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"Truth and facts, no alternatives."

A close-up portrait of Meghan Varner, a woman with long brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark blue sweater. She is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a blurred office or workspace with desks and equipment.

Meghan Varner

spent a fair amount of time as a child with physical therapists who were helping her deal with a pair of mysterious illness that would not be identified until she was well into her twenties. Meghan ended up becoming a physical therapist herself, and then when Covid struck she realized she needed to find a new path. She would eventually create a sort of health coaching service called Guid2Resilience so she could help others. It was the silver lining of the dark cloud cast by the pandemic. "It smacked me in the face and it said, 'You need to listen to this,'" says Meghan. *(continued on page 12)*

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COVER PHOTO BY *Rebecca D'Angelo*

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Melvin Major Fathers and Children

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

On the morning of March 24, Melvin Major, long-time owner of Fin & Feather Pet Center, passed away in his home on Dumbarton Avenue. He was a gracious man who, over the years, took hundreds of young men and young women under his protective wing. He is sorely missed by many. Although there was no viewing or funeral service, a celebration of his life will be held at a later date.

ARISTOTLE SAID IT best: "Nature abhors a vacuum." Whenever there is a void in our lives we fill it, consciously or otherwise. Too often, people try to fill that hole with anything that's available, things that can create a deeper hole, a hungry mouth that demands to be fed but regardless what and how much you feed it, it is never sated, for it is an abyss, a vast yawning gap, without end. But sometimes, if we're lucky enough, the very thing that replaces the emptiness is what we needed all along and we can actually become the very person that was missing from our own life. Through that transformation we are then able to fill the voids in others and become truly human.

Melvin Major sits at his desk in the rear office at Fin & Feather, the last independently owned full-line pet store in the region where customer service is flawless, where all sales associates have deep knowledge of the products they sell, which are generally less expensive than they are at the big boxes or grocery stores.

Melvin's beard and hair are white and his eyebrows form perfect arches like circumflex accents above his eyes. He is telling me about the Lakeside of his youth. There were three grocery stores, two full-service hardware stores, three pharmacies, two of which housed lunch counters, and an array of other shops and restaurants. It was a village unto its own, a sort of Mayberry—slow-paced, easy going, and everyone knew one another.

He grew up in his grandmother's house where he still lives today, just nine-tenth of a mile from the front door of Fin & Feather. They kept chickens and ducks, guinea fowl and

rabbits, and the back yard was filled with gardens. "We had it all," says Melvin.

Melvin's household was made up of his mother, grandmother, uncle, and, of course Melvin. But his father was not there. He had left his wife while she was pregnant and returned to his home in New Jersey. Melvin would not see this man until many years later. "I didn't know my biological father until I turned eighteen," he says. "I can't really describe how it was. It was nice to meet him but it was no Eureka moment. I saw him four or five times after that and there was never really any bond."

Just shy of his fifteenth birthday, Melvin applied for a part-time job at Fin & Feather. He was hired to work weekends and began learning the pet shop business. "It was the closest job I could find within walking distance from home," he says.

He took to business like a swordtail to water. While still in high school he met a woman, a teacher named Mrs. Humphries, who taught graphic arts and mechanical drawing. "She was from a relatively well-off family and very well-educated," he remembers. "And she would take a lot of the kids under her wing and take them to her house for dinner. She was one of the most memorable teachers I ever had.

She played a big role in my life."

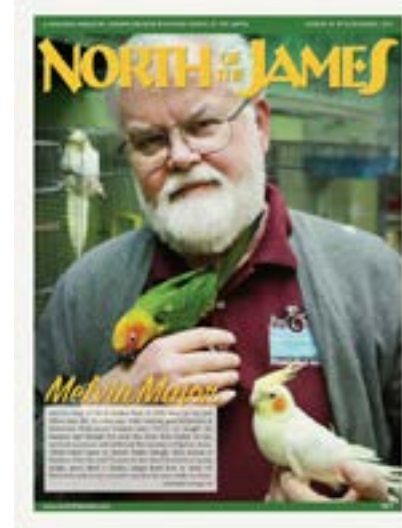
After high school graduation, still working part-time at the pet shop, Melvin began attending RPI (now VCU) where he studied general business. And then the former owner of Fin & Feather offered to sell the business and Melvin bought it. "It was only 2,000 square feet at the time," he says. "We are now a little over 7,000 square feet. I have owned it for the past 45 years."

In those intervening years, hundreds of young men and young women have worked at Fin & Feather where they found more than steady employment. They found a second home.

After Melvin purchased the property at 5200 Lakeside Avenue, which now houses the Pond Center, he began a ritual that lasted for about twenty years. "It was originally a house and the building was built onto the front of it as part of a business for the fellow who owned the house," he says. "I used to cook breakfast for the employees there on Saturday and Sunday mornings. It was just part of a perk. I enjoyed cooking and fixing breakfast and giving the employees a chance to get together and just relax before they came to work. One year I cooked an entire Thanksgiving dinner for an employee and his friend that couldn't get away to go home for Thanksgiving. I made soups and stews and barbeque, a big crockpot of stuff so they could eat on it during the day throughout the week."

And in that same house, on the second floor, Melvin created an apartment with two-bedrooms and a bath. "I've let our employees who were college students and needed a place to stay live there," he says. "To all my employees I've always expressed how important it is to get a good education and when they started school I would work around their college schedules."

When I ask him why, he grins and uses words he might have heard from his high school teacher, Mrs. Humphries. "Because it's the right thing to do," Melvin says. "Sometime people don't have advantages that they need and it's just the right thing to do to give them an advantage. I think it helped some of them. It certainly gave them an opportunity to get ahead. And many of them they did." Among those



who have worked for Melvin over the years are men and women who are now doctors and lawyers, teachers and engineers.

