



FALL 2022

Cover Photography courtesy of Maggie Jones

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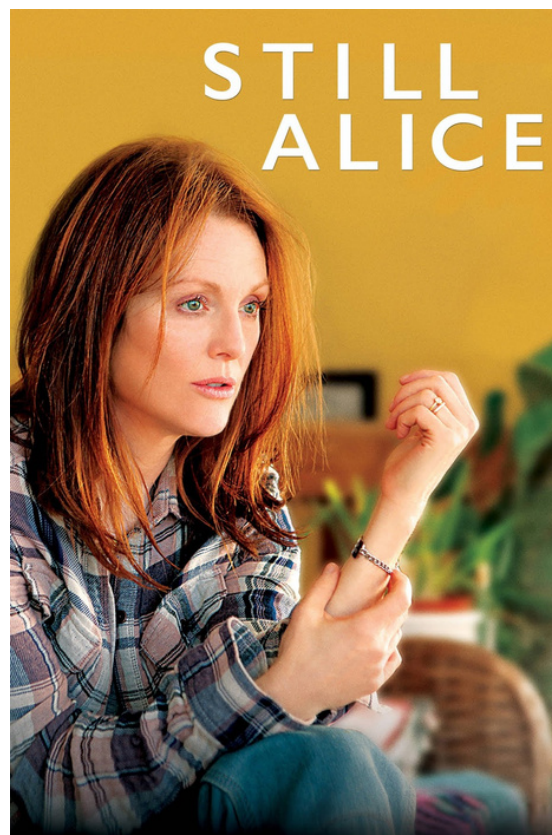
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REVIEW OF *STILL ALICE*

By Nils Skudra

This week I had the opportunity to watch *Still Alice*, a 2014 film written and directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland. *Still Alice* revolves around the experience of Alice Howland, a renowned linguistics professor whose diagnosis with early-onset Alzheimer's disease profoundly affects her relationship with her family. I previously saw this film following its release on DVD in 2015, and I felt that it offered a compelling look at the lives of individuals with Alzheimer's, the challenges they struggle with, and the ways in which they interrelate with family members. Given that there is often a sense of shame and stigma attached to Alzheimer's, I believed that this film merited a review since it delivers a message of hope and empowerment for Alzheimer's individuals and their families.

The film opens with Alice (Julianne Moore) celebrating her 50th birthday with her physician husband John (Alec Baldwin) and their three adult children, Anna (Kate Bosworth), Tom (Hunter Parrish), and Lydia (Kristen Stewart). Initially, Alice seemingly has every reason to enjoy this stage of her life. She is a distinguished linguistics professor at Columbia University while each of her children are leading successful careers: her eldest daughter Anna works as a lawyer and is expecting a child with her husband; Tom is in the process of completing his medical studies; and her youngest daughter Lydia is an aspiring actress in Los Angeles. Her relationship with Lydia is complicated by the fact that Alice expects her to go to college in the hope of having a backup plan for a career that will provide security, while Lydia is insistent on following her passion for the performing arts. Nonetheless, Alice believes that her life overall is full of brightness and fulfillment, with no looming obstacles to her happiness.



However, Alice gradually realizes that something is adversely affecting her cognitive ability, as she forgets a word while delivering a lecture and constantly uses a phone app to remember certain words. In addition, she becomes lost during her regular jog on the Columbia University campus, at which point she feels an overwhelming sense of anxiety. Furthermore, when her children come to visit for a family dinner, she asks Tom's girlfriend her name for a second time after having already been introduced to her several minutes earlier. She meets with her neurologist, Dr. Benjamin (Stephen Kunken), to determine what is wrong with her, as she fears that it could be a brain tumor. When he tells her to practice repeating a random name and address, she forgets the address upon trying the second time.

During Alice's follow-up session with Dr. Benjamin, he informs her that she is possibly exhibiting signs of early-onset Alzheimer's disease, an extremely rare occurrence for someone in her age range since most people with Alzheimer's are diagnosed around the age of 65 or older. Alice is shocked by this news since she didn't expect Alzheimer's to be the cause of her memory lapses and since she realizes how it will affect her entire life and career. When she shares this news with John, he is initially dismissive, stating that everyone has memory lapses as they get older. This prompted her to have a panicked outburst: "Damn it, why won't you take me seriously? Look, I KNOW what I'm feeling, and I... I feel, I feel like my brain is... is f***ing DYING and everything I know and everything I worked for, it's all going..." She then breaks down crying as John tries to comfort her.

When Alice and John go to her next session with Dr. Benjamin, he confirms the initial diagnosis, stating that it is a familial disease which Alice could pass on to her children and possibly her grandchildren. She shares this heartbreaking news with the family, stating that they can decide whether to take a genetic test. Anna and Tom agree to this, with Anna testing positive and Tom testing negative, but Lydia decides not to take the test.

As Alice's disease gradually progresses, she explores the option of moving into an assisted living facility for Alzheimer's patients but is appalled by the conditions in which its senior residents live. To retain her memories, she daydreams about her mother and sister, both of whom died in a car crash when she was 18, and writes personal questions to herself on her phone, such as "What is your oldest daughter's name," so that she can answer them each day. While Alice takes prescription medication to manage her Alzheimer's symptoms, she secretly hides sleeping pills in her room and records a video message to herself, giving instructions for overdosing on these sleeping pills when she will no longer remember the answers to these questions. Furthermore, the progression of her disease takes a toll on her work, as she asks students to remind her about the designated topics in the syllabus and loses her focus when delivering lectures. Consequently, she admits to the head of her department that she has contracted Alzheimer's, resulting in the loss of her job.

The progression of Alice's Alzheimer's also profoundly impacts her relationship with her family, as John becomes increasingly irritated and annoyed by her memory lapses, at one point telling her that they missed a dinner meeting with friends due to her being gone on her regular jog for over two hours. When he chastises Alice for not bringing her cell phone, she remarks, "I wish I had cancer. At least I wouldn't be ashamed. When you have cancer, they wear pink ribbons for you, they hold long marches for you. At least I wouldn't be a social – I forgot the word." In addition, when she reads Lydia's journal without realizing who it belongs to, Lydia is infuriated by her mother's apparent disregard for her privacy but later apologizes, stating that she was being insensitive. She then asks her mother what having Alzheimer's feels like, to which Alice responds:

"On my good days, I can, you know, almost pass for a normal person. But on my bad days, I feel like I can't find myself. I've always been so defined by my intellect, my language, my articulation, and now sometimes I can see the words hanging in front of me, and I can't reach them, and I don't know who I am, and I don't know what I'm going to lose next."

Alice is subsequently invited to speak at an Alzheimer's conference about her experiences. She delivers a moving speech, emphasizing how she struggles to live a normal life and wishes not to be seen as a victim:

“Who can take us seriously when we are so far from who we once were? Our strange behavior and fumbled sentences change other's perception of us and our perception of ourselves. We become ridiculous, incapable, comic. But this is not who we are, this is our disease. And like any disease it has a cause, it has a progression, and it could have a cure. My greatest wish is that my children, our children - the next generation - do not have to face what I am facing. But for the time being, I'm still alive. I know I'm alive. I have people I love dearly. I have things I want to do with my life. I rail against myself for not being able to remember things - but I still have moments in the day of pure happiness and joy. And please do not think that I am suffering. I am not suffering. I am struggling. Struggling to be part of things, to stay connected to whom I was once. So, 'live in the moment' I tell myself. It's really all I can do, live in the moment. And not beat myself up too much... and not beat myself up too much for mastering the art of losing. One thing I will try to hold onto though is the memory of speaking here today. It will go, I know it will. It may be gone by tomorrow. But it means so much to be talking here, today, like my old ambitious self who was so fascinated by communication.”

This speech provides powerful insights into Alice's personal growth and self-awareness as an Alzheimer's individual. While she struggles to remember the things that are most precious to her, she perseveres in her determination to stay connected to her family and her sense of identity, and she strives to make her life meaningful and productive during the time that she still retains her memory and her ability to speak. Furthermore, she does not want people to see her as a person to be stigmatized or pitied, but rather as someone making a passionate effort to live her life to the fullest while struggling with a severe illness. The speech strongly resonates with Alice's family members and with the audience, who deliver a standing ovation. As the film progresses, however, Alice's deterioration presents her family with difficult decisions that will shape their future lives, requiring major sacrifices to ensure that she receives the utmost love and care in her final years.

Still Alice provides a powerful and heartwarming narrative about the struggles of Alzheimer's individuals and the challenges that their family members face in caring for and interrelating with them. The film features stellar performances, with Julianne Moore superbly capturing Alice's determination, vulnerability, and resolve in the face of contending with a profoundly life-changing disease. Furthermore, the film delivers a strongly empathetic portrayal of the symptoms of Alzheimer's and its effects on interpersonal relationships. I can personally relate to this since one of my maternal great-aunts was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and could no longer recognize her children, and my neighbor's mother often wandered aimlessly down the block or needed to be reminded of who her son was. Admittedly, I felt irritated when this took place, but watching this film provides the viewer with an opportunity to develop empathy and compassion for Alzheimer's individuals. Finally, the film's message of hope and empowerment can give encouragement to Alzheimer's individuals to continue leading productive lives, with love and support from their families.

WOULD PRINCESS MARGARET HAVE MADE A BETTER QUEEN?

By Nils Skudra

Watching this year's Platinum Jubilee, commemorating 70 years of Queen Elizabeth II's reign, one cannot help but admire how Elizabeth has lived so long and has guided Great Britain through the passing of the 20th century into the 21st century. Throughout her reign, she has provided moral support on behalf of the British people and preserved the traditions of the British monarchy while simultaneously adapting its institutions to modern change. As a fan of *The Crown* miniseries, I have been very fascinated by the history of the British monarchy and the ways in which it has evolved over time. One royal figure whom I find particularly intriguing is Princess Margaret, Queen Elizabeth's younger sister, who earned renown as the first celebrity princess due to her glamorous demeanor, vivaciousness, and star quality. Since she and Elizabeth had fundamentally different personalities, I am deeply curious about what Princess Margaret would have brought to the monarchy if their roles had been reversed and whether she would have made a better queen. As a charismatic and energetic individual, Princess Margaret certainly had a significant degree of potential which she could have utilized as queen.



During their childhood, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret led a sheltered life with their parents, Prince Albert, the Duke of York, and Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, the Duchess of York. As second in line to the throne, their father did not have the expectation of becoming king, as he was deeply timid and struggled with a speech impediment. He took comfort in the company of his family, which he referred to affectionately as “we four,” and doted on both of his daughters, referring to Elizabeth as “my pride” and Margaret as “my joy.” Even at an early age, Elizabeth and Margaret displayed highly divergent character traits: While Elizabeth was reserved, serious and introverted, Margaret was energetic, extroverted and had a delightful sense of humor. There is some speculation that Margaret was Prince Albert’s favorite child, as he spoiled her and allowed her an unwarranted degree of freedom in practicing naughty behavior. Although she and Elizabeth sometimes quarreled, they were very close and did everything together, and before their father’s ascension to the throne it seemed that nothing would tear them apart.

However, the abdication of Prince Albert’s older brother Edward VIII brought about a fundamental change in the young princesses’ lives. Their father now became King George VI, a role that he had dreaded, which resulted in Princess Elizabeth’s elevation to heir apparent. Consequently, she was educated in British constitutional history and the responsibilities of being a monarch, while Princess Margaret was given lessons in French and playing the piano. This experience likely engendered some jealousy in Margaret, who later regretted that she had not had an opportunity for the royal education that her sister received. Nonetheless, being second in line also gave her more freedom than Elizabeth would have enjoyed since Margaret did not carry her sister’s responsibilities as future monarch, and she would utilize this freedom in becoming a celebrity princess over the following years.

As Elizabeth and Margaret reached adulthood, they participated in social occasions, including parties and the V-E Day celebrations that marked the end of the Second World War in Europe. Both princesses received widespread publicity, but Margaret constantly eclipsed her sister as the center of this media attention because of her glamor and vivaciousness. The newspapers constantly talked about a series of eligible suitors who were always seen in Margaret’s company. As their father’s health deteriorated, both princesses increasingly took on public functions, including speechmaking and appearing at ceremonial events. While Elizabeth brought her sense of formality and responsibility to her speeches, Margaret often injected her sense of humor, which endeared her to audiences. However, their father’s death proved devastating for Margaret, as she had been very close to him, and her sister’s ascension to the throne now left her with an uncertain role, which would often place Margaret in conflict with the royal establishment that she was a part of.

During the early years of her sister’s reign, Margaret became the center of a major scandal which, many believed, threatened the integrity of the monarchy. She had fallen in love with Group Captain Peter Townsend, a divorced man sixteen years her senior who served as palace equerry and was captured on camera brushing some fluff off his uniform following Elizabeth’s coronation. The newspapers quickly caught onto this incident and made a sensation of Margaret’s romance with Captain Townsend. While Elizabeth was personally supportive of her sister’s desire to marry the man she loved, she occupied a difficult position as head of the Church of England, which did not recognize divorce. Therefore she urged Margaret to wait two years until she reached the age of 25, when she would be able to legally marry without the required consent of the monarch. After these two years had passed, Margaret was allowed to meet with Townsend again, but she subsequently made a public announcement that she had decided not to marry him, putting her royal duty before love and her personal happiness.

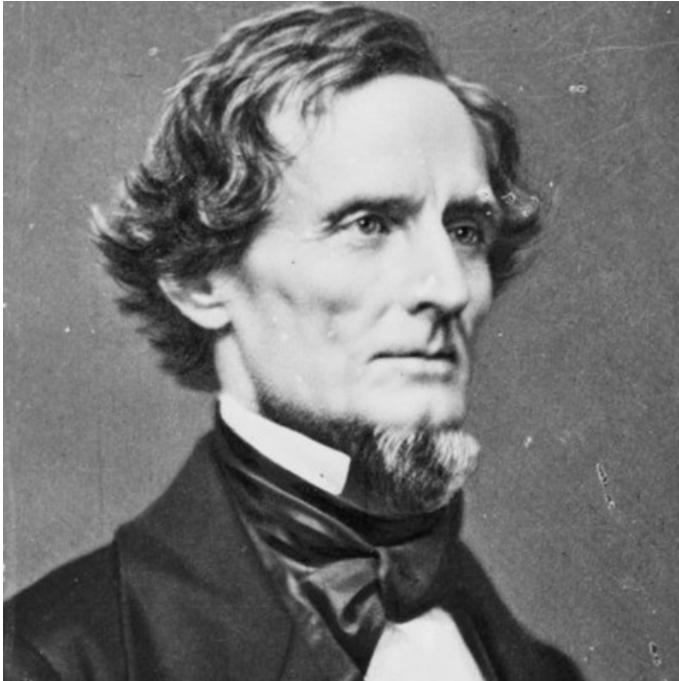
In the years following the Townsend scandal, Margaret became extremely sad and despondent, drinking excessively and having multiple affairs. She found a new love match in Antony Armstrong-Jones, a successful photographer who captured the emerging trends of the 1960s' fashion revolution. They were married in an elaborate ceremony that was broadcast around the world, but the queen's advisors were doubtful of Antony's prospects for being a good husband to Margaret, as he had led a bohemian lifestyle and was known to be bisexual. During the initial years of their marriage, Margaret and Tony seemed to have a fruitful and happy life together. They took on a highly publicized tour of the United States, during which they met a variety of Hollywood celebrities and dined with President Lyndon Johnson at the White House. However, over the subsequent years their marriage was characterized by emotional abuse and mutual infidelity. Tony resented royal protocol and being overshadowed by Margaret's publicity, and the media coverage of her affair with Roddy Llewellyn, a designer eighteen years her junior, finally resulted in a divorce between Margaret and Tony.

By the time of Margaret's divorce, the public perception of her had changed significantly. She was no longer seen as a celebrity princess but as an embarrassment to the monarchy, and her extravagant lifestyle had led many taxpayers to question the value of spending their tax money to fund the royal establishment. Nonetheless, Margaret continued to support her sister's reign and presided over several philanthropic organizations, but she would never again enjoy the celebrity status that she had once held. This role was subsequently filled by Princess Diana, who captured the hearts and minds of the British people through her kindness, compassion, and empathy.

What Princess Margaret would have brought to the role of monarch and whether she would have made a better queen is open to debate. As a highly extroverted, vivacious, and down-to-earth individual, she would have certainly brought much charisma and energy to the role, and she might have brought a level of connectivity with the British people much earlier than Diana did. However, Margaret was also known to have a narcissistic and entitled streak which made her difficult for members of the royal household staff to work with, and on several occasions, she alienated people with insulting remarks. In addition, she did not have the diplomatic skills and formality that Elizabeth possessed, and therefore it is likely that while Margaret would have thrived on being the center of attention, she would have dealt poorly with handling the responsibilities of leadership. Conversely, it is also possible that if Margaret had been queen, she would have grown into the role, thus combining her charisma and energy with a new maturity and sense of responsibility.

While Princess Margaret was largely denied the opportunity to shine and was forever overshadowed by her more celebrated older sister, she played an important role in shaping the monarchy's adaptation to the changes of the late 20th century. As the first British royal to get a divorce since Henry VIII, she set a precedent for subsequent members of the royal family to end their unhappy marriages, and she brought a significant level of energy and charm to her role as princess. Furthermore, although her relationship with Elizabeth was contentious at times, Margaret was always supportive of her sister as a bastion of moral support for the British people. Their closeness was strongly demonstrated by the queen's shedding of tears during Margaret's funeral, a notable occurrence since Elizabeth rarely displayed such emotions in public. While *The Crown* miniseries portrays them as having an often acrimonious and bitter sibling rivalry, historically their sisterly bond remained intact despite its many ups and downs. As Queen Elizabeth II enters her 70th year as monarch, it is vital that we remember Princess Margaret's contributions to the monarchy's continuity and evolution as a revered British institution.

DID JEFFERSON DAVIS HAVE ASPERGER'S SYNDROME?



By Nils Skudra

As a Civil War historian, I have always been fascinated by the various personalities on both sides that played a pivotal role in shaping the course of the conflict. One of the most enigmatic of these figures is Jefferson Davis, who served as the Confederacy's president throughout the duration of the war. Davis was imprisoned at Fortress Monroe for two years but ultimately never stood trial for treason and dedicated the remainder of his life to vindicating the Confederate cause. One question that has particularly intrigued me is whether Davis had Asperger's Syndrome due to a variety of personality traits that he brought to his role as the Confederacy's commander-in-chief. Among these were some positive traits, such as a hyper-intensive work ethic and attention to detail, but also a strong conviction in the validity of his own opinions, a hypersensitivity to criticism, and a refusal to admit to being wrong or in error. While these characteristics illustrated Davis' fervent devotion to the Confederacy and his task as its commander-in-chief, they proved highly detrimental to Davis' relationships with subordinates and other leading Confederate politicians. In the long term, these traits ultimately had a negative impact on his wartime leadership.

Jefferson Davis was born on June 3, 1808, in Fairview, Kentucky, some 100 miles from the birthplace of his future adversary, Abraham Lincoln. The son of an itinerant farmer who had served in the Revolutionary War, Davis moved with his family to St. Mary Parish, Louisiana and then Wilkinson County, Mississippi, where they earned their living growing cotton with the use of slave labor. Davis was thus raised in a slaveholding atmosphere where he was instilled with the ideology of white supremacy and the belief that slavery was the “natural condition” of African Americans, a people that, he would later argue in his political speeches, were unfit for self-government. Nonetheless, in his private life Davis earned a reputation as a humane slaveholder, developing a close bond with his personal slave Jim Pemberton, and he followed his older brother Joseph’s example of giving slaves considerable autonomy in having their own court system and training certain slaves, like Benjamin Montgomery, in specialized skills.

As he reached adulthood, Davis found a surrogate father in his brother Joseph, who arranged his appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1824. During his military studies there, Davis made close friendships with several cadets who would later serve under him as Confederate generals during the Civil War, including Albert Sidney Johnston and Leonidas Polk. Although he earned a series of demerits for insubordination, Davis managed to graduate 23rd in a class of 33, after which he served in the 1st Infantry Regiment in the Michigan Territory under the command of future president Zachary Taylor. He saw service in the Black Hawk War and was responsible for the escort of Chief Black Hawk to prison. While part of a victorious army, Davis showed much consideration and empathy for Black Hawk, shielding him from curiosity seekers, and the chief later recalled that the young officer treated him “with much kindness.”

Davis subsequently fell in love with Sarah Knox Taylor, the daughter of his commanding officer, and requested Colonel Taylor’s permission to marry her. The colonel initially refused since he was concerned about the difficulties his daughter would face as the wife of an Army officer on the frontier, and Davis therefore resigned his commission after consulting with his brother. He and Sarah married in Louisville, Kentucky on June 17, 1835, but their marriage tragically ended three months later when Sarah died of either malaria or yellow fever. Deeply consumed with grief, Davis spent the next several years in solitude, developing his plantation at Brierfield, studying government and history, and engaging in political discussions with his brother. In the 1840s, Davis began his political career as a member of Mississippi’s Democratic Party, serving as a presidential elector for the 1844 presidential election and winning a seat in Congress in 1845.

During this period, Davis met his future second wife, Varina Banks Howell, a woman seventeen years his junior and the granddaughter of New Jersey governor Richard Howell. Following their first meeting, Varina left a detailed observation about Davis’ personality traits:

“He impresses me as a remarkable kind of man, but of uncertain temper, and has a way of taking for granted that everybody agrees with him when he expresses an opinion, which offends me; yet he is most agreeable and has a peculiarly sweet voice and a winning manner of asserting himself. The fact is, he is the kind of person I should expect to rescue one from a mad dog at any risk, but to insist upon a stoical indifference to the fright afterward.”

Varina's reflection on Davis' opinionated nature offers some key insights into his possible Asperger's characteristics. Since individuals with Asperger's Syndrome tend to be very self-focused, they often believe firmly in the validity of their own opinions and consequently are not always considerate of other people's perspectives. This can sometimes have an alienating effect on interpersonal relationships that Asperger's individuals have with their peers, and in Davis' case this would be an enduring aspect of his relationships with subordinates during the Civil War. Nonetheless, despite her family's misgivings about Davis, he and Varina were finally married on February 26, 1845. Over the following years, their marriage would produce six children, only three of whom would live to adulthood.

Following the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846, Davis raised the Mississippi Rifles, a volunteer infantry regiment, and served under his former father-in-law. He earned distinction in the Battle of Monterey and the Battle of Buena Vista, where he received a serious foot wound that would leave him with a permanent limp. Returning home as a war hero, Davis resumed his political career and was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he became a prominent advocate of slavery's expansion, an issue that had been reopened by the acquisition of new western territories in the conflict. Davis fervently denounced Northern leaders' attempts to prohibit slavery's spread, arguing that because the territories were the "common property" of all U.S. citizens, slaveholders had a right to bring their slaves with them and that the Constitution did not give the federal government the power to curtail this right. Furthermore, while professing his devotion to the Union, Davis promoted John C. Calhoun's "compact theory," which maintained that the Union had been formed as a voluntary compact for the purpose of mutual defense and the general welfare of the nation, and that states therefore had a constitutional right to secede when their interests were no longer protected by the federal government.

Davis subsequently served as U.S. Secretary of War under President Franklin Pierce, earning a reputation for innovation and efficiency in modernizing the U.S. military. However, while Davis maintained a good working relationship with President Pierce, his strongly opinionated personality and aloof demeanor alienated a variety of colleagues, including General Winfield Scott, who referred to Davis as "a cheap Judas" who "would have betrayed Christ and the Apostles and the whole Christian church" for thirty pieces of silver. In addition, Sam Houston of Texas remarked that Davis was "as cold as a lizard and ambitious as Lucifer." Davis' interpersonal difficulties and emotional detachment could be interpreted as signs of Asperger's Syndrome since Asperger's individuals often manifest poor social skills in their interactions with other people, and their challenges with showing emotions can sometimes give the wrong impression of aloofness and unfriendliness. However, it should be noted that Davis' temperament was often affected by his frequent bouts with neuralgia, which left him bedridden for a time and partially blind in one eye, and his correspondence indicates that he was indeed a loving husband and father and had a strong loyalty to his personal friends, but this would later have an adverse influence on his performance as the Confederacy's commander-in-chief.

