

Valley Business FRONT

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Ride Source

Unearthly Creatures

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Merge or be Merged

Laura Sprouse
Brown Edwards





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June. Mid-year. Already?

Indeed. We're marching into the halfway 2024 mark with one diversified lineup. How's this sound: Roanoke's largest CPA firm; an outdoors recreation advocacy group; a donated race track and sports park; a quilting business; a transport service; women's activewear?

And that's just the stories. There are FRONT'n About happenings, career announcements, FRONT Notes blurbs with business news; reviews and opinions...

Like that quilting business, we patch it all together to complete a pretty attractive picture. We have colorful things happening here in Virginia's Blue Ridge.

Wrap yourself all up in it. And enjoy.



Tom Field
Publisher



Gene Marrano
Editor

“ ”
We have a three-year runway... — Page 26



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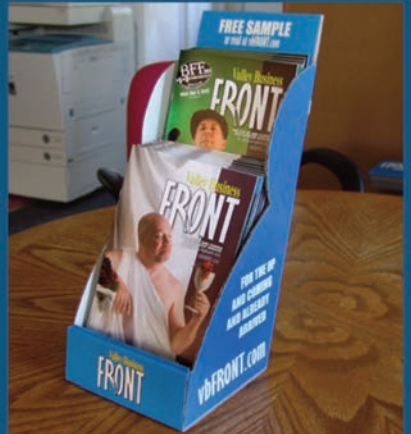
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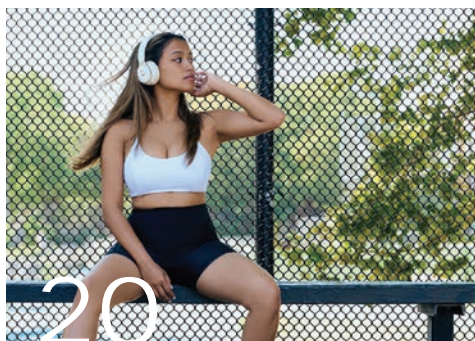
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“Why VOICE? We need an advocacy group. — Page 60

LEAD STORY PAGE 8

“Merge or Be Merged” *A building-up-the-future story of Roanoke's Brown Edwards*

By Emma Thomas





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JUNE



Aila Boyd



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Stevie Holcomb



Jennifer Leake



Emma Thomas



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Advisory Board

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

2024 CONTRIBUTORS



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Dan Dowdy



Tom Field



Gene Marrano



Ian Price



Sam Sokolove

“The goal is to keep up that momentum in the face of an industry-wide struggle for talent.

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“An investment is not instant gratification.

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Biographies and contact information on each contributor are provided on Page 52.

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Submitted photos

"Merge or Be Merged"

A building-up-the-future story of Roanoke's Brown Edwards

By Emma Thomas



Brown Edwards got its start in 1967 when two certified public accounting firms that could trace their histories back to the 1920s – one based in Bluefield, West Virginia, and another based in Roanoke, Virginia – merged. Since then, Brown Edwards has grown to include twelve offices across the Mid-Atlantic region with offices in Virginia, West Virginia, and Tennessee. Though its roots may seem somewhat humble, the firm's awards are anything but – having been named a Best Tax and Accounting Firm in the country by Forbes, receiving 2024's Best of Accounting Award by Clearly Rated, and boasting a client satisfaction rate of 85.5%.

Jason Hartman, who's served as Brown Edwards' CEO since 2016, says the firm's doing better than ever.

"We are about an \$85-million dollar in revenue firm now," Hartman reports. When



Jason Hartman

he took the position eight years ago, the firm's revenue was around \$25 million dollars. Hartman says the key to building up that revenue has been focusing on growth and client satisfaction. "I became CEO in 2016 and set out on a journey to grow the firm. We had decided that we wanted to remain independent. We needed to get more critical mass in order to bring specialization to our clients to open up other opportunities that, if you're small you just don't get. We set off on a path to grow and we started doing acquisitions."

But Hartman says he did not undertake the acquisitions alone. Laura Sprouse, acting COO, and rising CEO, has played a major role in helping to build and maintain the firm's growth. Sprouse's own history with the firm goes back to 1998 when the firm's reputation for great service prompted Sprouse to sign on doing audit and tax work. But with her background in IT, she naturally got involved in the firm's up-and-coming IT division.

"I was doing software implementation, software conversion, troubleshooting and support for our clients with various software products," says

“ ”

The key to building up that revenue has been focusing on growth and client satisfaction.



““”

We're more than just a tax and an audit shop.

““”

We have people who spend almost all their time in those practice areas and so they become very specialized.



Laura Sprouse

Sprouse. She was part of the team that helped take the firm paperless. "I'd always had a love for processes and that blend of technology." From there she continued taking on new administrative tasks – working closely with the HR, marketing, and web design teams. "I was so involved with all operations that it was kind of a seamless transition to become the firm administrator at that point, then the COO as I kept escalating the roles and things I was accomplishing at the firm."

Together, they did the work of making other, smaller, local firms a part of Brown Edwards. Hartman says his job was to go out and find the firms that felt like they would be a good fit.

"I was going out and identifying firms and talking to them and convincing them that their future would be better as part of a much larger firm than it would be if they stayed smaller and independent; and it worked out really well." Sprouse, he said, would then come in and help make sure that the new additions folded seamlessly into the firm. "Once they became interested, Laura got heavily involved. She's extremely good at process and procedure and integrating those new firms into our practice."

Those mergers and acquisitions have ultimately accounted for \$25 million dollars of the firm's growth, and part of that drive to grow has been a merge-or-be-merged mentality, according to Hartman.

"We want to remain independent, not be acquired, and we see growth as critical to doing that so that we can afford things to make our firm more attractive to staff for recruiting and retention... things like high-level HR... we've got a CIO now and a Chief Growth Officer and a CFO. All those are positions that didn't exist eight years ago. We couldn't have afforded them." Sprouse echoed his sentiment, adding that the mergers have also broadened their clientele list, "...being able to have the resources to do that [serve clients in other states], and have that kind of outreach has really allowed us to go after clients that we would not have been able to go after in the past as well, but still maintain that community feel."

Sprouse says thanks to its growth, the firm is now able to offer a wide variety of services to its clients. "We're more than just a tax and an audit shop. We provide outsourced accounting services for our clients, we've got a wealth management team, we have a real

BROWN EDWARDS AT A GLANCE

Headquarters: Roanoke, VA

Founded: 1967

Offices: (12)

- Bluefield, West Virginia
- Bristol, Tennessee
- Charleston, West Virginia
- Colonial Heights, Virginia
- Harrisonburg, Virginia
- Kingsport, Tennessee
- Lynchburg, Virginia
- New River Valley, Virginia
- Newport News, Virginia
- Richmond, Virginia
- Roanoke, Virginia
- Wytheville, Virginia

Employees: 450

Annual Revenue: \$85 Million

Primary Industry Niches: (5)

- Higher education
- Construction
- Benefit plan audits
- Community banks
- State and local governments

Sources: *interview and website*





“

It's about how can we make things go smoother, how can we make them go faster, how can we make them more efficient.

estate title services team, and then we've got specialty advisory services even within the CPA firm. We have multiple things that we can do for clients now besides just do their tax return. We can cross-sell other products to our clients and be a one-stop shop for them for a lot of the services that they need."


Aside from these "main street practices," as Hartman calls them, he says the firm also manages special projects beyond the scope of any one geographic location. "We decided some years ago to focus on what we call industry specialties or industry niches. Those are higher education, construction, benefit plan audits, community banks, and state and local governments. Those five niches are managed across the firm, versus an office; and we have people who spend almost all their time in those practice areas and so they become very specialized."

Both executives see Brown Edwards facing down the future from a good position, as Hartman prepares for retirement and Sprouse prepares to take up his mantle. The goal, Sprouse says, is to keep up that momentum in the face of an industry-wide struggle for talent.

"Right now, we struggle in our industry with the pipeline of future accountants coming up and retaining experienced accountants. So for me, it's about how can we make things go smoother, how can we make them go faster, how can we make them more efficient, and retain the quality that we want to be able to provide

for our clients.” She says the firm is already engaging in strategies to help boost that pipeline of new talent. Brown Edwards had seventy-five interns in-house this tax season from all twelve of its markets. Ultimately, Sprouse says she wants to keep the firm on the path of growth that she and Hartman started down together eight years ago.

“I want us to continue to grow through acquisition activities,” Sprouse says. I would love to be able to expand into other states. I would love to find other affiliated services—an IT firm, a human resources firm... just to kind of broaden the services that we can offer our clients. In addition to that, I want to continue to enhance our brand awareness in our current markets to really get the word out there about what all we really do for our clients.”

Sprouse says she is proud of what the firm has been able to accomplish and looks forward to growing its next group of partners up, and seeing what they will do as they become the next wave of leadership for the firm. 

“

I would love to find other affiliated services... just to kind of broaden the services that we can offer our clients.





Lisa Sink and Bryan Johnson

Gene Marrano

Offering Transportation Solutions One Route at a Time

By Aila Boyd

Transportation company Ride Source is the manifestation of proprietor Lisa Sink's passion for all things hospitality, tourism and outdoor education.

Despite all the blood, sweat and tears she has put into Ride Source, her path to business success wasn't a straight line. Sink, who has a background in both accounting and hospitality, found her way into the transportation business after working in the outdoor guiding and trip leading world for 10 years. It was during this time that she met her now partner in both life and business, Bryan Johnson, while being a guide in St. Thomas. The two eventually decided to start their own company, but they weren't quite sure what the business would look like. Banking on their experience and strengths, they started exploring ideas,

which led them to create a hop-on-hop-off brewery tour.

Although the Roanoke area native hadn't planned on permanently returning to the area, she was surprised to observe how closely the local governments were working together to promote tourism and small businesses during a visit. "Of all the other places that we've lived, and we've been to, there hasn't been an active push to build the community around the outdoors and tourism," Sink said.

The observation prompted the duo to move

to Roanoke, as well as a pivot to what would later become Ride Source roughly six years ago. To help get the business off the ground, they participated in The Gauntlet business mentoring and competition event. As part of the early planning stage, they learned about the area's unique needs due to its mountain-metro mixed composition. The biggest benefit Sink gleaned from the experience, the Roanoke County resident said, was networking with other entrepreneurs which helped her feel less isolated.

