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is booming in spite of the economy. It's a block long retail strip in the very core of Bellevue. Along this commercial oasis and its nearby counterpart on Bellevue Avenue there are a total of seven restaurants, one of the finest wine and beer shops in the state, a first-class garage, two grocery stores, an antique dealer, a florist, an electrical contractor, a coffee shop, a residential clearing service and art school, and a yoga studio. Recently, the Ginter Park Residents' Association awarded the Bellevue Merchants Association \$1,909 for tree plantings along MacArthur Avenue. And the city is now in the process of awarding \$240,000 in contracts for the enhancement of MacArthur Avenue which will include, among other things, ornamental street lighting.

continued on page 20

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NORTH OF THE JAMES

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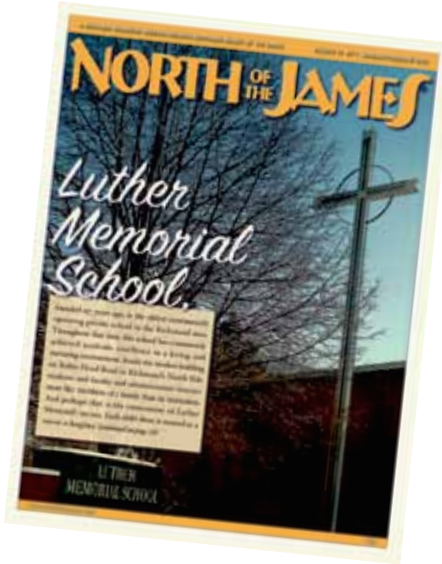
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LETTERS to the EDITOR



FROM LUTHER MEMORIAL

Dear Mr. McGuigan,

Our school was recently the featured story in North of the James. We appreciate the time and energy placed in this feature as it was in alignment with the environment of our school.

Luther Memorial School is proud of the opportunities offered to students and remains steadfast in our mission to provide a strong developmental and academic foundation for children in pre-school through eighth grade. We foster academic excellence, Christian faith and values in a safe, loving, grace-centered family atmosphere. Generations of Luther graduates have established a record of academic success at private and public high schools throughout the Richmond region.

While we value the continued quality advertising opportunities for our school, the story itself has proven very beneficial. Soon after the feature ran we held our February Open House.

Many families attending shared with us what a pleasure it was to read and a wonderful sense of tradition Luther Memorial School embodies.

Thank you for the partnership to showcase Luther Memorial School, the oldest operating private school in Richmond having been established in 1856. We look forward to our continued connection with North of the James.

Melinda Boisseau
Director of Admissions

FROM RREA

Dear Charles,

I am writing to extend my personal gratitude for the feature you wrote on my organization, the Richmond Region Energy Alliance (RREA). Thanks to your article, we saw an increase of about 50% in the num-

ber of homeowners taking our online home energy survey.

To quote one homeowner in particular:

"The article in North of the James was the impetus for going to your website. I live in Church Hill and am very interested in getting an energy audit done. I've lived in my house for 14 years and am past due in making it more energy efficient and hopefully more comfortable."

The neighborhoods that North of the James serves are also in RREA's target market. A lot of your readers reside in older homes, in which energy efficiency improvements have the greatest impact. Thank you for giving us a larger voice and helping us to share our services with the community who needs them most. We strive to put a human face behind our message, and you helped us achieve that through your thoughtful, personable, well-written article.

Sincerely,
Bill Greenleaf
Executive Director

FROM TWIG

Dear North of the James Editor,

Wow! A huge thank you for the wonderful article about Twig. The response has been tremendous! So many people are telling us they learned about Twig because of the North of the James article and ad in the January/February issue. Because of your great introduction, we received invaluable exposure along with an increase in customers and sales of our vintage and new home décor, fresh flowers and local artists' work. We're thrilled and grateful for your support of Twig and other locally-owned small business in Richmond.

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Chocolate Cravings Dark Desires

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN amazed how human beings can take something that grows—something not at all edible in its natural state—and refine it and by so doing create a culinary delight.

Consider the olive, a naturally bitter fruit that is fermented or cured with lye or brine and magically transformed into a palatable morsel. Someone figured that out about 6,000 years ago, probably in Syria.

The same is true with chocolate, which originated about 4,000 years ago in the Amazon basin among an extinct tribe called the Mokaya. Somehow one of these people figured out how to turn cacao beans extracted from a pod into something that would one day be eaten by virtually everyone who inhabits this world. A man or a woman in that distant time learned to make chocolate out of cacao beans by fermenting them, roasting them and grinding them.

Cathy Churcher knows chocolate, is frequently wrist deep in it as she spreads it, thick and dark, on a cookie sheet where it will cure once she's peppered it liberally with any number of fresh, organic ingredients. And then it will be broken into jagged chunks of bark that will be bagged and sold at fine shops throughout the Richmond area—Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, Ellwood Thompson's, For the Love of Chocolate, Urban Farmhouse and Café, and Emerson's Wine and Cheese, to name a few. Of course her handiwork is also available daily at her storefront, Chocolate Cravings, in the Hub Shopping Center on Lakeside Avenue. A vendor at Lakeside Farmers' Market just across the street also carries Cathy's creations and she's permanent fixture on weekends at the Williamsburg Farmers' Market.

Right now, she's carefully cutting a handful of crystallized ginger into fine slivers with a small knife. "When I'm finished with the cutting, the ginger will join cardamom in the chocolate," says Cathy. "I was

in England a few years and a chocolatier was doing a ginger bar and a cardamom bar and I thought the two flavors would go well together. Cardamom has a little heat to it and it works well with the dark chocolate and ginger."

Cathy Churcher received her professional chocolatier certificate from Ecole Chocolat. "I've also done the bean to bar," she tells me. "I learned how to make chocolate from the actual bean. It's quite a process. A few years back she traveled to Costa Rica to visit cacao plantations, where she learned volumes from the people who grow these remarkable trees.

"Cacao will only grow from between twenty degrees north and south of the equator," Cathy says. "It started in South America and migrated up through Central America into Mexico and around the world."

