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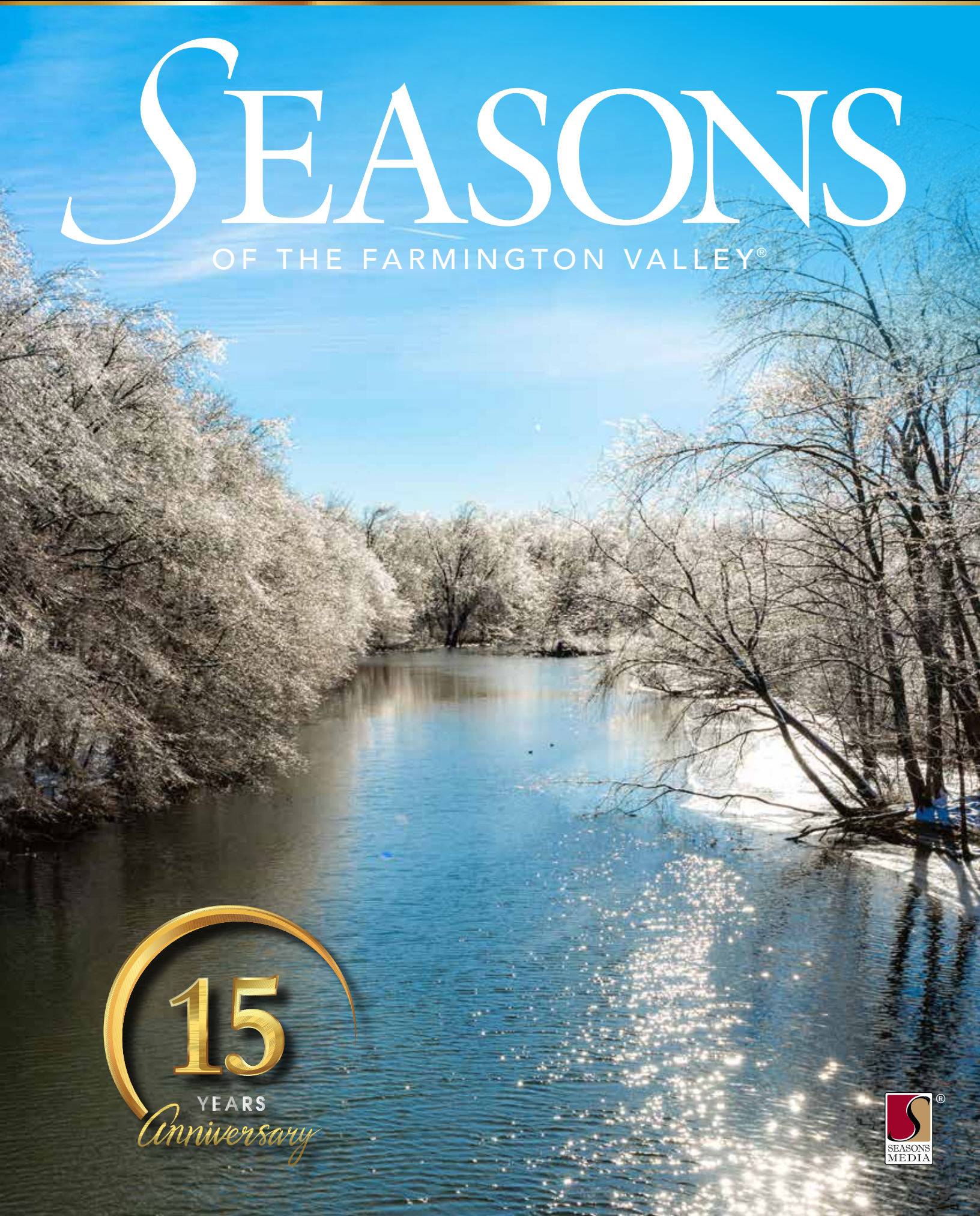

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# Seasons' Greetings

Carol Latter

As we approach the end of 2020, I wanted to thank you for reading and continuing to support us as we showcase all of the wonderful people and places we are fortunate to have as part of our Connecticut community. Especially in challenging times like these, it's important for all of us to not only take a break from the "bad news" of the day but to focus on the many good things that are happening in the state we call home.

Our good friend Dennis House has written a column for us in this issue, poignantly recounting some of the heart-rending personal and professional challenges that he – and so many of us – have faced in 2020. But he also notes the importance of retaining optimism, focusing on the silver linings, doing whatever you can to help others, and cherishing every moment with the ones you love.

An example of just that kind of outlook is reflected in our story about Make-A-Wish Connecticut. For the past 34 years, this organization has done everything possible to make dreams come true for children facing life-threatening medical challenges. I hope you'll be inspired by their ongoing efforts to temper adversity with joy.

Don't miss our other stories about ways to bring a smile to your own families' faces, indoors or out. There are so many opportunities to have fun this winter – get out on the slopes with your kids, learn to fly, make some melt-in-your-mouth chocolate truffles, and revamp part of your home into a home office so welcoming that you won't even feel like you're working! Read about how seniors are using technology to connect with their kids, grandkids and friends … you can do the same! And be sure to read our health and wellness articles about the state-of-the-art care available in Connecticut to make you feel better – and better about yourself.

All of us at *Seasons* wish you a safe and happy winter season and joyous holidays, no matter how you spend them. We'll see you in the spring!

*Carol*

**Carol Latter**
Editorial Director
Seasons Magazines

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SEASONS *of the Farmington Valley*®

# *Winter 2020-21*

> *"How many lessons of faith and beauty we should lose, if there were no winter in our year!"*
>
> –THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON


*Page* 8.
*Feature*
7 thrilling ways to make this holiday season magical.

*Page* 16.
*Health & Wellness*
Dr. Amy Bruce Of Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center.

*Page* 20.
*Feature*
Young entrepreneurs create ground-breaking health solutions.

*Page* 31.
*In The Spirit*
Make-A-Wish Connecticut brings dreams to life.

*Page* 36.
*Innovations in Health Care*
More than skin deep.

*Page* 40.
*Commentary*
Dennis House reflects on 2020 – the good, the bad, and the ugly.

*Page* 44.
*Delicious*
Homemade truffles and specialty drinks make any day more festive.

*Page* 50.
*Feature*
Technology helps senior keep in touch and stay active.

*Page* 57.
*Sports*
Skiing serves up a socially distanced tonic for the "Pandemic Blues."

*Page* 60.
*Adventure*
Connecticut's newest aviators are earning their wings.

*Page* 66.
*Home*
There's no place like home ... to work.

*Page* 73.
*Business*
In the midst of a pandemic, a family with Connecticut ties continues its quest to make the world a better place.

*Page* 79.
*Final Thoughts*
Putting a price on the holidays.

*Have a safe and happy Holiday Season*

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FEATURE

# A Holiday Season Like No Other

*By* **TERESA M. PELHAM**

Although this winter holiday season won't resemble any previous year, it can still be a special time filled with wonder and twinkly lights. Whether experienced from the comfort of your vehicle, or six feet apart wearing a mask, several local organizations have come up with several ways to make this holiday season just as magical as any other year.

COVID-19 restrictions have made it necessary to adjust the size and scope of many of this year's events. If you choose to venture out, please think of others, wear a mask, keep your distance, and play it safe in the hope that the 2021 holidays will be even merrier.

**Carl Bozenski's Christmas Village**
**150 Church St., Torrington**
**www.torringtonct.myrec.com**

Quaint, non-commercial, and magical, Torrington's Christmas Village has been a holiday tradition for 73 years. Located 45 minutes west of Hartford – on Church Street in Torrington – this free holiday attraction enchants visitors young and old.

This year's festivities will go on at limited capacity, without the traditional in-person Toy Shower or opening day parade. From Dec. 13 to 24, the village will be open to mask-wearing visitors on weekdays from 1 to 8:30 p.m., weekends from noon to 8:30 p.m., and on Christmas Eve from 9 a.m. until noon.

Guarantee your entry by registering online at www.torringtonct.org/christmasvillage, where you can select a specific date and time.

**Hill-Stead Museum**
**35 Mountain Rd., Farmington**
**www.hillstead.org**

Enjoy a trip back in time to a place that always looks like a Christmas card.

The Hill-Stead Museum and Ballet Theatre Company (BTC) are partnering to deliver a Nutcracker experience reimagined for 2020. Before touring the museum, which will be filled with more than 20 exquisite and sparkling pieces from BTC's "Through the Tulle" costume exhibition, attendees will be transported to New York City's Fifth Avenue for an opulent and enchanting window display. Inside the museum's Carriage Porch, dancers from BTC Company will perform excerpts from the Nutcracker, as onlookers are mesmerized by dancers twirling, leaping, and pirouetting in their very own snow globe. The exhibit will be on display through January 10.

The Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, CT

Also at the Hill-Stead will be a one-day outdoor event on Saturday, Dec. 5 (the rain date is Sunday, Dec. 6), where you'll find unique holiday gifts at Hill-Stead's Annual Holiday Boutique. Shoppers will find more than 20 vendors including artists, artisans, and specialty crafters. Each will have an individually tented booth. The Farmington Farm Truck will be selling seasonal items including wreaths, greens, centerpieces, maple syrup, honey, jams, and other local delights. There will also be grab-and go-food as well as hot and cold beverages. Free timed tickets will be available on Eventbrite for one-hour time slots.

**ALL AGLOW:** Hubbard Park is home to the largest free public holiday lights display in Connecticut.

**Festival of Silver Lights**
**Hubbard Park**
**999 West Main St., Meriden**
**www.meridenct.gov**

Although the traditional lighting ceremony that kicks off the festival will not be held this year, the largest free public holiday lights display in Connecticut will still go on. This year marks the 33rd anniversary of the event.

The impressive display includes 315 individual figures, 42 trees, 15 permanent structures, and more than 350,000 individual light bulbs. Approximately 120,000 vehicles typically visit the park during display season. From November 25 through January 3, the display will be lit from dusk until dawn (although some displays will not be lit during inclement weather).

**Holiday Light Fantasia**
**Goodwin Park**
**1130 Maple Ave., Hartford**
**www.holidaylightfantasia.org**

Perhaps the most iconic of all winter-themed events in Connecticut is the decades-old Holiday Light Fantasia, a Greater Hartford tradition. The two-mile show transforms Goodwin Park into a drive-through wonderland of holiday spirit with a beautiful collection of more than a million lights.

Whimsical holiday scenes, familiar characters, and local tributes shine bright in larger-than-life lighted scenes and 200 individual displays. Lighted animations celebrate not only Christmas, but Hanukkah, the New Year, and Three Kings Day.

Benefiting the Channel 3 Kids Camp, the Holiday Light Fantasia welcomed more than 100,000 visitors last year. The display runs through January 3, with a new schedule for 2020: Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, from 5 to 10 p.m.

**TAKING THE STAGE:** Hubbard Park bandstand is transformed each year with twinkling lights, Christmas trees, and even presents.

**ALL THAT GLITTERS:** The aptly named Festival of Silver Lights offers a breathtaking place for an evening stroll.

**GRACE IN MOTION:** Dancers perform the grand pas de deux in the famous holiday ballet, The Nutcracker. This will be part of the delightful presentations by the Ballet Theatre Company in store for visitors this year at Hill-Stead Museum.

**Outdoor Christmas Market**
**Bristol Historical Society**
**98 Summer St., Bristol**

In lieu of the Bristol Historical Society's usual holiday fair, an Outdoor Christmas Market will be held on Saturday, Dec. 5 from 3 to 6 p.m. Come shop for ornaments, Christmas decor, gift items, and curated gift baskets. Hot chocolate and coffee will be available. All will be held under twinkling Christmas lights, bringing the European tradition of outdoor holiday markets to Bristol.

Because of this year's pandemic, the market will not include vendors or the typical bake sale that usually accompany the holiday fair, and items will be marked in whole dollar amounts due to the change shortage. The snow date is Sunday, December 6.

**Bethlehem Christmas Town Festival**
**At the junction of Route 61 and Route 132, Bethlehem**
**www.christmastownfestival.com**

Life is always busy in the little town of Bethlehem during Christmas season given its famous name, and this year is no exception. The 40th annual festival might look a little different, but the spirit will still be very much alive.

This year's town festival will run from 5 to 8 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 4, and from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 5. A tree-lighting ceremony will be held Friday at 6 p.m. Santa will stay for the balance of the festival, giving families the opportunity to take their own safe-distance, memorable photos with Santa.

The festival's 2020 Christmas ornament will be available for purchase, and several of the town's non-profit organizations will be selling food and/or beverages, but crafts vendors will have to wait until 2021 to sell their wares.

A series of free music concerts on the town green will be held on Saturday, with a "Santa Made me Do It" 5K road race before the start of the festival.

The festival is run entirely by volunteers, with the goal of raising money to help support Memorial Hall, the community center in Bethlehem, by holding an affordable, family-friendly Christmas festival.

**Essex Steam Train and Riverboat**
**1 Railroad Ave., Essex**
**www.essexsteamtrain.com**

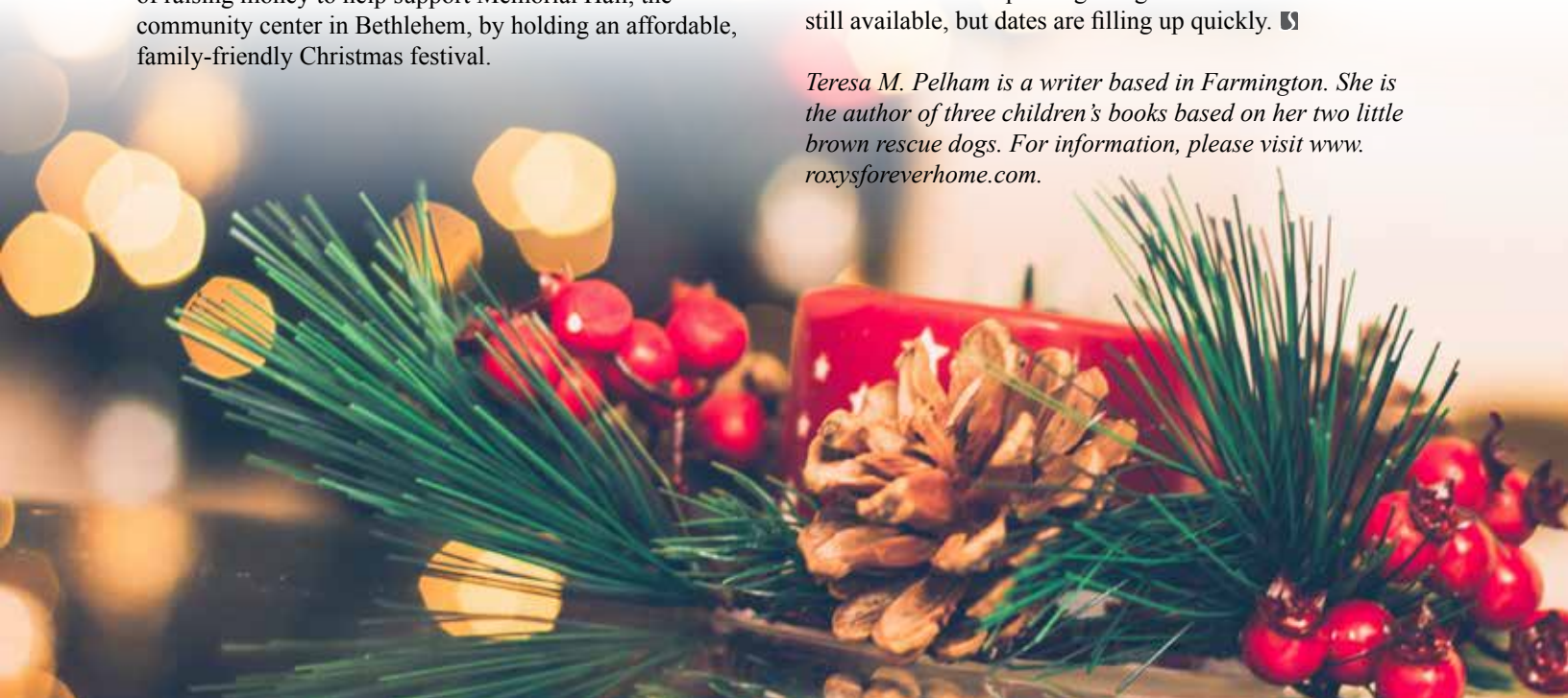
The folks at Essex Station love Christmas as much as anyone, but know that it's just not safe for large groups of families to come aboard the trains this year for the Essex Steam Train North Pole Express or Santa Special Elf Academy Train Excursions.

But using their collective talents, the staff is producing an amazing interactive, safe and socially distant outdoor experience. Christmas Adventures at Essex Station will include a one-hour, self-guided tour with treats, photo opportunities, and a socially distanced visit with Santa at his workshop.

Guests can feast on a specially selected four-course holiday meal served in beautifully decorated 1920s Pullman dining cars pulled by a vintage diesel locomotive. On the Essex Holiday Dinner Clipper Train, sip a festive drink, listen to merry music, and feel the warmth of the holidays during a special two-hour dining experience.

The dinner is for passengers ages 10 and over. Tickets are still available, but dates are filling up quickly.

