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AN OPEN LETTER TO OUR READERS:

Let's Help Our Neighbors!

Whether we're hunkering down at home or courageously manning the front lines to provide essential services, all of us are navigating uncharted waters. At this challenging time, it's important to take a break from the news headlines and try to find ways to relax and recharge, whether it's pursuing a favorite indoor pastime, playing a board game with the kids, cooking together as a family, or binge-watching movies.

As always, we hope you will find in the pages of *Seasons* some interesting and beautifully illustrated stories to read, enjoy and share – stories that will, perhaps, introduce you to some fascinating people and places, and take your mind off "all things coronavirus" for a while.

In the midst of this unexpected crisis, we'd also like to encourage you to remember those who may be struggling and in need of assistance, whether it's friends and neighbors or the small business owners in our community.

While everyone is affected by the pandemic to varying degrees, local businesses – restaurants, bars, nail salons, hairstylists, toy stores, hardware stores, and more – rely on in-person foot traffic and online sales to survive, and to feed their families. Many of these businesses, owned by our neighbors and friends, don't have the cash reserves to sustain themselves indefinitely during times like these, and they may be forced to close permanently unless we do something to help them.

So what can we do?

Here are just a few ideas:

- If their doors are still open, try to "shop local" whenever you can
- If their doors are closed but they have a website, order from them online
- Order take-out from restaurants
- Buy memberships to performance or music venues
- Buy gift cards to use in the future
- Pay your stylist or aesthetician for a future haircut or mani-pedi – and include a generous tip
- Reschedule events instead of asking for a refund
- Recommend them to friends, or give them a shoutout on social media
- Hire local people to do landscaping, yard clean-ups and exterior home maintenance, or to design and plant a garden for you
- Think of other ways you can help small business owners; do you have a talent – or some extra supplies – you can share with them?
- Once stores, restaurants and service providers re-open, patronize them as often as you can

As a local business ourselves, we understand all too well what a vital role all of us play in helping local owners survive and thrive so that they can, in turn, provide us with the goods and services we value.

Seasons Magazines has been blessed to have been supported not only by our readers, but by the local business owners who advertise in our pages. And as we mark our 15th year, we want to express our gratitude to all of you. It is a privilege to call you neighbors.

Thank you so much for your kindness and your generosity of spirit - and for continuing to keep our communities the vibrant, caring places we are all so lucky to call home.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Jim Tully

2020 marks our fifteenth anniversary! It's incredible how time flies. In 2006, *Seasons* was created to be a quality magazine that is direct mailed free to the households of the Farmington Valley. Our goal was to create the highest degree of interesting articles, beautiful layouts and photography, and an advertising environment that truly mirrors our brand – in short, a "gimmick-free" publishing model. We have a belief: that we want to tell our readers stories about the interesting people and places in our beautiful state. It's that simple.

Since 2006, *Seasons* has scaled to five additional areas: West Hartford, Glastonbury, the Northwest Hills, the Connecticut Shoreline, and New Haven. In 2019, we started publishing the only glossy quarterly publication dedicated to the LGTBQ community in the state, called *Connecticut VOICE*. A lot has changed in technology and the media landscape over 15 years, and we always strive to move Seasons Media forward. We want to enhance readers' and advertisers' experience with *Seasons* and *Connecticut VOICE,* through our magazines, website, social media, and television shows. And there is more to come. To us, this is part of the fun.

Seasons Media is locally owned and operated, right here in Connecticut. We quietly support many non-profit organizations in our communities because that was a focal part of our mission since Day 1. Our incredibly talented editors, creative design team, and contributors are simply the best, and our Connecticut Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) awards – more than 60 to date – speak volumes. It is about our people and team. We work very hard and are passionate about what we do and the responsibility that goes along with *Seasons* and *Connecticut VOICE.*

I am deeply appreciative of your continued support. On behalf of everyone at Seasons Media … THANK YOU.

Jim

James Tully / Publisher / Owner
Seasons Magazines / Connecticut VOICE
jim@seasonsmagazines.com

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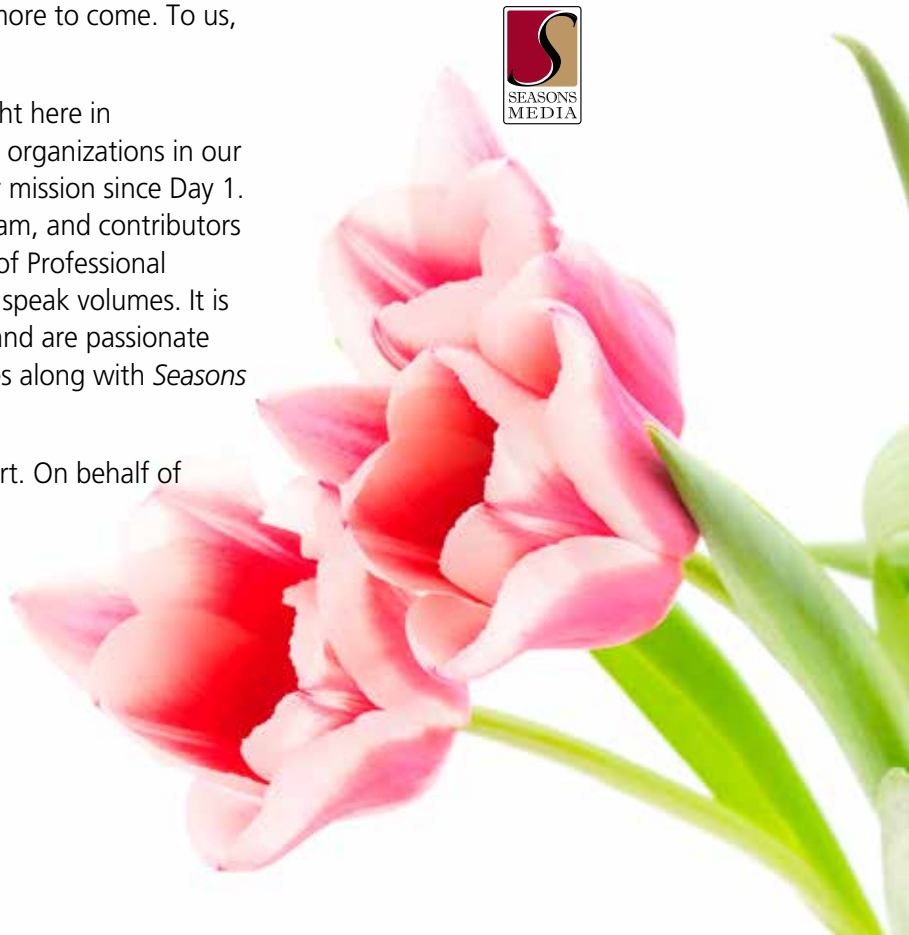

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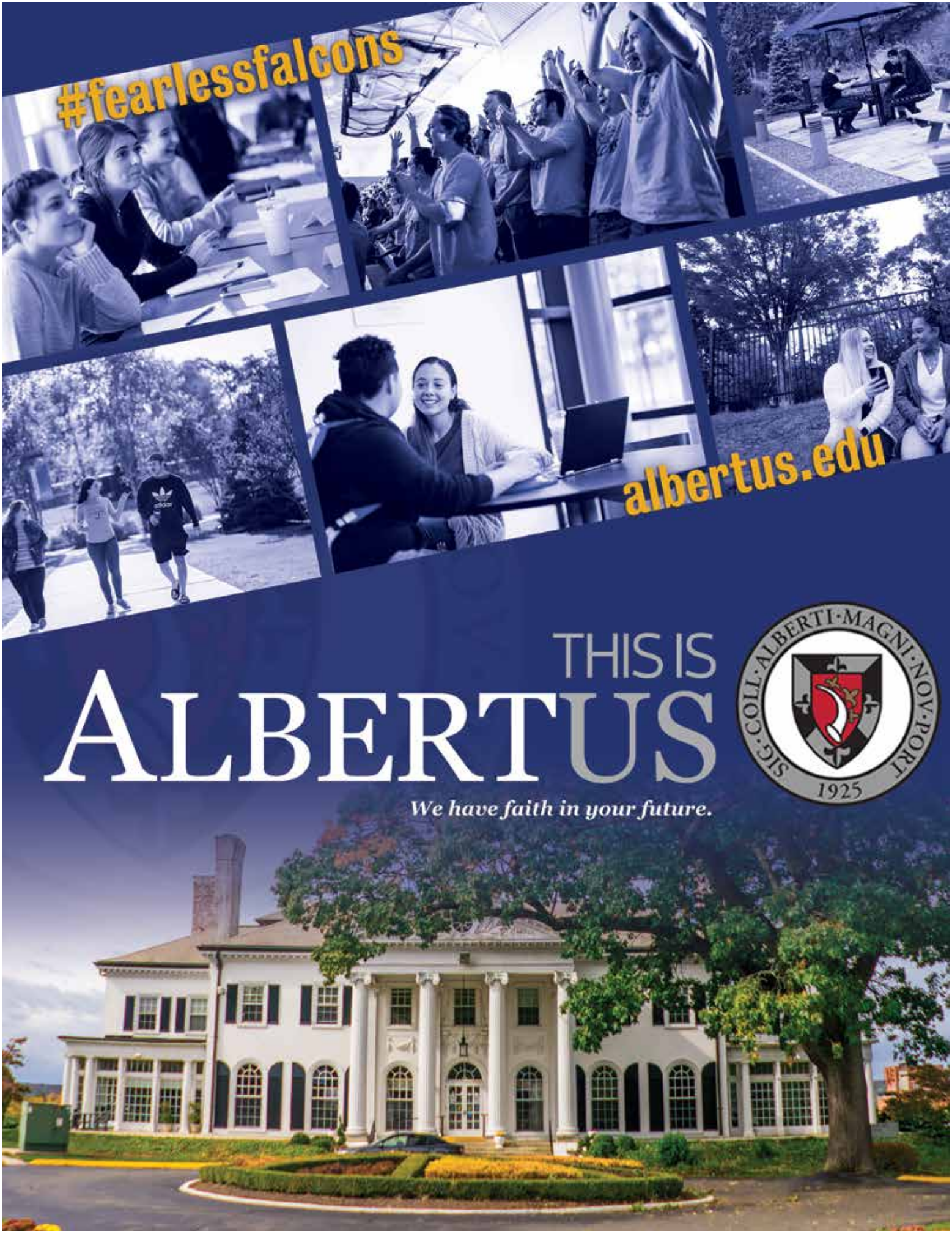
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ON THE COVER:
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Real Talk

Hang time gives ex-offenders a space for community and camaraderie

By **ALIX BOYLE** / *Photography by* **STAN GODLEWSKI**

Did you ever meet a person who can fit 50 pounds of potatoes into a five-pound bag? Charles Grady is one of those people.

On a rainy Wednesday, Grady strides into the Branford Starbucks and takes a quick scan of the room. He's six feet tall, but seems taller; in his late 50s, but looks younger. He's nattily dressed in a jacket with a pocket square, a tie pinned with a pearl tie tack and a blue earring.

"Do you mind if we sit over here?" Grady says, indicating a table where he can sit with his back to the wall and see all the entrances to the building. Old habits die hard. Grady, who worked for years as a Hamden police detective and as an investigator for the U.S. Attorney's office, doesn't feel comfortable unless he's poised to react if needed.

"Years ago, I was off duty in the Foundry Cafe on Audubon Street in New Haven and this guy walks in. It's a hot summer night and the guy comes in wearing a trench coat, looking suspicious. I took note, stood near the doorway, and the next thing, I heard people screaming. He ran past me, I chased him out the door, and a cop working a road job on Whitney Avenue and I tackled the guy."

Turned out, the guy had stabbed something like 11 people. Right place, right time. Grady has a million life stories, and he's creating more every day.

Currently working for the FBI as a public information officer, Grady has multiple side gigs, in criminal justice and the arts. When he started at the FBI, he noticed a gap – there was no place for people making the transition from prison to freedom to come together to talk about issues like difficulty finding a job, or fitting in with the family they left behind. Many were former gang members, put away for selling drugs. Once they were released from prison, people who were

Charles Grady, right, a public information officer for the FBI and one of the founders of the Hang Time nonprofit benefiting former inmates. with former president Barack Obama. Photo courtesy of Charles Grady

Charles Grady and his Hang Time co-founders realized that formerly incarcerated people returned to crime and violence because there was no place offering adequate support.

formerly incarcerated returned to crime and violence because there was no place offering adequate support. His nonprofit Hang Time is that place.

REAL TALK, WITH RESPECT

The first Hang Time meeting in 2014 consisted of five guys recently released from prison, Grady, Michael Gustafson of the U.S. Attorney's Office, and a local businessman.

"We ate dinner and watched football on TV with a federal prosecutor," Grady recalls. "Now we had a shared experience."

The location, the Bridgeport Neighborhood Trust building on State Street, was considered neutral territory. At least once, members of rival gangs attended the same Hang Time meeting, peacefully.

Today, Hang Time groups take place in New Haven, Waterbury, Hartford, and Bridgeport, drawing 30 to 50 people per session. Although women are welcome at Hang Time, Grady started another program called Her Time, a meeting just for women who have spent time behind bars. Childcare is provided.

In Bridgeport alone, Hang Time has helped more than 800 people with whatever they need – a hot meal, fellowship with other people who've walked in their shoes, a job, a resume, and more. Hang Time does not provide social services per se but connects participants with existing resources.

A typical meeting runs two hours. One recent night in Bridgeport, participants first spoke about why they felt "mad or glad" in that moment with facilitator Cassie Volcy. Then, while eating Swedish meatballs, noodles and salad, the group listened to a guest speaker talk about how society has ostracized people labeled sex offenders, and even those convicted of minor crimes.

"It's a place to develop social capital. A place where no one is

Hang Time meetings have helped hundreds of people with whatever they need – a hot meal, fellowship with other people who've walked in their shoes, a job, a resume, and more.

judging you," Grady says. "Other programs [run by the parole or other criminal justice system] censor what you can say. We don't do that. It's real talk, with respect."

Hang Time has placed participants in jobs including janitorial services, car washes, solar installation, roofing, and more. But before finding anyone a job, Grady requires that they volunteer at a community event with the group.

The program gets by on personal donations and small grants, for a total of about $100,000 in a good year. It collects donations under the auspices of The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport (CCGB).

"Charlie [Grady] has a profound love for the black community," says Reuel Parks, a parole officer for the state of Connecticut. "For these men, there's a lack of education, financial resources and job opportunities. While you can't overhaul the system, you can come up with ways to help those who've been disenfranchised."

Without a bureaucracy overseeing Hang Time, the program was able to grow quickly, expanding to Connecticut's biggest cities in five years, Parks says.

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

Her Time meetings inspired "Her Time, the Stage Play," which premiered at the Klein Memorial Auditorium in Bridgeport in November. The play – co-written by Grady with Steven Driffin, who also directed – chronicles the struggles of Kim Williams, a woman who returns home after 25 years in federal prison. Driffin is the youth and community programs manager for New Haven's Connecticut Center for Arts and Technology.

Ronnell Higgins, chief of police at Yale University, saw the play and was blown away.

"First, the concept was brilliant," says Higgins, who first met Grady when he worked in Hamden. "Most often we think about males, but what about females? It provided a conversation that needed to be had. That is special. Not everybody can do it. If we can't have that conversation, then who? We in law enforcement can be catalysts to lead that conversation. Charlie is so well-suited to facilitate; he's the drum major, keeping everyone on track."

Higgins says Grady has a genuine passion for helping people and does it naturally.

One of those people is Malik Nelson, a regular at the Bridgeport Hang Time. Nelson served 13 years in prison for a manslaughter he

committed at 18. Now 43, he says he's worked hard to stay out of prison and to associate with people who are a positive influence, which he's done successfully for 11 years. Hang Time has become his family, helping him find his job selling vegetables from a truck to people in "food desert" neighborhoods in Bridgeport that have trouble getting fresh produce.

Last August, CCGB announced his hiring as its new FEED Mobile Marketplace operator. "Malik impressed us as a CREATE student; his dedication, attitude, and skill shown throughout the 10-week course. His experience in prison served to fuel his desire to give back to Bridgeport, to uplift youth, and to provide a healthy environment for residents," the church council's organizers said.

"He's my brother, my confidante, my role model. He's a genuine dude," Nelson says of Grady. "He fought for me to keep my eyes on the prize and I appreciate him. Hang Time kept me whole."

Grady had plenty of the male role models growing up that Nelson lacked. His father and five uncles were all police officers. He first lived in the Brookside housing projects, a mostly black community, then in New Haven, but moved to West Haven – a mostly white community – when his dad was promoted.

"I got very good at code switching," Grady says. "My mother would say, 'You're no better than your cousins.' I learned how to survive in both worlds, black and white. You have to be well-rounded in order to succeed. No race survives on its own."

