation** will invest \$29.95 million to build a 200,000-square-foot expansion to its HVAC manufacturing facility in Botetourt County. The project will create 270 new jobs. Munters, a global company with headquarters in Stockholm, Sweden, manufactures climate control solutions for mission-critical processes. The new manufacturing facility will be built on a lot at the Botetourt Center at Greenfield, adjacent to its current facility.

Munters has experienced significant growth in its data center business over the past five years, expanding its operations with new facilities in Daleville and Cork, Ireland, as well as acquiring additional facilities in Italy and Thailand. Recognizing the continued expansion of the U.S. data center market, the company saw a need to further increase its production capabilities domestically. The upcoming expansion of its Virginia facility will establish a dedicated data center technologies production campus.

"I am thrilled to celebrate this exciting new chapter for Munters right here in Botetourt County," said Chair of the Botetourt County Board of Supervisors Amy White, who is also the Dean of STEM at Virginia Western Community College. "In 2022 we celebrated the company's grand opening in Greenfield, and this expansion is a testament to our community's commitment to innovation, economic growth, and creating new job opportunities. This rapid expansion also signifies the high caliber of our business partners. We proudly support businesses that invest in our region and contribute to our thriving local economy."

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Tom Field

## Conservations conversations >

**Botetourt County Chamber of Commerce** hosted its “Ag Lunch / Lunch-n-Learn” on April 8 at The Barn at Back Creek event venue in Lithia (Buchanan). A most informative presentation featured panelists **David Perry** (Blue Ridge Land Conservancy); **Stephen Lemon** (Martin, Hopkins & Lemon attorneys); and **Jared Schweitzer** (Miller, Long & Associates) who told the what-how-and-why of conservation easements to 30 attendees. Sponsors included First Bank & Trust Company, Farm Credit, Mountain Castle Soil & Water Conservation District, and Virginia Outdoors Foundation with local food by C&F Farms, Nick of Thyme, Scones by Sydney, and Tizzzone. Perry said of the mission: “we don’t want future generations to say why didn’t we do something” to preserve land; and that his organization has conserved 35,000 acres in this region (7,900 in Botetourt alone).



Submitted



## Etiquette at Radford > Submitted

Etiquette expert **Kathleen Harvey Harshberger** (long-time FRONT columnist) hosted one of her celebrated Etiquette Dinners (that has become a tradition) for the graduating senior athletes at Radford University on April 3. Author of *Etiquette Still Matters* (Berryfield; 2019)—a compilation of FRONT articles—Harshberger said the students were “outstanding young adults... they were engaged, enthusiastic, and eager to learn.” One attendee called the affair “important information that will last a lifetime... Kathleen is wonderful.”



## VBR biotech discussion >

The Roanoke Regional Chamber, in partnership with the Roanoke Blacksburg Technology Council (RBTC), held a State of Biotech panel discussion last month at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC. The event, the first in a series to be presented by Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge, explored the growing biotechnology sector in Virginia's Blue Ridge and its role in driving regional innovation and economic development. Panelists shared insights into emerging trends, current challenges, and opportunities for growth within the biotech sector in the region. Panelists included representatives from Carilion Innovation, P1 Technologies, Carilion Clinic, the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute/Virginia Tech and the City of Roanoke economic development department.

**Sally Allain** from FBRI was one of the panelists. The Chief Health Sciences Growth and Innovation Officer – a newly created role. Allain splits her time between Roanoke and the Northern Virginia Innovation Campus recently opened by Virginia Tech. "Working with a lot of people, but there's certainly a lot of strategic initiative." As for the panel discussion, Allain says "the strength of building biotech in Roanoke ... its early, but all the players are here. A research institute, a hospital [Carilion Roanoke Memorial], and having organizations the wrap around mentorship and services to those [biotech] companies."



## Valley Metro goes green >

**Valley Metro** has introduced Roanoke's first three electric buses, a return of electric public transit to Roanoke for the first time since the city's streetcars ceased operation in 1948. The new buses provide an eco-friendly and accessible transportation option for residents and travelers visiting the Roanoke Valley. Assistant General Manager Ron Parker says, "these new buses will not only reduce our carbon footprint but also enhance quality of life with cleaner, quieter, and more efficient transit options."

Manufactured by GILLIG in California, the buses were driven cross-country to Roanoke. They are fully battery-powered, chargeable at any standard charging station, and designed to cut emissions while improving service reliability. The new electric buses were funded through state and federal grants (\$770,000) and joined Valley Metro's 51-vehicle fleet after the unveiling.