*Teresa M. Pelham is a writer based in Farmington. She is the author of three children's books based on her two little brown rescue dogs. For information, please visit www.roxysforeverhome.com.*



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# Keeping it Real

## How to Capitalize on a Hot Housing Market

*By* TERESA M. PELHAM

Even amid the pandemic (and maybe because of it), many people are looking to buy and sell homes. It can be overwhelming to try to figure out how to make your home listing stand out.

That's where Dawn Gagliardi, a licensed Realtor with the Corrado Group in South Windsor and West Hartford, comes in. Here, she offers some tips:

**Q: What's the first thing a seller should do when considering a move?**
**A:** Anyone looking to sell their home should speak to a Realtor about the market conditions and what price they can expect to get, in addition to any updates or projects that can be done to add value to the home. So many people just list their homes without so much as decluttering, not knowing that strategically putting money into certain areas - such as kitchens, bathrooms, paint, light fixtures, and hardware - will not only help them get more for their home when they do sell, but will help them sell more quickly and with much more interest.

**Q: How important is "staging" in today's market?**
**A:** It's probably the most important thing that still isn't talked about as much as it should be. Buyers today look at houses on their cellphones and make snap judgments within the first two or three pictures about whether or not they even want to see the house. Staging a home can make the difference between multiple offers in the first few days, or sitting on the market and having to drop the price over and over again.

**Q: How has COVID-19 affected the real estate market?**
**A:** At first people were afraid to go out, and the market really slowed down for the first month. Then because of the incredibly low interest rates, more and more buyers started coming out searching for homes. The demand was so high and the inventory was so low that it quickly became a hot seller's market and every listing went into multiple offers, and prices kept getting pushed higher and higher. Now things have steadied a bit, but there's still high demand, which makes it a great time to sell.

**Q: What's a common mistake people make when buying or selling a home?**
**A:** Not connecting with a Realtor and a lender early enough in the process. Even if you're just starting to think about buying or selling, sitting down with the professionals to go over the process and discuss all of your options is such a crucial step, especially considering how fast things can move once you find a house you like or actually decide to put your home on the market.

**Q: What are smart investments sellers can make to get a home ready to sell?**
**A:** Everyone knows that kitchens and bathrooms sell homes so, if you have significant money you want to put into your home before selling, those would be the best places to do so. But you don't have to do a total remodel to add value. Painting older cabinets, installing new countertops, or even just changing out the hardware on the cabinets can all make a big difference and really modernize a dated home.

## Staging sells ...

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# Dr. Amy Bruce

*By* **LORI MILLER KASE** / *Photography by* **STAN GODLEWSKI**

Ever since she was young, Amy Bruce, DPM, loved to build and fix things. So it's not surprising that she gravitated toward a career in surgery. The foot and ankle surgeon, who joined Trinity Health Of New England and the Saint Francis Hospital staff in September, says she was attracted to podiatry in part because of the wide array of patients and pathologies treated within the specialty. "Also," she says, "the foot and ankle are the foundation of the body, so it is essential that they function well. Being able to ensure that was really interesting to me."

A native of Providence, Rhode Island and the daughter of a university professor and a physician, Dr. Bruce – who also teaches medical students and residents – was exposed to both medicine and academia as a child. A dual major in anthropology and biology at Boston University bridged her interests in science and culture. She homed in on health and wellness, and earned her medical degree, at Temple University School of Podiatric Medicine.

Dr. Bruce completed a four-year residency in reconstructive foot and ankle surgery at the University of Pennsylvania-Penn Presbyterian Medical Center in Philadelphia. "The program focused on understanding that you treat the patient as a whole, and not just as a body part," she says. Indeed, notes Dr. Bruce, systemic medical conditions can present with symptoms in the feet. Thus, as a resident, she rotated through many specialties, including plastic surgery, orthopedics, vascular surgery, internal medicine, rheumatology, and infectious disease.

Dr. Bruce says she was especially excited by trauma and reconstructive surgery – just as her childhood self was always enthusiastic about "putting things back together." She completed an advanced specialty fellowship in trauma and reconstructive foot and ankle surgery at Kaiser Permanente and Emory Healthcare in Atlanta, Georgia.

## A RETURN TO NEW ENGLAND

Dr. Bruce was drawn to Trinity Health because of the medical center's large network of specialized providers and its multidisciplinary approach to patient care. "I'm thrilled to be back in New England," she says. "And I love finally being able to spend time with my husband, who is also a foot and ankle surgeon practicing in the Hartford area, as we were long distance for years, with all the training we were doing."

Dr. Bruce admits that it is challenging to start a new position in the middle of a pandemic. But she stresses that her offices and the hospital take every precaution to keep patients safe, including mandatory mask-wearing by all patients and staff, social distancing, COVID-19 screenings, temperature checks, and limiting the number of patients allowed in the office at any one time.

Telemedicine, she says, has also served as a useful bridge to care during the pandemic, enabling high risk patients to consult with Dr. Bruce virtually. "I can ask the patient to show me the foot and I direct them to touch in certain areas and see where they have discomfort," she says. "I guide patients to do the same maneuvers I would be doing in the office, to gauge what's going on and what needs to be done next." For some patients, a virtual visit is sufficient; others are asked to come in person for further assessment and/or treatment.

As with other areas of medicine, "prevention is key" when it comes to patients with chronic diseases that affect the feet, Dr. Bruce says. She emphasizes that patients with diabetes, who are at risk for serious foot issues like diabetic neuropathy, Charcot neuroarthropathy, amputation, and infection, as well as those with vascular problems that interfere with wound healing, should should stay on top of routine surveillance, even during the pandemic. Patients neglecting the health of their feet could face limb-threatening or even life-threatening consequences in some cases, she says.

## FROM ARTHRITIS TO FRACTURES

Dr. Bruce treats patients for all medical and surgical conditions affecting the foot and ankle, from arthritis to fractures. Her special interests include reconstructive foot and ankle surgery, sports/athletic injuries, and bunion and hammer toe correction.

**BEST FOOT FORWARD:** Dr. Amy Bruce is committed to both preventative and restorative podiatric care, ensuring that patients have optimum health and mobility.

"I see a lot of arthritis in the ankle or great toe joint," she says. "I usually encourage trying conservative measures first – like topical medications, orthotics, braces, or even changing to a different type of shoe." Dr. Bruce says that for patients with arthritis in the metatarsophalangeal – or big toe – joint, stiff or "rocker-bottom" shoes are helpful so that you have the support of the shoe and are not rolling off the joint as you walk.

The gold standard surgery for patients with high levels of pain that is not alleviated by more conservative measures, she says, is fusion of the two bones that connect at the MTP joint.

"The one thing patients have to be mindful of is that the joint won't move anymore, but that will not limit their function and it will alleviate their pain," she adds. "There are other options, such as joint implants, for patients depending on their age, activity level and goals."

## FIXING FOOT DEFORMITIES

Dr. Bruce also treats many patients with bunions. A bunion is a bony bump at the base of the big toe that forms because of a change in the alignment of the bones in the foot. It occurs in 25-36 percent of adults, depending on age (they are more common among people over 65).

"Bunions tend to run in families, and we often see them in patients with flatter feet, as opposed to a high arch foot," says Dr. Bruce. There is a dynamic relationship between the muscles, tendons, and ligaments that work around the great toe joint; an imbalance, such as that caused by pronation, or a rolling inward when walking – which exerts excess pressure on the inside of the foot – can lead to a bunion, she explains. "A bunion deformity can be exacerbated by wearing tight, ill-fitting shoes," she adds.

Conservative measures to alleviate bunion pain include changing to wider-toed shoes, to ensure that there is no pressure on that area, wearing arch supports or orthotics in your shoes, and using toe spacers or padding and taping to realign the great toe joint, Dr. Bruce says. But years of abnormal functioning can lead to worsening deformity, arthritis in the joint, or even development of a hammertoe deformity, in which the second toe curves due to a bent middle-toe joint. This occurs because as the bunion grows, the first toe drifts toward the second toe, displacing it.

A small bunion can be corrected using minimally invasive surgery, Dr. Bruce says. "This results in smaller incisions, smaller scars, early range of motion, and early function." Minimally invasive bunion surgery, with its new advancements in technology and techniques, is an exciting developing field. The long-term outcomes are still being reviewed. Those with more severe bunions and hammertoes might require traditional surgery. A misaligned toe joint that functions abnormally for years often ends up developing arthritis, Dr. Bruce says, so there are benefits to addressing a bunion earlier rather than later, especially if the bunion is causing pain.

## SPRAINS AND BREAKS

Though Dr. Bruce treats and manages patients with sprains and fractures throughout the year, ankle injuries are even more prevalent during this season, because of snow and ice. The most common athletic injuries, she says, are ankle sprains and stress fractures. "Most ankle sprains respond to conservative treatments like rest, ice, and elevation, followed by physical therapy focused on strengthening the muscles around the ankle, working on balance, and restoring ankle alignment," she says. Sometimes, she says, what patients assume are sprains are actually fractures that need to be stabilized with a boot or cast.

Athletes develop stress fractures from repetitive stress on the bones: the continuous stress from running, for example, can cause small micro-fractures in the bone. "They typically need a period of rest, and proper orthotics to support any deformities so there isn't too much stress on one bone," Dr. Bruce says. In some cases, normal stress on unhealthy bone – say, bone that is weakened by osteopenia or osteoporosis – can lead to stress fractures as well. "You want to make sure these patients are optimized from a vitamin D and calcium standpoint," she says.

## EXCITING ADVANCES

The trend toward minimally invasive surgery has been an exciting advance in podiatry, Dr. Bruce says. Arthroscopic surgery – a procedure performed using a fiber-optic video camera attached to a narrow tube inserted through a small incision – has been around for a while, but is being applied more frequently to foot and ankle surgery. "Using arthroscopy, we can remove bone spurs, repair ligaments, repair cartilage and bone defects, and anatomically repair and reduce fractures through tiny incisions as small as 5 millimeters."

Dr. Bruce stresses that treatment is not "one size fits all," but rather is tailored to a patient's age and activity level. "Patients really respond well and have better outcomes when a procedure is picked for them according to their lifestyle," she says.

Dr. Bruce says she finds foot and ankle surgery to be extremely rewarding, because patients can see immediate results, whether that means a deformity is gone or a patient is finally pain free. "There is a lot of gratification in fixing something right then and there – and in seeing patients happy, and back on their feet."

*Lori Miller Kase writes frequently about medicine and health. She lives in Simsbury.*

*Stan Godlewski is an editorial, corporate and healthcare photographer based in Connecticut and working primarily between Boston and New York City.*

Dear Cardiovascular Team,

Last October, you performed surgery on my dad, Paul. Just days before, he hadn't been feeling well. You discovered he had an aortic root aneurysm and scheduled surgery right away.

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—Donatella Mancinone

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT:
A Haitian woman shows off the "bokit" system, a way to grow vegetables in a simple five-gallon bucket.

# Big Dreams With A Difference

## Young entrepreneurs devise innovative solutions for food insecurity, maternity issues, and body aches

*By* **ALIX BOYLE**

What started as an Eagle Scout project has morphed into a way to help people grow their own food almost anywhere.

University of Connecticut senior Christian Heiden, with his brother and dad, started the non-profit Levo International to teach Haitians hydroponic farming. It's an affordable and sustainable way to fight hunger for people who earn less than $2 per day.

"Farming without soil saves up to 90 percent of the water you would use in traditional farming," Heiden explains. "It's a crazy cool system – you can do hydroponics on a simplified level and really help people grow their own food."

But then COVID-19 hit, and Heiden and the team pivoted to bring their hydroponic growing systems to low-income residents in Connecticut cities by partnering with existing organizations like the Hispanic Health Council. Levo secured grants from The Neag Foundation and The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to bring their Victory Gardens to poor communities in Hartford, New London, and Waterbury.

The Victory Garden is a series of PVC pipes within a wooden frame, designed to hold 24 plants like lettuce, tomato, cucumber, pepper, and herbs that grow without soil in net pots immersed in nutrient-rich water. The system takes up just 5 by 2 feet of space. There were four on the rooftop at Hispanic Health Council in Hartford in the summer of 2020. There's no weeding or

watering, so it only takes about five minutes a day to tend this garden, by keeping a reservoir full of water, putting nutrients in the system, and trimming and maintaining the plants. And the plants reportedly grow faster.

The solar pump attached allows for the water to be pumped through the system on a timer, so there's no need to worry about manually pumping the water.

"The beauty of our system is that you can set it up almost anywhere," Heiden says. "It's all done outdoors with our community partners, who run the gardens with our guidance and distribute the vegetables in the neighborhood."

Levo is helping address food insecurity – the inability to pay for food – in Hartford, one of the nation's most food insecure locations. Hartford is also considered a food desert, with a lack of fresh fruits and vegetables readily available, Heiden says.

Heiden is majoring in applied and resource economics at UConn, studying economics as it relates to international development.

Back in 2016 when he was attending Northwest Catholic High School, Heiden proposed building a hydroponic greenhouse for an agency in Haiti as his Eagle Scout project. Well, the Scouts were overwhelmed by the idea and thought it too dangerous, so Heiden ended up building the greenhouse at his high school.

"I like to think I've been entrepreneurial since I was a little kid," Heiden recalls. "The turning point was when our 6th grade teacher's son told us about working in an orphanage in Ghana. Since then, I've wanted to work with developing countries."

Heiden's scoutmaster had hydroponics in his backyard, having built them in the Dominican Republic.

"We thought Haiti had a greater need," Heiden explains. "There are high levels of poverty and opportunities to solve a lot of different problems."

In July, 2016, Heiden, then only 16 years old, traveled to Haiti with his dad, Bill and brother, Nate to build a demonstration greenhouse on the grounds of Many Hands for Haiti, a faith based non-profit organization in Pignon that helps Haitians by providing education, agriculture, medical assistance, and safe homes. That demonstration greenhouse evolved into the Babylon system.

"Once we got down there, we saw how much we could do and it snowballed and we continued working on a solution," Heiden says.

Levo International has installed 30 systems in Haiti to date.

Because of the coronavirus, Heiden has not been able to travel, but hopes to resume in early 2021.

In addition to the Babylon and the Victory Garden, Levo produces a "bokit" system, (the Haitian Creole word for bucket, showing that it's possible to grow lettuce or spinach in a simple five-gallon bucket with a lid.

**SEEDING HOPE:** Christian Heiden helps solve hunger in Haiti with a hydroponic gardening system.

## HELPING WOMEN OF COLOR

If a garden is a solution to food insecurity, can an app on your phone improve your health? Three Yale University seniors say, most definitely, yes.

Mia Jackson, Alexandra McCraven, and Chika Ogbejesi teamed up to create Zoula, an app dedicated to improving health outcomes in Black mothers by connecting them to resources for information and support. The trio took second place for their idea last winter at the annual Healthcare Hackathon sponsored by Yale's Center for Biomedical Innovation and Technology. With $1,500 of prize money in hand, they set about creating the app that is now up and running in the beta testing phase. (See more at joinzoula.com.)

"Black women are not always focused on, not always heard," said Ogbejesi, who plans to go to medical school after working for a couple of years. "People are unsure about where to find information. We hope to be able to combat misconceptions. We wanted to create a space for women of color to get knowledge they need."

The app is chock full of information on childbirth, breastfeeding, mental health, and doulas – the birth attendants who provide emotional, physical and educational support to women before, during, and after they give birth. There's a forum for women to connect with one another and share information and tips. Users can listen to the Zoula podcast as well.

"The app emulates a lot of work that doulas do," said Ogbejesi. "We added the 'Z' because it's virtual, like Zoom. It seemed like the name that stuck."

**ACED IT!** From left, Alexandra McCraven, Mia Jackson, and Chika Ogbejesi show off their check after they win second place in a Yale Healthcare Hackathon.

More than 200 people from around the world participated in the hackathon. Teams were challenged to come up with a product or resource around the theme of social determinants of health. Over three days, teams worked to create their product or service in preparation for their four-minute Shark Tank-type presentation to judges.

The three women were inspired by their classes at Yale in developing Zoula. McCraven, for example, took a course in women in medicine.

"My mom is an obstetrician and I wrote a paper on maternal mortality in the Black community," she says. "It was the perfect match for me." She plans to apply to law school after doing a few years of public service work.

Jackson took a class in sickness and health implications of slavery and oppression, where she learned about health disparities for Black women.

"Black women with a graduate degree have higher infant mortality rates than white women who have a high school diploma," says Jackson, who hopes to continue building technologies that can accelerate healthcare accessibility.

**TFGL!** Members of The Feel Good Lab exhibit their products at an event. From left are C.J. Forse, Ryan Gresh, Gene Gresh, and Kyle Fitzpatrick.

Right now, a handful of users are testing the app, which is also being reviewed by medical advisors. Once it's debugged, the group plans to partner with community organizations and hospitals to recruit more women to use Zoula.