Today about 70 percent of all cacao beans come from West Africa, but Cathy uses only Columbian chocolate from a farm that practices fair trade.

Almost every cacao farm in the world—85 to 90 percent of them—are less than ten acres large. And growing these trees, which can live for about 70 years, and harvesting their precious pods is labor intensive. "There are generally two harvests a year and pod starts with a little flower that looks like an orchid," Cathy says. "It has to be hand harvested, one at a time because they don't ripen at the same time."

Each pod contains between 25 and 35 beans and it takes more than 300 beans to make a single pound of chocolate. Cathy holds up a block of dark chocolate the size a small laptop that weighs about five and a half pounds. "In November and December I went through 600 pounds of chocolate," she says.

Virtually all chocolate is grown organically. "The farmers who grow it don't have the money to buy insecticides and pesticides," says Cathy.



Cathy Churcher wrist deep in chocolate.


When it comes to chocolate, Cathy is like a chef. She creates her own recipes, using only natural and fresh ingredients, combining flavors that complement one another. "I do orange peels and cayenne bark, almond and sea salt, pistachio and cranberry," she says, naming but a few of her trademark chocolate barks. "I love using herbs, lavender, mint, fresh grated nutmeg, coriander and cinnamon. I do one with rose, fig and pistachios. It has a very floral taste."

She also does these wonderful little frogs made of white and dark chocolate, each one hand-painted with green and yellow stripes so they look like amphibians from an Amazon rain forest. "I do them for Love of Chocolate and they can't keep them in stock," Cathy says.

Though barks have become her

specialty, Cathy creates many other chocolate products. "I do truffles, I do my chocolate bars, I do Guinness-soaked brownies, I do European pralines, pretzels dipped in chocolate," she says, and then lists more.

In the future Cathy hopes for more commercial accounts and increased walk-in traffic. She loves meeting the people who buy her goods. And she always wants to keep the cost of her products reasonable.

"I feel chocolate should be accessible to everyone," says Cathy Churcher. "My chocolate is an affordable luxury. I can provide quality ingredients and quality chocolate at an affordable price." 

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Rich's Stitches

Sewing Their Way To Success

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

THIS APRIL RICH'S Stitches will celebrate its 25th anniversary—a very long time in a very competitive industry. They're known for embroidery, screen printing and promotional items. Everything from golf shirts and billed caps to pens and mugs and stainless steel cups, all stamped with a logo.

The owners, Chris and Cecelia Rich, are identical twins, born seven minutes apart, and it's hard to keep track of who is who. Even their voices are similar.

"I am the oldest," Cecilia tells me in the front office of their storefront on MacArthur Avenue. "And I'm the president of Rich's Stitches." Age, like rank, has its privilege.

As hard as it is now to tell the sisters apart, when they were young, it was nearly impossible, even for their mother.

"After we were born my mother put baby name bracelets on us to tell us apart," says Cecilia. "She had us in baby bracelets until we outgrew those and she got tired of replacing them—she strung the beads herself."

The Rich's right hand is Heike Smith who sits at the receptionist desk. "I never had a trouble telling them apart," she says. "They look different. But when I looked at pictures of them when they were younger, the only way you could tell them apart was by the part in their hair."

"That's right," Cecelia says. "I wore my part on one side; Chris wore hers on the other."

The twins attended St. Patrick's on Church Hill through eighth grade and then went to Marymount High School (now defunct) in Windsor Farms. "We never played tricks at St. Patrick's," says Cecelia. "I was afraid of the nuns and getting in trouble."

That changed in high school. Both girls played basketball, and during one game, when Chris was called out because of mounting fouls, she and Cecelia at half-time retreated to the locker room and exchanged jerseys.

"So I ended up playing with Cecelia's number and we got through the game," Chris remembers.

At VCU, Chris and Cecelia both studied general business and played field hockey, practicing with their teammates at Hotchkiss Field. After graduation Cecelia went to work at Blue Cross/Blue Shield and Chris got a job at Allied Chemical and then went to work for CP Dean. "I learned the trade of selling there," she says. "I was doing team sales. I learned about what it took to make it."

From the time they were very young, the Rich girls knew that they would one day work together in their own business. As Chris learned more at CP Dean about embroidery, her sister was growing restless at Blue Cross.

"I said to her," says Chris. "You know we can do something together now. Why don't we try this embroidery?"

The pair went to the super show in Atlanta, a portion of which was devoted to sporting goods. Cecelia watched the demonstration of a four-head embroidery machine that would enable them to do hats as well as other embroidery work. She watched closely, learning how it worked.

Something in the twins' genes was at play here. Their father Leonard was a master machinist, as was his father before him. So it was no wonder that Cecelia felt comfort-



Right-hand woman Heike Smith.



Rich's Stitches owners, Cecelia and Chris Rich.

able around machines and was a quick study, to boot.

And Emmalyne, their mother, had taught the girls to sew. "Mother taught us how to sew," Cecelia says. "And we were in 4-H growing up. Mother made a lot of our clothes growing up and we had to make some of our clothes ourselves. We're very thankful and I thank her to this day." Though virtually all the embroidery and sewing that comes out of Rich's Stitches is computerized, there are some exceptions. "I'll still sew on a patch by hand," says Cecelia.

After the show in Atlanta, the twins borrowed money from their parents, purchased their first machine and received a week's training from the distributor. Cecelia then quit her job at Blue Cross and they started up their business in the commodious basement in their brother Andrew's house at 3617 Hawthorne Avenue. Here they would cut their teeth and finesse the machinery, fill their first orders and lay a strong foundation for a business that would remain stalwart even in a shaky economy.

Chris continued working at CP

Dean for about another year. "We did get a little business from CP Dean just to get our feet wet," says Chris. "But most of our business came from word of mouth and our contacts with athletics and so forth."

One of Chris's co-workers at CP Dean became a sort of mentor for the twins. His name was Cris Criswell. "He kind of helped us with questions we had and we had plenty of questions," Chris Rich says. "We'd ask him questions and he had been at CP Dean for many, many years and knew a lot of stuff."