As a boy, Grady had a positive feeling about police, but when he became a police officer himself, he saw racism, classism and how police officers applied stereotypes when dealing with people of races different from their own.

Not surprisingly, Grady's working on a book about it.

Though he never even performed in a high school play, Grady's had a 20-plus-year career as a professional actor. His latest was a role as a task force officer in the feature film "Inside Game" with Will Sasso.

How he managed to accomplish this while holding down a demanding full-time job and raising two daughters (Charlee, now 21, and Madison, now 24) with his wife Cheryl is anyone's guess.

Grady started out as a self-taught drummer who toured with a jazz fusion band around New England. From there, he appeared in a couple of music videos and a photographer friend suggested he send some photos to an acting agent to try to get television roles.

A program called Her Time offers meetings just for women who have spent time behind bars. Childcare is provided.

Hang Time offers support and camaraderie.

For many participants, Hang Time has become "family."

Charles Grady is a man of many talents, including actor and author.

In short order, he got parts in soap operas and as an extra on "Law and Order." He took acting lessons in New York and got cast in an off-Broadway play called "Whatever Happened to Black Love?" No one was more shocked to be signing autographs at the stage door.

"No one gets as lucky as I," Grady says. "It was part-time hobby that turned into a major success."

Acting segued into writing. He's finishing up a children's book about a tortoise. He's revising his memoir and is in discussions to take "Her Time" to New York.

And soon, Grady will unveil the Hall of Change, an award for formerly incarcerated men and women who have made substantial contributions to their Connecticut communities.

Does he ever sleep?

"Not really," Grady says. "It's OK. My wife doesn't complain. While I'm in a position to effect change, I have to do it. If you do good things for others, good things happen to you."

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THE CONNECTICUT FORUM

A TREASURE TROVE *for* ALL

Once exclusive, the famed Beinecke now welcomes everyone to view its massive collection

By **FRANK RIZZO** / *Photography by* **TONY BACEWICZ**

Tucked behind Woolsey Hall in a corner of the lightly traveled Hewitt Quadrangle at 121 Wall Street is a solitary, glistening white jewel box of a building: the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

The literary archive of Yale University Library is a building of contrasts. A fortress and a sanctuary. Physically modern yet spiritually eternal. It's a building that from the plaza looks cool, opaque and intimidating. But enter through its revolving door and be bathed by a warm, golden glow from the walls' translucent, veined marble, windowed throughout in its giant, granite hexagonal grid.

Its interior space is spare and spacious, yet its inner sanctum – a six-story, glass-enclosed tower of 180,000 books – is a jaw-dropping showstopper (and Instagram fave). If the tower acts as a cathedral of books, then its exhibition spaces on its surrounding two floors are like literary chapels, offering a more intimate look and private revelations.

If the Beinecke is a center of rich humanities scholarship, it is also a place for personal reflection where one can sit on the mid-century furniture (designed by Florence Knoll and Marcel Breuer) and gaze at the titles on the bindings of the books in the tower. It's a kind of communion between writers and readers through the ages.

The Beinecke's director, Edwin C. Schroeder, enjoys watching the faces of new visitors as they enter through the building, seeing their eyes light up and soar upwards to the top of the stacks tower. More than 200,000 scholars, students, visitors and tourists came through the doors last year.

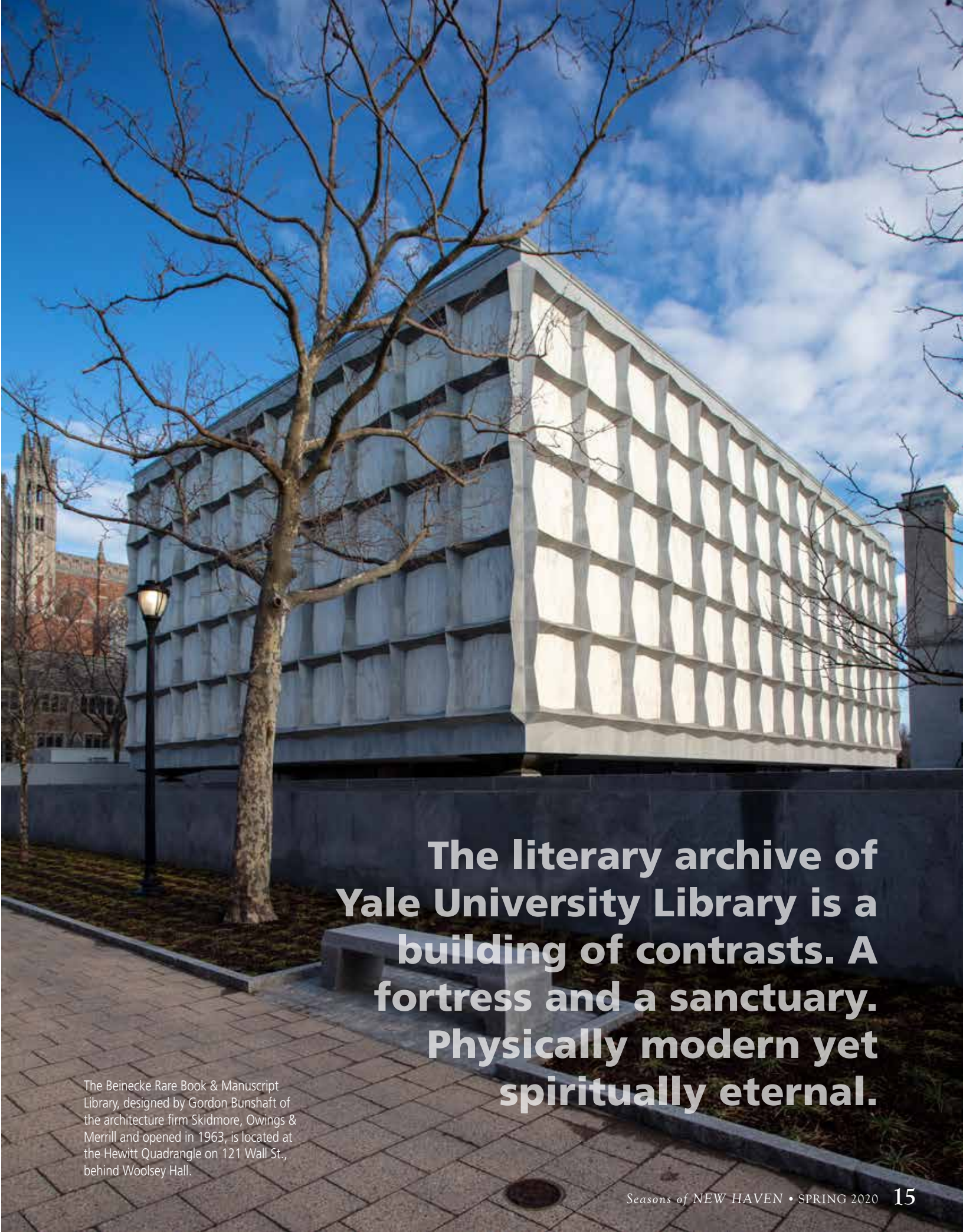
"You've walked into a space where books, writing, literature and the human experience are front and center," he says. "You know this is someplace special."

INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

The most popular item sought at the Beinecke? The Voynich Manuscript, the mystifying 15th or 16th Century cipher manuscript that has remained an enigma since it was donated in 1969. Its puzzling text (seemingly an encrypted language) and its bizarre illustrations have confounded scholars and fascinated the public for decades. The so-far unsolved manuscript is the subject of documentaries, as well as young adult and graphic novels.

That manuscript, like so many of the Beinecke's materials, is available online too. But those who want to delve deeper in scholarship or just feel the talismanic power of seeing original source material, are welcome seven days a week, free of charge.

It was not always so. When the museum opened nearly 60 years ago, it was a temple for the privileged, seemingly exclusive and mysterious, a literary Skull & Bones.



The literary archive of Yale University Library is a building of contrasts. A fortress and a sanctuary. Physically modern yet spiritually eternal.

The Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, designed by Gordon Bunshaft of the architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and opened in 1963, is located at the Hewitt Quadrangle on 121 Wall St., behind Woolsey Hall.

The second floor is where most of the exhibitions are presented and where the six-story, glass-enclosed tower of books dominates the interior, walled by the honeycomb of translucent marble.

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One of the 48 extant copies of the Gutenberg Bible is on permanent display on the second floor.

"I would describe it as a men's club. You had to be a senior scholar, a famous collector, a curator or a faculty member," says Schroeder of those early days before Yale went co-ed and the fundamental nature of the institution evolved to be more inclusive. Even students were not actively encouraged to fully utilize the library. "The director famously pushed students out who seemed to be loitering on the mezzanine."

For Schroeder, that was the long-ago past. Today's mantra is access, in terms of student and scholar usage, as well as in welcoming the general public to view its exhibits.

"We went from two classrooms to seven now, where we can do nearly 600 classes a year, serving [students] not just Yale but from Hopkins School and New Haven Promise," says Schroeder.

Major renovations were made in 2016 after an 18-month closure which dramatically expanded its staff, and its teaching and archival capabilities.

Schroeder says as the massive card catalogue has made way for digitized access, the Beinecke has also become more efficient, able to locate needed materials from its building as well as the library's shelving facility in Hamden, home to low-use, circulating books or the archival collections at the other colleges of Yale. (Looking for Cole Porter material? That's at the School of Music – but the Beinecke can retrieve that collection for you.) More than one million volumes and several million manuscripts are available in total.

But unlike the centrally located Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Center for British Art, the Beinecke's site and formidable physicality is a challenge. "Unless you know the campus. you can't get to us very easily, or at least, it's not as obvious a building as others," says Schroeder.

Exhibitions, always free, are also limited by the restrictions of the building's design. Exhibition materials must be placed in the originally designed cases. While architecturally pleasing and suitable for limited interest more a half century ago, the size of the cases now confines what the curators can exhibit. The collections have grown to include a wide range of materials from ephemera to substantial physical items, such as a pair of petite fireside chairs owned by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, with upholstery designed and painted by Pablo Picasso.

"There is so much here, and we want to show the diversity of what we have," says Schroeder.

VAST MATERIALS

Anchoring both sides of the mezzanine are two massive books that are on permanent display: one of the 48 extant copies of the Gutenberg Bible and the "Double Elephant Folio" of John J. Audubon's "Birds of America" (1827-1838). On the main floor is the pen that Abraham Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation.

Stored below are ancient papyri, medieval manuscripts, personal papers, photographs, drafts of books, handwritten letters, ephemera, and assorted personal items from writers, poets and cultural figures, adding up to a who's who in the arts and humanities over the centuries of civilization.

The Beinecke includes works or archives of J.M. Barrie, Yale alum Thornton Wilder, Gertrude Stein (and Alice B. Toklas, naturally), Rachel Carson, Joseph Conrad, Richard Wright, Charles Dickens, Alexis de Tocqueville, George Eliot, Langston Hughes, Thomas Hardy, Robert Lewis, costumer Irene Sharaff, actor Marian Seldes, Robert Louis

Also on permanent display is "Double Elephant Folio" of John J. Audubon's "Birds of America" (1827-1838). Below, a page from the Gutenberg Bible.

Stevenson, James Joyce, Rebecca West, Rudyard Kipling, D.H. Lawrence, Doris Lessing, Eugene O'Neill Jr., Thomas Mann, set designer Ming Cho Lee, Lillian Hellman, Edith Wharton, Ezra Pound, Larry Kramer, Paula Vogel, David Rakoff, and the just-acquired David Sedaris.

To clarify the mythology surrounding the scenario of a fire in the central book tower (not accessible to the public): Yes, the glass-enclosed stacks can be flooded with a mix of Halon 1301 and INERGEN fire suppression gas if fire detectors are triggered. But not until everyone is out and all persons are accounted for.

WHAT TO COLLECT?

So how does the Beinecke decide what to collect, given its vast resources and stellar reputation?

"Our idea of collecting is that we build on existing strengths," says Timothy Young, curator of modern books and manuscripts for the last 28 years.

Young sees the Beinecke going well beyond being "a monument to colonialization and patriarchy." Young takes an expansionist view of American Studies beyond the high-profile names of generations past to seek out those from backgrounds that are more diverse than the Western European works that formed the foundation of the Beinecke. "We are also interested in those who potentially influenced a figure to tell that broader story and to see how that plays out."

And as more personal stories are gleaned from the increasingly diverse collections, their relevance to a broader audience becomes ever more evident. "We might seem to be in an ivory tower, but these collections might have something to say about your daily life," says Young.

New technology in a fast-moving age and the ways that people, especially literary figures, communicate are ongoing challenges.

"We are collecting more material that is digital in nature," says Young. "And we struggle with how to collect social media and websites."

NEW EXHIBIT ON TRAVEL

The next exhibit at the Beinecke, which opens May 11 and continues through August 9, will be "Road Show: Travel Papers in American Literature" by Nancy Kuhl, curator of poetry in the Yale Collection of American Literature.

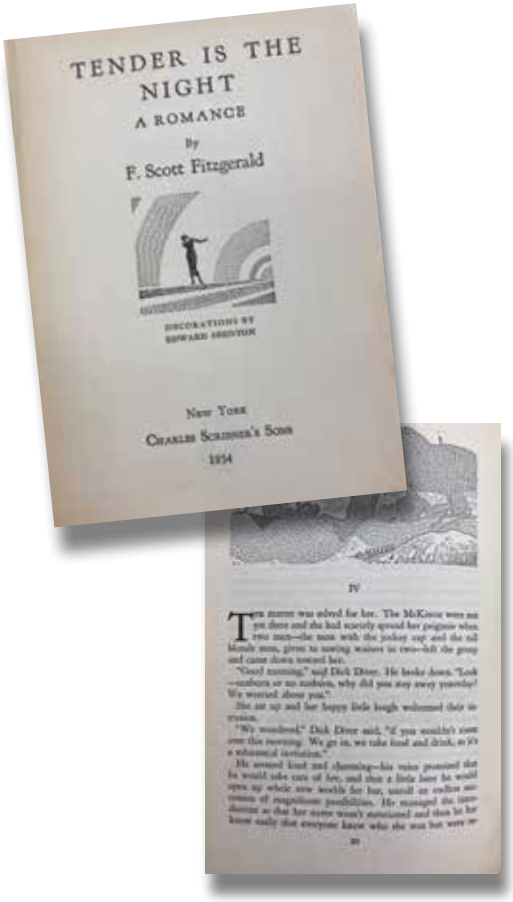
Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Bennett, Truman Capote, Annie Dillard, and many more.

The exhibit features material from Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Bennett, Truman Capote, Annie Dillard, and many more literary and cultural figures.

"It's not an exhibition exclusively about writers being 'on the road' or about novels about travel," says Kuhl. "It's more about how a writer's experience in traveling results in a great work

A detail from one of the shelves of books stored in the tower.

Nancy Kuhl, curator of poetry in the Yale Collection of American Literature, and Exhibition Technician Megan Czekaj, prepare the next exhibit which will be presented in May. Photo by **Frank Rizzo**



Among the artifacts in the upcoming exhibit "Road Show: Travel Papers in American Literature" is an original copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Tender Is the Night."
Photo by **Frank Rizzo**

of art. A writer's archive is not something outside of time and place. It's specific to a culture and a community so all of these [materials on exhibit], twisted into a certain light, tell us something about that culture. What kinds of travel do writers undertake, far beyond their creative lives, far beyond what we can see on the surface of a novel? How do their movements in the world impact their lives, their families, their work?"

The exhibit, for example, will feature evidence of F. Scott Fitzgerald traveling in Europe, meeting American friends and expatriates Gerald and Sara Murphy in the 1920s "and we see how that traveling experience 15 years later becomes 'Tender Is the Night.'"

Among the items of travel featured are about a dozen passports by cultural figures of the past century.

"What can be more intimate than a piece of identification that's been in your front pocket during the course of your travels?" asks Kuhl.

Other materials offer a darker view of travel. There's the "Green Book," a traveling guide for African Americans that was the basis of the Oscar-winning film of the same name.

There's also a business card from a hotel in Ohio that features a picture of its black owner. "It reflects the complexities of traveling as an African American in this country before the Civil Rights Act, and even after. The significance of a person putting his picture on a business card identifies the hotel as a place that's safe for a whole community of travelers."

Other items in the exhibit include whimsical maps by artist Saul Steinberg, traveling material by Langston Hughes, and postcards from Ernest Hemingway.

"One of the things this institution is about," says Kuhl, "is exciting students' minds and engaging them in whatever way, whatever might spark a spiritual connection, whatever might lead a student to do more rigorous research."

A pair of petite fireside chairs owned by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, with upholstery designed and painted by Pablo Picasso. Photo by **Frank Rizzo**

FEATURE

STAYING SAFE

Bullying is a pervasive problem – but help is at hand

By **CAROL LATTER**

In 2011, five teenaged boys attending a West Hartford high school harassed a female student for weeks, made threats against her, and then showed up at her house. When the girl's 19-year-old cousin went outside to confront them, one of the bullies shot him in the neck.