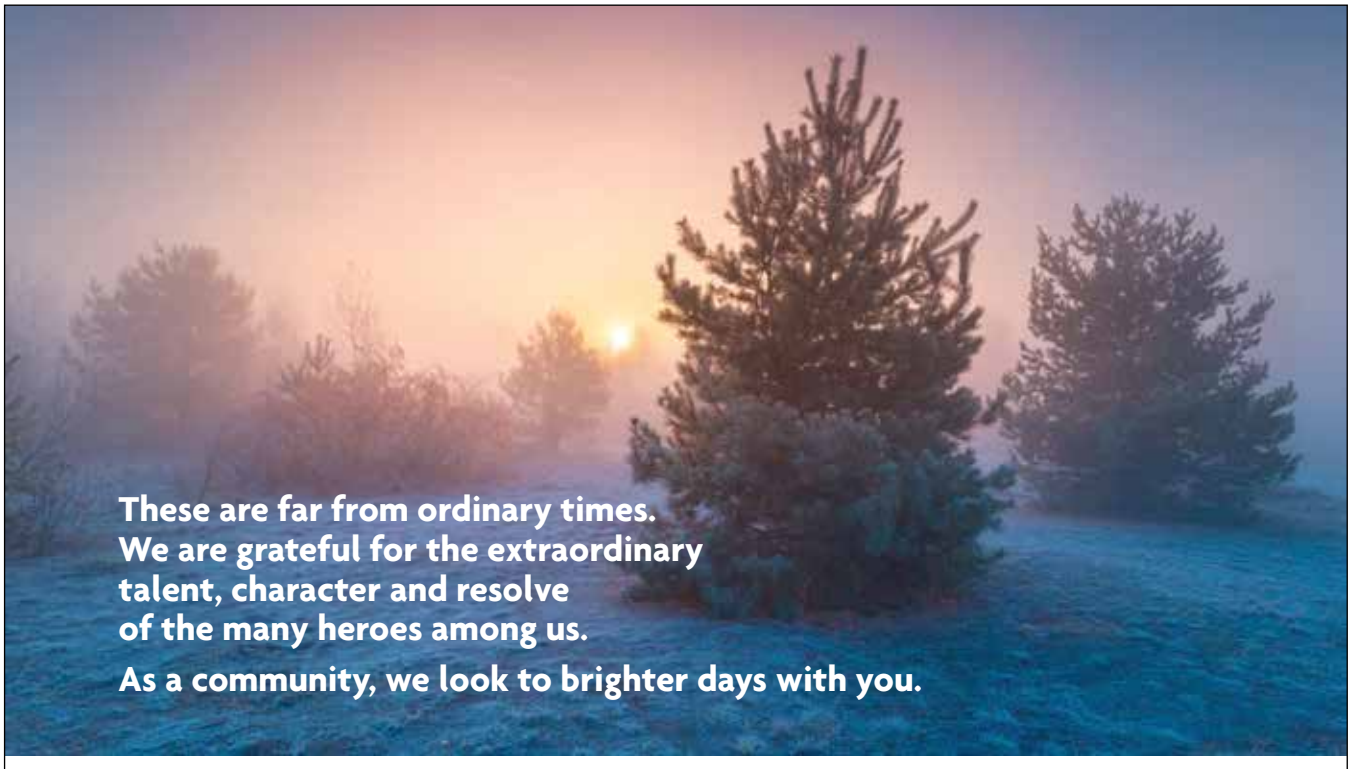
## PAIN, PAIN GO AWAY

When people think about entrepreneurs, they pay attention to the creator of the product. But every great product needs someone to promote and sell it, or else the public never hears about it. Kyle Fitzpatrick, 32, who grew up in Litchfield and now lives in Woodbury, drives sales and marketing for The Feel Good Lab, a start-up maker of an all-natural pain relief cream.

The FDA-registered cream contains turmeric, a well-known anti-inflammatory, as well as arnica, devil's claw, and a host of other natural herbs and natural ingredients. The active ingredient is menthol. Many people use ibuprofen or other oral medications to treat pain, but those have to pass through the gut before reaching the pain and may cause unwanted side effects. A transdermal cream can be applied right at the source of the pain.

The product was developed back in 2007 by compounding pharmacist and functional medicine practitioner Gene Gresh of Vernon.

"Gene is in it for the science," Fitzpatrick says. "He loves helping people but didn't have aspirations to grow."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Enter Gene's son, Ryan, who convinced his dad to launch the company in 2016 with monies raised from friends and family. Ryan Gresh invited UConn friends Fitzpatrick and C.J. Forse over to his apartment to try a bunch of popular pain relief ointments.

Anyone who's ever used Bengay knows it can smell, well, medicinal.

"I was honestly gagging at the smell and said, 'How do people use this stuff?' At the time, I was in sales and marketing at Red Bull. We left our jobs and started applying our skills to this business and never looked back," Fitzpatrick recalls.

Initially, the group's members worked out of an office in New Haven but have since moved to UConn Health's Technology Incubation Program in Farmington to work alongside other biotech startups. The Feel Good Lab has received a $200,000 from the Connecticut Department of Economic Community Development's Small Business Express program and a $100,000 equity investment from the UConn Innovation Fund.

The signature pain cream, as well as a sports recovery lotion are sold through the company website, and on Amazon as well as through physical therapy offices and chiropractors.

Although the company has partnerships with Target, CVS, and other large retailers, it's not yet in those stores in Connecticut, but that's coming. The Feel Good Lab also plans to develop a cream containing CBD that will be ready for distribution soon.

Fitzpatrick's advice for people thinking of developing a new product?

"Don't be afraid that someone will steal your idea. Take the first step of getting the product out there," he said. "You have to drive it. It takes three times the amount of time you think it will. You will get beaten up. The execution is oftentimes more difficult than you expect. It's a lot of work to launch a product from nothing, but it's really fun."

COVID-19 has forced numerous businesses to close. But at least one expert thinks the pandemic will spur innovation.

"I often think that in times of crisis, we see the greatest outbreak of entrepreneurship," says David Tomczyk, associate professor of entrepreneurship and strategy at Quinnipiac University.

Young entrepreneurs can get a leg up from organizations like CT Next, Connecticut Innovations, and the Angel Investors Forum. Although the state has a high tax rate overall, towns are particularly eager for new businesses as a way of creating revenue.

"I'm optimistic," Tomczyk says. "Connecticut is ripe for opportunity."

*Alix Boyle is a freelance writer and marketer who covers health, women's issues and business. She lives in Connecticut with her husband and exuberant rescue dog, Sophie.*


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*Air dates and times subject to change.*

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Headquartered in Berlin, Better Built Basements was founded in 2008 James and Deborah Tranmer and Randal Michalek, who remain its owners today. Coming from home improvement backgrounds, they know firsthand the headaches that can plague renovation projects: dealing with contractors and designers, scheduling logistics and navigating miscommunication. Better Built Basements alleviates the stress, putting projects in the knowledgeable hands of professionals that will guide homeowners every step of the way. It's a one-stop shop for home finishing needs.

The company, which serves Connecticut and parts of Massachusetts, is increasingly popular with consumers and plans to continue expanding but remains true to its guiding vision – to transform basements, using superior products and workmanship to achieve 100% customer satisfaction.

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**PEARLY WHITES:** Chairalis delights in her new, beautiful smile ... a wish come true.

# Making Dreams Come True

*By* **JOEL SAMBERG** / *Photography courtesy of Make-A-Wish Connecticut*

Make-A-Wish Connecticut is facing a fight to grant the wishes of the state's most critically ill children.

Perhaps without even realizing it, a teenage girl from New Haven asked Make-A-Wish Connecticut for a gift that essentially describes what drives, defines, and motivates the organization in the first place: a smile.

The 17-year-old girl has a genetic disorder; the treatment she receives impairs the enamel of her teeth, making her exceedingly self-conscious about her appearance.

"The thing is, she loves to take selfies, but she never smiles when she takes them because of her insecurity," explains Pam Keough, president and CEO of Make-A-Wish Foundation's Connecticut chapter in Trumbull. "Her wish was to have a beautiful smile. That's the kind of wish that speaks directly to our mission to deliver hope and joy to as many children with critical illnesses as we can. Basically," Keough adds, "this girl's wish is our mission."

In 2019, the Make-A-Wish Foundation, nationally, granted more than 15,600 wishes to children who had been diagnosed with critical and, in many cases, life-threatening illnesses. As its website states: "For children diagnosed with critical illnesses, a wish come true can be a crucial turning point in their lives. A wish can be the spark that helps these children believe that anything is possible and gives them the strength to fight harder against their illnesses. This impact is why we are driven to make every one of these wishes come true."

Since its inception in 1980, Make-A-Wish has given hope to and lifted the spirits of more than a quarter of a million youngsters. For more than 35 years, the organization has been the largest of its kind in the world.

The Connecticut chapter, one of 60 coast to coast, was established in 1986.

"Connecticut really isn't that big a state, and in a way that's what is really special and unique about our chapter. Our relatively smaller size makes it easier to work closely with individual and corporate donors from one end of the state to the other," Keough notes. "What's more, if we want to physically go see the family of a child whose wish we are working on, we never have to hop on a plane to do it." Often, that's a quicker and ultimately safer option than what

**HOLIDAY JOY:** One child's wish to go to Australia was revealed last holiday season at Macy's at the Danbury Fair Mall, as part of the Macy's "Believe" campaign.

other state chapters have available to them.

While that kind of logistical and operational benefit has always been of importance, it has taken on even more consequence during the coronavirus pandemic. And while a small state does allow some opportunities that larger regions may not enjoy, social distancing and economic strife nevertheless bring along with them other challenges. Most significant among those challenges is being able to raise the funds necessary to continue to grant the wishes and run the chapter in the ways Make-A-Wish Connecticut has come to depend upon.

"We've been working for almost a year now to diversify our fundraising efforts in such a way as to fully counteract the downturn in financial support – a downturn directly related to COVID-19," says Tara Navara, chief development officer. Navara acknowledges that in 2020, Make-A-Wish Connecticut has been at 50 percent of its average fiscal goal for the year.

"The flip side," she adds, "is that we are still able to count on support from corporations, from grants, and even from individuals, some of whom end up giving just a dollar – which is obviously a donation straight from the heart, because they are thinking about their own loved ones. These individual supporters are wonderful," Navara says.

"Our corporate relationships have also been so strong over the years, so much so that once these companies are able to rebound, we just know we'll be able to count on them to the extent we did before," Navara continues. "We'll get through the pandemic together, and we'll bounce back together."

Connecticut parents, grandparents, and children have a unique opportunity again this year to make a difference. Through the Macy's "Believe" campaign, folks can write letters to Santa and drop them in a big red letterbox in a Macy's store or send them online. Macy's will donate $1 for every letter written, up to $1 million, to Make-A-Wish, to create life-changing wishes for children all across the country. To send a letter online or to donate directly to Make-A-Wish, visit macys.com and click on the maroon "Believe" banner. Macy's has partnered with Make-A-Wish to raise funds for wish-granting since 2008.

Make-A-Wish is a nonprofit corporation, nationally headquartered in Arizona, that spends every non-operational dollar on the specific granting of wishes, accounting for nearly 80 percent of its revenue. The wishes these children have stretch from superhero visits and backyard treehouses to scuba-diving lessons and horse riding. It is conventional lore throughout the organization, nationally and locally, that a granted wish not only provides promise and pleasure to the children, but also unites their friends, neighbors, and

communities. The collaborations forged by Make-A-Wish transform entire families as much as they do the individual children whose dreams come true.

The Trumbull staff is especially aware of this special dynamic, partially because their enduring success has put them in touch with so many children, so many friends, and so many neighbors and communities.

"I am more than happy to say that we have granted every eligible wish that we've been asked to grant," notes Pam Keough. "We've never had to turn one down." That is not to say that the future will be without its challenges. Given these difficult and uncertain times, maintaining such a stellar track record will require continued hard work, dedication, cooperation, and perhaps even a little luck. But Keough and her Trumbull staff are committed to going the distance, and they remain entirely optimistic.

"Most of our referrals for wishes come from the families themselves. Many also come from social workers and from the nurses and doctors at Connecticut hospitals where these youngsters unfortunately have to spend a lot of time," explains Lisa Brown, program director. With such unwavering appeals, it is unambiguously clear how important it is to overcome even the most dire financial and logistical confrontations, in order to continue to grant wishes.

The entire staff at Make-A-Wish Connecticut is laser focused on that objective.

"Our chapter has grown over the years, and as a result, we have had to add new people," observes Carin Buckman, marketing communications and digital manager. Staff members at the regional Make-A-Wish have come from many different professions – from other non-profit organizations, and sometimes even from medical device and healthcare service companies. That makes sense, since many of those professionals have first-hand knowledge of all the various kinds of diagnostic and treatment efforts required by these children. For many of them across Connecticut, these efforts can be quite wearying, which makes dreaming and wish-making all the more fulfilling.

All Make-A-Wish children, staffers, and volunteers

**"... it is unambiguously clear how important it is to overcome even the most dire financial and logistical confrontations, in order to continue to grant wishes.**

–Lisa Brown

**OPENING DOORS:** Cameron enjoys the new Unified Lounge at Newtown High School - a "wish" come true thanks to Make-A-Wish Connecticut.

around the world have Christopher Greicius to thank for getting the ball rolling in Phoenix 40 years ago. When Christopher was seven and being treated for terminal Stage IV leukemia, a U.S. Customs officer named Tommy Austin – a friend of Christopher's mother – heard that his dream was to become a police officer, but would likely not survive to the age of eight. Austin and several of his colleagues commissioned a police uniform in Christopher's size, scheduled a helicopter ride on a police chopper, and arranged for the boy to take a police academy exam. Christopher, who died in May 1980 – two days after putting on his uniform and pinning on his badge – had the pleasure and pride of knowing his life's grandest wish had come true.

It is in this same spirit that Make-A-Wish Connecticut continues its mission. To help with the promotion of that mission, with the fundraising needed to support it, and with the volunteering effort necessary to actually make wishes come true, the chapter works tirelessly on a series of projects and events. These activities have such self-explanatory titles as the Walk for Wishes, the Taste of Wishes, the Trailblaze Challenge, Wish Night, the Evening of Wishes Gala, and more. Even during the pandemic, many events – a bit scaled-back and carefully arranged with an eye on safety and well-being – were still held, some virtually. When the pandemic subsides, the group's event calendar will once again be as broad and active as it has been for the last three-and-a-half decades.

All wishes have challenges of their own, especially these days, when so many contractors and other local professionals – people who in the past have used their skills to make wishes come true – have pandemic-related trials and tribulations of their own that affect their ability to come aboard to the extent they'd prefer. The Make-A-Wish Connecticut team is always eager to put out the call for more volunteers who can assist in many ways to turn dreams and wishes into reality.

"Before COVID, 70 percent of the wishes we received were travel-related – like Disney World and other exciting destinations," says Lisa Brown. "Now they include a lot of local shopping sprees, room makeovers, and the sort of wishes that can be restricted to the area and even endure far longer than any destination visit." That, she notes, speaks to the fact that so many of the young people involved handle the new social reality – and its many limitations – with maturity far beyond their years.

One of the clearest examples of that is the recent wish of a student from Newtown with cystic fibrosis. She is very involved in her school's Unified Arts Program, which focuses on opportunities to develop social and leadership skills in a safe, friendly environment. The wish of this student, who enjoys wonderfully close relationships with her high school classmates, was for a new Unified Lounge to be built in her high school. She wanted her friends in the program to be able enjoy a modern, comfortable lounge between classes day after day.

"These kids could wish for anything," Lisa Brown says with more than just a little pride and astonishment. "Anything! But she, like so many others, just want to give back for what they've been given, even when it may seem to others that they've been given so little in the bigger picture. These children are so special in so many ways."

Which is precisely why Make-A-Wish Connecticut does whatever it can to remain so special – in so many ways.

For more information on Make-A-Wish Connecticut and how you can help, visit wish.org/ct/ways-help-us or call 1-203-261-9044 [toll-free, 1-877-203-9474].

*Connecticut journalist Joel Samberg has also profiled and written for the YMCA of Greater Hartford, the Gengras Center at the University of Saint Joseph, Ethel Walker School, The Children's Center of Hamden, and several other schools and organizations in the state.*

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# More Than Skin Deep

## Cosmetic and laser dermatologic treatments help patients put their best face forward

*By* **CAROL LATTER** / *Photography courtesy of UConn Health*

In the past, many people who were unhappy with the way their skin looked from a cosmetic standpoint were forced to suffer in silence. In some cases, they didn't know enough about the options that were available or, if they did, simply couldn't afford them, since the vast majority are not covered by medical insurance. Some were unable to take the time off from work that was recommended or required for recovery – or worried that the results would not justify the cost, since some interventions were less successful than others.

Today, with the introduction of breakthrough products, innovative techniques, and state-of-the-art technologies that offer great effectiveness, laser and cosmetic dermatology has moved very much into the mainstream. And it is making a huge difference in the lives of patients, improving their physical and emotional well-being without a significant amount of downtime. In 2018, almost 18 million Americans had a cosmetic procedure or intervention, and the numbers continue to grow each year.

The Department of Dermatology at UConn Health has become a leader in this burgeoning field. In addition to providing medical-based care, such as performing Mohs surgery for skin cancer and treating dermatologic diseases, its fellowship-trained, board-certified physicians offer the newest and most effective laser and cosmetic treatments for everything from wrinkles, discoloration, and sagging skin to vein reduction, scar revision, contour sculpting, and permanent hair removal.

Hao Feng, M.D., M.H.S., FAAD – one of two procedural dermatologists in the department along with Maritza Perez, M.D., FAAD – says as faculty members of a university hospital, he and his colleagues use science-based therapies and treatments to give patients the benefits of the latest research and innovation in healthcare. "We have the expertise and the tools to really help people, no matter what the issue," he says. "They don't need to travel to New York or Boston. We deliver excellent care that rivals what is offered in the major cities."