During that period Rich's Stitches was doing only embroidery—golf shirts, towels, jackets, just about anything you could stitch your name onto. If it can be embroidered Rich's Stitches can do the job. "The biggest logo I ever did was 107,000 stitches," Cecelia says. "It was a martial arts logo and it was probably a four-hour run and I could do six at a time."

Five years into the business, growth was increasing so steadily that the Rich sisters had to find a new home for their business. "Our brother put up with the noise, he put up with the people coming in and out," says



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ANNIVERSARY

Cecelia. "It was a great location but we just outgrew it. Sometimes we were working around the clock to meet orders. We needed a new space. And what we were looking for was a storefront."

Both Cecelia and Chris were fans of Dot's Back Inn, one of the few retail shops on MacArthur Avenue in those days. "We both knew Jamie and we knew the area," Chris says. "Decatur's was there and the electric shop, but nothing else except Cock and Bull."

But there were plenty of vacancies. "So we picked this location, moved what stuff we had over here and have been happy here for the past twenty years," says Chris.

"And now that we had a storefront we could bring more business here," Cecelia says.

Business grew steadily. "And most of the business we've had since we started has been through word of mouth," says Chris.

"Our increases have been incremental, ten to twenty percent each year," Chris says. "And even during



Production area at Rich's Stiches.

the big recession we've seen a little growth. We're real excited."

In the beginning their stock and trade was strictly embroidery. Then they expanded their services to screen printing and finally every conceivable sort of promotional item—advertising that never goes away.

"In 1995 we started doing promotional items to try to get people from going anywhere else," says Chris. "Once they came to us we could satisfy their marketing needs. Anything you can put your name on that you can leave in front of your customer or a friend is advertising. You might as well be wearing some-

thing with your logo on it instead of Nike or Adidas. Adding the promotional items really increased our sales. We were able to hit people we weren't hitting before.

Rich's Stiches found its permanent home on MacArthur Avenue, and over the years the twins have seen vast improvements along this commercial strip. "Year after year it has steadily grown," Chris says. "Neighborhood people come in, thinking they're entering the coffee shop (Stir Crazy) next door. A lot of people have walked by this shop many times before one day it clicks, 'This is what y'all do.' A lot of people come in and think we do alterations. They see a needle in our logo and they think we do sewing or custom garments and stuff like that."

Chris and Cecelia depend on their support staff, which includes Heike. "Heike joined us three years ago and has become my right hand woman," says Chris. "Her main role is that she does the accounts payable. She meets and greets everyone who comes into our shop. She's the one who answers the phone. She helps

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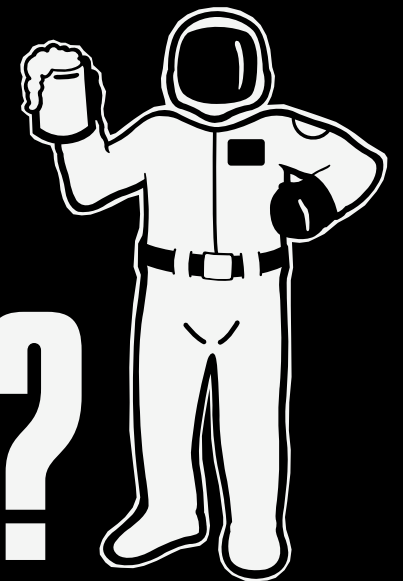
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me put together orders and she corresponds with people. When I'm too busy she can answer questions, she can deal with customers. She can do a little bit of everything."

And in the back of the house, Cecelia depends on Amber Smith, Tina Saunders, and the Rich's niece, Madi Saunders, who literally grew up in the business. "I have a picture on the door of Madi building and setting up her own little store inside our store when she was a little girl," says Cecelia. "She and Amber and Tina pick and fold and clean up the garments before we ship them out, before they go up front to Heike."

The other permanent fixtures at Rich's Stitches are the Rich's dogs—Odie, a chocolate lab and Cody, a golden retriever. They're friendly and dovetail perfectly with this family-style business. (Cody died recently and has a left a void at the shop.)

"We do operate as a family," says Chris. "When you enter the front door we take care of you, we ask you a bunch of questions so we can get a

good idea of what you're looking for. You can never ask enough questions."

Cecelia nods. "We provide excellent customer service and I think that's what refers other people to us all the time," she says. "The word's out about Rich's Stitches."

"It's also the quality of work that goes out that door," says Heike. "Cecelia won't let anything go out the door that's not perfect."

Chris acknowledges that the internet has helped drum up more business, but hands-on customer service can't be replaced. "One thing that has gone by the wayside in some businesses is customer service," she says. "It's hard to find customer service today, you get voice mail or you can't contact anyone. We have always offered great customer service. That's what keeps people coming back all the time. It's about how you're treated. We build relationships that last." ■

