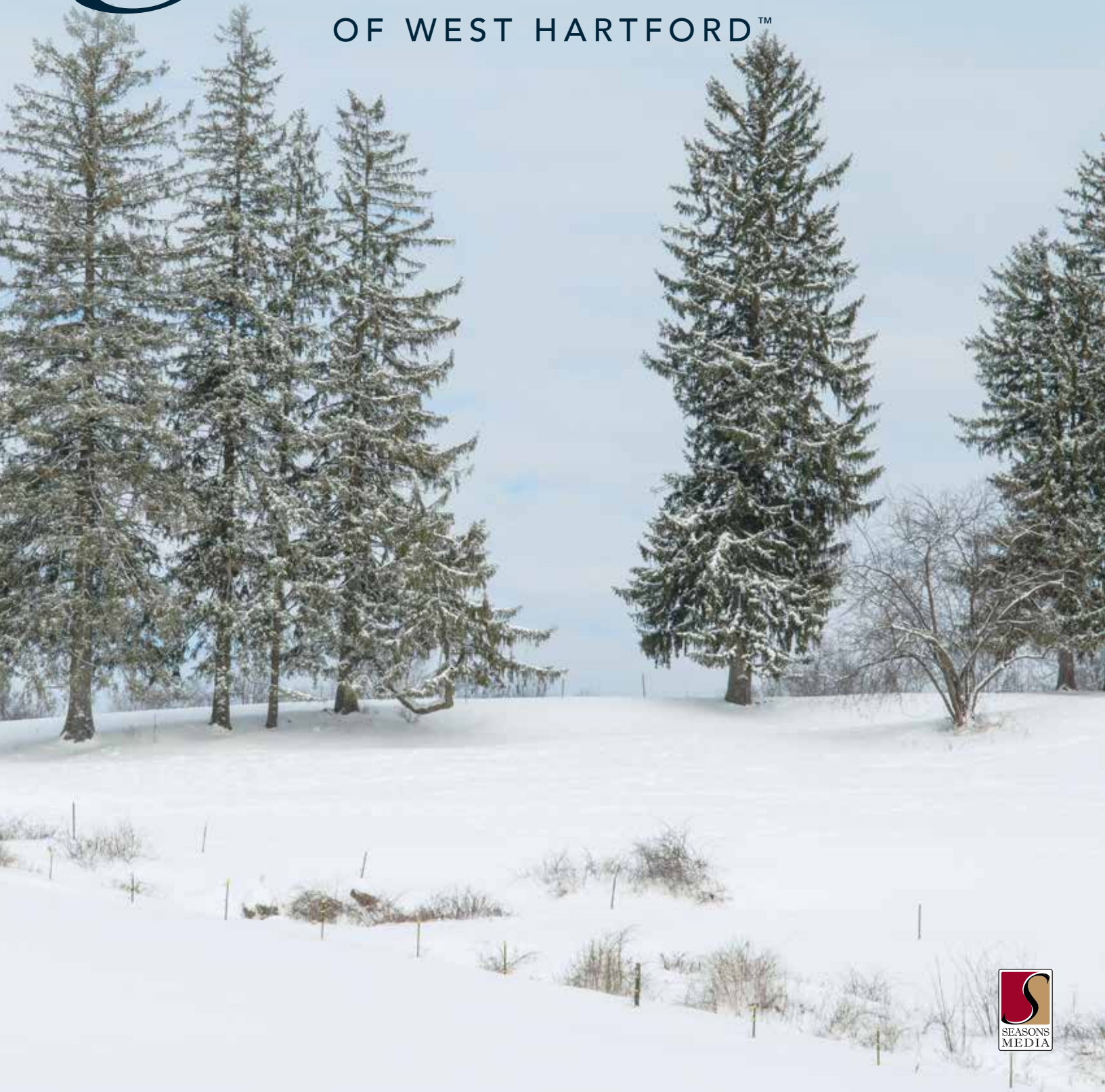


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# Seasons' Greetings



Baby, it's cold outside! But all is not lost. The arrival of lower temperatures brings with it a chance to do all those things that make winter in Connecticut so much fun.

What's your passion? Skiing? Ice fishing? Shopping for the holidays? Careening down a tobogganing hill with kids?

No matter which winter activity you adore, nothing could be more welcome than a nice, hot meal when you finally come in from the cold. And as food writer Amy White explains, a crock full of chili is just the ticket. In this issue, she shares some award-winning recipes that are sure to warm the hearts and bellies of family and friends alike, once their snowy boots have been left by the door.

And what could be better than curling up to watch a movie once the crockpot is empty and soaking in the sink? Whether you're a film buff or just enjoy spotting familiar places on TV, you won't want to miss our story on three homegrown moviemakers who love to use the Nutmeg State as their cinematic backdrop. The productions, filmed in places like Essex, Vernon, Meriden and Wethersfield, range from horror flicks to dramas to Hallmark romances. You'll want to see them all.

If you or a family member has ever served in the military, you may also be interested in reading our fascinating feature about local contributions to World War I, which ended 100 years ago on November 11. Connecticut had a huge role to play in winning the war, thanks to the brave men and women who stepped up to answer the call of duty. (Visit [seasonsmagazines.com](http://seasonsmagazines.com) to see our other winter editions, which chronicle the WWI adventures of people from other parts of the state.)

We hope you enjoy these and other stories in our magazine ... and as always, thank you for reading *Seasons*.

*Carol*

Carol Latter, Editorial Director



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# Winter 2018

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History  
War Heroes

“ I wonder if the snow loves the trees and fields that it kisses them so gently? And then it covers them up snug, you know, with a white quilt; and perhaps it says, ‘Go to sleep, darlings, till the summer comes again.’ ”  
– Lewis Carroll ”

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Goody Goodness



# War Heroes

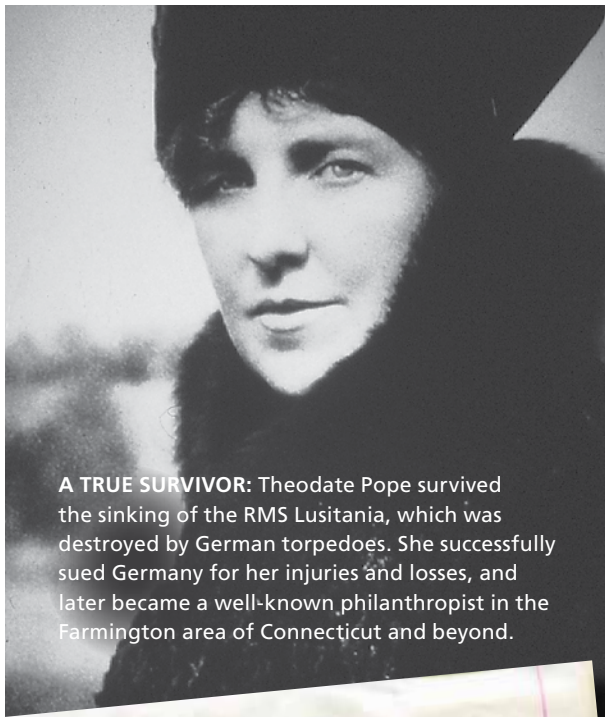
Area residents played an honorable role in World War I,  
which ended 100 years ago.

by JODIE MOZDZER and GIL CINDY SIMONEAU  
photography by VERN WILLIAMS and COURTESY OF THE STATE LIBRARY

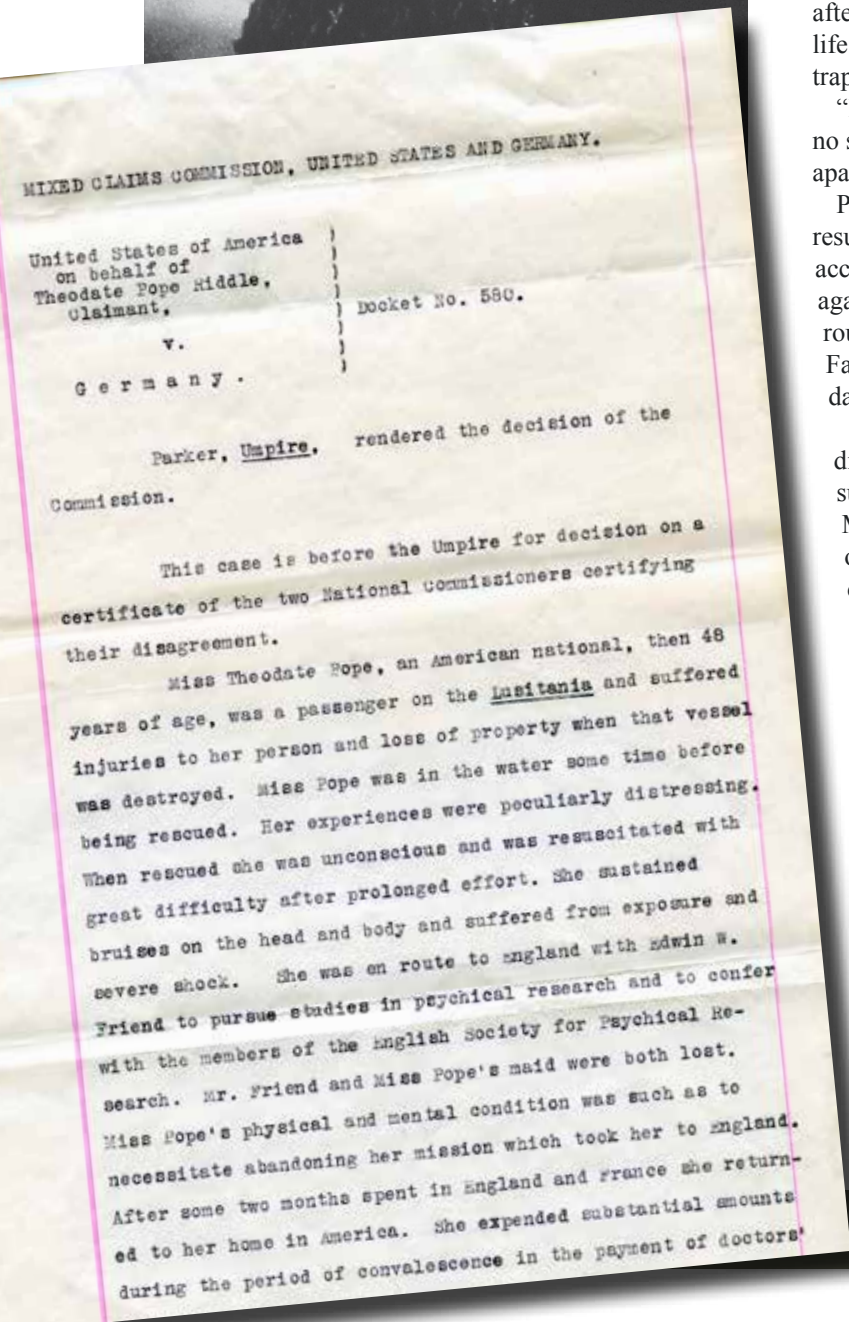


**PREPARING TO FIGHT:** More than 26,000 young men and women from Connecticut joined the Allied effort in Europe as soldiers and nurses. They were well supported by Connecticut companies, organizations, and people from all walks of life who stepped up to help – by providing machinery and ammunition, rations, funds, and encouraging letters from home.





**A TRUE SURVIVOR:** Theodate Pope survived the sinking of the RMS Lusitania, which was destroyed by German torpedoes. She successfully sued Germany for her injuries and losses, and later became a well-known philanthropist in the Farmington area of Connecticut and beyond.