Following his service as Secretary of War, Davis resumed his Senate career, which was marked by his active involvement in the debates over slavery's expansion and the increasing sectional tension between North and South. While steadfastly defending slavery and states' rights, Davis expressed hope that the Union could be preserved through a compromise that was favorable to Southern interests. But following Mississippi's secession he resigned his Senate seat and returned to Brierfield in January 1861. When he received word that he had been elected provisional president of the Confederacy, Davis reluctantly accepted the position and traveled to Montgomery, Alabama for his inauguration. Over the next four years, Davis shouldered the task of leading the new Southern nation in wartime while having numerous clashes with colleagues at home, which would bring out some of his most unpleasant characteristics.

As Confederate president, Davis brought an extreme diligence, hyper-intensive work ethic and detail orientation to the functions of commander-in-chief, handling all types of official correspondence and paperwork. These traits are often displayed by Asperger's individuals since they bring a very singular focus to their job tasks, and for this reason many employers have found them to be highly valuable candidates. However, Davis took a micromanaging approach to these tasks, displaying an inability to delegate them to the staff of the various government departments. Historian William C. Davis has written that this had a detrimental effect on the efficiency of the Confederate bureaucracy. In addition, due to the demands of the various Southern states for military protection, Davis showed a determination to defend every inch of Confederate territory, with the result that Confederate troops and resources were stretched thin instead of being concentrated in strategically important areas. This could also be interpreted as illustrative of how detail orientation can adversely affect the judgment of Asperger's individuals since it may inhibit their ability to see the larger picture rather than focus on meeting every detail, although, conversely, it could be considered a result of the pressure that Davis faced from the individual states, despite his commitment to prioritizing the needs of the Confederate nation above of those of the states.

Davis' interpersonal skills and his opinionated nature also had a detrimental impact on his relationships with colleagues and the public perception of him as commander-in-chief. During social occasions at the Confederate White House, he often appeared aloof and haughty toward politicians who disagreed with him, and he took strong personal offense toward any criticism. While he enjoyed a close working relationship with Robert E. Lee, disagreements over strategy and seniority of rank resulted in a bitter acrimony between Davis and two of his other leading generals – Joseph E. Johnston and P.G.T. Beauregard – which affected their cooperation throughout the war. In addition, Davis' conviction in the validity of his views and his loyalty to personal friends led him to make poor strategic decisions, followed by his failure to acknowledge his mistakes. This could be seen as an example of how the self-focused mindset of Asperger's individuals affects their judgment due to their challenges with recognizing other people's perspectives, although it can also be interpreted as emblematic of Davis' strong ego and pride, which certainly played a decisive role in his determination to continue fighting even as the Confederacy crumbled all around him during the war's final months.

Following the war's conclusion, Davis was imprisoned at Fortress Monroe, where he awaited trial for treason. Although his wartime leadership had made Davis highly unpopular throughout the South, his incarceration brought an outpouring of public sympathy among white Southerners, who came to see Davis as suffering on their behalf. Ultimately, Davis was released after two years without standing trial, but he never asked for a pardon since he believed that accepting a pardon would have constituted an admission that the Confederate cause had been wrong. During the subsequent years, Davis authored *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, in which he sought to vindicate the Confederacy and the principles that it stood for, maintaining that states' rights, rather than slavery, had been the root cause of the war. Although he promoted reconciliation and loyalty to the Union in his final years, Davis would never apologize for the cause that he had defended, and in the aftermath of his death he became a martyr of the Lost Cause movement, which venerated the Confederacy and its leaders through the erection of monuments and memorials across the South and the circulation of history books articulating the Confederate narrative of the war in Southern school curriculums.

In summation, Jefferson Davis was a highly enigmatic and complex historical figure whose wartime leadership has largely been compared unfavorably with that of Abraham Lincoln. Considering whether Davis had Asperger's Syndrome, I believe that strong arguments can be made both for and against this possibility. He brought a variety of personality traits to his leadership which are often found among Asperger's individuals, although these traits can also be attributed to Davis' strong-willed pride and perfectionism. In many ways, these characteristics had a profound impact on Davis' leadership style, contributing to his self-confidence but also alienating subordinates and adversely affecting the Confederacy's long-term strategy. In studying Davis' career, both neurodiverse and neurotypical students of history can hopefully take away the lesson that while particular personality traits can be an asset in certain scenarios, they must be balanced with the necessary qualities of strong leadership in times of war.

"REVIEW OF *THE FATHER*"



By Nils Skudra

Last night, I had the opportunity to watch *The Father*, a powerful psychological drama directed by Florian Zeller. *The Father* revolves around the relationship between a middle-aged daughter and her elderly father who suffers from dementia. The film offers a unique perspective on the symptoms of dementia by taking place entirely through the father's eyes, providing the viewer with the chance to experience his conflicted perception of reality versus hallucination. Considering this, I felt that *The Father* merited a review since it brilliantly captures the struggles of senior citizens with dementia and their impact on family relationships.

The film opens with Anne (Olivia Colman) going to visit her father Anthony (Anthony Hopkins) in his London flat, where he is listening to opera music on his headphones. She informs him that his latest caregiver has refused to return to work since Anthony accused her of stealing his watch and was volatile towards her. He responds that he believes his watch was stolen since he cannot find it anywhere, but Anne suggests that he look under the bathtub since he normally hides his valuables there. Anthony ultimately finds the watch, but then reiterates that he hid his watch so that the caregiver would not steal it. This proves overwhelming for Anne, who states that she is moving to Paris with her new boyfriend and that she will have to move her father into a nursing home if he continues to refuse a caregiver.

It is clear from this exchange that Anthony is suffering from symptoms of dementia since he cannot remember important life events and where he leaves things around the flat. Nonetheless, he adamantly insists that he will not leave his home and accuses Anne of being "a rat leaving the ship" for moving to Paris, although she maintains that she will still visit him occasionally on the weekends. He asks where her sister Lucy is, prompting a frustrated Anne to reply, "You're always asking about Lucy! She's not here, but I'm the one who's taking care of you!" She then leaves to go to the market, leaving Anthony alone in the flat.

When Anthony emerges from his room the next day, he discovers Paul (Mark Gatiss), a man whom he doesn't recognize, sitting in the living room. He belligerently asks, "Who are you? What are you doing in my flat?" Paul replies that he is Anne's husband and that this is their home, which sows confusion for both Anthony and the audience since we are initially led to believe that the story is taking place in his flat. In addition, Anne had previously told her father that she'd been divorced, which is bewildering since Paul claims to be her husband. Furthermore, he tells Anthony that Anne is on her way back from the market, but when the door opens, a different woman (Olivia Williams) enters the flat. Presumably, this is Anne's sister Lucy, but Anthony does not recognize her and asks where Anne is, to which she replies, "What do you mean? I'm right here."

We later see Anne reappear in her original manifestation with a new caregiver, Laura (Imogen Poots), to whom Anthony quickly takes a liking since she bears a strong resemblance to Lucy. He regales her with stories of his career as a professional tap dancer, but then displays a cruel streak when he tells her that she shares Lucy's tendency of "laughing inanely." In addition, he launches into a tirade accusing Anne of trying to convince him that he cannot live on his own so that she can move him into a nursing home and inherit his flat, stating that he will outlive her, and then concludes:

"I don't need any help from anyone. And I'm not going to leave my flat. All I want is for everyone to f*** off. Having said that... it's been a great pleasure. Au revoir. Toodle-oo."

Anne is deeply shaken by her father's malicious words, and it reinforces her doubts about the prospects of keeping him in her home with professional assistance. When Paul returns to the flat, he reappears as a different man (Rufus Sewell), which further contributes to Anthony's uncertainty about what is reality and what he is imagining. Anne confides in Paul that when she came home earlier, her father did not recognize her, to which Paul replies that they must place Anthony in a nursing home since it is the best solution. Anthony overhears their conversation and joins them for dinner, but their time at the dining table is filled with significant tension since Anne is torn between a sense of responsibility for her father and her feelings of being overwhelmed with having to care for him. Meanwhile, Paul is extremely irritated by Anthony's behavior, which he blames for Anne's cancellation of a holiday that they had planned together.

As Anthony's dementia progresses, his relationship with his family further deteriorates, as Paul confronts him and asks how long he will stay in the flat and continue to annoy everyone. This sequence repeats itself in Anthony's interactions with the different versions of Paul, and on the second occasion, Paul slaps him in frustration, prompting Anthony to break down crying. In addition, he displays a belligerent attitude toward Laura as she tries to care for him; when she brings him his medication, he asks her, "Are you a nun?", and when she replies "No," he remarks, "Then why are you speaking to me as if I'm retarded?" During this exchange, Laura mentions the accident that Lucy died in, which triggers Anthony's memory of finding his daughter in a hospital bed with blood on her face. The scene finally transitions to a bedroom in a nursing home, where Anthony is overwhelmed by his inability to understand his dementia and breaks down, stating:

"I feel as if I'm losing all my leaves. The branches and the wind and the rain. I don't know what's happening anymore. Do you know what's happening? All this business about the flat. I... I have nowhere to put my head down anymore. But I know my watch is on my wrist, that I do know. For the journey. If not, I... Don't know if I'll... be ready to, uh... To... To..."

He is then comforted by the nurse, who appeared earlier as both Anne and Laura, and she assures him that they will go for a walk in the park, promising that everything will be all right as the scene concludes.

The Father is a beautifully crafted and moving portrayal of how dementia affects the mindset of elderly individuals and their perception of reality. In many ways, the viewer can find similarities between this film and *A Beautiful Mind*, which captures the renowned mathematician John Nash's struggle with schizophrenia, manifested in hallucinations of individuals who were entirely nonexistent. Anthony Hopkins delivers a superb Oscar-winning performance in the title role, brilliantly conveying the father's various character nuances, including his confusion and his sense of denial. Olivia Colman also delivers a moving performance as Anne, capturing her feelings of responsibility and love, coupled with the overwhelming anxiety of trying to find the best care for her father in his fragile condition. Furthermore, Zeller's filmmaking utilizes an innovative technique in capturing the symptoms of dementia by having the audience observe them firsthand through Anthony's perspective, complicating their perception of reality versus imagination and thus enabling them to develop empathy for Anthony's character.

Since many families have elderly relatives who struggle with dementia, *The Father* is a highly relevant film that strongly resonates with a wide range of viewers. Through its portrayal of the symptoms of dementia and its impact on family relationships, the film provides the audience with an opportunity to develop compassion and empathy for individuals with dementia, and hopefully it can give viewers the emotional strength to ensure that their relatives receive the best care while continuing to have the love and support of their families.

"GIMMIE SHELTER"

(like the Rolling Stones said)

By Renee Skudra

In Greensboro, I claim this place as my own: a huge vacant grassy lot to the right of a Presbyterian church which posts a weekly message on a wooden signpost. Today's is, "I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken." Psalms 16:8, NIV. This is one of my favorite biblical verses, especially right now when I often feel (as the song says) that I am "standing on shaky ground". On the perimeter of the field are a rich assortment of trees, even some longleaf pine and delicate purple flowers whose name I do not know, mixed in amongst a canopy of brown and burnished leaves. Someone has placed an old wood Adirondack chair near an edge of the field. Although empty, it is still redolent with meaning and purpose, and I wonder for a moment who has sat in it and whether its comfort and unexpected appearance were appreciated. I have a photo of it, leaning into a sudden wind, beset with shadows thrown into relief by a sudden emergence of sun. The grain of the wood is strongly defined as though it is bent on making a statement. I take a cursory glance around to make sure that no snakes are anywhere in evidence, especially the copperheads who with one good bite can potentially send you to Your Maker, and place an old torn blanket near a bush heavy with red berries, so I can look up and glimpse their beauty at any time. With me I have two books: "The Last Ballad" by North Carolina native Wiley Cash and "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" by Rebecca Skloot. I am reading them conjointly, hoping to glean some wisdom from each and thinking there might be stories in them that I can use to create word pictures of my own.

This past year the coronavirus pandemic has taken so much of our lives, and I have found it imperative to find a small natural room where I can still thrive, nature rising up around me. Sheltering in my home doesn't fulfill the definition of sanctuary for me – the cell phones, computers, and instruments of technology are a constant intrusion on a writer's creative process and interfere with insistent demands that calls and emails must be attended to. I have the sense oftentimes that I cannot breathe in my own home where there are constant events requiring attention and things keep unaccountably breaking. Although my family and I enjoyed watching Stephen Spielberg's "War of the Worlds", the film is now stuck annoyingly in the DVD player and we cannot get it out. The refrigerator is humming loudly and the metal netting on a screen door has come loose. Although I have made my peace living with a resident male spirit who occasionally softly calls out my name and several times I have actually seen in profile going by, I walk into the den and see he has once again thrown the "Black's Law Dictionary" from its regular place on the Harper's Ferry oak desk into the middle of the room's carpeted floor. I think in some way this is a passive-aggressive attack on lawyers of whose tribe I once belonged but that it happens with regularity no longer amuses me.

The sanctuary that my soul craves is lacking in the place where we inhabit, and I have a sense that the house itself is registering a protest, although I know not whom against. In the middle of the night, I am suddenly awakened by the blaring “you got mail!” words from my desktop computer which has managed to turn itself on even though I had turned it off before going to bed. The pandemic is thus not only an event in the outside world, plying us with its not completely understood terrors and remonstrations, but something that with its consequences inheres in the environment that I call home. In league with my habitat, I am breaking down and the stories which I want to write withhold themselves although still clamoring for their expression.

I have found a place, however, which provides some solace and consolation where nature is abundant, admittedly a bit desolate and off the beaten path enough that others care not to find some refuge in. I revel in the fact that for the moment it is mine alone. It is here in the church’s adjoining field that I do my best thinking, making, and re-making of stories that I begin to limb out and fill in where no ringing phone can interrupt me. On a nearby tree someone has carved out the words “I still love you” and my heart leaps to the recognition that these words have import in my own life. I return to memories of my own partner, a Vietnam nurse medic veteran, who often told me “there are three of us in this relationship: you, me and Vietnam” and how he died of a stroke on an afternoon where earlier in the day we had plotted a move to my native Canada where I would write a novel about bravery and new beginnings. I remember how he almost always had a book in his hand and read constantly with an urgency I did not then understand, as if he knew his time was coming and he had to get in all the reading that he could. All the easy laughter between us, how simple it was to be silent together hangs in the air with its own density of thought, pre-pandemic without masks or social distancing protocols.

As I traverse the grass, near where some of yesterday’s rain has pooled and blue dragonflies are now negotiating, I recall my promise that I would write an ode to him and our shared life. Out of nowhere an Irish proverb comes into my mind: “You will never plough a field if you only turn it over in your mind.” A red-tailed hawk is hovering overhead intent on finding some prey and watching it. I make a resolution to pen that story now. The isolating constraints of the pandemic have brought out the sharp contours of my solitude, but it is here in the natural environment that my heart yearns to ensure that I put ink to paper and thereby encapsulate stories, of loss, of gain, of hope, of love so that they are always memorialized and may be of assistance to someone out there needing that, particularly in a time like now which so harshly takes from us with no concern for pleas or prayers.

Each of us has a story and this is mine: his name was Bill Waters. We spent 12 years together and he helped me raise my special-needs son with reason, rhyme, and humor. The story expands voluminously to fit the banks of my memories but of this I am sure: he provided uncompromised moorings for someone invariably lost in an emotional storm at sea. One also needs to be grateful for any gift because in the lack of it do you find a later graveyard of regrets. I think of Bill, looking at the conceit now made a part of this fir tree, and am grateful that they have pushed me into the unforgiving territory of finding necessary words, of doing what a writer must do which is simply to write and do so unabashedly. It is time for the full-court press and taking that ball where it is destined to go, without chatter or complaints. My therapist’s words come to me: in all adversity, there is a silver lining. The pandemic has impressed upon me the necessity of finding a shelter for my soul where it can do what needs to be done, a place where impermeability and determination meet. In the midst of nature, in a field strewn with flowers, and even with some debris, I remember that I am part of the unbroken circle of nature, as the hymn that recites this goes in my head.

After Bill's passing, I didn't write because all that was left in me was the impulse to grieve and uncover a way to reconstitute a life for my still ebullient boy and myself. I do not credit myself as being particularly insightful, I have waged a lot of battles and lost unnumbered wars – but I do know this: the value of having something that serves as, if you will, a room of one's own, a sanctuary which can buoy one up against the pestilences and vagaries of time. Here in Greensboro, in this errant field of unmowed grass, and red-toned dirt, reclining on a weather-beaten but still-standing chair, I am opening the gates behind which the words hide, bucking and gesticulating wildly. The fear is that I'll be thrown from the saddle, not able to complete even an 8-second ride which could net me the gold. The word bronco is ready to cast me heatedly to the ground. But the pandemic rears up: it is a story maker, a story promoter and out here, under a darkening sky and the sounds of the mourning doves, the grim arithmetic of the viral scourge never far from my mind, I am realizing that the words of the Rolling Stones – “gimme shelter” – are not merely filler, decorative stuff.

Each of us needs a shelter, real or symbolic, in which to begin your work and rage against the indignities of a so-often indifferent world. It took the pandemic, in a great stroke of irony, to make the stories once again bubble up in me, I who am surely a part of that fierce and ceaseless cauldron, with my own personal and unfinished anguish. The fact that I have a sanctuary, even for a little while, on a patch of undistinguished earth, in a city somewhere in the Southeast, emboldens me to put to those stories out in the world where they can percolate and be a blessing to anyone who might run across them in their literary travels. As the character Rafina says in the Irish film, “Sing Street”, “You can't do anything by half.” Having a shelter backs my resolve and as the rain begins to fall, I still sit here, beginning to write.

WHY EVERYBODY NEEDS TO GO TO CAFÉ MADELEINE, BIEN SUR



*By Renee
Skudra*

On a rainy and severely overcast Sunday on the way towards a first-time trip to New Bern, NC, I could not stop thinking about a segment I saw on “NC Weekend” about a French Bakery in Farmville. The reviewer had spoken ecstatically about its absolutely “divine” food. On a stretch of highway nearing that city, I suddenly decided I simply had to go there and sample such unbeatable fare. I would not be dissuaded by any argument about the shortness of time or the inordinately high price of gas by the rest of our crew. Convincing our driver to take a detour took some doing, but I threw all the theatrics and drama I could muster into the mix, including a bribe and a thinly veiled threat (“I won’t be making you that Indian curry you love so much anytime soon”!) Minutes later, quietly reveling in the fact that I had gotten my way (for once), we arrived at a pretty and unpretentious brick front in a historic neighborhood with the words “Café Madeleine” emblazoned decorously across its front window.

Sometimes one has the good fortune of being “right as rain” about something and stopping by this place was a case in chief -- I knew it was going to be marvelous from the get-go. Once we were seated, the owner, Coleen Starling, in a great show of personal touch, came over and explained the menu at length as well as good information about herself. An admittedly self-taught baker “with delusions of grandeur”, she opened the business almost three years ago with the intention of specializing in French pastries and other culinary items with a French accent. After visiting Farmville and falling in love with a Victorian home on its outskirts, she and her husband made the move from Raleigh with the hope of bringing big-city food to a small, tranquil town and throwing that town’s profile into a greater gastronomic relief. The business eventually found a home opposite the street from the Piggly Wiggly Market which held court over the whole neighborhood but didn’t boast a single French pastry in its store.

The Café's menu looked plenary and pleasing to our eyes – sandwich-based lunches, salads, fruit tarts, macarons, espresso drinks, international wines replete with the option of ordering custom cakes if your mood required that. Since we arrived five minutes before closing, the vast majority of desserts were long since gone but we were regaled by the idea of a still-purchasable delight: a croissant/French Toast mixed berry compote comprised of blueberries, raspberries, blackberries and strawberries in a decadent Grand Marnier filled sauce, all topped by mountains of house-made whipped cream. Coleen assured us that she would be making this herself which somehow made the idea of consuming the creation all the more enchanting. When all three orders arrived on the table, I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry – I was overcome by the sheer visual beauty of it and spent the first couple of minutes photographing them with my camera. Whether this was a lunch item or more particularly a dessert, I do not know but I can say with unabashed enthusiasm that this might have been the best sweet thing I have eaten in my California foodie life.

At times like this, sitting in a French cafe, my mind returns to the French I heard spoken in my home by my Paris-raised mother. "Un bon repas adoucit l'esprit et regenere le corps" (a good meal softens the mind and regenerates the body, nourishing the soul). This croissant/French toast was really too good to be true. When I returned to Greensboro, I ran across the saying in a food magazine: "desserts are the sweet threads of the warp and weft of our lives" by someone named Nicolette M. Dumke. I had never heard of her, but she sure got that right! I can say without reservation that EVERYBODY needs to go to this darling little place in Farmville where everything is scratch-made and clearly prepared with bounteous shots of love. Coleen herself is a doll – chatty and warm, she contributed so much to our consumption of a delicious meal in a sweet and unprepossessing setting. Learn a lesson from my family though – don't wait until the last minute to drop by. Café Madeleine is open Thursday–Saturday from 8:00 am – 3 p.m. and on Sunday from 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. Be at the ready to buy anything there since everything is simply so yummy, and please (if you will) spread the word about this wonderful establishment in Farmville which delivers some French delight in every bite.



THE DOGS OF LINDLEY PARK

By Renee Skudra

They are everywhere, the dogs of Lindley Park, populating our beautiful neighborhood with their myriad breeds, conventional or unconventional behaviors, different gaits (some trotting, others bounding forward, ready to leap into any possible fray), and variegated vocalizations. Some, like the pair of gorgeously groomed white and black standard poodles walking regally down Walker Avenue, their noses high up in the air with possible conceit, their owner clearly aware of the reverent effect they produce in the onlookers. He even seems to square his shoulders a bit and proudly meet their curious gaze. One day as I'm driving down the street I suddenly spot a medium-sized dog, a candidate for rising star in a possible dog world who I think might be a flat-coated black retriever. As I'm trying to ascertain the certainty of the breed for my own satisfaction, my son suddenly yells, "Mom, WATCH THE ROAD!!" Just blocks earlier I swear that I spotted a Chinese crested and a Cavalier King's Spaniel out of the corner of my eye on Elam Avenue and just barely missed hitting a bowed over tree.

As I navigate around Lindley Park, I am regaled and delighted by all the different dog folks stirring about: some happily trotting along, others rambunctious, maybe even oppositional, pulling at a leash or trying to engage a beleaguered cat or wary squirrel. I love them all for their canine-ity (like humanity) and the goodness and generosity they inspire in us humans who often require a jolt of humor to help us let go of our own self-absorption and stress. The reality is that dogs do funny things in our little neck of the city such as leaping up and grabbing that piece of pizza from Sticks and Stones that was originally destined for your mouth or tearing Duke Energy utility bills into smithereens (my dog, here) without the slightest bit of regret. We NEED that humor now especially in a world fraught with chaos and uncertainty with so many things missing – baby diapers to say the least ...

The satirist Jonathan Swift once wrote "Every dog must have his day." I believe that anyone who has ever owned a dog knows the implicit truth of this statement. In my pre-North Carolina life, the first dog I ever owned – a Bichon Frise named Beauregard, after a Confederate general by my Civil War historian son – taught me a new meaning of relationship, one where a form of unconditional love rose between a non-human creature and myself. Nothing was too good for that dog! – twice-monthly grooming appointments at the priciest spa, expensive food, treats and outfits, velveteen throws to lie upon. I didn't even do these kinds of things for myself! When Beauregard died of renal failure/diabetes at age 11, the grief my family felt eviscerated us. The pain was so immense, it felt like some hugely physical weight was sitting on our chests and leaning in. I remember reading Psalm 34:18 in the Old Testament: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" and weeping as I read it. I turned to these words for solace, irrevocably changed by the death of my beloved pet.

For two weeks I barely ate (yogurt and peanut butter sandwiches or worse) and lost at least ten pounds. One night I awoke and saw Beauregard sitting on the end of my bed on his favorite log cabin quilt with a slight smile on his face. I am still not sure if this was his ghostly apparition or a product of my anguished imagination. I do know that grief can play tricks and one can never underestimate its power. I do know that I often felt him riding with me in my car or hanging out by my son's piano bench as he so often did. My gentle and funny boy was in my head and embedded firmly in my heart which would forever skip a beat when someone's Bichon Frise might amble by. Remembrances of how huge a part Beauregard played in our lives, now memories of things past.