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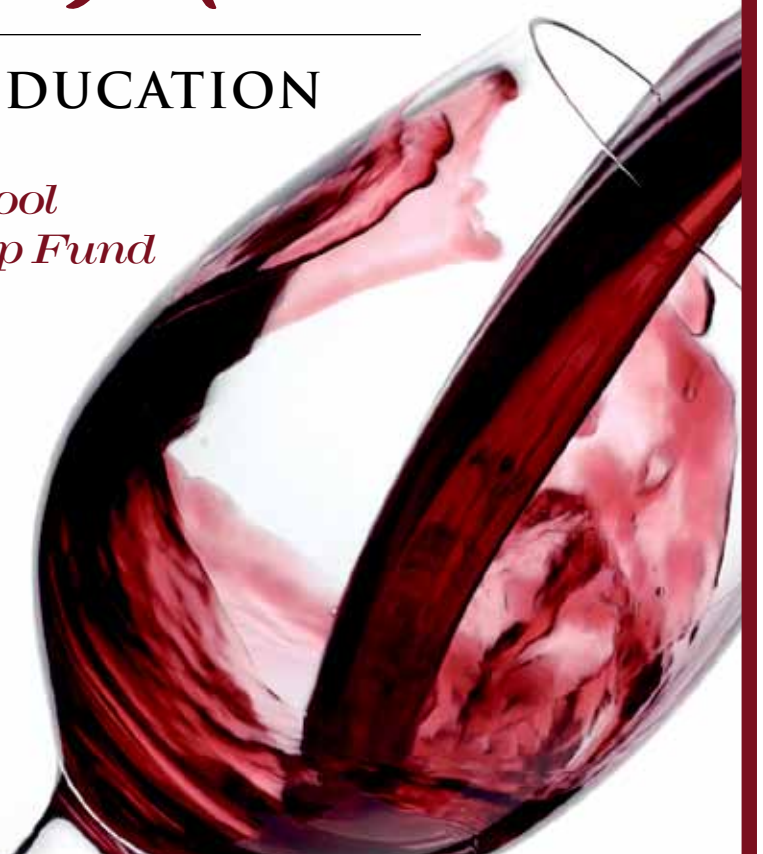
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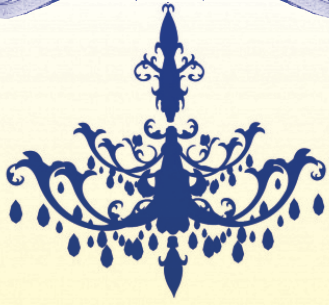
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Dots Back Inn Bigger Car, Bigger Engine

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

DOT'S BACK INN is going to bring the outdoors in. Possibly as early as mid-April.

Yet another improvement along MacArthur Avenue, outdoor dining at Dot's Back Inn on the wide concrete slab in front of the restaurant will handle the ever-burgeoning crowds who, whether they live in the neighborhood or not, have come to make this dining destination their neighborhood cantina.

Owner Jimmy Tsamouras is the consummate restaurateur, Falstafian in his conviviality. He sits across a booth from me and begins explaining what Dot's patio will be like.

"What you have to think about is a wooden deck out front that's going to be about eight inches short of the sidewalk," he says. "And then put a roof on top of that with the sides almost completely open. It will give us an additional twenty seats and allow people to dine outdoors."

When the weather gets too cold, clear vinyl shades will be lowered and heaters fired up, so it will be in use even during the most inclement weather.

City Council held a public hearing for Jimmy's request back in February and subsequently approved it. A trolley load of about thirty people rode down to City Hall the evening of the public hearing and every one of them spoke in favor of the proposed outdoor café. "I just really would like to thank the neighborhood for supporting us," says Jimmy. "No one was down there who opposed it."

Jimmy's been working on this plan for quite some time and it will ultimately do more than simply expand Dot's dining capacity.

"You know this is something a lot of people have asked about and it's a project that I've been working on for close to four years—outdoor dining," he says. "It's about fixing up MacArthur Avenue and making the whole strip look nicer. We have

this huge concrete slab in front of our restaurant so why not utilize it."

From the get go the neighborhood rallied round the idea. And that support encouraged Jimmy to pursue this dream even when the road got rough.

"I really put my head down and I just started driving and was just trying to make it happen," Jimmy remembers. "At a point I had kind of given up on it and it was the neighborhood and our customers who really kept me going and pushing me to get it done. The neighbors wanted to get it done and so I felt once I had started this trip that we had to go all the way."

Not long after Jimmy purchased

the restaurant from Cookie Gianini (who still works there two days a week), Dot's Back Inn was featured on Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives. "That let the world know about us," says Jimmy. "Dot's has become more of a Richmond name rather than just a North Side name. Dot's Back Inn is a little treasure hidden in the middle of a great neighborhood and the people here cherish it. They love to have their own little unique places that they can go to. And Dot's Back Inn is one of those neighborhood places."

Within throwing distance of the front door here, there are seven other food venues to choose from—the Mill on MacArthur, Tastebuds American Bistro,



*Dot's Back Inn
owner Jimmy Tsamouras*

Zorba's, Northside Grille and others. "Before these places opened up there wasn't a whole lot out here," says Jimmy.

Despite the rocky economy of the past eight years or so, Dot's Back Inn has held its own and seen a steady increase in traffic.

"We've been very, very fortunate these past few years," Jimmy says. "I really feel to have a successful restaurant you have to give something to someone. Something they want at a good price. People want a value. We keep our prices inexpensive because we want you to come back. We have a six dollar burger and a seven dollar burger. Most burgers anywhere else are eight to twelve dollars. We want to keep you coming back. We like to see your smart shining faces. At any given time you know half the people in here."

Which is true. One of the reasons people keep coming back, aside from the prices, is the consistency and quality of the food and a staff—from the back of the house to the front of the house—that is universally hospitable.

When Jimmy took over the restaurant he made very few menu changes—why fix something if it's not broken? Along with tweaking the menu he increased the turn around on every order, made the kitchen a more efficient machine.

To accommodate the expected growth that will come with the addition of outdoor dining, Jimmy is also planning to enclose a large section in the rear of the restaurant, bordering the alley.

"Well basically right now the building of Dot's Back Inn stops and we have outdoor storage and walk-ins outside the restaurant," says Jimmy. "What we'd like to do is cover them up. It will give us more of a prep area too. We're going to be expanding the rear of the building."

Jimmy looks around the restau-



A rendering of the planned sidewalk expansion.

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rant, which is steadily filling with the lunch crowd: There's only one booth left and two stools at the bar. "What we're doing," he says "Is we're making the car bigger by adding the patio. And the kitchen is our engine so we can only make the car so big for the engine to handle. When we close in the back that will give us more power for the engine so we'll be able to accommodate the extra seats."

Jimmy possesses a wealth of restaurant knowledge that came from years of education and lifelong experience.


"My family used to own the College Deli in Williamsburg," he says. "I graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in New York, Hyde Park/Poughkeepsie in 1992. I lived in Hawaii. I lived in Scottsdale Arizona, New York, came back to Virginia, worked at CCV for about two years and then moved down to Hilton Head, South Carolina. Then back to Richmond."