As the RMS Lusitania pulled out of Pier 54 in New York on May 1, 1915, headed to Liverpool, England, Theodate Pope for the first time read the warning Germany had issued against traveling across the Atlantic Ocean.

Although the United States was not yet involved in World War I, American passengers aboard British ships were at risk of attack from German submarines surrounding England.

“I said to Mr. [Edwin] Friend, ‘That means, of course, that they intend to get us,’” Pope, 48, later wrote in a letter to her mother.

The Farmington resident was right – and six days later, she was fighting for her life in the waters off the coast of Ireland after a German submarine sank the ship. After securing a life belt and jumping off the fast-sinking ship, Pope became trapped underwater between the ship’s decks.

“I was swallowing and breathing the salt water, but felt no special discomfort nor anguish of mind – was strangely apathetic,” recalled Pope, who then was knocked unconscious.

Presumed dead when pulled out of the water, Pope was resuscitated “with great difficulty after prolonged effort,” according to her personal legal documents from a lawsuit against Germany. She was one of 763 people to survive of the roughly 1,960 aboard. Her colleague, Edwin Friend, also of Farmington, and her maid, Emily Robinson, both died that day.

“She was furious at the German government because they did that, and she suffered so mightily, and that’s why she sued them,” says Melanie Bourbeau, curator at Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington, where Pope’s life is detailed. One of the first female architects in the United States, Pope designed her home there in 1901.

In 1925, she won a settlement of \$19,850 from her lawsuit against the Germans.

She was only one of the thousands of Connecticut residents with connections to World War I, which ended 100 years ago on Nov. 11, 1918.

### CONNECTICUT STEPS UP

Connecticut is a small state that had a major impact on the United States’ ability to respond in April 1917, when Congress declared war on Germany.

The Nutmeg state sent more than 26,000 residents to fight, produced billions of bullets for small arms, and raised more than \$100 million in war bonds to support the effort.

Researchers in New London developed new submarine detection. Artists and poets across the state later detailed the war through their work. In fact, two



**TRAINING GROUND:** During the summer of 2017, Camp Yale in New Haven, near Yale University, became a training center and home for troops. Here, the First Infantry Regiment of the Connecticut National Guard (later known as the 102nd Regiment, 26th “Yankee” Division) arrives at the field.

of the eight war artists commissioned by the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I called Connecticut home: J. Andre Smith lived in Branford before and after the war, and Henry Everett Townsend settled in Norwalk after the war.

George Seymour Godard, Connecticut’s State Librarian before and during the war, took special interest in cataloging the efforts for future generations, so the state has one of the largest local World War I collections in the country.

And more recently, since 2014, the State Library has continued the effort to tell local stories of the war through its Remembering World War I project, led by Christine Pittsley. The project catalogs letters, photos and other World War I documents brought to the State Library by Connecticut residents. Pittsley and her team have held more than 40 intake sessions around the state, called “digitization days,” where they welcome the public to tell their family members’ stories.

“We’ve reached so many people in the state. We’ve raised so much awareness over the importance of World War I, not only among the public, but among teachers and students,” Pittsley says. “We’ve made a very large contribution to the national dialogue over World War I, as well.”

The State Library has collected more than 4,000 war-related objects in the past four years, and collected details about more than 400 people who served in some capacity.

Journalism students and faculty from Southern Connecticut State University have been turning the individual stories into articles, which can be found at [ctinworldwar1.org](http://ctinworldwar1.org). Many of the details in this story come from the student and faculty work.

The Remembering World War I project has uncovered unique stories from across the state, including the following profiles produced by students and faculty members at Southern.

Pvt. Walter Patrick Moran of Norwich was saved by his friend Irving Bogue, after Bogue realized he was still breathing in a body bag after a battle in February 1918.

Dominic Palermo, after losing his brother Nicholas during the war and suffering shrapnel and mustard gas injuries, went on to help charter the first American Legion Post in New Haven.

Joseph M. Park of New Haven enlisted in the 102nd Infantry Regiment before World War I, starting a three-generation tradition of family members serving with the same unit.

Torrington resident Paul Maynard lived to see the last day of the war, but died before it ended.

Cpl. Timothy Ahearn, 19, of New Haven, was suddenly left commanding his troop when all of its officers and sergeants were killed during battle. He came home a decorated war veteran.



## COUNTING THE READY

Connecticut's then-governor, Marcus H. Holcomb, had readied the state for war even before the United States joined. In February 1917, the state legislature approved a military census to determine the preparedness of Connecticut's residents to support a war effort, including skilled tasks at home.

Questions were aimed at finding out the trade or occupation of each respondent, how many dependents they supported, their military background, and other more specific questions such as whether they could ride a horse or motorcycle, or knew anything about coastal navigation or sailing.

"We needed to be ready because the eventuality was that we were going to go to war," Pittsley explains. "With the manpower census especially, he wanted to be able to protect the munitions workers from possible draft."

Perhaps the most famous among those who responded was William Howard Taft, who at 59 years old was a former U.S. president teaching law at Yale University, a couple of years before being nominated to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Could he ride a horse?

"Yes," Taft answered, "but hard on the horse."

At the same time, the state also tracked which nurses were prepared to serve.

When the United States joined the war, nearly 5,000 women were ready to serve as nurses on the battlefields and at home, according to the 1918 report based on the surveys.

And when Connecticut residents returned from war, the

state again queried them in the military questionnaire of 1919. Connecticut was one of four states to do so, asking them about their feelings on the war, in addition to their service details.

## CONNECTICUT INDUSTRY TAKES THE LEAD

Connecticut's cities collectively made massive contributions to the war efforts, from Hartford, Meriden, Manchester and New Britain to New Haven, Bridgeport, Waterbury and Danbury. These manufacturing hubs retooled their production facilities to meet the demands of European armies and later, those of the United States' military forces.

"Every city in the state was making munitions," says Pittsley. "Even before the U.S. involvement, Connecticut had the best handle on its manufacturing abilities."

Bridgeport factories – including Remington Arms-Union Metallic Cartridge Co. – alone produced two billion .30-06 cartridges, and 1.2 billion shells of other sizes.

By 1918, Colt's Patent Fire Arms "was devoted to the war," and in "full-throttle mode," according to author David Drury in *Hartford in World War I*.

Many other war-related manufacturing efforts helped equip troops, including portions of other fighting implements such as gas masks, bayonets, and silk for parachutes and uniforms.

The rise of Hartford as the nation's insurance capital was also seen during the war, with companies such as Aetna and Metropolitan insuring soldiers' lives and Liberty Bond payments.



**V FOR VICTORY:** A “welcome home” boat greeted returning troops in Boston Harbor in April 1919, five months after the end of WWI.

### STUDENTS, WOMEN, ATHLETES ALL SERVE

As war efforts ramped up, Connecticut residents from all walks of life got involved. Colleges were especially active in helping. Yale University, Wesleyan University, the University of Connecticut, and Trinity College each had training programs during the school year. In June 1918, 40 of the 50 graduating students from Trinity didn’t attend class day because they were in active training or service, according to a *Hartford Courant* article. Yale had the most students enlisted, the *Courant* reported.

One Boston Red Sox player even missed the 1918 World Series to serve his country. That’s the year the Red Sox won over the Chicago Cubs – Boston’s last World Series title until 2004. John Joseph “Jack” Barry, a Meriden native, was close to Fenway Park, serving with the Navy reserves at Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston, but couldn’t leave to play in the World Series.

In addition to women taking roles in factories during the war, several stepped up as leaders, both on the home front and on the front lines.

For example, Jessie Weston Fisher, a Portland native, left

her husband and a successful medical career, shipped her 13-year-old son off to boarding school, and boarded a ship to serve in the war as a doctor at a Red Cross Hospital in Beauvais, France.

Katharine Houghton Hepburn, mother of the Academy Award winning actress of the same name, was president of the Connecticut Woman Suffrage Association, based in Hartford. The family, for many years, owned a shoreline home in the Fenwick section of Old Saybrook.

### ANIMALS, TOO, PLAYED A ROLE

One of the most famous heroes of World War I is Sgt. Stubby, a dog who trained and traveled to the battlefields with members of the 26th Yankee Division, 102nd regiment from New Haven, and became the division’s official mascot. In the trenches, Stubby would not only warn the soldiers about mustard gas attacks, but find, comfort and seek help for wounded soldiers.

“Stubby is a symbol of the many thousands upon thousands of animals used in WWI. It’s truly horrible to think about the ways in which horses and donkeys were

abused in war – laden with heavy machinery and munitions, struggling through the mud, often gunned down and bombed alongside their soldiers,” says historian Laura A. Macaluso, who researched the war for her book, *New Haven in World War I*.

“Stubby, most thankfully, offers another view into the use of animals during wartime: beyond his abilities to sniff out gas attacks, the real reason people respond to Stubby’s story is because of the companionship and love between him and his doughboy and owner, Cpl. J. Robert Conroy of New Haven. In the midst of great calamity, animals provide humans with solace, and almost everyone can relate to that,” says Macaluso.

After the war, Stubby led many veterans in parades through Boston, New York and Washington, D.C., met three U.S. presidents, and received numerous medals for heroism, earning him the designation of the most decorated dog in U.S. Army history. He is said to be the model for the Georgetown University mascot, where Conroy later attended. Stubby is enshrined in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. An animated movie of his life was released in April.



**DUTY CALLS:** Battlefield volunteer Sgt. Stubby was the Yankee Division’s official mascot.

## KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS

Relief and troop support in Europe were provided by The Red Cross and by other Connecticut philanthropic and religious organizations. One of the major contributors was the Knights of Columbus, created and based in New Haven in 1882.



**SUPPORTING THE EFFORT:** Women were instrumental in collecting much-needed war contributions. Here, two women help the Knights of Columbus raise funds in 1917 at “Liberty Bond cottage,” a small temporary frame building erected on the pavement next to the Old State House in Hartford.

The Knights of Columbus says 100,000 of its members were involved, both on the battlefields and by offering support and comfort to troops. Among its most impressive feats was raising war funds; by the end of the war, its contributions totaled \$14 million.

The Knights of Columbus has detailed its involvement and much of the war’s history at its museum’s “World War I: Beyond the Front Lines” exhibit, open through December.

## KEEPING THE MEMORY ALIVE

In West Hartford, the war is commemorated at the Connecticut Veterans Memorial in Veterans Park, West Hartford Center.

It’s one of hundreds of WWI monuments across the state.

Dedicated in May 2006, the circular Wall of Peace includes a block of polished granite for each war, engraved with names of those from West Hartford who died.

In front of the circular park is a Walk of Remembrance where any veteran can be honored with a paver stone engraved with their name. 🗿

*Jodie Mozdzer Gil is an associate professor and Cindy Simoneau is chairperson of the Journalism Department at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven. Research from Southern journalism students is included in this report.*

*The U.S. World War One Centennial Commission last year recognized the Journalism Department at Southern for its work telling the stories as part of the collaboration with the Connecticut State Library.*

# Archiving Connecticut's Legacy

By JODIE MOZDZER GIL and CINDY SIMONEAU



**RECORDED HISTORY:** Sandra Gomez-Aceves, a former journalism student at Southern and now a reporter for the *Hartford Courant*, examines a panorama photograph brought to a Connecticut State Library digitization day in New Britain in 2016. The state has held more than 40 such events, where members of the public bring artifacts and documents related to World War I for archiving by the State Library. Photo by **Vern Williams**

Librarians work to preserve history and to help researchers connect with the past. A century after Connecticut State Librarian George S. Godard started gathering reports and artifacts related to World War I, that collection continues to grow and evolve from a tactile record to a digital document.