He pauses when I ask him if he taught all these young people valuable life lessons. He slowly shakes his head. "I don't know that they've learned anything from me directly," he says. "I think they've learned how life can treat you and what you can accomplish in life if you work at it. I don't feel that I'm an instrument of teaching; I feel like I've facilitated their ability to learn."

Melvin does tell me that any time one of his long-term employees leaves the shop, he feels a certain pang. "They become part of the family and when they leave it's like a child leaving your home," he says. "It is hard, but it's also normal."

Periodically one of his old employees does return for a visit. "I see a few of them," says Melvin. "Just recently there was a boy that worked here in the mid-seventies. He's been down in North Carolina for years, raised a family down there, and he was coming through town on business and stopped in the store out of the clear blue just to say hi and talk about old times. I liked that. In all the years I've owned Fin & Feather I've never had a bad kid." He smiles at his own words.

When I ask if he has any regrets, Melvin says, "I've led a good life. I've managed to run a successful business. I've kept a roof over my head. I think we all could say we'd like to change some things, but it's petty. My one regret is not having kids of my own."

When I talk with Melvin later and mention the possibility of retirement he shakes his head. "My health is steady so I don't want to stop working," he says. "I don't want to be the old fellow that sits at home and stares out the window." 🐾

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DIVERSIONS

Live from New York! An Unforgettable Night at SNL

by FAYERUZ REGAN

KNOW IT HAPPENED, BUT it feels like a dream. I'm still processing it. I attended a taping of Saturday Night Live, and it was one of the most extraordinary nights of my life.

Readers, please note that it's possible for fans to win free tickets to a taping. Every year, the show hosts a ticket lottery for those who enter online.

Then there's Main Street Station, where you're whisked off to New York in a straight shot. This Amtrak line stops by the Staples Mill location as well, and delivers you to Penn Station in the heart of New York. I checked out every train station from Connecticut to Richmond, and no stop was as glorious as Main Street Station. Lit up and expansive, modern yet historical - it gave me a sense of pride.

We had to be at 30 Rock by 9:45 pm. The iconic skyscraper was built Art Deco style. Black marble, brass railings, and geometric etchings.

Security is everywhere to protect this vast office building, which has its own zip code (10112). We passed through metal detectors and were given wristbands (which I have since framed).

We were VIP guests, and sweet NBC pages ushered us into the Peacock Lounge before the show. It was lit in neon purple, with rotating digital displays of famous guest stars. At the entrance, a woman held a tray of pre-opened cans of beer and spiked seltzer - one per person. They wanted us to be a little loose, but not inebriated. They also seemed concerned that we would be tired, considering how late it was. This institution shouldn't be so humble - fans were running on pure adrenaline. They laid out unlimited cold sodas and bottled water. A DJ blasted music so loud, you had to yell to be heard.

We knew we had to put our phones away at showtime, so this was our chance to take photos. We got in a few good shots when none other than



Rajiv Surendra, who played Kevin G. in the iconic film Mean Girls, sat next to us. He looked dapper in a tailored plaid suit, and we got to talking about how one of his interviews got morphed into a false clickbait story, claiming he'd given up on Hollywood.

We took elevators that opened into a long hallway. It was lined with black and white images of famous sketches. Designed to evoke nostalgia - even reverence, it was a walk down down memory lane. We were reminded of sketches that not only delighted us, but ones we'd imitate. There was Steve Martin's Wild and Crazy Guy from my childhood. Adam Sandler holding a guitar brought back high school memories. In our 20s, we imitated the cheerleaders played by Will Ferrell and Cheri Oteri. In my 30s, I adored Bill Hader's Stefan, and so on.

The evening's host was Jenna Ortega and the musical guest was The 1975. The flurry of activity on stage was intoxicating. People were pushing backdrops, and stacking cue cards that contained every line spoken on the show. Poker-faced legend Lorne Michaels stepped out in a suit and tie to survey the scene, and I gasped. To warm up the crowd, Michael Che performed a five-minute stand-up rou-

tine. Then the live band fired off, with Keenan Thompson stepping onto the stage for a rousing blues song. Cast members Ego Nwodim, Heidi Gardner, and Chloe Fineman were backup singers, shimmying in sequined dresses.

Suddenly, it was silence on the set. Countdown to showtime. I got butterflies as if I were performing. The characters may be larger than life on TV, but they appear subdued during the show. They play toward the cameras, not the studio audience. Since it's live, all scenes are pre-prepped in pockets from one end of the studio to the other. Sometimes the cast is in front of you, and other times they are so far, you rely on the TVs. This keeps the action close, and the audience laughing. The goodbyes during sign-off don't look as awkward from the audience seats. I always felt for the solo cast member with no one to hug.

I thought it amusing that they flashed the "applause" sign during the show. We didn't need prompting. I may have needed to remind myself to breathe, but I had no problem cheering, or laughing. The only issue I have is convincing myself that this really happened. **👏**

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MacArthur Apartments To Be Renovated



MacArthur Apartments.

MACARTHUR APARTMENTS, some of the last truly affordable housing available in Bellevue, was recently sold for about \$4.5 million to a Varina-based real estate investor whose portfolio includes other rental properties in Richmond metro area. The property includes 36 one-bedroom apartment units, and a total of 42 parking spaces, which are as rare as hen's teeth on the MacArthur Avenue retail strip in the heart of Bellevue.

The new owner (who asked not to be identified) plans extensive exterior and interior renovations to the apartment complex, which was built more than 50 years ago. "I plan on giving the property a facelift on the front with new windows and roof, and painting the brick and installing new siding," he says.

Interior spaces will also be upgraded. "There will be new flooring and new paint," he says. "We'll also be sprucing up what's inside, maybe with new cabinets, granite counter tops, new appliances, and stuff like that."