His brother, who now owns the College Deli as well as the Yorktown Pub, is Jimmy's business partner. "We just bought Southwind Café in Matthews

County in December," Jimmy says. "My brother and I work together as a team. I design the menus and help create the kitchens. When you take over an existing restaurant, you just improve on things, speed things up and add your own personal touches."

Jimmy believes in taking care of everyone, from his employees to each customer. "You take care of your employees, your employees in return will take care of you," he says. "And that's the way I also feel about business in general. You take care of your customers, they're going to come back and take care of you."

And if customers are not completely satisfied, Jimmy listens carefully to all complaints. "I'm not going to say we're perfect," he says. "We'll make mistakes. And when we make mistakes we like to apologize and correct them as soon as we can."

That may be the wisest advice for any business owner, and it's certainly made Dot's Back Inn one of Richmond's most successful restaurants. 

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MacArthur Avenue

A RISING TIDE LIFTS ALL BOATS

THE HEART

of any real neighborhood is its commercial district. It pumps vitality into the community that surrounds it, strengthens the local economy and improves the very quality of life. Bellevue and Ginter Park are lucky enough to have two such areas—one on Bellevue Avenue and the other on MacArthur Avenue, which is the focus of this story.

Nineteen years ago, when the inaugural issue of *North of the James* magazine (then *NorthSide* magazine) first appeared, MacArthur Avenue was a ghost town, almost post-apocalyptic. Dot's Back Inn, Rich's Stitches, Decatur's Garage and Lauterbach Electric were there, but not much else. The storefronts on the strip were by and large vacant or housed questionable businesses. Windows soaped over or so encrusted with grit that they were opaque: You couldn't see in. It was depressing.

But it hadn't always been that way. For decades Bellevue and MacArthur avenues were bustling, vibrant business strongholds, bastions of free enterprise. During those boom years, Bellevue Avenue housed three grocery stores—a Lukhard's, a Safeway and Wood's Store. And there was also Willey's Drug Store where politics was served up with a limeade on a summer afternoon.

MacArthur Avenue was home to two movie theatres. Samis Grotto was formerly the Bellevue and on the site of Once Upon A Vine there was a second theatre called the MacArthur. Before World War II, the street was called Rappahannock Avenue—the name was changed after VJ Day to honor General Douglas MacArthur. The MacArthur Theatre eventually became a skating rink. And there were many other businesses along the strip and no vacancies. There was a Sinclair Service Station,



On behalf of the BMA, Bob Kocher accepts a check from the Ginter Park Residents Association.

a hardware store and a grocery store. MacArthur Avenue was also home to the Bellevue Post Office which was located in the building that now houses 4025 Yoga. Fifteen years ago, I interviewed a long-time resident of Bellevue, a woman by the name of Elizabeth Reynolds. She told me that once the Bellevue Post Office was relocated in the early 1970s, business along MacArthur went rapidly south. "Moving the post office was the worst thing that ever happened in Bellevue," she told me.

Where MacArthur Avenue fell into palpable decline, Bellevue Avenue generally held its own. I spoke recently with Brenda Stankus who co-owns Classic Touch Cleaning with her husband Joe. She also operates a full art school out of the same space on Bellevue. Their residential cleaning business is brisk and all of Brenda's art classes are filled to capacity. She and her

husband have lived in North Side since 1978. Her husband grew up on Noble Avenue and she attended John Marshall High School.

"Bellevue Avenue never really went downhill," Brenda told me. "The stores here are more visible and have grown up with the city."

But the same was not true of MacArthur Avenue. "When I married Joe there wasn't anything over there," she says. "There was just Ray's Cock and Bull and Decatur's. That was before Dot's Back Inn or anything else was there."

Bellevue Avenue still has strong tenants, including Nicola Flora, Northside Grill and the newest kid on the block, Little House Green Grocery open seven days a week and owned and operated by Erin Wright and Jessica Goldberg.

"Our goal is to provide fresh food to the neighborhood and to support local Virginia producers,"



BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN

Third District City Councilman **CHRIS HILBERT**



The MacArthur Avenue Enhancement will soon be underway!

MacArthur Avenue is the best example in the city of a revitalized commercial corridor. I am proud of our merchants on MacArthur Avenue, and elsewhere in the Third District, who have improved our daily quality of life and helped make our local economy strong.

My thanks to the Bellevue Merchants Association, and to North of the James magazine for its continued commitment to all projects and initiatives that ensure the well-being of the Third District and the City of Richmond.

As I've said before, "I believe our best days are ahead and there's more work to be done."

PAID FOR AND AUTHORIZED BY CHRIS HILBERT

says Jessica. “And we feel like we’re accomplishing our goals.” They’ve already seen consistent traffic since their opening back in December. As Erin says, “We have a lot of people who do their weekly shopping here and come in for things they know they can find here.”

Just next door is Northside Grille, which was an immediate success when it opened its doors in May of 2007. A lot of that has to do with its owner, Shanan Chambers, hard-working and diligent. Her restaurant seats 100 indoors and another 75 outdoors on the covered patio. She is quick to point out that the restaurants in Bellevue on both commercial corridors make things better for everyone. “We have a lot of people who now come to Bellevue to eat because we’ve got so much to offer and it’s all different,” she says. Shanan, for a time, had run an ice cream parlor and deli on MacArthur Avenue. It’s now home to the mill on MacArthur, one of the most popular restaurants in the neighborhood.

It’s hard to believe that it was just under two years ago that Amy Foxworthy and Josh Carlton opened the mill: They have become that integral a part of the community. “We’ve had such success because of the loyalty of the people in the neighborhood and their willingness to try a new place and keep coming back,” says Amy standing behind the bar, filling orders as she speaks, never missing a beat. “You have over 3,000 residences within one mile and it works well for us.”

During her relatively short tenure Amy has already noticed palpable changes. She mentions the success of National Night Out and Christmas on MacArthur, both of which are sponsored annually by the Bellevue Merchants Association. “The merchants association has done a lot to improve the street and Chris Hilbert (Third District Councilman) has done a lot in getting the trees put in.” Amy also mentions the police men and women who regularly drop by the mill and other businesses on the strip. “The police officers have been absolutely amazing,” she says. “They come in all the time. They support our businesses. And they look out for us.”