The mission of the Vinton-based business today is to "delight our clients with transportation and experiences that highlight convenience, reliability, customer service, and above all, safety."

The business has two branches: corporate and wedding transportation and fixed route transportation services. In offering fixed routes, it partners with localities,

nonprofits, businesses and universities to provide solutions in transportation deserts. To maintain all the routes, the business has 10 part-time drivers.

The Otter Bus and Hollins Shuttle are two examples of fixed routes. The Hollins route offers rides to places like Walmart, Target and downtown Roanoke on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. The service is beneficial to Hollins University students, Sink said, because of the location of the campus and the fact that many riders are international students who don't have any other means to get around.

The McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle is perhaps Ride Source's most high-profile route. For quite some time, McAfee Knob has proved problematic for Roanoke County in terms of parking, given that it attracts about 50,000 hikers every year. The County was looking for a solution around the same time Sink and Johnson were starting the



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McAfee Knob shuttle

business, so Johnson participated in an informational call with stakeholders who were discussing possible solutions. The County eventually put out a request for proposals, which the couple won and started offering the shuttle in 2022 as a pilot program in anticipation of the closure of the McAfee Knob parking lot to install a pedestrian bridge over Route 311. Officials estimate construction will be completed by late fall. To subsidize the service, the County obtained funding from the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation.

The service was expanded earlier this year so that it runs a continuous loop from the I-81 exit 140 park-and-ride in Salem to the McAfee Knob Trailhead parking lot Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from March 1-Dec. 1, costing \$5 per way. (US Senator Tim Kaine rode the shuttle from Salem to the now-closed Route 311 parking lot (another good reason to use the service) earlier this year, to check on the bridge progress.

Martha Hooker, who represents the Catawba Magisterial District on the Roanoke County

Board of Supervisors and serves as its vice chair, said "We want visitors to feel welcomed and have easy access to the stunning outdoor spaces we offer in Roanoke County. The McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle provides convenience for hikers, improving their experience from first step to last. We hope this encourages return visits which also promotes tourism for our region."

Sink feels the service is making a difference because riders tell her they appreciate how easy their trips are now because they don't have to worry about being ticketed or towed. "The County is alleviating the parking issue but the tourism that's being generated from everyone coming to the area is really neat," she said.

She also enjoys offering the shuttle because she gets to meet people from all over and hear their stories. "I met someone that was through hiking the entire trail. When I dropped him off in downtown Salem, I was able to point out some restaurants and coffee shops so he can make the most of his layover in the area," she explained.




City of Salem

"I get to hear about how people found out about McAfee Knob, if they are avid hikers or if it's just something they want to check off their bucket list."

Salem Mayor Renee Turk views the creation of the shuttle as a way to do just as Sink explained—drive people to the downtown area. "We greatly appreciate the opportunity this will provide for our businesses, and we look forward to the economic benefits and increased downtown foot traffic that it will provide," she said.

In looking ahead, Sink said she's open to developing more routes. She has her eye on routes with stops in downtown Roanoke, Explore Park and Splash Valley. "There's a lot of transportation gaps that are in our area and we are just working on creative ways to build them," she said.

Johnson added, "My favorite part has been seeing how we've grown within the community and how people are starting to know our names." 



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BEST JOB EVER

By Jennifer Leake

Executive Summary:

In today's dynamic work environment, traditional performance appraisals are being reexamined.

The power of job expectations: shifting the focus from performance appraisals

Organizations are seeking more effective ways to evaluate employee performance, and agile and effective methods are gaining traction. One such method is the shift from periodic evaluations to establishing clear job expectations. This new approach sets a different tone and brings many benefits, contributing to a more engaged and productive workforce.

1. Alignment from the Start: Clear job expectations from the outset guide employees and ensure they feel secure and part of a unified team. By outlining roles, responsibilities, and performance metrics early on, employees know exactly what is expected of them and can align their efforts accordingly. This clarity helps mitigate confusion and ensures everyone works towards the same goals from day one, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose.

2. Continuous Feedback and Improvement: In the new approach, job expectations encourage continuous feedback and improvement, creating a supportive environment. Managers play a crucial role in this, as regular check-ins between them and employees allow for ongoing discussions about progress, challenges, and development opportunities. This real-time feedback loop, facilitated by managers, enables employees to adjust, learn from mistakes, and consistently enhance their performance, demonstrating that their growth and development are valued.


3. Empowerment and Ownership: Clear job expectations guide employees and empower them to take ownership of their work. When employees understand what is expected of them and have the autonomy to make decisions, they feel greater accountability and pride in their work. This empowerment fosters motivation, initiative, and a willingness to go above and beyond to meet and exceed expectations, inspiring them to strive for excellence.

4. Focus on Development and Growth: Shifting the focus from performance appraisals to job expectations allows organizations to prioritize employee development and growth. Instead of evaluating past performance, managers and employees collaboratively set goals, identify areas for improvement, and create personalized development plans. This proactive approach enhances individual performance and contributes to the organization's growth and success.

5. Enhanced Employee Engagement and Retention: Employees who feel their contributions are valued and have clear expectations are more likely to be engaged and satisfied in their roles. This leads to higher levels of employee retention, as employees are less likely to seek opportunities



elsewhere when they feel supported, challenged, and recognized for their efforts.

In conclusion, the shift to clear job expectations offers numerous benefits for employees and organizations. This approach fosters a more productive, motivated, and resilient workforce by providing alignment, continuous feedback, empowerment, development opportunities, and enhanced engagement. As organizations adapt to the changing nature of work, embracing the power of job expectations can be a strategic advantage in driving performance and achieving long-term success. This approach not only enhances individual performance but also contributes to the overall growth and success of the organization, leading to higher levels of employee retention and satisfaction. 

Do you need ideas to strengthen employee performance, engage employees with more feedback and goals, or grow management skills? Contact me at Jennifer@AssessmentPros.com or 540-420-1004.

Jennifer is a seasoned Certified Management Consultant (CMC®) with over 30 years of business and consulting experience. She is a certified trusted advisor in employee assessments, engagement, and emotional intelligence. She offers ideas and best practices to help you hire the right people, engage employees, and lead effectively to enhance workplace performance and drive overall business success.

“Clear job expectations guide employees and empower them to take ownership of their work.”



June 21





Submitted photos

Fashion with a Conscience

By Ian Price

Do most things in life ever go according to plan?

For Julia Manning, her love of fashion has been refueled after realizing some of the climate-related pitfalls that many might not think of when it comes to what they are wearing. After attending the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, Manning worked in the industry before eventually leaving, because ethics and morals were being thrown by the wayside, she says. Safety regulations were being skirted for “literally pennies,” Manning emphasized.

Where do you go from here? Manning has worked with non-profits like Humble Hustle here in Roanoke. She’s also worked as a certified trainer since. That expertise as a trainer would end up leading her back to the world of fashion. Manning founded Unearthly Creatures in 2020. The women’s activewear brand can be used for outfits outside of the gym - if you know how to fashionably

use the pieces. All the activewear is made from recycled water bottles and reclaimed fishing nets.


Manning says one issue is so-called “fast fashion.” She labels that as an industry that exploits people from other countries to produce garments at a lower cost. Manning considers educating consumers about this in hopes of cutting down on so-called sweat shops as part of Unearthly Creatures mission statement. It’s women helping women because those buying activewear from Unearthly Creatures, or other sustainable companies, help keep businesses away from clothing facilities that don’t use proper OSHA standards. Manning says worrying about sustainability means also considering how a garment is transported, what kind of dye processes are used, even how it’s packaged and shipped. Manning says Unearthly Creatures ensures that

everyone involved in their supply chain is being paid and treated fairly. “A lot of the responsibility falls back on the consumer” to find out if the clothing you are buying has been crafted equitably, she adds.

Manning says making clothing this way is going to cost more money for the consumer. But to that end, she says “It’s an investment ... and an investment is not instant gratification.” The advantages of higher quality clothing speaks for itself in a number of ways; however Manning took it a step further with the company’s investment in sustainability. It gives back by planting one tree for every piece of activewear purchased from Unearthly Creatures. Tree donations have become a popular way for many to give back as climate change has become an even larger threat year after year – and expanding the tree canopy is one way to make a difference.

To keep this sustainable approach, Unearthly Creatures has just launched a crowdsourcing campaign for those that want to help the company with its mission. The crowdsourcing campaign

comes with tiers. Tier One is a General Support \$10 donation. Tier Two is a \$25 donation. Tier Three is a \$55 donation with a Butterfly tank top. Tier Four is a \$120 donation with a matching set. Tier Five is a \$600 donation, and you get all the pieces from the new collection “Secret Garden.” Then there’s the “Unearthly Angel” Tier. It’s a \$1000 donation that comes with eight pieces of activewear from any collection. Manning says this can be used for collections that come out after signing up, allowing customers to bank those free pieces for future releases.

“The design of the brand and the pieces that they produce are very light, cute, and feminine,” Manning added. She says Unearthly Creatures is a tribute to femininity, using bright colors and that “playfulness” in their designs. “Unearthly Creatures is a multi-faceted name in terms of the nods it makes,” Manning notes, in reference to its sustainability, equity, and femininity. Find out more about the just-launched Unearthly Creatures the brand or take part in the crowdsourcing campaign by going to UnearthlyCreatures.com. 





SMALL BUSINESS TOOL KIT

**By Sam Sokolove,
Building Beloved
Communities**

Executive Summary:
*The restroom is not
the board room!*

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Don't flush out workplace boundaries

While enjoying lunch recently at the Roanoke City Market building, nature called, and I stepped into the men's room. While washing my hands, I heard a man's voice booming from behind a stall.

"Did you email me the agenda for the board meeting?"

"Yes," a woman's meek voice replied through an iPhone speaker. "I sent it this morning."

"I didn't get it," the man complained. "Hold on, let me check my emails."

There was a pause, followed by an unmistakable cacophony of biological sounds. "I still don't see it. Are you sure you sent it?"

"Yes," the subordinate insisted. "Are you sure it's not in your junk folder?"

"It's not there," the man grumbled as his elimination process continued to its flushed conclusion. I imagined some poor assistant at her desk, attempting to filter out this scatological soundtrack. "I have to get the minutes before the meeting, so go ahead and send them again."