We also know the benefits of having a dog. I know it more than ever as we traverse our lives, at times with equanimity, at others with trepidation, our second Bichon Frise in tow. The truth is that he is almost always with us, he is undeniably an extension of ourselves. The joy we derive from Jackson is bigger than that in itself – it extends to delighting in watching others having a similar relationship with their beloved pets and rejoicing in that not-always intelligible bond. I get a kick out of watching my neighbors walking their dogs, some struggling like myself to keep him on a leash when truth be told, as a rather brusque neighbor said to me, “he’s walking you – where’s the control?”

When people ask me “why do you have a dog?” I sometimes fall back on the American Heart Association's chapter and verse that dog owners are 54% more likely to get the recommended amount of exercise than their non-dog owning counterparts. In their company our stress levels decrease, and they do other good things too like fostering social situations. I conveniently forget all the blankets that Jackson has torn and the furniture he thought was meant to be a part of his diet, chairs that are broken from his chewing and books that no longer sport dustjackets in untattered form. We already know how chatty North Carolinians are, but factor in the presence of a dog, and even the most reticent of individuals will make an approach and ask you a question about your fur baby. Still, I focus on the good things about dog ownership. A gentleman named Roger Caras once remarked, “If you don't own a dog, at least one, there is not necessarily anything wrong with you, but there may be something wrong with your life.” The truth is no one needs a justification for having a dog because it may come down to simply this: the pleasures of creature comfort and being critically important to another living being. We can always buy another blank or a chair but who could possibly replace this one, this precious dog? Perish that thought ...

I will go so far as to say that I prefer the company of people who own dogs. Once, when I still lived in the San Francisco Bay Area (and you could actually afford to do so), a kindly friend offered to introduce me to “a good-looking and successful single man” who however I was told “hated dogs (and cats too)”. On that basis alone I told her, “Not interested, what kind of person hates animals anyway?” I thought about this today as my son and I, with our Bichon Frise, Jackson in tow, visited the Farmer's Market in (or near) Lindley Park and recalled how many folks came over to meet our boy who enthusiastically returned their interest and affection. No one asked if he had pedigrees although several inquired as to where they could buy a dog like our pup.

Admittedly dogs are natural conversation starters, and the real treat of this morning was looking at all the dogs who were onboard, just clearly enjoying their lives and the unrequited attention of numerous others. We were thrilled to meet a beautiful 4-month-old Sheepadoodle named Grady and his owner Beth. An Australian cattle dog/German shorthair pointer mix named Quinn in company with “T” (full of good info about the breed) merited several photos and a bevy of compliments. So happy to cross paths with a Bernadoodle named Babka, 1 ½ years old and born on December 25th, hanging out with his better half, a Cavachon named Penny, both owned by Brooks. Avery, a 5-month-old part Burmese Mountain Dog, clearly had claimed the heart of John, its owner and a wee bit of ours as well. Top marks for every dog at the market, wishing that we had had the chance to interact in an inter-species embrace of gallantry and goodness.

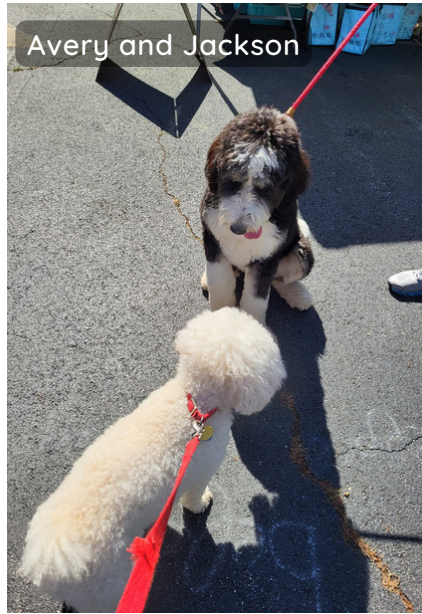
Every now and then I run into someone who asks me about my dog’s bloodlines as if any dog really needs to be AKA-enhanced. Since he’s a rescue, I could only guess if his dad was a purebred or his mom fell a bit short on the standards of the breed. For all I know, Jackson’s mommy could have been “a woman of the night” in doggy form. Some of these dogs out here, truth be told, have more degrees than me (and I have 2 ½). Louis Sabin once remarked “No matter how little money and how few possessions you own, having a dog makes you rich.” I don’t have big money, but I do have a dog that makes me feel infinitely well-heeled (intentional pun) – when I come home, he’s barking up a storm and jumping up and down and flooding me with doggy kisses. In recent memory, I can’t remember when any man in my life was THAT happy to see me. But there’s always hope, right, that I can find a guy that loves me as much as my Bichon Frise. And Jackson can clearly teach him those behaviors that incontrovertibly impress ...

I want all my Lindley Park neighbors to know that I love ALL your dogs, whether they are mutts or have the canine bloodline equivalents of a Secretariat or Man of War, whether they are Chihuahuas or Great Danes. I wish I could photograph all of them so each can enjoy some measure of posterity. Beyond a doubt, owning a dog has made my own son a better man and has expanded my emotional repertoire of what it means to love without the expectation of return. “Be the person your dog thinks you are”, a guy named C.J. Frick reputedly said. That means always sharing what you have and caring about others. If Jackson knocks over a quart of milk on the brand-new rug from Macy’s, I take a breath and say “pick your battles” and forego expressing any frustration. I say my mantra quietly to myself: “always choose love.” In my opinion, my dog cannot do any wrong. When I sing him the song my Polish/Canadian dad always sang to me as a child – “How much is that doggy in the window, the one with the waggly tail, how much is that doggy in the window? / I do hope that he is for sale”), Jackson listens intently and then moves closer for a hug.

There may be some point where that narrative changes and our Bichon Frise realistically needs a time-out, but for now our destinies are inextricably stitched together. He makes me happy, and I am so grateful for his presence in our lives. Once you really look, you cannot help but notice the unexpectedly large abundance of dogs in Lindley Park, all seemingly bent on bringing out the best in their peoples’ lives, simply sharing their lives with alacrity, knit in a self-same web of closeness and dependency as the one we have with our dog. We all shine for that effort and are grateful for all the dog-day afternoons we can get. Belly rubs to all you canine rock stars out there—I think I can say this with confidence: you are each inestimably loved.



Babka and Jackson



Avery and Jackson



Penny



Babka and Penny



Jackson and Grady

Photography courtesy of Renee Skudra

MY POSITIVE SELF

*By Maggie
Jones*

When I get down on myself and feel the world is mad at me, when I also need to push up and try my best. I don't feel that was enough to get myself out of a dark hole that was filled up with grief and upsetting times.

I felt the world was on my shoulders weighing me down and no one seemed to understand. Inside me was something that I wanted to give to the world that I knew needed me the most. A world that is my home, Planet Earth. I know and truly believed the power of good was inside, wanting and waiting to come out of me. My gifts of talent, and my gifts that offer help to people and give from my heart and mind and spirit.

I feel and always believed God gave me the wings of courage to help and to give it my all to do what is the next right thing when it sometimes seems all hope is lost. You get back up and try to keep persistent and never give up what you know deep inside is right. What you were taught by your parents is a gift of knowledge to you alongside love is a gift of wisdom. You have the gift of strength when it seems impossible but it isn't, you give all you got with all your might to help a lot of people.

I can say to you that my positive self is doing rightful things and has true God given potential to anything good you put and set your mind to.

I am autistic, and I can achieve anything like everyone I know and don't know. We are all made of differences that make us unique and gifted and beautiful inside and outside. We are human, and it's okay to make a mistake. We would not be human if we didn't make a single mistake. I know in my belief it was made by God that suffered, died, and arose again on the third day, so all men can make a mistake and learn from it, and let it go. Knowing that God is merciful all around. He forgives all that you do wrong but tries to learn from it and do better.

If my positive self can do it, I know I can with a little help. It is good to ask for help so you know for the next time. If you don't know how to do things, asking for help is a must to better understand what you're doing.

I feel I'm giving it my all when I do my best everyday. I can celebrate what I have accomplished over the past two years of the covid-19 pandemic and its different strains. It was so hard when I wasn't going outside, and seeing people that I know everyday. And so many people passed away from covid -19, and it had a toll on me, like many people did, from nurses, doctors, first responders, to front line workers. I thought I was having it hard myself, when I found out I was not the only one in a dark hole. People were getting sick really bad, and dying. I watched the horror on the nurses' and doctors' faces and imagined how they suffered mentally. When they see a person that passed away on a hospital bed from covid-19 or dying, it really hits me hard. Because I feel I need to know what is the right and responsible way at the time, to keep myself safe and healthy. And my family is safe as well. And everyone around me too. Because I care.

Things that you want to achieve in life are very hard. But you have to believe and not give in to your fear and say I can do this. Think of all who achieved it. It was hard, but they did it anyway because it is the right thing to do. Think of how man got to the moon then to Mars with a rover.

Think of paintings painted by artists who went beyond their imagination , And look at people who became teachers, doctors, nurses and so many things to be said. We can't give up on our fears because we are afraid of making a mistake or something happening not our way at first. We keep going knowing in our hearts it is the right thing to do. And don't just say I can't, because it's hard. It's time for you to do with the God given potential that you have to use part of it is your brain and common sense. I know in my heart God listens with his merciful heart like I said before.

And if an autistic person like me can do it and a person with disabilities can do this so can everyone. I feel like I can do more and help people. I care about how I treat other people, and I also think that I can make a difference in someone's life because I know I have a loving caring heart.

I believe my positive self can be happy with being herself and trying to do what I know is right, and I know in my heart, we can change our negativity about other people and things turn around for the better. This is how I feel about things the way they are in a positive way. I will not turn back and keep going and trying and doing better to succeed in my life with autism. I will do my best and move forward with my gift to the world that sits around me. Filled with life and happiness with a hug waiting for me at the front door of my house from my mom. And when I need help I can ask for help from a friend or family member.

Having autism isn't terrible to have for me. I just work around it with the best of my abilities and hard work.

THE SECOND MOTHER

By Renee Skudra

All of us are originally blessed with two birth parents and if we are lucky one or two of those are on board for at least some portion of our lives. If we are really lucky, due to the kind hand of providence, we may have the good fortune to score another mom or dad figure, someone who appears virtually out of nowhere as fate might have it and takes us under their propitious wing. Such a thing happened to me in the form of a bright, spunky and emotionally generous woman named Joanie Arnesty who helped me through the vale of darkness which infiltrated every corner of my being. As a child of a German-Jewish Holocaust survivor, my mother's past of suffering and trauma filled my own life with perpetual sadness which I found difficult to eviscerate. There was scant laughter in our house and constant retellings of what my maternal family had gone through in World War II and how many of them had perished in the Shoah. I yearned for the happy childhood I intuitively felt was my birthright but which evaded me because the spectre of war filled up our entire home, bent on sufficing me to its legacy, apparently in perpetuity. Although grateful for my parents, I felt the emotional burden of my mother's scarred and tattered life to ultimately be too much and I fled at age 19 to a coastal California town to begin a college life, excited by the prospect of sand and sea at my doorstep and new stories and events which had nothing to do with the Holocaust which had stolen so much from us, not only real individuals but the souls of those who survived as well.

Throughout my adulthood I wondered why I had not been given a happy family and a childhood which was punctuated with cheery memories. In every photo that was taken of me by my Polish father -who had hoped to become a photographer but instead found himself bitterly working in low-paying jobs in various factories, never with anyone who spoke his native language or his creative intelligence – I look depressed and off-kilter, as if the vagaries of life have already turned me to the dark side. My mother has piled my auburn-colored ringlets high atop my head, in some vague European-influenced do and I am wearing clothes that are old beyond my years, somber and unflattering, out of step with the fashion of the day. In those pictures it looks as if I am always poised on the brink of tears and constantly under the impress of her reminders that I should not be pouting, or acting "beleidigt" (the German word for angry) and be grateful for my very life when so many had died during World War II. When I am finally able to leave the house of despair which is my family, I feel I have been given a second chance at life although throwing off the yoke of depression will be a battle I will fight my entire life, one which still pulls at me with its relentless and intractable force, which is not stayed or mitigated by a battery of allegedly efficacious anti-anxiety/anti-depressant meds.

When I look back the years often blur, although I seem to remember with some affection those when I lived in the world of academia. I made my way through undergraduate school, a year of graduate students and finally three years of law school – not in any of those venues did I ever meet anyone whose parents were Holocaust survivors or who seemed to live daily with the scourge of the remembrances attached to that horrific event. I had long ago learned to blend in, to shed the apparent manifestations of an inherited life where pain, not pleasure, always predominated. I chose as my companions those who laughed easily and often, who absorbed the imposture that I always felt I was without any real resistance.

In my thirties, then settled in Berkeley, California and working in the legal field, I met someone who would change the architectonics of my life and the notions of family, albeit, from the fragmented moorings of a biological one to a new definition of what an intentional family might confer. Joanie Arnesty entered my life, encountered at some now forgotten community event, and became the mother I had always hoped for, full of effusion and contagious laughter and shining hopes. The first time we met I recall her saying “such a beautiful girl you are! That hair! People would die to have that glorious mane of hair. And a law degree? Beautiful and smart! Well that’s the icing on the cake!” Compliments were not the tender my parents traded in and I yearned to hear a good word thrown in my direction. With my own son I have emphasized the importance of being around what I call “encouragers” – those who not only give you emotional support but do it with a fiery vengeance. These are the folks who throw fairy dust on any situation and you emerge the wiser and the better.

Joannie was the physical embodiment of the epiphany that I needed and a second mother who helped me navigate the sudden storms and vicissitudes of life and celebrate the good times. The turbulences of her own life seemed to have borne no adverse impacts upon her. The product of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, she lost her own mother around five years old, a Jewish woman who worked as a nurse and got involved with a married Irish Catholic man named John Brown. Raised by her mother’s sister, she inherited her father’s red hair and storied charm and wit but never met or even saw a photo of him. After high school she married a man who in quick succession gave her three brilliant daughters but there were black eyes and beatings which finally caused her to run with just the clothes on her back and the three children in tow. When I think of Joanie, I remember the name of a film – “The Unsinkable Molly Brown” which turned out to be a perfect descriptor of her. A single parent, she raised three girls, with never a male in the picture, all embodying her own unshakeable confidence and optimism and watched them eventually attain professional identities, respectively as an optometrist, pediatrician and university professor. During their childhood she held numerous jobs and worked as a seamstress, baker, cook, babysitter and lived a lean but happy life, never dwelling on her own misfortunes which were substantial.

As our friendship grew from a chance meeting, I grew comfortable in sharing insecurities and what it meant to have never felt comfortable in the family I was born into. When I told my own mother one day that I wanted to be a writer, she yelled at me in German that this was “a stupid idea, you have a lot of those.” I never forgave her for that outburst and I still feel the sting of what it means to be deeply and disinterestedly misunderstood. I shared my mother’s words one time with Joanie and this woman, who admittedly was not book-smart and tutored, said energetically to me “The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away.” Pablo Picasso said that. I saw it in a magazine and I cut the words out and put them on the refrigerator.” And there they were on her old General Electric fridge, with magnets on each end, their wisdom illuminated in the midst of Safeway coupons and doctors’ business cards. “You need to have faith in yourself and to follow your dream. You are a great writer but you need to first and foremost believe that yourself.”

I have many failings but do not number among them the inability to listen closely. The reality is that we may not have parents that are a good or appropriate match for us but it is within our power to seek out those who can fulfill these roles. I consciously chose Joanie as a second mother who encouraged me to feel that I was good and able enough and deserved the fruits of a celebratory life.

In time I gained a husband (whom she introduced me to), saws me through a difficult pregnancy and threw a large and amazing baby shower replete with a ton of baked dishes and desserts, scratch-made by her. She seemed able to put her unique and affectionate brand on everything. She loved and worried over my son who was born with congestive heart failure and an array of other medical conditions. She once said to me “you’re my fourth daughter” and my eyes filled with tears. She was always at my side, bouncy and ebullient, helping to lift me emotionally when I so often foundered. My own mother, 800 miles away in Los Angeles, continued her criticism saying that I had ruined my life, remaining emotionally distant and mired in depression that her husband of 42 years had suddenly passed. It was as if she had no happiness to give anyone, including herself and the role of a biological parent disappeared into some obscure background.

What I have taken from my own story is this – one can always find a parent or a mentor to fill in the spaces where support was lacking. In my case I required encouragement and someone who was willing to listen closely. I needed laughter because there seemed so little of it in my own familial background. I remember seeing another quote on Joanie’s refrigerator which stood out, remarkable because it really captured the essence of who SHE was. I wrote it down on a yellow post-it and have it to this day: “Nothing is worth more than laughter. It is a strength to laugh and to abandon oneself, to be light.” The author was Frida Kahlo, a Mexican artist who I did not know of at that time. Joanie taught me the importance of rising above what could be the oppressive weight of life, of laughing often and out loud, and embracing a path of positivity. The photo of my son and I on her desk shows us both smiling, seemingly recovered from our battles – mine of a life filled with emotional turbulence and his of a successful fight with a life-endangering condition. Years later when I moved to central California, I wrote her a letter and told her that I was writing again, that I had returned to what I characterized as being a wordsmith.” A week later I received a beautiful card and opened it to see the words imprinted in a careful and deliberate hand: “Always be yourself. And be grateful for your gift and the ability to share it.”

I do not know that I am a good writer or that any critical commentary will make such a determination. But I do know that having a second mother, who stepped in time with me like some ineffable Mary Poppins’ character, made the difference by her enthusiasm and encouragement and restored to me the idea of what a family who embraces you really feels like. In the end it is not the biological bounds that necessarily provide succor and strength and perspicacity -- there are other mothers and fathers to be found, intentionally or not, that can well provide those qualities as well. Here is to all the Joanie Arnesty’s in the world that have rescued the people whose families were emotionally missing in action and gave us the hope to soldier on and create new networks of families to lean into.



Photography courtesy of Renee Skudra

AUTISM EVERYDAY

By Maggie Jones

Everyday, that's right, every single day, I have to put up with my diagnosis.

Sometimes I feel like I'm alone struggling to figure out the answer to, why do I have this diagnosis, why was I born with it. I sometimes don't get it myself. But at least I have a family that understands me all my life from then till now. I have to be the one to put my best foot forward and start looking at a brighter perspective on having a life with autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). There is more to life than just looking at yourself as autistic; you have to appreciate life. There is no way to turn back, but you have to go forward in life or there will be no happiness within you. You have to do the next right thing and know you are making a difference in someone's life, like doing something to help another person or an animal in need of help. When I look at the world it needs more love, empathy, and respect for your neighbors besides yourself. When you look at your life and especially for people like me with autism or someone that needs help understanding things, it's hard to do very hard. And sometimes I get frustrated when I can't find the words to say something that you were talking about.

When I see someone getting mistreated, someone like me or anybody. I feel bad but at the end of the day, I forgive. you can't make someone do what you want them to do or change them, so, let it go and pray that they change for the better. That's all you or I could do.

I always help someone in need and I always put my needs second when it comes to helping a charity or a nonprofit or having a good ear for someone who needs someone's understanding of what they're going through. I always believed being a good friend is very important, and a helping hand during hard times when someone needs it the most.

My name is Maggie Jones and I accept who I am and I love myself just the way I am, I love giving to people that need help, and I am a person like everyone else, special. And I am proud to work around my diagnosis of Autism. I also have anxiety and depression. But I don't let my anxiety let me down or make me sad. I'm a person with compassion for writing, art, singing and loving towards a lot of people. I have a lot to offer in my life. I'm autistic, I'm extraordinary in so many ways. And I have a lot to give too of my talents, my skill and understanding for others. I am a person of character and honesty and respect, and I am proud of being autistic.

I will make sure no one walks alone empty handed and I care about people. Just give me a chance to get right what I am understanding cognitively, and I will understand you. I showed what the world needs: love.. Everyone needs to treat each other the way they would want to be treated: with dignity and respect, love and honesty. Share what you have and don't be selfish with anyone, for everyone needs love and understanding with empathy.

And I hope you're proud of me. I have come a very long way. And I made it. I'm working with a magazine called Pittverse, and I'm proud to work with everyone in the magazine. I've made new friends and earned money working, something I could not have done ten years ago.

I love doing interviews with people for the magazine, and I have done a good few interviews in my time with Pittverse. And I love working because of Pittverse and Progress City. Thank you very, very much for taking the time to let me have my voice heard with the world.
Sincerely, Maggie Jones.

VICTORIA THE CHRISTMAS WINDOW ARTIST

By Maggie Jones

I know it's fall, but last winter I got to do an interview with a talented lady that does Christmas window art for Lawrenceville, Garfield, and Bloomfield neighborhood businesses. I asked about how she does Christmas window art, and this is what she explained to me: don't be afraid to ask questions, especially when it comes to someone letting you paint their windows for their stores.

She also loves to inspire others with her work. When Covid-19 hit, she wanted to lift everyone's spirits for the holidays in 2020, during the pandemic. and it made everyone very cheerful and happy knowing even though there was a pandemic going on globally in the holidays. Whenever she sees someone else happy it makes her day better knowing she did her job that she loves to do, painting windows for Christmas.

It was a windy cold November day after Thanksgiving on shop local Saturdays. I wanted to see what was happening in Bloomfield that day for shop local Saturday. I saw this woman painting windows for Christmas. It was amazing work she put into artwork she does for business in the Bloomfield Garfield and Lawrenceville region. I had an idea to write something for the spring that was different for a change, I loved winter, and I loved Christmas, and I loved art. I think Victoria paints very, very well. And she does it to lift spirits and cheer people up for the holidays, like I said it was during the pandemic.

I loved the fact she made me think of how to get people in the holiday cheer in the darkest days of our time. I asked her what she was painting, and at the time she was painting winter trees in front of a store on Liberty Avenue and Edmund Streets in Bloomfield. I introduced myself and got the word out about Pittverse magazine. She said she has a relative that is autistic. I stood and talked to her about how her work was beautifully done.

Then I got the idea to interview Victoria last early December of 2021. She agreed to the interview. The next time we talked was the interview, and it went really well.



Above Artwork done By : Victoria - the window artist.

WE ARE BETTER TOGETHER

By Maggie Jones

We know there are some days we care and some days that get hard, and those times are a lot harder to deal with. No matter how frustrating it gets some days when people that are your co-worker, a friend, an acquaintance and when you feel down you seem to not get together as a team because you don't feel you fit in or different beliefs of things.

When it comes to Covid and you feel lost, know that there are people that care out there. There will be a better day if we work together to end this pandemic especially. We can wear a mask to protect ourselves and others to slow the spread also. We need to get vaccinated and do the right things to better end this pandemic.

We must do everything we can to stop the pandemic. We need to try harder to actually care about one another and get vaccinated and wear a mask. It will not only save the lives of others. It will save yours as well, and keep you out of the hospital so people that really need help can get help.

And you're not being selfish by getting the vaccine or masking. Trust me, to make it the end of the pandemic we need to do our part. It's to save your life and others, especially those who have heart attacks, strokes, cancer, mental illness emergencies, accidents, and broken bones even. When you don't get vaccinated, you are putting a lot of people at risk of not only dying, but others will be affected by it. They can't even get the right care just because you didn't do the right things. Hospitals need relief, and you need to grow up and act like true adults and do your part to end a pandemic and get vaccinated, just ask the scientists and doctors and researchers trying to get a cure for covid 19 strains. But until then, get vaccinated, wear masks, and do what you have to. I'm not just telling you because I am mad, I have too, it's the right thing to do.

And I am not shaming anyone. I am telling you what is right so you don't end up in a hospital bed that's needed for, like I said earlier, people that actually need a bed. Not because you took the time to do nothing to protect yourself and your families and let doctors and nurses get a break.

May God bless doctors and nurses and for front line workers for doing their job, saving lives, and serving a great nation. And for researchers to find a way out. And for those who took the time to listen when it comes to saving lives by vaccines and masks.

We have to come together for this one, no excuses.

FOUR STORIES TO FLIP DISCRIMINATION

By Nathaniel Geyer

We live in a society that focuses on differences versus similarities. As a result there continues to be discrimination. In the 1970s racism was binary, white versus black, and a classic episode of *Little House on the Prairie* posed the question, “Would you rather be black and live to be 100, or white and live to be 50?”. In 2022 there continues to be discrimination based on differences in the form of racism, homophobia, antisemitism, and ableism. As a result, I have learned to flip discrimination by focusing on similarities rather than differences as told in these four stories.