Today you can eat at a different restaurant every day of the week in Bellevue, and Amy sees this as a very good thing. “I think



Jerry Bistline of Stir Crazy

it’s a healthy competition that brings people to our little strip of the world,” she says. “In the Fan it’s always worked and it has in Carytown. Those strings of businesses and restaurants bring people again and again to see what’s going on. That’s happening here now. Places that are doing so well, Dot’s Back Inn, Northside Grille, Tastebuds. Everyone does something that is slightly different. It gives people variety.”

Amy hopes that someday signs will be installed on Laburnum to let people know where MacArthur Avenue is, this business district tucked in the heart of Bellevue. “We have to do everything we can to let people know that this street exists because it is such a weird little street,” she says. “It kind of dead ends at Bellevue and Laburnum. It doesn’t go anywhere, and if you don’t know about it you don’t know about it. It would be nice to get signage at Laburnum and MacArthur.”

MacArthur Avenue is merely five blocks long and just one block of this stretch is lined with businesses. But that block has tremendous appeal, day and night. At night, all lit up, the street buzzes with activity. Restaurants packed, a honey colored light emanating from the storefronts, people buying wine and beer at Once Upon A Vine, Stir Crazy pulsing with a green aura. It’s a sort of cross between Mayberry and Carytown with a slice of Main Street, USA, and a sliver of Our Town.

If there is a mayor of MacArthur Avenue that title would have to go to Bob Kocher, owner of Once Upon A Vine, which cel-

brates its ninth year this May. Bob and Chris Egghart, whose wife Helen Campbell owns 4025 Yoga and Wellness, were instrumental in starting the Bellevue Merchants Association and putting together annual events including Oktoberfest, National Night Out and Christmas on MacArthur.

“When I got here there were four vacant shops down the street,” Bob tells me as we stand in his parking lot. “The street was a mess. It’s been cleaned and we got trash receptacles and trees planted.”

Before Bob Kocher opened Once Upon A Vine he had run a successful grocery store called Price’s Market for 20 years on Strawberry Street in the heart of the Fan. There he had helped create the Strawberry Street Festival back in 1979. It’s all part of his philosophy about community businesses.

“As I said to our merchants at our first meeting, ‘It’s nice to stand on this side of the counter and take that money in and pay for your car, your kid’s tuition, your insurance, your house payment, but sometimes you got to stand on the other side of the counter and give back,’” says Bob. “And when you give back it always comes back. It comes back two fold. This is a close knit community—Ginter Park and Bellevue—and when you show people you, as a business owner, care about them, they, in return wind up caring about you, too.”

Just around the corner from Bob’s, next to Rich’s Stitches (see article on page 8) is Stir Crazy, the neighborhood coffeehouse. Owner Jerry Bistline opened his shop a week

after Bob Kocher opened his. Years before, back in the mid-1990’s Jerry would often eat lunch at Dot’s Back Inn (see article on page 14) and it was then that the seed for the coffee and sandwich shop was first planted.

“I remember looking out the window there and noticing this bank of storefronts across the street and how cool they were architecturally and how empty they were,” he remembers. A few years later he bought a house in Bellevue and then in September of 2003 signed a lease on the property that would become Stir Crazy. “Inside there were dead pinball machines everywhere and the place was dirty, but through the magic of a bank loan and city grants here stands Stir Crazy Café.”

It took almost a year to get city permits in line, but he opened the following May and has seen changes on MacArthur that border on the unbelievable. “It has been amazing,” says Jerry. “When I opened Stir Crazy you could have parked an eighteen-wheeler on this street most days of the week and had some room to spare. Now when I drive down here even on a Monday or a Tuesday night I have to park out back in my parking place behind my store because you can’t park on the street. That’s what’s transitioned in this neighborhood. Our good friends and neighbors have helped with trees and bicycle racks (the bicycle racks were purchased by a local Girl Scout Troop and Bob Kocher) and everything else and now instead of having a nowhere land in the middle of our neighborhood we actually have a nice place to walk to. There’s anything you want on this street as far as edible goes.”

Jerry shakes his head. “It’s really exploded,” he says. “The old adage, a rising tide lifts all boats, is absolutely true. Every time you get somebody on this street that walks by here in the evening. Maybe they’re on their way to the mill or they’re on their way to Dot’s Back Inn. You see them stop and look at the place and perhaps make a mental note, ‘I’ll give this place a try tomorrow.’ It’s just a great place to be and a great time to be here, truly.”

Tastebuds American Bistro is just up the street and owner Andrew Wisniewski has seen a lot of changes since he first opened in another building on MacArthur Avenue.



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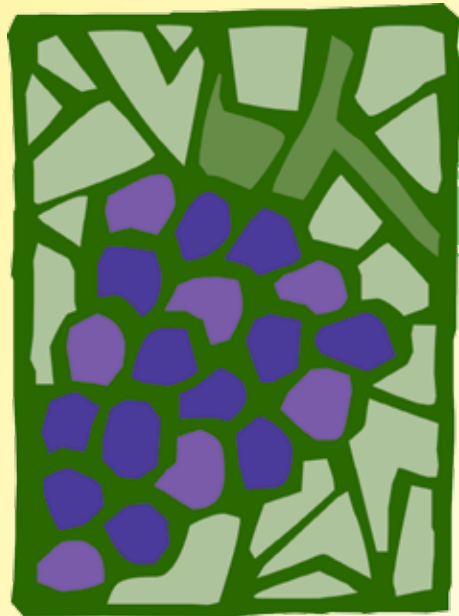
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"It's night and day from when we first came onto this street," he says. "We bought Tastebuds, which was a catering business, in 2002 and even on a Saturday afternoon there wasn't a soul out here."

He noticed subtle changes in the neighborhood a few years later and began offering food to go. "When we saw all these new people moving in to the neighborhood we saw an opportunity to do a take-out business and we had dining for 12 patrons," he says. Five years ago he opened Tastebuds American Bistro and his business is doing well.