Godard, the state's third librarian who served from 1900-1936, had the foresight to invite the public to submit any artifacts to the Connecticut effort, eventually creating the state's Department of War Records. Now, 100 years later, Christine Pittsley is continuing his work through the Remembering World War I project.

"We've taken what he started and modernized it," says Pittsley, project manager for the State Library, who has spent the last four years cataloging Connecticut stories about the state's role in World War I to add to the state's already robust collections on World War I.

Through the project, the State Library has held more than 40 "digitization days," where Connecticut residents can bring photos, letters, uniforms and other war artifacts to volunteers for scanning and preservation in an online archive. They have cataloged more than 400 individual stories, and digitized more than 4,000 objects, Pittsley says.

She says the project is important because it honors the memory of those who fought.

"So the sacrifice of the men and women from 100 years ago, and what they did for our country, is never forgotten," she says. "It is the things they did that created the world in which we live today."

Pittsley hopes that 100 years from now, Connecticut residents will look back on the materials collected on the centennial, and continue to honor the memory of those who fought, the same goal Godard had.

Pittsley references a *Hartford Courant* article that quoted Godard.

"He says he's doing this for the people of tomorrow, for our children and grandchildren, so they know what Connecticut has done," Pittsley says. "He really was thinking about not the people of his time, but he was thinking about us."

The Remembering World War I project involves multifaceted delivery of information to the public across social media platforms.

Each day, Pittsley or someone in her office sends tweets from @CTinWWI summarizing headlines from the *Hartford Courant* 100 years ago. A corresponding Instagram account shares historical photos from those same pages. The accounts get about 30,000 impressions a month.

The State Library has also re-issued Daniel Strickland's book, "Connecticut Fights: The Story of the 102nd Regiment," which details the movements of Connecticut troops during the war.

And the State Library has partnered with state college students, who volunteer at events, and continue to conduct research and tell the stories of the state's connections to the war.

Since 2016, Southern Connecticut State University's journalism students, completing their capstone requirement for graduation, have worked with Pittsley to conduct more in-depth interviews with state residents who have family connections to the war. The project is led by Journalism Department Chairperson Cindy Simoneau and Associate Professor Jodie Mozdzer Gil, who have participated in the research alongside their students.

Students this fall continued to conduct oral history interviews for archival purposes, and turn the interviews into journalistic articles and videos. The more than 80 articles are being published on the State Library's website: [ctinworldwar1.org](http://ctinworldwar1.org). The students also report on World War I trends related to the state, and World War I monuments across the state.

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# Dr. Danielle Butto

Saint Francis podiatrist Danielle Butto, who graduated from the University of Akron with a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering, says there are a lot of similarities between civil engineering and podiatry, particularly when it comes to reconstructive surgery of the foot and ankle, Dr. Butto's specialty.

"When someone has a deformity – or has suffered a trauma – and you are looking to rebuild the lower leg, you have to consider a lot of the same concepts that would go into constructing a column for a building," Dr. Butto explains. "You have to think about how the foot is going to support weight, you have to think about alignment, and you have to figure out where to put a screw to withstand forces from walking, and what type of plating system can hold it all together."

Civil engineering was Dr. Butto's back-up plan: She had always wanted to go into medicine, but her mother advised her to get an undergraduate degree in something she could do in case she changed her mind. She didn't. She was a junior in her engineering program when she reached out to a podiatrist in nearby Youngstown and asked to shadow him for a week. "I didn't know it at the time, but he was considered one of the best reconstructive surgeons in the profession." After that auspicious introduction to the field, she decided to pursue podiatry as a profession. Almost a decade later, Dr. Lawrence DiDomenico, the foot specialist she randomly chose to shadow, would become her fellowship director.

A native of Ohio, Dr. Butto grew up in Niles, about an hour from Cleveland. She remained in the Midwest for her medical training at Des Moines University College of Osteopathic Medicine, came to the East Coast to complete a three-year surgical residency at Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center, and returned to Ohio to do a fellowship in Reconstructive Rearfoot and Ankle Surgery under Dr. DiDomenico. She was invited back to Saint Francis by her current partner, Dr. Rachel Balloch, who trained her as a resident. She joined the hospital's staff in 2016.

## RECONSTRUCTING THE FOOT

During her fellowship training, Dr. Butto became skilled in performing the intricate surgery required to reconstruct the foot and ankle following trauma or in individuals who suffer from a condition known as Charcot foot. "Charcot is a disease process where the bones break down and deform," explains Dr. Butto. "It tends to happen in people who have neuropathy – or nerve damage – in their feet, possibly because if they misstep and fracture a bone, they can't feel it, so continue to walk on it, and the bone deforms."

Neuropathy – and Charcot – often occur in people who have diabetes. "I think we are seeing more and more of it because diabetes is becoming more and more prevalent," notes Dr. Butto. Neuropathy can also develop as a result of chemotherapy, some autoimmune disorders, and drug use.

Reconstructing the foot usually involves the placing of screws and plates, Dr. Butto says, so her background in engineering comes in handy. In fact, Dr. Butto helped design a new device for this purpose that will soon be added to the foot surgeon's arsenal.

Dr. Butto is often called on to correct other common foot deformities like flat foot, high arch, and bunion, all conditions that people are either born with – or born with a genetic predisposition to. People with flat feet often experience knee pain, Dr. Butto says, as insufficient arches cause instability of the midfoot. People with flat feet also tend to pronate; that is, they put most of their weight on the insides of their feet as they walk or run, which puts excess stress on the knee.

Conversely, those with high arches supinate, or walk with most of their weight on the outside of their feet, exerting undue stress on the outside ankle joint and causing ankle instability. In fact, people with high arches tend to sprain their ankles more easily. "The initial treatment is the same for both problems," says Dr. Butto. "An orthotic to realign the foot, and physical therapy." Severe cases, however, may require surgical intervention.

Bunions, which often develop in people with hypermobile



Written by **Lori Miller Kase**  
Photography by **Seshu Photography**



**IMPROVEMENTS AFOOT:** Dr. Danielle Butto helps to solve medical and functional foot problems, to help her patients have better mobility and less pain.

joints or flat feet, are bony – and sometimes painful – protrusions on the inside of the foot. The classic bump, which juts out just below the big toe, develops after years of abnormal movement and pressure on the joint. Wearing orthotics can help support that midfoot joint, says Dr. Butto, and she doesn't resort to surgery unless the bunion is causing pain and interfering with everyday activities. "Unless you can say yes to both of those conditions, you adapt your shoe gear," she says. "Once it becomes painful, you address correcting it."

Though there are several different possible procedures, Dr. Butto most commonly performs what is called a "Lapidus Bunionectomy," an operation that realigns the bone to where it should be and fuses it into place. This procedure usually requires about six weeks of recovery – Dr. Butto advises her patients to stay off the foot for two weeks and then transition to a boot and, ultimately, a sneaker. Patients with osteoporosis, who aren't candidates for this procedure, can have the bump surgically shaved down, which eliminates the pain, but not the underlying abnormalities that are causing the bunion, so recurrence is a possibility.

For bunions that are caused by arthritis in the big toe, a relatively new procedure that is less painful, less invasive, and requires less recovery time, replaces the big toe joint with a synthetic cartilage implant called Cartiva. Though the implant is FDA-approved and Dr. Butto will only do this procedure in the right patients, she says doctors don't yet have any long-term data on these implants, because they are too new.

## **SALVAGING THE FOOT, RESTORING MOBILITY**

Limb salvage is another special interest of Dr. Butto's. Diabetics can develop vascular disorders and ulcers that lead to infections in their lower extremities; Charcot can also lead to foot ulcers and limb-threatening infections. In these patients, below-the-knee amputation is often a consideration. "It becomes a challenge to save the foot, but I like that challenge," she says. Treatment can involve special

**ONE OF THE MOST  
REWARDING PARTS OF DR.  
BUTTO'S JOB, SHE SAYS, IS  
RESTORING MOBILITY TO  
PATIENTS WHO COME TO  
HER UNABLE TO WALK.**

wound dressing, wound grafts, or surgery. Dr. Butto says she often works with the hospital's vascular and plastic surgeons to find the best way to remove infected tissue while preserving the function and aesthetic appearance of the foot.

One of the most rewarding parts of Dr. Butto's job, she says, is restoring mobility to patients who come to her unable to walk. A recent patient, age 53, came to her in a wheelchair, with a foot so deformed by severe Charcot that he couldn't even get a shoe on, much less walk.

"We reconstructed his foot, which was literally turned in, and held it in place with screws

and plates," she says. "Now he can walk again; in fact, he walked into my office last week, wearing a custom shoe. Those are my feel-good days, when you know you made a difference in someone's life."

She says she is more likely to be able to help patients if they don't wait too long to come in to see her: "The longer you are walking on a deformed foot, the harder it becomes to correct," she explains. "I think that people are afraid that if they come in, we are automatically talking surgery, but that is not always the case. For me, surgery is always the last thing we talk about."

On Dr. Butto's desk – along with the binder that corrals the extensive research she has done on podiatric procedures, protocols and devices – is an eclectic array of objects, ranging from a large purple geode, to a clock that survived the hurricane in Puerto Rico, to hand-drawn pictures created by some of her pediatric patients.

"I display every gift a patient has ever given me," says Dr. Butto, "as a reminder of why I do what I do and how people are appreciative in their own ways because of it." ❧

*Lori Miller Kase is a freelance writer living in Simsbury.*

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A woman with long, wavy brown hair is the central figure. She is wearing a vibrant red, double-breasted coat with large black buttons and a white fur collar. Her hands are clad in bright red, shiny gloves. In her right hand, she holds a string of colorful Christmas ornaments in shades of red, green, and silver. In her left hand, she holds a white envelope. The background shows a light-colored house with dark shutters and windows adorned with festive Christmas wreaths. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

**FEATURE**

**MAKING IT MERRY:** Jessica Lowndes stars in the Hallmark movie "Christmas at Pemberley Manor," produced by Synthetic Cinema International. Photo courtesy of The Hallmark Channel/Crown Media Holdings, Inc.

A festive outdoor scene featuring a white porch with a railing. In the foreground, there is a small, decorated Christmas tree with red and white lights. To the left, a gingerbread figure wearing a red and white striped hat and scarf sits on a jar of cinnamon sticks. Next to it is a red and white striped paper cup. To the right, there are two clear glass pitchers. The background shows a white building with a window decorated with a Christmas wreath. The overall atmosphere is bright and cheerful, suggesting a holiday celebration.

# Lights, Camera, Action!

**Local filmmakers and production companies  
bring a little Hollywood to Connecticut**

*by* SARAH WESLEY LEMIRE



**I**t's an unseasonably warm October afternoon, but in Old Wethersfield it's Christmastime.

Shop windows are adorned with garland, there's snow on the sidewalks and the Hurlbut-Dunham House, a historic landmark located in the center of town, is gearing up for a holiday party.

Inside the 18th century Victorian, preparations are underway with tree-trimming and Christmas cards being hung by crew members, busily finalizing details before it's time to shoot the scene.

It's the last day of filming on the set of the Hallmark Channel film "Christmas on Honeysuckle Lane," and with merely weeks to go before it airs, the team at Synthetic Cinema International is working under a short deadline.

"Movie days are long," says Andrew Gernhard, producer and owner of the Rocky Hill-based motion picture and production company.