The price tag on the exterior improvements alone will easily top \$140,000, he says.

Currently the apartments there rent for between \$600 and \$700 a month. "I am going to improve the apartments and, of course, increase the rents," says the new owner. "I'm not quite sure what the rent increase will be; that will be judged on how much renovations will take place on the property."

Tenants will be required to fill out a

background check and a credit application, he says. "And their debt to income ratio's going to have to match current rental rates," he adds. "But I want to be as fair as I can [with the current tenants]."

JOHN MARSHALL JUSTICES REIGN SUPREME

The John Marshall Justices, pride of the Northside, won the Class 2 Boys State Final last month, defeating, in their final game of the season, the Radford Bobcats with a 91-34 win. This is the fourth time since 2014, the John Marshall High School basketball team has won this statewide championship. The Justices won 18 of their last 19 games by astonishing margins.

"I am so proud of the John Marshall Boys Basketball team," says Third District Councilwoman Ann-Frances Lambert. "On and off the basketball court, they represented excellence, humility and team work . . . hard work pays off."



Third District Councilwoman Ann-Frances Lambert and John Marshall principal Monica Murray at the victory game.



John Shinholser steps down as president of McShin Foundation.

JOHN SHINHOLSER RETIRES AS PRESIDENT OF MCSHIN FOUNDATION

John Shinholser, co-founder of The McShin Foundation has retired from his role as president of this organization. A tireless advocate for those in recovery, he will continue to serve at McShin as Senior Peer. The organization will now be led by Honesty Liller, who was named CEO of the Foundation nine years ago. Honesty is an alum of McShin and excited about the future of the organization.

"We want to thank John for creating a foundation that helps those with addiction, and their families," says Honesty.

Since its founding in 2004, McShin has inspired and educated the community about recovery. It was formed by Carol McDaid and John, both of whom are in recovery, and have dedicated their lives to helping individuals and families in or seeking recovery from the disease of addiction. The McShin Foundation operates on the founders' belief that by helping others find and sustain recovery, they can better sustain their own recovery.

The McShin Foundation is Virginia's leading non-profit, full-service Recovery Community Organization (RCO), committed to serving Individuals and families in their fight against substance use disorders.

HAZARDOUS INTERSECTION OF LABURNUM AND HERMITAGE

Even with the removal of the pedestal and statue at the juncture of Hermitage Road and Laburnum Avenue, this intersection remains one of the most treacherous in the city. Cars and pickups barrel along Laburnum Avenue at excessive



Intersection of Hermitage and Laburnum.

speeds frequently paying no attention at all to the school zone (Holton Elementary School is located on the northeast corner of the intersection). It's clear that the posted speed limit on both Laburnum and Hermitage needs to be reduced to 25 miles per hour. And others have suggested putting in speed humps along both roads, which makes sense since they traverse residential communities.

The city is supposedly studying the intersection and ways of remedying the problems there.

RAMPS RVA BUILDING INDEPENDENCE AND MOBILITY

Rachel is in a wheelchair full-time and has to be carried down the steps by her two grown daughters, putting them all at risk for a catastrophic fall. Gary can't use his legs and hasn't been outside in months, except to go to a doctor's appointment with the help of his elderly brother. Gla-

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Students from Deep Run High School stand behind the ramp they just built for Thelma, a Henrico County Resident with multiple health problems.

dys, who has lost the use of her legs, had to call the rescue squad to get to medical appointments. What do they all have in common? Their lives got a lot better recently because of RampsRVA.

Founded in 2005 by three Collegiate students who wanted to serve their community, RampsRVA builds free wheelchair ramps for people in serious medical need who can't afford to purchase one. There are now over 300 students from 13 local high schools willing to donate their time and funds to build ramps for those who need them.

RampsRVA also benefits from valuable community partnerships. Corporate partners built and funded 18 ramps last year, not only serving their community but also enjoying a day of teambuilding.

This spring, RampsRVA is thrilled to announce a special partnership with C&F Financial Corporation, which includes C&F Bank, C&F Finance Company, C&F Mortgage and C&F Wealth Management. C&F joins RampsRVA with plans to make a powerful impact on the mobility needs of our community.

Fund-raising, two refurbishment days, and two ramp builds are already underway for the spring. For more information please visit rampsrva.org

RENAMING GINTER PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Symbols of white supremacy and the Confederacy are dropping like

flies across the South. Not long ago the last Confederate statue in Richmond came down with the removal of A.P. Hill on the Northside. But more than memorials are being removed. Recently the name of Fort A.P. Hill in Virginia was changed to Fort Walker, which honors an actual American hero, Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, the only woman ever awarded the Medal of Honor.

There is now a move to change the name of Ginter Park Elementary School, which was named after Major Lewis Ginter, a prominent businessman and developer, who served in the Confederate Army. Ginter, in essence, was responsible for creating what we now call Northside Richmond. **NS**



Ginter Park Elementary School may get a new name soon.

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MEGHAN VARNER A SILVER LINING

MEGHAN VARNER GREW UP ON A TREE-LINED

street in a neighborhood filled with Arts and Crafts cottages. In her backyard, twenty feet off the ground, was the best treehouse in all of Bellevue. It was painted green and had electricity but no plumbing, and Meghan played in this lofty fortress for hours on end, thinking of the things she would one day do. She could already do what many of her peers couldn't. For instance, she could bring her feet over her head while sitting down. And she could do splits without any effort at all. This, too: Meghan seemed to be double-jointed, or that's what people called it. Her parents had begun to notice some of these traits in their only daughter when the girl was just two years old. As she grew older Meghan could bend her fingers backward as well as forward, as if none of her joints had a one-way hinge. Her parents were told by doctors that Meghan would grow out of it. But she never did.

Meghan Varner sits across from me, her hands palm down, flattened on the table top. Around virtually every finger joint there are these very exotic looking silver rings, almost like a series of coils that wrap around each segment of every finger.