Eager to escape, I hurried through washing my hands as the stall door burst open. An elderly man, perhaps in his seventies, emerged wearing a college tee and khaki shorts. Holding the phone aloft, he continued barking instructions while lathering up, seemingly oblivious to my aghast expression in the mirror. "Technology," he lamented with a sigh. I said nothing.

This incident highlighted a startling lack of personal boundaries and respect for others' space—issues I had just covered in a training on "Cultivating a Culture of Constructive Communication" with a client's staff. The training emphasized the importance of managers respecting subordinates' boundaries setting clear boundaries around physical spaces, emotional needs, moral principles, and professional roles. As discussed in the training, boundaries matter for healthy teams. They prevent misunderstandings, unrealistic expectations, overload, resentment and build the foundation for mutual trust and respect.

Reliving the restroom incident, I realized it violated nearly every principle we covered regarding personal boundaries, respect for shared spaces and roles, and professional communication norms. While an extreme example, it highlighted how easily workplace dignity can be

undermined when basic tenets of respect are disregarded.

There is precedent for this frankly disgusting management practice. In addition to making high-level calls from the throne, Lyndon B. Johnson infamously conducted business conversations while indisposed, which historians have interpreted as a power play and intimidation tactic.

In a Slate podcast, advice columnists Emily Yoffe and Farhad Manjoo debated restroom phone etiquette. Yoffe stated bluntly: "I'm going to carve out some time just me and the toilet and not communicate with people...Separate things in your life."

Suzanne Lucas, a human resources consultant who writes under the name "Evil HR Lady," also calls for lavatory-workforce separation: "Put your phone down—or at least in your pocket - before going into the bathroom. People don't need to know what you are doing all the time. And please, go to the bathroom in private."

While managers should heed Yoffe and Lucas's advice, subordinates can enforce their personal and professional boundaries by refusing to engage until the boss relocates to an appropriate venue. If the practice continues, it should be reported to HR to ensure the offending party's responsibilities are reassigned to someone with better bathroom boundaries. 🚫

“Workplace dignity can be undermined when basic tenets of respect are disregarded.

FIRST FRIDAYS





Courtesy photo

SHELOR Motor Mile

SWEET DEAL

By Jennifer Poff Cooper

Shelor Motor Mile is giving the Motor Mile Speedway & Dragway and Calfee Park to Pulaski County, the largest gift the county has ever received. So, what's the plan?



Pulaski County

Jonathan D. Sweet

The Motor Mile Speedway, officially named Pulaski County Motorsports Park, is a 152-acre property in Fairlawn which has hosted NASCAR, drag racing, and monster truck events. Calfee Park, a historic stadium that has been home to professional baseball teams, currently hosts the Pulaski River Turtles, a summer collegiate team in the Appalachian League.

Shelor Motor Mile's main goal with the gift is to "ensure these event facilities are permanently available for use by all of the New River Valley communities," according to a statement.

Shelor Motor Mile is "very community-oriented, so it makes sense," said Melissa Epperly, operations manager at Calfee Park and marketing/PR agent for Shelor.



Courtesy photo

Calfee Park

Epperly said that Larry Shelor and David Hagan, co-owners of Shelor Motor Mile, are “passionate” about community. They would never want someone to tear down Calfee Park and put something else in its place, and with selling to an individual, there’s no guarantee, she said.

The donors also wanted to “give the community, especially youth, something to do,” said Epperly. She mentioned visions of high school sports teams playing at the ballpark.

Jonathan Sweet, County Administrator of Pulaski County, said that the county has been “blessed with benevolence.” Shelor Motor Mile could have gifted these venues to “so many entities,” he said. He feels they chose Pulaski County because they vetted both its “intentions and wherewithal,”

including how it has managed the past gift of Randolph Park.

The speedway and ballpark have been successful because Shelor Motor Mile “strives to make sure fans and customers are happy,” Epperly said, by offering “top-notch,” cared-for facilities.

Sweet noted that both venues are “long-time staples in the community” and “symbols of pride.” Calfee Park has been voted multiple times as the Best Rookie-Level Ball Park in America by Ballpark Digest, and last year’s SRX race at Pulaski County Motorsports Park, televised on ESPN, won the state-wide Virgo Destination Event of the Year award.

The monetary value of these venues is beside the point, according to Sweet, who said they are “invaluable assets.” It is hard to nail

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Calfee Park

down the economic impact of these venues, too, because both COVID and the evolutions of the track and ballpark [now a summer circuit for collegiate players and no longer a minor pro league] have changed the numbers. They generate a tremendous amount of sales tax and meal tax, plus there is an indirect effect on the hospitality industry, Sweet said.

Shelor Motor Mile and its affiliates intend to lease both the speedway and the ballpark back from the county and will continue to manage the operations of both facilities for the next three years as a means of continuing the existing functions of each enterprise and to better allow for a training period and smooth transition of ownership, according to a statement from Pulaski County. Shelor Motor Mile will donate the net revenue from this period back to Pulaski County to advance the county's sports and entertainment vision.

This three-year public-private partnership will not only provide funding but will allow Pulaski County to get a handle on the venues' finances and to do market research. Sweet wants to learn what is profitable and what the community wants. At the end of that time, the county may look to continue operations, modify them, or find new operators, he said.

"We have a three-year runway as a learning curve," Sweet said, because "we don't know what we don't know."

When Shelor Motor Mile personnel is joined with Pulaski County personnel, "all of that horsepower will take these venues to the next level," said Sweet.

Pulaski County will possess the assets immediately upon transfer of ownership but will rely on the professional staff of each respective operation to continue business as usual. Pulaski County will, however, have the ability to utilize both assets for their own purposes as a means of tourism, economic, and community advancement when events are not being hosted by Shelor Motor Mile or their affiliates, according to the statement.

In the immediate future, "baseball season will stay the same," said Epperly, with the River Turtles under the guidance of the Motor Mile sports management team. Meanwhile, Shelor Motor Mile is busy making sure the speedway has needed infrastructure. There are events (specifics to be announced) in the works for August and September.


Sweet sees a variety of sports and entertainment coming to these venues in the future. Each can be modified to be used for more than a ballpark or a speedway.

He emphasized that the county is not looking at these things as singular assets but as "part and parcel of a larger sports tourism vision." This vision, which Pulaski County has been working on for some time "quietly and strategically," is still being "fleshed out," said Sweet, but it will mean "operating on a bigger level." When adding these gifts to the county's existing assets, including Randolph Park, the New River Valley Fairgrounds, and a large indoor sportsplex, "the scale is impressive."

Sweet said, "Pulaski County is going to be the outdoor and indoor recreation destination in southwest Virginia."

One challenge – or an opportunity, as Sweet sees it – is the impending need for more hotels, restaurants, and commercial operations to support sports tourism. He is confident local entrepreneurs will rise to the occasion.

Epperly said that what the Shelor Motor Mile / Pulaski County partnership will look like after the three years is somewhat "up in the air," but Shelor Motor Mile is "excited to be working side by side" with the county.

Said Epperly, "We hope to work together for years to come." 

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COX



Tom Field photos

Boutique business for quilt enthusiasts

By Stevie Holcomb

Local quilting business steps in to help craftspeople
with the less favorable parts of the project.



Picking up a craft is something so many want to do, then get halfway through it only to find it's too hard. Sure, it was fun at the beginning, but actually finish a product? That's WORK. Enter Julia Larina, owner of Quiltoff, a quaint little shop located near Oak Grove at 2149 Electric Rd. in Roanoke. "We take care of the boring parts," she laughs, explaining that her shop focuses on quilting services to finish quilts. The quilt tops – the patchwork, usually – is the fun part. Cutting and piecing and sewing together. But once you have to bind it and quilt the top...that's where quilters often give up.

"It's repetitive work. Not everyone enjoys that kind of work," Larina quips. She likes it, however, seeing people coming in with different quilts. Everyone has different visions and styles, or sometimes you'll see the same pattern with different fabrics. "Quilting is truly a one-of-a-kind craft – one person in a lifetime will never be able to make every pattern, and each is different," she says. She loves seeing all the different types of quilts.

Larina travels a lot round the country, visiting on average eight national shows a year. She



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teaches six classes at about 100 people a show, how to use long arm machines. She teaches how to quilt, how to develop an artistic side – not for everyday quilts, but for show worth quality.

Looking around the shop, colors abound—whirls and pinwheels, circles, and squares. Cats and dogs and houses—and the fabrics sing off of the quilt tops. The shop also sells pieced pre-cuts, perfect if you want to quilt but hate the cutting part. “There is always something someone doesn’t want to do, so we take care of that for them.” From Jelly Rolls (strips of fabric of 2 1/2


inches width) to Charm Squares (5” squares) to “Fat Quarters (quarter cuts of a yard of fabric), Quiltoff offers quilting services beyond the putting together part—they offer classes and sell quilting machines. Quiltoff is an Innova brand authorized seller.

Who are Quiltoff clients? Experienced quilters usually, people interested in patchwork and piecing, guilds, and individuals. Currently, Larina is working on a lot of quilts for graduates, especially T-shirt quilts where the quilter in the family collects shirts from various ball games and



events throughout the graduate's school years and puts them together for a truly unique gift to take off to college.

Quiltoff opened August 2022, after the threat of Covid closed many businesses down, but just right for those looking for a "pandemic pastime." It's a family business; Larina laughs that the shop is "another baby we have."

Open weekdays Monday through Friday, 10:00 to 4:00, her shop is waiting to make your creation an heirloom. We won't tell anyone you didn't do it all yourself. 



New home taking shape for FloydFest >

FloydFest 2024-Horizon is less than months away. The music and outdoors festival is several decades old but is brand new this July 24-28 at its relocated home, dubbed Festival Park. New roads, new stages, hiking and biking trails, a tournament-worthy disc golf course. All are on the way to Festival Park just off US 221-Bent Mountain Road in the Floyd County town of Check. **Sam Calhoun** is Chief Operating Officer for Across The Way Productions: "we'll have the Higher Ground viewing deck stage completely built -it's kind of the pinnacle of the site – a gorgeous structure that so many have worked hard on. We will have a temporary main stage ... very massive, but when the doors close to FloydFest 2024-Horizon we'll immediately begin construction on the brand new [permanent] main stage."