"Yesterday, I worked a 20-hour day; I got home at midnight and had to be up at 4 a.m. to get back to the set for 6 o'clock."

However, the extended hours are worth it, considering film is what Gernhard is passionate about.

"I consider myself the most fortunate man in the world," he says. "I love movies of every genre. I love working in movies, no matter how hard it is, or how awful or great it is."



**BEHIND THE SCENES:** Producer Andrew Gernhard (left) with director Nick Everhart on the set of "Imposter?" in 2017. Photo courtesy of Synthetic Cinema International.





**WINTER WONDERLAND:** The wizards at Synthetic Cinema added a backdrop of artificial snow before the crew began filming "Christmas on Honeysuckle Lane" on location at the Silas Robbins House in Old Wethersfield this fall. Photo courtesy of Synthetic Cinema International.



**HOLIDAY MAGIC:** In the movie "Wishin' and Hopin'," set in 1964 Connecticut, a substitute teacher played by Molly Ringwald (left) helped to ensure that Mouseketeer Annette Funicello's less-famous cousin, played by Wyatt Ralff (right) had a wonderful Christmas. Photo courtesy of Synthetic Cinema International.



As a young filmmaker and fan of director Steven Spielberg, Gernhard got his start in 2000 after making a shot-by-shot parody of Spielberg’s “Jaws” – called “Trees” – which features a man-eating, great white – wait for it – pine tree.

By sheer luck, the release of the SNL-style spoof coincided with the 25th anniversary of the original, and Gernhard’s film went national.

“Every Blockbuster in America bought, like, 10 copies,” says Gerhard, laughing. “So 80,000 units on VHS of this stupid, awful movie called ‘Trees’ went all over the place.”

Capitalizing on its success, in 2004, Gernhard produced the tongue-in-cheek sequel, “Trees 2: The Root of All Evil,” which, unfortunately, wasn’t met with the same reception.

Discouraged, he took a break until distributors began contacting him, seeking more films.

He obliged, and since then, has been involved in the production of more than 30 movies, all filmed in Connecticut except for one.

While much of his early work is largely concentrated on horror flicks, more recent years have seen Gernhard producing a variety of other types of films, including the 2014 production of “Wishin’ and Hopin’,” a drama comedy based on the *New York Times* best-selling novella by acclaimed author and Connecticut resident, Wally Lamb. The movie, which aired on the Lifetime channel, starred Molly Ringwald and was narrated by Chevy Chase.

Gernhard says the movie was one of his favorites, along with the 2017 film “Romance at Reindeer Lodge.”

“That was a last-minute film for Hallmark. We actually had to make it and deliver it within six weeks, which is insane,” he says.

Despite the frenetic pace, he says, things went smoothly and it was a movie he truly enjoyed making.

“It was kind of great just to see all this fake snow and [it had this] magical atmosphere; there’s just something about it.”

Finding a niche in the genre, Gernhard has also produced “A Very Merry Toy Store,” starring Melissa



**A CONNECTICUT CHRISTMAS:** Jessica Lowndes and Michael Rady starred in Hallmark’s “Christmas at Pemberley Manor,” filmed in Essex and Old Lyme. It began airing on The Hallmark Channel in October, attracting millions of viewers. Photo courtesy of The Hallmark Channel/Crown Media Holdings, Inc.

A man with dark hair, wearing a red t-shirt under a blue button-down shirt and blue jeans, stands looking slightly to his left. He is positioned under a large, grey, lattice-like bridge structure. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an outdoor setting at dusk or night. The overall mood is contemplative and cinematic.

“Visually and physically,  
Connecticut has been  
great and inspirational  
to my stories.”

- A.D. Calvo, Goodnight Film

**LOST AND FOUND:** Robert Longstreet and Alexia Rasmussen filming under a bridge in New London for A.D. Calvo's movie "The Missing Girl."  
Photo courtesy of Budderfly Entertainment, LLC.

Joan Hart and Mario Lopez, along with “Christmas at Pemberley Manor” and “A Very Nutty Christmas.”

A Norwich native, he's returned to his hometown to shoot many of his films and says that Connecticut is the ideal location, especially when making holiday movies.

“When anyone thinks ‘classic Christmas,’ it's all New England architecture, landscapes, so I think that's why a lot of these companies are interested in Connecticut ... for that ‘Christmas in New England’ kind of feel.”

With multiple projects in current, pre- and post-production, Gernhard is flush with work, which he says translates into jobs for actors and film crews throughout the state.

And though he once aspired to be the next George

Lucas, he says that his career and subsequent success in filmmaking is more than he could have hoped for.

“I look back at my life, and what I've achieved, what we're working on, have worked on, and I could not have done it any better; I could not be happier with the way everything has turned out.”

### **Goodnight Film - Essex**

A.D. Calvo didn't get into filmmaking until later in life.

After working in software and technology for many years, as his 40th birthday approached, he began rethinking his vocation for two reasons: his father had passed away at a young age, and advances in digital technology allowed what had been a long-time desire, to become a reality.



“I had always wanted to be a filmmaker as a child, so I embraced the technology and jumped in,” he says.

Fueled by a quote he read suggesting that if you can become successful doing something you don’t like, you can do even better doing something you love, he took the leap in 2005, establishing Goodnight Films in Wallingford.

“I was not afraid at all because I felt like it was almost some destiny,” he says. “I really felt like this was exactly what I needed to be doing at this point in time.”

After making a few short films, Calvo penned the screenplay for his first feature-length project, “The Other Side of the Tracks,” a suspense film about a man haunted by the memories of his girlfriend, who was killed in a train accident.

Through a mutual friend, his script ended up in the hands of some Hollywood producers, who liked it enough to sign on as executive producers, giving it legs and credibility.

“We were able to get the film to Showtime on a two-year rotation,” he says.

The success of the project resulted in more work for Calvo, and soon he began production on another film, this time with a bigger budget and higher-profile actors.

“Then the Lehman Brothers collapse happened in September of 2008 and everything just unwound. So a year’s worth of work went out the window.”

Despite the setback, Calvo was eager to continue working, subsequently writing and directing a second independent film, before deciding to take a break in



**HOME-GROWN HORROR:** Actress Erin Wilhelmi from A.D. Calvo's "Sweet, Sweet Lonely Girl" in a scene filmed in Vernon. Photo courtesy of Budderfly Entertainment, LLC.

order to direct films written by other screenwriters.

Neither proved to be satisfying.

"All these films got distribution," he says, "but I had a bar that I wanted to hit – critically, and in terms of if I looked back on the work and was happy with it. And I wasn't quite hitting that bar."

So, in 2013, he shifted gears, writing and directing "The Missing Girl," a suspenseful, dark comedy centered around the owner of a comic book shop and the young graphic novelist he's hired, which Calvo filmed in New London.

Starring veteran actor Robert Longstreet (currently

appearing on the Netflix show "The Haunting of Hill House"), the film screened and was well-received at the acclaimed Toronto International Film Festival in 2015, as well as making the rounds at multiple other accredited festivals throughout the country and in Europe.

In 2016, he completed his next project, "Sweet, Sweet Lonely Girl," a horror movie filmed in and around Vernon, and currently featured on SHUDDER, AMC Networks' subscription horror-film streaming service.

Calvo says because Connecticut is among the oldest



**NEW DIRECTION:** A.D. Calvo with Erin Wilhelmi on the set of "Sweet, Sweet Lonely Girl." Photo by Robert Wise.



**HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS:** Producer David Gere on the set of his latest film, "My Adventures with Santa," filmed in Meriden, Middletown and Cromwell. Photo by Ryan Sweeney.

states in the country, it serves as a great backdrop for his films, which often feature elements of loneliness, dread and atmosphere.

"I find that this area has a lot of texture," he says. "We're going to find a lot of those gothic or old New England villages and haunting kind of areas, or areas that are just stuck in time and have a period kind of feel to them, which is often so hard to recreate."

When he's writing, he often visualizes places in the state that he's familiar with or has driven past. "It helps with the storytelling to have a sense of place," he says. "Visually and physically, Connecticut has been great and inspirational to my stories."

In sum, Calvo has done six feature films and is currently working on his seventh, a follow-up to "Sweet, Sweet Lonely Girl," which begins shooting next year.

"We're hoping to take it to another level – bigger budget, bringing on bigger names, talent," he says.

If things go according to plan, it'll be released in 2020.

As for Calvo, who recently relocated Goodnight Film to Essex, he hasn't looked back since making his leap of faith more than 14 years ago.

"It's the art; you do it because you love it," he says. "It's been a humbling but very rewarding experience."

### **Shadow | Vale Productions - Cromwell**

Somewhere along the way to becoming a lawyer, Cromwell native David Gere became a model, actor, stunt man and film producer instead.

A student at Providence College in Rhode Island in 1996, Gere took a film class where he was introduced to Peter Farrelly, an alumnus, as well as director and writer of hit films like "Dumb and Dumber" and "There's Something About Mary."



**PROLIFIC PRODUCER:** Since 2012, Connecticut native David Gere has been involved in the production of more than 40 films. Photo by Ryan Sweeney.

“We initially had a casual meeting and then I was offered a role in ‘Outside Providence,’ a film starring Alec Baldwin based on a book Peter had written,” Gere says. “That started my journey on set and earned me entry into the Screen Actors Guild.”

For nearly a decade, Gere worked as an actor, accumulating an impressive IMDB list of credits in films like “War of the Worlds” and “Rocky Balboa” and the television series “Gossip Girl.”



He also performed stunts in more than 18 movies, including “The Dark Knight Rises” and “The Purge: Election Year.” But acting didn’t always prove to be an easy gig.

“I would drive to New York City, have a one-minute audition and not have any idea of the context, if I had a shot at the role, or what the feedback might be, and [I’d] turn right around go back to Connecticut, always kind of wondering.”

That uncertainty proved to be a catalyst, motivating Gere to become more involved in how things operated behind the camera, as opposed to in front of it.

“Really, the decisions are made in the boardroom, or among the executives or producers in terms of how films are structured, who gets in films, whether they’re independent or studio,” he says, “and I felt this propensity towards wanting to learn more, to understand it. It’s a big mystery when you first start out, especially as an actor.”

While continuing to act, Gere began branching out, making connections and becoming increasingly involved in the business end of film production.

“When I got into a position to learn the business, I realized that I really might have a good mind for producing, and started to produce some smaller, independent films. I played them close to home in

CONTINUED ON PAGE 32



**ACTING OUT:** David Gere as Agent Johnson in “Black Wake” (2017). Photo by Ryan Sweeney, © Red Entertainment.



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 30

Cromwell, Middletown, realizing that I could get some help from friends and family and resources I had access to.”

Before long, he began producing larger projects, shooting both locally and nationally from New York to Los Angeles. Since 2012, he's been involved with the production of more than 40 films including “Bleed for This,” the story of boxer Vinny Pazienza, starring Miles Teller and “The Opposite Sex,” a comedy featuring Mena Suvari and Kristin Chenoweth.

In addition to working with several different production companies, Gere, along with partner, Chelsea Vale, recently launched Shadow | Vale Productions, a production company based in Los Angeles and Cromwell.

He strives to do as many films in Connecticut as he's able because it allows him to give back to the state and his community. “I'm just so grateful for being able to do what I love, involving dozens, if not hundreds, of people that I know in these projects.” Gere says he's pleased that he's been able to “give a break” to the

many crewmembers and actors from Connecticut who have played a role in his films.