"These beautiful rings on my fingers are for where my joints partially dislocate," Meghan tells me. "That dislocation is called subluxation." And the rings are actually splints that help limit the movement of her finger joints which are hypermobile symptomatic of Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), one of the two disorders Meghan has.

While attending Luther Memorial School (long since closed), Meghan had her very first encounters with physical therapists at Children's Hospital, which was then located on the massive lot right next to the school's campus. "I would walk over there from school," she says.

Her days at Luther were not the best. Meghan had to wear leg braces which acted pretty much like the ring splints she now wears. "I was a good target for some bullying there," she recalls.

So when she was in sixth grade her parents enrolled her in Landmark Christian on Creighton Road. Though somewhat restricted by EDS, Meghan was physically very active. "I did basketball," she says. "I did horseback riding on the side, that's another love of mine. I even had my own horse at one point."

But there was a spinal deformity that needed immediate attention

by the time Meghan entered her junior year in high school. She had major back surgery that lasted a full eight hours. Surgeons had fused part of her spinal column and there would be a long recovery period. "Recovering from back surgery is difficult," says Meghan. "You're lying down a certain portion of the day, and then you're upright. You are rearranging your spine."

During that recovery period, Meghan persevered in her academic pursuits with the aid of tutors, and then she and her parents made a decision for her senior year. "I started in a home school program where you go two days a week and then do your assignments on your own," she says. "It was amazing. It prepared me for college."

There would be subsequent surgeries, and after each one Meghan would spend a lot of time with physical therapists. "So where do you think I got my interest and my passion for physical therapy?" Meghan asks. "I loved science as a kid. I was interested in the way the human body works, and I wanted to do something in some way where I could serve people."

So while still an undergraduate at Randolph Macon College in Ashland where she majored in biology with a minor in chemistry, Meghan decided to become a physical therapist. After earning her bachelor's

at Randolph Macon, she began a clinical doctorate program at Virginia Commonwealth University. "They have a great program," Meghan says. "So I stayed in the neighborhood, saved money, and lived at home for the three years of graduate school."

While still attending VCU, Meghan had a second back surgery. "It was a revision of the first one," she says. "I asked myself, 'Why is this happening to me? This isn't fair.' I had it done over a break because I'm a Type A personality, very driven, so didn't take a year off."

With seven years of college under her belt, Meghan got her first job as a physical therapist in Fredericksburg at an outpatient orthopedic manual therapy clinic. "I loved it," says Meghan. "But my body kept falling apart."

And neither Meghan nor the scores of doctors she had seen over the years were able to diagnose what was going on with her body. "I felt there has to be an underlying issue connecting all of this, and stress made it worse," she says. "Somehow all of this had to be interconnected."

Meghan's health continued to decline while she was up in Fredericksburg.

"My fatigue was getting worse, and there was brain fog and extreme exhaustion," she remembers. "I

would go to sleep and couldn't recover. My glands in my neck started to swell, I had low grade fevers and chills, weird body aches and muscle spasms. I would try to sleep at night, but I just couldn't fall asleep. It was that tired but wired feeling. You kind of feel like you're outside your body."

She saw specialist after specialist, and none of them could diagnose what was ailing Meghan. So Meghan decided to leave her job. "I thought it must be the stress of my job," she says. "Pushing and pulling on people, popping my joints in and out. I needed to do something less physically demanding."

That's when she began course work for a PhD in rehab and movement science at VCU. "I thought I would be able to do research or be a professor, something less physically demanding," says Meghan.

And then one day, as she was headed home from VCU's health science campus in downtown Richmond, Meghan nearly passed out at the wheel. What's more, she couldn't remember how to get back to her home in Bellevue along a route she had driven many times before. "My memory was gone," she says. "It was scary. I was having trouble walking up and down the hills."

After much consideration, Meghan opted to leave the PhD program and seek in earnest what was going

on with her. "I took time off and kept searching, and tried a different endocrinologist," she says.

This endocrinologist, a woman, asked all the right questions, and listened carefully to Meghan. After hearing Meghan's long list of symptoms, she asked her this: "Have you ever heard of POTS (postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome)?" "No," Meghan replied. "What is that?"

She would learn a lot about this syndrome which had plagued her since childhood. POTS is a form of dysautonomia, a disorder of the autonomic nervous system which regulates functions we don't consciously control, such as heart rate, blood pressure, sweating and body temperature, and it can be difficult to diagnose. "It's pretty common with POTS to take that long to get diagnosed," says Meghan. "It can take up to ten years to diagnose. The POTS diagnosis gave relief. But now what? How am I going to manage this?"

There was a long road ahead, along

with another diagnosis, this one for Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), an inherited disorder which affects connective tissues. Folks with EDS have extremely flexible joints. "So when you think of someone being extremely flexible or hypermobile you think of circus performers," says Meghan. "That's like Ehlers-Danlos syndrome."

That same summer, back in 2015, Meghan would undergo a few gastro-intestinal surgeries. "That set me back," she says. "I figured out how to manage it. It was finding a doctor and a cocktail that worked for me. Finding a form of exercise so I could gradually build myself up, and rebuild my upright tolerance." The meds she took in the cocktail included beta blockers and anti-spasmodics. "And the first line of treatment with POTS is fluid loading," Meghan tells me. "Increasing your fluid intake along with sodium and other electrolytes. I also began wearing compression stockings to get that blood back up to my brain."

She began working again as a physical therapist in 2017, and two years later married Ray Varner, the man she first met during her Randolph Macon days.

By 2020, Meghan was working as a physical therapist for a health agency called Heaven Sent. "They were one of the better ones," she says. "They really valued patient care; and it wasn't focused on quantity, it was focused on quality."