In 2016, a seventh-grade student at a New Haven magnet school was punched and knocked unconscious during class, the culmination of five years of abuse by his classmates. His mother sued the school district and city, saying she had repeatedly notified school authorities, but nothing was done.

In 2018, an elementary student who had moved to Cheshire from New Mexico five months earlier – and was constantly bullied in her new school because she was Hispanic – committed suicide at home two days before Christmas. She was 11 years old.

These are just some of the shocking bullying cases that have taken place throughout Connecticut in the past decade. While bullying is not limited to schools or school-aged children, educational settings have been a hotbed of this type of activity for many years – and it seems to be getting worse. A poll of more than 160,000 students by nonprofit YouthTruth revealed that about 30 percent of middle-school and high school students had been bullied in school in 2017, up from 25 percent two years earlier.

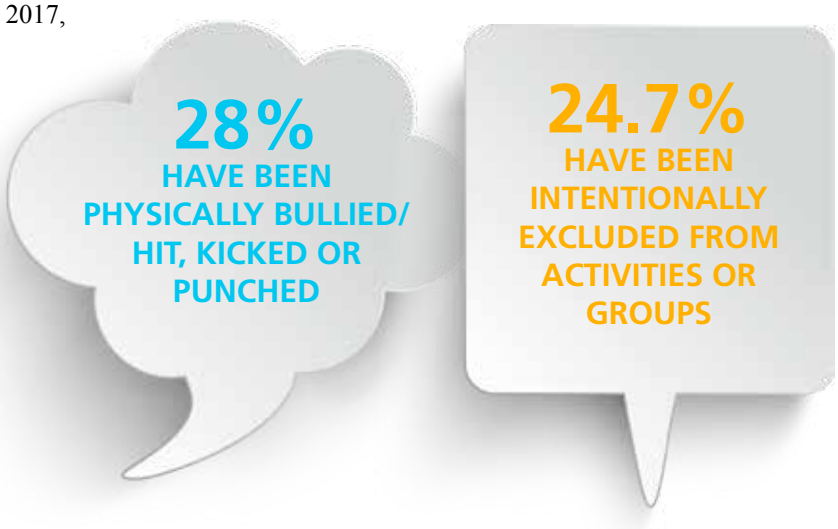
According to the Tyler Clementi Foundation, bullying is "widespread in schools and on campuses across the United States" but is often underreported because the victim is afraid that telling someone will only make things worse. The New Jersey-based foundation is named for Tyler Clementi, a college freshman who killed himself by jumping off a bridge after his roommate secretly videotaped him being intimate with another male student, and then posted it on Twitter.

Some recent statistics suggest that bullying is in a much bigger problem in other states than in Connecticut. For instance, a 2018 WalletHub report ranked our state 37th in the nation – far better than Louisiana, Arkansas and Missouri, which garnered 1st, 2nd and 3rd spots, respectively, for the highest incidence of bullying behavior in the U.S.

But many Nutmeg state parents would argue that the prevalence of bullying here is still far too high. Responding to a survey that was conducted by Patch.com and published in October 2019 as part of a multi-year reporting project, more than 330 Connecticut parents said they were extremely concerned about the severity and extent of bullying their kids had been subjected to, both in school and online. Nearly 90 percent of these parents said that one of their children had been bullied at least once, and more than 50 percent said their kids had been bullied frequently.

Moreover, parents reported that the impact had often been severe – including significantly lower

CONNECTICUT PARENTS RESPONDING TO A PATCH.COM SURVEY SAID OF THEIR CHILDREN ...



grades, fear of going to school, anxiety, depression, and physical harm. Some children were forced to change schools; some teens dropped out of school altogether.

One Nutmeg state parent wrote that her daughter "cried every day, her entire school career. She went to a private [counselor] and still has no self-esteem. She was a happy little girl until the bullying began in second grade."

Another parent wrote: "It's had lasting effects on my son. He doesn't trust any of his male peers, is afraid to even approach them, and he won't participate in any social event where they may be present, which is most."

NOT A NEW PROBLEM

Alex Agostini can relate. Now a graduate student intern about to complete his Master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy and working with Nancy Martin, LMFT at Wellness Counseling in Farmington, Agostini was bullied growing up.

"I have distinct memories from back in elementary school. I still remember the bully by name. I know why he bullied me - because he told me flat out that it was easy and fun - but it really stung. The fact that he didn't leave me alone all the way to middle school was atrocious. I don't think I made as big a deal out of it as some other people [who were bullied] did. I thought, 'I need to roll with him as long as I can.' I took a very passive role," he says. "Knowing what I know now, I wonder what his home life was like. I didn't think about that then."

It's an interesting observation. Multiple studies have shown that bullies were often bullied or mistreated in childhood themselves, encountering mistreatment by peers at school, or domestic violence and/or sibling aggression at home.

24.4%
HAVE BEEN TEASED OR CALLED NAMES

12.5%
HAVE BEEN BULLIED BY PHONE, TEXT OR ONLINE

ONLY 8.3%
HAVE NEVER BEEN BULLIED

Experts also say that parents who are quick to take issue with other people, instead of teaching children to be kind and respectful, may be unintentionally modeling behavior that children will emulate. It's something to consider the next time you're tempted to yell at that driver who cut you off in traffic, or make scathing remarks to a stranger on Facebook.

As Nancy Martin notes, "When we see this type of behavior or the repercussions of it, we ask, "Where is the bully getting the bullying behavior from?' It often starts in the family of origin."

Sometimes that's not the case, but kids see poor behavior modeled regardless. "In a wider, systemic view," says Agostino, "our culture is one where bullying is almost pervasive. People not only have to win; you also have to make sure your opponent loses. In many ways, I feel we've lost our spirit of cooperation."

FROM COMMON OCCURRENCE TO CRISIS

Bullying has been going on for years. Many of today's parents and grandparents were bullied themselves at one point or another, or witnessed it happening in school. But things have escalated dramatically, and many kids' physical and emotional wellbeing – and even their lives – may be hanging in the balance.

For anyone tempted to dismiss bullying as a common if unfortunate part of growing up, it's important to remember that for victims, bullying is not only painful but potentially deadly. Researchers have identified a strong correlation between bullying and suicide, and studies by Yale University show that young people who are bullied are two to nine times more likely to consider suicide than their non-bullied peers.

Marie Osmond, whose son committed suicide by jumping from the balcony of his apartment building in 2010, said in an interview that he had called her a few days beforehand and told her he was depressed and had no friends. Osmond, who was away at the time, told him she would be there on Monday, and that things were going to be okay. In an interview with Oprah eight months after his death, Osmond said, "depression doesn't wait 'til Monday." In October 2019, she revealed for the first time that her son was not only dealing with multiple other issues in his life at the time, such as his parents' divorce, but had been repeatedly targeted by three bullies. "I've got the texts – I mean they're horrendous, and … I believe that that was a high component in him just feeling overwhelmed and that he didn't fit in," she said.

Alarmingly, a report released last June showed that suicide among teenagers and young adults has hit a 20-year high. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the suicide rate among 14- to 17-year-olds rose by 70 percent for Caucasian teens and 77 percent for African American teens in the 10-year span from 2006 to 2016. And numbers continue to rise, by roughly 8 to 10 percent a year.

Why the increase? Social media may have something to do with it. The advent of online social platforms now means that bullying can take place anywhere, at any time. And that means for victims, there is almost no escape. Even worse, what once was a relatively private source of embarrassment and angst now has the potential to go public – on YouTube, Facebook, or another social platform. When a humiliating video goes viral, for example, it can seem like the whole world is laughing at you.

Quite justifiably, young people often perceive that the public embarrassment heaped on them by their tormentors via social media will haunt them

WHAT IS BULLYING AND WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

Bullying can manifest itself in many ways, and is usually repetitive, rather than a one-time event. It might involve insults or name-calling, intimidation, humiliation, spreading rumors or lies, physical assault, sexual harassment, extortion, blackmail, theft, property destruction or a combination of these things.

Experts say that victims may be chosen because of their physical appearance, a disability, perceived socioeconomic differences, choice of hobbies or interests, sex, race or ethnicity, personality, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, grades, or lack of athletic skill. But for many victims, there is no identifiable reason at all.

Sometimes, experts say, children and teens use bullying tactics as a way to feel more powerful or important. They may do it because it directs attention away from their own self-perceived flaws, or because they think it will make them popular with their friends. It may make them feel like they are part of the "in" crowd – while the victim is kept on the "outside." Or they may simply find it an easy, if perverse, source of amusement. In some cases, the bully is jealous of the victim and wants to take them down a peg or two. Prejudice can also play a role.

for the rest of their lives. In an age where negative videos, photos and commentary can be revived and shared by virtually anyone, even years after they were initially posted, the hurt and shame can seem endless.

Connecticut has had anti-bullying laws on the books for almost 20 years, defining what bullying specifically entails and setting out both remedies and penalties. As part of the original 2002 legislation, all school districts were required to create and implement a bullying policy, train their staff to address all of incidences of bullying, and report these incidents to the state.

Unfortunately, follow-through in identifying and effectively dealing with bullying behavior has varied greatly from one school – and school district – to another, according to published reports. In the Patch survey, many Connecticut parents said anti-bullying school policies are "poorly enforced, if they are enforced at all." Some said the policies were inadequate, ineffective, or "a joke."

Rather than try to get to the root of the problem, Agostini says, some well-meaning teachers or school officials may tell students who complain of being bullied that they'll just have to learn to live with it. "Faculty may take a stance of telling a student who complains, 'You're too sensitive,' or 'It's just part of life. If you don't learn to deal with it, what are you going to do when you grow up?' That may be objectively true," he says, "but it makes victims feel they have even fewer allies to trust in the school system."

Parents may send their kids a similar message, and school friends or acquaintances who witness bullying may be too afraid to step in, worried that they'll become the bully's next target. While one survey found that more than 70 percent of staff had seen bullying at school, and 41 percent said they saw it once a week or more, other studies show that just 1 in 10 of the victim's peers will intervene, and only 1 in four adults will do so. "The rest – 85 percent – will do nothing."

That can leave a child or teen feeling totally isolated, and even hopeless, says Martin.

FINDING SOLUTIONS

Past efforts to curb school-based bullying and its devastating effects have not been very successful. The problem continues even in Connecticut, where the state's anti-bullying law has been updated and strengthened several times, and people engaging in threatening or intimidating behavior can be charged with either a felony or a misdemeanor, depending on the nature of the behavior and the circumstances.

Obviously, a dramatically different approach is required. But what?

The answer seems to be a proactive effort to get at the root of the problem, and to stop bullying before it starts.

In July 2019, Governor Ned Lamont signed into state law a bill that was passed unanimously by both the House and the Senate. In summary, the law – HB7215, An Act Concerning School Climates – requires boards of education to develop safe school climate policies, establish a "social and emotional learning and school climate council" in place of the existing safe school climate committee, and provide training on the prevention of, and intervention in, discrimination against and targeted harassment of students. The Department of Education was tasked with developing a "social and emotional learning assessment instrument" and a model safe school climate policy, and schools will have to assess their school climate and ensure they provide a safe environment for students.

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Unlike the state's previous legislation, which described bullying actions as behavior "repeated over time," this law also includes severe single acts of aggression. Rep. Liz Linehan (D-Cheshire), who advocated for the new law, recounted how a group of high school girls once broke into her parents' home and went from room to room, looking for her, while she hid in a closet. "They wanted to drag me out and beat me up," she said. Linehan argued in the House that bullying "can be the smaller instances of poke, poke, poke … consistent picking on a child" but it can also be a more serious single action that "places an individual in reasonable fear of physical or emotional harm or infringes on the rights or opportunities of an individual at school."

A new school climate collaborative, meanwhile, will identify evidence-based best practices to deal with bullying and conduct a state-wide survey of schools every two years – with input not only from school officials and teachers but parents and mental health professionals.

Connecticut's revised approach seems to be in line with recommendations from two leading experts on the topic of bullying prevention. Writing for the American Psychological Association (APA), Dr. Dewey G. Cornell and Dr. Susan P. Limber, both psychologists and professors, said that students

SIGNS OF SUICIDAL RISK

Experts say that parents need to be aware of signs that may indicate that their child is at risk for suicide. Signs may include:

- Talking or writing about wanting to hurt or kill themselves
- Indirect verbal indications, like, "I wish I could disappear"
- Trying to gain access to pills, guns, knives or other ways to end their lives
- Saying they have no reason to live or purpose in life
- Showing anxiety or hopelessness
- Insomnia or sleeping excessively
- Withdrawal from family or friends
- Giving away possessions

and parents should be educated about bullying, and should be given access to anonymous reporting methods to make it easier to get help. (Several school districts in Connecticut, including West Hartford and Glastonbury, already encourage students to report bullying anonymously, using phone apps dedicated to that purpose.)

Drs. Cornell and Limber also say that when bullying does happen, schools should conduct "a prompt and thorough investigation," and intervene immediately to protect the victim from additional bullying or retaliation. Parents of both the victim and bully – and the police, if appropriate – should be notified. Schools should mete out "graduated consequences" for bullying, and offer academic support and mental health referrals for both victims and bullies, they say, noting that these policies have been proven effective in improving school culture.

Also showing a lot of promise is an innovative national campaign launched by the Tyler Clemente Foundation. Dubbed #Day1, the campaign seeks to turn "bystanders" into "Upstanders" who promise to identify and intervene in bullying on the first day they witness it. (One study showed that when bystanders intervene, bullying stops within 10 seconds, 57 percent of the time.)

So far, hundreds of private and public schools, teams, colleges, organizations, workplaces, and individuals across the country – almost 700,000 people so far – have taken the #Day1 pledge. Teachers, parents and students can help by encouraging everyone to get involved, says Tyler's mom and the foundation's co-founder, Jane Clemente.

Meanwhile, in Connecticut, award-winning songwriter and producer Jill Nesi has teamed up with Christopher Zullo of the Spotlight Stage Company to produce an anti-bullying musical "showcase" that has been on a tour of the state's middle schools. They hope to license this play to every middle school in the state and, eventually, the country, with local children performing in their own schools. A longer, more complex version that is geared to teens and adults, called "Stand Up: The Musical," will have its world debut in October in North Haven. Parents can take their teenagers to see the musical, or PTO members can help school administrators bring the showcase version to their own middle school. (For related story, see page 30.)

GETTING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

There are also things that parents can do at home to ensure their own kids aren't being bullied – or *being* a bully, for that matter.

Experts recommend being proactive, instead of waiting for signs of a problem.

One of the best things parents can do is to have regular conversations with their children about how things are going at school, what they're worried about, and if there's anyone at school they don't like, or don't get along with. In addition to emphasizing the importance of treating other people well, and modeling that behavior, parents can explain to their children that bullying is a big problem, talk about the consequences, and reassure their kids that if they *are* being bullied, they are not alone. They can also explain to their children the importance of sharing any problems with trusted adults and peers who can advocate for them.

If your children or teens show signs of depression or suicidal thoughts (see box, above), get help immediately. Talk with teachers and school officials – even in confidence, if your kids beg you not to intervene. One useful place to seek assistance is an organization called STOMP Out Bullying; it offers resources for parents, teachers and young people, including a free and confidential chat line for youth who are being bullied and may be at risk of suicide as a result.

One-on-one private therapy can also be a lifesaver,

especially if reaching out to the school has not resolved the problem. "Once children establish a connection and trust level with us, we help them to feel heard and teach them to problem-solve the immediate issue," says Martin. "We'll ask them, 'What have you done already? Have your parents been involved? Do you think it would be a good idea for us all to talk together?'"

She adds, "We can also give them concrete suggestions. For instance, a lot of times, bullying happens in the cafeteria. For one person, we recommended bringing their lunch down to the counselor's office and then using the time until the next class doing something else. When kids are bullied, they don't have to sit there and take it."

Also, says Agostini, "We try to encourage them to play into the strengths and qualities that they have, rather than what they perceive they lack. If you can encourage them to be all that they can be, they begin to see that they are special and that they can succeed. We give the victim a sense of power and strength about what they can do by pointing out the things they excel in."

Dr. Joelle Santiago, 29, a chiropractor in Avon, found that type of counseling extremely helpful when she was bullied – not in high school, but in college, when people who had previously been friendly began treating her poorly.

"It made me feel very nervous, uncomfortable, panicked, and unsafe. Bullying really can happen to anyone, anywhere," she says. "One of the things that I can't stress enough is the importance of being able to talk to someone outside of the situation. I saw a therapist, which was the best thing I could do."

Also, rather than allow the bullies to make her feel isolated and afraid, she limited her exposure to them by avoiding situations where they might be present and drew on her existing network of family and friends for support. "I had friends who made me feel safe and appreciated, and my mom was very, very proactive about it. She would drive to campus and take me out to lunch. Her priority was continual communication."