When I graduated from my first master's degree, I was only able to find work at a supermarket. When my former mentor who experienced apartheid met with me, he hired me, and we worked in direct contact for eight years. In case you were not aware, apartheid was when the white minority in South Africa had control over the black majority in a caste system environment. For example, he was bright like me and was sent away to an elite school, which taught smart black people how to be farmers, thereby preserving the caste system. Fortunately, after year at school many people outsmarted the school and found a way to avoid being farmers. He later emigrated from South Africa to the United States to better his life and ended up being my first mentor. He was the first true Black friend and he taught me to be more empathetic towards people with color.

My granduncle, who was the baby of his family, lived on Long Island with his partner. He was well liked by his friends and family and used to be a member of the local garden club. His sister, who was my maternal grandmother, was very supportive of him and was a true humanitarian. My granduncle like me experienced some challenges earning his doctorate but ended up getting a second master's degree. I suspected he was gay, but it was never confirmed. He lived a long life and attended my sister's wedding and made an impression with members of the event. He loved to dance and have a good time, yet he lived a very private life with no kids. Although I did not see him often, he taught me to be a supportive family member and to never stop being true to myself.

I was brought up a Christian but recognized that the Old Testament was like the Torah, meaning that I had a great appreciation of the Jewish religion. One of my favorite teachers was Jewish, and she taught me about Hanukkah and Passover and to appreciate the Jewish roots of Christianity. Although I am not a practicing Jew, I recognize that it is a minority group that continues to be persecuted yet continues to prosper despite the struggles. I learned through my teacher about appreciating people's differences and to find common ground. It is through overcoming hardship that hope of a brighter future exists.

When I was a teenager, I went to a high-end disability camp, which had a high population of Jewish people. What encouraged me to attend the camp was the Super Teens program where people were told to be waiters and apply for jobs helping to mentor younger kids, while paying for each position a wage of one dollar each week. Wednesday was our day off where we went off site and spent the money on activities. It was through this experience that I witnessed the struggles of being disabled. Many of the people there felt like outcasts and did not have the supportive family that they deserved. I learned the value of hard work, how to be a mentor to people with disabilities, and to avoid feeling entitled. I also learned more about the Jewish religion and tolerance for other people's beliefs. I also met my first girlfriend at the camp, who was an inspiring influence in my life. She was the first person who had the courage of asking me out and we had a two-year relationship, which included going to California for three weeks. Unfortunately, I lost her phone number after she moved to a group home, so I have no way to reconnect with her for over twenty years. Although I do not keep in contact with fellow campers and staff the memories of going to this camp still are important to me in 2022.

In response to the question "Would you rather be black and live to be 100, or white and live to be 50?", I respond that a life spent doing what you are passionate about and living a quality life is more important than the quantity of life.

SMART GOALS TO ADDRESSING OBESITY IN AUTISTIC ADULTS

By Nathaniel Geyer

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 40 percent of autistic children are likely to be obese. Weir et al. (2021) found that compared to non-autistics, autistic adults were more likely to have an abnormal weight (i.e., Underweight, 6% vs. 3%; Overweight/Obese 64% vs. 45%). This suggests a lower likelihood of following basic health recommendations for diet, exercise, and sleep, which affect a person's quality of life. Some of the factors leading to abnormal weight in autistic adults are limited food selection, strong food dislikes, not eating enough food, constipation, and medication interactions. There is also a gap in the United States Healthy People 2020 guidelines on how to help adults on the autism spectrum.

I am technically obese based on BMI but not waist circumference, which I feel is more accurate to address obesity in the autism subpopulation. Men with a waist circumference of 43 in (110 cm) had a 50% chance of death than 37 in (94 cm) waist. Women with a 37 in (94 cm) had an 80% high risk of death than 27.5 in (70 cm) waist. Unlike other children with autism, I had a normal weight, belonged to boy scouts and in high school belonged to a fitness center. Sadly, when I went to college in my last two years my fitness center usage decreased, and my weight increased. However, in 2007 I worked at a bakery at a supermarket preparing items, which led me to decrease my weight temporarily. However, since I moved to a full-time position, I have been criticized for being overweight and not going to the fitness center. Recently, I am taking an increased emphasis on losing weight, due to my education journey coming to an end.

A recommendation to address losing weight, with the absence of national guidelines is to make SMART goals, which stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Based. Specific goals need to be narrow for more effective planning. Measurable is to define what evidence will prove that progress is being made and to reevaluate when necessary. Attainable is to make sure you can reasonably accomplish the goal in a certain timeframe. Relevant goals should align with your values and long-term objectives. Finally, time-based goals must have a realistic ambitious end-date for task prioritization and motivation. Some advantages are that SMART goals incorporate your plans and provide a way to track your progress in a timely manner. If a small deadline within your overall deadline is missed it will give you time to get back on track. However, a strong disadvantage is that it could lead to becoming obsessed to completing your goal by a certain deadline, at the detriment of other activities, so they must be practical and flexible to adapt to changing circumstances, yet still be achievable.

Example: I will increase my daily activity by walking for 20–30 minutes at least 4 days each week. I will track my progress by using my Fitbit tracker and check my dashboard once each week. Increasing my activity level may help me to lose weight and reduce my risk for diabetes. It will also help me to move more comfortably when I go hiking with my friends. I will re-evaluate my goal in 8 weeks and increase my walking time or adjustments so that physical activity on most days of the week gradually becomes a lifestyle habit.

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ZEITGEIST TV SHOWS

By Nathaniel Geyer

In the world of television there are programs that are dated or timeless. A show that is zeitgeist captures a period of history, from the 1970s to the 2000s. Some of the more zeitgeist TV shows reviewed are Little House on the Prairie, A Different World, Golden Girls, Seinfeld, Friends, Gilmore Girls, and Reba.

Little House on the Prairie was a 1970-1980s show that showcased the challenges and troubles of living in the Western United States. Some of the relevance to 2022 are dealing with a pandemic and accepting people's differences. For example, the actor who played Albert was a child on the autism spectrum who was adopted and now mostly does voice overs but is married and has stepchildren. Adoption is a recurring theme in the show because in real life the depicted family never adopted or had a boy that lived past infant age. Yet Albert was created for the TV show because Pa wanted a boy to balance out the girls in the family. There also was a classic episode on racism where an actor stated, "Would you rather be black and live to be 100, or white and live to be 50?", which was progressive in the 1970s.

In the 1980s when I was young, two shows A Different World and Golden Girls were also timeless in 2022. In memorable episodes both shows talked about challenges of growing up differently. For example, both shows talked about different topics that are taboo and controversial. My favorite that brought me to tears was a special episode where Betty White's character met her birth father after acknowledging for just that episode that she was adopted. Whereas a Different World talked about challenges of going to college, which help inspire younger people to use their voice to better society. These shows took risks such as the AIDS episode of A Different World, which was only produced because of a special guest star, which was a rating hit.

In the 1990s when I was in my teens there were TV shows like Seinfeld and Friends that continue to have lasting power. For example, in my high school chemistry class we did a skit on Mole Day (October 23 from 6:02am-6:02pm), which was based on the infamous soup scene, in which we stated, "No moles for you." Also, during that time Friends was a popular show, which dealt with single life in the 1990s. These TV shows highlight the period well yet continue to be funny today. In the 2000s while in my twenties two TV shows were Gilmore Girls and the show Reba, which continues to show on cable television. These shows were geared to families and touched on timely issues that continue to be watched like adultery, extended families, teenage pregnancies, and other generation struggles. Both shows were unique and willing to take risks and willing to provide a family-friendly atmosphere. Many of these actors are still doing work on other incredible television shows, yet these two shows were well received and still provide an interesting take on life and willingness to combat obstacles.

Interestingly enough, my interest in writing about these three shows is dedicated to my friend who died unexpectedly ten years ago. During the short time he was my roommate he managed to make a difference in my life. He encouraged me to think out of the box but start small and think big. These shows were willing to take risks and, in the process, still have themes that relate to 2022 audiences.

THE TRAGEDY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

By Nathaniel Geyer

As somebody who was a special education student as a child, who grew up between the window between the passing of the Americans with Disability Act and the September 11 attacks, I saw the breakdown of separate special education classes and the reestablishment of separate schools for autism. I was able to graduate with my high school degree with minimal special education help. I am an avid reader and like to work with numbers but have dysgraphia. I somehow escaped the treadmill of failure experienced by future students.

Recently, an opinion piece found in the Wall Street Journal stated that special education students are consigned to a treadmill of failure. The author further writes that there are financial and employment rewards for classifying and retaining special needs children, and they are only accommodated until the point where they are of further interest to the system (i.e., age out of the system).

After comparing my primary and secondary education journey to reality today, there were times when my carefree journey had stumbling blocks. I did have a lower-than-average reading level in third grade, but my parents found a way for me to get tutored in reading during the summer so that I caught up with the rest of the class. In math, which is now my strong subject, I failed the 6th grade math exam and was held back one level, which I successfully completed with a 100% final grade and was able to finish as a college prep student in High School. As for writing, I still can only write my full name in cursive writing but am a strong computer keyboarder. Based on my experience, it is possible to overcome the treadmill of failure, but it takes hard work and self-determination, and most importantly long- and short-term goals.

However, many former special education students that I have met over the years do not have any long- or short-term goals or lack the motivation to put in the work to improve their lives. I have asked many people who were forced to abandon their ambitions to appease others. Unlike others, I tend to have a more optimistic outlook and focus on the present and future, which has led me to three graduate degrees and multiple peer-reviewed manuscripts. My journey has been showing others that a treadmill of failure with encouragement of family and friends can become a mission of hope.

Some other recommendations on surviving and overcoming the treadmill of failure is to start small and think big. Very often people with special needs fell like a silo, where nobody can relate to their experiences. At the same time the perception of doing everything wrong can be draining on these same individuals. I know firsthand the power of negative words can pull down optimism. Sometimes I say yes just to avoid conflict, but it buries feelings that can explode like a volcano if not dealt with appropriately, leading to meltdowns. Although meltdowns cannot be completely unavoidable the occurrences of them can be reduced by talking through the issues rather than burying them. I also found that programs like Mental Health First Aid (<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>) can be a godsend for developing “adaptive empathy”, by teaching that mental health is not a solo activity and that people with mental illness can manage symptoms and live productive lives.

ONE DAY, SOMEDAY SOON: DISNEY'S THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME: 25TH ANNIVERSARY

A Pittverse Exclusive Interview/Retrospective with Head Screenwriter Tab Murphy

*Conducted by Michael
Kurland*

1. When did you start working for Disney? What was your first assignment there? And what was it like working at the "Mouse House?"

A: "My first project for Disney was Hunchback of Notre Dame. I believe I started work on it sometime in 1993. My experience at Disney from day one was one of the most creatively rewarding experiences I've ever had as a writer. Instead of sitting in a story room with a bunch of stuffy 'suits', I was surrounded by amazingly talented artists, directors and producers. In those days, you were only limited by your imagination. You worked in a creatively rich environment where all ideas were encouraged – even bad ones! It was artistic collaboration in the best sense of the word. And it was a helluva lot of fun! Which is why I kept going back and back and back..."

2. When/How did you first get the assignment on Hunchback?

A: "Disney had been after me to have a meeting for a while. My very first job as a screenwriter was in 1983, writing a project at Paramount for Jeffrey Katzenberg. Jeffrey had since moved to Disney and was trying to rejuvenate the animation division. He wanted to bring live action screenwriters in to initially help develop animated story ideas. By that time, I had received an Oscar nomination for Gorillas in the Mist. So, I was one of those screenwriters he was pursuing. I kept saying 'no thanks' because I was focused on a live action screenplay I had written and wanted to direct. And frankly, I wasn't interested in writing 'kids' animated movies. I considered myself a 'serious artist' – ha! Eventually, I took a meeting with the Disney execs. They went through a list of projects they were developing – Aladdin, Pocahontas, Hercules, etc. None of which really grabbed me. By the end of the meeting, I was convinced it was all for naught. Then they mentioned that they were also trying to do something with Hunchback. What they didn't know was that I was a total '60's monster nerd. I collected monster magazines, loved all the Universal horror movies, etc. I was aware of Hunchback and Quasimodo's story by the time I was 9 years old! I jumped at the chance to see if I could find a Disney animated movie somewhere in that huge Victor Hugo novel."

3. With five credited screenwriters, could you easily identify which parts were yours? If so, how much of the finished film was yours?

A: "I think my contribution to Disney's Hunchback is best described in the film's credits where I am given a single-card credit for 'animation story by'. I was the first and only writer on that project for a full year. Everything you see from a story standpoint – plot, structure, characters, etc – was essentially derived from my early treatments. Sure, I can point to moments of action

or dialogue and say ‘I wrote that’, but what’s more important is the fact that the finished film is representative of 300 crewmembers that worked tirelessly for three years making that movie. Everyone brought his or her ‘A’ game to the process. And it is truly such a collaborative process; I never got hung up on what was ‘mine’. That movie was ‘ours’, and everyone contributed. I just focused on doing my part.”

4. What was it like working with the same directors, producer and composer from Disney’s Beauty and the Beast?

A: “Kirk Wise, Gary Trousdale and Don Hahn were a joy to work with. I had known Don socially for years before Hunchback. He had actually tried to get me on Lion King at one point, but it didn’t work out because of scheduling conflicts. Together with Alan Menken and Steven Schwartz, a ‘dream team’ of creatives surrounded me! It was such a great working experience that we replicated it once again on Atlantis.”

5. Could you give one example of a scene or bit of business that you had wanted to include in the film, but didn’t make it?

A: “There is a moment during the chase for Esmeralda at the ‘Feast of Fools’ where her head appears hiding in a basket of vegetables as soldiers run past. Originally, I wrote that the basket was filled with severed heads from a nearby guillotine. It lasted long enough for artwork to be done depicting the moment. Which I loved! But finally, it was decided it was too graphic. So they settled on vegetables.”

6. Looking back 25 years later, is there anything you would have done differently? If so, what?

A: “25 years on, there is really nothing I would do differently, story wise. There is one number that sticks out like a sore thumb for me tonally – ‘A Guy Like You’. The whole vaudeville shtick felt out of place for me. Still does. But people love it and I know it exists for the kids. So I just go with it...”

7. As a writer yourself, do you have any last bits of advice for our writing staff at Pittverse?

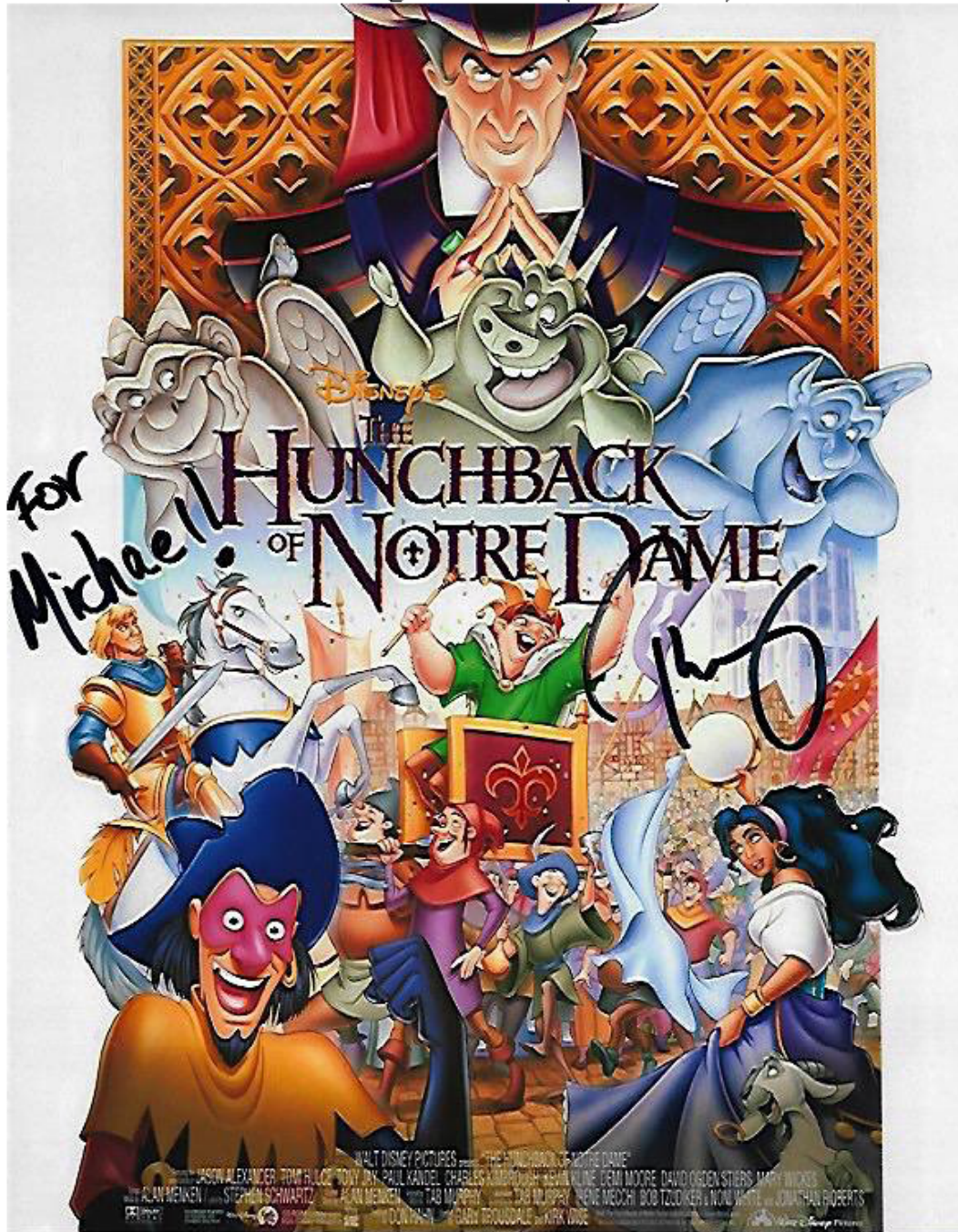
A: “With regard to writing, since every story has been told, every genre mined to the deepest depths, one might wonder ‘what’s left’? Well, what’s left is your own unique voice as a writer, and your own worldview. Nurture that voice. When a studio exec has a pile of twenty scripts to read over a weekend, and he or she is only giving each script 10 pages to grab him or her, it’s that ten pages in your own unique writer’s voice that is going to compel them to read the entire screenplay. Never give them a reason to not read beyond ten pages!!”

Special Thanks:
Tab Murphy
Walt Disney Animation Studios
&
Don Hahn



Head Writer Tab Murphy

In Memoriam:
 Mary Wickes (1910-1995)
 Tony Jay (1933-2006)
 &
 David Ogden Stiers (1942-2018)



Original 1996 Movie Poster Signed by Tab Murphy
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THE NEGLECTED PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

By Megan Cunningham

In our society, there's always a clear distinction between adults and children. However, whenever a mass shooting happens in the United States, such definitions are immediately discarded. Of course, each one plays by a predictable script. Guy buys an assault weapon and shoots up a bunch of people in a public place which makes national headlines and wall-to-wall coverage. There are some tributes to the victims and asking for "thoughts and prayers." But whenever someone brings up the notion of guns, pro-gun politicians always shut it down, stating that, "now's not the time to talk about guns." Sometimes they may state, "guns aren't the problem, we need to talk about (mental health, violent video games, shows, and movies, bullying, rap music, and whatever lousy excuse)." Or they play the Second Amendment card, justifying why they should be able to own a military grade assault rifle that they'll never use save as a photo op prop. Because despite that these weapons were primarily invented to kill a bunch of people in seconds, it's well established that murder's kind of illegal. Also, I'm pretty sure the Second Amendment doesn't allow me to buy other military grade weapons like a fighter jet for instance.

Since the harrowing shooting at Columbine High School, mass shootings have become a very troubling aspect of the American landscape. The notion of gun control remains a highly contentious political issue that just mentioning it can ignite a cavalcade of flame wars all over the Internet. Nonetheless, given the frequency of mass shootings happening since my childhood, the price countless schoolchildren across the country have paid for them, and the scary availability of military grade assault weapons in several states, I strongly believe we need to address our relationship with guns as a country. Especially if the gun control debate has now boiled down to people wanting to frequent a public place without getting shot vs. gun collectors who just want to keep their highly dangerous toys.

As of 2022, gun violence is a public health crisis that won't get better unless our federal and state governments adopt these common-sense gun measures. Every year, gun violence takes thousands of American lives whether through mass shootings, standard homicides, gang wars, suicides, domestic violence, accidents, and whatever else. Thus, to not do act will only get more people killed as well as result in a public that's constantly on edge. It's bad enough that schools have resorted to armed guards and active shooter drills. Students have been subjected to security checks and constant anxiety that one day they can walk into their school and never see home again. Gun violence takes a great toll on the healthcare industry, especially in areas where gunshot victims don't have health insurance and/or end up disabled.

As an autistic woman, I see the notion of an armed society as deeply terrifying as my social skills aren't the greatest. Even though I'm better than I used to be, I still make mistakes in social interaction. But one bad interaction will usually result in someone throwing a temper tantrum at worst. However, if I'm where everyone's armed, one bad social situation might get me killed. Whenever I hear about some nutjob showing up at a Starbucks with an AK-47, it scares the living daylights out of me. When I'm out in public, I want to be able to talk to people without worrying about endangering my life whenever I mess up. And given how unpredictable people are, I never know what kind of buttons I'd push. Especially if I tell someone what they don't want to hear. Say what you want about gun-free zones, but I don't want them to go away just because people don't feel safe without carrying a loaded weapon. Because while they may feel safe with a gun on them, a loaded gun makes many people feel like they're in a room with a ticking time bomb that can blow up at any moment.

Unfortunately, federal law hasn't much budged on enacting stronger gun laws thanks to the NRA's constant pro-gun lobbying since the late 1970s. Not only that, but too many states have loosened their gun laws to allow certain measures that many would think as insane. Like letting people carry guns on college campuses for instance, which is utterly madness. But apparently, you can do so at any public university in Texas. "Stand Your Ground" laws have been equally problematic as they allow people to use force without a duty to retreat. Well, as long as you're white but that's a different story. Of course, our nation's gun problem has a lot of similarities to what's going on with Covid. It's a public health crisis that can easily be fixed if we get our act together as a society. But apparently, we can't deal with it as responsibly as we'd like because some people don't want to make sacrifices for the greater good. Except that while Covid 19 only became a thing from March 2020 on, our nation's crisis with guns and gun violence has gone on for decades. In fact, it's a problem old enough for Credence Clearwater Revival to record "Run Through the Jungle," which talks about exactly that (and not Vietnam).

Although most Americans may not always be on the same page with everything in regards to gun control, they generally agree on common-sense measures. According to Gallup polls, the most popular measure is background checks on all gun purchases, which 96% of Americans support in 2017. And this includes 95% of gun owners. Meanwhile, only 21 states have adopted such policy.

Current US federal law requires background checks for purchases by licensed gun dealers. But it doesn't mandate them for guns sold by unlicensed sellers like non-dealers who sell guns online or at gun shows. Called the Gun Show Loophole, this loophole enables people with felony convictions, domestic abuse restraining orders, and other people with questionable histories to buy guns no questions asked. According to a study by Everytown Gun Safety, 1 out of 9 people arranging to buy guns on Armslist.com can't legally buy guns. Even more disturbing, the unlicensed gun sale marketplace is vast. A 2015 survey found that 22% of Americans reported on acquiring a gun without a background check in the 2 years before. While a 2018 investigation found there were 1.2 million ads for firearms sales that wouldn't require a background check either. And according to the Giffords Law Center, around 80% of guns acquired for criminal purposes are obtained through unlicensed sellers. While 96% of inmates convicted of gun offenses who were already barred from owning a weapon got their firearm through an unlicensed dealer.

Requiring universal background checks has proven effective in reducing gun violence. Such state laws by point-of-sale checks and/or permit have been associated with lower firearm, fewer firearm suicides, and lower firearm trafficking. Mainly because running a background check before a gun buy helps identify people who shouldn't have them like convicted felons and domestic abusers. Most common federal background check legislation simply requires unlicensed sellers meet their buyer at a gun dealer. While the gun dealer will run a background check in exactly the same way as for sales in the dealer's store. Since most Americans live closer to a gun store than a McDonald's or a post office, it's an easy and convenient process that only takes less than 2 minutes. Besides, most gun owners are already used to this because they have to go through it every time they buy a gun from a licensed dealer. And while no system is completely accurate, FBI quality control evaluations suggest that background checks have a 99.3-99.8% accuracy rate.