The routine with home health care suited her. "You see patients during the day, you come home and do your notes, you arrange your schedule for the next day," says Meghan. "I did really enjoy collaborating and working with all of my colleagues. It's not just PTs, it's occupational therapists, nurses, and social workers."

While working at Heaven Sent a sort of seed was planted in Meghan's mind. "We were there to help clients keep up with whatever things we were trying to educate them on with diet and exercise," she says. "We were teaching them what

to do on a routine basis so that they wouldn't find themselves back in the need of care. That piece contributed quite a bit to what began to get me thinking about something else I could do with my career."

The rigors of the job were already taking their toll. Meghan was again exhausted. In February, to celebrate their anniversary, she and her husband took a trip out to Arizona, visited family and the Grand Canyon. But when she and Ray returned, Meghan was more exhausted than ever. "I knew the symptoms of going into a flare with POTS, and I was heading in that direction," she says. "So we came back in March, and in April the world changed." That's when Covid shut it all down.

As bad as it was for the rest of us, it was ten times worse for the many healthcare workers on the front line. "It was a lot of uncertainty," Meghan says. "It was a lot of stress levels of not knowing what the virus would do. The company I was working for didn't know how many masks we had. You had to treat

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them like gold. There was a lot of stress." And stress is one of the key triggers for flares of POTS.

"I called that stress the cherry on top of my sundae of demise," says Meghan. "It got to me, and sent my nervous system into a state of fight, flight, or freeze."

She would have to make a decision to keep working or quit her job. Fortunately for Meghan a cardiologist essentially made the decision for her. "I'm very grateful to the doctor I was seeing at the time," she says. "He said, 'You need to step back. Step back and let's see what happens over the next few months. We don't know what this virus will do to POTS. You could get very, very sick.' No one, not even epidemiologists, knew a damned thing about this novel virus.

"People were already dying, already having severe repercussions from it," Meghan remembers. "We didn't even know about long Covid then. Fast forward to now, individuals with long Covid are now being diagnosed with POTS and dysautonomia." Prior to the pandemic, there were an estimated one to three million Americans with POTS. Experts now believe there may be an additional one million new POTS patients likely as a result of COVID-19.

Meaghan, at the very end of April, took the advice of her cardiologist and stopped working as a physical therapist. "It was a very tough decision," she says. "To step back and say I have to let go of this was tough, and to watch other coworkers continue in it and to watch other friends in the healthcare profession continue in it, it was tough." Like the rest of us with any sense in those early days of the pandemic, Meaghan retreated to her home. "I was doing okay, doing yard work like we all were, or what we could do around our house to keep ourselves busy," says Meaghan.

But Meaghan's health issues got progressively worse. "I had trouble sleeping," she says. "My GI issues got worse, my anxiety issues got worse." And the heart in her chest raced every time she rose from bed, or stood up from a chair. It



was POTS. "Normally your nervous system would communicate to your heart and bring your heart rate down," Meaghan says. "But with POTS it can just keep going up."

Despite all the adversity Meaghan experienced at that time, she discovered things about her disorder, and ways of combating the symptoms that would ultimately lead to a new profession, and a renewed purpose.

"This was the silver lining of the pandemic," she says. "I took time off for a couple months. We were all stressed out about the pandemic. I was right there with everyone, and my nervous system was already primed to overreact and I was in a spiral of stress. I was very blessed to have a spouse who was able to support me. We were still doing okay, and I'm super grateful for that piece of the stress not being there."

Instead of sleeping on the couch or binge-watching a Netflix series, Meaghan began searching for answers on-line. "I began to look into what can I do to come out of this," she says. "And what can I do to still have purpose? To still be able to use what I know, my knowledge as a PT."

She came across a blog called the Non-Clinical PT put together by another physical therapist, a wom-

an who had battled cancer, and ultimately became a health coach.

"So I started exploring what that would look like for me," says Meaghan. "I looked at going into a functional medicine-leaning, health-coaching training program, and that's when I went to the Institute for Integrative Nutrition and completed their program."

With her medical training, coupled with her own experience and her training as a health coach, Meghan launched Guide2Resilience. "I wanted to find something I could still do and do it from my house," she says. "My business is one hundred percent virtual. I wanted a purpose. I have seven years of school, I have knowledge, I have this experience that has a meaning. And I have empathy for those that are suffering. How can I help these people so they don't have to go through what I have gone through?"

Meaghan Varner then says this: "That silver lining of the pandemic gave me time, it smacked me in the face, and it said, 'You need to listen to this and see how this is affecting you.' And I'm getting there. I'm beginning to see that EDS and POTS are there as teachers, and they're there as a weird blessing, as a weird gift."



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MUSIC

Live Music At Northside Grille

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN



Ryan Crenshaw with *The Ex-Patriots* on Saint Patrick's Day.

ON SAINT PATRICK'S Day the band begins playing at the stroke of nine to a house already packed to the seams. Of course this is at Northside Grille, Bellevue's home of live music since last summer, and the band playing is appropriately enough *The Ex-Patriots*—Pogue-like in the Celtic punk tradition. They begin with a rousing rendition of "The Foggy Dew", a ballad written by Father Charles O'Neill in the last century, recalling the Easter Rising of 1916 when the Irish rose up against their colonizers and long-time sadistic oppressors. Every table, every bar stool is occupied, and many patrons are standing, some dancing, virtually all holding a drink, and generally making merry. There are many familiar faces and a lot of newcomers. Dana Beers is working the bar steadily, and Ada, with round tray balanced on flattened palm, navigates through the throng like a jet fighter pilot, dodging and weaving, while always keeping that tray upright. Brett Cassis began booking bands at Northside Grille this past June. "It started out to be just a patio thing," says Brett, who also serves and tends bar at Northside. "We started out Thursday nights, then we added Saturday nights, and when it got cold we started to gradually pick up more shows." Now there is live music there every Thursday through Sunday.