Dr. Santiago also expanded her circle of supporters by explaining the situation to her teachers and by taking part in a variety of activities on campus. "The combination of having the support from friends, family and teachers, and participating in activities with new friends, was a really refreshing thing," she recalls. "I was equipped with all the right things and people in my life to help me." Coping with it on her own, she says, "would have been way too difficult."

She also credits the Avon school system for raising awareness about bullying while she was a student there. This helped her to identify bullying when she saw it and realize that "maybe this isn't about me."

Today, she leads a happy and fulfilling life, and tries to help others whenever she can, both personally and professionally. "It really makes me feel good to give my friends advice, whatever the topic is," she says. "I think some of my experiences have helped to shape me into a more compassionate person and given me a deeper understanding of the difficult things people can go through."

And as someone coming from a long line of chiropractors – her grandparents, two uncles and her mother are also in the profession – "I've always had a huge interest in treating the entire person. Nothing feels as good as helping people. It's rewarding and terrific." NH

CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES:

Connecticut Children's: connecticutchildrens.org/health-library/en/parents/bullying

Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center: cpacinc.org/school-climate.aspx

Cyberbulling Research Center: cyberbullying.org

Megan Meier Foundation: meganmeierfoundation.org/resources

National Bullying Prevention Center: pacer.org/bullying/resources/cyberbullying

nobully.org

State of Connecticut: portal.ct.gov/SDE/Publications/Parents-Guide-to-Bullying-and-Harassment-in-Connecticut/About-the-Law

STOMP Out Bullying: stompoutbullying.org

STOPit Solutions: stopitsolutions.com/blog/a-look-at-the-year-ahead

U.S. bullying prevention site: stopbullying.gov

Creating A Kinder World

Connecticut-born musicals hope to wipe out bullying

By **CAROL LATTER**

The co-creators of a new, full-length anti-bullying musical are aiming high, hoping the evocative play will one day appear on Broadway, and that a shorter version geared to middle school students will eventually be seen in every community nationwide. But that's not their only – or even primary – objective.

Instead, Emmy-nominated singer, songwriter and producer Jill Nesi and Spotlight Stage Company co-founder and director Christopher Zullo would like to see these productions change a culture of bullying that has persisted for decades – and give peace and resolution not only to victims and their parents, but to bullies as well.

"Stand Up: The Musical," intended for adult and teenage audiences, will have its world premiere in October, at High Lane Club in North Haven. The production will feature young people from across the state who responded to casting calls earlier this year.

In the musical, a high school sophomore who is bullied by her classmates at school and on social media is visited in her dreams by the ghost of a gay, African American teen – in scenes reminiscent of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." The ghost, who committed suicide after being bullied himself, urges her not to give up hope. He encourages her to stand up and speak out on behalf of herself and others, and to surround herself with allies who can help put an end to the bullying. In the process, the sophomore is also able to show compassion and kindness to the perpetrator, a young girl who has been bullied and mistreated by her own mother.

A shorter version of the production, better suited to a younger audience ("Stand Up: The Bully Prevention Musical Showcase"), has already been touring middle schools across the state, to rave reviews. Both are part of an anti-bullying initiative called Stand Up and Speak Out. The mission is to raise awareness about today's global bullying epidemic "by building connection and empathy through the arts."

The whole effort got its start a few years ago, after Nesi's seventh-grade daughter told her mom that she was being bullied in school. Nesi – who had been writing and performing inspirational music to benefit nonprofits, families and children – not only intervened in that situation but wrote a song about it. She shared that song in a meeting with State Rep. Noreen Kokoruda (R-Madison), a panel of school superintendents, and state Commission on Women, Children and Seniors executive director Steven Hernández, in the hope of bringing attention to this important issue. Their reaction was enthusiastic. "And from that song came 14 other songs," she says.

Nesi got help on several of them from Guilford musician Nick Fradiani, Sr. The result was a musical called "Her Song," which debuted at the Ivoryton Playhouse in May 2017, and was funded entirely by Nesi. "We had seven shows there. Four were school shows – there were probably over 1,000 kids – and then three public shows, which all sold out," she recalls.

Three years and several rewrites later, the production has morphed into the current 30-minute musical showcase that has been touring middle schools as well as the full-blown version geared to an older audience – thanks in large part to Zullo, who was brought in last year as the director and ended up rewriting the show, with plenty of input from Nesi.

"It's been an amazing collaboration," says Zullo. "I never considered myself a writer." The subject matter speaks to him. He is gay and was bullied in school as well.

He says the response to the shorter

school-oriented showcase has been amazing, with everyone from students to parents to politicians loving every minute of it. He notes that audiences have been moved by the messages of compassion, empowerment and hope in the productions, and the student actors – whether they've been bullied themselves or not – have gotten a fresh outlook on the topic.

Nesi couldn't agree more. "For the people who have viewed this, or been part of this, I see a change. And that alone is just amazing," she says. "There's one girl who tried out for the play and she was painfully shy – she could not even talk – so we gave her a main part in one of the songs where she is a dancer. Now when she comes to rehearsal, she's a different kid. I've never seen anything like it. She used to wear her hair back and her shoulders were hunched, and she would just hide in the corner. Now, she's dancing and hair is down. She's flying around. It's worth it, just to see that. Her mom came up to me after one of the public shows that we did and she said, 'Thank you for doing this. It's changed her life.' And a lot of people have said that."

Nesi says the central message of the play is clear, even to younger audience members. Rather than hide from bullies, fight back, or withdraw, "we want kids to stand up and speak out for themselves, and stand up and speak out for one another, as well. Because kids experience [and witness] bullying all the time, and they don't say anything because they're afraid."

She says because the school showcase involves high schoolers performing for middle school students, "the younger kids see 'themselves' on the stage, and they're learning through music and the arts about kindness and compassion and empathy without even realizing it."

Zullo says he and Nesi also want to illuminate this potentially devastating issue for parents and teachers. "For some reason, bullied kids often don't think that they can tell anyone what's going on. We want to hold up a mirror and say, 'This could be happening right under your nose.'"

Hernández and the state Commission on Women, Children and Seniors have remained involved in supporting the program, and since the anti-bullying showcase began touring Connecticut, Nesi and her group have performed songs from the shows at the state Capitol – and even for the United Nations in New York. "It's really been an amazing experience for the kids and for me," she says.

Now comes the challenge to find funding to keep the effort going, and to expand it geographically. Nesi, Zullo, and the rest of their team continue to seek partners, sponsors, grants and fund-raising opportunities to keep the dream alive.

Hernández says the Stand Up and Speak Out showcase performances have been incredibly effective at opening the hearts and minds of everyone involved, from performers to audience members, and the longer version will no doubt have a similar effect. The musicals spread a heartfelt anti-bullying message "through two different avenues – the expressive avenue of stage craft and the expressive avenue of musical craft – and also [offer] the connective value of having adults and young people working together toward making a better environment in their schools," he says. He adds, "We're hoping that the state of Connecticut can lead … the country in this work."

The ultimate goal is to license the musicals to school drama directors and PTAs as well as community theaters across the country, so that the productions can be performed using local talent. "That's impactful because it's life-changing for the kids in the play, as well as for the kids who see it," Nesi says.

When kids are bullied, she explains, "they feel belittled by other kids and it affects their self-esteem for the rest of their lives."

For some, the impact is even more severe. "Bullying now is causing some kids to end their lives. It's disgraceful," Nesi says. "Children need to see that if you stand up for yourself and other people stand up for you, and you open up to adults and we speak about it – you can see what your life can become rather than thinking, 'Oh my God, this is the worst thing that's ever happened to me. I don't want to be here anymore.' And that's what the play tagline that Chris Zullo created is about, and what we want kids to understand: 'No one is too broken to be fixed.'"

For more information, visit **www.facebook.com/StandUpandSpeakOutMusical** and **standupspeakoutct.com**

Production team, from left: Sandy Mascia (company manager), Jill Nesi (creator/ music and lyrics) and Christopher Zullo (director and writer)

Kaki King. Photo by **Waleed Shah**

The Sounds *of* Summer

By **CARA ROSNER**

Photography courtesy of The International Festival of Arts & Ideas

It's a sure sign of summer in the Elm City: The International Festival of Arts & Ideas. This year, the innovative celebration of music, theater and dance is scheduled to take place June 13-27 at the New Haven Green and at other sites throughout the city.

The festival, founded in 1996, is known for bringing world-class performers to New Haven. This year's schedule will focus on the theme "Democracy: We the People." Organizers say the festival will spur conversation, civic action and community building through interactive and provocative performances.

This year's lineup includes Kaki King, a groundbreaking acoustic and lap steel guitar player; modern dance troupe Keigwin + Company; and a collaboration between mime artists Chaliwaté Company and puppeteers The Focus Company, among many other acts.

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Making Beautiful Music Together

"The Singing Chef" and his husband are living their dreams

By **MAKAYLA SILVA**
Photography by **TODD FAIRCHILD**

Achieving culinary prowess is a labor of love requiring both talent and devotion. Perhaps the same can be said of show business. Dedication and passion are usually the ingredients for success, whether you dream of becoming a singer, dancer, or actor.

So, is it possible to attain mastery as both a chef and an entertainer? Neil Fuentes might say yes.

A Venezuela-born chef, Fuentes has worked in Connecticut kitchens for the last two decades, including at Southport Brewing Company (SBC) and as executive chef and partner at Branford's Venezuelan restaurant Jojoto.

Widely knows by his adopted moniker, "The Singing Chef," he makes regular appearances on WTNH News 8 and on national cable programs like the Food Channel's "Hot Spots" and the Food Network's popular cooking competition "Chopped."

Fuentes also is a formidable showman, and since 2012 has run the New Haven Academy of Performing Arts along with his husband, Billy DiCrosta, also a singer.

Raised on a 17-acre farm in Venezuela as the youngest of five brothers, Fuentes started his

Neil Fuentes (seated/right) and his husband, Billy DiCrosta, make beautiful music together - in life, and in their work as leaders of the New Haven Academy of Performing Arts. Fuentes is widely known by his nickname, "The Singing Chef" and regularly appears on local and national cooking programs.

"At New Haven Academy of Performing Arts, we don't do recitals, we don't do competitions, we do productions."

culinary journey at a young age. When his older siblings went off to high school and college, he was the only one left to help his mother.

He came to Connecticut in 1995 after traveling the world as a flight attendant for three years and began working in the restaurant industry to make money, tabling his passion for show business temporarily.

"My first love is the performing arts. Cooking, for me, was a way of survival in this country. It was a way to form myself as an individual in the American society. It was a way to get to know the culture of the United States, but it was never what I always wanted to do," Fuentes says.

Completely self-taught, working his way up the ladder within the local SBC Brewery & Restaurant chain in his 12-year tenure there, Fuentes eventually became the director of catering and training for all of the restaurants.

Then, while singing at an SBC karaoke night in 2009, he was approached by WTNH News 8 to appear on its midday lifestyle show "Connecticut Style." For his first segment, he recalls, Fuentes went in dressed like Ricky Ricardo, "with the ruffles and everything," singing an improvised song to the tune of "Cuban Pete" by Desi Arnaz. And voila – The Singing Chef was born.

Unlike plenty of esteemed chefs, Fuentes has always been a natural in front of the camera, with numerous YouTube shorts online. Whatever "it" is, he's certainly got it. He appeared on "Connecticut Style" 112 times in five years and his local TV appearances led to national exposure.

From there, Fuentes was cast as a brand ambassador for Sabra in 2013, appearing in six commercials with Food Network chefs Maneet Chauhan and Chris Cheung, where he cooked recipes using assorted Sabra hummus flavors and salsas.

"The casting director for that particular show is the same casting director for Chopped. So I was cast on Chopped. And I was chopped," Fuentes says.

Fuentes later went on to host episodes of Food Channel's "Hot Spots," which spotlighted New Haven's Rubamba, Cromwell's Chicago Sam's and the Redding Roadhouse.

From there, he was invited to compete on Food Network's "Rewrapped," a competition show where chefs innovate with respect to America's most beloved snacks. Chefs are asked to recreate the original food item from scratch, and then they're tasked with using that snack food in an original dish.

Fuentes and his competitors were asked to recreate Swiss Miss Triple Chocolate Dream pudding and use it in a dish.

"I made a turkey sandwich. With chocolate pudding," Fuentes says.

And he won.

Having been a three-time celebrity chef at the Greenwich Wine + Food Festival and as his popularity as The Singing Chef continues to grow, Fuentes says he's happiest doing exactly what he's doing now: teaching voice and performing.

"When I was a child, the only thing I wanted to do when I grew up was put on shows," he says.

Since 2013, Fuentes and DiCrosta have helped thousands of students launch and develop their performing arts journey at the New Haven Academy of Performing Arts.

"At New Haven Academy of Performing Arts, we don't do recitals, we don't do competitions, we do productions," Fuentes says.

DiCrosta, an international coach and vocal artist, has been performing professionally for roughly three decades. The youngest of an Italian family of six, DiCrosta started singing at age seven and fell in love with being a stage performer. He studied acting and vocal performance at Western Connecticut State University and, subsequently, musical theater at The Hartt School.

He has made his living as a performer, working in New York, on Oceanic and Celebrity cruise ships, and doing musical theater, concerts, and more. Most notably, DiCrosta has landed roles as Tony in "West

Side Story" and Mike in "A Chorus Line," and performed for the Clinton family at The White House in 1997.

Says Fuentes: "While I was appearing as The Singing Chef, my husband was traveling the world, singing on cruise ships. And after six years, I told him he needed to come home and be with his husband."

Before founding the New Haven Academy of Performing Arts, DiCrosta worked with a handful of students, teaching voice out of the front porch of his home, through the Billy DiCrosta Vocal Studio. When the opportunity arose to share a studio space with Broadway Dance, owned by longtime friend Gina Helland, DiCrosta moved into her East Haven studio.

DiCrosta is accredited by the International Voice Teachers of Mix, and is an area administrator for that organization, helping educate new teachers. His students travel from all over to study his technique, and those who can't travel take lessons via Skype or FaceTime.

For Fuentes, one of the most rewarding aspects of his role as an instructor is working with many children who have special needs. Two years ago, Fuentes was asked to join Vista Life Innovations, an organization preparing individuals with special needs with life skills, in the group's production of "The Addams Family."

"It was so amazing. I have never experienced someone who tells you every single day how grateful they are to have you. They are so genuine. I began teaching voice lessons for them and will be directing their next performance, 'All Shook Up,' in the spring," Fuentes says.

In the last six years, Fuentes and DiCrosta have taught music, theater and dance through summer camps, private vocal and music lessons, and acting classes to 250 students each week from around the world.

"Everyone teaches voice in a specific genre, whether pop, rock, soul. We teach the individual from the science perspective how to use the vocal apparatus, regardless of whether you're a man or woman," Fuentes says.

Or, if you're transgender.

"When you have a boy who wants to sound like a girl, or vice versa, you have to work with transgender people to help them find their voice when it comes to singing," Fuentes says.

Fuentes met DiCrosta in 2004 on gay.com. They married in East Haven in 2007.

"All of my life, I have been extremely open with my sexuality. Because I came from a country where I couldn't. Being gay was not an option. When I got here, I said, 'I'm going to be who I am and that's the end of it,'" Fuentes says. "I believe that by being true to ourselves, Billy and I are more successful in every way, shape and form. We have a lot of LGBTQ students who want to come here and see us as a power couple to look up to, that they can do it too."

Best of Both Worlds

Hamden's "nostalgic throwback" evolves but honors its roots

By **CARA MCDONOUGH**

There are a couple of toddlers "making breakfast" at the play kitchen near the shelves of kids' videos. Close by, their parents are catching up over coffee at high tables near the Scorsese selection, and neighbors who regularly run into each other – there to get a little work done, return a rental, or grab their daily cappuccino – talk local politics while they wait for their orders or browse the movie selection.

This space, located on Whitney Avenue in Hamden and known formally as Best Video Film & Cultural Center (or simply "Best" to its loyal customers), means many different things to its devotees and clients. It's tough to list everything that the nonprofit does, as there's so much, but its important role as a meeting space and arts haven makes perfect sense to everyone who has visited, then proceeds to visit again … and again, many becoming lifelong fans and regulars.

For starters, Best Video is one of the few remaining video rental establishments in the country, making it a must-visit tribute to a time gone by. But in order to stay afloat, Best has gone through various incarnations and is currently serving myriad roles beyond its original purpose: it's also a coffee shop, music and events venue and, most importantly, popular gathering place for the community.

It all began with the videos, however, when Hank Paper started the business in 1985.

Paper had been a screenwriter in Hollywood and an enthusiastic film buff. He'd helped a friend open a small chain of movie stores and wanted to try creating his own. So when he, his wife, and their daughter moved from California to Connecticut to be closer to family, that's what he did, opening the business in a space just down the street from where it exists today.