Gere is currently in production on several films, including “My Adventures With Santa,” a holiday film shot in Meriden, Middletown and Cromwell, starring Denise Richards, Barbara Eden and Patrick Muldoon, which is set to be released in 2019.

He's also working on a new project for Netflix, as well as a crime thriller called “Five Times Thirty-Eight,” slated to begin shooting in Connecticut next year. His recently completed film “Vault,” a period crime piece, is scheduled for a spring 2019 release.

“I want to continue to make great feature films,” he says, “and up the ante in terms of the scope. I want to really play some great projects to Connecticut and continue the longevity of that process for myself, my company, and all the people I work with here.” ❄️

*Sarah Wesley Lemire is a Hartford-based journalist and humor columnist. Follow her on Twitter @swlemire.*



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DELICIOUS

# Chilly? Cook Some Chili!

**SAVOR THE FLAVOR:** Award-winning Pools Brew Chili, garnished with cheddar and chives, and with a side of cornbread.



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written and photographed by **AMY S. WHITE**

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**W**henever winter begins its sure approach, I look forward to cold-weather cooking – soups and stews, yes, but especially chili. I find that nothing has a way of warming up me (or my kitchen) quite like a pot full of chili. As the recipe simmers away, the spicy scent wafts through the house, forcing my taste buds to wait impatiently for the end result: a bowl of meat and spices with all the fixings.

There are as many variations on chili as there are legends about where and how the dish originated. But we do know that in the 1880s, the “bowls o’ red,” as they were called, were being sold by women known as “chili queens” at stands around San Antonio, Texas. This red chili con carne (always, forever, and very stringently without beans) became such a tourist draw that it was featured at the San Antonio Chili Stand at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair and in 1977, was proclaimed the official state food of Texas.

Having judged several chili competitions for the International Chili Society, I at least outwardly subscribe to their rules for both green (chili verde) and traditional red chili. For both, neither beans nor pasta nor any non-meat fillers are allowed, nor is preference given to either cut meat or ground meat. Traditional red chili is defined as “any kind of meat/combination of meats with red chili peppers/powders, various spices and other ingredients,” while chili verde is the same but made with green chili peppers/powders.

The green chili recipe below is my own, specifically designed for the slow cooker, for a relatively easy weeknight dinner. The red chili recipe is from Bob Plager, the only two-time winner of the International Chili Society World Championship and fellow ICS judge. Finally, I offer a simple recipe for semi-homemade cornbread, a side dish with a little sweetness to balance out the spicy heat from either chili. Great for snow days, game days, National Chili Day (which is the fourth Thursday of February), or any blustery cold day in between, these recipes will prove that even though it may have been born in the heat of Texas, chili finds a perfect home in any New England kitchen. And to bean or not to bean? I’ll leave it entirely up to you. 🍲

*Amy S. White is a food writer who teaches Latin for a living. She loves seasonal cooking, taking pictures of her food, and snow days. Find out more about Amy at [amyswhite.com](http://amyswhite.com).*

## SLOW COOKER CHILI VERDE

### Ingredients:

- 1 ½ pounds fresh tomatillos\*
- 1 large white onion, peeled and quartered
- 4 cloves garlic, peeled
- 2 poblano peppers
- 2 jalapeño peppers
- 1 bunch cilantro, stems removed
- 1 Tbsp olive oil
- 1 ½ pound pork loin, cut into half-inch cubes
- 1 Tbsp all-purpose flour
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 tsp kosher salt
- ½ tsp freshly ground black pepper
- ½ tsp ground cumin
- ½ tsp dried oregano
- tortillas (optional) for serving

*\*Fresh tomatillos can be found at Spanish specialty markets. If not available, use 1 28-ounce can and do not roast them.*

Heat oven to 450F.

Place the fresh tomatillos, onion quarters, garlic and peppers on a foil-lined baking sheet and roast for 20-25 minutes, flipping half way through. Allow to cool slightly, then place the roasted vegetables and the cilantro in a blender, and pulse until the mixture takes on a salsa-like texture.

Toss the pork cubes with flour. Heat olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Brown the pork on all sides, working in batches as needed. Add the browned pork to the slow cooker and then add the chicken broth, salt, pepper, cumin, oregano and roasted vegetable salsa.

Cover and cook on high for 4 hours or low for 8 hours. Serve with warm tortillas.

**WORTH WAITING FOR:** Slow Cooker Chili Verde pairs perfectly with warm tortillas.



## SEMI-HOMEMADE SKILLET CORNBREAD

Ingredients:

- 1 box Krusteaz Honey Cornbread mix**
- 8 ½-ounce can corn kernels**
- 1 stick salted butter, softened**
- ½ cup honey**

Prepare cornbread according to package directions. Stir in the canned corn. Pour the mixture into a cast-iron skillet and bake according to package directions. While the cornbread is baking, beat together the butter and honey until light and fluffy. Brush the top of the cornbread with some of the honey butter as soon as it comes out of the oven. Serve with the remaining honey butter.



**SWEET TREAT:** Skillet cornbread topped with honey butter offsets the spiciness of any chili recipe.

# PERFECT PAIRINGS

by **SCOTT CLARK**

**W**ith the arrival of fall and – soon – winter, nightfall is coming ever earlier, and trying to fit work, errands, activities into a shortening day can be daunting. Being able to have a hearty meal prepared ahead of time, and simply heating it up with little to no prep time, is a wonderful thing.

During these colder months there is no greater hearty comfort food than chili. I love chili. There's just something about the flavorful combination of tomatoes, chili powder, peppers, cumin and meat (although vegetarian options work as well) that I adore.

Chili is essentially a humble classic American stew. You can keep it simple and classic, or go more exotic!

Now when it comes to which adult beverage to enjoy with a hearty, hot bowl of goodness, an ice-cold beer comes to mind for most. This certainly works, although wine adds an added dimension to the flavors of a meal.

There are plenty of wine options available to pair with chili, especially if you prefer red wines. Look for medium- to full-bodied white, pink and red wines with ample fruit flavors, and moderate tannins.

For red wines, consider Zinfandel, Malbec, Syrah, Grenache or Rhône-style red blends. For white wines, consider an off-dry Riesling from Washington state or Germany, or a Chenin Blanc. And don't forget Rosé, that versatile pink wine that delightfully bridges the gap between red and white wines.

Consider red wine for tomato-based chili, and white wine for "white" and other non tomato-based chili. Some of our favorites are:

## **WHITE:**

Chateau Ste. Michelle Riesling  
Dr. Loosen "Blue Slate" Riesling  
Pine Ridge Chenin Blanc + Viognier

## **ROSÉ:**

Chateau d'Esclans Whispering Angel  
Crios Rosé of Malbec

## **RED:**

Four Vines "The Sophisticate" Zinfandel  
Tablas Creek Patelin de Tablas (Rhône blend)  
Bogle Phantom

One large pot of chili can be transformed into several meals, and experimenting with a different wine with each meal can open your horizons to something new and unexpected. Enjoy!

*Scott Clark is the general manager of Liquor Depot Inc.*

## **POOLS BREW CHILI**

*(recipe by Bob Plager, adapted from [www.chilicookoff.com](http://www.chilicookoff.com))*

### Ingredients:

- 2 Tbsp Crisco shortening**
- 2 ¼ pounds tri-tip beef roast, trimmed and cut into 1/4-inch cubes**
- 2 cups beef broth**
- 2 cups chicken broth**
- 1 cup tomato sauce**
- 2 Sunsweet pitted prunes**
- 1 cup water**

### First Round of Spices

- 1 Tbsp paprika**
- 1 ½ tsp onion powder**
- 1 tsp garlic powder**
- 1 ½ beef bouillon cubes**
- 1 chicken bouillon cube**
- ½ tsp seasoned salt**
- 1 ½ tsp New Mexico chili powder\***
- 1 ½ tsp New Mexico ground chili pepper\***

### Second Round of Spices

- 3 tsp ground cumin**
- ½ tsp garlic powder**
- ½ tsp seasoned salt**
- 1 ½ Tbsp Gebhardt chili powder\***
- 1 ½ Tbsp Texas-style chili powder\***
- 1 ½ tsp New Mexico hot ground chili pepper\***
- 1 ½ tsp New Mexico light chili powder\***
- Additional water if needed**

### Third Round of Spices

- 2 tsp Texas-style chili powder**
- 1 tsp ground cumin**
- ¼ tsp garlic powder**

**Tabasco sauce, to taste**

**Shredded cheese, sour cream, green onions, tortilla strips, or other garnishes (optional)**

*\*Yes, these are very specific spices, and a lot of them, but then again, this is a world-champion recipe. I was able to find them at [www.mildbillspices.com](http://www.mildbillspices.com).*

Melt the shortening in a large stockpot. Brown the meat on all sides, working in batches as needed. Transfer the meat to a colander to drain, rinse it with water, and return it to the pot. Add the broths, tomato sauce, prunes, water, and first round of spices. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to medium. Cook, stirring occasionally, until meat is tender, about 2 hours, removing the prunes half way through. After the 2 hours are done, stir in the second round of spices, add 1 to 1 ½ cups of hot water if it needs additional liquid, and simmer another 30 minutes. Add the third round of spices and cook 15 more minutes. Add Tabasco to taste and garnish as desired.





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# An Evolving Story

Read to Grow's mission and impact keep expanding

by AMY J. BARRY

Children flourish in all aspects of their lives when language and literacy skills begin at birth with their first and most important teachers – their parents. It's a simple but important mission that Read to Grow has been making a reality since its inception almost 20 years ago.

The Branford-based nonprofit set out with a tall order: to provide a brand-new book to every child born in every hospital in Connecticut. Initially, the baby board book, "Welcome to the World!" by local author Nancy Elizabeth Wallace, was distributed in a literacy packet given to every family with a child born at Yale-New

Haven Hospital. Today, the flagship Books for Babies program is in an additional 13 hospitals throughout the state, reaching at least 61 percent of babies born in Connecticut every year.

And the nonprofit keeps growing. Through various programs that have been added to its roster, to date, Read to Grow has provided more than 1.8 million children's books to more than one million people since the year 2000. Remarkably, the continuum of services provided statewide – and the growing number of books distributed – are achieved with just two full-time and seven part-time staff, along with more than 100 dedicated volunteers.



**THE BIRTH OF READING:** A Read to Grow volunteer visits with the mother of a newborn at Yale New Haven Hospital and explains the important role reading plays in childhood development. Photo by Tricia Bohan Photography

The Books for Kids program – formed several years after Books for Babies started – provides books and literacy education to families, childcare providers, doctors and teachers, along with a variety of other organizations and groups. Over the last four years, Book Places and Partnerships were added to the mix as formal collaborations with other nonprofits to reach more low-income and at-risk families.

Just recently, in October, Read to Grow launched Early Steps to School Success in New Haven elementary schools in partnership with Save the Children, which has been implementing the innovative early learning program for at-risk children in rural communities nationwide for over a decade. New Haven is the only cityscape adaptation of the program.

## A DREAM COMING TRUE

Roxanne J. Coady, Read to Grow’s founder and board chair, isn’t surprised the organization’s original mission is coming true in so many ways. Instead, she’s grateful.

“Our success is certainly what I’d hoped for,” she says. “I think the notion was a simple story I’ve told a million times. When I learned there was an eight-year-old boy at the Fair Haven Clinic [in New Haven] who had never owned a book, it seemed like a big problem. And so, my goal was to make sure there wasn’t another eight-year-old who didn’t have a book.”