And the response from Bellevue and well beyond has been overwhelming. "The neighborhood's been receptive, and it's brought people into the neighborhood," Brett tells me. "It's worked well."

Part of the success of music nights is how Northside Grille's owner and the patrons there treat the musicians. "Shanan (Chambers) has been generous," says Brett. "It gives the bands an opportunity to make a little money while they get a chance to play. We don't charge a cover charge and that's because

the folks in the neighborhood tip well. Everybody's pretty generous here."

And every Sunday through early summer, before the dog days set in, Northside Grille will feature acoustic acts on the patio.

"It's going to be a sort of Key West feel," Brett says. "We're going to do some drink specials, some food specials. It will be acoustic, mostly single performers, but we do have a four-piece Jimmy Buffet tribute band. It should be a lot of fun." **[B]**

Editor's note:

In next month's NORTH of the JAMES we'll be doing a full feature on Northside Grille's live music.

BOOK REVIEW

The Great Escape

by FRAN WITHROW

MANY ENSLAVED people bravely attempted to escape to freedom during America's long and terrible history of slavery.

Most of their stories are lost to the annals of time, but not all of them, fortunately. One of the more fascinating true stories is "Master Slave Husband Wife," which chronicles the 1848 escape from slavery of Ellen Craft and her husband William.

Ellen Craft was enslaved by her father and her half sister in Georgia. Her husband, William Craft, was a gifted cabinet maker enslaved on a nearby estate. On December 20, 1848, they made a daring and ingenious escape. Ellen, who was very light skinned, dressed as an ailing white gentleman, while William posed as her enslaved servant. Together they traveled from Macon, Georgia to Philadelphia and then on to Boston and freedom.

In New England, with the help of activist William Wells Brown, the Crafts learned to tell their story as a way of supporting the abolitionist movement and joined the lecture circuit, despite being in danger from slave hunters. They learned to read and write and penned a book about their experience: "Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom."

Then the United States passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, which required all citizens to return Black people to bondage in the South. The danger multiplied not just for the Crafts but for all formerly enslaved people in the North. Tensions boiled over throughout the country, with southerners fearing for their way of life, northerners supporting the abolishment of slavery (though they too had their prejudices against Blacks), and politicians arguing about whether to legalize slavery in the new territories and states out west.

Ilyon Woo has written a fascinating chronicle about this couple's story within the backdrop of the country's turmoil: the difficulties they faced during their escape, their struggles to find safety and work in New England, and the exhaustion of traveling the country telling their story.

Woo has carefully researched this subject and seamlessly notes places in the story where there is no supporting documentation to verify events. She paints a picture not only of the Crafts and their enslavers, but also of Congress wrestling with the problem of slavery. Readers can see how opposing views of slavery permeated the capital, anger and fear simmering and sometimes exploding as the country drew ever closer to Civil War.

The Crafts eventually settled in England and started a family, not returning to the United States until after the war. Still, now back home and no longer enslaved, they faced discrimination, financial struggles, and even civil suits. Woo wonders if this is why their story is not better known.

Yet this story should be more widely told. How this couple pulled off a brilliant escape, became renowned activists, wrote a book, raised a family, and returned to their homeland in the midst of Reconstruction and racism is worth telling. Their story of love and survival despite the odds is a profound testament to the courage and ingenuity of people who just want to be free. **[B]**

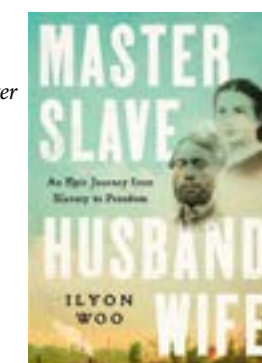
"Master Slave Husband Wife"

By Ilyon Woo

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Shooting Down Solutions An Assault Weapons Ban History

by JACK R. JOHNSON

ON JANUARY 17, 1989, Patrick Edward Purdy, armed with a semiautomatic rifle returned to his childhood elementary school in Stockton, California, and opened fire, killing five children and wounding 30 others. Purdy, a drifter, squeezed off more than 100 rounds in one minute before turning the weapon on himself. Since 1989, we've seen variations of this scenario played out time after time, ad nauseam. The most recent, of course, happened just last week in Nashville's Covenant School. In this most recent incident, three children and three adults were slaughtered. No action looks to be forthcoming from our Republican House, preoccupied as they are with naked Italian statues and book banning. But Purdy's massacre of January 17, 1989 held one important distinction from today's current morass. Back then, in 1989, the US Congress actually did something. Through four years of concerted effort, they mustered the votes to pass the Crime Control Act of 1994. The act banned the manufacture, transfer, and possession of certain semiautomatic firearms designated as assault weapons and "large capacity" ammunition magazines.

It was not perfect by any means: the ban only blocked a narrow range of weapons and did not prohibit the continued transfer or possession of assault weapons manufactured before the law's effective date. Manufacturers took advantage of this loophole by boosting production of assault weapons in the months leading up to the ban, creating a legal stockpile of weapons. To secure the votes for passage, the ban's sponsors agreed to allow those who already had these guns to keep them. Sponsors also accepted a "sunset provi-

sion" by which the 1994 ban would automatically expire after ten years unless renewed by a vote of Congress. No renewal was forthcoming.

Despite its shortcomings, though, the ban proved effective.

A Justice Department report compared actual 1995 state gun murder rates with the rates that would have been expected in the absence of the assault weapons ban. "Overall, 1995 gun murder rates were 9 percent lower than the projection. Gun murders declined 10.3 percent in States without preexisting assault weapons bans. The study found that 1995 gun murder rates were 10.9 percent below the projected level."