## Safer access to The Knob >

Appalachian Trail through-hikers and those just making the 7-mile round trip to "The Knob" and back now have a safer way to cross Route 311-Catawba Valley Drive. A new 90 foot long, 18-foot-high bridge that took more than a year to build has cut the ribbon at the McAfee Knob parking lot on Route 311/Catawba Valley Road. Jason Bond is a local VDOT spokesperson: "this bridge will definitely enhance safety for pedestrians. They'll be able to [cross Rt. 311] without having to be in the way of traffic." McAfee Knob is a favorite spot for locals, especially during the Fall colors and attracts thousands from elsewhere to one of the most photographed spots along the AT. The parking lot has now re-opened as well; Roanoke County shuttle service from the I-81 park-and-ride and several other stops in Salem is still available as an alternative.



## New Makerspace in Roanoke >

**MAKE Roanoke** showed off their studio on Albemarle Avenue at Williamson Road in Roanoke, in the old Press Press Merch building - with a soft opening last month. MAKE Roanoke members will find tools and machinery for builders, tinkers and hobbyists all under one roof says board member Chris Santacroce: "anybody who is interested in making things of any kind, really. It's like a 24 hour gym, but instead of workout equipment and weights, its table saws , milling machines, sewing machines, things of that nature. It's an inclusive space that caters to all types of disciplines." MAKE Roanoke members who pay fifty dollars a month will have access to the studio 24-7. MAKE Roanoke says there are 300-400 such spaces nationwide, including one in Radford.



Courtesy of Noke Van Co



## Devastating business loss >

A devastating, major industrial fire struck the **Riverdale** site at the foot of Roanoke's Mill Mountain overnight on April 4. **Noke Van Co** (customized van builder and recreational retrofitter) suffered a complete loss of its operating facility (along with a vendor vehicle for **Chris's Coffee & Custard**). Firefighters contained the fire to building gB1 (which developer Ed Walker reportedly said was the best structure on campus) and no one was injured. Noke Van Co says it will rebuild the business, and various stakeholders are conducting fundraisers toward that end... or, new re-beginning.



## THE ART OF LEADERS 2025

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## Grove on Patterson debut >

It's called **The Grove on Patterson** - a new residential addiction treatment and recovery program for pregnant and parenting women seeking help. A 1916 home on Patterson Avenue SW in Roanoke City purchased and refurbished by Restoration Housing - which will be the landlord - celebrated with an open house last month. Donna Littlepage is President of the non-profit's board: "although we're going to need ongoing support into the future, for all that has happened so far, I feel quite confident that the community is going to be here to support us for another 30 years and beyond, so these services will be here for woman and their unborn children – and their born children. This is a facility that will let them bring [babies] back here after they're born. That's what makes us unique."

Aetna Insurance, Roanoke businesses, local governments and private citizens all stepped up to help get The Grove off the ground says Littlepage. Each bedroom has space for two mothers and their babies. Anderson Treatment Center will provide services for those women at The Grove battling a substance addiction.



## Member One steps up for TAP >

**Total Action for Progress** (TAP) hosted an event last month week at Indian Village Head Start Center to honor Roanoke-based **Member One**, a division of Virginia Credit Union, for sustained support of TAP programs that uplift families and children across the Roanoke Valley and Allegheny Highlands—including the donation that made a new Head Start bus possible.

In addition to the gift that funded the bus, Member One recently contributed \$50,000 to TAP's Domestic Violence Services. That investment made it possible for 11 families, including 8 with children, to escape dangerous situations. In total, 23 children gained access to secure housing, stability, and the opportunity to heal in a violence-free environment from this donation.



Tom Field



## Six-shooter at Shenandoah >

**RAMP** in-residence technology / life sciences entrepreneurial and startup accelerator held its newest Meet the Cohort affair at the Shenandoah Club on April 10 to a gathering of around 50 to introduce six inductees for the Spring 2025 term. The lineup included Roanoke and New River Valley-based teams **Helix Acoustics** (molecular diagnostic disease detection); **Huginn Sonography** (wearable bladder scanner); **Modern Reproduction** (pregnancy and IVF genetic testing options); **NebulaNeuro** (human neurotransmitter measuring); **Pod Farms** (modular hydroponics); **ClutchQMS** (quality management software). The 12-week program provides \$20,000 non-equity funding, mentoring and office space, and other extended membership perks. This cohort's "Demo Day" is scheduled for June 5, where the work will be presented.

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



## EDUCATIONAL FRONT



**Fincher**

**Dr. Louise “Lou” Fincher** was unanimously selected and has been named the twenty-third president—and the first president of Emory & Henry University, formerly Emory & Henry College. She has been serving as interim president since August 2024. She has over 30 years of experience in higher education.