Coady, who since 1989 has owned independent bookstore R.J. Julia Booksellers in Madison, adds: “I really think reading changes lives, which is why I opened a bookstore.”

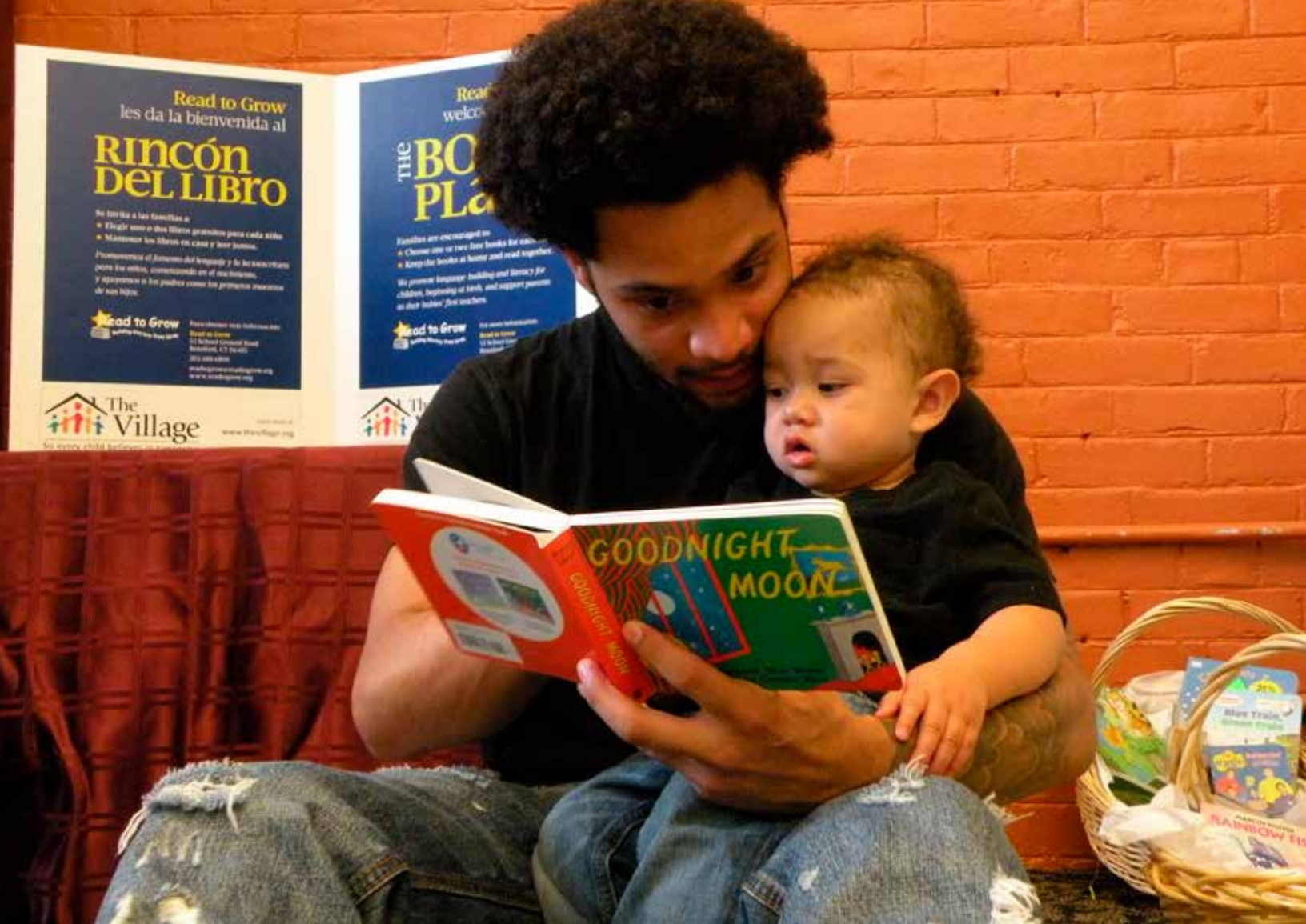
As Read to Grow expanded its reach, the complexities of the literacy problem became more apparent, she says.

“The research about zero to three [years old] being the most critical time for brain development was coalescing in the late 1990s and is now considered common currency,” Coady says.

Explaining why Read to Grow is so big on giving books, Kyn Tolson, executive director, points to a 20-year worldwide study that was published in 2010. Its author, Mariah Evans from the University of Nevada in Reno, found that the number of books in a home is the top



**GETTING A GOOD START:** Research shows the first three years of a child’s life are the most critical when it comes to brain development, according to Read to Grow founder Roxanne Coady. Photo by Tricia Bohan Photography



**STARTING SMALL:** A father and his infant son enjoy the classic children's book *Goodnight Moon* at the opening of Read to Grow's Book Place at the Village Annex in Hartford. Photo courtesy of Read to Grow.

factor predicting success for children. The more books children have in the home, the higher level of education they will attain.

"It's not the wealth or education level of a family that's a predictor, it's that books create home libraries," Tolson says. By having books in the home, she explains, parents create the expectation for their children that books and reading are important.

Read to Grow's work extends beyond just literacy, says Coady.

"There's a disconnect in our culture that what's going on over here isn't really impacting me," she says. "But these problems impact quality of life, what our cities look like, how our government spends its money – a lot of things, economically. But most importantly, it ought to reinforce our need to be compassionate and

thoughtful in the macro sense. There's 'us' and 'them' and it should be 'we.'"

Read to Grow, she adds, is implementing change in a cost-effective way.

"We have the slightest overhead and the most efficient, hard-working staff and volunteers. So, a large percentage of the dollars go to the families that are impacted," she notes.

## ON THE GROUND

Marguerite Alpert is the Books for Babies coordinator and is expanding a new component of the program – The Prenatal Project, which aims to provide literacy information and baby books to women receiving prenatal care at community health centers and clinics.

"I have a teaching background, and we know as teachers, the more

times people hear a message, the more likely it is to stick," Alpert says. "The Prenatal Project speaks of our overarching goal, which is to help parents understand that they are their children's first and best teachers and that it's never too early to start reading."

Alpert points out that an infant's auditory senses are fully engaged by 20 weeks' gestation.

"It's always really fun to see the expression on people's faces when they realize they can read to their babies before they're even born," she says. "And that babies recognize your voice."

Linda Sylvester, co-coordinator of Books for Kids, remembers a time 12 years ago, when a Bridgeport mother called to request books for her two- and four-year-old children.

“The little boy loved the books so much, he started sleeping with them under the pillow,” Sylvester recalls. “The kids are now in middle school and high school, and the mom still calls us periodically for books. She knows how important it is. Her kids remember Read to Grow and ask, ‘Can we call that book lady?’ It speaks to the relationships we’ve made.”

Evelyn Tomasello, the bilingual co-coordinator of Books for Kids, addresses the state’s increasing need for books and materials in both English and Spanish.

“Being from Puerto Rico, I can say to Spanish-speaking parents that in our culture, you don’t talk much to little kids, [even though] they’re listening, they’re learning, their brains are developing,” she says. “And the parents listen when I tell them that’s not the way to do things. We’re giving them tools, educating them, helping them. It’s really powerful. That’s what makes us unique. If parents are the first teachers, we have to educate them first.”

Another Read to Grow partnership involves providing an educational component and children’s books to the Connecticut Food Bank’s GROW! [Grocery On Wheels] Truck, which travels to the locations of Head Start and other early childhood



**SPREADING THE WORD:** Judith Jerald, left, senior advisor for Save the Children early childhood programs, and Read to Grow founder and board chair Roxanne Coady, gave a presentation at the New Haven Lawn Club about their new Early Steps to School Success partnership. Photo by Tony Bacewicz.



**TEAM READING:** Read to Grow staff members from left, Marguerite Alpert, Robin Baker, Evelyn Tomasello, Linda Sylvester, Kyn Tolson, Paula Grimm, and Diane Visconti at the Early Steps to School Success presentation at The New Haven Lawn Club. Photo by Tony Bacewicz.



Read to Grow founder and board chair Roxanne Coady at R.J. Julia Booksellers, the independent bookstore she has owned in Madison for more than 25 years. Photo by Tricia Bohan Photography.

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**“I really think reading changes lives.”**

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also praise parents for not being on their phones when they come to our workshops.”

### **AN EXCITING TIME**

“Read to Grow started from something being a negative, terrible situation that Roxanne saw and imagined,” Tolson says. “How can there be an eight-year-old that doesn’t have a book in the U.S. in 2000? But Coady tackled the problem in a positive, passionate way and that trickles down to every single person connected with Read to Grow.”

“I think our success has been making people feel that passion,” Tolson continues. “You can tell them to care, what to think, but, ‘Don’t tell me, show me.’ Our ‘show’ is passion and caring, the fire and energy about what we do that you can see in our staff.”

Robin Baker has been the nonprofit’s office manager for the past 17 years.

“I’ve stayed so long because I see so much value in the mission,” Baker says. “The energy behind it from the key people who were involved was pretty intense from the beginning. They had so much in their hearts, so much energy to keep it going. And the volunteers are amazing.”

She adds, “I’m here when these families call and say, ‘Can I get books?’ The children seem to respond to the books with more joy than they do to any toy or gift. It never changes. It’s fun to be a part of making this happen. It’s meaningful; there is such a need. And it seems like such a simple way to help children.” ■

*For more information about Read to Grow, visit [readtogrow.org](http://readtogrow.org).*

programs in Connecticut.

“It’s fantastic,” Tomasello says. “Families have to attend a half-hour literacy workshop before going on the truck to get food. We talk about why it’s so important to read to your kids. It’s a nurturing partnership, providing books and food.”

Read to Grow leaders say the biggest challenge in educating new parents is teaching them how critical it is to delay the onset of screen time.

“The fact is, the American Academy of Pediatrics has said

unequivocally that children from birth to 18 months should have zero screen time,” Alpert says. “They recommend that even up to age five, children shouldn’t have more than one hour of any type of screen time [daily]. There is strong evidence now that bright colors and flashing lights are disruptive to the development of the brain.”

Tomasello adds, “I saw a mom with a two-year-old and the baby was holding a device. We explain why that’s bad for the child, but we

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# Promoting Mental Wellness

UConn Health uses unique approaches to treat patients with mood and anxiety disorders

by JAMES BATTAGLIO / photography by SESHU PHOTOGRAPHY

**E**ach year, providers involved in UConn Health's Mood and Anxiety Disorders Program treat more than 500 patients with the skills of a psychiatric SWAT team, using diagnostic tools that epitomize the 21st Century.

The team is comprised of seven psychiatrists and four psychologists who have taken the treatment of psychiatry to a near-unprecedented level, using such innovative applications as smart phone apps and nasal spray mood elevators.

The program – launched four years ago by Dr. Jayesh Kamath, associate professor of psychiatry and immunology at UConn Health – distinguishes itself by tailoring treatments to patients with specific disorders, ranging from extreme depression and mood swings to suicidal tendencies.

“We see patients with mood and anxiety disorders who can benefit from specialized treatment approaches,” he says. “In founding the clinic, I wanted to create a program that would provide evidence-based care.”

Dr. Kamath says mood patients can primarily be divided into two extremes: those with depression, and those with mania or hypomania. The latter, he says, are frequently on a roller coaster ride of emotion from feeling low to feeling euphoric, “while patients with depression swing between feeling normal and feeling depressed.”