Grant Duwe, author of "Mass Murder in the United States: A History", found that the lowest ten-year average in mass shooting rates was between 1996-2005, which largely corresponds with the ban period. In separate research published in Criminology & Public Policy in January 2020, Christopher S. Koper, argued that the "most important provisions of assault weapons law" were restrictions on large-capacity magazines. "Data on mass shooting incidents suggest these magazine restrictions can potentially reduce mass shooting deaths by 11% to 15% and total victims shot in these incidents by one quarter (25%)."

Koper argued that "exemptions and loopholes" in the 1994 assault weapons ban likely blunted the short-term effects of the law. Millions of existing weapons and magazines were "grandfathered," making them legal to own, and dealers were able to import tens of millions of large-capacity magazines manufactured before the ban took effect.

To understand how a truly effective ban could mitigate murder on a national scale, it might be useful to examine Australia's assault weapons

ban.

A massacre occurred in Australia one year prior to the Columbine massacre in the United States, in 1996. It involved the usual script. A lone gunman, mentally unstable, goes on a shooting rampage, murdering 35 innocent people. Like citizens in the U.S., the Australians acted with shock and horror. Unlike the United States, the Australian government—a conservative government—successfully sought to ban rapid-fire rifles—our infamous assault weapons. The "national firearms agreement," as it was known, led to the buyback of 650,000 guns, and to tighter rules for licensing and safe storage of those remaining in public hands. Importantly, the law did not end gun ownership in Australia, but it reduced the number of firearms in private hands by one-fifth. They were the kind of weapons most likely to be used in mass shootings.

The results were profound. After Australia's national firearms agreement, not a single mass shooting has occurred since. Gun homicides have fallen by 59 per cent and firearm-related suicides have fallen by 65 per cent with no consequential rise in homicides and suicides by other means.

According to the Sydney Morning Herald, "researchers at Harvard University, concluded that 'The National Firearms Agreement seems to have been incredibly successful in terms of lives saved.' To be specific, we've had no gun massacres since 1996, compared with 13 such tragedies during the previous 18 years. Total gun deaths have been reduced: gun homicides and gun suicides had been falling gradually before Port Arthur, but the reforms in 1996 caused that decline to accelerate dramatically. In the early 1990s, about 600 Australians were dying each

year by gunfire; that figure is now fewer than 250."

Could we do the same in this country? Certainly. It only requires intelligence and courage. Our representatives failures in both regards was made evident when 1100 black "body bags" were laid over a section of grass on the National Mall on March 24 after the recent Covenant School massacre. Each bag represented 150 individuals (100 x 150=165,000). Which mean, since the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, that's the number of gun-related deaths in America. Incidentally, the bags on the Mall spelled out "THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS."

Inside the Capitol, Jared Moskowitz, a Florida Democrat blasted the Republicans' stonewalling, "...there are six people that are dead in that school including three children because you guys got rid of the assault weapons ban. Because you guys made it easy for people who ... are mentally incapable of having weapons of war, being able to buy those weapons and go into schools. ... You know why you don't hunt [deer] with an AR-15? Because there's nothing left. And there's nothing left of these kids when people go into school and murder them while they're trying to read. You guys are worried about banning books? Dead kids can't read."

The victims at the Covenant School were Evelyn Dieckhaus, Hallie Scruggs and William Kinney, all nine years old; Katherine Koonce, the head of the school, who was 60; Cynthia Peake, a substitute teacher who was 61; and Mike Hill, the school custodian, who was also 61. **NJ**

Latest on the Fate Of Thirteen Acres

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

BOB BALSTER, WHO of the Hour—Fredrick has worked tirelessly in an effort to preserve the Thirteen Acres building, one of Northside's oldest structures, recently released two reports: one from Historic Richmond; and another, which is essentially a response to the Historic Richmond recommendations, comes from the Hermitage Road Historic District Association, of which Bob is president.

Topping Historic Richmond's recommendations is almost exactly what David Hudson, the former principal of Holton Elementary School, had envisioned a decade ago. "Due to size (5310 SF + 1050 SF porch) could fit multiple offices, school programs, remote study rooms, early childhood development classrooms or school activities in existing structure," according to the report from Historic Richmond. "Would not need to delineate parcel boundaries and RPS would retain ownership. Could create landscape plan to better connect historic building with school and relocate existing parking area." Furthermore, the document says, "Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits may be available to offset rehabilitation costs depending on structuring or legislative change. Any exterior alterations visible from the public right of way will be subject to review of the Commission of Architectural Review." The Hermitage Road Historic District Association, which has been a long-time proponent of preserving the historic building, is on board with most of Historic Richmond's recommendations.

"We are very pleased that Historic Richmond has listed several potential options for the redevelopment of the building and property," the report reads. "We are especially pleased that all these options call for preservation of the building. In principle the HRHDA could support all these options. We are on record as preferring relocation to face Hermitage Road and redevelopment as a single-family residence in keeping with the residential character of our neighborhood. Our least

favorite option is the building of multifamily housing on the property, particularly the addition of more housing units on the property. The neighborhood is eager to retain the greenspace on the Thirteen Acres property, and the many Holton parents among our residents want to maximize the amount and shape of outdoor recreation space for students."

Built in 1885, Thirteen Acres is one of oldest remaining homes in the Northside, and is the second oldest house on Hermitage Road. Back in 1967, the house and an accompanying thirteen acres was sold to the City of Richmond for \$475,000 by the Virginia Methodist Home for the Aged, which operated its facility there. Richmond Public Schools (RPS), at that time, planned to build an elementary school on the site, but there was fierce opposition from the adjoining neighborhoods. They argued that the location was too close to the dense traffic along Laburnum and Hermitage, and children might be hit by speeding cars.