Dr. Perez, who has worked in cosmetic dermatology for more than two decades and has performed and authored countless journal articles about a wide array of dermatological interventions, agrees that when it comes to doing cosmetic procedures, expertise is key. "The compendium – the whole package of how to rejuvenate a face – is not only based on lasers, Botox, or fillers. It's knowing how to analyze the face and knowing the best way to improve a patient's look. And that comes with a lot of experience."

She notes that UConn is very fortunate to have such skilled physicians, not only in Dermatology but in its other departments as well. "It's important to have the right quality of professionals to take care of your patients," she says.

Members of UConn's Dermatology team have an impressive arsenal of tools at their disposal.

Surface-level treatments include wrinkle-fighting serums, cryosurgery to eliminate benign lesions, and painless removal of skin tags. In microdermabrasion, also known as the "lunchtime peel," crystals and suction are used to exfoliate the top layers of damaged skin, promoting the formation of new, smoother skin with no discomfort or downtime.

Chemical peels – which not only exfoliate skin but stimulate collagen using alpha-hydroxy acids – are great for making wrinkles, fine lines, and pigmentation less visible, improving skin texture, and minimizing the appearance of active acne and scarring.

Lasers can eliminate unwanted blood vessels, fine lines and wrinkles, scars, discoloration like rosacea and brown spots on the face, and sun damage on the neck and chest. Blu-light treatments can remove precancerous lesions. Lasers can also be used to permanently remove hair and tattoos.

Injectables are also popular. For instance, botulinum toxin (known by the trade name Botox) is not only used to eliminate or reduce wrinkles, but can make hands look younger, reduce excessive underarm sweating, and improve the appearance of the neck when injected along the jawline. It can also promote a better appearance for patients who feel their gums are too prominent when they smile. Fillers, meanwhile, can help to correct facial wrinkles and folds, scarring, skin depressions, and lip lines, as well as correct volume loss in the face and hands. Patients with spider veins in their legs may opt for sclerotherapy, in which a liquid is injected into the veins to make them less visible. Kybella injections are used to eliminate the fat cells that contribute to a double chin.

Minor surgery, small amounts of liposuction in certain areas,

Dr. Hao Feng

Dr. Maritza Perez

UCONN HEALTH

**BEST FACE FORWARD:** Patients seeking cosmetic improvements may be treated with botulinum toxin, fillers, chemical peels, or prescription-strength serums – or with lasers that reduce redness or resurface and tighten skin. Minor surgical interventions are also available. *Photo courtesy of UConn Health*

**HEALTH AND BEAUTY:** The field of dermatology – which includes medical and cosmetic subcategories – helps patients not only improve the appearance of their skin but ensure that their skin health is optimized. UConn Health's highly skilled dermatologists offer patients the best care from a medical as well as aesthetic standpoint. *Photo courtesy of UConn Health*

and microneedling with radiofrequency are also available.

Dr. Perez says often, the best approach involves not just a single type of treatment but several. "Combination treatments can offer the best outcome, the least amount of downtime, and sometimes the lowest investment," she says. "For example, for some patients, if you use the right combination of Botox, fillers, and lasers, you can get the improvement of … not a facelift, but almost a facelift. And you can do it in one sitting. When you combine treatments, it's a beauty, because the improvements are exponential rather than additive."

## A PERSONALIZED APPROACH

No matter what type of result a patient hopes to achieve, the guidance provided by UConn's dermatology team is invaluable. "There's a dizzying amount of information on the internet, including a lot of advertising," says Dr. Feng. "It's very difficult for the consumer to navigate all of that, and to know if any of it really works. A big part of my job – and what I love doing for a patient – is to provide them with the correct information. To say, 'This is what we can realistically do for you,' and help guide them through the process."

UConn's dermatologists take into account not only the potential effectiveness of a treatment but its suitability to the individual patient and their situation. "We want to understand what kind of results patients are seeking, and what kind of downtime they can have," says Dr. Feng. "Then we consider what kind of potential harm there may be. For example, if you have dark skin, your skin is going to be more prone to side effects and complications than someone who has Caucasian skin. As a team, we really want our patients have an excellent experience. We'll never recommend things that will not work or is not right for them."

## RIGHT PROCEDURES, RIGHT PROVIDER

One thing many patients may not be aware of is that it's critically important not only to select the right products or procedures, but the right provider. Dr. Feng explains that while various cosmetic treatments can have marvelous results, they can also be dangerous in the hands of a provider who is inadequately trained to use them safely or does not know how to deal with complications when they occur.

"I've seen multiple patients who've gotten procedures done and suffered long-term consequences. One example is a young college student who was bothered by excess, unwanted hair on her arms and had a treatment that resulted in very visible burns and scars. We had to do a lot of work to help correct that," he recalls. He also knows of patients who had filler accidentally injected into a blood vessel, causing serious complications. "Unfortunately, the injector did not recognize this serious complication and the patient never received time-sensitive treatment that could have prevented her facial scars."

"Our goal is to never have a patient be in that position in the first place," he says.

"I really urge consumers to look at the training and the expertise of anyone that they're considering getting cosmetic and laser energy-based treatment from. You want someone who really knows what they're doing, who can take care of you from the beginning to attain your goals, and who has the right devices and options that fit your needs – not just what's convenient for the person who's treating you. And I think that's something that makes UConn stand out compared to other places in the area, and really in the entire state."

At UConn, he notes, a complication is "a very rare event, but it can happen. However, we are trained to recognize and reverse any side effects very quickly, with no negative results. You really have to know what you're doing, to minimize complications and use these products safely."

Because UConn's dermatologists are also expert in treating medical issues, they are able to identify and treat potentially life-threatening skin lesions, like melanoma.

Finding a concerning skin lesion during a cosmetic consultation is not uncommon, Dr. Perez says. Since joining UConn from private practice 18 months ago, "I've removed five melanomas in a given week, so we're saving lives here on an everyday basis. But on top of that, we're improving the appearance of people who may be feeling self-conscious or depressed about the way they look."

When it comes to offering medical care, Dr. Perez takes a lot of satisfaction in helping people, regardless of their situation. She says one of the reasons that she shifted from private practice to UConn Health is because she wants to give back to the community. "We take care of all patients, regardless of their insurance status."

You might say that both physicians bring to their positions something of a world view.

Dr. Perez was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She went to college at 15, finishing a bachelor's degree in biology with a minor in chemistry in just three years, and finished medical school at 23. After completing a fellowship in immunology and marrying a fellow physician, she spent several years in research at Yale before completing another fellowship, this time in dermatology, and subsequently went into private practice. Her twin daughters are also in medicine.

Dr. Feng, who was born in China, emigrated to the U.S. with his family at the age of 10 and lived in Florida and California before earning his medical degree at Yale, followed by a year-long internship at Yale New Haven Hospital. After completing his dermatologic residency at NYU, he stayed in Manhattan for a fellowship in surgery, laser surgery, and cosmetic dermatology, returning to Connecticut in 2019.

Both are delighted to be at UConn. "I always wanted to have a career where I can not only provide excellent patient care, but also really teach and help mentor the next generation of physicians to be top-notch dermatologists," says Dr. Feng. "Also, being at an academic center, you're surrounded by so many brilliant people, both those with a lot of experience and really great young minds. We're building and creating something here that's really exciting to me."

***Drs. Perez and Feng discuss advanced cosmetic dermatology treatment options on the November episode of the UConn Health Pulse podcast. Hear it at https://h.uconn.edu/derm-podcast.***

*Carol Latter is the editor of* Seasons Magazines *and lives in Simsbury.*

# NEW PSORIASIS CENTER OPENS IN THE NEW YEAR.

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Psoriasis is a chronic skin condition caused by an overactive immune system that affects people of all ages. The symptoms can include dry, flaking skin, inflammation, and discolored skin patches.

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UCONN HEALTH

DERMATOLOGY

COMMENTARY

# Perspective 2020

*By* **DENNIS HOUSE** / *Photography by* **STAN GODLEWSKI**

2020 was going to be epic. A powerful repeat-digit year that we last had in 1919, but this was extra special – a double-digit year, not seen since the Middle Ages in 1010.

As 2020 approached, the economy was booming. People were planning 2020-themed weddings and special trips, and those graduating in the class of 2020 felt their group was extra special, all because of the numbers 20-20.

Here we are ringing in 2021, hoping there is never again a year like the one we just trudged through. We cried, we worried, we grieved, and we changed the way we lived, perhaps forever.

For many of us, 2020 began with a pall of sadness. Connecticut was still processing the sudden death of Denise D'Ascenzo, the legendary newswoman, my co-anchor and "TV wife" for a quarter century. Her shocking death triggered what was said to be the largest outpouring of collective grief in Connecticut for a single person since the death of beloved governor Ella Grasso in 1981. For more than 30 years, Denise was a constant on televisions in our state, a beacon of warmth during the biggest news events of our time. As Gayle King put it, "this wasn't supposed to happen. Denise was always supposed to be here."

As 2020 began, I had to adapt to a new phase in my career, one as a solo anchor on the evening news. I didn't take any extra time off. I'm fiercely loyal and felt I needed to be there on the news for the viewers, who would write to me saying that seeing me brought them some comfort, peace, and a sense of trust – that everything was going to be okay after such a devastating loss.

It was a time of tremendous sadness for me as I helped plan the memorial while responding to the cards, emails, Facebook messages, and gifts from distraught viewers. It wasn't easy, but Denise would have wanted me to be a strong, dependable leader. I spoke to her husband and daughter almost daily during this time, while Kara and I monitored our children, who were still trying to comprehend the death of "Auntie Denise." I found solace in deep conversations with some of my co-workers who were really having a tough time coping with her loss. Leading our team and our state through this bereavement was my top priority and what Denise would have expected. I felt her guiding me through that awful month. Still do.

Her public memorial was held on January 29, one day before her birthday, at the Connecticut Convention Center. The state united in mourning that day, at what would be one of the last big events before Connecticut and the world changed.

In late January, we started hearing a little about coronavirus, a deadly contagion overseas, but many people weren't paying close attention. The drumbeat of stories continued through February and increased, reaching a peak in March as the threat of a deadly pandemic grew closer.

On March 20th, the governor ordered non-essential businesses to close. Gyms, restaurants, and schools were shuttered. Students came home from college, young professionals fled New York and Boston and beyond, to live with mom and dad back home in Connecticut.

Supermarkets were vastly different. There was a run on toilet paper and cleaning products. Package stores were allowed to remain open, and they experienced brisk business. Students started what we know now as remote learning. We learned about Zoom, Webex, Google Meet, and Houseparty.

**HOME, BUT NOT ALONE:** Since leaving WFSB after 28 years at the station, Dennis House has enjoyed spending quality time with his family and savoring each moment with his wife, Kara, and their two kids.

COVID-19 was a real thing, and it was killing people in Connecticut. By the end of April, more than 2,000 people had died. The number of infections increased daily, and we witnessed field hospitals being hastily assembled across the state for the overflow of patients. A little over two months after "Be Not Afraid" was played at the convention center during Denise's memorial, people were afraid, as the mammoth complex was transformed by the National Guard into a makeshift hospital.

There was the economic fallout. Layoffs, furloughs, reduction of services, shortages, and closings became a part of Connecticut life. There were stories of people who lost loved ones to COVID, then lost their livelihoods as their businesses went under, never to reopen. In some cases, people died alone, their family not allowed to visit them as coronavirus stole their last breath. The grieving had to be done at home. Funerals weren't allowed, and neither were social gatherings. There were no attractions open to take your attention away from the grim situation, no gyms to burn off steam or malls to pass the time.

There were so many unanswered questions. I helped launch a special edition of Face the State for Thursday nights with Governor Lamont and me, that became known as Thursdays with Ned and Den. On two of those broadcasts, the governor told our viewers if they had a problem with their unemployment claim, to "contact Dennis and he'll let us know about it." My inbox and voicemail blew up. I had so many people reach out to me with heartbreaking stories of jobs lost, mounting bills, and mouths to feed. I helped them navigate the bureaucracy of the state Department of Labor. The notes of thanks I received from people after their benefits were approved were a highlight of 2020.

Through these dark times, Connecticut began to shine.

We saw the state come together in unprecedented fashion. Social media was filled with messages of love for healthcare workers, first responders, restaurant employees, and those who worked at grocery stores. Those people were working extra hours on the front lines of the pandemic. We cooked more and had more family dinners. Families played games and went on hikes. Bike sales soared. Home improvement stores saw an uptick in business as people invested in fixing up their abodes. That room that was last painted in 1995? It finally got done. Free time for many was plentiful.

We embraced masks and the social distancing protocols. As spring turned to summer, we saw our state become a model of how to manage COVID-19. The experts told us the metrics were heading down, and we started to live a little. Not a complete return to normalcy, but restaurants and stores re-opened. Cities and towns allowed the expansion of outdoor dining into their streets. Our hair got longer as barbers and salons remained under quarantine.

We learned Connecticut was actually growing. Many of those people who fled big cities are still here. I have some new neighbors who bolted Brooklyn and love it here, and the real estate market in parts of Connecticut is red hot. My realtor told me of a house in West Hartford that listed for $625,000 and sold for $775,000 after a bidding war. In October, Governor Lamont told me more than 25,000 people have moved to Connecticut since the pandemic began and the moving trucks continue to come in.

I know that there is no guarantee of what the coming year will bring. Still, I'm an optimist. I know that better times are ahead.

A funny thing happened to me as the pandemic progressed. Connecticut is, of course, my home and I'm happy here, but I found myself really falling deeply in love with our great state, and my desire to see it survive and succeed intensified during this crisis. My commitment to inform, educate, and help Nutmeg Nation (did I just create that term?) grew stronger as the negative news increased. I found myself more energized as I would head into work knowing much needed to be done. I helped viewers on my day off and decided to give back a little. I picked up a stack of Dunkin' gift cards to hand to people I would see at traffic lights with signs indicating they were down on their luck. I wanted to do my part.

As the summer came to an end, like so many people in Connecticut, I lost my job too – laid off after 28 years. Fall arrived, and we learned about major cutbacks at several companies; state health officials warned about a second surge, and it came. The state was forced to roll back some of its reopening plans and saw the COVID numbers start to creep up. At the time of the writing of this article, families were planning smaller Thanksgiving dinners and winter school sports had been cancelled. There is talk that visits to Santa Claus will be through plexiglass. No sitting on the big man's lap.

If you had told me on December 1, 2019 of all the major changes that would come in 2020, I would have laughed hysterically and called you crazy.

I would have said: "Forget it. Tom Brady is not going to play for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers."

I would have been wrong.

So I know that there is no guarantee of what the coming year will bring. Still, I'm an optimist. I'm a positive vibes guy and know that better times are ahead

**HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS:** Dennis House and Kara Sundlun relax with their children, Helena and Julian.

for our state and for me. My loyalty to this state runs deep, and I believe Connecticut is a fantastic place to live. I'm confident that 2021 will be a great year. There are signs of new shops and eateries opening, a major development project just got underway next to the home of the Hartford Yard Goats, and all of our new fellow residents are spending money in our state, their new home. Two pharmaceutical companies recently announced new vaccines – both of them reported to be 95 percent effective. It's the breakthrough we've all been waiting for.

There's no question in my mind that we will overcome this unprecedented global challenge. In Connecticut, the Land of Steady Habits, we will hang tough and continue to do what we've always done – pull together, help one another, and lift each other up as we begin to glimpse the light at the end of the tunnel.

That's something we can all do, to make 2021 a better year.

That's what Denise would have done.

# Chocolate Indulgences

## Homemade truffles and specialty drinks can make any day more festive!

*By* **AMY S. WHITE**

Did you know that eating chocolate can make you happy? It's not a myth! Cacao contains a number of compounds that scientists say have mood-lifting properties. One such compound is the natural anti-depressant phenethylamine. Another is tryptophan, an amino acid that the brain uses to make serotonin, a neurotransmitter that produces feelings of happiness. And that little bit of caffeine cacao contains is always a nice pick-me-up.

So, if you require scientific justification for your chocolate cravings, now you have it. Now get into your kitchen, gather a couple of ingredients you probably already have, and conjure up your own bite-sized balls of happiness in the form of homemade chocolate truffles.

Originating in France, truffles were named for their earthy resemblance to the highly valued edible fungus that grows in forests throughout Europe. A confection named after something so rare and expensive must be difficult to make, right? Not one bit. The heart of every chocolate truffle is ganache, a fancy French term for a very simple thing – chocolate that has been melted with warmed cream. That's right, a mere two ingredients is the base for every bliss-filled bite.

But here's the best part. That ganache? You can flavor it. With just about anything. Liqueurs. Extracts. Spices. Teas. Herbs. Citrus zests. Shuffle your favorite flavors around and take those taste buds on one unique trip. Once the cream-and-chocolate mixture has been chilled to firmness, all you have to do is hand-roll it into balls and adorn each ball in your choice of coating. You can even use it to join in on this year's hottest cold-weather trend, cocoa bombs. See below!

I know you're excited to start candy-making, but before you jump to the recipe, here are a few key tips.

• Use a 2:1 ratio of chocolate to cream, that is, heavy cream and whatever chocolate makes you happy. When I'm trying to be fancy, I use "good" chocolate that is more than 60% cacao, but if the chocolate craving strikes or I need an easy hostess gift, I've been known to use regular old semi-sweet chocolate chips.