Universal background checks may not prevent every kind of gun violence, but it's a measure we need to implement throughout the country. Any measure is better than doing nothing at this point. It was appalling enough that Congress passed no gun control measure in the wake of Sandy Hook back in 2012. Universal background checks are almost universally popular, are easy and quick to undertake, and save thousands of lives in the states where it's law. In fact, many of the best-known mass shooters have bought guns from unlicensed sellers and have histories of domestic violence. Thus, enacting universal background checks to screen out dangerous people who shouldn't have guns is a no brainer. It's about time the United States takes responsibility for its gun problem. Enacting universal background checks is the least we can do.

TRACING THE KILLER RABBIT OF CAERBANNOG

By Megan Cunningham



As an avid fan of history and Monty Python, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* has always been among my favorite movies since I was a kid. It's no shining beacon in historical accuracy given that King Arthur and his knights are prancing around medieval England while their attendants clang coconut shells together to stimulate hoof sounds. After all, this film was made to be funny and outrageous, not a serious drama where the accuracy would matter. But it nonetheless draws more of its material from medieval history, legend, and culture than Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* ever did. Some of it is obvious like the death cart scene, Sir Robin's minstrels, Arthurian legends, the monks with boards, the French taunters, and of course, the Holy Grail. While some of it not so much. For instance, Sir Lancelot's one-man Red Wedding in his tale is based on some of his earlier legends. A lot of medieval science wasn't much different from what you see with Sir Bedevere and the accused witch.

One critical scene takes place at the Cave of Caerbannog, where Tim the Enchanter warns King Arthur and his knights of its vicious guardian so terrible to have killed everyone who's tried to enter the cave, declaring "death awaits you all – with nasty, big, pointy teeth!" However, once they reach the bone ridden cave entrance, a little white rabbit appears. Although Tim insists that this is the monster with "a vicious streak about a mile wide!," Arthur and his knights don't take him seriously. King Arthur orders Sir Bors to cut his head off. But when Bors approaches it, the rabbit suddenly leaps at the knight's neck and bites clean through it in a single motion, decapitating him with a can opener's sound. Despite their initial freak out, Sir Robin soiling his armor, and Tim scoffing at their idiocy, the knights attack in full force. The rabbit injures several of them and kills Sir Ector and Sir Gawain with ease. With no hope of vanquishing this vicious rabbit, Arthur panics shouts, "Run Away!" as the knights retreat. Only the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch can save them now. But that is another story.

Anyway, while many people might see the notorious Killer Rabbit as one of many Monty Python's examples of subversive humor, the concept strangely holds a lot of basis in medieval art than you would expect. Sure, they were seen as symbols of purity and helplessness as well as fertility in some cases, but



don't let that fool you. In fact, the idea for the killer rabbit for *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* lent inspiration to façade carving from Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. In this engraving, a knight flees from a rabbit, showing his weakness and cowardice. But when you google medieval images of killer rabbits, you'll find a whole treasure trove of manuscript images of violent, savage, and bloodthirsty bunnies wreaking havoc on anything that gets in their way.

Back in the Middle Ages before the advent of Johann Gutenberg's printing press in the 15th century, books were always copied by hand, often in monasteries. Some of these medieval works could also be illuminated with some additional illustrations or drawings to jazz it up a bit. After all, who doesn't like books with some pictures in it? Medieval people would feel the same. However, every profession always has their share off goof-offs who like to put a little fun into their dull work days. And medieval artists were no exception. Thus, when you look at some illuminated manuscripts, you might find images in the margins of monsters, beasts, obscene depictions of human-animal hybrids, and of course, classic drawings of human genitalia. Known as marginalia, the particular humorous kind are known as drolleries, which were most popular from 1250 to the 15th century.

The world of medieval drollery shows a world turned upside down. Here, roles are reversed and the impossible becomes the norm. Often in a humorous and satirical way. One popular motif was the "rabbit's revenge," which is often used to illustrate emphasize a depicted person's cowardice and stupidity. As "stickhare" was a Middle English term for "coward" at the time. Assuming that the rabbit featured is unarmed and not seemingly dangerous. While other such drawings might depict rabbits as violent and merciless killers hell bent on punishing hunters who've committed crimes against their rabbit kind. You might see rabbits pursuing hunters and their hounds with bows and arrows, axes, swords, the noose, and other weapons. These rabbits killed people and other animals in often sophisticated ways. They could have serious armory and fight in severe battles and duels. They could lead a hapless hunter to the gallows and gleefully do the same to his hound. They could ride humans, lions, horses, dogs, and snails while mutilating corpses of hapless knights. Nonetheless, the results could often be quite gruesome. Think of it as if Quentin Tarantino directed Bugs Bunny cartoons. In fact, Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd cartoons could also trace their origins to these marginalia images. Even they're not as violent, they have the same setup.



But why did these artists draw so many killer rabbit pictures? Of course, there are theories that these graphic rabbit revenge pictures range from social satire to medieval moralism. Both of these are valid. However, I think a more plausible explanation has to do with sheer boredom. We must keep in mind that most of your medieval copyists and manuscript artists were monks who spent all day copying books by hand, most frequently the Bible. I'm sure this was an arduous job with long hours that didn't feature much excitement. Thus, I don't see it as much of a stretch for these monks to resort to distracting themselves by drawing funny doodles. And apparently, they might find the idea of killer rabbits just as funny as Monty Python did centuries later. Although their doodles might be far more graphic than what you'd find acceptable in a children's book. As these weren't meant for kids.



boring and arduous lives. Especially if it pertains to anyone cloistered in a monastery who has to write down the same kind of crap every day for the rest of his life.

Title Picture courtesy of Google Images.

Notre Dame engraving courtesy of Wikipedia.

1340s Marginalia courtesy of British Library Blogs

Nonetheless, every work of art has its critics and drollery was no exception. For Cistercian founder and eventual Saint Bernard of Clairvaux once described these as “ridiculous monstrosities” in 1153, writing “Even if the foolishness of it all occasion no shame, at least one might balk at the expense.” Now many writers interpret this quote as him being a killjoy with no sense of humor and was no fan of subversion. Then again, he could be complaining about his copyist monks acting like idiots drawing margin doodles in manuscripts when they should be doing their job like copying scripture. After all, no supervisor wants their subordinates wasting valuable time and resources squiggling doodles to amuse their friends in the monastery like it was a thirteenth century version of *The Office*. Not to mention, stationery supplies weren't readily available back then like it is now. Thus, if a monk decided to etch in a rabbit fighting a hunting dog with swords, well, the monastery would be basically stuck with it. Then again, I'm just speculating here because who knows what was on these monks' minds. But given how emotionally draining work can be in the Middle Ages, you have to understand the need for some amusement in their

BRINK (PT. 1)

By Jordan Watson

The air is scented with saline. Ambiance of the waves slosh all around us. The gulls screech overhead, as the sun reflects over the azure ocean's rippling seascape. Nothing could be far from serene. I'm Joel Alistair. My beloved childhood friend, and now girlfriend Joyce Atsuko and I have taken one of her father's boats out near the western region of the Pacific Ocean. After years of finally saving up from my job as a musical instrument technician, I was able to visit her abroad from her home country of Japan, near the Hokkaido prefecture. Her father is a fisherman that helps deliver his large catches over to his fishery near the Tokachi Field Station. His love for the ocean was easily handed down to his daughter. As a token of my appreciation for her and her family, I gave him an acoustic guitar with the calligraphy of Ocean & Wonderment. He knew this would be a perfect opportunity for me to take Joyce out to enjoy the freshwater scenery, so he let us have it for the next couple days.

Seeing her bask in the serenity of the vast open waters, it's hard to take my eyes off of her. Her shimmering jet black hair, her rosy cheeks, her light freckles, and her bright blue eyes to match the ocean. Her sunhat matches with her stunning summer sundress braided in white, green and blue fish from the Epipelagic to the Bathypelagic zones. Pleasantly surprised by some flying fish jumping from the waters of our slow moving boat, I take this moment to take out my acoustic guitar, and play her a melody just for her. As she hears the free-form strumming of my chords, she turns to me, and lets out the warmest smile to eclipse the beating sun, and skips down from the right starboard, near the bow where I lay. She gently wraps her arms around my left arm, and leans on my shoulder, where she earnestly stares at my fingers pick at the strings, letting out a comfy tune. She lets out a tender giggle, as she then poses a question out of the blue.

“Do you remember when we were kids, and we had such a massive obsession over pirates, we would talk all the time about how we'd find buried treasure one day?”

I softly smirk, followed with a chuckle of my own.

“Like how we'd find Ballistire, and plunder the watery depths of knowledge?”

“Hehehe! God, we were so nerdy back then.”

“Implying we still aren't?”

We both share playful laughs, as she unwraps herself from my arm, and lays across my lap, plucking at the strings as I continue to play for her. She looks up at me with a gentle gaze.

“It's funny when you think about where we are.”

I stop to adjust the tuners to my strings to match a correct pitch, stopping to reply.

“That we're out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?”

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She chuckles, and pokes at my cheek.

“C'mon dummy, you know. Out in the one spot where the Under Treasure is supposedly buried?”

The thought never once crossed my mind this whole trip. I start to remember it like it was yesterday. Joyce didn't just love the ocean. She was absolutely fascinated by it. To the point where she wanted to one day find that elusive Under Treasure residing in Ballistire in the books we used to read about as kids. Whether her dad read it to her, or my mom did for a bedtime story, we always wondered if it was merely a myth, or if it lived up to the legends every scurvy pirate once raved upon for generations. In fact, it was said that the real secret underneath the Mariana Trench was exactly that. An ancient library of treasured books that can grant whatever the mind or heart desired, no matter how simple or complex the subject matter can be.

After reminiscing on what seemed like an hour, I speak up while improvising my strums.

"Tall tales that tell even taller truths. Even as teenagers, we still wonder if our childhood stories aren't just in our imagination."

She giggles, and brushes my short, frizzled hair.

"Yees, but that makes our imagination all the wilder."

Her eyes beg for my undivided attention. She raises herself upward to kiss me tenderly.

Though it would seem to be cut short by what sounds like a passerby of dolphins. They immediately catch Joyce's notice. To the right starboard, two come up for air, as she joyously leans on the side to gently rub against their rubbery heads. What comes out of her mouth soon after, is a soft, yet concerning tone.

"What are those? Are those scars? Poor things. Wait.....Joel, come look at this!"

I place my guitar near the mast to see what Joyce had witnessed. The dolphins appear to have had some noticeable scars scrawled across their heads. While visibly deep, they're also...emitting some kind of strange, shimmering blue luminescence.

"You *definitely* don't see that everyday."

"Dolphins don't usually show light like this, unless....it's deeper underwater."

Both of us turn to stare into each other's faces. Perplexed doesn't even come close to our thoughts on the matter.

Two months have passed. Joyce was admitted to the Sapporo Higashi Tokushukai Hospital for some strange breathing issue. At first I thought it was some allergic reaction to the sushi she had near one of the local cart areas around her hometown. Even then, she was always open to me about being able to eat fish, regardless of her affinity to the ocean life. That the circle of life will always eat one another no matter what you choose to consume. Despite the doctor's endless, tiring hours of in-depth analysis, he had tried to pinpoint it to a few different reasons. The first was an obvious lead to cystic fibrosis. However, she never had any inheritance of it in her family history, never mind she was the top of her class in the swimming team, so it was impossible for her to have any mucus build up over the years, especially at such a young age of 20. The second one was IPF. But because she has had healthy lung functions for most of her life, it wouldn't add up to why there were scans that she didn't have oxygen going to her brain.

The last one was an odd, rare disease that seems to have appeared within the short span of time we admitted her to the hospital. Lung agenesis. But how? How could she have garnered a severe lack of lung tissue, let alone the rest of it start to disappear in such a sparse amount of time? Despite their efforts, he had stated to us this dreadful conclusion. They aren't sure what the root cause is. It's likely to be a new type of virus that no one is able to determine. Joyce's treatments have minimal effect, even with the amount of oxygen being put into her at all times. As time goes by, her appearance is beginning to worsen. Her skin starts to feel coarse. She's developing weird sores all around most of her midsection, down to her lower abdomen. Her feet have been slowly bleeding, and pustulating to the point where the nurses have to come and change the sheets almost every single day. The pain she's been enduring has been hellishly excruciating.

There are nights she wants to scream, yet it struggles to come out as a dry, scratching wail. Even the other outpatients can't find an easy night of sleep. Yet I persevere, and hope they continue to find a solution for her. The only thing I can muster is the six string I bring with me to ease her wounded state. To try my hardest, and smile through it. For her sake. To hold her hand in between playing her songs. To let her caress mine near her thinning face. She especially was such a fan of VNV Nation. So I played her favorite song, Nova. It was to help her not only smile, but for her to sleep as well as she could. The chorus always helps to brighten her up, aptly that she is the light that consistently shines on me. I only pray she does not walk towards another. A steady stream of tears leak from her bloodshot blue eyes. I struggle to hold back my own water-welling, and lean in to delicately kiss her forehead. The nurses tell me that she needs her rest, so I wish her a good night, and head out of her room. The pours of rain trickling from my eyes couldn't be more apparent from walking away.

During the next day, I notice a squad of cop cars surrounding the hospital's main entrance. Ignoring the authorities, I rush in to see the commotion from the staff. A girl from Room 123 has jumped out of her window.

Dear God...Joyce...

BRINK (PT. 2)

By Jordan Watson

2028. It's been five years since Joyce's passing. In this time frame, I had decided to look into a new deep sea excavation company. What intrigued me most about this was that Joyce's father had recommended them to me. The operation they were building towards didn't require the usual UDT(what does this acronym mean?)Training. Not just super project assembling, zero visibility training, offshore safety survival training, or recompression chamber operations. This was much different. Something he told me would change the course of my young life. I read that fateful email with the link to Aurora Marianus.

Orientation Day has arrived. I was taken within one of their new hydro-propulsion vessels, allowing for us to traverse 15,000 leagues towards their main facility. All without worrying about sudden compression. Just when I thought the trip was unreal, the facility's scale was even more of a site to behold. A neon blue luminescent dome in the very center, surrounded in four corners by towering spires of dark blue lights. Connecting them are glass encased pathways that not only link each spire, but also curve into a downward coil within smaller armored dome facilities. Beside their erect foundations are coiled ventilation tubes that sprawl their way to the top, emitting black smoke, much like deep sea vents do within the 2,000 leagues threshold. Something to it looks awfully familiar.

Before I even had time to soak the rest of it in, we were preparing to dock at their entrance tunnel. Small, illuminating rectangular fragments begin to surround themselves, and form the tunnel around our vessel. A small chime comes online within the transport.

“Initiating pocket decompression.”

The way it's shown to me,] the water is pocketed into the transforming tunnel. Next, the luminescent fragments cusp our vessel with the water intake, and in a near-instant, flashes to evaporate it into a steam vapor. The vapor then helps decompress the immense weight around the underwater vehicle, and then slowly takes us up by an elevated tube. Within 3 minutes of seeing the immense deep sea spectacles all the way to the top of the facility, the hole opens up atop of me.

“Pocket decompression complete. Welcome to Aurora Marianus.”

As the compression dome around the transport unit unfolds, the door opens. I witness the immensity of the facility's scale. On the outside, it's covered within the aforementioned blue light. On the inside, the dome is encased in vastly lit geodesic patterns, supported by unique flying buttresses which would feed into the exterior tubed system into the smaller domes, as I have witnessed from the outside. Throughout the ground level, there are several diverging paths that would lead into the other code labeled territories of Aurora Marianus. Before it could all overwhelm me, I was then greeted by a man in a heavy navy blue three piece suit, with a large forehead, dark curly hair, and a small rugged beard, with a predominant pencil mustache.

“You must be the new arrival, yes? Welcome Joel Alistair!” As he spoke in a thick, French accent. “Oh! Hello!”

I come out of my brief wonderment to approach him to shake his hand firmly, and respectfully.

“You'll have to forgive me, I-I just didn't think this place would be so—“

“Immaculate, ah of course! Well, you would not be the first! I'm Fabrice Otes, one of the co-founders of this very immaculate organization! I trust you have many questions about this facility, oui?”

“Y-Yes sir I do.”

“Merveilleux! Well, let's start our grand tour!”

He directs me over to the left divergent path of the main dome area.

“As I am about to show you, Aurora Marianus's dream was started by my close colleague, Baldur Aurora. He was a man who loved the ocean more than any can openly admit. Using his savings he accrued during his expeditions as an Icelandic fisherman, he grew tired of the local fisheries, and wanted to expand his endeavors. With the help of his uncle's connections, we were able to start realizing his vision. To explore the depths of all ocean life.”

Each glass encased hallway leading to the respective domed areas were engraved in varied décor of numerous fish from different sea zones. The northwest had Epipelagic fish, which would be the mess hall area. The northeast with the Mesopelagic fish, indicating their specialized compression tech area, where they would experiment with the state of the art tech suits, oxygen infused cores, and even new mobile suits for the deepest of divers. The southwest had Bathypelagic fish, showing what they aptly called the uber assemblage facility. This is where they would take repairs to several excavation tools, including state of the art GROVs, which were ROVs with remote controlled arms, as well as smaller scale underwater drones, and much more. The southeast had Abyssopelagic fish, where it showcases the maintenance area to keep most of the ventilation, centralized power grids, and servers to keep the documented research online at all times. Mr. Otes helps to interject my already curious mind.

“I'm sure you have already experienced the process that our technological advances have shown through the pocket decompression process. Here at Aurora Marianus, we take complete pride in perfecting our facilitations by ensuring our staff can work in a well oxygenated environment, regardless of the depths of the ocean. You must be wondering, how can a facility such as this operate in a rather hazardous, and bacterial zone? Well, we've conscientiously studied about advancing filtration systems through a rare approach no other man has achieved. It's through the wonders of hydrothermal ventilation!”

“You mean from deep sea vents and creatures within the Midnight Zone?”

“I knew you would catch on. See, much like how NASA and Space ForceX uses compressed oxygen units within their suits, Mr. Aurora wanted to expand upon their ideas and technological schematics by reverse engineering the process, and using the sea life itself as the forefront of his vision. 40 years of advancements later, we've finally created the next best achievement since, well, the first terraforming on Mars!”

Even throughout the whole tour, something feels missing. I decided to ask Mr. Otes in regards to this inquiry.

“Mr. Otes, I've realized that this facility only seems to have four out of the five zones covered. What about the Hadal Zone?”

A smile as wide as the continental rise forms over his face. He claps his hands together, and confidently makes his statement.

“That, Monsieur Alistair, is where your requirements shall be needed. Follow me.”

We begin to take an elevator down from the maintenance area, and arrive in a moderately sized boxed facility, filled to the brim with cool colored computing hardware, and what appear to be flooded docking bays with orbital vessels similar to the one I arrived in. Before me is a small team of lightly armored squadrons. Mr. Otes goes to their left side to introduce me to them all.

“This will be your designated crew to work with alongside your biggest job ever. They're code-named Iron Coop. The large man with the buzz cut, beard and glasses is Buchanan Higgins.”

“Call me Bucky fer short! Good to meet you, good sir!”

“The properly groomed one next to him is Hollins Azure.”

“Hellooo handsome.”

“The dark haired young lady covered in art is Charis Babs.”

“Don't let the tattoos put you off sweetie, I'm quite friendly if you want me to be.”

Her wink makes me audibly gulp. Thankfully Mr. Otes continues before I have the chance to bumble my introduction.

“And the strapping fit young lady with the curled bun is Jenee Wiles.”

“Southern hospitality, and lord willin', a boot to put in yer face if you cross me. But you seem sweet enough, so welcome darlin'!”

I awkwardly rub the side of my right arm at some of their otherwise flirtatious comments.

“Good to meet you all! I'm Joel, and I look forward to working with all of you. So, Mr. Otes, what exactly is the assignment you have us doing?”

Before he has a moment to get his words processed, he is interrupted and coarsely shoved away by a moderately fit grey haired man with a thick southern accent.

“We're gonna be excavating an uncharted location that was once a civilization people dreamed of being the next Library of Alexandria, because it has something we want. That's where you come into play, fella.”

“*Ahem*, As their team leader, Evan Andre—“

“Captain Even Andrews, Otes. I needn't have to correct you again unless your accent is thicker than my brain power.”

“As...Captain Even Andrews has brashly explained, your mission is to head to an underwater wreckage site that most of society deemed only but a fairy tale from ages past.”

Those words set me in a state of slight confusion, only to come to a sudden realization.

“Unreal....You mean, you've found it? You've...found Ballistire?”

The intercoms chime with an alluring female voice.

“Activity has been detected.”

“Well, shall you see for yourself, Monsieur Alistair?”

BRINK (PT. 3)

By Jordan Watson

Suited up in our hydro-pedal armor, filling our oxygen infused cores, and preparing ourselves within their new mobile suits, we embark within their ship dubbed The Mariner. It charts the course to an additional 3,000 leagues from Aurora Marianus's facility. During the trip, my mind began to wander with several questions. Despite the otherwise friendly demeanor most of the Iron Coop gives off, some of them looked considerably enveloped on the mission at hand. Striking a conversation would seem to be but a fruitless matter, yet thankfully, Bucky seemed welcoming to the idea, and began to strike it up for me.

"Sooo, anyone wanna fill in Joel here about what kind of catch we're about to get wranglin'?"

Hollins impassively speaks out.

"Well, considering the pendant he's been fidgeting with, I'd say he's answering his own question."

Surprised doesn't even cover the multitude of emotions I've felt from Mr. Otes' prior statement. Let alone Hollins being able to recognize my pendant. I can't help but stumble in my reply.

"It...I-It's just astonishing to me, really. A lifelong fable we were told as kids...How is it possible we, well, we're *going* to find out what it holds?"

The friendly atmosphere soon dims by the concise tone from Capt. Even.

"Well, if you'd been paying attention during your training courses with your UDT training, you'd also know about your studies related to the marine life itself."

He pulls out a holographic projection from his watch to show the presentation of their findings.

"Out near the North Pacific Basin, we caught word from some fishing vessels making their shipments from between Necker Ridge's ports, to the Solomon Islands that they had caught some rather unusual fish, to which most would normally only be shown in the Abyssopelagic Zone.

Now that's unusual indeed. I properly interject.

"Wait, but aren't most fish usually within that zone adapted by Abyssal gigantism?"

"Well, you're actually a bit smarter than I initially thought, Alistair. Yes, but here was the asinine part...their size was doubled to what their initial count was upon surfacing. To add to that, they had strange blue illuminated carvings to them. Not like what you saw back at the facility."

Wait...weird lights? It hit me. The description matches perfectly to what Joyce found on one of the dolphins on our ocean trip.

“Please, continue.”

Capt. Even then switches viewpoints from the top down levels of the global shores, down to the varied levels of the ocean.

“Upon careful inspection from several sonar trackers from our submersible division, we picked up intervals to massive waves of activity between July of 2025, to just now within this central location, i.e., the one we're about to reach our embargo to soon. We believe it's related to the amounts of large fish gathering within the aforementioned points of interest of the Pacific Ocean. It very well could be your fabled underwater city come to life.”

Charis feels the need to chime in on the discussion.

“Oh! The one with the Under Treasure? Where we can wish for anything?! Oooh, I want to get some new jewelry talismans!”

Jenee then feels compelled to do the same.

“Oooh, a new farm for my chickens to grow and prosper!”

As the others continue to boast of their wants and needs, before I can crack a bigger smile, the captain puts that to a screeching halt to inform us of our destination.

“Quit yammering on like squawking fu*kin' parrots! We're about to head out!”

The Mariner stops 400 feet away from what looks like a large, pulsating glow of pink light. It presents the darkened outline of what looks to be a massive, monolithic castle sanctuary.

Capt. Even then punches into the ship's computer instructions before speaking into the intercom.

“Launch the orbilites around the outlined site. Commence lighting procedure.”

“Verifying site of interest. Scanning for active life.”