## FINANCIAL FRONT

**Michelle Austin** has been named president and chief executive officer of the Bank of Botetourt by the board of directors, effective June 30, succeeding G. Lyn Hayth, III, who



**Austin**

will retire. Austin, who served as president since 2023, began her career at Bank of Botetourt as a college intern in 1991 before assuming a full-time role in 1993. She has a Bachelor of Business Administration from Roanoke College, an MBA from Troy University, and is a graduate of the Virginia Bankers Association School of Bank Management at the University of Virginia. She was also an adjunct professor of business and economics at Roanoke College.

**Bill Kirchner** has been hired as wealth partner for Ridge View Bank Private Client Solutions. He will oversee the Roanoke, Smith Mountain Lake, and



**Kirchner**

New River Valley markets. Kirchner brings more than 11 years of experience through various roles at BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager and leading provider of investment, advisory, and risk management solutions—including mutual fund management and serving as vice president and market leader. He'll focus on planning and growing client investments and also provide trust, estate settlement, and business investment services. Kirchner grew up in Northern Virginia and graduated from Northeastern University with a degree in finance.

**Kevin Triplett** has joined the Business Banking team at



**Triplett**

Freedom First Credit Union as Vice President Business Banking, working with businesses in Central Virginia to meet their financial needs. Triplett has almost two decades of experience in banking and financial services and focuses on helping small businesses find custom banking solutions. He will be based in Lynchburg and serve businesses in the city and surrounding counties.

## LEGAL FRONT

**Arthur Anderson** has joined the Roanoke office of the law firm Spilman Thomas & Battle (Spilman) as Counsel. Anderson has decades of experience and is considered one of Virginia's preeminent

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**Anderson**

municipal bond attorneys. At Spilman, he will continue to focus on municipal bonds while also providing invaluable mentorship and training to attorneys within this practice. In addition to his focus on bonds, Anderson will also serve clients in the areas of local government law, public finance, and tax law.

## MUNICIPAL FRONT



**Simon**

**Steve Simon** has been named Fire & EMS

Chief for the City of Salem. Simon was the executive director of Western Virginia Emergency Medical Services Council since 2015 and fire chief for Roanoke County prior to that. He has a bachelor's degree in Fire Service Administration from the University of Maryland and master's degree in executive Fire-EMS Leadership from Grand Canyon University; and is a graduate of Executive Fire Officer program at US Fire Administration, Homeland Security.

**Ken McFadyen** has been named County Administrator for Allegheny County. He served as director of economic development in Botetourt County



**McFadyen**

and has over 25 years of experience in local government administration and economic development, including positions in

town management in North Carolina, and executive director of Blue Ridge Crossroads Economic Development Authority (covering Grayson County, City of Galax, and Carroll County). McFadyen has a master's degree in public administration from Appalachian State University.

*Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field.*

## *Have a career announcement?*

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

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**A Suggestion On What We Could Cover?**

**Send your note to: [news@vbFRONT.com](mailto:news@vbFRONT.com)**

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*Medical device company to ramp up*

**Integer**, a Salem-based global medical contract developer and manufacturing of devices such as catheters, guidewires, stents, and pacemakers, plans to make a significant investment over the next five years to expand its operations. The company will lease an additional 13,000-square-foot manufacturing facility to increase production of catheter components for its growing cardio and vascular business segment. The project (utilizing a \$350,000 Commonwealth Opportunity Fund grant) is estimated to create 83 new jobs.

*Changing suits*

**Davidsons Clothing**, a part of Roanoke's retail landscape for 115 years, has announced the sale of the business to Lynchburg-based **R. Coffee Ltd.**, with the transition to be completed by September. The sale ensures continuity for Davidsons' Roanoke clientele and custom services. R. Coffee Ltd. is a central Virginia retailer for menswear, founded almost 40 years ago.

*Bye, Pete*

**Pete's Deli**—a longtime popular family style diner in Roanoke—announced its closing at the end of March. Old-time patrons remember Pete's at the previous Crossroads Mall before it moved to the adjacent strip mall at Town Square. A family member cited a lease

renewal issue as one reason for closing, and thanked customers for the past 26 years, as well as the six decades the small business operated.

*Savannah unhooked*

**Hooker Furnishings**—still based in Martinsville—announced at the end of March it is closing its operation in Savannah, GA. The company has distribution plants in Virginia, Georgia, and Vietnam, as well as other line manufacturing in North Carolina, Nevada, and California. Hooker cited container freight rates as a major factor for the decision; and said the Georgia exit would preliminarily save about \$1 million and approximately double net charges for fiscal 2026. Most sources indicate around 50 employees work at the Savannah plant.