• Take care not to scald the cream. Heat it until bubbles start to form on the edges and it just begins to steam.

• Add your flavoring agent after you've taken the cream off the heat. If you're using liqueur, extract, or a ground/powdered spice (like cayenne pepper or nutmeg), just stir it in. If you are using a spice that isn't already ground (like star anise or a cinnamon stick), an herb (mint, lavender, rosemary), citrus zest, or tea leaves (a teabag or loose tea), place it in the warm cream and allow it to steep for 10 minutes, then strain it out.

• Give the ganache time to chill until it is firm enough to form into balls. Truffles are very hard to roll when they are melting messily all over your warm hands.

• Adorn your truffles with something that is a perfect pairing to their flavor – cocoa powder, chopped nuts, sprinkles, powdered sugar, and even a light sprinkle of sea salt are some of my favorites.

• Make these now! Wintertime in Connecticut is the perfect time to make truffles. If you run out of refrigerator space, use nature's "freezer" to cool and/or store them (in airtight containers, of course). I've been

known to store them inside the grill on my deck.

• Bring truffles up to room temperature before serving/sharing/devouring.

I hope by now you're convinced that making chocolate truffles is almost as easy as getting in the car and buying them. My basic recipe makes about two dozen of these melt-in-your-mouth treats – enough for you to enjoy with some left over to gift away. Share the homemade happiness! We could all use a little right now.

## BASIC CHOCOLATE TRUFFLE RECIPE

Note: Makes about two dozen; to make more or fewer, use a 2:1 ratio of chocolate to cream.

Ingredients:

**2 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips**
**1 cup heavy cream**
**Flavoring, to taste (for liqueur, about an ounce; for extracts or ground spices, about a teaspoon; for chopped fresh herbs or citrus zests, about a tablespoon; for tea, about 2 tea bags' worth – the more you add, the stronger the flavor will be)**
**Finishing touch (a small bowl's worth of chocolate sprinkles, cinnamon sugar, powdered sugar, chopped nuts, cocoa powder, or whatever you can think up!)**

**Step 1 – Make and chill the ganache:**

Warm cream in a small saucepan until bubbles start to form around the edges and it just begins to steam. Turn off heat and add desired flavoring. Allow to sit for 10 minutes to infuse; strain if needed. Meanwhile, place chocolate chips in a medium bowl. Pour warm cream over chocolate and stir until fully incorporated, smooth, and glossy. Cover with a lid or plastic wrap and allow to chill for at least two hours, until firm enough to roll into balls.

**Step 2 – Hand-roll into balls:**

Scoop chilled ganache out of the bowl with a tablespoon. Roll between your hands to form small ball-shaped truffles. Set truffles on a parchment-lined cookie sheet or baking tray and chill for another hour or so.

**Step 3 – Decorate:**

Roll chilled truffles in desired coating.

**Step 4 – Storing and serving:**

Keep truffles chilled in an airtight container. Bring to room temperature for serving.

## DIY HOT COCOA "BOMBS"

Follow the basic recipe above, but roll balls two to three times the size you would for a truffle. After chilling, roll in cocoa powder and freeze. To serve, drop one "bomb" in a mug of hot milk. Top with marshmallows or whipped cream and enjoy.

Choco

## A FEW TRUFFLE FLAVOR IDEAS TO GET YOU GOING

- Maple Toffee – Infuse cream with maple liqueur, syrup, or extract, and roll in Heath bar bits.
- Amaretto Joy – Infuse cream with almond extract or Amaretto liqueur, and roll in toasted coconut flakes OR infuse with coconut rum and roll in chopped almonds.
- Mexican Cacao – Infuse cream with cayenne pepper and roll in cinnamon sugar.
- Chocolate Orange – Infuse cream with orange liqueur or orange zest, and roll in chocolate sprinkles or cocoa powder.
- Lavender Chip – Infuse cream with edible lavender flowers (be sure to strain out), and roll in mini chocolate chips.
- Earl Grey – Infuse cream with Earl Grey tea leaves and roll in powdered sugar.
- Peppermint Dream – Infuse cream with peppermint extra, liqueur, or mint leaves, and roll in chocolate sprinkles or cocoa powder.
- Indian Kiss – Infuse cream with rosewater and roll in chopped pistachios.

*late*

Photo by **Mary Quinn**

## PERFECT PAIRINGS: HOT CHOCOLATE COCKTAILS

You may be an old hand at making hot chocolate for the kids, but how about raising the bar … to adult height? With cold, wintry days upon us, these chocolate cocktails can give your spirits a lift.

### BASIC HOT CHOCOLATE RECIPE

Ingredients:

**½ cup sugar or sugar replacement (i.e. stevia)**
**¼ cup cocoa**
**1 pinch salt**
**4 cups milk (1 qt.)**
**¾ tsp. vanilla extract**
**⅓ cup boiling water**

Directions:

Mix sugar, cocoa, and salt in medium saucepan. Stir in water. Bring to boil over medium heat, stirring constantly. Boil and stir for 2 minutes.

Add milk. Stir and heat until hot – do not boil. Remove from heat and add vanilla. Beat with whisk until foamy. Makes about six 6-ounce servings. Double the recipe if desired.

You can serve this to the kids, of course. But for an adult-only version, read on.

### MIXING IT UP

In a heavy, footed glass or Mason jar mug, measure out 1½ oz. to 2¼ oz. of your favorite liquor or liqueur, or use a combination:

**Rum (coconut, pineapple, or spiced)**
**Amaretto**
**Peppermint, butterscotch, or peach Schnapps**
**Frangelico**
**Kahlua**
**Irish cream**
**Drambuie**
**Chocolate liqueur**

Fill the glass with hot chocolate. Stir. Then, use your imagination to customize your grown-up treat:

**Top with marshmallows or whipped cream (liquor-infused or plain)**
**Drizzle with your choice of chocolate, butterscotch, or caramel syrup**
**If desired, sprinkle with cinnamon, toasted coconut, crushed peppermint candy, crushed nuts, chocolate chips, or crushed chocolate bar**

# WITH COLD, WINTRY DAYS UPON US, THESE CHOCOLATE COCKTAILS CAN GIVE YOUR SPIRITS A LIFT.

FEATURE

# Staying Connected

## Technology helps seniors keep in touch, active during pandemic

*By* **TERESA M. PELHAM**

For the first seven years of her grandson's life, Marye Gail Harrison would visit him in New Hampshire for a weekend once a month. When COVID-19 hit, she figured her visits with him would be put on hold, at least temporarily. Now several months later, her relationship with him is stronger than ever, and they "visit" with each other for an hour, five days a week.

Thanks to Zoom, Harrison and her grandson, Ron, enter a world of make-believe, complete with costumes and props. It's a part of his at-home schooling that will most definitely stay with him long after 2020 is in our rearview.

Harrison begins each Zoom call by asking, "What's going on in the neighborhood today?" Ron then comes up with a scenario involving a few of his stuffed animals, and the two take it from there. They both have plenty of dress-up clothes, hats, and masks, and the hour goes by in a flash.

"We're basically doing extemporaneous theater," says the 79-year old resident of Seabury, an active life plan community in Bloomfield. "It's a little like 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood,' a neighborhood of all of his buddies and allies, along with other nefarious characters."

The pair has been at this since his elementary school closed in mid-March, with no summer break.

"For someone my age, COVID is very scary," she says. "To have this intense experience with this child who I want to live for, and who I want to see grow up, it's blown my mind, frankly. In this time of great angst, this [visiting virtually] has been a source of great joy."

Harrison has learned quite a few computer skills that are helping her stay engaged. She learned how to set up an email listserv for an art group based at Seabury and is now its administrator. And she learned some pretty complicated computer skills in order to incorporate artwork into an online service for the Unitarian Society of Hartford.

"I thought I was really hot because I could email an attachment, I could text, and I have a Facebook account," she says. "I'm not a pro now, but give me enough time and I can figure it out."

We can officially stop making fun of senior adults' inability to use computers and handheld devices. It's estimated that more than 70 percent of seniors are online, and since that segment of the population has been especially hard-hit by the virus, it shouldn't be surprising to learn that many older Americans are not only keeping up with technology but embracing it. Many seniors are also coming up with new ways to stay busy and pursue hobbies they enjoyed before 2020.

A recent report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine states that isolated and lonely adults have a 50% higher chance of developing dementia, a 29% higher chance of coronary heart disease, and a 32% higher chance of having a stroke – and are at a higher risk of hospitalization.

Singers like Priscilla Hurley, who lives at McLean senior living community in Simsbury, have had to temporarily give up that hobby, since singing is one of the highest-risk activities people can do, in terms of spreading the coronavirus.

But Hurley belongs to the Hartford Chorale, which meets virtually every month. Along with some 25 other members, she recently played Jukebox Bingo online, and is proud to announce that she won the first game. The organization also figured out how to do virtual group singing, with members recording two sections of Handel's Messiah on their cellphones and editing them to perfection.

Hurley, who declines to give her age, says she was surprised at how much entertainment is available through your computer. She has been hearing a different opera or musical every night, streamed by the Metropolitan Opera and the Goodspeed Opera House. And she's preparing to participate in a virtual murder mystery with the Theatre Guild of Simsbury.

"Singing is going to be one of the last things to come back," she says. "Singers are spitting all over the place. But we're doing what we can to stay busy and active."

Just down the road at Duncaster in Bloomfield, Susan Aller is busy running a memoir writing club that used to

**WHAT A CARD:** During the pandemic, Marye Gail Harrison has gotten creative when it comes to spending time with her grandson. The two chat and play games, via Zoom, complete with costumes and props.

**TECH TOGETHERNESS:** Susan Aller, who lives at Duncaster in Bloomfield, enjoys a Zoom gathering with friends and family.

meet in person every Monday morning to read each other's writing around a big table and share feedback.

All but one of the 20 club members have stayed involved through email. Aller regularly provides the group with a prompt to get the creative juices flowing. She recently read a New York Times article about six-word stories. In addition to printing some of residents' own six-word stories in "Thistle," Duncaster's monthly literary magazine, we've shared some here (see box.)

Aller, 86, has worked as a professional writer for many years, having written more than a dozen books.

"I've been computer literate for a long time but I'm still learning, and as I learn, I teach other people to get up to speed," she says.

Duncaster employs two full-time IT professionals who are available to help residents with any tech-related issues.

"When you've got a computer problem, you just call Walter or Eric," Aller says. "It's worth living at Duncaster just for that."

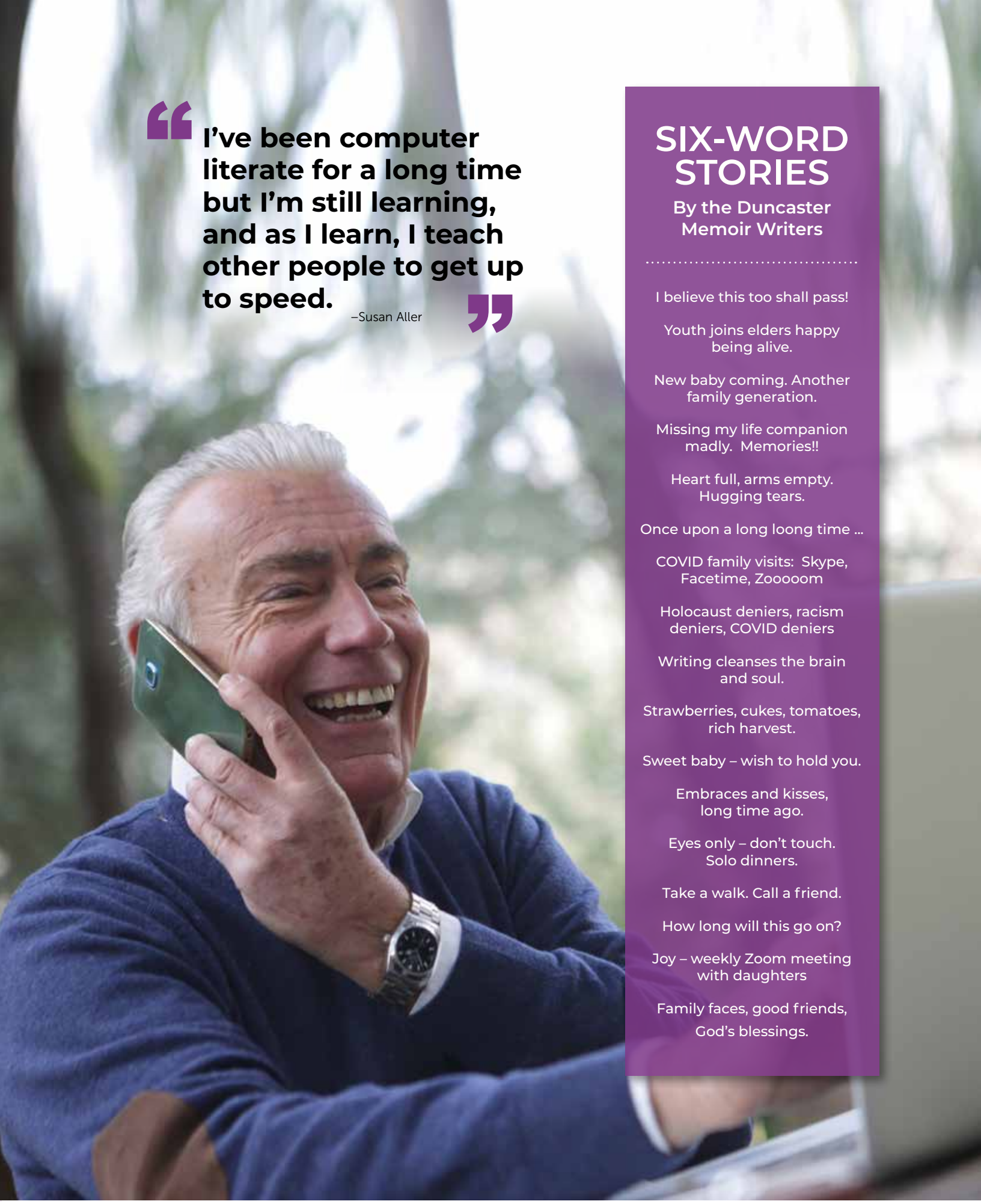
Aller also is active in a children's book writers' group in West Hartford, which meets via Zoom twice monthly, in addition to meeting with Duncaster's board of directors as a resident representative once a month.

She has family living in Paris and New York City, and she regularly catches up online with them.

"We all complain about and criticize young people with their faces buried in their phones," Aller says. "Suddenly we are that generation. We have to be."

While Aller has decided she's not a fan of telehealth appointments, she has embraced getting items from Whole Foods delivered through Amazon Prime, and she found a distant cousin during lockdown through Ancestry.com.

"Boredom sets in when you don't have a goal," she says. "The people who thought they could get through life without adapting to technology are really suffering now from the inability to connect with others. We're making lemonade out of lemons."



> **I've been computer literate for a long time but I'm still learning, and as I learn, I teach other people to get up to speed.**
>
> –Susan Aller

# SIX-WORD STORIES

## By the Duncaster Memoir Writers

I believe this too shall pass!

Youth joins elders happy being alive.

New baby coming. Another family generation.

Missing my life companion madly. Memories!!

Heart full, arms empty. Hugging tears.

Once upon a long loong time ...

COVID family visits: Skype, Facetime, Zoooooom

Holocaust deniers, racism deniers, COVID deniers

Writing cleanses the brain and soul.

Strawberries, cukes, tomatoes, rich harvest.

Sweet baby – wish to hold you.

Embraces and kisses, long time ago.

Eyes only – don't touch. Solo dinners.

Take a walk. Call a friend.

How long will this go on?

Joy – weekly Zoom meeting with daughters

Family faces, good friends, God's blessings.

# To Give & To Receive

## Gifts for your loved ones ... or a treat for yourself.

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**West Hartford**
**860-819-2949**
**float41.com**

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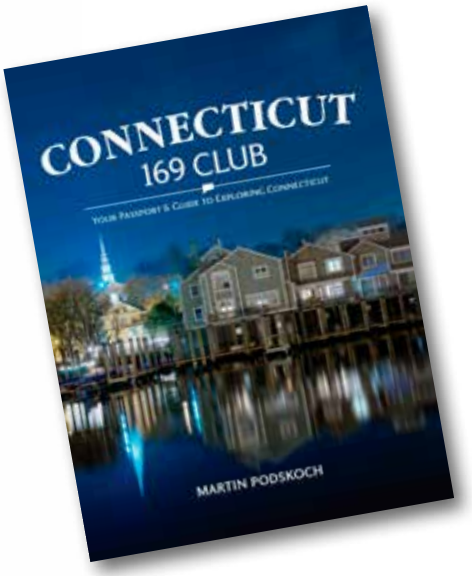


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# Safety in Numbers

## Skiing offers a socially distanced tonic for the "Pandemic Blues"

*By* **JOHN TORSIELLO**

Golf and skiing don't seem to have much in common, besides the fact that both are done in the great outdoors. But in the year of COVID-19, that similarity can make all the difference in the world.

Some Connecticut golf courses this year reported increases of 30 to 40 percent in the number of rounds played, mainly due to the fact that the sport was one of the few that could meet government and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for social distancing and is played, obviously, in an open air setting. The state's ski area operators are counting on that same combination of factors to bring people to the slopes and woods this winter, hopefully with smiles on their faces – until they need to put on their masks, that is.