The Mariner begins to transmit a neon blue light to begin its scan of the entire structure, then launches from its side ports hundreds of orbilites to shine upon the nearly pitch black seabed. Amazement filled our whole crew. Lifelong erosion aside, it was unmistakable even to our eyes. A picturesque depiction straight from our children's books. The once glistening coral tower structures on all five points of the castle walls. The intricate snail shell foundations around the walls of the city. The wonderment of the bizarre statues of strange sea creatures even we have not understood by modern science, chiseled in the towns and statues of a once teeming civilization. It's right before us.

“I'll be damned. It's more awesome in person!” as Bucky excitedly put it. Jenee adds to the wonderment.

“Y'all think there'll really be treasures waiting for us?”

Like a prayer to the Gods, The Mariner's central comms come online, with Fabrice helping to answer our call, as everyone begins to gear up in the mobile suits.

“It is precisely why we've sent you all here. Your mission is to not only immerse yourselves within the central confines of Ballistire's lost city, but to seek out the source of its rhythmic pulses of energy. We only hope it will help quell the sudden change in marine life throughout the upper levels of the ocean, and possibly help finish Mr. Aurora's dream.”

Whoa. Seems like I wasn't the only one who wanted to know what lies beyond the fairy tale's walls. Before we dock ourselves in place, I notice Bucky kissing a small statue.

“Good luck charm?” I ask him.

“Heh, sure is. His name is Shadow, and he helps me go through all forms of darkness, no matter where I end up going to.”

“You not a fan of the dark?”

“Eh, not really, but there's another reason why, but I'll tell ya later.”

Hollins can't help but inject to the conversation.

“It's because he loves horses a bit too much.”

“Well screw you too, asshole!”

“Now now children, don't tell me I gotta spank your asses red...” as Jenee passively snips at them both. With everyone strapped in. Capt. Even once again puts the chatter to an abrupt stop.

“Y'all stop acting like steers, and cut the bullshit! We're dropping in T minus ten seconds!”

After he counts down to zero, our mobile suits light up, and proceed to let our own drop docks submerge us into the murky black waters. Just like how I was taught in their UDT department, let the suit sink until indicated by the buoyancy gauge to turn the chest valves, and allow for free flow floating. Thanks to its propulsion tech, we simply take the sides on the pack mantles behind us, and steer ourselves into the open gates of the city walls.

The inner architectures are even more whimsical, despite the bleak ruin. We see to our left the townscape which was once bustling with hermes and hermitels, including the School of Reefs. To the center is the metropolis of Coralpia, filled with the miles long marketplace to Plank Tons with statues of King Primo and his subjects. To the right, spanning an endless amusement park to Atinterraria, one where all can get away to awe in the flying whale acts, the roller coasts of whirlpools, and of course, The Monsunami Dome! As we venture through the underwater graveyard, we notice the pulsating light is closer to the ground level across the end of Coralpia. As we reach its brightest source, we gather around it, realizing what it entails. Capt. Even, despite his blunt remark from the comm breathalyzer, was even shown a sign of ignorance in this situation.

“Well, what are you gawking at? What's it telling y'all?”

We look to one another. The utterance of a singular, collective phrase is all that we muster.

“To all kind, be fish or man, unlock thine seal, unveil what once began. Illuogh ut aquus, ued aquus ef illuogh!”

Every kid knew the story. If you came across its sigil near the center of its city, it would unveil the greatest kept secret of all time. So long as you knew the ancient code. Illuogh ut aquus, ued aquus ef illuogh. It translates to “I am water, and water is I.” The sea floor quaked at our words. It would etch in the same intense pink light of the sea-rune of Ballistire's proud insignia. It then flashed to break apart its ground, and shifted outwards to show the long, winding staircase to the bottom. Entranced by its warm aura, we all propel ourselves once more into its depths. What awaited us was both excitement, and curiosity. We closed in on the horizontal gated door. As we are in hands reach, they look to me to pull its handles apart.

“You....you want *me* to pull it?”

They all nod.

“...Well...here goes.”

As soon as I turn the elongated shell knob, we then find ourselves swirling into a watery vortex down into the mass of light! We then reach impact, as sudden darkness swallows us...

BRINK (PT. 4)

By Jordan Watson

I can feel solid ground. The submersible whirlpool should've jettisoned us into a near bone-crushing fall. Even stranger, is that the atmosphere feels lighter. A massive air pocket? Maybe even an oxygenated room? Is it even logically possible? It certainly feels that way. Our mobile suits activate their emergency contact lights. We can see traces of what looks to be coral debris. But then, just before we would have to consider a struggle to use up our collective internal cores' power, The floor lights up underneath us. The bolting light energy carves its way through varying symmetrical pathways. Even briefly showing some still erected structures, making its way around the entire oval interior, then ending the remaining lights to the far center.

Small sparks of lavender pink flames align the circular row from where we've fallen. It slowly emits more lights around the concave complex, surrounding the shelves of conch shaped bookcases. Tall tail spire shells in perpendicular positions, and decayed doric pillars amassing nearly ten gigantic floors' worth of lined shelves to all the literature the world has yet to lay witness. It would make any bookworm burrow into their own cozy chair, and drink in knowledge even mere mankind have yet to fully swim in their waters. Even the reading chairs are hermit shaped. The light comes full circle, and reaches a titanic chandelier made entirely from deep reef coral, and rare, sparkling amethyst. It all drenches itself in a sweet, flamingo glow. Taking off our helmets to breathe in the fresh saltwater air, our gaze is affixed to the ambiance.

"It's beautiful...just like the books showed us it would." As Charis's breath is taken away.

"One of the greatest finds of all human life." As Hollins contributes to the statement.

Both Bucky and I say in perfect unison.

"The Under Treasure."

Bewitched by the immense scenery, it was but a good 5 minutes before it would be silenced by the distinct activation of a few GROVs shining behind the squad. Captain Even proceeds to activate his mobile suit's holographic projection right in front of us to keep focused on the mission. It's only been a few hours, and already his demeanor seems too condescending for even my own good.

"Team, the mission status we've been updated by A.M. tells us to obtain a specific book that might be the cause of the energy fluctuations. To do so, we're gonna split up into groups of two. Bucky, you'll be with Jenee to cover the ground floor lobby to search the hermit crab shelves and tall tail ones. Hollins will be with Charis to cover the first five floors to each opposing section. Joel and I will cover the last five. Look for a book with this type of physical description, you won't miss it if it's glowing."

Hollins dryly throws in his thoughts on the matter.

Uum, quick question cap, but, if the glow was the same color as the library itself, how will we know to find it, even with the GROVs?”

Captain Even starkly can't contain his impatient tone.

“Through the GROVs' recent ultraviolet sensors, what other reason would you use 'em? Think before you speak! Everyone break!”

Noticeable murmuring aside, the team does just that. Being paired with the captain seems a bit more concerning than it is a relief, even while within the presence of Ballistire's best kept secret. Over the course of 3 hours, even through the team's thorough sweeps, we couldn't really determine the source of the energy's whereabouts. Don't know what felt more awkward, dealing with the captain, or dealing with his absolute silence. It's occasionally broken every 5 to 20 seconds of the comms from the other members. Looking from afar at the 8th floor, to the far, far right of me, I chime into the captain's comm link if he needed help in climbing one of the rotted shelf structures Before I could hear his response, an unusual whisper fills my ears.

“Approach it.”

“...What?”

“*Click* I'm fine. Repeat that last broadcast, Joel? *Click*”

His chatter starts to get drowned out by an ambient droning in my ears, followed by another settling whisper.

“Approach it. To the south. Seven shelves high. Four cases star quarter. Third of its bindings.”
“Wait...are you telling me where it is?”

The comms continue to churn robotic voices on all fronts. Yet the droning becomes more discernible in following its guidance. As I aptly approach it, a convenient shell ladder beside the bookcase is in sight.

Seven shelves up.

I climb up it to slowly wheel my way over to the shelf in question.

Four cases star quarter.

The droning becomes louder.

Third of its bindings.

The spine is coarse in its crustacean coating. The light pulsates familiarity. The verbal hum is known once more.

“Only the first who have witnessed its messenger, may gaze into its mysticism.”

Pulling from its shelf, it shows its ovaled, ruby eye. Frilled in anemone lining. It softly coaxes me further.

“Free it.”

I open the book of its contents...

Swiftly I am met with a blinding white light! This promptly makes me fall from the ladder, and onto the floor! I audibly shout in near hysteria, which surely grabs the attention of the other team members. After wailing in what seemed like hours, in mere minutes they're all swarmed over my body. Bucky puts his hand on my shoulders, shaking me from my mass fit.

“Joel, JOEL! Snap out of it, buddy! What was in that book that made you this way, man?!”

While Charis was raising me up slowly, Even looks down upon the book's cover. To me, it looked familiar. To them, it was unmistakable.

“It's what we've come for, people. Quick, get the GROVs to pick it up, get back to A.M. intel to grab us, and roll out. *Click*, Fabrice, we got the book, but we're gonna need nurse sharks for Joel stat, he seems to have been bli- ”

“I-I, I'm fine, captain. Just...just give me a minute.”

“... *Click* Keep 'em on standby, Fabrice. We're heading back outbound from our current coordinates. Captain Even over and out. *Click*”

Before we even have time to settle our nerves, the GROVs next to the book start to suddenly spark violently upon contact! The shock surprises everyone in unison.

“DEAR GOD! What the he-Sweet spit on the shitter, wh-Aaah!”

With everyone panicking over the now short fused units, the whisper reveals itself once more within my ears.

“You have seen its name...Now...Speak it.”

My open mouth quivers at the thought of its words, yet it compels me to utter it.

“O-O....O...Olarumero...”

HOW I GOT HIRED AT GIANT EAGLE

By Joshua Walburn

On April 21, 2021 a job coach came along to my place with two other colleagues from Achieva. My inclusion liaison, Barbara Graham, works with Giant Eagle to support the recruitment and higher level retention rates produced by the minds of job candidates with autism, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, psychosis, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and many other intellectual disabilities. I was involved in the meeting and they immediately set up an interview for me. When it came to looking for a job, I thought or knew I had it planned.

After graduating from Pittsburgh Public School's City Connections program, I spent two semesters learning about food safety when attending the Community College of Allegheny County for culinary school. I was lucky to attend the CCAC Food Service certificate training program in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic because many people couldn't find jobs due to furloughs. I decided to apply for Giant Eagle. As I got to the interview, there weren't any worries for the need to disclose my disability. They've had the reasonable accommodations already in place. In this job offering process, the only focus was a tour around the store departments with available jobs. This isn't a traditional interview, but I've spoken with HR managers questioning about what their offering. Before the orientation two weeks later, Giant Eagle quickly hired me to work as a Prepared Foods Team Member. My job coach provided me one week of additional training. The skillsets I'm responsible for in this job are: preparation, temperature food storage and product packaging.

In addition to a larger talent pool I bring to the table, special needs hiring programs also allow taxpayers to remove disabled people from public assistance and give these job candidates a chance to contribute to society. Giant Eagle's purpose is about benefiting the overall health and well-being of coworkers, customer satisfaction, diversity, inclusion and how various minds and souls are there to empower society. I like working at Giant Eagle because my bosses understand me for who I am. I don't get bored easily in individualistic tasks and my thoughts drives sustainability. Second, I might inherently be faster at packaging the food while weighing them. Third, I may be less prone to the 'Gambler's Fallacy,' a belief that future probability changes are dependent on the past. An example is that after I complete a task on the boneless buffalo chicken wings, I expect that the next step is to be packing up the salmon meals until a coworker decides what I should do next.

According to Integrate Autism Employment Advisors and Drexel University, about 1.1 million teens with autism will age out of the public school system within the next 10 years. About 79% of young adults on the autistic spectrum are part-time employed averaging \$9.11 per hour. While a growing number of businesses are providing job accessibility to this overlooked talent source, collaborative research for an intervention called “Cognitive Enhancement Therapy” is a potential breakthrough in improving the outcomes for autistic adults, out of the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Social Work and the Department of Psychiatry. The six-year study involved an 18-month randomized trial led by professor Shaun Eack, Ph.D. CET provides a faster thinking toolbox for people with impairments related to executive functioning such as: emotion regulation, decision making, planning and time management. The intervention is also effective among people with schizophrenia.

Giant Eagle has been reaching out to the disability community for more than 30 years. Beyond distribution centers, supermarkets and GetGo gas stations, the Pittsburgh-based grocery giant continues to extend their diversity and inclusion goals with experts from the National Organization on Disability. The company also reports a 95% retention rate among intellectually disabled employees and a perfect Disability Equality Index score as of 2022. Part of this is due to sustainability-driving thoughts and work motivation. Many who are sustained are doing well. We have seen a few other major corporations around the United States launching special needs hiring programs within the past ten years. Businesses such as: Walgreens, Freddie Mac, Microsoft, Kroger and Highmark are continually offering jobs to candidates who struggled with finding employment related to their disability.

In April 2015, Microsoft launched their autism hiring program in which has announced full-time positions with competitive pay at their Redmond-based offices, located about 15 miles east of Downtown Seattle. The company was flooded with thousands of emails and more than 700 resumes after the announcement. In the Steel City, eight employers have addressed a disability friendly work environment. That’s part of what makes Pittsburgh among the best cities for jobs. FedEx Ground, Tobii Dynavox, University of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County hired more than 350 young adults total as of 2018, since the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania launched its ‘21 and Able’ initiative. The program provides assistance from job coaches who are embedded with these employers. In 2013, a Pitt and Carnegie Mellon study drew conclusions that TSA baggage screening is an option for people with autism. The researchers were able to statistically demonstrate the ASD group staying more true to the tasks and the controls who get distracted easily, in an experiment known as the ‘Luggage Screening Task.’

I asked my inclusion liaison, Barbara Graham about her commitment with several important questions. Her reports show that between 2007 and 2013, she recruited 150 job candidates with special needs: 40% are employed by Giant Eagle, 52% are working for other businesses, and 8% are still looking for jobs. Four of the job candidates are graduates from the Pittsburgh Public Schools’ City Connections program.

The sky is the limit. Unlike going to school, the employment possibilities are endless. If you have an IDD diagnosis and are struggling to find a job, please call Achieva to schedule a supports meeting. You will be introduced to Giant Eagle’s onboarding programs recruiters and a job coach. They’ll book you a tour at any convenient location so that you can find an open hiring position. You’re welcome to work at our supermarkets!

SUICIDE FIASCO AND TRAGEDY

A Home Heart of Compassion Wall Decoration



*Story and Color
Photograph by Joseph
Cepek*

This is a fictional tale of an autistic character named Ellerastie Igbolta. Mr. Igbolta lived his entire life in Fenton, Missouri. The other featured persons are fictional as well. They all have real names, yet the central character has an unusual name due to him being the one of special interest in this disturbing and tragic-ending-to-this-drama. The dates and the place are real. Born on Wednesday, July 3, 1957, he was the middle child of three (3) children. His siblings include an older sister named Ellen and a younger brother named Grendel. Ellen died in 2019 at the age of sixty-eight (68) due to complications of heart disease. Grendel still lives in the Fenton area. Neither of Igbolta's siblings married. They had dated in the past. Yet, Ellerastie was the only one who received an autism diagnosis.

Igbolta was a fifty-eight (58)-year-old single white male. There was no dating or marital history during his lifetime. Igbolta was five feet seven inches tall (5'7") while never weighing more than one-hundred and sixty (160) pounds. Straight black hair and a thin pencil mustache further featured in his adult physical appearance. This also was truthful at the time of his death. A diagnosis of autism came when he was aged thirty-nine (39) years from his personal care physician (PCP). EI (his first and last name initials) was verbal yet he did not speak with a Southern drawl accent. Neither one of his siblings did (do) either.

None of the Igbolta children ever went to college. Neither did the parents.

When he was growing up, advanced technology gadgetry was not in existence. These include smartphones, iPads, as well as online social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Igbolta did not have extended reading skills. Therefore, he had difficulty understanding many things which he attempted to read on a daily basis. Throughout his lifetime, he never had any genuine friends or acquaintances. This was unfortunate despite him being a genuinely kind and thoughtful person.

When he was twenty-two (22) years old, he earned his General Education Diploma (GED). In the process of doing so, he had an arduous time grasping the required coursework which was necessary for him to earn his diploma. Written examinations were equally as rigorous for him to adequately comprehend and pass with needed scores. Due to him struggling with the presented information, he had to retake some of the required written tests. This was the case for the Mathematics, Biology, Foreign Language (French), and World History assessments that he needed to pass. Fortunately, he passed each of these examinations with a “C” letter grade. This was his best performance even though he tried so painstakingly hard to study the needed material for each course in which he was enrolled. Being a slacker and lazy about his schoolwork were certainly not personal behavior traits of his.

After getting his diploma in 1979, he vowed that he would never attempt to pursue further formal education endeavors. The trying journey in order to earn his GED was enough for him.

However, after the twenty-first (21st) century began, he ever so gradually became feeling overwhelmed by the path of communication technology advancement. As an unfortunate consequence, he increasingly began reasoning that he could never keep up with all of the burgeoning complexity of technology devices and online communication forums. His limited reading skills contributed to him feeling more and more intimidated by such sophisticated technology offerings.

Finally, he decided that he needed to escape from a world which he could never seem to keep up with properly. After much thought and thorough consideration, he wrote a shockingly tragic suicide note. The grim message was written as is follows,

“To Anyone who Finds This Explanation, I cannot survive in a world where I am apparently unable to keep up with all of the information in a post-modern society. I have tried so hard to successfully read books that I am interested in due to me being unable to grasp the authors’ words no matter how much I work at comprehending the printed material. This also applies to magazines, brochures, online webpages, booklets, and household appliance owner’s manuals. This is altogether frustrating and demoralizing for me. I just cannot go another day in this tortuous life of mine. I am sorry that I will leave behind others around me (Ellen and Grendel), but I need to check out of this awful life that I never ever wanted in the first place. I hope that God truly forgives me for what I am about to do to myself.”

Igbolta knew the black ballpoint ink pen print-worded note would be found on the table by his body in the bedroom where he shot himself in the mouth with a personal handgun on Friday, September 18, 2015. The concerned siblings discovered the grisly death scene four (4) days after he had killed himself. A local coroner determined that EI had died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound some one-hundred hours (100) hours before his corpse was discovered. There were no illicit drugs or alcohol specimens found in his digestive system organs.

Ellen's demise four (4) years later was partially attributed to severe depression and grief over Ellerastie's shocking suicide. Now sixty-one (61), Grendel still receives outpatient psychiatric and spiritual therapy to help cope with both of his siblings' and parents' deaths. Their parents, Lester and Thelma (maiden name Eckler) had passed away in 2006 and in 2010 respectively. There had been no suicides in the family as far back as Ellen and Grendel could recall though depression ran through several family members' mental health histories to a certain (individualized) extent. Both parents died from natural causes due to advanced age. The father and mother had lived to ages ninety-seven (97) and ninety-nine (99) respectively. One of the mom's siblings had even made it to age one-hundred and three (103).

In reality, technology need never be the cause of one taking one's own life no matter how complex such gadgetry gets in the future. I myself struggle with being updated with the numerous technology avenues and also feel intimidated by such things in real life. Yet, I would never kill myself if I never successfully am able to keep up with everything there is to know about communications technology in the future. Nobody should ever feel he or she needs to commit suicide over not being able to master all of the world's manmade technology no matter how advanced it may become in the coming years. Nothing can be further from the truth. People lived for millennia without such gadgetry. They kept on with life by and large. 2022 living should be approached with the same collective attitude.

Additionally, this is undeniably true no matter the level of one's formal education or reading skill proficiency. Preserving life as much as is possible should always be the main goal for each and every person. This is no matter what each individual's abilities are. No one is insignificant or a failure as a human being. All of us have varying levels of skills and opportunities in our individual lifetimes. One who never finished high school and has limited reading skills is NOT inferior to one who has a Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) and can read through a one-thousand (1,000)-page book in less than a week's time with excellent comprehension. Not everyone is able to achieve the same formal education and vocational success levels. Financial, social opportunity, and learning capabilities are certainly NOT uniformly equal from one person to another. Worthiness as a person does not depend on these factors at all. One being autistic or non-autistic additionally does not factor in the ultimate worth of each person's worthiness to live in a happy and contented manner. Understanding our differences should enable us all to feel more interconnected with one another since we all are humans with unique levels of gifts and talents.

A FESTIVE CAKE REVIEW

*Color Photographs and
Commentary by Joseph Cepek*

My mom purchased a seven-inch layer cake on Tuesday, May 17, 2022. Lincoln Bakery is located in the community of Bellevue. The food service site's formal address is 543 Lincoln Avenue Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15202. This community is located outside of Pittsburgh. The business is a family-owned affair which has operated since 1945. Since it is an independent bakery shop, the prices can be higher on some items than in most chain-run stores.

"Heavenly Cakes and Pastries" and "Out of this World in Flavor and Texture" describe their numerous confections of sweetness. This probably explains the haloed angel facial image. The angelic smile might be referring to the angel's positive response after eating one of the delicious products.

The cake which my mom bought cost her \$15. Despite its diminutive size, its overall taste and presentation appearance is an eight out of ten in my personal opinion. An invented rating scale of mine goes like this: one for terrible and ten for excellent. I liked that the chocolate and vanilla icing was sweet but not too sweet. The matching cake mix batters were moist and easy to swallow. I wish there had been colored sprinkles and drawn pastry icing balloons (plus icing flowers due to May being a Spring month) on the cake's top part. I remember seeing these additions put on previously decorative cakes.

The worker who sold my mom the cake told her that the boss would not allow any counter attendant employee to use a pastry bag to write "Happy Birthday!" on the top of a little pastry item. My mom wanted to treat my dad and I to a sweet treat due to it being her birthday. I believe this particular company rule is weird. I additionally believe that the cake is too expensive for how small it is. The cake is neither gluten nor sugar free.



Title: May 17 Birthday Cake.jpg



Title: Tasty Birthday Cake.jpg

IMAGINARY CAMERA MIND STATION AT BUBBLES ON ROYAL

By Joseph Cepek

When I went to obtain twenty quarters from a five-dollar Federal Reserve Note on Tuesday, August 9, 2022, I envisioned a U.S. Treasury printing press template device suddenly appearing in front of me. Simultaneously, two connected printing templates both came out of the floor and out of the ceiling in a laundromat room in Shaler (in the northern suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) in order to legally duplicate the actual existing \$5 bill that I had on my personhood on that particular day. The upper template had black, green, and yellow ink jet printing compartments. The lower one had black, green, purple, and yellow ink jet compartments.

I placed both the front and reverse sides on a rectangular wooden panel (black) shelf which perfectly fitted the width of the \$5 currency piece as my mobile Behavioral Support Specialist (BSS) clinician and I once again viewed the intricate numbers, ink colors, and wordings on the paper currency note as we had done a few minutes earlier in her personal vehicle. I debated with her as to whether I should put the \$5 piece with Abraham Lincoln's pictorial likeness facing up toward us (heads) or the reverse side's printed Lincoln Memorial replica (tails) into the "cash-to-coins" changing machine's paper bill feeder.

I turned the bill on the heads side and then on the tails side as we looked at each side for a few seconds apiece. I silently suggested giving the bill's tail side to one of the machine's two feeder apparatuses. She suggested the bill's head side. I went with my internal instinct and gave the machine's feeder the bill's tail side. The machine took the bill and proceeded to give me twenty quarters (an equivalent to \$5 dollars in paper currency).

Going back to the fantasy-based mental envisioning of the U.S. Treasury machine instantaneously appearing in my imaginary mind-set just a few minutes before I gave the machine the \$5-dollar bill, I believe it is a normal creative edge to the human mind, that is, in the imagined creation of harmless mental motion-picture videos of the real-life Federal Reserve Note printing process. This is while fantasizing about these printing press machines appearing in an unrelated public place such as at a local laundromat.

I used the coins to purchase clothing items at a local Goodwill retail store in Cheswick (also in the Pittsburgh area). I used the same laundromat machine on Thursday, August 4, 2022, in order to receive quarters so that I could get extra quarters to wash, rinse, and spin dry personal clothing articles. I placed four separate \$1-dollar bills side by side on the perfectly framed rectangular wooden panel located below the "bill-to-coin" changer machine's paper currency feeder apparatuses. I did not have the imaginary U.S. Treasury bank note video unexpectedly play in my mind shortly before giving the \$1-dollar bills' tails sides into one of the machine's feeders. Similar to August 9, I silently debated on putting either George Washington's printed likeness (heads) or the pyramids and bald eagle likenesses (tails) into one of the "bill-to-coin" changer machine's feeders. Also, as was the occasion on August 9, I elected to go with the bills' tails parts.