He says the needs of these patients are different from those of people with psychotic disorders. “Patients with schizophrenia, for example, experience paranoia and hallucinations.” While they may also have mood and anxiety symptoms, they're only a part of their symptomatology. “The first target for their treatment is usually those psychotic symptoms, like hallucinations,” he says.

The clinic has refined its treatment program by using a triage-like approach to direct patients to specific providers based on patient needs and provider expertise. This process begins when patients in need call the clinic and report their symptoms to Razan Jazeh, the clinic's coordinator.

“I handle the process of interacting with patients via phone and, after hearing their concerns, I select the appropriate [physician] provider for them,” says Jazeh, a four-year employee of the anxiety program. She's become so attuned to her

role that “I can pretty much predict when patient activity will increase – especially around the holidays or during bad weather, winter versus summer, or even when TV news is depressing. Every day, I'm impressed with the faculty here and the way they deal with each and every patient.”

Many of the patients in the program suffer from debilitating anxiety as a result of physical, sexual and, in some cases, military trauma.

“We also see patients who have, unfortunately, been subjected to other horrible traumas during their childhood or early years, and they can't carry that baggage any longer,” says Dr. Kamath.

One of the features that make this program unique is its focus on both medication and psychotherapy, unlike those that focus only – or primarily – on medication management.

“In our program, we have psychiatrists who have expertise in psychopharmacology, so if a patient needs medications to manage their problems, they are assigned to these providers,” says Dr. Kamath.

“But we also have psychiatrists who have expertise in integrating medication management with psychotherapeutic treatments, and that is really one of the unique natures of this program. I would say most of us provide supportive psychotherapy with medications, and then there are psychiatrists in the clinic who provide specialized psychotherapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy.”

In terms of psychotherapy, that's where someone like Karen Steinberg, PhD, comes in. Dr. Steinberg, a 20-year UConn Health employee, is a psychologist who conducts research in the areas of psychotherapy and child attachment; oversees programs aimed at reducing risk factors for child maltreatment and supporting new families in fostering positive relationships and child development; and teaches within the medical, graduate, and residency programs. She enjoys teaching mind/body skills and psychotherapy for psychiatry residents and fellows, helping them to cope with managing the stress of medical school.

She also sees individual patients throughout the week. “In the clinic, many of the people I see are struggling with work. They may be having challenges with a supervisor or coworker,” she says.



Karen Steinberg, PhD





**CHANGING THEIR MINDS:**

Razan Jazeh, Dr. Jayesh Kamath and Krystyna Lipinski are an instrumental part of the Mood and Anxiety Disorders Program at UConn Health, and work diligently to improve patients' mental well-being.

Other patients may be students who are feeling stressed as they try to balance the demands of life, work, and school. Many have experienced traumatic stress that continues to interfere with their lives, and their ability to feel joy and happiness.

One approach she finds to be particularly helpful involves the cultivation of positive moods that can counteract the negative states of mind.

“We’ve known about these ideas for a long time,” she says. “But it’s almost like competing responses. It’s hard to be really tense and relaxed at the same time. Relaxation approaches are sometimes very helpful. A lot of them involve breathing techniques – slowing down breathing or progressive muscle relaxation. Guided imagery is an approach that uses the mind and imagination to try to reduce stress and create peaceful images, and we know this can [lower] blood pressure and heart rate. So, if you can teach people things that actually turn on the relaxation response, it can counteract a stress response.”

She then picks up her cell phone and taps an app titled ‘Instant Heart Rate.’ A few seconds go by as she places a finger over the small camera window on the back of the phone, which can measure a person’s heart rate and track the measurements over time.

Dr. Steinberg shares tools like this with her patients as a way for them to become more aware of how the body experiences stress throughout the day. These apps are like miniature “biofeedback” tools, and can often be obtained free of charge on mobile devices.

In a session, patients might use an app to measure their heart rate and think about how stressed they feel. “Then maybe we would do some kind of breathing exercise or relaxation technique and see if that had any effect,” she explains.

Another app, called “Breathe,” helps patients learn how to relax. It might tell the patient to “Stop, Breathe and Think,” and guide the patient through a 10-minute relaxation session or provide some information on stress. “It might give the patient a little quiz, after which it could say, ‘Tame your anxiety.’ There are even things about [improving] your sleep.”

Although it can be exciting to incorporate some of these advances into treatment, Dr. Steinberg does not feel they can replace one of the most important ingredients of psychotherapy – a positive connection between the therapist and patient, where the patient experiences the therapist as understanding, compassionate, and genuinely interested in their welfare, and in the improvement or resolution of their problems.

And that’s when the subject turns to one of the most innovative psychiatric approaches of the 21st Century. In short, the cell phone has replaced the 1975 mood ring.

For the past five years, Dr. Kamath has been collaborating with Professor Bing Wang, an associate professor of computer science and engineering and an artificial intelligence (AI) expert at the University of Connecticut Storrs campus. Both are leading a study funded by the National Science Foundation, using Smartphone technology to detect the worsening of depression, even without questioning patients.

“The cell phone is part of our body now, and with the patient’s consent, we can get data from these phones that can really tell us a lot about what’s going on with them,” says Dr. Kamath.

Using an app developed by the study team, Dr. Kamath and Professor Bing followed two groups of students, with

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**“It’s no secret that antidepressant medications take as much as four to six weeks before they can help a patient feel better. The field of psychiatry is on the verge of changing that, and we are proud to be part of it.”**

–DR. KAMATH

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and without depression. The app enabled them to track how quickly or slowly the patients moved, their mobility, their sleep, and how many places they visited during the day.

“We can even measure the intonation of their voice when they make a phone call. The app can track their activity on the cell phone, and even their Internet activity, or how many calls they make. Every two weeks, we send them a questionnaire asking a number of questions regarding their level of depression,” says Dr. Kamath.

The study clearly showed that as patients became depressed, they moved and talked more slowly, visited fewer places or remained in their home, and reduced their Internet activities. Through a Fitbit that patients wear at night, provided by the study team, “we can also tell if their sleep was disrupted.”

“It’s fair to say that their cell phones can be tattletales,” Dr. Kamath quips.

During the first phase of UConn Health’s study, involving 68 patients, the doctor and the professor found good correlations between the data and patients’ depression questionnaires. “By the second phase, among 120 patients, we were able to predict depression without even knowing the questionnaire outcome,” he says. Dr. Kamath believes they will soon be able to predict which patients are going to become depressed in the future.

Just when you think the cell phone’s AI represents psychiatry’s zenith, Dr. Kamath announces yet another innovation in the field of treating mood and anxiety disorders – a novel medication based on ketamine.

Ketamine is a medication often used as an anesthetic and pain reliever. UConn Health is one of 55 worldwide sites testing esketamine, a derivative of ketamine, as a mood elevator that acts quickly, potentially reversing the threat of suicide.

“It’s no secret that antidepressant medications take as much as four to six weeks before they can help a patient feel better,” says Dr. Kamath. “The field of psychiatry is on the verge of changing that, and we are proud to be part of it. Esketamine in a nasal spray form seems to be very effective. It works to reverse suicidality within hours or days, instead of weeks.”

Dr. Kamath said the FDA is close to approving this product, which is currently in a study phase. Its potential side effects include increased heart rate and blood pressure, possible disassociation, dizziness, nausea and headache, but there is no threat of overuse.

“The patient will have just a one-time use of the nasal spray at a physician’s office, after which the product container is disposed of,” he says. “If it gets approved within the next year or two, it can be a game changer in the field of psychiatry.” ■

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# Dreams and Illusions





# What's Next for MOMIX? Just Ask Alice.

by FRANK RIZZO

**O**n an autumn afternoon in a rehearsal hall located along a wooded country road in Washington, Connecticut, six MOMIX performers find themselves in a wonderland.

As music begins, they move rhythmically, bouncing giant, cobalt blue rubber balls in Oompa Loompa unison. As the melody becomes more sharply metered, they toss the shiny spheres to each other with clockwork precision. Then, they glide over the giant orbs on their stomachs, as if they were bodysurfing speed bumps, before regrouping and collectively transforming themselves as one long, undulating...could it be?...caterpillar.

Or maybe not.

Things could change in the development of this work in progress, says Moses Pendleton, whose dance illusion company has transfixed audiences internationally for nearly four decades.

The dancers, Pendleton and Cynthia Quinn (his longtime life partner and former MOMIX dancer), are collaborating on a new piece, the first for the company in several years. "ALICE" is an evening-length work inspired by Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" and "Alice Through the Looking

Glass." It will receive a soft opening January 12 and 13 at the Warner Theatre in Torrington, before its official world premiere in Italy in February. The company will also perform a "Best of MOMIX" program at the Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts at UConn at Storrs on February 6, with a Q&A session the following night.

"You never know what Moses is going to do," says dancer Gregory DeArmond, who has been with the company for four years. "When he gets in the studio he has an idea and a vision, but he's not stuck to it and it's all a collaborative process. We're still playing with things in the studio but he'll be changing things up until the premiere – and even when the production is touring, it will continue to transform."

## IT'S A NATURAL

For MOMIX fans, Alice's adventures are a natural subject for the company.

"It goes back to Pilobolus and MOMIX," says Pendleton, who formed MOMIX in 1981 as an offshoot of his first dance company, Pilobolus, which he co-founded in his senior year of Dartmouth College. Pilobolus also continues to create new pieces

**EYE ON THE BALL:** Dancers move in rhythmic motion in a dance piece called "Spawning." Photo by Charles Azzopardi





VISUAL POETRY: Jennifer Chicheportiche lights up the stage in "Paper Trails." Photo by Max Pucciarello





**PARTNERS IN LIFE AND ART:** Artistic Director Moses Pendleton and Associate Director Cynthia Quinn. Photo by Frank Rizzo

just down the road from MOMIX in Washington Depot, albeit not with any of its original founders remaining as artistic directors.

Both Pilobolus (named after a mushroom known for its explosive spores) and MOMIX (named for a dairy supplement fed to veal calves) explore dance in terms of sculptural forms, both sensual and surreal.

MOMIX describes itself as presenting “illusionist choreography,” creating pieces that confuse, intrigue, seduce and delight the eye by utilizing a wide variety of forms and techniques — acrobatics, gymnastics, dance, yoga, mime, props, costumes, lighting and projections — into a singular moving experience.

“MOMIX implies a certain kind of controlled nonsense and visual poetry with amazing bodies doing amazing things,” says Pendleton. “It’s a highly physical and visual theater. We use props and imagery and nature and take the human body to

make connections to the non-human. MOMIX is also about escaping the so-called ‘real world’ to experience the surreal.”

Over the years, he says, both companies have often been described in “Alice” metaphors: “Talking about our illusions, how we changed the scale of things, the dreams, the non-sense, the surreal.”

Pendleton says he never intended — or intends — to do a literal interpretation of Carroll’s ripe-for-interpretation evergreen. But a photographic gig last year using the dancers for an “Alice”-themed calendar launched Pendleton down his rabbit hole of “Alice” research. That’s when this new MOMIX piece began to happen in earnest.

But there was a practical reason, too.

“MOMIX is a mom-and-pop operation,” says Pendleton, who turns 70 in March and runs the company with Quinn. “The reason for doing this is



AMID THE MAGIC MUSHROOMS: Rebecca Rasmussen and Seah Hagan in "ALICE." Photo by John Kane. Graphic design: Equilibre Monaco



**DAZZLING DANCERS:** Choreography and special effects awe the audience in "Light Reigns." Photo by Charles Azzopardi



**MIRROR MAGIC:** Sarah Nachbauer in "Echoes of Narcissus." Photo by Max Pucciarello

as simple and as boring as this: We just have to make a new show to run another three-year cycle, and I said I'd give it one more shot."