"I think that the concept between golf and skiing is very similar," Ulla Jacobs, marketing director for Ski Sundown in New Hartford, says. "Snow sports are naturally experienced at a social distance. People tend to spread out and pick their own path to ski or ride the mountain. It's a very individual sport. Because of the cold temperatures, most skiers and snowboarders are used to face and hand coverings while they're outside. And with our new socially distanced lift policies, there's nothing to keep you from enjoying the fresh air and mountain views."

Brian McCloskey, guest services and marketing manager at Mount Southington Ski Area in Southington, believes people want to be able to get outside and get some fresh air, especially during the sometimes long, dark days of winter. "With skiing, you're typically wearing gloves and face coverings because of the cold temperatures – and you're usually trying keep your distance from others while you're on the hill to avoid making contact with another skier or snowboarder," he says. "We feel skiing is a great way to get outside and exercise while we are in this pandemic."

Jim Shockley, branding and equipment director at Mohawk Mountain Ski Area in Cornwall, says that "in these trying times, people need an escape," a reprieve from the never-ending pandemic news cycle. "If we can offer our customers a small sense of normalcy while they're doing something that they love – or have never done before – the impact will be felt physically and emotionally."

Winding Trails is a several hundred-acre cross-country ski area in Farmington that is a refuge for residents during the winter. Scott Brown, executive director, is confident the area can provide a safe environment for skiing. "Being outdoors on 12.5 miles

**SAFETY ON THE SLOPES:** Ski Sundown has new socially distanced lift policies, to ensure "there's nothing to keep you from enjoying the fresh air and mountain views."

**ENJOYING THE GREAT OUTDOORS:** Powder Ridge has reconfigured its indoor space and added a heated seasonal tent for extra outdoor seating and event space.

of trails is the perfect environment to enjoy nature, get exercise, and be safe," he says.

Brown notes that skis are essentially built-in social distancing barriers. "You can't get with six feet of another person. Also, with 380 acres, you can certainly find space to be alone." The potential issue that Winding Trails may have involves interaction in its ski center. People who rent skis will need to social distance and wear masks until they get outside. "We will be limiting the number of people in our rental area," he says. "And our lodge will be limited to 50 percent capacity for those looking to get a snack or warm up inside."

Ski Sundown has been collaborating with the Connecticut Ski Area Association (CTSAA) to put together a unified and comprehensive COVID-19 plan over the summer and fall months. This plan, guided by the recommendations of the state of Connecticut and the National Ski Area Association (NSAA), consists of a COVID-19 Responsibility Code and COVID-19 Operational Guidelines.

McCloskey says Mount Southington Ski Area officials worked with all ski areas in Connecticut to come up with general guidelines that "all could follow" this winter, based on state guidelines for businesses. "We put a plan in place to show the state that we are all working together to make sure we do whatever we can to keep our guests safe. The state approved our plan."

In an effort to allow for social distancing on and around the slopes, Mount Southington Ski Area is taking a number of steps, including allowing day tickets to be purchased ahead of time, with capacity limits set on a daily basis. There will also be a 50 percent capacity limit inside the area's lodges and rental areas.

Ski Sundown has developed a unified and comprehensive COVID-19 plan.

Mount Southington allows skiers to buy tickets online ahead of time to ensure they're not affected by capacity limits.

Outside, there will be empty lanes at lifts to space people riding side by side, and skis and boards "naturally give you appropriate distance in front of you and behind while waiting in line," says McCloskey. "We will ask our guests to only ride on the lifts with people they came in the same car with – and will allow those who wish to ride the lift alone to do so."

In addition to the above steps, Mount Southington's staff will be required to wear masks on property. At the start of each shift, employees will take a temperature reading and answer a questionnaire before they are able to clock in. Everyone will be required to wear safety masks inside the area's restaurant and cafeteria, and will be following guidelines set forth by the state and the CDC. As for the lodge, Mount Southington will be following state restaurant guidelines. "Even if we [as a state] progress to a higher percentage allowed inside, we will be keeping to the 50 percent capacity for this season," said McCloskey.

Laura Loffredo, director of sales and marketing for Powder Ridge Ski Area, as well as Brownstone Exploration & Discovery Park and Fire at The Ridge in Middlefield, says management and staff at those facilities "learned a lot this summer" after successfully opening them to the public.

Sean Hayes, president and chief executive officer of Powder Ridge Mountain Park & Resort, said of the resort's summer opening, "We operated at a limited capacity level with strict policies and extensive staff training. We have taken what we learned and coupled it with our industry organizations, the CTSAA's COVID response and the NSAA's "Ski Well, Be Well – Ski Area Operations Best Practices" to form comprehensive policies and procedures."

Face coverings will be required at Powder Ridge Ski Area at all times when indoors, and when physical distancing is not possible to maintain a safe distance. Lift, lodge, rental shop, and lesson capacities have been reduced to allow for physical distancing. The resort has relocated its retail store to add more socially distanced seating space in the base lodge; added heated outdoor seating, including a windscreen on its Ridgeside Tavern deck; opened its internet cafe in the restaurant to provide more seating for mid-week morning and early afternoon guests with free WiFi and charging stations; expanded its rental shop to allow for greater social distancing and improved flow; and added a heated seasonal tent for additional seating and event space.

**FUN FAMILY TIME:** This year, Winding Trails will limit the number of people in its rental area and lodge to keep everyone safe, but there's plenty of space for fresh air and enjoyment outdoors.

Jacobs says Ski Sundown will be following the state of Connecticut capacity restrictions, which at press time allowed the areas to operate at 50 percent. "To better regulate our capacity, we have moved to an advance online ticket sales system, which allows us to cap the amount of tickets we sell each day. We strongly urge our customers to purchase their tickets online in order to avoid being turned away if we have reached our daily maximum capacity."

Ski Sundown is also reducing building capacities to 50 percent, which will allow for social distancing and better flow throughout the buildings. These capacity limits will be monitored and maintained by "lodge hosts." Lift lines will be socially distanced as well; both between the rows and groups of passengers. "We are asking that if you arrived together, ride together," says Jacobs. "Otherwise, passengers will ride as two singles on opposite sides of a triple-person lift – or individually, if they feel more comfortable."

Pre-packaged food will be offered in its food courts this winter, and more outdoor eating options will be available at its barbecue area. "Our bar, The Last Chair, will be open as well, according to state of Connecticut guidelines at the time of opening," adds Jacobs. "We would like to encourage our customers to limit their time inside the lodge to quick food, changing, and bathroom breaks." He hopes people will "cooperate and be kind, in regard to sharing this limited indoor space."

Shockley explains that Mohawk Mountain Ski Area made improvements and renovations to its lodge to accommodate socially distanced seating, and opened up numerous walls to help increase air circulation. Restrooms have been reconfigured to allow for one-way traffic entrances and exits. "We have developed an app that will allow our customers to purchase their food and beverages without entering the lodge. Our app will alert the customer when their meal is ready so that they can pick up their order at an outdoor window with minimal exposure."

Jacobs says ski areas have been preparing since the beginning of the summer to get ready for opening during the pandemic. "We think we can have an awesome season, as long as everyone understands that things will be different this winter, and that we all need to cooperate and have more patience and understanding during these unusual times."

Of course, Mother Nature must cooperate for ski areas to open, but Shockley is hoping to open Mohawk Mountain the day after Thanksgiving, with other ski areas targeting the same day or a bit later. Winding Trails will need a good dumping of snow before people can hit the meadows and woods. Shockley adds whimsically but in all sincerity, "C'mon Mother Nature, we need your help this year more than ever."

Now there's an understatement.

*John Torsiello, an independent writer/editor living in Torrington and part-time in Mount Pleasant, S.C., writes on a variety of topics. While he does not downhill ski, fearing an injury that would derail his modest amateur tennis career, he often enjoys gliding through woods and meadows on a pair of cross-*country skis.

# Flying High

## Connecticut's newest aviators are earning their wings

*By* **JOEL SAMBERG**

**UP AND AWAY:** Instructor Mark Poole considers Connecticut one of aviation's most fulfilling flight paths. Photo courtesy of Mark Poole.

Call it a tale of five student pilots. Not a cautionary tale, but a spirited one.

First, there's Justin Shafner. Shafner, who grew up in Madison, is studying aerospace engineering at the University of Maryland, so on one hand it's not unusual to hear that he took flight training at the New Haven Aviation Center and received his pilot certification in September. On the other, he had two intriguing motivations beyond simply getting from one place to another. The first was to observe the world from an exclusive perspective, the second to enjoy the sensation of manipulating natural forces.

"I would much rather spend my free time exploring new places and watching the sun set from above the earth," says the new pilot. "And it's an incredible feeling to make decisions that impact how your airplane moves through the sky."

Then there's Glenn Buonanducci. When Glenn was in third grade, he saw Tom Cruise sail through the atmosphere in "Top Gun." A few years later, he took his first airplane flight and was absorbed with how the silver ship rose above the clouds with deceptive ease. When he was 13, he joined the Civil Air Patrol and flew in a KC-10 tanker aircraft that refueled F-16 fighter jets in flight. He was hooked. It's no wonder that the 42-year-old law enforcement officer from East Windsor is one of Connecticut's most active civilian aviators.

"When I turned 30, my wife gave me a gift certificate for a flight lesson," Buonanducci recalls. "For one reason or another, it stayed in a drawer. When I turned 40, she asked me what I wanted for my birthday. Something compelled me to ask where I had hidden that certificate." A few months later, he enrolled as a student pilot at the Premier Flight Center in Hartford.

Next is a 17-year-old high school student from Portland named Bryce Wiekrykas. For Wiekrykas, aviation has been a passion throughout his entire childhood, traced to the age of seven,

**THANKFUL:** For Glenn Buonanducci, flying is a gift that began with a birthday present. Photo courtesy of Glenn Buonanducci

when he received Microsoft's Flight Simulator X as a Christmas gift and could hardly tear himself away from the console. The following year, when he was eight, he took it upon himself to dress up as an airline pilot for a family vacation flight to South Dakota. The crew, captivated and amused, took him to meet the pilot and quizzed him on the Airbus A319 (which they assumed he'd

know all about).

"They were impressed," Wiekrykas recalls proudly. "My passion led me to begin flight training at the Meriden Aviation Center. I plan to apply to military academies, as well as to private aviation companies, and hope to become a military or commercial pilot."

Up next, 37-year-old West Hartford resident Eric Buhrendorf, who says he grew up listening to stories about his grandfather, a Navy pilot who, after World War II, flew his own Cessna all over New England to run his construction company. Buhrendorf's father had also wanted to fly, though economic conditions prevented that from happening. But Buhrendorf, who founded a successful IT support company, was able to take lessons at the former American Flight Academy in Hartford and earn his certificate. "I haven't looked back since," he says. "I consider flying an awe-inspiring privilege."

Finally, there's dermatologic and Mohs surgeon Jim Whalen, who lives in Avon, works at the Cromwell practice he co-founded, and trains to be a pilot at Simsbury Airport. For him, it's all about pragmatism. With vacation property in Delaware, the doctor realizes that being able to fly there in his own plane would have significant benefits over other methods of transportation.

"I like the practical nature of being able to go places," he says, acknowledging that for him, flying is more a serious endeavor than an exuberant pastime. "As a pilot, you have to be entirely focused on all the things to do both in and out of the cockpit."

Still, Dr. Whalen, who took his first private plane flight at Hartford-Brainard Airport in 2019, always thought flying would be an interesting hobby, and looks forward to achieving his pilot's certificate.

It can be expensive, which may be one reason why, compared to the total population, there are relatively few certified pilots in the country (not much more than half a million). All told, it can cost between $6,500 and $12,000, depending on the school, the type of certificate sought, and the length of time spent training. And it can take between several months and several years to achieve certification, depending on a student's schedule and financial resources.

"Students who plan two or three lessons per week can complete their training in a few months," says Phillip Smith, owner of Learn 2 Fly CT of North Windham and Hartford. "Students who schedule one lesson per week, or every other week, can expect to complete their training in a year or more."

All certified pilots have to abide by regulations and requirements set forth by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which are consistent throughout the country. But according to some flight instructors in the state, Connecticut happens to be one of the most worthwhile places to get involved in aviation.

**LIVING THE DREAM:** Phillip Smith tells anyone who wants to fly that it's an entirely achievable pursuit. Photo courtesy of Phillip Smith

"The basics are the same no matter where you learn, but we are in an especially good area with different kinds of topography and elevations, proximity to major waterways, islands off the coast, and busy airspace not far from JFK, LaGuardia, and Newark Liberty," says Mark Poole of Meriden Aviation Center, which has a sister location in East Haven (New Haven Aviation Center). "Connecticut is a great place to learn, to take off from, and to return to."

John Lampson, a trainer at Professional Instrument Courses (PIC) in Old Saybrook and a flight instructor at the Premier Flight Center in Hartford, is quick to add that weather often has the final say when it comes to training.

"All areas of the country have changeable and sometimes treacherous weather," he says. "But we have Mark Twain's old saying to contend with: If you don't like the weather in New England, wait a minute! Temperature extremes can affect flight performance, as can icing and turbulence. There are many cancelled training days in Connecticut due to weather. But there's a big benefit, too," he notes. "Our students become more sensitive and conscious of weather and its impact on flying, and the value of that cannot be underestimated."

**NEW HORIZONS: Dr.** Jim Whalen has been training to become a pilot. His dream is to fly his own plane to destinations south, and back again, whenever travel opportunities present themselves. Photo by **Pamela Whalen**

Pilot certificates fall into three categories: sport, recreational, and private. (The phrase 'pilot's license' is commonly used, but what pilots receive after training and testing is a certificate, not an actual license.)

The private pilot certificate seems to be the most sought after, though the sport pilot certificate is extremely attractive because it is the least expensive to obtain, though limited to light-sport aircraft (LSA) and a single passenger. Private pilot trainees must also receive a medical certificate from the FAA.

There are several additional rules and regulations – some age-related, others that concern nighttime versus daytime flying – all of which are explained during training. Student pilots must complete a multiple-choice exam on the FAA's website, which requires a separate charge (currently $150) and has to be taken at an FAA-authorized testing center. One of the final steps is a test commonly known as a checkride, which consists of both an oral exam and a test flight. This, too has a separate fee (generally about $400) which varies from school to school.

Pilot certificates do not expire, though pilots must maintain what's called flight currency if they intend to fly with passengers. Here, too, different rules apply for different situations.

Sound a bit complex? It certainly can be. But on the other hand, those who have the compulsion to learn to fly never let complexity get in the way. And that includes the technical elements involved. Anyone who has ever seen a cockpit or a movie about pilots and air traffic controllers knows there are many mechanical factors with which pilots must be familiar.

"I am not an expert in math and science," says Phillip Smith. "At Learn 2 Fly, we can go deep into the intricacies of aeronautics, but most students don't require that much detail, particularly since we have some easily-understood formulas that enable anyone to learn to fly safely and with complete confidence."

Mark Poole of Meriden Aviation Center and John Lampson of PIC agree.

"Yes, there are a number of computations you need to make as a pilot," Poole says. "But if you have the passion, you'll figure it out. If you love to fly but don't cherish arithmetic, you'll learn that knowing how to do calculations can be a lifesaver."

"At our school," says Lampson, "we have some pretty cool charts and graphs that make the math and science much easier to understand than many people may think."

"Getting my certificate was one of the more challenging things I've done in my life," affirms Buonanducci. "It's not something you get 'half' into. Between the instruction and the physical flying, you must be completely focused."

Connecticut pilots are part of a rich history of aviation in the state. "Plan to License Airships and Men" was the headline in the Washington Herald in February 1911. It concerned the nation's first law governing pilots. In fact, that Connecticut statute, signed by Governor Simeon Baldwin, was also the world's first aviation law, and it quickly became the model for similar directives in other states. Twenty-six years later, Connecticut became the first state in the country

**BIRD'S EYE VIEW:** Instructor Phillip Smith and his student pilot get a unique perspective on the Connecticut countryside. Photo courtesy of Phillip Smith

to institute a separate department to handle all aviation matters.

There are more than a dozen flight schools in Connecticut, which makes it easy for anyone who is interested to find a place to learn. Experts caution, however, that students should make an effort to decide which school is right for them.

"First impressions are key," says Wiekrykas. "For me, the first thing I looked for was a professional-looking website, because the image a flight school cultivates is indicative not only of how well they maintain their aircraft, but also how seriously they approach their training."

"Aircraft availability was at the top of my list," offers Buonanducci. "Students should also determine if the available equipment is in excellent condition. Not good condition – excellent condition."

It may also be worth checking out whether or not a school offers full or partial scholarships. Some do.

It's rare for new pilots to have their own airplanes. Depending on a craft's age, size and condition, prices can range between $18,000 and $275,000 – and that's before storage fees, fuel, and other expenses.

"Sure, I'd like to own my own one day, but the decision comes down to cost," admits Justin Shafner, who quickly adds a caveat: "In my opinion, however, the freedom associated with having your own airplane is enough to outweigh the cost differential between private and commercial air travel."

Dr. Whalen made some ownership-related moves even while still training. His flight school was leasing a 2002 plane from a person who decided to sell it. Dr. Whalen and two associates co-purchased the craft and loaned it to the school to keep it in the fleet! "Owning one of my very own one day is still part of my long-range planning," he says.