He called it Best Video because he wanted his establishment to be, well, the best. When he ordered his initial stock of 500 videos, he made sure he knew nearly every title (with the exception of some of the newest movies) and could make recommendations to customers. As his customer base grew, his knowledge of their individual tastes did, too.

Performances by Dr. Caterwaul's Cadre of Clairvoyant Claptraps. Photo courtesy of Best Video Film & Cultural Center

It was a popular, thriving, business, highlighting Paper's love of eclectic and undiscovered films. His staff – all movie buffs themselves – helped solidify Paper's vision. Best Video was the real deal when it came to the movie rental business, and it had to move a few more times over the years to bigger spaces in order accommodate more customers and DVDs.

Around 2013, however, with the advent of streaming video, "the writing was on the wall," Paper says. The business tried to evolve with its own mail-in video service (like Netflix) and a website with streaming video, but it was soon clear the venture couldn't stay afloat.

Giving up, though, wasn't part of Paper's plan, and although Best was losing customers, the loyalists who remained had a fervent desire for the beloved hangout to remain open. "When you're forced to make changes, you can bemoan that fact – or you can make changes," Paper says.

That's when he started contemplating whether a nonprofit status could keep Best Video alive. By that point, it was more than a video store. It had become a social hub where customers ran into old and new friends, chatting among themselves and with staff. A few years prior, they'd begun bringing in music acts to perform about once a week and holding movie screenings, as well.

Hank Hoffman, who was working part-time at Best at the time, and currently serves as its executive director, remembers that period well.

"It had become a community gathering space," says Hoffman. "It was a throwback to a time when businesses were anchors of the community."

So, after meeting with the city, forming a board and doing the required legwork, Best Video applied for nonprofit status with the IRS as an "artistic cultural center." It opened on November 1, 2015 in its new incarnation and in its current location, next to a travel agency (its landlord) and a barbershop.

"We didn't know if it would work," admits Hoffman. But the new entity eventually paid Hank Paper off for the business and began to successfully navigate its existence as a nonprofit. Needless to say, customers from the neighborhood and beyond were elated that they could still grab a movie, breakfast or a show at their favorite spot.

There have been challenges, of course. A couple of cash-flow crises have caused leadership to question Best's future, Hoffman says. But fundraisers, including New Haven's annual "Great Give," have proved that supporters will rally with a serious influx of donations when needed, allowing Best to keep kicking.

And, yes, Best Video's lifeblood still includes the video rentals that marked its beginnings, with more than 40,000 titles organized in various ways – from directors, to countries to staff picks – geared to pique the curiosity of the movie-lovers who carefully scan the shelves. There are more than 450 households maintaining memberships (Best offers one, two, three and four-movie plans) and the collection includes many titles you can't find via streaming or other methods, says Paper, who now teaches film at nearby Quinnipiac University and counts himself as a regular, coming in nearly every morning to get some work done or chat with friends.

"The spot goes on, despite the online life we are called to nowadays," he says of the space.

The staff is still made up of film buffs, too, so customers still ask for recommendations. Best's cultural lineup includes "Secret

Cinema" nights twice a month, organized by staffer Rob Harmon (Paper claims Harmon knows more about movies than anyone, anywhere).

Beyond the film, Best Video's lineup has grown considerably, with frequent concerts featuring local and national acts, as well as bluegrass and Irish music jams on the weekends. Regular Saturday morning cartoon events, complete with cereal and Pop Tarts, are popular with kids and their parents, who can wax nostalgic watching series popular from the 1960s to the 1990s.

The space houses art shows, poetry slams, and monthly open mic nights. It's an afterschool hangout for kids, who can walk over before heading home, raid the 25-cent candy section, order vanilla steamers and gab with their friends, while honing their independence skills. Some strike up a chord at the upright piano in the corner.

"It's a nostalgic throwback," says Hoffman. "Kids can hang out without their parents."

The coffee shop offers local favorites, including Willoughby's coffee, Foxon Park soda, doughnuts from nearby Whitney Donut, and pastries from Hamden's Bread & Chocolate Bakery Cafe. At night, beer and wine are on offer, too, meaning concertgoers can relax with a craft brew while they enjoy the music.

The truth is that Best Video, with its breadth of events, personalities, and offerings, is somewhat undefinable. But its unique mix of features works seamlessly to create something truly one-of-a-kind, where friends meet and are made; its brick-and-mortar sense of warmth serves an undeniable need in modern society.

Photo courtesy of Best Video Film & Cultural Center

"'Community gathering place' is the phrase I'd use to describe it," says Karen Ponzio, who runs the open mic events on the second Wednesday of each month. The events bring performers of all ages and experience levels together, from seasoned musicians to newly minted poets. "Best Video provides a space that is comfortable enough for anyone to participate. It's 100 percent a welcoming, comforting spot."

Says Hoffman, "What kept us around is the community aspect. By evolving with the times, we were able to build on that solid foundation. We appealed to a need for people to have places to gather in the real world."

NEWS / CULTURE / HEALTH / COMMUNITY / TRAVEL / FASHION / DELICI

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A Vue of Farmer's Best

Jackie Post got a taste of a new menu at Foxwoods' top restaurant, Vue 24, that is featuring some local farmers.

Holistic Healing

One physical therapy team takes a more holistic approach to treating the transgender community. Hilary Russo has the story from Middlesex Health.

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LOVE
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Photo caption

Modern ART

Elm City artists take their creativity to the streets

By **MEAGAN MCADAMS**
Photography by **STAN GODLEWSKI**

Indoor galleries aren't the only places to see innovative, thought-provoking works of art. Some of New Haven's most provocative pieces have long been showcased in unconventional places – on the sides of buildings, atop restaurants, on parking garages, or under overpasses.

Three prominent artists in the Elm City street-art scene, who have literally decided to paint the town, are Herve, Josh Griffin, and Magge Gagliardi. Here they reflect on their early days, share their inspirations and discuss plans for what's next.

HERVE

Herve began his journey with street art as a young skateboarder.

"It was just kind of part of rebellious lifestyle. I looked at art as an escape," he says of his early graffiti days.

Herve's work is found many parts of the city. From Whalley Avenue to warehouses in Fair Haven, a small "blob" character can be spotted. This is Duce. It is present throughout most of Herve's art, and a representation of himself.

"Sometimes I just feel like I'm not from this planet, like I'm from somewhere else, so I just created a character who's from outer space."

Herve has explored different mediums, like acrylics, oil painting, and pastels, but always comes back to the spray paint. The freedom that he has is a huge driver for him.

It's not an art form that is typically taught in schools. He noticed that graffiti isn't analyzed and studied in classrooms like painting, drawing, or photography – but he wants to change that. One of his favorite recent pieces was a bus that was painted by himself, a few other artists, and kids from the area. The New Haven Department of Parks, Recreation and Trees gave them a school bus as a canvas and let it become moving art. Working with the younger generations and sharing this art form with them is something that he plans to continue. Herve hopes to soon open a nonprofit organization where the youth of New Haven can come and make their art.

Herve says that graffiti isn't analyzed and studied in classrooms like painting, drawing, or photography, but he wants to change that.

"Street art has always been one of those things where people always just picked it up and did it, and sometimes it's not necessarily legal," he says. "But it's a way of expressing yourself, and I feel like we live in a world where if you don't have permission to do something, you really can't do it. That stops the creative thirst for a lot of people because they feel limited, and to be creative, you have got to be free; you have got to be carefree."

Something he really wants to teach people is that street art doesn't have to be illegal. It is something that can be learned, practiced, done in free time, and a become a potential way to make money – all legally.

While Herve began spray painting illegally – as a way to gain recognition and get his name known – today, all of his work is commissioned. The nonprofit he wants to form would give artists a safe space to create the art that they want to create, and hone their skills, which may not be options in their schools.

He advises aspiring artists not to limit themselves. By putting his name out there as much as he can, he has

evolved from a skateboarder with spray paint to one of the most prominent artists in town.

JOSH GRIFFIN

"GREETINGS FROM NEW HAVEN" read the Corsair building via mural in 2016. Josh Griffin has created murals as a resident artist – for the Corsair apartment building on State Street, for the Bregamos Community Theater on Blatchley Avenue, and for High School in the Community on Water Street.

Josh, also known as "Zim," always had a passion for painting. He received his graffiti name in high school, based on the cartoon Invader Zim.

"Invader Zim came to Earth to study humans and take over the planet; he was an alien. It was ironic because he never fit in, so in turn he felt alienated, and I felt the same way. I felt alienated [in high school]," he recalls. "I was an introvert, I was a bit awkward at times and I didn't really know how to fit in, so I drew. I just painted pictures. I kind of connected with people through art and I met a few friends

“I’d spend my last dollar on paint just so I won’t feel sad. Just so I can paint to feel good.”

– Josh Griffin

in high school who were doing graffiti. We just came up with the name Zim and it grew on me."

As he got older, the name began to take on an additional meaning for him. Z and M are the first letters of his mother's and younger sister's names. To him, the I in the middle represents Griffin being between the two, trying to be a good son for his mother, and a good role model for his sister.

In 2016, it was a Swedish Fish that helped solidify him as a legitimate artist. In the basement of an art store he was then working at in Brooklyn, he spray-painted an image of a three-dimensional candy Swedish Fish. The piece sold twice. At that time, Griffin was gaining more confidence in his art; for a few months prior, he had tried to quit, deterred by not earning steady pay as an artist, but he always came back to it.

"I remember taking a break for a few months and then trying to draw a picture and it came out pretty bad and I said, 'No, this is something I don't want to lose.' People remember you for what you can do, and the things that you do have an effect on the way that people feel. So, if people feel good about your work, they feel good because you do good drawings, they chase that feeling," he says.

It's a feeling Griffin wants to keep in his art. He wants to hold on to the kid inside himself: the cartoons, the laughter, the joy. Painting gives him that feeling.

"I'd spend my last dollar on paint, just so I won't feel sad. Just so I can paint to feel good."

It's a passion that has led him from just tagging the town as "Zim" to creating full murals on prominent New Haven buildings.

Josh Griffin has created murals as a resident artist – for the Corsair apartment building on State Street, pictured at left, for Edgewood Skate Park, below, and for several other locations in the city. Photos courtesy of Josh Griffin


Magge Gagliardi created two freehand murals for Elm City Social. Photos courtesy of Magge Gagliardi

MAGGE GAGLIARDI

After heading to New York City to study animation, Magge Gagliardi quickly brought her talents back to New Haven, and the city is reaping the benefits.

"I went to the School of Visual Arts in New York to study visual animation originally, and then I decided I'd rather be the person to create the characters than to actually animate them. So, I came back to Connecticut and did illustration at Paier [College of Art in Hamden], and I have a masters in illustration from the University of Hartford."

The tiki torches and tropical scene atop the Elm City Social restaurant on College Street was freehand painted by Gagliardi in collaboration with Collective Arts Brewing.

Collective Arts Brewing is a Canadian company that puts different art on all of its beer cans. The company puts out an open call quarterly and chose Gagliardi to be its Connecticut artist. She currently has five different can designs with the company, each sporting a different character.

In addition, Gagliardi's own project, called "The Squatch Squad," has been in the works for almost three years. She teaches art and digital illustration at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, which was the breeding ground for her inspiration for the series. As a demo one day, she created "the spaghetti yeti," and it only grew from there. The lore of what is known as Bigfoot has a different name in many different cultures. She takes the different names of these creatures, rhymes it with something else, and creates new characters. Her goal is to create 20 of them; so far, she has 15.

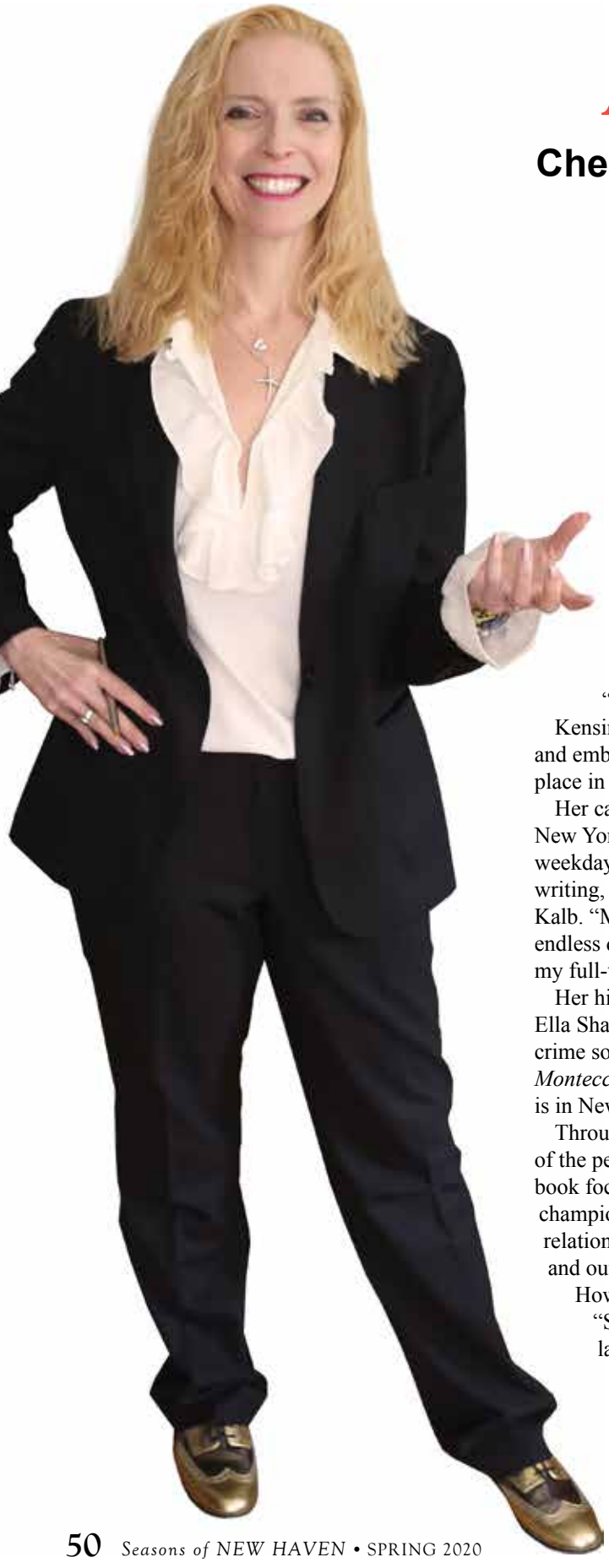
Since these characters came into her life, Gagliardi's art has expanded greatly. She's taken on mural projects not only in New Haven, but also recently created a three-dimensional mural made out of aluminum cans for Austin Street Brewery in Portland, Maine.

"I do this just to be able to keep creating and keep doing this kind of work rather than having to work a job that I have no interest in. I want to keep creating my own stuff," she says. "I mean, I'm my own worst enemy, I'm my biggest competition, I always want to one-up myself; as long as I can keep doing that, I'll be happy."

Finding an art studio to be rather lonely, she enjoys teaching as a way to stay connected with other artists. It's the perfect balance, she says, of doing mural projects and freelance work, and having a weekly outlet where she can be around other creative people and keep her creativity constantly growing.

Gagliardi's process for projects usually begins with an indecipherable scribble, that she says makes sense to no one but her, then she freehands her ideas right on the walls. The two murals she created for Elm City Social were done completely freehand. She prefers working like this so that, no matter what happens, it's never a mistake. It's never deviating from a solid plan; if something doesn't look how she expected, she can just make it work.

Luckily for New Haven, Herve, Griffin, and Gagliardi have no plans of slowing down. Each of them has their own distinct style but share a passion for what they do. They are part of a larger community of artists throughout the city who are taking their art off the paper and into the streets. NH



A New Chapter

Cheshire mom, radio anchor publishes first mystery book

By **CINDY SIMONEAU**
Photography by **TODD FAIRCHILD**

Radio news anchors are frequently reporting on crime and mayhem to their listening audiences. One New York anchor, and Cheshire resident, has decided to switch roles and become the mastermind behind her own murderous landscape instead of reporting the actions of others.

Kathleen Marple Kalb has a two-book deal to publish a new mystery series featuring the crime sleuth and opera singer Ella Shane, who solves a murder from her vantage point in the floodlights of the stage – and despite the New Haven coroner's ruling of accidental poisoning.

"A Fatal Finale," Marple Kalb's first book, goes on sale April 28 by Kensington Books and is the result of years of her development, dedication and embracing the adage, "applying butt to chair and getting it done." It takes place in 1899 in New York City's "Gilded Age."

Her career as a weekend morning anchor for 1010 WINS radio, covering New York City, Long Island and New Jersey, also provides opportunity for weekday writing. "My boss [Ben Mevorach] is extremely supportive of my writing, as he has been of others at WINS and their projects," says Marple Kalb. "My WINS colleagues were amazingly helpful with beta readings and endless discussions of my plot twists. And with my son in elementary school, my full-time job as mom picks up when he comes home."