### **INSPIRATIONAL LITCHFIELD HILLS**

Pendleton has always found a free-flowing stream – of consciousness, of creativity, of water – amid his natural surroundings among the Litchfield Hills, which Pendleton has called home since the '70s. He first arrived during the early days of Pilobolus because co-artistic director Martha Clarke lived in the area and the company found the natural beauty of the area to be inspirational for their works.

In the late '70s, a realtor showed Pendleton a barn on Bell Hill Road that could be used as a rehearsal studio. He also showed him the house across the street that was for sale. Whether it was the smell of spring air, the angle of the light or the funkiness of the digs, it was love at first sight.

Pendleton bought the barn, the eight acre-property and the 22-room, homey/haunting Victorian house surrounded by hawthorn trees, which is said to ward off evil spirits. The three-story fun house, with its towering, invasion ready turret and a wrap-around porch, offers panoramic views of the countryside.

### **WHO'S IN, WHO'S OUT**

The process of MOMIX-ing Carroll's "Alice" was one that emerged over several Connecticut seasons in the rehearsal hall.

"You don't copy Lewis Carroll but reference him," says Pendleton, who points out how other artists, from Salvador Dali to Tim Burton, have used Carroll's work as inspiration for their own visions.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the Cheshire Cat, Humpty Dumpty, and the Mad Hatter are all characters rich for the MOMIX treatment.

### **BUT WHAT ABOUT ALICE?**

"I'm willing to give Alice a shot," says Pendleton. "She's auditioning



**MASTERS OF ILLUSION:** (Top left) Dancers emote a cowboy theme in "Daddy Long Legs." (Top right) Jason Williams defies gravity in "Table Talk." (Bottom) Four dancers transform into a beautiful bouquet in "Marigolds."  
Photos by **Max Pucciarello**

for the show and so are the others but we haven't decided anything yet for sure — even the Caterpillar, who just might come out at the beginning of the show and say, 'You know I've never been given enough credit — so put that in your pipe and smoke it.' ”

Pendleton says he is also toying with the idea of doing a voice-over as Lewis Carroll. After all, the two men have a shared passion for photography and playful language.

#### TITLE TRAUMA

Then there's the title.

“I have a sister Alice so maybe we should just call the piece ‘Alice Pendleton’ or maybe ‘MOMIX in Wonderland’ or ‘Shades of Alice.’ I've thought of that title today. Or ‘A.I. Wonderland’ where Alice is a robot, and Wonderland is run by Google. I also like ‘Muscaria,’ which is the mushroom that Alice ate to make her grow tall or small. It's a psychoactive drug that makes you go to these places that she would experience under the influence. That's a world I'm somewhat familiar with.”

On Pendleton's mind of late is Michael Pollan's book, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of*

*Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence.*

“[In reading the book], I started seeing all the relevancy of tweaking the brain into a world of dreams, surrealism and other possibilities. It doesn't mean you're ill or you're trying to escape, but maybe you're trying to develop a new reality that may be part of our health, education and welfare. After all, Alice is just a figment, a pigment, a smattering of Carroll's imagination. Just because there's a 100-year-plus difference in our times doesn't mean that you can't reconnect, and transcend time and space. There's an energy there — and a kind of belief that that's possible.” ■





*For more information on the dance company and its productions, visit [momix.com](http://momix.com).*

*Frank Rizzo is a theater critic for Variety and arts writer covering Connecticut for the last 40 years, writing for a variety of in-state publications as well as for The New York Times and American Theatre magazine. His blog is [ShowRiz.com](http://ShowRiz.com) and you can follow him on [@ShowRiz](https://twitter.com/ShowRiz). He lives in New Haven.*

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THE SIMSBURY INN, 397 HOPMEADOW STREET, SIMSBURY  
7:00 – 11:00 PM ♦ \$75 PER PERSON

Autism Families CONNECTicut (AFC) is celebrating its 9th Anniversary with its annual fundraising event, A Sparkling Celebration, on Saturday, April 13, 2019 at the Simsbury Inn.

The evening promises to be filled with fabulous food, cocktails, live and silent auction opportunities, music and dancing, all to raise money to support recreational and social programs designed specifically for individuals with autism.

Reserve your tickets today at [autismfamiliesct.org](http://autismfamiliesct.org), call 860-474-3444 x103 or email [Leah@autismfamiliesct.org](mailto:Leah@autismfamiliesct.org).

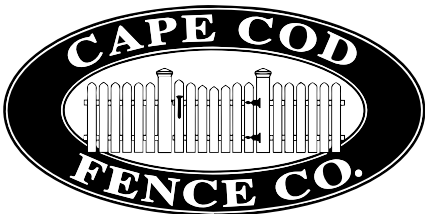
*All proceeds benefit the recreational, social, and educational programs of Autism Families CONNECTicut. We provide safe, sensory-friendly activities for children, teens and young adults with autism and their families. These programs and special events are specifically designed to meet their needs; provide fun, healthy activities; and build lasting friendships. Visit our website at [www.autismfamiliesct.org](http://www.autismfamiliesct.org) for more information.*



If you missed Theresa Sullivan Barger's wonderful story featuring Dustin Atkins, *The Spectrum of Success*, you can find the whole story online at [www.seasonsmagazines.com](http://www.seasonsmagazines.com)



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## Gooney Goodness

I announce to my class of fifth grade students that it's time for a snack. They scamper off to their lockers to retrieve their bits of nourishment, and I step behind my desk, reach into my bag, and pull out my own.

Strawberry frosted Pop-Tarts. The snack of champions. Two fruit-filled tarts covered in white frosting and pink sprinkles. Toasted or not, Pop-Tarts are the nectar of the gods. They are so good that I cannot bring a box of them to work or I will be compelled to eat every single one.

When I was a kid, I would've run barefoot through broken glass for a Pop-Tart.

I step back over to my students as they are returning to their seats with their own snacks. I can't believe my eyes. No

less than half a dozen of my students are peeling open small, plastic containers containing dried seaweed. Rectangular-shaped slices of greenery, not unlike the shape of my Pop-Tarts, but absent all of their goodness.

No frosting. No sprinkles. Just disgusting sheets of ocean weeds.

Seaweed. My students are eating seaweed, and they are eating it by choice. This is not something foisted upon them by evil parents who are hell-bent on ruining their children's lives. These kids like seaweed. They choose seaweed. They smile as they ingest this horrendous thing pretending to be food.

And those not eating the seaweed are almost as bad. They are eating berries, nuts, granola, celery, carrots, and other awful, unfrosted, unprocessed foods. Organic and all-natural monstrosities of

nutritional excellence.

I can't believe it.

Then one of my students sees my Pop-Tart and groans. "What are you thinking, Mr. Dicks? Do you know how unhealthy those are for you?"

I love this kid, but in this moment, I hate her, too. Hate her for hating the food product that brings me so much joy. Hate her for doing what so many think is acceptable in today's world: judging my food choices.

This has been the story of my life for some time. Slowly, inexorably, the world has been shifting away from the heart-warming foods of my youth: canned vegetables; mashed potatoes in a box; preservative-laced meats; white, nutritionless bread; frozen dinners; and gloriously processed things of all shapes and sizes.

This was the food of my childhood.

Instead, my students eat seaweed. Kale. Edamame. Bean sprouts. These things didn't even exist when I was a child. I couldn't have eaten kale if I had wanted to, and rightfully so. The world has begun to change, devolve, and with it, everyone around me has changed, too. Human beings are suddenly focused on the quality of the food instead of the amount of sugar and fat that can be packed into a single serving.

It makes no sense.

While I remain appropriately fixed and immutable, the people around me have grown nutritionally conscious and, in turn, exceedingly judgmental about my food choices. We can no longer judge people by almost any standard (nor should we), but food remains one of the last bastions of the fundamentally judgmental jerk faces.

If you're eating in a way that someone deems ill-advised or unhealthy, they will let you know and think this level of judgment is acceptable. They won't criticize the fact that I'm wearing jeans to a wedding, parking in a fire lane, or listening to Meat Loaf by choice, but if I'm eating something that they see as nutritionally questionable, they will say something.

As a result, I find myself as the only person standing up for the Egg McMuffin, Swedish Fish, Domino's pizza, Diet Coke, and canned corn.

I'm a man on an island, eating Pop-Tarts, while the world has sailed away. My students included.

There is only one time each year when the monsters I teach turn away from their kelp-based diet and come to my side of the aisle. That day is the Wednesday before Thanksgiving.

On this day, my students are encouraged to bring in a dish from home that means something to them or their family, to share with me and their classmates. Sometimes it's a food connected to the student's religion or culture. Other times, it's a family recipe.

Parents are invited to join us. It's typically a large affair. A Thanksgiving feast.

Most of the time, the dish is nutritious, non-processed, and wholly agreeable to the judgmental heathens I teach every day. They nod in approval. Smile. Sometimes even applaud.

On this day, I wait. I allow the nuts

and berries, the bacon-infused tofu, and the gluten-free chicken kebabs to pass by. I bide my time. I await my opening. Then I strike.

From the same bag that I used to transport my Pop-Tarts to school, I remove a staple of the Thanksgivings of my youth. The next best thing to turkey. Pure holiday tradition.

Canned cranberry sauce.

Many of my students have never seen canned cranberry sauce, which makes me wonder if this constitutes some form of child abuse. Those who have seen cranberry sauce in a can have often never seen it outside the can.

But they see my can and all think the same thing: "Food in a can? This must be a terrible thing. The canned version of his evil, stupid Pop-Tarts."

Even the parents groan a bit.

It plummets to the plate, purple on white, where it bounces, lands, bounces again, and then spins two or three times before finally coming to a halt.

The children erupt into cheers.

Laughter. Hands are covering mouths in disbelief. Fists pump into the air. Kids shout, "Look at it!" and "It's in the shape of the can!"

And when they taste it, they can't believe how good it is. They can't believe how the sugar-laced gelatinous version of a cranberry can taste better than an actual cranberry, but it does. They admit it.

I bring three cans every year, and I always go through all three.

My processed, canned, nutritionally questionable contribution to our Thanksgiving feast has stolen the moment. For the one and only time

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## **My processed, canned, nutritionally questionable contribution to our Thanksgiving feast has stolen the moment. For the one and only time each year, I have found a way to get other human beings to celebrate the food that I love most.**

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But I have only just begun.

I place a white plate on the table. I choose white because of the contrast it will afford. I choose a full-sized plate because of the action that it will allow. Then I remove the can opener from my pocket and cut off the top of the can while all eyes watch.

I turn the can over, cut a single hole in the bottom, and return my can opener to my pocket. I hold the can, open side down, over the center of the plate, and with my thumb and index finger, I squeeze ever so slightly.

The subsequent sound cannot be reproduced on the page. It is a sloughing sound. A suction sound. A gloriously suspenseful, entirely unexpected sound as the cranberry sauce emerges from the can, maintaining its canular shape.

each year, I have found a way to get other human beings to celebrate the food that I love most.

For one singular moment, I am no longer alone on my island. Instead, it is filled with children devouring the processed food of my youth and loving it just as much as I did – and still do. 🍽️

*Matthew Dicks is a teacher, storyteller, and the author of several novels and the recent Storyworthy: Engage, Teach, Persuade, and Change Your Life Through the Power of Storytelling. Learn more at matthewdicks.com.*

*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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