"It's true that it's an expensive hobby," says Buonanducci. He acknowledges that he will most likely seek out a flying club that has a pool of aircraft. "Still, it would be worth every penny, because the feeling of freedom is priceless."

*In his work as an author and journalist, Joel Samberg has written about many human endeavors and has profiled professionals in such fields as psychology, music, theater, higher education, and neuroscience.*

## CONNECTICUT FLIGHT SCHOOLS:

**Arrow Aviation**, Danbury, arrowaviationllc.com, 203-744-5010

**ATP Flight School**, Hartford, atpflightschool.com, 904-595-7950

**Coastal Air Inc.**, Groton, flycoastalair.com, 860-445-7315

**Danbury Flight Training**, Danbury, danburyflight.com, 203-565-6994

**Fly G Force**, Hartford, facebook.com/fly=gforce-169946866521803, 860-278-7961

**Future Flyers of Connecticut**, Simsbury, futureflyersct.com, 860-819-3717

**Interstate Aviation**, Plainville, interstateaviation.com, (860) 747-5519, 203-266-2089

**Learn 2 Fly CT, North Windham & Hartford**, learn2flyct.com, 860-849-2226

**Meriden Aviation Center**, Meriden, meridenaviationcenter.com, 203-648-4870

**New Haven Aviation Center**, East Haven, HVNAC.com, 203-815-9542

**Northeast Helicopters Flight Services**, Ellington, northeasthelicopters.com, 866-634-3567

**Premier Flight Center**, Hartford, premierflightct.com, 860-724-2245

**Robinson Aviation**, East Haven, robinsonaviation.com, 203-467-9555

**Three Wing Aviation Group**, Stratford, threewing.com, 203-375-5795

**LIVING THE DREAM:** From a toy simulator to real-life training, Bryce Wiekrykas is on an upward path. Photo by Faith Lee

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**ELEGANT EFFICIENCY:** This home office, designed by Sharon McCormick, proves that work does not have to equal clutter. Photo by **Caldwell Photography**

# There's No Place Like Home … to Work

## Tips and tricks on how to create a stylish and functional home office

*By* **SARAH LEMIRE**

While cubicles and watercooler gossip aren't a thing of the past just yet, 2020 definitely redefined what it means to "go to work." For many people, the new normal no longer involves heading to the office in bumper-to-bumper traffic and grabbing coffee from the drive-thru window.

Instead, it's a battle for internet bandwidth and extra space at the kitchen table.

Since the pandemic set in earlier this year, a significant number of employees have transitioned to working either part-time or full-time from home. And, according to one study, many of them have little to no interest in returning once the pandemic is over.

A survey conducted by Global Workplace Analytics, a research and consulting firm, finds that nearly half of respondents would look for another job if their employer didn't allow them to continue working remotely at least some, if not all, of the time.

"Employers are struggling with some tough decisions about the future of remote work right now, and employees are eager for answers," says Kate Lister, president of Global Workplace Analytics. "In the face of so much ambiguity, both are feeling the need for a vision of how they will be working in the future."

Regardless of the outcome, one thing is certain; home offices are here to stay – and creating one that's functional, practical, and stylish is essential to optimizing workflow. It can also make the difference between working from home, and being home, feeling overwhelmed with work.

## SPACE, THE FINAL FRONTIER

"I'm passionate about creating home offices that work for people who think it's going to be long term," says Sharon McCormick, an interior designer and owner of Sharon McCormick Design, based in Glastonbury. "What I'm doing now for some of my clients is looking for space that hasn't been utilized enough in their house."

According to McCormick, that space can be found in any number of places, including spare bedrooms, closets, and even under stairs. "That's a big, empty space," she says. "So, you can put a door on it and make an office out of it."

But not everyone has space to spare – including McCormick, who lives in an apartment and, due to COVID-19, transitioned from an office to working out of her home.

To make it work, she moved a desk into her living room and incorporated it into her living space. She also got creative, repurposing items she already owned for more storage. "You can use furniture to put your supplies in," she says. "You can convert a dresser for things that you don't need every day, like paper."

McCormick says that part of converting a portion of her home into a workspace was viewing things from a new perspective. "You have to figure out how you can do things differently in this space you have. If you're an outsider looking in, what's redundant? How you can streamline it? How you could get things online?"

Ideas include scanning receipts, then tossing them; using your TV as a computer monitor, and ridding kitchen cabinets of unused pans and dishes to clear space for items you use more often.

"It's really important to understand yourself and spend some time looking at what you do – how many times you have to get a file, what you touch, and that will tell you what you need on a daily basis."

Finally, to help avoid a tangled nest of cords cluttering up your space, McCormick recommends investing in an under-desk surge suppressor with multiple outlets and USB ports to bundle them together. Tucked up underneath a desk or dining room table, they're much less of a visual and physical nuisance.

"It's much neater and it doesn't look so office-y. One cord is all you need."

**SWEET SPOT:** Be sure to make your home office a space you enjoy working in and look forward to going to. Add things you love. Photo courtesy of **Jennifer Moreau**

**APPOINTING YOUR CABINET:** This office designed by Sharon McCormick shows that the storage solutions and finishes that work in a kitchen are also highly functional and beautiful in a home office. Photo courtesy of **Urso Photography**

## DON'T JUST LIKE IT, LOVE IT

Whether your home office is a dedicated space or carved-out corner of the family room, it's essential that it's a space you enjoy working in, and look forward to going to, as opposed to feeling like you're spending 40 hours a week in a work dungeon.

"Now, more than ever, it's extremely important to love it," says Jennifer Moreau, an interior designer and owner of Moreau Designs in Granby.

"People are realizing, after spending some time at home, how the space makes them feel and that they need to take action. It really makes you realize that you are affected by your environment."

Moreau, who emphasizes wellness and healthful living in her designs, says that she incorporates colors that help her clients feel happy, and surrounds them with biophilic – or natural – elements. "I believe it makes you calmer and makes more of an environment for you," she says. "I try to make your home feel good."

Moreau put her philosophy into practice when she converted an extra bedroom into a work studio for her interior design firm.

Wanting a space that was both inspiring and functional, she started by ripping out the old carpeting. The hardwood she found beneath it was in rough shape, so she painted a design on it. Then, she enlisted her daughter, a graphic designer, to paint a mural on the wall.

Moreau added other functional elements to the room like a worktable, bookshelves, and good lighting.

"It's a multi-use space, but it's great to be able to work there and feel like, at any given time, if I go off on a tangent, I can do it. I can create. It was really important to me have something that was vibrant, light, and bright."

When putting together a home office, Moreau says that even if you're working on a budget, try and pick out one or two items that are "must haves," whether they be functional or meaningful.

"If you buy something cheap, or something to just make do, you're never going to really, truly love it and you'll probably end up replacing it. So, I would take the risk and I would say, 'This is the non-negotiable piece that I have to have for this space.'"

## BACKGROUND CHECK

It wasn't that long ago that people congregated in boardrooms for discussions and meetings. But much like wearing makeup and dress clothes, in-person gatherings have been kicked to the curb in favor of Zoom and Teams calls.

In this brave, new, virtual world, background is king. And while many people are opting to superimpose themselves in front palatial estates and nature retreats, there's no substitute for actually having a virtual-worthy background of your very own.

Jonathan Gordon, lead designer and owner of Design by

the Jonathans, LLC, suggests doing some strategic decorating to help create an aesthetically pleasing backdrop, starting with plants.

"You have to stage a little vignette. A small table or bookshelf, maybe put a few books on it … but add some greenery; the greenery makes it feel like an enjoyable background and like it's an intentional space, even if it's in a high-traffic area, like a dining room. People don't see what you see. They're looking at your face and they're looking behind you."

He suggests concentrating on that viewable space by mindfully putting furniture, books, art and other visually pleasing items within the line of sight.

"It doesn't have to be completely balanced," he says. "You can put pieces in one area and a couple of pieces in another area, but you don't want to see wires and you don't want to see general mess. You want to keep it curated."

He also says that a home office should reflect your personal taste.

"Do you want it light and bright? Do you want it a little bit darker or more moody? You can express parts of your own character, your own design, look, and feel, Gordon says. "Somebody may want glossy white furniture; somebody else may want dark oak paneling. It just depends on personal aesthetic."

Beyond appearance, Gordon says it's important to create a home office around the tools that you use every day, and what your primary needs are. "The bare bones is really designing it around your electronics," he says.

Lighting is also critical – whether it's overhead, recessed, or lamp lighting. Give consideration to your window treatments as well. "You don't want to get glare on the screen."

Of all the items in your office, the chair might just be the most crucial. "Comfort is key. A good chair is so important for a comfortable office. It's a matter of health." It might be expensive, but according to Gordon, a good chair is worth

**LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER:** Jennifer Moreau uses local artisanal goods in the rooms she creates for clients, as well as customized pieces that she designs herself. For Moreau's own home office, her daughter Madison created a mural that includes symbols that are special to her mom – a koi fish swimming downstream (which represents overcoming obstacles), mountains with the sun rising (representing abundance and Moreau's travels in Peru), and feathers (a nod to her father's love of eagles). Photo by **Todd Fairchild**

the investment to help preserve your back, posture and how you feel overall.

If you're on a budget, he recommends doing a second-hand or pre-owned office furniture search. With many companies closing down their physical offices, good deals can be had on everything from chairs and desks to tables and bookcases.

"You may find some really good things," he says, "but also understand that they have to fit in your house."

If you're unsure of how to design your office, spend some time looking at Pinterest, Houzz, Instagram, and other sites to find ideas and inspiration. Sometimes, however, it's best to leave it up to the experts. "If it's a complex space or needs a complex solution," he says, "you probably need a designer."

## A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

Part of creating an ideal work-from-home space is mapping out a plan to help optimize storage and reduce clutter.

"People tend to overcomplicate the amount of materials they need to run a functional office," says Kristin Vander Wiede, owner of Livable Solutions, a professional organizing business located in Guilford.

"Most need the basics: a printer, stapler, paperclips, Post-it notes, pens, pencils, a notepad, and file folders. In sum, keep it simple. No desk decorations, paper weights, or trendy office organization products."

To keep clutter under control, Vander Wiede recommends going digital with paperwork and calendars, and foregoing common paper traps.

"Avoid flat trays that tend to accumulate items all around your surface areas in an office," she says.

"Categorize paper into action folders or file it away. If you need more room, maximize your vertical space with a functional bookshelf or closet area, with shelving to store paperwork and supplies off the surfaces."

Some of the most common mistakes Vander Wiede sees clients making are trying to work in a central area of the home, setting up an office in a place they don't enjoy working in, and using non-functional furniture.

"Many of my clients work with furniture pieces they have inherited or that were bought for a different purpose. With a renewed need to have functional spaces in our homes, it's important to make sure your furniture is functional as well," she says.

"Does your desk have drawers for supplies? Do you have enough room for your computer and space to write? Are your walls covered with furniture or loose bins holding items that can be consolidated into one tall bookshelf? Really focus on what you want your ideal workspace to look like, and don't be afraid to invest in the right pieces you need to pull it together."

Working from home with children can be especially difficult and presents its own, unique set of challenges.

"As a parent working from home with two kids 2 and 7 years old, there is no greater challenge than the constant interruptions and keeping them occupied. I think most parents are having a difficult time staying focused long enough to be productive," she says.

To help, Vander Wiede suggests keeping storage systems simple and purging old toys, clothes, and other items that can pile up and get in the way.

If possible, create a separate workspace for children, free from toys and distractions – or set up a mobile workspace by using portable containers and supplies that can be put away at the end of the day.

The final step in creating the ideal home office space is implementing good practices.

"It's all about systems," says Leslie Raycraft, owner of POSH Organizing in West Hartford.

"Having a system just saves you all the time of paper shuffling. You're like, 'I wrote it down somewhere' or 'I know I got an email,' then you're shuffling through paper or your emails looking for that one particular thing and you waste so much time."

To combat time lost trying to locate information, Raycraft recommends creating action files for paperwork and emails so you know where to look for quick access.

"A filing system is huge because, like anything, if you don't have a system for the paper, it's just going to pile up."

According to Raycraft there's not one, single, right way to set it up. Instead, it should be tailored to meet the individual needs of the person.

"Some people need to have it front and center right on the desk, others are fine to hide it," she says, adding that what matters isn't necessarily where you put things, but rather that you're able to easily find them when you need them.

Raycraft notes that with any workspace, it's essential to set limits.

"If you're working from home, act like you're going to work. Get dressed, take a shower, work out before you start your day, do your routine, 'go to work,' but also take breaks," she advises.

"We've brought our job into our home and it can be seamless. So, whenever your normal end-of-day time is, stop. People have to learn to set boundaries and have a hard stop."

*Sarah Lemire is a journalist, columnist and author whose new humor book, "I Could Have Been a Hand Model," is coming out this spring. After a recent writing stint in New York City, she is now once again happily working out of her home office and hoarding leftover Halloween candy.*

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# Beans, Birds and Business Savvy

## In the midst of a pandemic, a family with Connecticut ties continues its quest to make the world a better place

*By* **CAROL LATTER**

The Inman family has never been known for backing away from risk, especially in support of a good cause. And not just any cause – one designed to reboot the environment, economy, and wildlife habitat in nation after nation.

Over the last 25 years, Crist and Amie Inman have worn a variety of hats: consultants to national governments and private business investors … designers and managers of hotel, resort, and lodge projects … and operators of their own eco-businesses – all built around a singular concept that was the focus of Crist's mid-1990s doctoral dissertation at Cornell.

His research demonstrated that conservation efforts could be significantly broadened if the private sector could be persuaded to invest in eco-friendly development, complementing what governments and philanthropies were already doing to preserve and protect the environment. "Sustainable development" has become something of a buzzword since then, but Crist's conceptualization of "entrepreneurial conservation" was unusual at the time, he says.

Once put into practice, this concept would not only benefit the environment, as it turned out, but help to create a novel business ecosystem aiding everyone from local farmers and artisans to the hospitality industry.

It all began when Crist was invited to Costa Rica in 1995 to give a presentation on his big idea. "And before Amie and I came back home to Ithaca, New York, I had a verbal offer that if I wanted to spend a year or so down in Costa Rica, there was going to be a real concerted effort on the part of the new president to make tourism part of his sustainable development plan. I accepted the offer."

The couple joined Costa Rica's tourism industry as it built from virtually nothing to become one of the country's most important economic drivers. They have also helped replicate these entrepreneurial conservation efforts in such far-flung locations as India and Croatia.

**GREAT DAY FOR A STROLL:** Crist, Amie, Seth, and Milo taking a walk in one of their favorite wooded areas near their home in Costa Rica. Photo by **Diana Terán Victory**

Now, after years of traveling the globe to put their game-changing ideas into jaw-dropping practice, Crist and Amie have teamed up with their oldest son Seth, 28, to launch a coffee business called Organikos. And, of course, it's not just any coffee – it's coffee with a mission, designed to help reinvigorate ecosystems in their adopted country of Costa Rica.

The Organikos coffee brand officially debuted on Thanksgiving weekend, 2019 as the centerpiece of a plan by Amie and Crist to feature locally sourced products in gift shops that they conceptualized, created, and continue to run at two Marriott luxury resorts in Costa Rica.

Both the coffee and distinctive handmade wares at their "Authentica" branded shops proved hugely popular through March of this year, giving the Inmans the "proof of concept" they were looking for.

Now the Organikos brand has come to America.

### THE CONNECTICUT CONNECTION

Seth – who was just four years old when his parents took him and his younger brother Milo to live in Costa Rica, and who has lived and worked in several countries since then – has been active in La Paz Group, his family's global hospitality business, since he was quite young.

He is currently based in New Haven while wrapping up his graduate degree at the Yale School of the Environment, having previously completed his Bachelor's degree in history at Cornell while working at the Lab of Ornithology.

**GROWING GREEN:** Coffee at Villa Triunfo is harvested between November and February. This estate, in Costa Rica's West Valley growing region, has pioneered sustainable growing methods under the shade of high-altitude forest canopy. Photo courtesy of Villa Triunfo

The original concept for Organikos stemmed from projects he became involved in while his parents were immersed in ecotourism development projects in countries around the world. Seth had been interested in – and had laid the groundwork for – sustainable coffee production in South America, and particularly Costa Rica, through his work there over a number of years. This included encouraging local growers to switch to shade-grown coffee on farms where the natural environment had been eroded by a more aggressive farming approach. The shade-grown model allows coffee plants and birds to happily co-exist.

After nearly a decade developing lodges in India, Amie, a self-professed "Air Force brat" who was born in Alaska, and Crist, who grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, decided to return home to Costa Rica in 2019. Knowing that Seth still needed to finish his studies at Yale, they offered to help keep the wheels turning on his planned coffee venture by procuring the beans and arranging to have them roasted and packaged while they waited for him to return. After landing the contract with the Marriott properties, the couple offered to showcase

**LOVE TAKES FLIGHT:** Amie and Crist met in September 1983 in the TWA terminal of New York's JFK Airport, where they were both waiting to board a flight to Athens, Greece. They have been traveling together ever since. Photo by **Diana Terán Victory**.

**BRINGING IT STATESIDE:** Seth Inman's vision for Organikos, a company offering the highest quality shade-grown Costa Rican coffee, has come to fruition. Organikos coffee is now available in the United States. Photo by **Stan Godlewski**

**LIQUID MEMORIES:** Organikos showcases "taste of place" from several of Costa Rica's outstanding individual coffee estates, and from several of its prize-winning regions. Photo by **Alejandro Moreno Bianchi**

Organikos coffee in their newly minted Authentica gift shops, where it practically flew off the shelves.