Her historical mystery is set in New York in the Gilded Age of 1899 and Ella Shane plays "trouser roles" where women played the roles of men. Ella's crime solving career is launched when the star of Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi,* Violette Saint Claire drinks poison during the final act. The troupe is in New Haven for the last stop on its tour.

Throughout the mystery the reader watches as Ella's keen observations of the people and actions around her lead her to solve the crime. The book focuses on Ella – called "Heller" by her cousin and former boxing champion, Tommy Hurley, for her street-scuffling antics as a child – and her relationships with family, friends and theater cast, and those who come in and out of their dramatic lives.

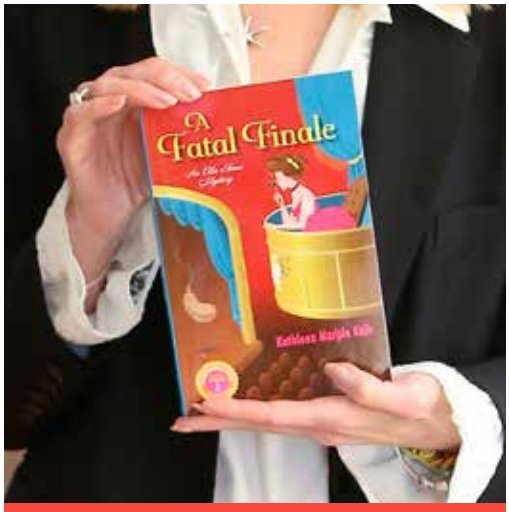
How did Marple Kalb settle on the name Ella Shane?

"She was always Ella. It was a fairly common name for women in the late 1800s. The name Shane sounds like a stage name, and of course it is, instead of the very obviously Irish O'Shaugnessy, in a time when

Kathleen Marple Kalb of Cheshire is juggling it all: mom, news anchor, and now published mystery author with "A Fatal Finale," published in April.

there was still a lot of very public prejudice against the Irish, and immigrants in general. Her real first name, Ellen, is my original middle name, from my great-grandmother."

Writing, says Marple Kalb, 51, has always dominated her time and life. As early as age 16 she completed a historical novel that she even managed to have some editors read. She later wrote a mystery based at a Vermont radio station that brought some attention but did not get published. Her interest in the English Renaissance and history in general stretches back to her college days at the University of Pittsburgh. Her interest in history, and desire to accurately represent the story's timeframe and theatrical experiences, are seen throughout the mystery in Marple Kalb's meticulous descriptions and explanations of scenes and characters.



"A Fatal Finale," Kathleen Marple Kalb's first published book, is part of a two-book contract with Kensington Books.

"I was very careful throughout to be historically accurate. Ella doesn't do anything a nice woman of that time wouldn't do. She is very much a respectable lady and an artist."

Despite the history and writing pull, it was a broadcast career Marple Kalb pursued after graduation, radio reporting and anchoring first at KDKA in Pittsburgh, then in Vermont, and eventually in Connecticut, where she moved from WSTC and WNLK in Stamford and Norwalk, to WDRC and others in the Hartford region before making the move back to a much larger audience in New York.

"It has always been a casual thing for me to write. But it was when my son [now age 9] went to kindergarten I thought I would try it again. And then I kept it going," she says.

She started writing a 50,000-word manuscript and then following editor feedback, rewriting and additional research, completed the current 80,000-word version for publication. Finding the time for a writing project means discipline and determination, but also a willingness to embrace research and criticism to hone the storytelling into a publishable outcome.

Turning the hobby to occupation came last year when Marple Kalb was offered the two-book contract (she hopes to eventually pen four books in the series). It was a time of health challenges for both her and her husband. She became known as the lady with the laptop as she toted her computer at their multiple doctor visits.

"I'm so happy to say that's all behind us now," she says.

She describes the arduous task of writing and rewriting after building characters and linking the storytelling over and over as her agent and editors made suggestions. She advises aspiring writers to be steeled for many difficult days; before breaking through she often fielded two-to-three rejections a day.

"I suggest people not give up on their writing. They should keep polishing it to make it better," she says. "You don't reach the long end unless you actually like hanging out with these characters for a long period of time."

The decision to give her heroine a career as an opera singer, Marple Kalb says, was a nod to her own interest in the late Beverly Sills, an American opera singer who hailed from New York. Sills was known for her coloratura soprano roles. For her book, however, the opera is merely a medium for Ella Shane's mystery-solving role. And, she sees her own experience as a radio anchor as somewhat theatrical, having to capture the audience using only her voice

"Also, my agent is a big opera fan, which helps make sure of my accuracy," she explains. "There's not a lot of insider baseball about opera. It's just a tool for my storytelling."

Deciding to make Ella Shane pursue the theatrical "trouser roles," she says, was a nod to her own broadcast career where she would sometimes be assigned what were known as "top of the hour" updates, traditionally called "a boy shift."

Like many writers, Marple Kalb draws on family for some of her inspiration in creating her novel's characters.

"While I don't model characters directly on anyone I know, I do borrow qualities or relationship dynamics," she says. "So, Ella and Tommy are close friends the way I've been with some of my on-air partners. Their informal uncle, sportswriter Preston Dare, treats Ella much like my late uncle and grandfather treated me - and he's a stand-up guy the way they were."

"I do sometimes borrow a name as a little tip of the cap to a friend or family member. My grandfather and a favorite cousin are named Thomas, and it's my son's middle name. Ella's mother is Malka Steinmetz, known as Molly after her immigration. My husband's grandmother was Molly. Ella's doctor, Edith Silver, gets her first name from my husband's Aunt Edith, who is a psychologist and a pretty awesome lady."

Her husband is fellow radio broadcaster and University of Connecticut journalism instructor-in-residence Steve Kalb.

And who does Marple Kalb read for literary inspiration?

"I grew up reading Elizabeth Peters, and her Amelia Peabody series, featuring a British couple who solve mysteries in 1890s Egypt, that is still terrific. 'Crocodile on the Sandbank' is the first and there are 19 more. The cool thing there, which I hope to get to do with Ella and her crew, is that you get to watch a cast and their relationships evolve

over the years."

Other favorites: "Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum is the gold standard for comic mysteries. Bill Pronzini has an amazing and fun historical series set in 1890s San Francisco. 'The Bughouse Affair' is the first one. And I stake out my library waiting for the new series installments from both Faye and Jonathan Kellerman."

Because she is now in the middle of writing her second Ella Shane novel, she says she's switched to reading nonfiction (Alison Weir's biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine) so she does not get influenced by others' fictional ideas. She has already planned a third mystery in the series with agent Eric Myers of Myers Literary Management and editor John Scognamiglio at Kensington.

As her first novel debuts at book stores and on e-media, Marple Kalb says she is both "excited and scared."

"This is a great shot for me. My mother is over the moon at my opportunity. My husband is so happy for me to be accomplishing what I've wanted to for many years. This is the culmination of years of long, hard work. And I can share my fixation on Ella Shane with my family, friends and the reading public."

The crime sleuth Ella Shane has become part of Kathleen Marple Kalb's "family" as she works on books two and three.

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Creating Space

Versatile she sheds enliven backyards and people's lives

Written by **MARIA ALI**

Stacy Moher's she shed in Goshen is a light-filled space that offers multiple functions and a gorgeous view of the lake. Moher designed the layout, the custom cabinetry, "and everything else in there." Photo courtesy of Stacy Moher

This past year saw she sheds gain popularity in mainstream culture, thanks to a memorable State Farm commercial featuring a husband and wife as they watch a shed burning in the backyard. The wife is on the phone with State Farm and is relieved to find out the 'she' shed is covered by the insurance company, informing the audience that the area is her space, not just a regular shed.

Further back, in 2015, The Today Show did an entire segment on she sheds. The growing trend was attributed to women creating personal sanctuaries. Equivalent to the man cave, these mixed-use spaces are great for reading books, listening to music, crafting, and entertaining guests. Ultimately, they're providing a private space for personal autonomy.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

For Stacy A. Moher, owner of Seymour-based Living Interiors of Connecticut, all of those possible uses resonate. She first decided she needed a she shed about three years ago, when she realized her family was short on space for guests at her lake house, located in Goshen.

"We have a very small two-bed cottage there and we often have visitors, which is exactly what we wanted. But we found that we didn't have enough space for guests to relax or stay overnight," she says.

Moher, whose firm offers design and interior decorating services for residential and commercial spaces statewide, decided to build a base shed on an elevated portion of the yard that offered a view of the lake, and to hire someone to customize the building with extra doorways and windows – to let in more light than a typical shed would allow.

The interior of Moher's shed was designed for maximum function, including banquette seating and a couple of ottomans that not only offer extra seating but storage for games. Photo courtesy of Stacy Moher

"I think she sheds are being used for so many different things now. Art or craft studios, offices, entertaining spaces, retreats, or just a spot to recharge and do whatever you want." – Darlene Risley

Thomas Mach, owner of Thomas Mach Interiors, remodeled a backyard shed into what he calls "The Playhouse" six years ago.
Photo courtesy of Thomas Mach

The mother of two daughters, aged 16 and 12, Moher also wanted the she shed to be a place where her girls could relax, play, and entertain friends. Today, the structure includes a sleeping loft with a ladder for access and a sofa bed. "We also have a place to sit and eat meals or play games. We have a mini fridge and coffee pot in there. It's a nice place to stay – we think of it as an upgraded camping or 'glamping' situation," she says. "It's been incredible for my two daughters; they love to hang out there and have sleepovers with their friends."

Of course, Moher also takes time in the shed just for herself. "This is where I like to come to have a drink of coffee or a glass of wine and read magazines. I've done work out of my she shed, too, but mostly it's a peaceful, tranquil place to relax."

CREATING A BUSINESS

"I think she sheds are being used for so many different things now," says Darlene Risley, owner of She Shed Creations in East Hampton. "Art or craft studios, offices, entertaining spaces, retreats, or just a spot to recharge and do whatever you want."

Risley has her own she shed and uses it to store vintage finds that are waiting to find a place in her she shed shop. Her husband helped transform an existing shed in the backyard by adding double doors, a deck, wood floors, shelving, and a workbench.

"About five years ago, I was telling my husband that I would like to take over most of the space for my own. I felt like I didn't have any place in the house that was totally mine," she says.

Her business, She Shed Creations, was decades in the making. Risley always had dreams of becoming an interior designer. She spent the majority of her career working for window treatment companies like Curtain Land and Casual Curtain but her love of textiles, patterns, thrifting, and junking continued. When it became clear that her employer of 12 years, Country Curtains, was going to close, Risley saw an opportunity to pursue her passions. "It was then that I decided that it was now or never for myself."

At first, she refurbished and painted furniture and sold at flea markets. As time went on, Risley realized she wanted a shop of her own, full of the unique items she spent time collecting, as well as her own creations. Today, "the shop is mostly filled with other people's work. I sell goods from artisans made from around the USA."

She sheds can have a variety of uses, depending on their size. Some are small and simple rest areas to enjoy a garden and potted plants. Others can house entire dinner parties.

"The trend is growing and she sheds are becoming more elaborate. I'm seeing she sheds with plumbing and kitchens. Almost like a boutique hotel room in your backyard," Risley says.

THE PLAYHOUSE

Thomas Mach, owner of Thomas Mach Interiors in Simsbury, has such a she shed. It's nicknamed The Playhouse.

"I had it completely remodeled for a wedding six years ago. There's a bar area. We have Bose surround sound and a clipper ship chandelier that took a year to find."

The Playhouse is a Kloter Farms custom-built shed with

Mach's design touches include a wood-topped blue desk with delicately turned legs, light-catching glass accents, plants and rustic lanterns. Photo courtesy of Thomas Mach

Jenni Freidman's Kloter Farms she shed serves as both an art studio and a place to host former students. Photos courtesy of Jenni Freidman

double doors and windows on both sides. Electrical wires run from the main house to the shed to provide electricity. The surrounding area boasts lavish gardens.

Mach, an international color expert whose company also has offices in London, England, took on the process of decorating the shed himself. "I did the entire interior. I really wanted the colors of the gardens to be the highlight. After the wedding, it became the perfect outdoor living room space. It's away from the main house. Great place to sit and read a book, listen to music. We've had wine tastings and dinners."

"Everyone deserves to have a special retreat – a quiet corner of your home or perhaps a she shed," he says. "It should be a relaxing space, surrounded by things you love."

The room is painted in Farrow & Ball All White. The furniture is all upcycled and painted in Chalk Paint by Annie Sloan. Mach is very familiar with both brands of high-end paints since he carries them in his showroom. The artwork is by well-known local artist Deborah Leonard of West Simsbury.

Mach lets his friends relax in The Playhouse even when he's out of town.

A PLACE FOR ART

Jenni Freidman, a former professor at the University of Hartford's Hartford Art School, also shares her Kloter Farms she shed. The she shed functions as a studio and it's open to former students.

"I decided to buy the shed for my studio because prior to living in this house, my studio was in the basement – there was no exterior accessibility to this basement, however. I have a 1,000-pound printing press that cannot go very easily down a set of stairs!"

A friend gave Freidman the idea to fundraise for the shed. She made a special etching and sold the prints to friends

The color scheme and decorations all are part of a big aesthetic shift in my artwork at the time.

– Jenni Freidman

The unexpected and extremely fun color palette that Jenni Freidman chose for the interior of her she shed only adds to her enjoyment of the space. Photo courtesy of Jenni Freidman

Sally Rothenhaus runs a thriving birdhouse business from her fabulous she shed in Old Saybrook. Photo by **Tony Baciewicz**

and community members. Her husband and brother-in-law added drywall, insulation, a heater and air conditioning, and electricity from the main house.

"Once the studio was set up, I hosted a thank you open studio for all the kind folks who bought a print to support buying the shed. It's a great space!"

After 13 years of teaching, Freidman left Hartford Art School. That's when her needs for the she shed studio changed. She needed to free up space in her studio for all the work from her school office. The transition inspired her to reconfigure it.

"So in moving stuff from the studio to the attic and from my office to the studio, I decided it would feel really good to redesign the studio, too. That is when I moved in the little couch, painted the wall and hung up the scallop trim. The color scheme and decorations all are part of a big aesthetic shift in my artwork at the time. I was right, it felt AMAZING!! After I left my teaching job, I worked in my studio quite a bit, on and off the press – experimenting with digital media as well."

Now Freidman spends her time working for West Hartford artist Amy Genser. This has left her with less time to create her own artwork in her she shed studio. She's happy to help her former students by letting them use the space.

"I bet as my life and work shift, so will the space. It's nice to adjust the furniture and the decor to respond to what my needs and vision are at any given moment in time."

FOR THE BIRDS

Sally Rothenhaus – a long-time accountant and tax professional – also uses her storage shed as an artistic space. The shed had been used by previous owners as a depository for landscaping equipment and as a pen for small livestock. When Rothenhaus and her family moved into their Old Saybrook home, it was transformed into a classroom for homeschooling her kids, a meeting space and, as the time went on, a rec room and guest space for out-of-town fifers and drummers. (She and her kids are musicians.)

Following her divorce and as her kids began leaving for college, it became a "stuffed to the gills storage shed until about 2014 or 2015, when I said, 'Okay, that's it, everybody out. I need some space. I have things to do.' So everybody came and claimed their stuff or we moved it elsewhere and I turned the shed into a creative, artistic kind of space."

Rothenhaus runs a bird house business out of her she shed. "I've been a photographer for my whole life, and I knew I wanted to get back to some form of that, so I did some product photography for clients. And then after a while, I realized that I liked to make things, so I learned how to make wooden bird houses and to put my images onto metal and wrap the metal on the bird houses," she says.

"They've really gained traction. I've done quite a lot of art shows and craft shows, primarily with the bird houses but also with other things I am making." She also advertises through her website (cshoresal.com) as well as on Facebook, Instagram and Kuellife.com, an online community and shop for women over 50.

Sally Rothenhaus shows off some of her photo-based wares.
Photo by **Tony Baciewicz**

Her bird houses have been sold and shipped "all over the country – New England, California, Colorado, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Canada. Each one is unique," she says. "To me, birds represent freedom of movement and spirit, and they're just fun to watch. And the birdhouses are obviously so evocative of our homes. Just like us, some birds clean up their homes; some of them don't. I love that. Plus, it gives me a really fun way to tell stories with my photography."

Rothenhaus believes women should have a space of their own when possible. "I need that sometimes more than other times, but it's nice to know when I do, I have a place to go. I can just make a cup of tea or coffee and take it out there, and have my time to think or create."

Louis Gillen, a sales rep with The Barn Yard & Great Country Garages in Ellington, believes the demand has found a term, not the other way around. "She sheds were around long before that commercial. The name caught on," he says. "But we've been selling regular sheds to women who want to have their own space for arts and crafts, reading, entertaining for a long time."

A customized she shed can take four to six weeks to be delivered. Most women start she shed shopping in the spring so that they have the space ready to use in the early summer months. Retailers tend to see a lot of window shopping by women before they make a purchase.