The difference, in my opinion, may have resulted from a dialogue conversation with my BSS therapist about the U.S. paper currency printing process and the special inks which are used to prevent counterfeiters from illegally duplicating paper currency pieces. I had this conversation with her on August 9, which occurred just before we went into the laundromat facility. I believe that this was the direct catalyst which may very well have sparked my brain to get especially creative. This is in regards to the imagined printing device video playing in my internal mind-set. I did not have this specific conversation with my then-CS clinician on August 4.

Bubbles on Royal, which is located at 805 Mount Royal Boulevard, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15223, is the location where the imaginary video in my brain occurred on August 9, 2022. I certainly believe the human brain and how it sometimes peculiarly operates is undoubtedly a fascinating concept to attempt to understand. I correctly assume countless others would agree with me here. Yet, I do not believe the imagined images and thoughts were extraordinary (out-of-the-ordinary). That is, in attempting to mentally visualize how paper bank notes are created in the U.S. Treasury Department's confines. Additionally, the thoughts and mental images occurring right after discussing the topic with another person are normal and understandable. I hope others will take a refreshing delight in reading my writing effort here.

This is a case-in-point explanation of the brain being creative in a normal and harmless manner.

Cropped BSS iPhone Images



Lincoln Heads



Lincoln Tails



Cropped BSS iPhone Image

A PERFECT WOMAN FOR AN IMPERFECT MAN

By Andrew Olsavicky

In the past I have written articles which give my opinion on various subjects and in some cases ask for support in spreading causes I feel need to happen. This time however I am writing a call out to people to help me find someone with whom I can find true love and have a good life. I do this in the hopes that someone who reads this will find the girl who is best for me and let me know about her so I can be happy. I also have a strong belief that by putting my description of this woman in writing that I will find this person, especially since I saw her in a dream. In the dream she called herself "Ataru" (Ah-Tar-Ooh) and I felt a deep connection with her. It is my belief she exists out there. Though not much was said to me in the dream, I hope to find her regardless of what her true name is based on the following note of how I would describe my perfect woman.

- Her name is very beautiful
- Born with an Asian heritage
- Her family is wealthy and powerful
- She is very beautiful inside and out
- She has a thing for men that are different
- My appearance does not matter to her
- She vows that she would be the perfect partner/wife/friend to he who is her true love
- When she meets me I'd be perfect for her
- Together we would have an relationship that would go beyond any and all existence, with no way for us to be separated from each other for any period of time
- We would be so in-tuned with each other that at times we would think and act as one without hesitation
- Our decisions would be perfect as would our lives both together and individually, as it will also be for our loved ones, with no fear for and or from anything
- She and I would live with no regrets at all

- Just as she would be to me I would become the man of her dreams
- We will meet and fall in love immediately
- We will use our great riches and influence for good
- We will forever be living the “Good Life”

I strongly believe that this woman exists out in the world somewhere and if anyone knows where I can find her please let me know. You will find my name as the author of this article and as I write this I currently work at the “Dollar Tree” in Cranberry Township, PA 16066. Please help me find my True Love. I have a deep belief that this will help me to do so.

DISNEY MOVIES AND THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY BELT SYSTEM

By Amelia Krzton

Just this past fall, I began to associate some of my favorite Disney movies in the early to mid 1990s and one in the late 1990s with the different colored belts in the Allegheny County Belt System. The Red Belt corresponds to *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the Orange Belt corresponds to *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the Yellow Belt corresponds to *Aladdin* (1992), the Green Belt corresponds to *The Lion King* (1994), the Blue Belt corresponds to *Pocahontas* (1995), and the Purple Belt corresponds to *Mulan* (1998). *NOTE: "Blackhole" years, meaning uninteresting weather years, of 1996 and 1997 are not included.*

To show how passionate I am about this theory, I have already made 2 YouTube video series on 2 of my favorite passions combined. My first video from this past Halloween was entitled "Aladdin and the Yellow Belt", which is a 2-part video series due to an overload of data on my phone. Luckily, I missed out on some non-memorable parts that day, such as YouTuber Cruising Pittsburgh going through a detour in Hampton Township and Abu touching the forbidden treasure as Aladdin was finding the magic lamp in the Cave of Wonders. Also, when I was filming my second video from New Year's Day entitled "The Lion King and the Green Belt", and we got to the Hampton Township part, we got to the sad Mufasa death scene in the movie, which I tried to tune out while filming the video. This will lead to an unpopular opinion about Hampton Township, even though it is one of the top suburbs in Allegheny County.

However, both of the "falling in love" scenes occur when cruising and going away from the Allegheny River, such as going through Harmar Township and Oakmont during Aladdin's romantic scene, including crossing the Hulton Bridge over the Allegheny River. During The Lion King's romantic scene, the cruise went down Allegheny River Boulevard and Sandy Creek Road in Penn Hills, which are both routes to signify my childhood on my way to my now deceased grandparents' old house in Churchill. So, that personally makes the scenes even better, in my opinion!

MORE SPRING AND SUMMER ACTIVITIES

By Amelia Krzton

In the dead of winter, it is a perfect time to reflect on memories of warmer weather in the spring and summer! This even includes different favorite activities to do. Here are some excerpts from 3 female Pittsburgh's Perfect Parties clients reflecting on their best activities to do in the spring and summer.

Allison Brawner is a junior at Carnegie Mellon University. In the 7th grade, she enjoyed playing Chopped, Jr. in the borough of Bridgeville. Chopped, Jr. is named after the famous cooking show on the Food Network. One of the most popular recipes that Allison and her friends enjoyed making together was pizza. Three months later, during the summer of 2014, she and her friends went to the dollar store in Moon Township near the Pittsburgh International Airport to look at some fun supplies to use during their time together.

Twins Kaitlyn and Colleen Marioni are both in the 10th grade at Shady Side Academy. In the 7th grade, they enjoyed going to Riverside Park in Oakmont. Not to mention, this was during the Allegheny River-themed Memorial Day weekend that year due to doing various activities with my friends in different neighborhoods along the Allegheny River. Three months later, they wrote and acted out a play about what it is like to be twin sisters in the borough of Plum, which is just south and east of Oakmont.

Abigail Mifflin is a junior at Chatham University. Despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, she tried her best to make the spring and summer of 2020 memorable for her. The April activity was considered to be in the red phase, which was the bonfire in McCandless Township. The May activity was considered to be in the yellow phase, which was bowling in Reserve Township. The activities during the summer months were considered to be in the green phase, which included breaking open a piñata in Sewickley, a squirt gun battle in Sharpsburg, and making a fake snowman in Zelienople, which is part of Butler County.

NEW SNACKTIME RECIPES

By Amelia Krzton

In the last article, recall how I talked about a Pittsburgh's Perfect Parties concession stand, which we did earlier this week! Since we really didn't have too much to sell that day, I would like to talk about the snacks that I made all by myself from the Taste of Home website, which is the same website that my systematic skill builder, Emily Bogesdorfer, printed out recipes for me from. So far, I have made stuffed peanut butter and jelly French toast kabobs for a breakfast treat. I have also made fruit and cheese kabobs, frozen chocolate monkey treats, which are basically chocolate-covered bananas, festive apple dip made with cream cheese, peanut butter, brown sugar, vanilla extract, mini marshmallows, and hot fudge dip, peanut-marshmallow popcorn, peanut butter and granola pinwheels for another breakfast treat, and fruit juice pops made with, well, fruit juice.

One snack that I haven't quite made that I would like to try making is the White Chocolate Party Mix made with Cheerios and Chex cereal along with peanuts, M&Ms, and of course, white chocolate chips. Making these snacks has really cut down on my budget in the past few weeks when I was tempted to spend money on miscellaneous snacks from one of my local convenience stores. One of the benefits of making all of these homemade snacks besides saving money is the nutritional value of all of these snacks. For example, I have something useful to eat with my apples when I make Festive Apple Dip and I have something useful to eat with my bananas when I make Frozen Chocolate Monkey Treats. Not to mention, I also use the bananas for my favorite to-go breakfast treat, which is a Banana Dog, which is also a banana on a bun, with peanut butter and jelly for condiments. I consider this to be cheaper than buying breakfast every day. Whether online or in one of my nutrition books, it is always fun to try new healthy recipes. If you give them a try, you will find and try something new that you might like! Overall, I enjoy making new recipes at snacktime. They are overall very tasty and very delicious!

UPCOMING PITTSBURGH'S PERFECT PARTIES SLUMBER PARTIES

By Amelia Krzton

2022 has officially arrived, and with a new year comes a new internship! This internship was rather different from the past 2 years, as the activities were more spontaneous than planned. Pitt freshman Julia Robison hosted a “Cook-Over” sleepover on January 15, Chatham University junior Abigail Mifflin hosted a “Makeover and Spa Night” sleepover on February 19, Shady Side Academy 10th grader Madison Dayley hosted a “Fashion Show” sleepover on March 19, Shady Side Academy 8th grader Grace Luster hosted a “Dance Party” sleepover on April 16, Shady Side Academy 9th grader Isabella Black hosted an “Activity First then Sleepover” sleepover on May 21 featuring bowling across the river at Zone 28, Shady Side Academy 12th grader Sarah Ching hosted a “Camp-Over” sleepover on June 18, Shady Side Academy 11th grader Jill Moser will be hosting a “Beach Party” sleepover on July 16, Shady Side Academy 10th grader Hannah Mifflin hosted a “Hotel” sleepover on August 20, Carnegie Mellon University junior Allison Brawner hosted a “Boy/Girl Party” sleepover on September 17, Pitt alumni Brooke Leesaw hosted a “Scary” sleepover on October 15, Shady Side Academy 6th grader Samantha Mifflin will be hosting a “Movie Night” sleepover on November 19, and Shady Side Academy 7th grader Lauren Bennett will be hosting a “Holiday” sleepover on December 17.

As for recipes that everyone chose for the “Cook-Over” sleepover this month, Julia is making Strawberry Cream Floats, and her 4 best friends each chose a recipe to make as well. Jennifer Preager is making Sleeping Bag Blondies, Sloan Culleiton is making Bananas Foster Crunch Mix, Sasha Beanie is making Marbled Orange Fudge, and Erin Thomson is making Rainbow Cupcakes. Activities will also include watching some episodes of the TV show Chopped on the Food Network and crafting their own aprons prior to making their snacks. All of these recipes came from the article from Taste of Home, in which I tried many more of these recipes and ate them myself.

PICK ONE, KICK ONE PITTSBURGH EDITION

By Amelia Krzton

1. North Side or South Side
2. University of Pittsburgh or Carnegie Mellon University
3. Kennywood Park or Pittsburgh Zoo
4. PNC Park or Heinz Field
5. Carnegie Museum of Art and Natural History or Carnegie Science Center
6. Sandcastle Water Park or Station Square
7. Monroeville Mall or South Hills Village Mall
8. North Hills or South Hills
9. Beaver County or Westmoreland County
10. Butler County or Washington County
11. Ohio Valley or Allegheny Valley
12. Route 28 or Interstate 376
13. Three Rivers Arts Festival or Picklesburgh
14. Ross Park Mall or Pittsburgh Mills Mall
15. Aiello's or Mineo's
16. Eat n Park or Pamela's Diner
17. Incline or T
18. Waterworks or Waterfront
19. Route 65 or Route 8
20. West to Ohio or east to Harrisburg on the Pennsylvania Turnpike
21. Schenley Park or Frick Park
22. Squirrel Hill or Shadyside
23. Benedum Center or Heinz Hall
24. National Aviary or Phipps Conservatory
25. Dave and Andy's or Milkshake Factory
26. Pierogies or halushki



Artwork by Daniel H. Ashkin

THE LIFE OF JOHN DENVER

By Daniel H. Ashkin

Henry John Deutshendorf Jr. was born on October 12, 1942 and died in a small airplane crash in 1997. He was an American folk hero and a country song writer. He played as an Actor in the Muppet Movies and Oh God. John Denver was best known as an activist and humanitarian for the environment.

In the 1960s, John began singing in the group called the Trios. He was the most popular folk artist in the 70s with major hits such as "*Rocky Mountain High.*" During his lifetime, he has produced over 33 albums and sold over 33 million in revenue. The theme of John Denver's music was to assist people to live life in harmony with nature. Flying played an important role in his music. It represented the role of freedom, and of animals to become wild in their habit.

Some of John Denver's greatest songs were the following: They included "*Take me home, Country Roads,*" "*Annie Song*" and "*Rocky Mountain High.*" Other famous songs were "*Country Road,*" "*Thank God I'm a Country Boy*" and "*Sunshine on Shoulders.*" I also enjoy listening to the songs "*My Sweet Lady*" and "*I 'Sorry.*"



Besides playing music, John Denver has played a major part in producing documentaries about our environment. John Denver produced a documentary called "*Let this be a Voice*" (1998) before he died in a small air plane crash. In his documentary, John has traveled with Jacques-Yves Cousteau's boat. to search the unknown depths of the sea for unknown creatures. The explorer searched for unknown

sea creatures all over the world before he died. After John Denver went skin diving with him, he wrote a beautiful song to honor the famous explorer's name. The name of the song was "*Calypso*." The famous explorer wanted mankind to take care of our oceans; as John Denver wanted to preserve our wildlife.

John Denver played a major role in writing the Alaska Land Act in 1980 to save Alaska's environment. Before the 1980s, major oil companies were causing some damage to Alaska's environment. John Denver wanted to preserve the wildlife, the culture, and the mountains of our 48th state. After President Carter signed the bill, John Denver gave a speech to the audience on why it is important to save and conserve our wildlife. The Alaska Land Act Bill has given 100 million acres of wildlife for the public lands. Furthermore, the bill has given Alaska dozens of new national parks and wildlife refuges for the public to camp.



From the Learning Tree Project website, children can learn many things through watching movies about wildlife and hiking through the woods. They are learning the following important lessons about life: participating in the environment helps youngsters in many positive ways in their life. For example, it may likely address the problems of obesity, attention deficit, and childhood's depression. When a group of children are walking through the woods, they are learning new skills in science, technology and mathematics. From observing the wild life, it assists them in solving new ways in critical thinking. Finally, children learn new ways to recycle our natural resources through the use of energy efficiency and water conservation.

In 1997, John Denver died in an amateur plane crash off Monterey Bay in his experimental amateur aircraft. Looking at John Denver's amazing life, the audience will likely appreciate his amazing talent in music and the environment. John Denver was known as the greatest country folk singer of all time during the 1970s. He has played major roles in the Muppet Movies and Oh God. John Denver has produced numerous documentaries about saving our environment. Finally, John Denver has given us new insights on ways to conserve our environment.

HOW ARTIFICIAL COLORS IN FOOD AFFECT CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR

WHAT ROLE DOES THE VESTIBULAR AND CEREBELLUM SYSTEM PLAY IN ATTENTION DEFICIT?

By Daniel H. Ashkin

In this article, I am going to demonstrate how different types of artificial colors in your food affect your child's behavior. Second, what are the physical and the emotional side effects of eating artificial dyes in our foods? Third, what role can these colors play in children's allergies? Furthermore, what role does the Vestibular System and the Cerebellum play in our attention deficit?

Dr. Rebeca Bevans has given a speech on Ted Talks about how her child suffers hyperactivity from eating yellow and red dyes in foods. She holds a degree in the field of neuropsychology. After Dr. Rebeca's child suffered hyperactivity, she removed all the artificial colors in her family's foods. After a few weeks of her experiment, she found that her child became much calmer.

Some of the most common food colors are found in these types of food. They are cupcakes, candy, soda, mouthwash, and popcorn. You can find artificial colors in commercial frosting, pudding, and flavor drinks. MSG is commonly found in soups, broths, and some of the Chinese Foods that Americans commonly eat every day. When you eat these types of foods by an accident, they may likely cause painful headaches and severe neck pain from the NY Allergy & Sinus Center. Other types of reactions could likely be swelling of the lips, tongue, and the neck.

I want the reader to listen very carefully about this statistic on how this type of chemicals is destroying our children's future. The following statistics came from the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment in Oakland, CA. When the research examined children between the ages of 8 and 17 years old, they found that 11% of children have been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. Alarmingly, 10% percent of the children will likely develop behavior problems if they continue eating junk food all day. When the group surveyed families in poverty, they found that 21% of parents have given their sons and daughters junk food instead of healthy food.

When moms and dads go to the supermarkets, they must read the labels very carefully for food dyes. According to Dr. Rebeca Bevans, the parent's children may likely act calmer if their children avoid all the junk food in their diet. However, I feel that the kids may need to see a psychiatrist for medication for further help in calming down. Next, I am going to discuss how the vestibular system and the cerebellum may likely play a major role in your child's attention deficit.

The Vestibular System plays a critical role in our special orientation of the following our sense organs. They include balance, posture, alertness, and our eye movements. The Vestibular System receives information from the brain and the central nervous system. After the Vestibular System receives the information, it plays essential roles in our ability for our head to move right, left, up, and down. It plays an essential role in our ability to move backwards and forwards.

When the Vestibular system and cerebellum are not working well together in children and adults, adults and children need more **time to do everyday tasks in their lives**. For instance, when I am cleaning my house, it takes me more lateral, visual, and vertical movements to complete a simple task. Because of the excess movements in performing everyday chores, children and adults may likely experience dizziness and anxiety in cleaning their own houses and apartments.

How does the vestibular system play a major role in our child's learning today...? When the vestibular system does not work well properly in your inner ear and brain, it is very difficult to listen to verbal instructions from your teachers. When I am unable to listen to verbal instructions from my teachers, I feel angry at myself. The next major problem with a poor vestibular system is poor eye movements. Reading, writing, and looking at your teacher become an extremely difficult task unless the children are medicated by your psychiatrists.

Eye and head exercise can likely reduce some of the vertical and lateral eye exercises and neck exercises. However, the eye exercises do not relieve the problem one-hundred percent. Changing weather can likely make the problem worse in the city of Pittsburgh. For example, when the temperature drops suddenly in Pittsburgh, his or her balance may likely get worse during a period of 12 to 24 hours.

Before the reader makes a final judgment on the cures for their child's hyperactivity, he or she must see a neurologist or psychiatrist for an opinion. Furthermore, a balance test is essential for complete diagnoses for the problem. I found this website at griffinot.com/vestibular on the internet.

In summary, the two problems never go away completely in one's life.

WHY DRINKING SODA EVERY DAY IS DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH

By Daniel H. Ashkin

I am going to write a small article on why drinking carbonated beverages is dangerous to your health. According to the American College Rheumatology Annual Meeting in Washington D.C. they show the following reports: When a person drinks carbonated drinks every day, they have a very good chance of getting osteoarthritis in 20 years. The Nurse Health Study I and II did a study in the country of Sweden on the effects of carbonated beverages on women in their country. The study surveyed 190,000 persons who have drunk carbonated beverages more than once a day for twenty years. After the study was completed, they have found that 63% of women would likely develop rheumatoid arthritis. In simple forms, 60 out of hundred would likely develop this disease in a large classroom. In a simpler form, 6 out of 10 of your friends who drank carbonated soda every day will likely develop severe knee pain, hip problems, and other symptoms.

Unless a person stops drinking carbonated beverages every day, they might suffer the following side effects. Occurring to youtube.com videos, some of the side effects may likely be hip problems, back problems, and knee problems. Furthermore, carbonated beverages may likely increase the likelihood of getting high cholesterol and hyperactivity in adults and children. Because he or she drinks soda every day, my friend is walking with bad hips and knees after 20 year of seeing them. When you drink soda every day, he or she may likely suffer tooth decay. After your teeth fall out, they can likely cost over thousands of dollars to replace their teeth. When your teeth fall out, you can suffer an inflammation of the gums. This could likely lead to an infection.

I suffer from TMJ disorder. When I eat too many sweets during the day, my jaw could likely go into spasm later in the day. I have seen my mother's back go into spasms when she is eating too much cake. Unfortunately, none of the doctors can prescribe a magic cure for a person. The following Websites come from Arthritis-Health and Youtube.com articles.

In summary, the article teaches the reader the dangers of drinking too many carbonated drinks. Some of the long term side effects are knee, hip arthritis, and your teeth falling out as you get older. Today, I am seeing some of my friends with bad hips and knees who drink soda for many years. Do you want to live a life of terrible pain after 50 and 60 years old? By eating a low-sugar diet, you can reduce some of the symptoms of arthritis when you get older.





Photography by Maggie Jones



Photography by Maggie Jones



*Poem and Photography by
Delaine Swearman*

Don't Look Under the Lid

I can just put the lid over myself
And no one will see the tiny bubbles,
The soup of life simmering inside.
Add heat and the soup begins to boil.

No one takes notice
Until the dramatic moment
When the boiling soup overflows,
The lid no longer able to contain
All the chaos inside.



Photography by Delaine Swearman

SETTLING INTO MIDDLE AGE

By Delaine Swearman

What is middle age? I guess it would be defined as the years of life between youth and when I am considered a senior citizen. These are the years when my body parts start showing signs of malfunction. I am starting to develop arthritis, bursitis, and tendinitis. But the most telling sign that I have entered middle age is my wisdom. I have lived and learned from the experiences of half a lifetime. I have lived in history, in a world that the youthful generations cannot fathom.

My advice for the young is to point out what has worked for me and to encourage them to find their own solutions, but I don't want to walk them through every single step.

I am tired, and I'm interested in the straightforward and least stressful route, not taking a rocky detour to catch every single sight along the way.

But when needed, I also have a bank of knowledge, a brain full of creativity, and a collection of useful things in my garage. I'm not afraid to embrace a new challenge, because I don't care so much about what others think of me.

I look around and see nothing of real value in my home. My priorities have changed as I realize material goods are meaningless. I am less concerned with pettiness, and now ponder my role in the societal issues challenging the world today.

I am sometimes overwhelmed by the weight of the world. I can no longer lay claim to the carefree attitude of youth. I am older now and I have become wise.

Mirage

By Delaine Swearman

At the edge of my consciousness
I am neither here nor there,
Neither asleep,
Nor awake.
My thoughts flit back and forth
As they swirl, mix, mingle.
They are rolled together like dough.
Are the elements of my dream real?
Or are the things of life a dream?
In my languid state I wouldn't know.

JOB SUCCESS DESPITE DISABILITIES

By Zach Grabowski

Many people struggle to find work because of their disabilities. For me, I am blind, hearing impaired, on the Autism Spectrum, and epileptic. The following is my story.

I worked for a company called Diamond Kinetics. Diamond Kinetics is an organization that specializes in technology for baseball and softball. I worked at their warehouse located in Penn Hills. Diamond Kinetics was a small group employment opportunity through Progress City. Everyone who worked there was on the Autism Spectrum. If you were looking for small group employment through Progress City, you could have worked as little as one day per week for three hours to start. I worked there every Wednesday afternoon.

I constructed PitchTracker softballs and baseballs, then packaged and shrink wrapped them for shipment. In addition to baseballs and softballs there are swing trackers that track how far the ball is hit and its speed. There are mounts that go on top of the bats and chargers for the swing trackers, which have a couple parts to them. The parts include round discs that are shaped like hockey pucks and O-rings that go with the chargers. These smart balls with their technology are used in major league baseball, as well as college and high school baseball and softball. It is really neat! I enjoyed my job! I worked there from December of 2021 through June of 2022. My staff from Hanlon Therapy and Progress City supported me on the job. My co-workers were all very nice and helpful to me.

Progress City is no longer providing small group employment through the Autism Waiver. I am now looking to seek competitive employment.

RITTER'S DINER ENVIRONMENTAL GROUP BREAKFAST REVIEW

By Zach Grabowski

For the 2022 Pittverse summer/fall edition's Foodie Call our Environmental Small Group chose seasonal foods. I went to Ritter's Diner in Bloomfield for breakfast with a fellow Pittverse writer. I had the pumpkin pancakes with whipped cream and a side of bacon. The pumpkin pancakes were amazing! If you ever find yourself at Ritter's Diner I would highly recommend the pumpkin pancakes! My food came in a timely manner and it was reasonably priced. The wait staff were very friendly and helpful! My staff person who went with me to Ritter's described the restaurant and the table as clean.