On the much larger property they now own (around 200 acres) - instead of leasing as they did in Patrick County - Calhoun says the infrastructure work needed - leading in large part to the cancelation of FloydFest '23 - is on track: "we have almost three miles of roads finished at the site, they have wonderful drainage, a lot of them are very wide to take multiple semis or tour buses. We actually have nine transportation bridges as well, and many other pedestrian bridges."

Then there is the music - Calhoun says the final lineup is now about set; five days and nights in various genres. Some single day tickets remained at press time for FloydFest 2024-Horizon in late July at its new home in

Floyd County - much closer to Roanoke than before, about 25 minutes Calhoun estimates. Sierra Ferrell, Black Pumas, Victor Wooten and dozens of other performers are gearing up for FloydFest 2024-Horizon - after the "boutique" music and outdoors festival took a pause last year.

After leaving its mountaintop leased home in Patrick County behind after the 2022 event, FloydFest wasn't ready last year to relaunch at the purchased property just off US 221-Bent Mountain road. So, the team behind Across the Way Productions - minus FloydFest co-founder Kris Hodges - who parted ways after two-plus decades - worked on infrastructure instead. Some of it says Chief Operating Officer Sam Calhoun, will be accessible to the public once FloydFest 24-Horizon is over in late July: "Festival Park is supposed to be a regional resource, like the hiking and biking trails, the disc golf course, the open spaces. We want it to be a park for people to enjoy. We want this to be a community resource. Floyd County is so beautiful but there's not a terrible amount of parks. We're working through that with all the right agencies."

As for that disc gold course, designed by Innova, "we have had their top brass design this course," says Calhoun, "they tell us its world class. We hope to have tournaments throughout the year and be known as a world [tour] stop." Where the old FloydFest disc golf course "kind of got taken over by campers; at the new site we laid it out so that [no one] will get hit by a disc people are throwing. The vistas you see [on the course] are incredible."



Christine Wright (Left) and Suzanne Youngkin



Gene Marrano

New non-profit aims to get the addicted back on track >

A residential recovery center with eight beds for men who are determined to get their lives back on track as they deal with substance abuse has opened in northwest Roanoke on Staunton. It won't be the first, says a co-founder. **Christine Wright** is a recovered addict who admits to spending time behind bars and losing partial custody of a child until she battled her demons and won. Now a peer recovery specialist for the **Hope Center at Bradley Free Clinic**, she helped cut the ribbon at **Four Truths Recovery** with First Lady of Virginia **Suzanne Youngkin** last month.

"Housing first is the priority, alongside of that are peer recovery specialists will be providing linkages to employment, navigating barriers around transportation, access to healthcare and mental health resources. There are just so many beautiful reasons why this all came together," said Wright. "The Alpha Program and drug court saved my life," said Wright, "I had a place to go when I left treatment and incarceration. That allowed me to rebuild relationships with my children." Having a supportive place to call home is the entry point to effective treatment she noted. "If they have no place to go that's safe and supportive [after initial treatment for substance abuse disorder] they go back to the unhealthy environment."

It fits well with Suzanne Youngkin's It Only

Takes One campaign about the dangers of Fentanyl. Roanoke has been hit especially hard by Fentanyl overdoses. She was on hand for the Four Truths Recover center opening - modeled in part after the Roads to Recovery residential treatment center in Lynchburg. The Four Truths in the center's title? The Truth of Suffering, the cause of Suffering, the end of suffering - and the Truth of the Path leading to the end of suffering. "I hear over and over and over again that there is just beds, not enough resources as people need and want," added Youngkin, "and in particular as we see the increase of substance abuse disorder among young people. The state is strained to try and figure out how to deal with that."

James McMahan is the other co-founder and director of operations for the new recovery center. He is also a peer recovery specialist at the Hope Center, helping others overcome substance abuse addiction as he did. As for locating it in northwest Roanoke, inside a leased and renovated residential property - the northwest quadrant of Roanoke, where many of the shootings reported there have some connection to drugs, doesn't have enough resources he said. But the eight beds available at Four Truths Recovery are open to anyone in the region who comes through the application process and can commit to a six month stay in the housing and treatment program. The non-profit has now opened the first of what it says will be several homes like this; another location for women battling addiction - and their children - could open this fall.



LEAD BY EXAMPLE

By Carrie Cousins

Executive Summary:
Ensuring your content gets consumed requires careful and tactical consideration.

Readability, accessibility, and communicating through design

It's a common thought – and rightly so – that people don't fully read most things put in front of them. This is especially true when it comes to your website.

What if you are creating a barrier unintentionally almost ensuring that your content doesn't get read? What if you are turning an audience away or sending a signal that you don't care because the design is challenging for them to understand?

From readability to accessibility, how you communicate through design speaks volumes about your business and the relationship you have with customers.

But first, let's dive into two key terms of “designed” communication online:

- **Readability:** The ease of which someone can scan text quickly and understand the words. Readability relates to everything from the typeface you use to the amount of space between lines of text to how long or short sentences span across the screen.
- **Accessibility:** The degree to which people with different abilities can access content in a way that they understand. From a design perspective, this can include elements such as color contrast, text size, and making sure everything has a “readable” label.

Both are important because they determine if your website is easy to understand. Clear communication is a key to reading comprehension and even overall website conversions.


Readability and accessibility are pretty complex topics but in the most simple form it comes down to this: Is your communication clear and understandable by all?

While this is by no means an all-inclusive list; here are five things you can do to facilitate readability and accessibility. (We'll focus everything here on design elements for your website.)

- Avoid text effects (or use them sparingly); this includes all caps, underlines, too much centered text, or elaborate or novelty typefaces that make you think to read.
- Give all text elements in the design room to stand alone. You should be able to look at a page and clearly identify different text elements and their groupings, such as headlines, subheaders, body text, or captions. There

should be adequate space between lines of text, that's often 1.25 to 1.5 times the height of the typeface's characters.

- Pay close attention to color. Text elements should have strong contrast with background elements to ensure they are readable for all people, including those with limited color vision. WebAIM has a great color contrast checker that allows you to enter the color codes for background and text colors to see if they pass basic guidelines.
- The same concept applies to text size. Text on the page should have an obvious and distinct hierarchy, from large to small, using a scale that's easy for the eyes. Most designers will start with a set of specifications for the body text and scale from there.
- Use a little math to ensure that your body text size (often the smallest on your website) is easy to read. No matter what typeface you use, the ideal width of a line of copy from left to right is 50 to 75 characters. This means that you probably should not have a text frame that extends all the way across on a desktop screen.

Readability and accessibility are a growing concern for website designs. It's important to plan new website builds with intention and in a way that makes them work for your target audience. Dive deep into website accessibility with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). 

“How you communicate through design speaks volumes about your business...”

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Challenges solved faster, more authentic work relationships

Sheri Winesett has been a lobbyist, a Chamber director in Botetourt County and an officer with The Advancement Foundation, the non-profit behind The Gauntlet mentoring program and business competition for startups and emerging small businesses. Now after many years of development – and waiting for the right mix of experience and time to tell her story, Winesett has released a book, *Transparent Leadership for Women Who Mean Business*, delving into what she calls the 7 keys to unlock full leadership potential.

While it's geared towards women, Winesett, who now works with business clients in a consultant mode through her Business Accelerators firm, says anyone can learn from the lessons she's realized over the course of her varied career. She says anyone from a "seasoned executive," to entrepreneurs, business owners, side hustlers or aspiring leaders "ready to take on the world," will benefit from reading *Transparent Leadership*. "I had this book in my head for nine years ... but I wasn't ready."

For nearly 20 years Winesett claims to have, "coached over 1000 entrepreneur's, CEO's, executives, and their teams to become the best version of themselves and become leaders that others want to follow." Sometimes she is just a coach, and she also does some public speaking. For entrepreneurs who have a hard time taking their hands off all the levers, "letting go of the vine," she calls it, her background can help show them the path to doing just that. "It's really lonely at the top – but who do they have to talk to?"

It's different with every client she notes, "which is what makes it so interesting." Sometimes she comes in as a "fractional executive," working short-term in a capacity like COO to help get a business off the ground – or moving again in the right direction, "really get the right people [and] tools in place." (Valley Business FRONT is also pleased to announce that Winesett will return to our pages as a bi-monthly columnist soon, writing about business leadership and related topics.)

"I was the executive – the hard charger. But I was also the mom and the wife," notes Winesett, who now wants to pass along the wisdom gained over the years to other hard chargers in *Transparent Leadership*. See more about Winesett's book at transparencyinleadership.com 



Courtesy photo



THERE'S SOMETHING HAPPENING HERE

By Gene Marrano

Executive Summary:

Sheri Winesett says her new book geared towards women is designed for those "tired of herding cats," and those in toxic workplaces "running me down."

Find an accomplice.

Who's your accomplice? That word is typically reserved for someone who assisted you in a negative capacity. Like a partner in crime. But an accomplice—particularly in a legal sense—is often placed in the position of being just as culpable as you. You're the main deal, but it's made clear that you wouldn't be in the place you're in without your accomplice.

I attended a little lunch affair where I was reminded of how much I really need an accomplice. Well, the better word is pronounced a bit differently. I need an accomplished.

An accomplished accomplice.

Whatever endeavor you undertake, it pays to have an accomplished accomplice. That's not how Leah Weiss said it, but that's the mnemonic device I'm using to remember her valuable point.

What Weiss said (at her presentation to the Persiflage Writers Group) was to "remove your defenses." She was talking about not being thin-skinned. To take criticism and advice in order to improve yourself. Now, to be clear, the examples she gave from her own journey to blockbuster-status novelist, involved listening to her editors and literary agents. And not just any editors and agents; these were unquestionably professionals, highly credible, with sizzling track records, and... accomplished.

Weiss was advised to re-do something that would require a lot of effort. She was told to do that AFTER already publishing two top-selling books. She apparently brushed herself off, after a bit of pain and insult, and then contacted the critics to... get this... apologize. Basically, she said she was sorry and that she just wanted the chance to do better.

After the agents pulled themselves up off the floor (they weren't used to that kind of response—from an accomplished author), they celebrated and prepared to move full steam ahead again.

When I told my wife this story, she said, "Do you think you could do that?"

No. She knows me. I know that's a big fault of mine. I would immediately recoil and think, "I'm not writing for these agents. I know what I'm doing; and I know what I want."

I learned a lesson at this little lunch affair. It's wise to buddy up to an accomplished.