"We're in the shed business but we're really in the 'making people happy' business. If women want to imagine what owning a she shed could be like ... we let them know prices and what they're looking at. It can be a long-term goal," says Doug Marcarelli, Connecticut business manager for Pine Creek Structures in Berlin.

East Lyme artist Kameron Ghaffari of East Lyme gave his wife an old farm stand that became a she shed. After her death, he kept it as a "magical guest house."

Not all she sheds are brand new. Some are forgotten structures on big properties that find a new life with a new identity. Others can be repurposed from something else entirely. A she shed, then, is not defined by a particular physical structure but instead by the imagination of its owner, and the goals for that personalized space.

Susan Hurley's she shed has remained a favorite retreat.

LOVING MEMORIES

Kameron Ghaffari, an artist in East Lyme, gave his late wife Susan Hurley an old farm stand when she sold her beloved houseboat, and had it placed in their backyard. She filled it with the artwork, knickknacks, and eclectic furnishings from the vessel, and nicknamed the she shed her 'boat shed.'

"She lived on a houseboat for 17 years in Mystic. Everyone in the community knew her and knew that boat. When she had to sell it, I gave her the she shed as a new home for the trappings and memories of that part of her life," Ghaffari says.

Susan Hurley was a new-age Renaissance woman – prolific as an artist, events planner, photographer and writer, among many other incredible talents. Having a space to herself was very important to her work and creativity. She also spent time entertaining her family and friends in her she shed.

It was her own space and was always there as her respite, to recharge creatively or to retreat to if Ghaffari and Hurley had conflicts.

"We're two artists. We met on Match.com. Life with two passionate, independent, creative souls can get fiery at times, and we both needed some places we could cool down and just be. She had that shed," Ghaffari remembers. "After she died, I kept it. It's a place that she spent so much time in. Now it's a magical guest house."

Four years after Susan's battle with brain cancer ended, Ghaffari has been working on curating an exhibition of her artwork at Hygienic Art, a New London gallery. Some pieces from the she shed may end up in the exhibit this April.

She sheds seems to have a transformative quality. They can be a quiet place to remember someone, add to the process of self-care, exercise creativity, dabble in hobbies, entertain. They originated from old potting sheds that had enough space for women to sit. Over time, the potting shed evolved into today's she shed. But can they be for men too? Is there a he shed out there?

Joseph Marganski from Guilford repurposed a free-standing shed he was using for kayaks and yard equipment in 2015 to make one. The idea occurred to him one summer when he saw discarded rough-sawn oak wood at work.

Susan Hurley's she shed is a repository for her beloved treasures. Photos by **Todd Fairchild**

Kam Ghaffari shows off some of his late wife's favorite things.
Photo by **Todd Fairchild**

He asked if he could use it. Once he was given permission, he was surprised to find that the size was perfect for the shed he already had.

Marganski bought pressure treated 4x4s at Home Depot, laid them on the ground to level out the structure, then laid down the flooring. He added windows and shutters for ventilation, made trusses, bought tinted acrylic panels for the roof to let in light, and added solar LED light inside.

"I built my Tiki Surfin' Safari man shed one summer on a whim. It's used by my friends and I to smoke cigars, drink beer, rum and bourbon, and rest and relax too. I'll sit out there in the summer and read. It's very peaceful and quiet inside."

Marganski already has something like a man cave in the attic of his house with an entertainment system and surround sound. But the man shed in the yard is a space with a different purpose.

"It's perfect on a rainy night in the summer. And when we have parties, it's a great place to hang out in, and it's always warm."

This particular man shed or he shed has a tiki theme. And it's open to everyone. Marganski told his wife, photographer Catherine Kiernan, she could use it at any time.

Regardless of who owns the she shed/he shed/man shed, there seems to be an understanding that these spaces are structures independent of the main house. The space can provide privacy and distance from distractions to focus on the activity at hand, like: hosting a wine tasting for close friends, reading the latest bestseller, smoking cigars and playing music, making artwork, or something as simple as taking a minute to look at the yard and admire it.

In a culture constantly seeking new ways of practicing self-care, for some people, this type of personal oasis has become more of a necessity than a luxury – a place to escape the frenzied pace of this ever-connected, mad, mad world, if only for an hour or two.

Every Blessed Town

Run 169 Towns Society members share a statewide passion

Written by **CARA MCDONOUGH**

It's a gorgeous September morning and the Haddam Neck Fair is in full swing. Families are buying tickets for the carousel, the animals are happily grazing in the petting zoo tent, and the persistent scent of fried dough serves as a solid reminder that fairs aren't places to stick to your diet.

Over on a side road, however, a group of runners completing the event's annual 5K are getting a serious workout in. Although, on closer inspection, they look less serious and more festive. Many are wearing matching shirts in blue or pink. Some are wearing … tutus.

At the race's finish line, adjacent to the fairgrounds, they gather around one woman. She's wearing a sparkly blue tutu and stands there, beaming, as fellow runners provide her with a gold crown, bouquet of flowers, and a plastic necklace with large numbering: 169.

That woman is Sandhya Sridhar and finishing the Haddam Neck is a culmination of a years-long goal, celebrated by a group she belongs to, called the Run 169 Towns Society. As the race wraps up, she addresses the crowd.

"Running is hard. But then you enter this group and people have the same attitude, and then it becomes an obsession. They want you to succeed," she says.

But why 169? And what's up with the tutus? The first question is easy. And we'll get to the second.

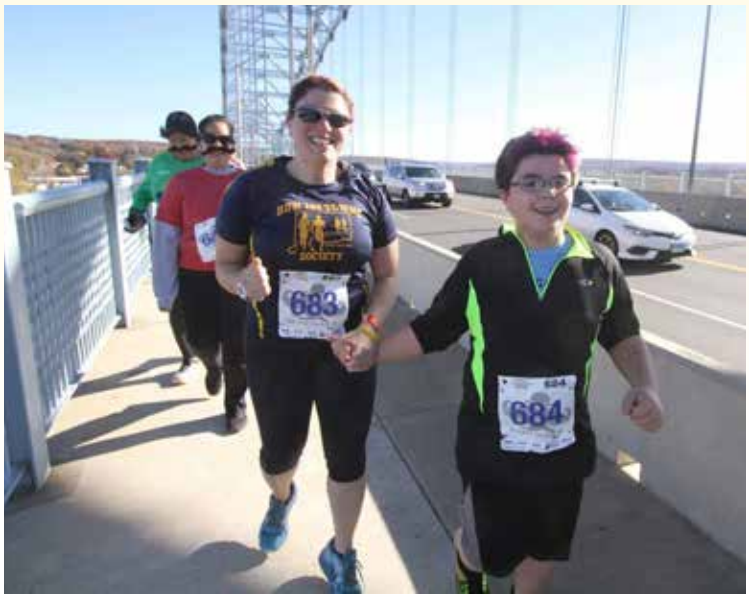
The Run 169 Towns Society was established in 2012, inspired by a Connecticut-based runner on an informal quest to run a race in every town in the state – a total of 169 – a challenge he'd been working on casually since the 1970s. The notion made the rounds in the local running circuit, and eventually a group of friends who saw each other regularly at races decided to try it out themselves.

"We also wanted to invite others to do the same," says Adam Osmond, one of those runners and a co-founder of the group. "So the group has grown tremendously and the rest is history."

The group – originally dubbed, and still sometimes called "DEBTiConn," for, "Do Every Blessed Town in Connecticut" – currently includes 3,455 registered members from across the state. As for completing the 169-towns goal, there are 109 who've done it – plus one dog (we'll get to her, too).

The rules are fairly simple. To complete a town, participants must run an "official" race, meaning an outdoor event, no less than one mile in distance and usually publicized. And completing all 169 has no time limit; it may take a lifetime.

That's good news, because not every town hosts a 5K or any other distance race annually. Take Sherman, for instance, on the far western border of the state, or Canterbury, 100 miles to the east. These and other towns are referred to by the 169ers (as they call themselves) as "elusives" for their lack of regular race activity. In fact, in some instances the group has taken organizing races in these towns upon themselves, to ensure a member can check it off their list and reach their 169 goal. Because elusives are so – well – elusive, it means that when they do crop up, a lot of 169ers usually show up, and that's a lot of fun.



The Run 169 Towns Society welcomes runners of all ages and abilities from across the state.

An online race calendar, as well as members' progress, is monitored by a team of

Working towards a common goal, the runners who join Run 169 often become good friends. Anyone can join by filling out a simple form on the group's website, **debticonn.org**.

hardworking volunteers in the group, so that everyone can keep track of their numbers and be on the lookout for towns they haven't yet run with a simple visit to the Run 169 website (debticonn.org).

Which brings us back to Haddam Neck (a "village" within the town of Haddam, for tallying purposes), which will always have special meaning for Sridhar as her final town. There's a celebration set up for her at picnic tables, where the 169ers in attendance are snacking, hugging and congratulating their friend. Tables are covered with cupcakes, balloons, and poster boards full of photographs, marking the roughly four years she's been running with the group.

Everyone who completes 169 races gets an on-site celebration, organized by the group's awards committee or by other enthusiastic volunteers. The runner in question usually wears a tutu to mark the occasion (yes, the men, too) and is crowned a "Queen" or "King." Parties often spill into after-parties at local breweries or other festive locations.

Not the types to miss a chance to celebrate, runners are also lauded on their 100th race, and many who get to 169 opt to do a "round two," completing all the towns again, or at least showing up at races regularly. There are often get-togethers at a local hangout post-race, milestone or not.

Which makes sense. Because besides working towards a common goal, the runners who join Run 169 often become good friends. And many will tell you that the friendships are what it's really all about, even more than the running.

In fact, plenty of 169ers had barely run at all before joining.

Michele Ridolfi O'Neill has been in the group for almost five years, and is currently at town 168, anxiously awaiting her final race in Groton. She's an incredibly enthusiastic member of the group, serving as its "events coordinator." She works with the awards committee to celebrate 100th and 169th milestones and plan social get-togethers outside

Groups of friends, both new and old, give themselves catchy monikers. Romances have also blossomed within the group.

the races, whether it's regular Monday night trail runs followed by drinks at Kinsman Brewing near Southington, a holiday party, or a charity drive.

She says the group has solidly reminded her how good it feels like to do something "just for herself," and encouraged her to take her running further, including completing multiple half-marathons.

But she didn't initially join because of some lofty athletic goal. She starting jogging to keep up with her son, who – when he was little – liked to ride a toy motorized car around their cul-de-sac. From there, she joined Run 169 on the advice of a friend and did her first race just before her 40th birthday. Afterwards, the other members took a picture together and sang "Happy Birthday." It was – simply put – "such a nice feeling," she says.

She started racking up towns slowly, but then picked up the pace, in part because hanging out with fellow169ers was so enjoyable. They loved getting to know all the towns in Connecticut, often "making a day of it," spending time at fairs – like the one in Haddam Neck – or discovering a new brunch nook.

"Now some of my best friends are 169ers," she says. "It's really expanded both my friendships and my running goals."

Osmond says that these supportive friendships are why so many of the group members have continued to challenge themselves, race after race.

"Those individuals in the group, as a whole, are very caring, supportive, and encouraging of other members, no matter how fast or slow they run. We have group members who are very speedy and win races as well as those who are happy to be the last runner to cross the finish line," he says. "The group is about acceptance."

Osmond, who has now completed several marathons, says that he could barely walk a mile without being winded before Run 169, "so the gains I made through the support of the group have been phenomenal."

These meaningful 169 moments seem to happen all the time.

One of the most emotional, according to members, was on September 23, 2016, during a race in Bethany that was developed as a tribute to 169 member Mario Hasz, who had died of brain cancer the year prior at age 66. His widow walked the final yards of the race with the overall winner, and members who had pledged to run his remaining 109 towns in Mario's honor crossed the finish line that day holding a stuffed bear signifying their friend, and marking that his journey was complete.

Another big day occurred in October 2019, when Quinn (a Labrador who belongs to 169ers Katey Baruth and her husband Rick Shoup) finished her 169th town and was hailed as the first canine "Queen" of the group. Quinn – now on town 20 of her "round two" – has raced with over 45 members. She's known as a fierce competitor (her fastest 5K was a dizzying 18:58) and is scheduled to run her first marathon this year.

Members have delivered meals when someone is sick, and "dedicated miles" to each other in running apps, a way to honor someone when times are tough. Children have joined – including O'Neill's 12-year-old son – and watched as their parents and other role models illustrate positive goal-setting, while setting their own goals. There are groups of friends of all ages and levels that give themselves catchy monikers (the "Sizzlin 60s" 169ers often meet up for a photo opp) and actual romances that have blossomed within the group.

Faster runners sometimes double back to cheer on newer runners during a race, and a runner being crowned that day will often be circled with friends as he or she crosses the finish line. Heather Park and her husband, Scott Grant, are active members of the group, regularly helping update race listings. They joined Run 169 after seeing the shirts at a race, and felt immediately connected, due to the group's non-judgmental, social vibe.

"Everyone is so motivating and encouraging. We are all striving for the same goal, but everyone is always willing to stop and lend you a hand both on and off the course," says Heather. "When I first joined, I was afraid I wasn't fast enough and soon learned that didn't matter in the least. It didn't matter what pace you ran or where you finished because you always knew you had friends cheering for you at the finish line."

And they have plenty of adventures outside of running, too. Nick Ricciardelli even got a group of 169ers to go skydiving with him for his birthday this year.

O'Neill says that in her role planning events, and simply as a member, she just wants the group to be as inclusive as possible, from the walkers to the 6-minute milers.

From an observer's standpoint, Run 169 is doing a stellar job in that role. The inclusivity is palpable; the positivity front and center.

"We are extremely nonjudgmental; we don't care if you run, walk, skip or jump," says Keith Hall, a 169er who attended the Haddam Neck race. "We are just here to support each other. We just love each other."

As the runners congregate that day, celebrating their friend's victory, their own journeys and the big and small details of each other's lives, it's clear that this group provides the purpose and connectivity that make life more meaningful.

That's how Sridhar sees it. Chatting happily as her tutu sparkles in the early September sun, she shares some wisdom: "I always say, if you lose faith in humanity, run a race." NH

Everyone who completes 169 races gets an on-site celebration. The runner in question, male or female, usually wears a tutu to mark the occasion.

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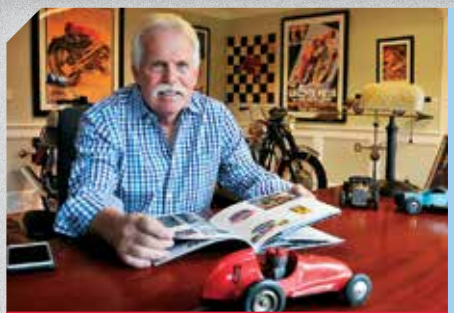

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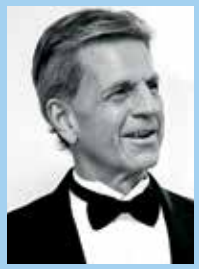

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Lessons for Life

Non-traditional schools offer students alternatives

Written by **CARA MCDONOUGH**

A group of students gathered to learn more about ATLAS, a theater-based middle school in New Haven, at a recent workshop. Photo courtesy of ATLAS

It's the beginning of a school day at ATLAS. The seventh graders enrolled there aren't working through math problems, discussing U.S. history, or doing any of the activities you might expect at a middle school, however.

They're running lines and stage direction for their upcoming performance of the play "The Giver," which the students there have completely planned, from costume design to creating marketing materials. Not to mention that they're doing the lighting, have created the set, and are acting in the play, which will cap off their fall semester.

That's the whole idea at the theater-based middle school,

which opened in 2019 with a class of seventh graders and will be expanding to include eighth graders next year. ATLAS – which is located at Neighborhood Music School, a non-profit arts school in New Haven – is an alternative school where students learn through running a theater company.

It's one of many alternative schools in the state that provide a unique educational landscape for families and students who want – or need – something other than the norm. From private schools (like ATLAS) to charters, magnet schools, and alternative schools within the public system, these educational institutions provide a huge range of educational methodologies.

These schools exist all over the state, and the New Haven area alone is home to many, including newer schools, like ATLAS, as well as established alternative schools like Common Ground, the nation's longest-running environmental charter school, opened in 1997. The high school emphasizes environmental stewardship in its curriculum, and the campus includes an onsite urban farm, giving students real-life lessons about sustainable living and the opportunity to contribute to New Haven's food system. The school also runs a host of programs for families focused on connecting visitors to the natural world.

As with other alternative schools, the curriculum at ATLAS might seem like completely unfamiliar territory, at least at first. But learning through theater is a dream come true for some students looking for a completely different middle school experience.