INTRODUCING THE PIRATE ANNOUNCER AND PENGUIN ORGANIST

By Zach Grabowski

I had the honor of interviewing Tim DeBacco, Public Address Announcer for the Pittsburgh Pirates and Organist for the Pittsburgh Penguins.

As a PA Announcer for the Pittsburgh Pirates, Tim's job is to announce the players up at bat. For instance, he will say "#21, Roberto Clemente." Tim's love for baseball began at a young age. He always paid attention to the announcers at the games and his dream was to one day become a Public Address Announcer himself. At the age of 23, Tim learned that the Public Address Announcer for the Pirates was leaving and there was an open position. Tim applied and has been working in the position ever since.

II asked Tim how he prepares before and after every Pirate game. If it is a 1:05 P.M. game, he arrives at the ballpark before 10:30 A.M. and reads and records the scripts that give the names of the players from both teams. He familiarizes himself with anyone who might be in the pre-game ceremony and any persons or groups who perform the National Anthem. He will also meet with the producers before-hand to discuss any changes that may happen.



At 11:30 A.M., Tim takes a 30-minute lunch break. At around 12 P.M., he will review the recordings he has made over and over again. He likes to make sure he has the correct pronunciation, and everything sounds perfect. He makes his first announcement at around 12:40-12:45 P.M right before the 1:05 P.M. game.

Once the game is over, Tim reads the totals, which tell the fans the number of hits, runs, how many men were on base, the winning and losing pitchers, the length of the game, and the number of paid attendees. He also gives a brief overview of the next game and closes the day by saying "Please drive home safely."

The Pirates have other PA Announcers, including Dave Shinsky, Rick Dayton, Andrew Stockey, Larry Richert, and Guy Junker.

Tim shared that his favorite part of announcing for the Pirates is that he gets to sit in beautiful PNC Park with its spectacular view of the city and he gets compensated for it. When I asked Tim if there was anything he doesn't like about his job with the Pirates, he explained that he had to give up close to half of his summer nights and be away from his family. He typically would announce 81 home games a year and would miss out on family activities. The positive aspect, as a result, is that he has a wife and two daughters who are very understanding of his schedule. He could not have done it without their support.

In the 2022 Pirate season Tim cut back on announcing and only announces week afternoon games before 4 P.M. There are only about 12 week afternoon games at home.

I asked Tim if he ever gets to interact with the players, and he doesn't. Although, when the Pirates played at the Three Rivers Stadium many years ago, he did several promotions out on the field where he did have the honor of interacting with the players. Now, Tim just goes straight to his perch on the upper level of PNC Park.

Tim's all-time favorite Pirate is Willie Stargell. He had the honor of working with him in the late 1990's. When asked who his current favorite Pirate is, Tim explained that it changes daily. He simply enjoys getting to announce the names of the players or he may be inspired by a play from a player out on the field.

To become a PA announcer, Tim attended college at Clarion University where he earned a degree in communications. He kept his focus on television broadcasting. Clarion had two excellent radio stations and a television station where he got to spend as much time as he wanted, and the producers there were wonderful, and they let him work on projects and explore his passion and creativity. He really enjoyed getting to work at the television and radio stations. It helped prepare him for where he is today, working as the Public Address Announcer for the Pittsburgh Pirates!

Tim is also employed as the organist for the Pittsburgh Penguins. He plays a little crescendo on the organ during each TV time out or commercial break and after each player is announced. He does a little ditty at the end of each period and a little fanfare after every goal is announced. If the Penguins win, he does a little fanfare as the players come out on the ice to be recognized and the fans give a round of applause.

Tim has been the organist for the Penguins since 2010. He received an email from them asking him to play the organ. He tried out and then a week later got the job. The Penguins do not have a fill-in organist. If Tim calls off, they will just play recordings of his music.

In order to become an organist, Tim took lessons for many years, beginning at the age of four years old. He took lessons from two different instructors. One of his instructors was Vince Lasheid, former organist for the Pirates. Tim would fill in on the organ and would announce the Pirate games. He had to do both in one day at least 20 times between the mid 1990's and early 2000's. Ever since Vince died in 2009 the Pirates discontinued the organ. They now just play recordings of his performances.

Tim's all-time favorite Penguin is Mario Lemieux. His favorite current Penguin is Sidney Crosby.

I asked Tim what he does to prepare for the Penguin games. If it is a 7 P.M game he arrives at the stadium around 5:40 P.M to turn on the organ, warm up his fingers, and rehearse what he will be playing. The organ that he plays is called a “Hammond B3,” which was manufactured in 1965. Once he rehearses his piece on the organ, he will break for dinner and then take a walk around the inside of one of the concourses of the arena before the game starts.

The Penguins only have a little over 40 home games a season, which is half as many games as the Pirates. It is easier for Tim.

I asked Tim if there were any differences from the Pirate games verses the Penguin games. He has more flexibility and creativity at the Penguin games as an organist than he does as an announcer at the Pirate games and it gives him a broader range of what he can play on the organ. He can sometimes play what he wants to play on the organ, but he also has to make the crowd yell “Let’s go Pens!”

I also asked Tim if he has ever worked both a Pirate game and Penguin game in 1 day and to describe the challenges. He explained that he has worked both in one day. If the Pirates play at 1:30 P.M, and then the Penguins play at 7 P.M., that works out well for him. He will park his car, take the Subway to the Pirate game, then take the Subway to the Penguin game after the Pirate game is over, and then after the Penguin game take the Subway back to his car.

If both games would overlap, and the Penguins were in the playoffs, Tim would work the Penguin games. The Penguins playoffs are more important. Dave Shinsky will then fill in at the Pirate game.

I asked Tim where he sits in comparison to the television and radio announcers at the games. He is near both. He is closer to the television booth than the radio booth, just by a couple sections.

Tim also works another full-time job where he oversees marketing communications for a gentleman with three audio related businesses in the North Hills. He often does video editing.

In his free time, Tim enjoys listening to music, especially vinyl records - he collects them. His favorite musician is Elvis Presley. He has visited Graceland in Tennessee eight times. He also enjoys spending time with his family and traveling.

Tim also does volunteer work for the Blessing Board in Pittsburgh. There is an article in this issue of Pittverse discussing what the Blessing Board is.

Tim’s future plans include not to work as much, and he plans to retire someday.

My interview with Tim was very inspirational and caused me to never want to give up and to be determined in everything that I do!

KELLY O'S DINER BREAKFAST REVIEW

By Zach Grabowski

For the 2022 Pittverse spring edition I decided to do my own foodie call. I was in the mood for a good breakfast and decided to head to Kelly O's Diner in Pittsburgh's Strip District. My go-to breakfast whenever I am at Kelly O's is the Body Builder Omelet. This omelet has five egg whites, tomatoes, green peppers, onions, and I added pepper jack cheese and sour cream. I also got a side of home fries and a coffee to wash it all down. It was delicious as always, and as a bonus, this omelet is high in protein.



I went to Kelly O's with my community support staff and she described the restaurant to me as clean. The service was excellent and I got my food in a very timely manner. Kelly O's serves breakfast and lunch. Some of their other menu items include burritos, french toast, waffles, shrimp and grits, burgers, lunch sandwiches, soups, salads, sides, and desserts. Kelly O's has two other locations –in the North Hills and in Warrendale, PA. If you are looking for a good breakfast, or even lunch, I would highly recommend Kelly O's.

INTERVIEW WITH AARON AT CREATION LAB MAKER SPACE OWNER / GALLERIA PITTSBURGH

By Max Chaney

1. How did you get into 3D Printing?

a. I started with years of experience with 3d modeling and design with Autodesk Inventor for 21 years. After working in engineering for 10 year, I got my first 3d printer and was instantly hooked. I can now take my design from the computer to the real world very easily.

2. What inspired you to become an instructor?

a. My mom. I come from long history teachers. Lots of relatives have had careers as teachers.

3. How long have you been doing 3D printing?

a. 7 years.

4. What is your favorite 3D print for a business?

a. A trade-show model for Harbison Walker. They make refractory brick lining for crucibles for the steel making industry.

5. What is your favorite 3D print for fun?

a. Zwolf – the 12-legged, radio-controlled walking machine.

6. Did you play any war-games before you got into 3D printing?

a. No- I much prefer machines and devices.

7. Do you enjoy 3D printing?

a. Yes, very much. Since I was able to learn 3D modeling many years ago, when I got my first 3D printer, I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to do.

8. What is "Creation Labs"?

a. *Describe the memberships and classes.* Memberships offer access to lots of high-tech manufacturing tools and software. Ranging from \$50-\$100 per month, they also give you a half off discount on the classes. Classes show the students how to use the specific machines and software to get you started.

b. *What kind of technology do you have at Creation Labs that can get you started?* Mostly 3D printing and also laser cutting, CNC routing, vacuum forming and 3D modeling and design software.

9. What is the future of advanced manufacturing?

a. I'm not sure. I know things will get easier, faster and higher quality. For 3D printing, things are still very slow, loud and low quality. In the future, the parts will be better with less human interaction..

10. What can we expect from Creation Labs in the future?

a. More machines and classes will be added to the lineup. More members and businesses will be participating in making and creating.



Photography courtesy of Max Chaney

Photography courtesy of Max Chaney



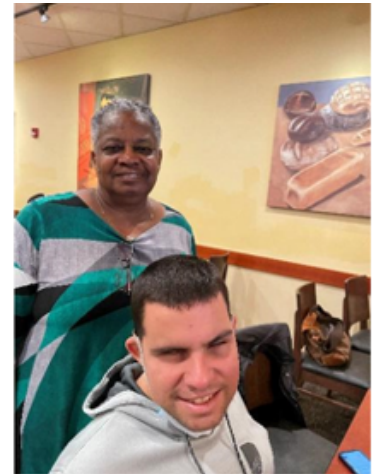
Photography courtesy of Max Chaney



TIS THE SEASON OF GIVING

By Zach Grabowski

The Blessing Board is a non-profit organization in Pittsburgh where donations of furniture and small household items are distributed throughout the community to people in need. The types of people who receive the donations include individuals with very low income, those who may have lost their homes in a fire or flood, single parents who are struggling to make ends meet, people recovering from an addiction, and veterans. If you are looking to get rid of furniture, you can drop it off at no cost at either of the following locations:



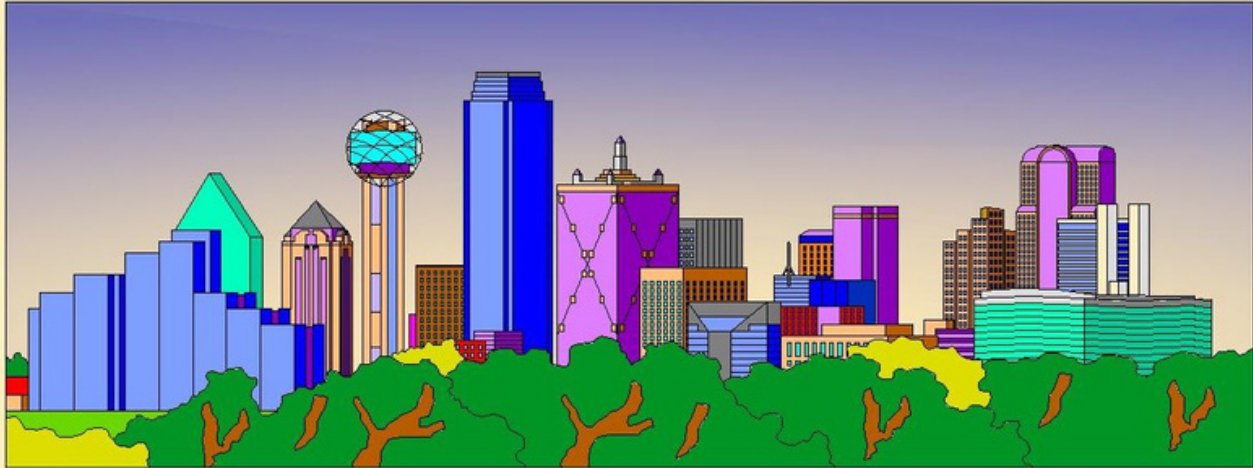
North Showroom in Shaler, located at 880 Butler Street, Suite 1A, Pittsburgh PA 15223, or the South Showroom, located at 1200 Lebanon Road, West Mifflin PA 15122. It is required that donated items are free from heavy stains, rips and tears, pet hair, cigarette smoke, urine, bed bugs, dry rot, or mold.

Furniture and small household items for donation can be picked up at your home for a cost. The cost may vary, depending on the size of the furniture, where it is located in the home, and how many steps lead up to the home.

If you don't have any furniture or household items to donate to the Blessing Board, you can donate your time by volunteering with them. I volunteered at their North Showroom consistently on Mondays. I cleaned the bathrooms, the kitchen, the tables, the rugs, and the offices. I started volunteering there in November of 2021 and I really enjoyed it. (I am no longer a volunteer at this organization.)

To learn more about the Blessing Board and its mission visit, www.blessingboard.org.

Dallas, Texas

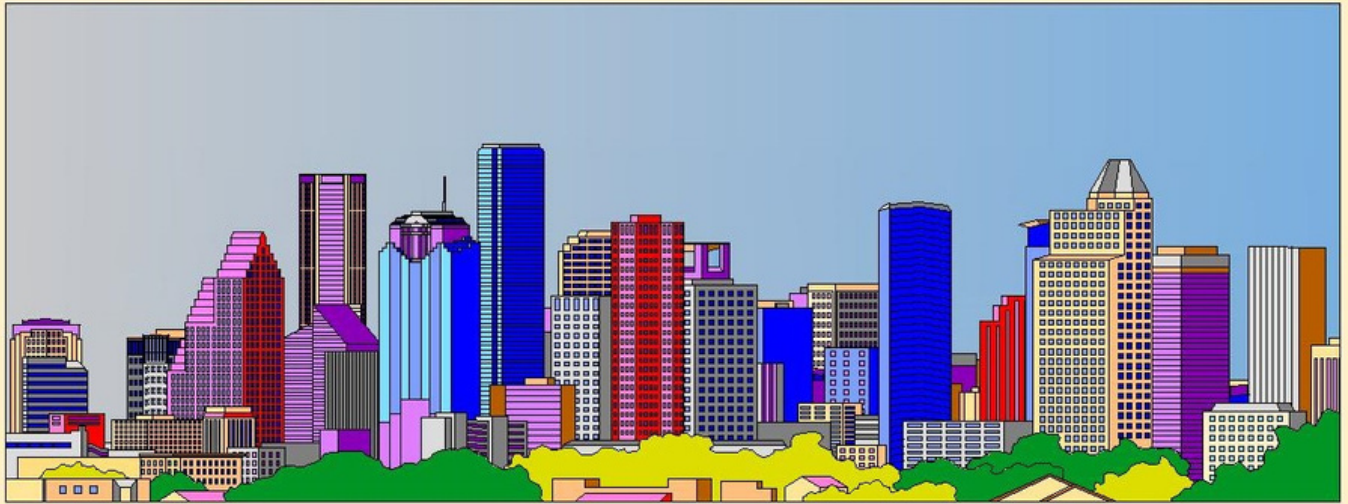


Interesting facts about Dallas

- 1. Dallas is the third - most populous city in Texas, and ninth - most populous city in the country. It has a population of 1.3 million people.*
- 2. The city's tallest building is the 72 story Bank of America. It stands 915 feet tall.*
- 3. The microchip was invented in Dallas in 1958.*
- 4. With the roof enclosed, the entire Statue of Liberty could fit into Dallas Cowboy's Stadium.*
- 5. The Cotton Bowl Classic is an American college football bowl game. It has been played in Dallas annually since 1937.*

By: Mark D. Lizotte

Houston, Texas

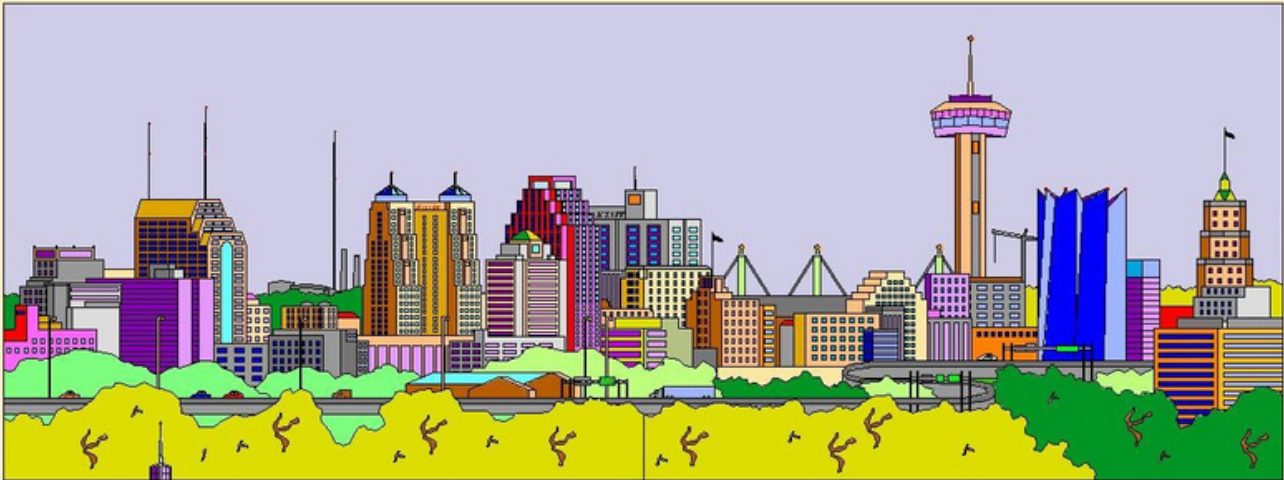


Interesting facts about Houston

- 1. Houston is the most populous city in Texas, and fourth - most populous city in the United States. It has a population of 2.3 million people.*
- 2. The tallest building in Houston is the 75 story JP Morgan Chase Tower. It stands 1002 feet tall.*
- 3. The city has over 11,000 restaurants.*
- 4. The city has hosted the Super Bowl three times (1974, 2004, and 2017).*
- 5. Houston is home to NASA's Johnson Space Center.*

By: Mark D. Lizotte

San Antonio, Texas



Interesting facts about San Antonio

- 1. San Antonio is the second - most populous city in Texas, and seventh - most populous city in the country. It has a population of 1.4 million people.*
- 2. The city's tallest structure is the Tower of the Americas. It stands 750 feet tall.*
- 3. The Alamo is the number one tourist attraction in the state of Texas.*
- 4. The city is home to the River Walk - a 15 mile network of shops, bars, and restaurants.*
- 5. The city is home to more than 50 golf courses.*

By: Mark D. Lizotte

By WJ Max Chaney

PittVerse | Birthday Interview - Bob Mehler, Jr Family Member - Esther's Hobby Shop
www.esthershobby.com Esther's Hobby Shop 219 North Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15209

Date of Interview: My 26th Birthday 10/26/21 @ Esther's Hobby Shop In Millvale



My 26th Birthday started off with a trip to my favorite hobby shop in Millvale called Esther's. I thought it would be nice to find out a little more about them. Well Thank you Bob (Jr.) for meeting with me today. I know Esther's is a family owned shop started by your Grandmother on your Dad's side. I understand the shop had a different history and a different location before becoming a Hobby Shop focused on Trains. Let's talk about Esther's Hobby Shop from its beginnings as a sweet shop.



When Did Esther's Open As A Penny Candy Shop?

Esther was my Grandmother. She opened the store originally as an ice cream, soda fountain and penny candy shop - it lasted that way from 1938 until about 1985, the store changed locations in 1954. Because of it's soda shop history, I'd always kid my Dad (Bob Mehler, Sr) that he was a 'Soda Fountain Jerk' (a slang term they used to use in that day for the employee's who were behind the counter making sodas).



How old was your Grandmother (Esther) when she opened the shop? My Grandmother, my Dad's Mom, was 30 years old. She passed away in 1980, she didn't make it to her 80th birthday.

Are there pieces remaining in the Esther's store today from the original sweet shop?

Unfortunately, all of the remaining pieces got wiped out in the flood resulting from Hurricane Ivan in 2004 that hit Millvale. However the original soda fountain went to one of the Pamela's Diner's in Pittsburgh. President George W. Bush, Jr. visited Millvale then and supplied disaster relief. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/09/20040922-9.html>There's a waterline on the front of the building, and water in the Store was as high as these glass cases holding trains and supplies.



Has anybody famous visited like movie stars or football players and such? Rick Seebak (WQED Producer, Narrator) comes in every once in a while. The guy from Channel 13 that does all of the special shows.



Saturday, October 16, 2021

By WJ Max Chaney

Did your Father (Bob Sr.) enjoy his hobby...and How did you get started with Trains?

Oh very much so and he still does. My Dad who's 91 loved Trains, the Esther's you see today was grew out of his love for this hobby - but his interest was rooted from my Grandmother Esther who started the shop as an Ice Cream, Soda and Candy shop but also always sold small toys and trains. My Grandmother Esther had a small section of trains for sale - she mainly sold Lionel Trains back in the day. My Mom is also still alive. I started helping my parents with the shop and my interest grew with his enthusiasm for Trains.

My Dad began the store focusing mainly on Lionel when it was made in the U.S. and he focused on HO scale trains - but manufacturing went to China after some years. My Dad had a friend who was focused on these little trains - N Scale - he had a friend who liked them and his interest in N Scale grew. He liked them because they took up less room, a layout could be in an apartment now and with people moving out of the big old houses that used to allow for a whole room dedicated to train layouts - he thought this was a good fit, where the business would be going.

Do you intend to continue the hobby shop or do you intend to close it?

No, I'm never going to close it. I am going to continue, I have to. (That's wonderful!)

To let you know how it works - most hobby shops make 35-50% profit on what they sell. We're different - Right away, when you spend more than \$50 here at Esther's you're going to get 20% off. So, we give away more than we make and we do that for love of the hobby and the fact that we can do it because my Grandmother own's the building, we have little overhead and no payroll - we all volunteer as the Train Club. No rent and no payroll.

What is your first and second best product that you sell?

Since we love N Scale, **Kato** (Japanese quality manufacturer of N-Scale trains) is the best product or most popular sales. We've got a good relationship - here is a picture of Mr. Kato with my Dad (Bob Sr.). What do you like Max? *I Like the old Lionel HO (larger scale) stuff.*



We have alot of used Lionel downstairs - that's the old stuff made in the U.S. before manufacturing was shipped to China.

Well, Thank You Bob, can you take me downstairs now to take a look!

Saturday, October 16, 2021

THE ROLE OF GRANDPARENTS IN OUR SOCIETY

By Daniel H. Ashkin

I feel that grandparents play an essential role in developing their grandchildren's confidence and self-esteem. Trust, faith, and assurance come from our grandparents. Because grandparents are old, they tend to live a short time. In this essay, I am going to write about the consequences of children who have lost their grandparents. I will also talk about my grandparents.

After the Russian soldiers have killed the children's grandparents in Ukraine, the boys and girls have lost hope in their future. Who is going to show kindness, compassion, and empathy to the boys and girls without their predecessors...? Because their ancestors have died in Ukraine, the boys and girls will lose hope in a better future for themselves. Before the Russian soldiers shot the old people, why did they not think about their predecessors growing up...? Will the Russian soldiers suffer regretful feelings of their atrocity...? How will the soldiers tell their sons and daughters about this tragedy?

When I had grandparents who were alive, both of my grandparents would lecture me on my good traits. Anne and Lou believed that I could make friends with other people. Lou and Anne were my grandparents. Anne and Lou said I was very intelligent, smart, and cared about other people.

When I was sick in the hospital, my grandparents often showed compassion, empathy, and kindness toward me. They often called my mother on the telephone about my illness.

After both of my grandparents have died, I began to feel lonely and insecure about myself. When my grandparents were alive, both of my grandparents had brought our whole family together with special kindness, empathy and compassion. For example, the holiday of Passover Seder was a great experience during the time when Anne and Lou were alive in Hartford CT. Ginsburg's family was at the Seder plate in Connecticut in the month of April. I was able to see my uncle, cousins, and aunt at the Seder. Today, they are dead.

In summary, grandparents play an essential role in the child's development in growing up to become a young man. In addition, they show love, kindness and encouragement toward your future plans. Furthermore, both of my grandparents have given me confidence and faith in myself.