Imma go look for one now. 



ON TAP FROM THE PUB

By Tom Field

Executive Summary:

We've all heard the advice before, but this time it hit with extra impact: associate with the true pros.

FRONTReviews >

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



Watch your back with this dynasty

We don't generally review streaming shows, but I'm making an exception here. *Succession* (HBO Max; 2018—2023) is as biased and stereotypical as they come. Mesmerizing, nevertheless. Biased, in that all the characters are American capitalists, and therefore evil. In fact, though Shakespearian in theme, I'm not sure I can recall any production where everyone is flawed to this extent. There is not a single character blessed with more than a shred of redeeming traits. I was hooked. A few times, our story dragged a bit; but I think that was more a result from me binge-watching. If you own a family business (albeit this one is the richest media conglomerate in the world), you might laugh your ass off. (If you relate too much, I pity you.) The Roy family empire here (possibly loosely modeled after Rupert Murdoch, but certainly latching on to right wing uber-conservatism) will draw you in and spit you out all along the way. With a hearty "F-you!" and "F-off!" to complement just about every utterance.

The production value of *Succession* is stunning. Even the theme song itself (with its tune woven throughout) is somehow beautiful and ugly at the same time. One of the most compelling interactions involves an imploding marriage—but that is just one of a dozen in every single episode.

Are there individuals making up an entire family who are truly this brutish? I suppose. I've known a few and many of us have worked with some. But worse than that are the individuals willing to suck up to them

and stay for the long haul and certain abuse. Lavishness is a temptress like no other.

Our FRONT business journal could cover a power family like this one; but I'd have to change it to an underground publication.

—Tom Field

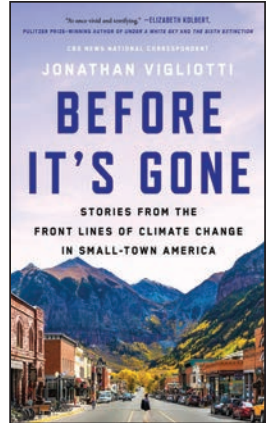
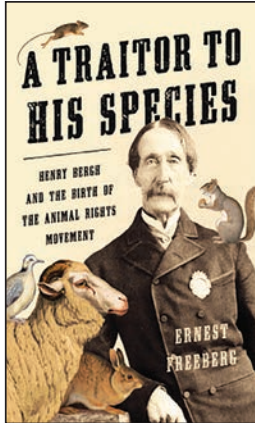
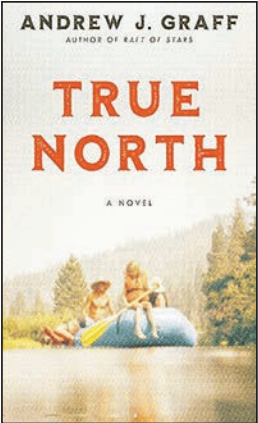
Splash of 'business' adventure

True North (Ecco; 2024) by Andrew Graff reads quickly; as in three-afternoons-on-my-recent-trip-to-the-beach quick. Even though I was at the ocean, and this is all about the river, it was a good adventure-read fit. Straightforward (this is no *River Runs Through It*) and linear, what I liked was the interweaving of rafting with business ownership with marriage. And, of course, the many references to our own New River (though this novel is set in the Wisconsin Northwoods). If you've ever run a business—like running a river—with a family member, the story will mean more to you; but it's a decent trip downstream nonetheless if you're keen on the outdoors.

—Tom Field

RSO Italian-style

As the Roanoke Symphony wound down its season in April, Jefferson Center played home to a Masterworks "From Italy with Love," concert, featuring a different twist with Michael Havens on classical guitar. He's a local who also teaches music at Patrick



Henry High School. Maestro David Stewart Wiley, conducted Rossini's Overture to "The Barber of Seville," (yes, it was in a Seinfeld episode), Havens was featured on Carulli's Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra in E minor Op. 140, and the program ended with, keeping with the theme, Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4 in A Major known as the "Italian." Bravo and Brava to all. Coming up this month is the season-ending June 14 Pops concert featuring music from The Who, at the Salem Civic Center.

—Gene Marrano

He lit the fire for animal protection

You may have never heard of Henry Bergh—but you probably know about the ASPCA and its various affiliates. In the mid to late 1800's the New York City resident fought back against the view of many that horses, dogs and even livestock animals headed to slaughter could be mistreated and in the cases of trolley-pulling horses pre-railroad could be worked to death without compassion. Bergh managed to get laws passed and even stopped trolleys in their tracks on the streets of Manhattan, demanding that tired, overworked horses be sent back to the stables for replacements.

Bergh advocated for how livestock was treated, demanding that even as they headed to the slaughterhouse they should be fed and watered, and killed more humanely. Many revered him and he inspired chapters around the country, included women's branches. Others, especially business people

that put profits above all else, despised him. *Traitor To His Species: Henry Bergh And The Birth Of The Animal Rights Movement* by Ernest Freeberg (Basic Books, 2020) is a lively if sometimes horrific tale that the ardent animal lover will ultimately appreciate.

—Gene Marrano

Climate change hits the heartland

Eyewitness stories of massive, lingering tornados, historic wildfires, flooding not seen for many years if not ever—and in parts of the country foreign to these types of disasters. For years CBS national correspondent Jonathan Vigliotti has often answered the call in the wee hours of the morning, jumping on planes to travel the country, reporting on natural disasters, talking to the locals about lives turned upside down by climate and habitat change. *Before It's Gone: Stories From The Front Lines of Climate Change in Small-Town America* (One Signal Publishers, 2024) will make even the biggest climate change skeptics realize that there are natural disasters here in the U.S. and around the world occurring on a more frequent and more impactful scale. For many it's a reckoning deftly told, for others it may be a wakeup call.

—Gene Marrano

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



Tom Field



Top tips at Persiflage >

On May Day, the **Persiflage Writers Group** (that currently meets regularly at Salem Museum) featured **Leah Weiss** from Lynchburg, author of *If The Creeks Don't Rise* (over 200,000 sales) and *All The Little Hopes*, who shared her journey into award-winning, top selling authorship. She also shared valuable tips to the gathering of 18, including the advice to "remove defenses" (thin skin won't help you with editors and agents); introduce "saints and sinners;" the absolute importance of beginning and end; and crafting your "unique writing voice." Her personal story included how she stepped in to the writing venture: recording a memoir of her mother's stories and entering a writing contest.



Courtesy of RBTC

TechNite troupe >

The **Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council's TechNite 2024** was held on May 8 at the Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center, as hundreds of local and state leaders gathered to honor this year's standouts in innovation in Virginia's Region 2. Virginia Western Community College president **Dr. Robert Sandel** was named to the RBTC Hall of Fame. The Hart of the Entrepreneur Impact Award recipient was The Tiny Cargo Co. Other winners included **Dr. Heather Lindberg** and **Dr. Kristylea Ojeda**, Virginia Western Community College | STEM-H Educator Award; **Mark Levy**, Roanoke Valley Governor's School for Science and Technology | K-12 STEM-H Educator Award; **Fermi Energy Inc.** | Rising Star in Technology Award; **Dr. Sarah Snider**, BEAM Diagnostics | Rising Star in Biotechnology Award.

Also: **Dr. Read Montague**, Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC | Innovator Award; **Rob Day**, TECHLAB | Regional Leadership Award; **Adam Donato**, Card Isle | Entrepreneur of the Year Award; CytoRecovery | Leading Small Tech Company; and Elbit Systems of America—Night Vision | Leading Large Tech Company.



Pipeline for lab life >

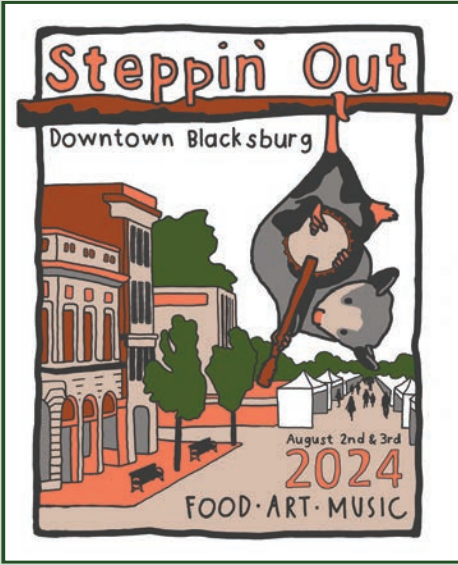
Mountain Gateway Community College has launched a new Medical Laboratory Technology (MLT) program, in partnership with **Virginia Western Community College** and **LewisGale Hospital Alleghany**. The MLT program is ideal for those interested in healthcare careers, phlebotomy, nurse aid, medical assistant, and technologists who carry out diagnostic testing. Employment opportunities include hospital clinical laboratories, urgent care facilities, doctor's offices, and large corporate labs such as LabCorp, Quest, and American Red Cross.



Big check for Life Ring >

Cushman & Wakefield | Thalhimer partnered with **The Life Ring Foundation** for the first quarter of 2024 through their Thalhimer Gives program, a companywide initiative focused on community involvement and charitable giving. The Life Ring Foundation is an organization dedicated to fighting pediatric cancer, based in Roanoke. Life Ring Foundation is especially significant for Thalhimer as one of its Roanoke associate's family members is an ambassador for Life Ring and has benefitted from the resources offered through Life Ring at Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital and Cincinnati Children's Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio. **Tripp Poats**, son of Roanoke associate **Wyatt Poats**, has been battling a relapse of acute lymphocytic leukemia (ALL) since the fall of last year.

Life Ring's goal to support families during treatments and raise money for a pediatric hematology and oncology treatment center with Carilion Clinic. Thalhimer recently donated \$17,000 to The Life Ring Foundation. Thalhimer offices also sourced gifts and created care packages for patients and caregivers of Carilion's pediatric cancer center. 50 care packages were assembled, and associates donated over \$2,180 for the items to fill the packages. Associates participated in a Cards for Kids quarter-long activity and created over 125 hand-made cards of encouragement for patients and caregivers of Life Ring participants.