*Another cow at beach*

**Blue Cow Ice Cream**—the artisan ice cream shop at the foot of Roanoke's Mill Mountain—is opening a second Virginia Beach location (The Traditions at Sherwood Lakes in the Pungo area) this summer which will join its other Virginia Beach shop at (Cape Henry Plaza off Shore Drive).

*From 2 Fords to 1*

**Duncan Ford Mazda** in Blacksburg has acquired the Shelor Motor Mile Ford dealership in Christiansburg for an undisclosed sale amount. Both owners said having another Ford dealership and direct competitor "in

its back door" was a "distraction" for customers, prompting the sale.

*Whatcha makin'*

**Make Roanoke**—a nonprofit craft arts and maker space—has opened in Roanoke at 128 Albemarle Ave. Sewing, knitting, woodworking, 3-D printing, and metal fabrication are among the skillsets. The operation is recruiting memberships.

*Patton up*

**Patton Logistics Group**, a U.S. integrated supply chain company, is expanding for the second time in four years in Pulaski County, investing \$10 million to build a new 100,000 square-foot warehouse and distribution facility. The project will create 25 new jobs.

*Wawa in WVA*

**Wawa** convenience/fuel store group announced it is expanding in western Virginia, including new locations in Roanoke and Salem. The investment in our region is projected to be \$7 million for each store; and around 50 jobs by 2026.

*Star ride/hike*

**Mill Mountain Trails**—a new project at Roanoke's "Star" attraction—is now under construction. Over \$350,000 has been raised by the Roanoke Parks Foundation for trail construction by North Carolina-based Black Diamond Designs (rather than volunteers) which

employs full-time trail crews utilizing professional grade equipment. The two-way (non-motorized) trail will include a distinct zone for three downhill-only mountain bike trails, among other new features.

*Angels over SWVA*

**Roanoke Blacksburg Innovation Alliance** and **Common Wealth Angles** (CWA) announced a relaunch of the private investment organization. CWA invests in high-growth startups alongside venture capital funds and other angel investment organizations. The relaunch addresses innovations in this region by providing early-stage, well-vetted investment opportunities in technology and other sectors with a bias for entrepreneurs hailing from Southwest Virginia.

*Labor stats*

Current Employment Statistics ("CES" or "the establishment survey"), nonfarm payroll employment in Virginia fell by 1,000 in February and Virginia's labor force participation rate decreased by 0.1 percentage points to 65.7 percent. According to BLS Local Area Unemployment Statistics ("LAUS," or "the household survey"), Virginia's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in February edged up by 0.1 percentage points to 3.1 percent, 1.0 percentage points below the national rate. Since February of 2024, more than 54,000 jobs have been added, an increase of more than 260,000 jobs since

January of 2022.

"Job growth in February was down a little at -1000 and unemployment remains low at 3.1%, a full point lower than the national rate," said Governor Glenn Youngkin. "Virginia's economy remains strong with more than \$100 billion in capital investment committed by companies growing in Virginia, 259,000 open jobs across the Commonwealth, and our ongoing workforce development initiatives connecting skilled workers to in-demand industries."

## *Salem Sox rebranding ahead at end of 2025 season*

The **Salem Red Sox** will have a new name, logo and new uniforms for the 2026 season - "a bold new identity designed to celebrate the unique spirit, culture, and energy of the Blue Ridge region," according to the Red Sox. Salem Sox general manager Allen Lawrence: "some of the most well-known teams in the country when

you think minor league baseball are the Trash Pandas, and the Rumble Ponies. In Richmond they have the Flying Squirrels. There are not too many teams [still] named after their major league affiliate and the ones that are - there's no life behind it." The official unveiling will happen this Fall, after the 2025 season ends says Lawrence, who adds that the local Single-A Carolina League team will remain a Boston Red Sox affiliate in 2026.

## *'Hot Now' deal*

Krispy Kreme stockholder JAB Holding plans to acquire Prosperity Life Group (the firm that brought Roanoke-based **Shenandoah Life** out of receivership in 2012) for \$3.1 billion, according to a filing with the State Corporation Commission.

## *RAMP announces Spring 2025 cohort*

The **Spring 2025 RAMP Cohort** is busy undergoing the 12 week "In Residence" program.

## *Have an announcement about your business?*

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

It's the region's signature technology and life science accelerator program. RAMP Director John Hagy says this cohort selection process was one of the most competitive ever. Out of 30 applicants 6 were chosen to complete the 12-week program, which ends with a "demo" day for potential investors. Three of the businesses are from Roanoke, 2 from Blacksburg and one from Pulaski.