He mentions his neighbor, the mill. "They're doing a bang up business and bringing all sorts of new people to the street and that's helping everyone," says Andrew. "And that's true with the coffee shop and the beer and wine shop, too. We're a good business community. Everybody visits one another at their restaurants. If we have to turn people away we inform them that there other choices around the neighborhood and that helps all of us."

One of the prime movers in the Bellevue Merchants Association is Chris Egghart. He's worked tirelessly to assist in physical improvements on MacArthur Avenue. He helped secure four decorative waste cans from the Clean City Commission and helped with two rounds of tree plantings. The first, paid for through Councilman Chris Hilbert's district funds, included five European hornbeams and two English oaks. An additional eight hornbeams were funded by the Bellevue Merchants Association and the Bellevue Civic Association. He also helped with a privately funded initiative that included the placement of wooden box planters with evergreen junipers along with large ceramic pots.

Chris's wife, Helen Campbell, owns 4025 Wellness and Yoga, which conducts charity events, provides teacher training work study, offers discounts to the unemployed and disabled, and works to bring yoga programs to people with medical problems who can benefit from the practice.

Not long ago, the Ginter Park Residents Association presented the Bellevue Merchants Association with a check for \$1,909 for the planting of additional trees along MacArthur Avenue. "We give this money each year to an organization in the community that is really making a difference in Ginter Park," says GPRA president Rebecca Dodson. "Even though MacArthur is not in Ginter Park we consider it our retail strip. They've done so much in the past few years improving the looks on MacArthur Avenue and we wanted to be part of that."

The city also wants to be part of the MacArthur Enhancement. Thanks to Third District Councilman Chris Hilbert, approximately \$240,000 will be spent in the next year for the planting of crepe myrtles and the installation of ornamental street lighting, comparable to the fixtures on Hermitage Road. "The numbers are out to bid," Chris Hilbert tells me. "When the city gets those numbers back then they'll award a contract and we'll

start to move forward. This is part of an overall city improvement."

Like other area residents, Chris has watched the slow, but steady progress, on MacArthur Avenue. "I believe that it's a real success story," he says. "It's becoming the gathering place for north Richmond. My wife and I have lived in Ginter Park for 17 years and the transformation has just been wonderful to see, and to have a small part in it is very gratifying."


Chris Hilbert, as a councilman, has always been committed to the revitalization of commercial corridors and he hails the progress on MacArthur. Then he says this, and it's good advice to follow: "I would just ask everyone as we're out in our daily toing and froing to remember those local merchants because they are the key for our success as a community. Keep those merchants in mind because they are the ones that are building our community, day in, day out, and we've got to support them if we want them there in the long run." **N9**



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WHAT'S NEW

Richmond Antiques Buying Low, Selling Low

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

RICHMOND ANTIQUES had just opened in time for this past year's Christmas on MacArthur, which is always held the second Saturday in December. Pedestrian traffic was tremendous and the owners, Susan and Larry Salomon, were extremely pleased with the turnout and developed an instant customer base.

"That was obviously a very wise move," says Susan. "We did very well that day and we've done consistently well every week since. We're very happy."

Their space is bright and open with stamped-tin ceilings and a broad storefront window, a perfect backdrop for antiques and collectibles and so much more.

"We have what I think is a nice eclectic mix of stuff," Susan says. "We have antiques, we have collectibles, we have fifties vintage stuff, we have ephemera, we have used books, we have vintage jewelry, vintage toys, railroad stuff, tobacco stuff, military stuff."

And just about everything else in between.

Larry, who as a boy growing up on Long Island used to accompany his mother when she was antique hunting, has a good sense of value.

"We buy low, so we can sell low," he says. And the prices at Richmond Antiques reflect this philosophy.

"We like going out and finding stuff and giving customers something they wouldn't have found otherwise," says Susan. "We buy from auctions and estate sales, and people come in and we buy stuff from them. We buy stuff that we like because we figure if we like it someone else is going to like it."


Anticipating a soon-to-be empty nest (their daughter is graduating from JMU, their son is graduating high school) the Salomons began in the antique business a couple years ago with a stall at an antique mall off Staples Mill Road, and later a storefront, that proved to be too small, in Ashland.



Richmond Antiques owners, Susan and Larry Solomon.

Ultimately the couple chose MacArthur Avenue because it suited their needs. "We liked the storefront here," says Susan. "It's in an older neighborhood with a mix of people—couples, singles, young families and seniors. It was a perfect fit for us and everyone's been really nice to us, including the merchants' association. We're more of a neighborhood shop than a high end antique store."

Larry nods. "We even sell CDs," he says. "Just a buck a piece and people come in from the neighborhood and buy them. We comparison shop, price stuff very fairly, which we've heard from many people."

"Buy low, sell low," says Susan and Larry nods again. 

*Richmond Antiques
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MUSIC

Party with The Taters!

by ANNE JONES



DID YOU EVER GO to look up a song on YouTube or iTunes and that one song leads to another, and then another, which leads to a different artist doing the same song, and then there's his other song which leads to that other song that sounds kind of like it and suddenly it's 2:00 am and you've listened to great music for the last three hours and now you're happy? That's just like a Taters show – a hoppin', joyous journey across all kinds of terrain – pop, country, Americana, and rock-n-roll. Who knew the “Road to Shambala” led to “Werewolves of London”? The Taters did. And with their tight, smooth harmonies, superb musicianship, and cosmic song connections, every show turns into a celebration with the audience.

That's why their brand new CD is aptly called Taters Party!-it's a mix of favorites covering everyone from the Bee Gees to Leadbelly with some interesting originals thrown in. Plus, it's all acoustic, recorded at an actual Taters party in someone's living room. 

Don't miss the CD release party at Positive Vibe Café on Saturday 3/30 at 7:30 pm.