Playin' possum in B'burg >

It's always fun to see the new t-shirt design for **Downtown Blacksburg's Steppin' Out** street festival every year. For the 2024 event, **Claire Lambert** (born in Salem, now in Bassett) submitted the winning design. "I reviewed the previous design winners and saw that many had animals and instruments. I wanted to incorporate things that were important to this region. Along with a downtown Blacksburg scene, I picked the possum and a banjo. The possum is one of my favorite native animals and bluegrass is important to the heritage of Southwest Virginia," Lambert says. Steppin' Out 2024 will be held August 2—3 in downtown Blacksburg (www.blacksburgsteppinout.com).

EZ in >

EZ Mobility Solutions celebrated the grand opening of its new showroom and headquarters at 4549 Shenandoah Ave NW, Roanoke, with a combined ribbon-cutting ceremony and Friends & Family Open House. The event last month brought together city officials, community leaders, and health advocates, as well as friends and family of the EZ Mobility team, underscoring the company's dedication to improving mobility and quality of life within the Roanoke community.

Said President and Founder **David Todd**, "our new showroom isn't just a place to display our products—it's a hub for innovation and support within the community. We are here to provide cutting-edge mobility solutions to those who need them the most." The new showroom features a wide array of mobility aids, including high-tech wheelchairs, electric scooters, and bespoke mobility accessories. The ribbon-cutting ceremony officiated by Eric Sichau, President and CEO of the Roanoke Regional Chamber, along with other local dignitaries. "This investment represents another great reason why the region of Virginia's Blue Ridge is the place to live, work, play and raise a family," he said before helping to cut the ribbon.





Roanoke City Market Building rebranding >

The downtown **City Market** building has been an anchor institution in downtown Roanoke for more than 100 years. Recent economic challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have presented several obstacles. The Board of Directors and facility staff said at a news conference in mid-May they spent the last 12 months planning for the future, also announcing that they are once again operating with 100% occupancy – for the first time in five years. They are also pursuing a new positioning strategy that will include an interior redesign of the food hall and mezzanine areas, releasing a new brand and visual identity system more closely aligned to the city's larger promotional strategy, highlighting the building's historic role.

The new logo, graphics, and styling highlight the city's downtown arts scene, the outdoor assets in the region, and the Roanoke Valley's Blue Ridge Mountains backdrop. "We envision a future where inside the Market Building patrons can get a taste of all that Roanoke offers and then be guided to the various experiences outside our doors that make this region so special," Executive Director **Elliot Broyles** said. As part of the new branding effort, Charter Hall, the third story event space, also received a new logo and marketing strategy designed to increase visibility.

Table manners >

Ahead of last month's commencement, a group of **Virginia Western Community College** students got a chance to put on their best outfits and learn proper etiquette for dining in a professional environment last month. They joined faculty and alumni, some of whom were business professionals, to dine at 419 West. **Amanda Mansfield**, Philanthropy Director at Virginia Western, guided the students through the dinner: "it's incredibly important for students to be able to have all these tools in their arsenal, if they try to make a great impression and navigate the business world. There's a huge portion of conducting business that doesn't happen in the office. It happens in many social situations. It might be the difference between you getting the job or not ... or getting the promotion."

Those in attendance were part of the school's TRIO program for those enrolled that are first generation, facing low-income challenges, or disabled. They learned business protocol on everything from the correct way to use utensils, to how to budget their money for the bill. Some were getting to graduate; other students are still working on their associate degrees.





Alum secures VT commencement >

Mehul Sanghani, chief executive officer and founder of Octo, delivered the keynote address at **Virginia Tech's University Commencement** ceremony on May 10. Octo, a technology firm focused on national security, caught the attention of a number of Fortune 100 companies as an acquisition target. In January 2023, IBM announced it was acquiring the company for just under \$1.3 billion. Sanghani, a Blacksburg native, graduated from Virginia Tech with bachelor's degrees in industrial and systems engineering as well as psychology.



Gene Marrano

Repurposed trades >

"Experienced welders needed" - there's often been a shortage and now a third annual student "sculpted art contest," that involved arc welding was on display at Roanoke's **Black Dog Salvage** last month. Visitors had the chance to vote for a People's Choice award. Welding is not new to the Whiteside family at Black Dog Salvage, where **Mike Whiteside** – who calls himself "the big dog," - admits that his son **Tay Whiteside** has the real welding skills. Tay now has his own business, **Lift Arc Studios**, which specializes in utilizing that trade. "It is our ethos, we've been re-purposers since day one." As for his own welding skills says Mike, former co-star of the Salvage Dawgs TV show, "I was terrible at it. Tay did a lot better with it."

The American Welding Society staged the third annual sculpted art contest, with entries from eleven Student-artists at five high schools in the Roanoke and New River Valleys, who used arcs welder to create their pieces - seven were female high school students versus only four males. "It's definitely [about] wanting to get interest in the trade," says Mike Whiteside. "The trades have gone down, now it's kind of going the other direction [as an employment option]."



Gene Marrano

Artspace at Riverdale >

The Minnesota-based non-profit developer **Artspace** is moving forward with a project in Roanoke City. It will be one of the features in the mixed use plans for the Roanoke Industrial Center now known as **Riverdale**. Artspace renovates industrial buildings into affording housing and workspaces for artists and other creatives. The organization has done projects across the country, and this would be the first in Virginia. More than 800 people locally filled out the Artspace questionnaire signaling their interest in affordable apartments and studio space. The organization provides affordable living and workspaces for artists.

Wendy Holmes, senior vice president of Artspace projects, says Artspace ROA will fit in well with developer **Ed Walker's** mixed use plans for the Roanoke Industrial Center. "It's the artists and the families that activate the space. Our space creates the affordability and preserves that affordability for the long term, but it's really the people who live and work in the building that activate it. We [also] create a lot of common and community space in the building, so that artists can have an opportunity to put together an exhibit [or] a music performance [or] have art crawls in their building."

Holmes said at an event announcing the survey results that each project is representative of its community. The next step is to identify which building on the campus best suits the Artspace project – and then purchase it from Ed Walker and his associates. She adds it will cost around \$800,000 to draw up the initial engineering and architectural plans. Further financing will come from a variety of sources, she added. At the April event announcing the survey results, Ed Walker celebrated the one year anniversary of taking ownership of the former 9th Street SE industrial park by cutting a birthday cake for those on hand.



Dogwood Festival draws Vinton >

The venerable **Vinton Dogwood Festival** celebrated its 69th year last month with dozens of vendors, an estimated 8-10,000 visitors and a parade through the streets of the town. There was also live music, a beverage garden and food trucks. The Dogwood Festival touts itself as the oldest event of its kind in Virginia's Blue Ridge.



Play through, Baber >

The recent passing of **Edgar "Ned" Baber**, as sad as it was, reminds many of his contribution to the game of golf in the Roanoke Valley. Although he spent much of his life in Roanoke, Baber grew up in Lynchburg, where his early golfing years were played at Oakwood Country Club.

He was a graduate of Virginia Episcopal School in Lynchburg before enrolling at Washington and Lee in Lexington, where he was captain of the Generals' 1959 team. As early as 1960, he won the men's state amateur, and he won the super senior amateur as recently as 2017.



Baber also had a career spanning 46 years as an Equitable Advisor in Richmond and Roanoke and was a member of the Equitable Hall of Fame. He helped form the **Roanoke Valley Golf Hall of Fame** in 1974 and had been a member of it since 1982 and had the good fortune of watching his son, Miller, crowned in 2010.

Phil Owenby, now in the golfing business, was the head pro at **Hunting Hills Country Club** in Roanoke when he met Baber in 1979, and Owenby later served as the head pro at **Roanoke Country Club**, where Baber was a major figure. "I go back a long way with Ned," said Owenby, named to the Roanoke Valley Golf Hall of Fame several years ago in Baber's presence.

"It was certainly bad news, no question about it," Owenby said, "and I reached out to Miller as well. [Ned] was a terrific guy and always very positive. The thing I liked most about Ned is that he was always positive. He loved the game and was passionate about the game and passionate about junior golf. He really wanted to see kids out there and introduce people to golf, whether it was girls or boys."

"He did a lot for the Blacksburg Country Club," Prater said. "Chuck Hartman, the baseball coach, and a couple of other guys said it would be awesome if I could help them get into the [Roanoke Valley Golf] hall of fame. They were kind of expanding—not quite ready to expand—and Ned helped us get into the hall of fame."

- Doug Doughty



Chamber roundup >

Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce drew Chamber members and guests to the Salem Civic Center last month for the annual Legislative Session roundup featuring local delegates and State Senators. Among the highlights was Delegate **Terry Austin** (R-Botetourt County), chair of the transportation committee in the General Assembly, discussing changes that will expedite the widening of I-81 to three lanes in the Roanoke Valley.



Dog Bowl is back >

The **Dog Bowl** live music venue located adjacent to **Black Dog Salvage** off 13th Street Southwest in Roanoke returned for 2024 with headliners Crawford & Power last month, with local favorite Corey Hunley opening the show. **5 Points Music Sanctuary** programs the monthly concerts and receives proceeds for its non-profit 5 Points Foundation, which promotes music therapy and helps those with hearing issues. "They did it last year for the first time," says Black Dog Salvage co-owner **Mike Whiteside** of 5 Points' involvement, "and it was an outstanding success." Already scheduled are Phat Laces (June 8) and the Dead Reckoning (July 7) with August and September TBA.



Submitted



RC's new Science Center >

Roanoke College broke ground on the first phase of its new forward-looking Science Center in late April. The Science Center will reimagine three major buildings on campus to create a state-of-the-art hub for STEM learning and research. Construction will be done in phases starting with the demolition of the circa-1970s Massengill Auditorium. In its place, a new \$30 million facility will be built, with a completion date projected for 2026. Future phases also call for major renovations of the neighboring Life Science and Trexler Hall buildings. Roanoke College president **Frank Shushok** says the entire makeover that will house a third of all school courses may take about six years to complete. "We have a steady flow of students coming from Virginia Western straight over to Roanoke College. That's an important partnership," notes Shushok, "and we're also working on dual credit programs with the lab school at Salem High School; we're partnering with Roanoke County and Virginia Tech. We're going to be linking arms with just about everyone up and down the educational pipeline."

The groundbreaking and farewell to Massengill Auditorium coincided with Roanoke's annual Alumni Weekend celebration and the return of hundreds of graduates to campus. Shushok says the new Science Center will allow room to add new majors – like engineering, which he is familiar with after a long tenure at Virginia Tech. "We hired our first engineering professor last year and just hired our second. We think we can be really good at computer science and engineering. We're already terrific at all of the sciences in general."