Hagy says four of the startup founders are women. "It's one of the most enthusiastic groups across any part of my time in the startup world," says Hagy, who was recruited to Roanoke's high-tech business accelerator from the Research Triangle in North Carolina. They're all

incredibly intelligent, masters of their space and really excited to be in the program." Hagy says the cohort is diverse in their business models, products and types of financing they need. Two companies are spun off from the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute.

## *Speedway gets new branding and management*

New operators and a new name - **Franklin County Speedway** is now under the management of Timmy and Misty Meadows, who are leasing the track in Callaway, and has been rebranded as "Virginia's Asphalt Action Track." There's a new scoreboard, a new tower for race officials and

## Notable Transactions

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- Major convenience store chain **Wawa** is expanding to western Virginia, holding a groundbreaking in Lynchburg and announcing new stores coming to Roanoke and Salem
- Qentoris leased 5,000 sq-ft at 2903 Commerce Street in Blacksburg Industrial Park
- **Prov Exam** leased 1,600 sq-ft of retail space at North Market Village in Roanoke on Williamson Road

## COVENANT REAL ESTATE SERVICES

- **Danville-Pittsylvania Regional Industrial Authority** plans to purchase an additional 289 acres adjacent to Berry Hill, using a \$1.89 million loan from Virginia Small Business Financing Authority
- **Atomic Wings** leased 1,500 sq-ft at Blue Hills Village, 3621 Blue Hills Village Dr in Roanoke
- **Benera Corp** leased 10,092 sq-ft of industrial space at 3125 Salem Turnpike in Roanoke

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



VIPs, and some septic tank issues have been resolved in the track infield. Franklin County Speedway will run races every other week in order not to conflict with the South Boston track, where many of the same races and drivers also compete, says spokesperson Kenny Lang: "Our main division, the Limited Sportsman's Class, is running by the same rules as South Boston."

## *The trouble with tariffs*

If you lost money from a 401K or other retirement plan portfolio tied to the stock market fluctuations surrounding worries about the on-off-on again (to an extent) tariffs coming out of the White House, don't expect to see it all restored any time soon even if the Dow, the S+P and other public trading platforms rebound in the aftermath of the turmoil and mixed message surrounding tariffs placed on goods shipped to the U.S. from other countries.

So says **Jadrian Wooten**, a Professor of Economics at Virginia Tech: "you will not gain

back the same amount of money as quickly as you lost that money. You might have lost 10 percent in 5 days – you're not going to get that 10 percent back in the next 5 days even if the market is going up. It could take years, it could be really fast, [but] any time we see these sorts of downturns, its generally going to take at least a few months to get back to the level it was at before." Wooten's suggestion - don't look at your retirement portfolio for a while.

## *BoCo wants folks to get outside more*

**Botetourt County** has a new tool in its arsenal for directing people to its outdoor amenities – including those who live in the immediate area. Let's Go BoCo is an interactive map which shows the County's website visitors where to find best places to hike, fish, bike, and what they should bring along for their outdoor adventures. Victor Morales, Director of Botetourt County Parks and Recreation says the goal of this project is to encourage residents to visit these

local sites: "there's something you can do every single weekend with your family and your friends. I just want to encourage people to get outside and enjoy the beauty, the natural resources that exist here."

## *Food bank concerns over federal funding*

A supplemental shipment from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to **Feeding Southwest Virginia** that was paused in March left the Salem-based food bank's president and CEO wondering what the future might hold. USDA food shipments under TEFAP - the temporary emergency food assistance program - are the lifeblood for Feeding Southwest Virginia and the wide region it serves. Pamela Irvine is the President and CEO; she says that \$513,000 USDA shipment pause left her concerned about future cuts: "we depend upon that food, we have for years, its 31 percent of our food supply." Irvine said on a trip to Washington in March she met with members of Congress and their

staffers from Virginia, sharing concerns about the possible loss of federal funding and donated food inventory - in the current political climate.

## *VT's new business building*

**Virginia Tech** will be constructing a new business building, the second academic building in the Global Business and Analytics Complex, as part of the Pamplin College of Business's relocation and expansion. The 92,000-square-foot structure will connect to the western end of the Data and Decision Sciences Building's multi-story commons area and will provide spaces for experiential learning, industry collaboration, and interdisciplinary research. Featuring the Apex Center for Entrepreneurs, the Hokie Hospitality Lab, student learning accelerator, and cutting-edge collaboration zones, the building will serve as a dynamic hub for talent, innovation, and business education in an increasingly data-driven world.

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