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DATES

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Wed., May 29, 2013

Wed., July 24, 2013

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Wed., Dec. 11, 2013

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Goals, Updates & Accomplishments

RAINBOW MINUTES

The First Gay Kingdom

ESTABLISHED ON JUNE 14, 2004, by a group of Australian gay rights activists, The Gay and Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands was created as a symbolic protest in response to Australia's refusal to recognize same-sex marriage. The activists 'seceded' from Australia and sailed from the mainland aboard their chartered ship, the Gayflower. Upon arriving at Cato Island, the largest island in the Coral Sea Island Territory, they declared the territory a 'Gay Kingdom' with the planting of a rainbow flag.

Protest leader Dale Anderson was declared emperor, becoming Dale Anderson I. The kingdom's founders even established their own Declaration of Independence. Citizenship in the kingdom is immediately



granted, if you are gay or lesbian.

The kingdom issued its first stamps in July, 2006. One their currency, the Pink Dollar, they feature a picture of Emperor Dale Anderson I. Their capital is Heaven Island, formerly known as Cato Island, just a six-hour boat ride from Australia's Queensland coast.

Today, the kingdom's claims are not recognized by any State. And with no settlements, the islands remain uninhabited by humans.

The Presidential Citizens Award

ON FEBRUARY 15, 2013, DURING A ceremony in the East Room of the White House, President Obama awarded the nation's second highest honor, the Presidential Citizens Medal, posthumously to Jeanne Manford. She was the founder of the group Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays, or PFLAG. Her daughter, Suzanne Manford Swan, was present to accept the medal for her mother, who was one of 18 rec-

ognized for the award.

Before President Obama presented her award he recounted the 1972 event that led to PFLAG's creation. Manford's son Morty had come home beaten after participating in a gay rights protest in New York City. She marched with him in the city's Pride Parade holding a sign saying: "Parents of Gays: United in Support for Our Children."

The parents' support group was born.

The Secret in a Time Capsule

ON APRIL 22, 1979, A TIME CAPSULE was unearthed at San Francisco's Washington Square Park. Inside, among various items like buttons, a dress catalog and a fork, was a travel booklet titled, "Great Geysers of California and How to Reach Them."

On its flyleaf, in old-fashioned handwriting, was this message: "If this little book should see the light after its 100 years of entombment, I would

like its readers to know that the author was a lover of her own sex and devoted the best years of her life in striving for the political equal and social and moral elevation of women."

It had been written a hundred years earlier, in May of 1879, by Laura De Force Gordon - pioneering feminist, lawyer, journalist, editor, and yes, the writer of a travel guide on geysers.

GAY AND LESBIAN HEROES
HISTORY AND CULTURE

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The Rainbow Minute is produced by Judd Proctor and Brian Burns and can be heard every weekday at 7:59am, 12:29pm and 4:59pm on WRIR - 97.3fm in Richmond, Va. and web cast at www.wrir.org.

It's also heard internationally on over 200 stations.

RESTAURANT REVIEW

The Hermitage Grill Innovative Cuisine

by ANNE JONES




I T WAS 2010 WHEN A major fire shuttered the Hermitage Grill for 13 months, and it had been a couple of years before that when I had last eaten at this neighborhood grill known for its smoky barbeque and friendly neighborhood vibe. So I was curious to see what it's like nowadays, almost two years since its renovation and re-opening. I'm pleased to report it's still going strong, with an improved space and innovative cuisine.

The enlarged space is basically the same, but the light bead-board walls and wainscoting give it a more upscale feel. The biggest improvement is invisible to diners: the kitchen used to be one of the smallest restaurant kitchens in Richmond, and is now a huge industrial-style area much more in-line with what comes out of it.

And the tastes that came out of that kitchen last week when G and I went for dinner were superb. We did it up right, from appetizers to dessert, and tasted such a good sampling of the menu that there's not space to cover it all here. So, highlights: the crab and red pepper soup and the jalapeno salmon croquettes were superb for the same reason, the spices complemented, not dominated, the flavor of the

fresh seafood. The same goes for G's fried oyster salad; fresh, good oysters with a uniformly golden and crunchy batter – as light and porous as anything fried can be. The salad became so popular with diners that it quickly changed from a special to a staple on the menu. The same batter on my fried rockfish tenders made them taste more like a delicate fresh fish than fried food.

The prime rib salad was another high point, with melt-in-your-mouth-tender beef, and sweet mandarin oranges that countered the strong flavor of the gorgonzola cheese. Here's what's different about Waller McCracken's famous North Carolina-style pork barbeque: it's slow-smoked, all lean meat without a drop of fat, and it's more chunked than minced. But the crème-de-la-crème was the crème brulee. It was deep, dark, heavenly, luscious, intense chocolate and Kahlua, with that perfectly hardened crust that feels so lovely to crack into.

It won't be another two years till I'm back for more, of everything. 

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A Spring Feast For Eyes And Ears



The Richmond Concert band will hold its annual Easter concert, "A March Into Spring", at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, where you can stroll through "A Million Blooms". Saturday, Mar 30 at 2pm. (804) 262-9887 www.lewisginter.org

Bert Arens At THE REFINERY ►

Recent works by Bert Arens are now on display at ReFinery, 5402 Lakeside Avenue. ReFinery owner Linda O'Neal supports local artists.



Peter Batchelder, "Upstaged", 36" x 30", oil on canvas

Spring Into Color At THE RED DOOR

Spring into Color, April's show at the Red Door Gallery, features works by Peter Batchelder, Dallas Mosman, and Pat Gerkin. April 5-27, 1607 West Main Street, Richmond, VA 23220.



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Ashland Musical Variety Show

Ashland's Musical Variety Show will be performed March 21-23 at 7:30 p.m. at the Randolph-Macon College Blackwell Auditorium.

The show, "Ashland's Bandstand: Raise the Roof!" features a cast of 400 of all ages in an exciting mix of musical numbers new and old. Proceeds support community arts programs and will help the historic Center with needed maintenance and repairs.

General admission tickets at \$15 can be purchased at Cross Brothers Grocery in Ashland. Reserved seating tickets at \$20 can be purchased by calling (804) 798-2881. 

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