Gene Marrano

Chamber games up >

The annual **Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce Business Showcase** took place last month before a **Salem Red Sox** home game, as Chamber member businesses met with the public and talked about the services they offer. It also included an apprenticeship signing ceremony, with high school students stepping up to learn from local companies that might lead to career options and more direction about what educational opportunities they may pursue.

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

EDUCATIONAL FRONT



Hinton

Hollins University President **Mary Dana Hinton**, Ph.D., has been elected chair of the Board of Directors for the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU). Hinton leads a team of four new board officers and 14 new board members who will take office on July 1, 2024. Founded in 1976, NAICU is the only national membership organization solely focused on representing private, nonprofit higher education on public policy issues in Washington, DC. NAICU board members set the association's agenda on federal higher education policy,

actively encourage support for the association's priorities and initiatives, and oversee the organization's financial administration.



Blake

Peter Blake, the former longtime director of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) has been selected to serve as interim president of the Commonwealth Alliance for Rural Colleges (CARC). Prior to his service with SCHEV, Blake worked as a vice chancellor for the Virginia Community College System, as Deputy Secretary and Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Virginia, and as a legislative analyst for the Virginia House Appropriations Committee.

FINANCIAL FRONT



Cundiff

Lisa Cundiff has joined Farm Credit on the Virginias as an operations support specialist based in the Roanoke branch. FCV is a lending cooperative that serves Virginia, West Virginia and western Maryland. Prior to joining FCV, Cundiff worked for a large insurance company, where she held a variety of roles, from insurance processor to customer retention to the project support/compliance team.

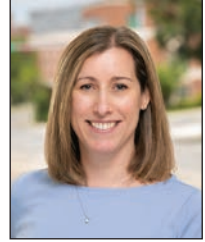
Tiffany Rawling has been appointed Chief Operations Officer at Valley Wealth Group. Rawling joined the firm at its inception in 2015 as a director; coming from 17 years'



Rawling

experience in financial services, including positions at AXA Advisors, SunTrust Investment Services, and Valley Bank. Roanoke-based Valley Wealth Group specializes in wealth management, financial and retirement planning.

CONSTRUCTION FRONT



Caldwell

Jennifer Caldwell has been hired by Building Specialists, Inc., (BSI) Construction & Design as Estimator. Caldwell is a former

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employee of BSI, and after a twelve-year absence has rejoined the Building Specialists team in this critical role. Caldwell has a wealth of experience and knowledge with over 25 years in the construction industry.

Have a career announcement?

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



Smith



Yost

MB Contractors, the local construction company, announced the promotion of two employees. **Sterling Smith** has been promoted to the position of Director of Operations, after over a decade of service with MB Contractors;

and **Aaron Yost** has been promoted to the position of Chief Pre-construction Manager. Yost joined MB Contractors nine years ago as a project engineer.

COMMUNITY SERVICE FRONT



Paxton

Randi Paxton has been appointed Vice President and Chief Operations Officer of HopeTree Family Services. She is responsible for leading

the agency's programs and services lines that include Therapeutic Foster Care, Therapeutic Group Homes, Developmental Disabilities Ministry, HopeTree Academy, and Family Centered Treatment. Paxton has 22 years of experience working with youth, adults, and families in residential and community-based settings. Before joining HopeTree, Paxton served in a variety of leadership roles in a community-based mental health organization for the past seventeen years, most recently as Executive Director. In addition to her leadership experience, Paxton has worked as a clinician working with high-risk populations, primarily children and families.

CREATIVE FRONT



Mower

Jefferson Center announced Dr. **Tonia Socha-Mower** as New Senior Director of Development. Jefferson Center Foundation is a Roanoke-based nonprofit organization focused on community enrichment through the performing arts and arts education. Socha-Mower brings nearly thirty years of fundraising and nonprofit leadership expertise to her new

Valinda Hayes

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Mortgage Loan Officer
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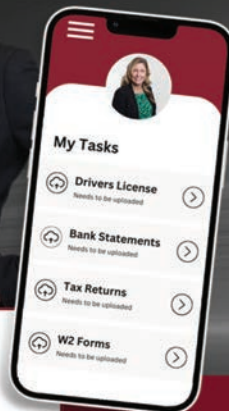
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CONTRIBUTORS

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

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

Jennifer Poff Cooper is a senior correspondent for FRONT, and a graduate of the RB Pamplin College of Business at Virginia Tech with a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from Hollins University. She is a native of Christiansburg, where she lives and writes in her family's home place. [cooperjp91@gmail.com]

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

Dan Dowdy is the business development director for Valley Business FRONT and owner of The Proofing Prof proofreading services (proofingprof.net). His background includes service in the U.S. Air Force and an extensive career in education, including teaching college-level writing competency and business courses, and working for a Fortune 100 company. [ddowdy@vbFRONT.com]

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

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

Stevie Holcomb is a Roanoke Realtor, actor, and author of the book This is Not My Cat. She knits and crafts in her spare time. [tignorholcomb@gmail.com]

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

Jennifer Leake is a seasoned Certified Management Consultant (CMC®) with over 30 years of business and consulting experience. She is a certified trusted advisor in employee assessments, engagement, and emotional intelligence. She offers ideas and best practices to help you hire the right people, engage employees, and lead effectively to enhance workplace performance

and drive overall business success.

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

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

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

Ian Price is a radio and print journalist in Roanoke who looks at things through a Millennial's eye. The Radford University communications major is also a pretty good DJ and trivia host, some say. [IanPrice23@gmail.com]

Meg Reed is the vice president of business banking at Freedom First Credit Union. With 25 years of banking experience, she ensures present and future Business Members are equipped to grow their business while helping them financially succeed; catering a financial plan to take the business to the next level. Reed views every business "like a zebra—no two businesses have the same stripes. What may work for one, may not work for the next." [mareed@freedomfirst.com]

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

Sam Sokolove is the Senior Consultant and Director of Government Contracting for Building Beloved Communities, which works to help non-profit organizations grow. [sam@buildingbelovedcommunities.com]

Emma Thomas is a Roanoke native and 2022 Hollins University Graduate. She works for WFIR News Talk Radio as a reporter. [thomasek432@gmail.com]

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

“ ”

It's wise to buddy up to an accomplished. — Page 37

role, previously serving as the Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of the American Association of Dental Boards. During her tenure as Director of Counseling, Medical, and Dental Services at Morehead State University, she led initiatives that garnered millions of dollars in grant funding.

TRANSPORTATION FRONT

Matt Humphreys was named Operator of the Year for Small Airports

at the 2024 NEC/AEE International Aviation Show Symposium in Buffalo. Humphreys is an equipment mechanic at the Roanoke Regional Airport, and the recognition singled out his deep snow equipment expertise and airfield snow removal operations.

MUNICIPAL FRONT

Scott Woodrum was named Assistant County Administrator for Montgomery County.



Woodrum

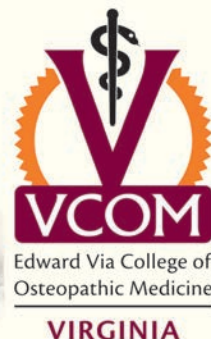
He is responsible for oversight of the Animal Care and Adoption Center, General Services, Human Services, and Information Technology. He began his career with Montgomery County in 2016 as County Engineer, in 2019, he was

selected to serve as the Director of General Services. Previously, he was employed by the Virginia Department of Transportation as Land Use Director for the Salem District. Scott has a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering Technology from Bluefield State College in 1996 and is a licensed professional engineer in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Compiled by Tom Field and Gene Marrano

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in Giles County is expanding, increasing its space with a new 40,000 square foot facility and adding 27 new jobs. The \$1.6 million investment will be used for manufacturing and office space as the company specializes in packaging line design and equipment manufacturing.

Lab work for college

Virginia will host the launching of six new college partnership lab schools with dual enrollment and extracurricular opportunities for high school students interested in STEM, health and bio sciences, and related disciplines. In our region, this includes **Roanoke College** (awarded \$2.83 million in startup costs) and **Emory & Henry College** (awarded \$3.85 million in startup costs). Both of these institutions are the first private entities to receive this funding.

Mall resurgence... for foodies

Two restaurants have recently opened at Roanoke's Valley View Mall complex: **KPOT Korean BBQ** and **Bubba's 33** (classic American fare). Both are national franchises, KPOT (Philadelphia-headquartered for US chain; about 70 locations); Bubba's 33 (Louisville-headquartered; about 30 locations—most in

Texas; Texas Roadhouse founder).

Ambulance ride to jail

James C. Jones Jr., owner of **Lifeline Ambulance Service** in Christiansburg, was sentenced to six and a half years in prison for tax evasion and obstructing the IRS. Court documents showed that Jones failed to pay the IRS approximately \$200,000 in Social Security, Medicare, and income taxes withheld from employee wages. The report says Jones claimed he did not have the assets to pay the taxes, but he also owned several Caribbean beachfront condominiums, a classic muscle car collection, multiple foreign bank accounts, and his "conduct caused a tax loss to the IRS of at least \$1.5 million."

Parkway less bumpy

The **Blue Ridge Parkway** in the Roanoke corridor is slated to receive about \$75 million for roadway improvements. Frequent drivers have noticed significant increases in potholes and other disrepair in recent years; and the funding—from the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA)—should address 24 miles between mileposts 97 and 121. Repairs listed include road resurfacing, slope stabilization, drainage structures, curbs and walks, guardrails, stone walls, overlooks, pavement markings, and signage.

Various single-lane and full-road closures are anticipated for 2025—2026.

A lot more bull

Buffalo Mountain Natural Area Preserve in **Floyd County** is slated to receive nearly \$10 million in federal funding. The investment would protect over 3,000 acres of forest and streams.

TechTrophies

TechNite 2024—a **Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology (RBTC)** annual awards event—was held a Hotel Roanoke on May 8, where the following winners were announced: **Robert Sandel**, Virginia Western Community College president—RBTC Hall of Fame induction; **Tiny Cargo / Spencer Marsh**—Hart of Entrepreneur Impact Award; **Heather Lindberg and Krisylea Ojeda**, Virginia Western Community College—STEM-H Educator Award; **Mark Levy** of Roanoke Valley Governor's School for Science and Technology—K-12 STEM-H Educator Award; **Fermi Energy**—Rising Star in Technology Award; **Sarah Snider / BEAM Diagnostics**—Rising Star in Biotechnology Award; **Read Montague** with Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC—Innovator Award; **Rob Day** with TechLab—Regional Leadership Award;

Adam Donato with Card Isle—Entrepreneur of the Year Award; **CytoRecovery**—Leading Small Tech Company Award; **Elbit Systems of America-Night Vision**—Leading Large Tech Company Award; Hal Irvin with Fralin Biomedical Institute at VTC—Ruby Award.