A typical day at the school, which begins with "movement and meditation," clearly indicates the creative ways ATLAS staff incorporate lessons into the theater theme. STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) learning is infused into all aspects of stagecraft, such as costume design, which students complete at a station in one of their classrooms, complete with spare material and measuring tools. Students learn humanities lessons by comparing aspects of their play with connections to current events, and recognize individual intellectual specialties through an "objectives" course, pursuing self-directed projects like photography or choreography.

"I feel like in any school in the first year, the number one goal is building a culture," says Founding Artistic Director Maria Bartz. "The students here have really co-created that."

Bartz created the concept for the school with Founding Education Director Caroline Golschneider, and staff also includes Billy O'Shea, the STEM director, as well as a roster of specialty instructors.

The result of students collaborating to reach such a specific educational goal has resulted in a cohort of inspired and inspiring students, unusually connected to their shared ideals and to one other.

"We're all different, but we are all like a big family," says student Giada, who declined to give her last name.

Part of the ATLAS curriculum involves venturing into New Haven for field trips in order to learn from, and contribute to, the community. Photo courtesy of ATLAS

CALL OF THE WILD

At Slate School in North Haven, a nature-based elementary school that opened in the fall of 2018, large sliding doors and windows look onto a pristine courtyard, central to the bucolic 25-acre campus. The setup is meant to provide students a seamless transition from inside to out, allowing children to explore many different workspaces at the school and roam the campus regularly, investigating wildlife, native plants, and the changing seasons.

The school itself is a natural wonder, crafted from environmentally friendly materials, such as sustainably forested wood, with circadian rhythm lighting that mimics the natural light of the sun and changes throughout the day.

"This is a powerful space," says Julie Mountcastle, head of school and a second-grade teacher from the Grove, one of the bright, airy school buildings where student art projects dot the walls. All of the classroom buildings, such as Apple Tree and Wildflower, have nature-inspired monikers.

The Slate School, created by couple Jennifer Staple Clark and Alexander Clark, emphasizes student-led projects,

Slate School is one of the only nature-based elementary schools in the country, and also one of a handful of nature-based, arts-integrated elementary schools. Slate School fosters each child's unique curiosity and creativity in a nurturing, academically-rigorous learning community. Photo courtesy of the Slate School

which direct the overall learning. Children choose subjects, examine texts and other learning materials, and gather "artifacts," working with teachers to fill their notebooks with "impressions, facts, and more questions," according to the school's website.

"We teach them through the lens of their curiosity," says Mountcastle of the process, which favors a hands-on approach, with students working side by side on different subjects. In one classroom, for instance, a teacher encouraged a curious student as he conducted an experiment, floating different materials in a bucket of water. Nearby, another student sat engrossed in a book about squirrels.

There are many other ways Slate School differs from a typical school structure: the faculty includes a writer-in-residence who works onsite,

At Slate School, the curriculum does not include passive learning, memorization, standardized tests, or worksheet-based learning. Instead, children are actively engaged as critical thinkers and real learners. Photo courtesy of the Slate School

At Slate School, the heart of every day is its work on projects. Beginning in October, each child selects his or her first unique topic of the year. The process, spanning selection to presentation, takes place 4-6 times in a school year. Project topics among the youngest elementary school students at Slate School have ranged from Leonardo da Vinci and Italy to vegetables and bones. Photo courtesy of the Slate School

and will soon include a fully functioning greenhouse, accessible during all seasons.

But the fundamental goal is encouraging each student's individual creativity, says Jennifer Staple Clark.

"It's phenomenal seeing the children," she says. "They're just so excited about everything they're learning."

SIDE BY SIDE

Dr. Anne Dichele is dean of the School of Education at Quinnipiac University, as well as one of the founders of the Side By Side Charter School in Norwalk, one of Connecticut's first state-funded charter schools. The school opened in 1997.

She says that she understands the desire for alternative educational outlets, and that starting new schools is certainly the prerogative of those who choose to do so. But she adds that a potential downside of the trend occurs when public education systems are neglected in the process.

"The issue is when people begin to think of schooling as a commodity, as something you can buy or choose," she says. "Whereas public education is really a civic commodity."

She is proud that the Side by Side Charter School has stayed true to its original mission over the years. The school, which has been recognized by the state for its successes, is a small, innovative institution that serves a community in need, instilling social justice ideals in its high-achieving students, she says.

According to its mission statement, Side By Side's staff members help students "build character and responsibility through a commitment to community, social justice, and tolerance towards others."

The school's downtown SONO location "enables our students and faculty to partner with surrounding art centers, museums, Long Island science studies, festival performances, and neighboring commerce. Through challenging and enriching hands-on activities, SBS focuses on high academic standards, respect, tolerance, and success."

"Initially, charter schools were meant to be labs of innovation, says Dr. Dichele. "They were opportunities to not have to deal with red tape and give teachers more autonomy."

She fears, however, that many charter schools are becoming money-making ventures for corporations that run them. School, she says, "can't just be a commodity; it has to be a civic obligation."

AN ALTERNATIVE PATH

Alta at the Pyne Center is an alternative high school, but it is part of the Southington Public School District. The "school of choice" serves students referred through Southington High School, who may not have been successful in a traditional setting.

Referrals come in for a variety of reasons, says Jess Levin, director of the school. Some students thrive better in a smaller school environment (Alta typically enrolls 40 to 50 students total) and some are experiencing anxiety or emotional issues.

That being said, the school aligns itself with the traditional high school's curriculum, allows its students to utilize programming at the high school and expects academic excellence from those enrolled, Levin says. But what Alta does well, through smaller class sizes and alternative programming, is to help students thrive in an environment that allows them to express themselves individually and work towards goals at their own pace.

The school's trout farm, for example, is a grant-funded program, allowing Alta students to grow trout from eggs

At Alta at the Pyne Center, part of the Southington Public School District, students are encouraged to think independently, problem solve and write with purpose. Photo courtesy of Alta

and release them into a nearby waterway each spring. The project gives the students a uniquely close-up look into the world of aquatic life, says Levin, but also teaches responsibility and observation skills in a real-world way.

Students also join advisory groups, made up of six or seven students each, that meet weekly to touch base and set goals. "We can be a lot more flexible here, and that's important because a lot of our kids do come from challenging backgrounds," Levin says. "We can work creatively, and individually, with each student."

School counselor Mark Hill says these alternative experiences, and the close relationships school faculty are able to forge with students, can make an incredible difference.

"I literally can say that I speak to each kid every day, and that's awesome," he says. "Every student has at least one staff member they are really close with."

Because of a smaller student population at Alta, teachers are able to form close relationships with students, getting to chat with them about their challenges and successes on a daily basis.

Dan Patterson, who is a social studies teacher at Alta, says that the biggest success is getting students in the front door every day, in a place where they can truly learn.

"We believe that every student matters. They all have bright futures and it's our job to tap into their interest," he says. "One of the most rewarding things that we can get out of teaching at Alta is seeing students grow over time and getting them through their struggles and adversity. Somehow, we are this big fishbowl with a lot of different personalities, but it really gels together."

FEATURE

Jumping Through Hoops

An old-fashioned toy gains new popularity as fitness tool

By **MAKAYLA SILVA** / *Photography by* **STAN GODLEWSKI**

Hula-Hoops, once considered a "retro" toy, has become a centerpiece for fitness at BringtheHoopla.

Hula-Hooping has come full circle in recent years, certainly since the original hoops were made popular by Wham-O in the late 1950s. Between then and now, the Hula-Hoop craze had lost most of its momentum, with sales remaining in a downward spiral for decades. But hooping as a form of fitness has made a comeback, re-emerging as a new and improved workout regime that fitness experts say offers an intense cardio workout.

Nicole Heriot-Mikula, owner of BringtheHoopla, has built a career around this classic slice of Americana. She says the ubiquitous pastime is changing the way people think about physical education.

"Hula-Hooping has provided me with the opportunity to empower thousands of children, set new precedents for fitness, and create a conversation around healthy minds and healthy bodies for children of all ages," she says.

Heriot-Mikula launched BringtheHoopla in 2011. The business has since been restructured, shifting gears from creating custom-designed hoops to a becoming fully educational fitness company that focuses on children in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade.

Curricula offered by BringtheHoopla is designed to meet children at their physical and cognitive levels, while introducing challenge to encourage growth.

"We provide high-quality programming for children of all ages by using the hoop as a form of play, exercise and learning. Our unique curriculum aligns with state and national standards (Common Core) to ensure developmentally appropriate programming that promotes physical literacy," she says.

Growing up in Shelton and graduating from Shelton High School, Heriot-Mikula pursued a BFA in Music Theater from The Hartt School at the University of Hartford, which led to an 11-year career in theater in New York City.

"As an actor, there's a few things you need: persistence, determination, the ability to work well with others, always remembering to put your best foot forward, and a sense of humor. I took that all with me," she says.

But after living in New York City for a decade, Heriot-Mikula wanted to build something from the ground up.

Nicole Heriot-Mikula, owner of BringtheHoopla, says the Hula-Hoop is changing the way people think about physical education.

BringtheHoopla offers kids both fun and fitness.

"I wanted to be a part of the community again and give back to a community that meant so much to me growing up. There is such a strong feeling of solidarity and teamwork to give back to the place you call home and when we started this business, that's what we did. We still strive to give back as much as we can," she says. "My dear friend in Seymour loved to Hula-Hoop and began constructing hoops, and she asked if I wanted to go into business together and see where it could take us."

BringtheHoopla's first class was a hooping fitness class held in downtown Shelton, upstairs at the Echo Hose Fire Department in 2011.

"Then we continued to book whatever came our way. I totally believe that in business, if someone is interested, as the business owner you figure out a way to make it happen," she says. "Through the summer, we did beach classes and a ton of free stuff just to be a part of the community. And that was the first year of business – diving in and beginning a business with complete passion and excitement and really not knowing the exact direction we were going in."

Although Heriot-Mikula never initially imagined she would venture into the educational fitness world, says points to BringtheHoopla's quality of programming and instructors as the number one reason the business has sustained and grown to what it is today.

"A business is only as strong as your team is. I am very grateful to have an incredible team, led by Sarah Murphy, our program director, and who I believe is the true face of BringtheHoopla," she says. "We are indeed a small business, but our sales increase year after year, primarily by word of mouth, and as they say, that's the best form of advertising."

Using positive reinforcement and encouragement to foster persistence, self-confidence and free expression for all students, Heriot-Mikula has worked to integrate the company's hooping programs into the educational ecosystem across the state.

BringtheHoopla has partnered with schools and organizations across Connecticut, including the Hartford Public Library, the Connecticut Folk Festival in New Haven, Mary R. Tisko Elementary School in Branford, the Bethany Parks and Recreation Commission, and Naugatuck Public Schools, among many others.

"Being integrated in school districts is an organic process that takes patience and consistent efforts," she says. "Our program is successful within schools because our curriculum embodies the key themes and conversations we need to be having with our children about the importance of physical fitness, self-esteem, self-confidence, and loving ourselves for who we are."

BringtheHoopla's early learning curriculum is a six-week, hoop-centered program designed for children ages three to five. The curriculum supports and aligns with the Connecticut Early Learning and Development

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Standards, using Hula-Hoops as a tool to promote physical activity and offer developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

For children in kindergarten through sixth grade, BringtheHoopla offers 60- to 90-minute programs over a multi-week session, with the capability of extending up to 15 weeks. The elementary curriculum focuses on physical literacy, team building, conversational and group discussion skills, positive self-image, and self-expression through movement and dance.

The beauty of BringtheHoopla, Heriot-Mikula says, is the ability to fully customize programming for any setting, ranging from schools and libraries to community and senior centers, birthday parties, corporate events and ladies' nights.

"This past year, we facilitated programming in over 250 public and private schools, libraries, summer camps and preschools. We taught over 3,800 students. We are always partnering with organizations to continue our outreach and to build awareness of who we are and what we do," she says.

Joanne Bonomo, site coordinator for the City of Bridgeport's Lighthouse Program, says BringtheHoopla has been a partner in its summer program for the last three years.

The Lighthouse Program was designed to blend community and school visions to give Bridgeport's youth educational, cultural, and recreational opportunities through diverse programming. The summer program runs for five weeks, incorporating science, dance, art, theater, music and various sports.

"Initially, I wasn't sure if the kids would take to Hula-Hooping. But it's a program that they really look forward to," says Bonomo. "The instructors are incredible; it's amazing what they can do with a Hula-Hoop. The program is both a social and physical experience."

She says the summer program serves more than 200 students.

"Kids today, they're either on their phone or playing a game. They don't seem to get the physical activity that they need," Bonomo says. "Hula-Hooping gives them the outlet they need for physical activity and also creativity."

"This past year, we facilitated programming in over 250 public and private schools, libraries, summer camps and preschools. We taught over 3,800 students." – Nicole Heriot-Mikula

Written by **Matthew Dicks**
Illustrated by **Sean Wang**

Don't Let Go

It makes sense to let it go.

You've spent the last 26 years raising four lovely children into blessed adulthood. Your three girls have good, stable jobs. Two are married, and the third may never get married, and that's just fine. She has two cats, three fish, and a vacation home in Vermont. Frankly, she's doing better than you ever did.

The boy is still chasing down his lifelong dream of hand modeling in New York, but that's fine, too, because before he left home to pursue this ridiculous modeling career, you made damn sure that he got his degree in finance. When this hand modeling dream ends in ruin (his hands aren't even that attractive), he'll be equipped to find a real job with a real paycheck.

So now, with all four of your kids having flown the coop, you're rethinking the contents of your home.

You've served 10,000 meals at this dining room table. It's time for something new. Something modern. That's why it's sitting on your front lawn, alongside the board games that your kids loved to play on snow days. And the dresser from the girls' bedroom that is now in your sewing room. And the rolltop desk where your oldest spent long nights groaning about homework. Propped atop the desk is the crock pot that was recently replaced by something faster and smaller but somehow also bigger and better.

It's spring. Yard sale season. The optimal time to clean out the clutter and make space for the new, or maybe just make space for space. The perfect time to reclaim the corners of rooms that have been absent for so long, hidden under piles of never-read New Yorker magazines and plastic bins of toddler clothes, and a cat tree for a cat that passed away during the first Obama administration.

After a week of prepping and pricing and plastering posters, the time has come. You'll replace stuff with money, and if you earn enough,

maybe you'll finally be able to spend a weekend in Vermont since your youngest won't let you use her home.

Damn ingrate.

The scavengers arrive before the appointed hour, hoping to snatch up the best of your offerings. A steely-eyed man offers you $25 for the table and $5 for each chair. You blink in disbelief.

Did he not see the price tag?

You bought the table at the furniture store on Park Road that's now a combination Dunkin' Donuts/Baskin Robbins. A vaping store now sits where you and your spouse loaded it into the back of Bill's pickup truck. Bill and Donna were your best friends back then. Both had been in your wedding party. Donna might've been your maid of honor if your sister wasn't so damn needy.

That was a long time ago. You haven't seen Bill and Donna in more than a decade. There was no falling out. No conscious decision to stop seeing each other. One day they were your favorite movie and buffalo wings partners, and then, seemingly the next day, they were gone.

Did the steely-eyed guy really say $25? We bought the table for more than $800, and that was almost 30 years ago. A table like this could go for millions today.

The man counters with $45. He says the number like I should appreciate the fact that he's nearly doubled his offer. What could he possibly be thinking?

Objects that shared our space and time cannot be sold to strangers who have no understanding of their intrinsic value.

Does he have any idea how many birthdays have been celebrated at this table? How many overcooked Thanksgiving turkeys have been eaten at this table without complaint, lest I give everyone in the house the silent treatment for days? This is the table where our eldest opened her acceptance letter to Dartmouth, thus dooming our plans for early retirement. This is where our youngest fell asleep during dinner one night, his face landing in his plate of spaghetti.

My spouse and I may have even had sex on this table one or twice, though admittedly that might not help the price much.

"Fine," the man says. "$75, and $10 for each chair. I tripled my offer on the table and doubled it on the chairs. Final offer." He rocks back on his heels. In his mind, the table is already his. This offer – enough money for dinner for two with dessert and a drink at Applebee's – is supposed to do the trick.

It does. I tell him to leave. Get off my lawn. The yard sale is over.

What could we have been thinking? Why did we think we could ever place a price tag on these priceless memories? Objects that shared our space and time cannot be sold to strangers who have no understanding of their intrinsic value. These are scavengers that I have invited onto my property. Heartless, soulless bargain hunters. What do they know of the value of memories and nostalgia?

Modernity be damned. Now I understand those hoarders that I see on TV. Maybe not the newspapers and the empty boxes of Chinese food and ancient computers. That's crazy. But this dining room table and chairs? And that box of board games? The rolltop desk? Who needs a little more space and a weekend in Vermont when I stare at those things that are so much more than things?

Yard sales are great for folks who want to dispense with their memories. I plan to hold onto mine, and never let them go.

"Yard sales are great for folks who want to dispense with their memories. I plan to hold onto mine, and never let them go."

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