Over this past summer and fall, as COVID-19 outbreaks have ebbed and flowed in every American state and around the world, Seth has been working part time with Amie and Crist to get the U.S. division of Organikos off the ground. In between classes at Yale, he has pitched in on everything from helping to create the package labels and website (organikos.com) to strategizing about the best way to get the word out to potential customers.

So far, most marketing has been through word of mouth – to relatives, friends, colleagues and, most recently, former guests at some of the hospitality destinations they've designed or managed around the world.

Its four best-selling varieties are currently available in the U.S., and next year, the family hopes to add four or five more. Seth says he and his folks have been careful to set a fair price point, to ensure people receive a high-quality product at a reasonable price. "We want our customers to know that they are not paying 'extra' for the environmental aspect," he says.

The response has been very promising so far, with many repeat customers. "Things are going well," says Amie. "People seem to love it."

## NOT YOUR AVERAGE COFFEE

So just what is it that makes Organikos so special?

It's a good question, with a complex answer.

Seth says first off, all of the profits are earmarked for investment in bird habitat regeneration, which is explained on the Organikos website and illustrated through its social media. "This is what we mean by 100% Forward, the commitment we make on our labels," he says. The first investment they have made is rehabilitating an organic coffee farm on land the family purchased in 1998. Coffee sales from the first year funded planting shade trees in 2020, with coffee seedlings to follow in 2021.

Second, Organikos is made from the highest quality beans, roasted to preserve their smooth, distinctive flavors. The raw or "green" beans, grown by Costa Rican farmers and transported to the U.S. by ship, are processed by a third-party, certified organic roaster in North Carolina. The beans are then placed in packages that contain virtually no plastic and are sent directly to customers, using shipping labels created by Seth and his parents in response to orders through their website. All of this helps keep the company's environmental footprint small.

Third, for some buyers, Organikos may be a sentimental choice of coffee brands, bringing back fond memories of their visits to Costa Rica – especially now, when such exotic vacations are difficult or impossible. For tourists who enjoyed the Inmans' coffee while in Costa Rica and hoped to buy more once they got home, the virtual Organikos storefront allows them to do just that.

Fourth, as Organikos continues to grow, the family hopes the company will also help provide a much-needed boost to Costa Rica's economy and its people, who depend to a huge degree on both coffee sales and international tourism to make a living. In recent years, several million tourists have visited from around the world, patronizing the hospitality industry, touring the lush and scenic countryside, and taking tours of local coffee farms. While there, many people sample the coffee and take some home, either for themselves or as gifts for friends and family, along with local handicrafts and other goods. In 2019, tourists purchased roughly 1 million bags of coffee on their way out of the country – an important source of funds for both the local growers and the proprietors of shops where the coffee is sold.

Not only that, but when people give it as a gift, "that has a really important impact on exposing others to the fact that Costa Rica produces good coffee. Tourists will also share the story from their vacation. And so coffee becomes a taste-of-place ambassador for Costa Rica as a place to visit," Crist says.

## FULL STEAM AHEAD

Some people might think twice before launching an international business venture in the midst of a global pandemic. For Crist and Amie, it was something of a no-brainer. In fact, not only has the devastating impact of COVID-19 over past nine months failed to stop these entrepreneurs in their tracks – it has actually accelerated their timeline.

The original plan was to begin selling Organikos coffee online in 2021, after plenty of exposure from its sales in Costa Rica. But then the unexpected happened.

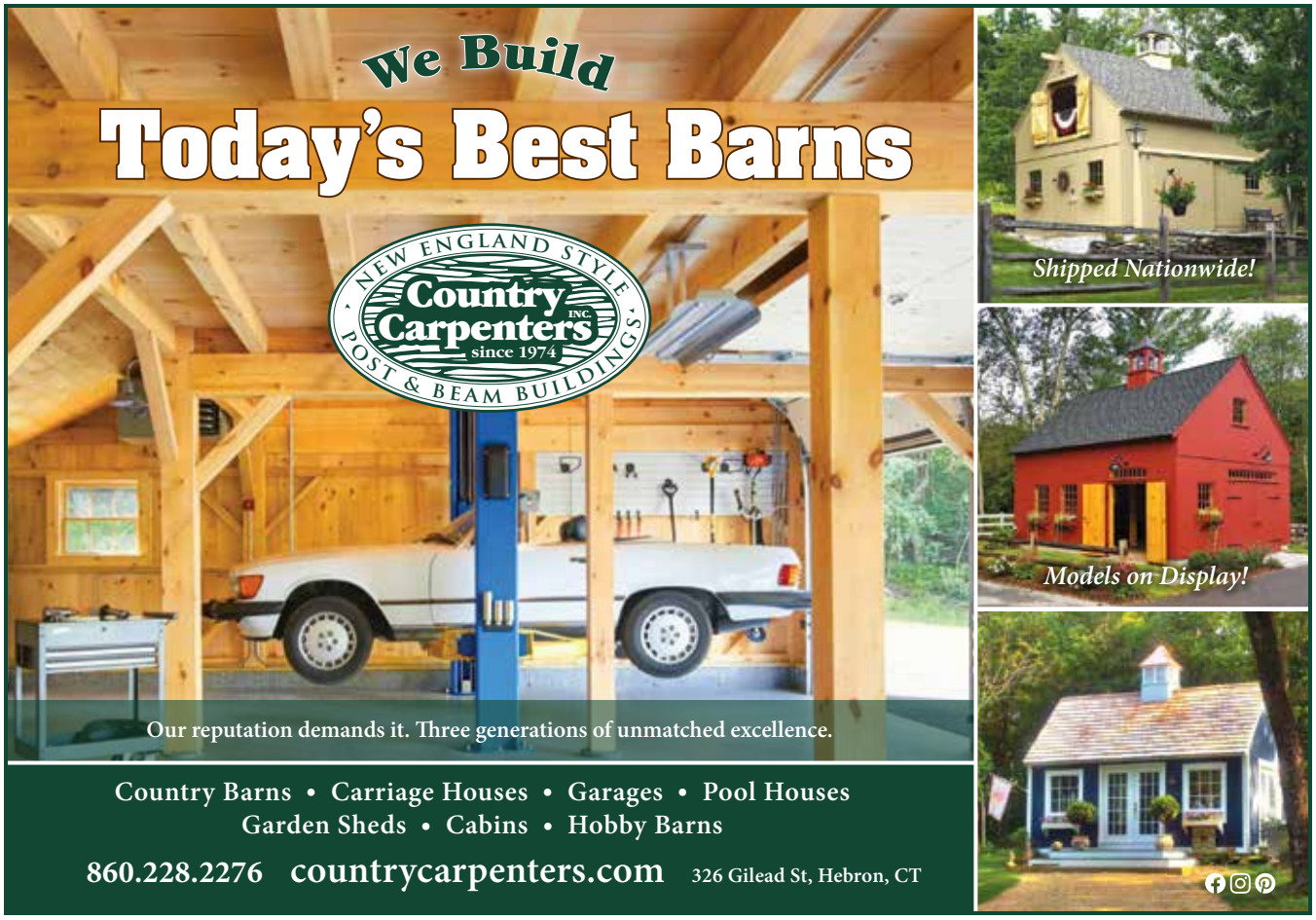
"Our two new shops were fully open after renovations last November," Crist recalls. "And by the end of February 2020, they were doing very well. We were able to say to ourselves, 'We were right to do what we did – basically leaving everything we've done before in the hotel development and management field behind for now, and focusing everything

**THE GENUINE ARTICLES:** The Authentica shops at Marriott Hacienda Belen and at Marriott Los Suenos offer locally made artisan handicrafts, including Ceiba Design Collective's kitchen utensils made from recycled fine woods, and Wagat Upcycling Lab's fancifully conceived re-use of plastic waste. Photos by **Alejandro Moreno Bianchi**

The arrival of the global pandemic in early March 2020, and the closure of Costa Rica's airport soon after, brought international tourism – and the accompanying coffee sales – to a screeching halt. Crist says coffee revenues "went to zero" after the borders closed. Next year, visitor numbers are expected to be much lower than 2019's totals, and coffee sales will track that visitation. Making Organikos available online to American buyers will help to keep the coffee growers afloat while also benefiting environmental tourism and conservation – all causes dear to the Inmans' hearts.

on this new concept called Authentica, which we decided upon because we knew that other hotels in Costa Rica would want to do the same thing that these two Marriotts did. There's a lot of talk about wanting to return to authenticity."

On February 29, the family celebrated Amie's "leap year" birthday. "That was the last day of the old world," says Crist. "Starting in March, everything changed. It would be very easy to tell a sad story about starting up a new business and



**WOODEN YOU LIKE IT:** Ceiba Design Collective's spice bowls and utensils (their coffee scoop, seen with Organikos coffee in the photo above, is a best seller) are treated with organic beeswax to provide a food-safe finish that allows the materials to breathe and age naturally. Photo by **Alejandro Moreno Bianchi**

then getting shut down by the pandemic, but I honestly don't feel that way."

For the next few months, he says, "we were basically forced to just slow down to practically a standstill and reflect. We could have said, 'Well, I guess we need to back out of this [retail operation] now because tourism is not only shut down for most of this year, but it's going to continue at a slow pace next year.' Instead, we decided to re-up our commitment to what we were doing."

By July, Amie recalls, "we realized that one of the missed opportunities this year is not just our reduced sales, but the fact that Costa Rica won't sell anywhere near a million bags of coffee this year. And so we thought, 'What can we do? Not just for our own business, but for all those coffee farmers we have contracts with?' And we thought, 'Let's just experiment. Let's see if we can offer our coffee over the internet and make even a small dent in the lost sales for this year.' That was the impetus for this idea."

With travel restrictions making it difficult for Seth to travel back to Costa Rica, and realizing that he still had another semester to complete before graduation, "we asked him what he thought about spending some of his summer getting a head start on what might be the next most logical step for the coffee business."

Amie says she and Crist have always left the door open for Seth to change his mind about running Organikos after graduating from Yale – they would operate the business if he didn't want to. But Seth has been eager to move forward.

While his plans after his December graduation are not yet finalized, Seth says there may be an advantage for him to remain in Connecticut and oversee the U.S. operations. His brother Milo, meanwhile, is happily running an organic farm in Ithaca. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Crist jokes.

No matter what happens, it's safe to say that for the Inman family, another unusual but inevitably successful venture is just around the corner.

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

# The Price of Happiness

The problem starts in September. I receive an email informing me that Santa Claus will be visiting our local recreation center in December. For the "low, low cost" of just $25 per child, my children can sit on Saint Nick's lap and have a photo taken that we probably won't ever look at again.

I send in my check. How could I not? It's Santa Claus.

By mid-October, as my children are still debating about a dozen Halloween costume options, the brainstorming of Christmas lists begin. Somehow catalogs filled with LEGOs, Playmobiles, American Girl dolls, and more migrate into the home, filling tables and counterspace with glossy images of idealized, joyous children playing with magnificent, pristine toys in strangely artificial landscapes.

I don't get it. I thought that catalogs died alongside the TV Guide and the phone book? Where do my children find these things? How do they smuggle them into our home without me noticing? And why have these publications taken the place of children's literature as their primary form of reading?

But as they begin circling items for their wish list, wanting a particular piece of molded plastic or an electronic doodad possessing more computing power than Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin had on Apollo 11, I am reminded of my own childhood. The gifts never received. The Christmas mornings less enchanting than others. The disappointment of a Christmas present gone terribly awry.

My thirteenth birthday, for example, when the only gift under the tree for me was an envelope instructing me to go to the garage.

The garage?

Am I getting a car? I don't have a driver's license yet, but who the hell cares? I'm getting a car!

The car turned out to be a weight bench. I didn't ask for a weight bench. I didn't even lift weights. I didn't want to lift weights. I had never expressed any interest in lifting weights. Perhaps this was my parents not-so-subtle hint that I should be lifting weights, but kids don't want not-so-subtle hints for Christmas.

They want the items on their damn wish list.

My kids will not suffer the same fate. I may – no, I will – complain for the next 364 days that my children have too many toys, too many gizmos, too much clothing, too much molded, colored plastic, but on Christmas Day, all of those concerns disappear.

Pile on the presents, I say. Despite my wife's desperate protestations, I buy it all.

And it's true. I'll complain about every single one of them for the next year. I'll rail against the wanton materialism and mess that they create. I'll blame my wife and children for their excesses. But on Christmas Day, I am downright gluttonous in my gift-giving.

It only costs me about one million dollars.

Then there is the Christmas tree, which somehow now costs as much as a year's subscription to Netflix. And though we don't need a Christmas wreath and never wanted a Christmas wreath, look! The Christmas tree folks are selling wreaths. Let's get an even dozen. Also, a bottle of that stuff to keep the tree alive (even though it's very much dead) and a new Christmas tree stand, since last year's is still perfectly fine but not-so-new.

Add in some post-Christmas tree purchasing of hot chocolate for the whole family (at Starbucks, of course), and this little excursion only cost me half my paycheck.

Later in the week, I come home to find that the exterior of my house is now decorated with twinkling lights, courtesy of my Jewish wife who adores Christmas because she's only about 15 years old in Christmas years. So now we are an outdoor Christmas light family, which means we are now an outdoor Christmas light in constant need of replacement family.

**"I'll blame my wife and children for their excesses. But on Christmas Day, I am downright gluttonous in my gift-giving."**

My wife handles these purchases, so I don't know the actual dollar total.

Probably several thousand dollars.

Then there is the food. Four people are coming over on Christmas Day, which means we need enough turkey, ham, wine, and cookies to feed 40. We could probably feed a small village with the food we purchase, but that is irrelevant. It's Christmas. We must have an abundance of food, damn it. Everyone needs to eat enough food to make them sick, and there needs to be plenty of leftovers to make people sick for days to come.

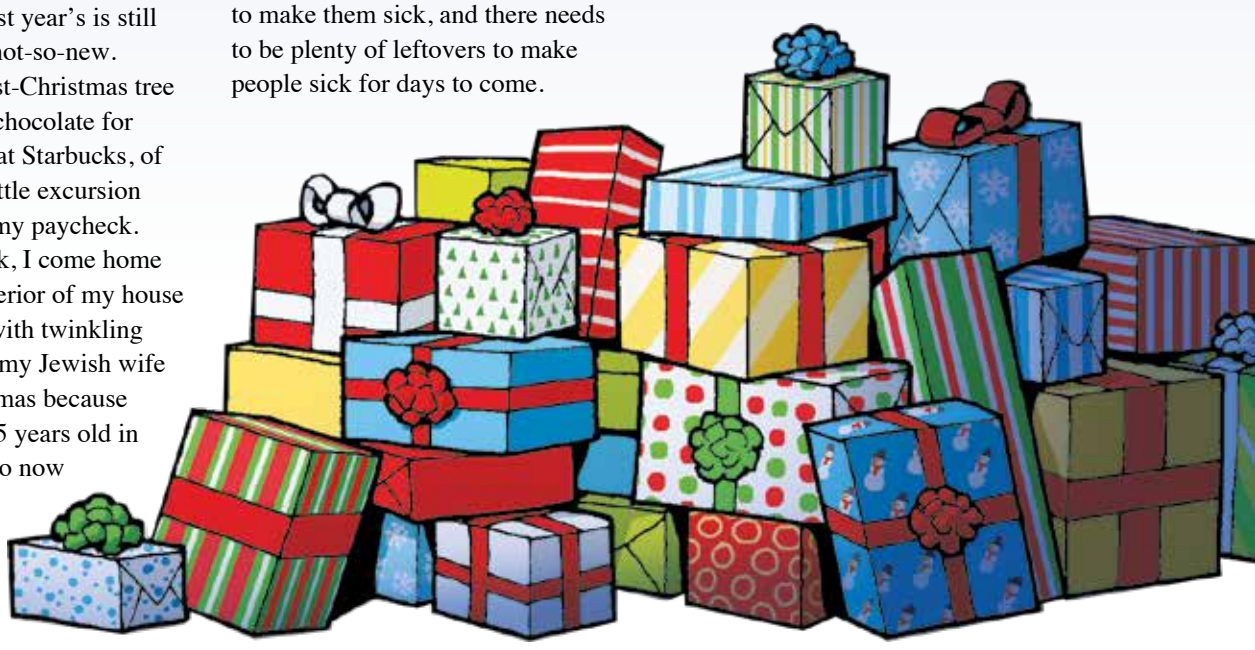
Our grocery bill more than triples.

In the end, Christmas costs me a fortune. I'd tell you that it exceeded our budget, but that would imply that I had a budget to begin with. Only a fool would dare to create a budget for something as expansive as Christmas. Spending during the holiday season is like that 1950s movie "The Blob." It just grows and grows, reaching its appendages out farther and farther every year, sucking in more of my banking account with every turn.

That's okay. The smiles of my children on Christmas morning? Priceless.

*Matthew Dicks is an elementary school teacher, bestselling novelist, and 50-time Moth Story SLAM champion. His Christmas Day meal budget may be a little smaller this year, depending on the latest COVID advisory. Or not. He likes leftovers.*

*Sean Wang, an MIT architecture graduate, is author of the sci-fi graphic novel series, Runners. Learn more at seanwang.com.*



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