Pet present

The **Regional Center for Animal Care and Protection (RCACP)** in Roanoke received a \$10,000 grant from the national nonprofit Petco Love. RCACP is a local open intake municipal shelter for the City of Roanoke, Town of Vinton, and Counties of Roanoke and Botetourt. Headquartered in San Antonio, TX, Petco's contributions include pet education and advocacy, vaccines, adoptions, and reunions.

Band of baristas

According to **Starbucks Workers United**, its coffee shop at I-81 and Roanoke Street in Christiansburg became the 18th Starbucks location in Virginia to join the union.

Return to familiar

Woods Rogers law firm, headquartered in Roanoke, is once again, Woods Rogers. The historic 100+ year old firm that merged with another historic 100+ year old firm, Vandeventer Black, in 2022, carried the

combined (WRVB) name until a rebranding announcement in mid-May. The firm claims multidisciplinary practices statewide, 135 lawyers, over 250 employees, and offices in Roanoke, Richmond, Lynchburg, Charlottesville, and Norfolk.

utility would buy under a separate company; and "renewable energy certificates." The deals (with submissions by mid-July) are structured for Appalachian to meet clean energy goals and help with Virginia Clean Economy Act compliance.

Mountain pass

Mountain Lake Lodge in Pembroke celebrated the opening of the **Giles County Trail Center**; called "the gateway to a multitude of attractions and outdoor experiences across the New River Valley and Southwest Virginia."

Wind and sun in forecast

Appalachian Power sent out requests for proposals for wind, solar, and battery storage to add to its energy portfolio. RFPs include "up to 800 megawatts" by alternative energy providers that the utility would buy; "up to 300 megawatts" of wind and solar that the

Freedom First Gives

Freedom First Credit Union has announced a new giving program, Freedom First Gives. The goal is to make applying for funding less time-consuming by sending funding requests through a single, streamlined process. Additionally, Freedom First Gives applications will be accepted on an ongoing basis so there are no funding windows that could be missed. Funding requests of up to \$5,000 will be considered and organizations within our field of membership can apply. Each year, Freedom First commits a minimum of 10% of the previous year's net profit towards

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'give back activities'. "Whether it's through targeted investment, economic development, financial education, community outreach, or Freedom First Gives, our goal is to help make a difference in the lives of those we serve," said Paul Phillips, President/CEO of Freedom First.

Hotel Roanoke expansion plans

The Hotel Roanoke and Conference Center will get ready to move ahead with an expansion project after City Council authorized the issuance of public improvement bonds at a meeting in April. Brian Mann is Executive Enterprise Administrator for the City of Roanoke; he told Council as new competition comes online for large meetings

and conventions the Hotel must stay current. Some of that larger space comes from taking an outdoor feature and bringing it inside – the north courtyard where Christmas lights go up every year. "That will allow for weddings [and] indoor/outdoor events. It allows us to go out and market high-end weddings that we've not been able to."

All told the conference center footprint will enlarge by ten percent to 94,000 sq. ft., according to Mann. Meanwhile a patio space closer to the walkway over the train tracks will be enclosed - Mann says that will allow for more weddings and other events - lawn amenities in the same area such as pickleball, bocci ball and firepits are in the plans as well. Roanoke City Council

Notable Transactions

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- **HVAC** plumbing / piping business purchased industrial building on 19th St Roanoke for \$652,000
- **Franklin St** historic building (Atlantic Union Bank branch) to be purchased by Town of Rocky Mount
- **Tizzone** at Daleville Town Center moving to adjacent new construction
- Town of Christiansburg opens **Huckleberry Park** inclusive play ground, splash pad, sports complex
- **Floyd Regional Commerce Center** awarded \$2.7 million from USEDA to develop infrastructure
- **Six and Sky Rooftop** fully open on top of Roanoke's Center-in-the-Square

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

approved issuance of those bonds for a project estimated between 11 and 13 million dollars.

More Youngkin appointments

Citizens' Advisory Council on furnishing and interpreting the executive mansion: **Kent Greenawalt** of Roanoke, Chair and CEO, Foot Levelers, Inc.; Small Grains Board: **Floyd Childress** of Christiansburg, President, Childress Farms; Criminal Justice Services Board: **Ryan M. Zuidema** of Lynchburg, Chief of Police, Lynchburg Police Department; Radiation Advisory Board: Dr.

Gregory Daniel of Blacksburg, Professor Emeritus of Radiology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Tourism grants

10 Virginia communities will launch new tourism programs to boost their outdoor recreation economies. Each was awarded up to \$20,000 through the **Virginia Tourism Corporation's (VTC) DRIVE** Outdoor grant program, a tourism development grant program targeting outdoor product development and entrepreneurial expansion throughout the Commonwealth. The

Alleghany Highlands will receive one of those grants.

Funding for workforce training

The federal Infrastructure Bill signed into law three years ago included almost 400 billion dollars for over 40,000 projects in 4500 communities - and \$1.2 trillion overall. Now proposed legislation will address the workforce issue: it's called the **BUILDS Act** for short, designed to connect businesses with education providers and to encourage workforce training programs and mentorships. US Senator Tim Kaine on the BUILDS Act: "It is

specifically designed at creating partnerships between businesses and educational institutions, primarily community colleges but not exclusively, to focus on innovative training of our infrastructure workforce. There are some great examples of this in Virginia." With an aging infrastructure workforce Kaine says the U.S. needs to train the next generation. Just recently Build Smart Institute in Roanoke and Ferrum College announced a joint construction trade education program.

Compiled by Gene Marrano and Tom Field

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“Anyone can learn from the lessons she's realized. — Page 36

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Gene Marrano photos

Lending a VOICe to how outdoor amenities are developed in the Valley

By Gene Marrano

A grassroots group wants a seat at the table on helping to plan and support outdoor amenities in the area.



It's called VOICE! The Valley Outdoor Infrastructure Committee, featuring luminaries such as former State Senator and healthcare executive William Fralin; Jeff Todd, the owner of Roanoke Mountain Adventures; Nicola Cranmer, executive director of the Virginia's Blue Ridge Team Twenty24; and Matthew Reedy, executive director at the Kirk Family YMCA. His family was drawn to the area indeed but its proximity to nearby outdoor amenities they spoke to an invite-only gathering

last month about their mission, at The Train Station (the old Virginia Railway Passenger Station) now operated as a private event venue by Schaal's catering. It launched with a campaign to gather support to reopen the Roanoke Mountain Campground on the Mill Mountain spur road to the Blue Ridge Parkway, to overnight guests again who want to rough it for a weekend or perhaps more – whether they are from hundreds of miles away or maybe from the valley below itself.



"There's not a lot of peace in our world, but you get out in nature, and it solves a lot of problems," said Cranmer, whose trains the young women and girls that come to the valley as members of the Twenty24 cycling team to experience nature as they ride along scenic backroads in the area. "Increasing access to trails is critical," she added. There are other agencies in the area advocating and raising money for outdoor amenities – like Roanoke Outside and Pathfinders for Greenways, Fralin noted. "Why [VOICe?]. We need an advocacy group, somebody that raises money privately and gives money to candidates ... and gets people to commit to what we think is important in terms of outdoor infrastructure. That's not really a role anybody else has."

That may be a tough ask, reopening the Roanoke Mountain Campground to overnight use again. Committee members say the National Park Service is wary of letting private vendors run campgrounds along the national park roadway, and VOICe may have to help convince the City of Roanoke to once again oversee and budget for what had

apparently become a losing proposition. That may be difficult, unless they can show a path to profitability. Committee members said there is room for another Parkway-adjacent campground in the Valley – noting they say that the campsites at Roanoke County's Explore Park just down the road are often full. The Roanoke Campground would be primitive at this point in their thinking; no expensive hookups for trailers at least in the initial plans.

VOICe speakers also pointed to the 2% Roanoke City budgets for outdoor amenities – noting Asheville for example setting aside 8% annually for parks & rec. Public support for completing the Roanoke River Greenway – the "spine" of the valley's greenway system – was also on the agenda. The Valley Outdoor Infrastructure Committee describes itself as, "advocates for the Roanoke Valley outdoors. [The] mission is to enhance outdoor spaces, promote recreational activities, and improve the overall quality of life in the region. The committee collaborates with various organizations and community members to achieve these goals." Building the

VOICE for long term success is the goal, said Fralin to a round of applause. That he added means support, commitment and spreading the word.

"We're not in competition with anyone," said spokesperson Shannon Dominguez, an occasional Valley Business FRONT contributor, who is working with VOICE as an officer with the Building Better Communities non-profit that helps mentor other emerging non-profits. "We are wanting to see all ships rise by investing more in the outdoor infrastructure. We're just trying to create education and awareness."

"The city [has] museums, and arts, and music and everything that comes along with a city – and there's a campground right next to it," said Todd. A first outdoor adventure for a local family in the woods could take place just a few minutes from their home, above all the lights while they commune with nature he added. "They don't have to go an hour away to an unfamiliar place. They can go just down the road. Achieving this is going to require a lot of patience and

determination ... preparation, creativity and a little bit of gumption perhaps on behalf of public officials and private action – but it's worth it."

It may also require a solid business plan that could help what has become a day use area only recapture its former glory as the Roanoke Mountain Campground, at the gateway to the Blue Ridge Parkway. But it could also be another asset for the city and for Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge to market to visitors looking for that true metro-mountain experience. VBR executives, Roanoke City Council members and City Manager Bob Cowell were among those on hand for the VOICE event in mid-May. "We can't just snap our fingers and make it happen," noted Jeff Todd, "It's something we have to work towards." A groundswell of support that VOICE wants to encourage might help by offering a "positive vision," could help: "what can the City of Roanoke do – and what can we do to help to encourage and support that?" he asked from the podium. (see the group's [giveourvalleyavoiced](#) on Facebook.) 



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