For the next four years, the old house served as a school for children with special needs. Then, from 1973 until 1978 the building became home to the RPS community relations department. In 1978, RPS proposed using the site as a residential school for adolescents. The surrounding communities—Rosedale, Bellevue, Ginter Park—were vehemently opposed to the proposal, but two years later Thirteen Acres opened a five-day residential program for emotionally disabled students, ranging in age from six to twelve. It continued as a residential school until 2007, eight years after Holton Elementary School first opened its doors.

Since its doors closed permanently 16 years ago, the City has allowed the building to deteriorate. On the exterior, paint is peeling, exposed wood rotting, and window panes have been shattered and dentils pried loose from the fascia boards. The interior is in equally bad shape. The structure itself, though, is in very good shape and would be a perfect candidate for restoration. **NJ**

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Megan Slay Performs At Richmond Public Library



Megan Slay to perform at the Richmond Public Library. Photo by Rachael Snoddy Seals.

MEGAN SLAY, A concert pianist who grew up in Northside, will perform in the Gellman Room at the Main Richmond Public Library at 2 pm April 29. The hour-long concert titled "Romancing the Piano: An Afternoon of Franz Schubert and Sergei Rachmaninov," includes Schubert's Piano Sonata No. 16 in A minor D 845, and Rachmaninov's Moments Musicaux, Op. 16.

All concerts at the library are free and open to the public.

Megan Slay is pursuing her Doctor of Musical Arts in Piano Performance at George Mason University as a Dr. Linda A. Monson Scholar. At Mason she has taught various levels of Keyboard Skills and Classical Music Appreciation.

She was selected as a first prize winner in the 2022 Charleston International Music Competition, performed in the Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic Association's Summer Chamber Music Series, and holds a Master of Music in Piano Performance degree from George Mason and a Bachelor of Music in Piano Performance from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Megan has brought her music home to Northside audiences at The Hermitage and Legacy at Imperial Village who were unable to attend her perfor-

mances in person.

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Native columbine, one of many native plants available at the annual ACE plant sale.

ACE ANNUAL SPRING PLANT SALE AT HERMITAGE HIGH

The ACE Center will be hosting its annual spring plant sale from 9 am till 5 pm on April 25 and April 26 at Hermitage High School. The plants are raised by students in two classes at the high school—Horticulture Science, and Greenhouse Management and Landscaping. Overseeing the project are horticulture teacher Jennifer Mazza, and her assistant, Miranda Rapp. Each course offers real world experience for the students in these fields of study. Students from all nine high schools Henrico County are eligible to take these classes.

Prices are extremely reasonable. More than 100 different kinds of plants will be sold, everything from jalapenos and tomatoes for your vegetable garden, to columbine and cone flowers for your perennial garden. What's more many of the plants sold are natives. There are also a host of herbs, and a selection of more than 200 hanging baskets. If you love gardening, you will not want to miss this sale.

*Hermitage High School
8301 Hungary Spring Road
Henrico VA 23228*



Arts on the Lawn is returning to Hermitage Richmond on May 20.

SPRING EVENTS AT HERMITAGE RICHMOND

Hermitage Richmond at 1600 Westwood Avenue brings you the Blessing of the Pets on Saturday, April 22 from 10 am till noon on the front lawn of this Northside community. Bring your pets with tails, scales, fur, and feathers out to the lawn to be showered in sunshine and blessings. If you can't bring your pet, bring a photo of your pet. All pets are welcome. We'll be collecting donations for our friends at the Richmond SPCA. Donations can include pet treats, toys, collars, fragrance-free dryer sheets, as well as quart and gallon-sized Ziploc bags.

Then on May 20 from 10am till 4pm Hermitage Richmond will host its third annual Arts on the Lawn. More than 50 local artists and creators will showcase their paintings, photography, pottery, fiber art, handmade jewelry, woodwork, and more! There will also be several local food trucks. Net proceeds at Arts on the Lawn will benefit Hermitage Richmond's Opening Minds through Art (OMA) program, which is an evidence-based inter-generational art-making program benefiting people with dementia.

*Hermitage Richmond
1600 Westwood Avenue
Richmond, VA 23227*

MAY FAIRE FESTIVAL AT RICHMOND WALDORF

Mark your calendars for a family-fun day in celebration of spring at Richmond Waldorf School. The annual

May Faire Festival will be held from 11am till 2pm on Saturday, May 6, rain or shine. The event is free of charge and open to the public.

Commemorate the season with flower crown workshops. Make your own jump ropes, and tie-dye T-shirts. There will also be marionette puppet shows, a petting zoo, Capoeira demonstrations, and much more. For refreshments Timber Pizza Co. and Davvero Gelato will be set up from 11am-2pm on the school's campus.

Tickets can be purchased at the door for crafts and activities. All proceeds benefit Richmond Waldorf School, a 501(c)3. For more information, please contact Rachel Davis at rdavis@richmondwaldorf.com.

*Richmond Waldorf School
1301 Robin Hood Road
Richmond, VA 23227*



Dallas Wommack with her daughter at last year's May Faire.

BELLEVUE PORCHELLA RETURNS APRIL 22

What has become Bellevue's most popular semi-annual event—a celebratory day of neighborhood wandering and mingling, and music performed by some of our best local musicians—comes alive again on April 22. This spring's Porchella will feature more than 30 musical acts, including JOBIE, Susan Greenbaum, No Anchor, Bellevue Bon Temps, Ex-Patriots, Indira & Guppy Jo, and many more.



JOBIE one of more than 30 acts at this spring's Bellevue Porchella.

Bellevue Porchella was created in the grim days of Covid. A month after the world locked down, Brooke walked by a house on MacArthur Avenue where the Bon Temps were playing their fiddles. And then in early summer she saw her neighbors, Dacey and Haze, entertaining kids who were passing by on the sidewalk.

Brooke shouted across the street to her neighbors: "Wouldn't it be cool if we had an outdoor walk-around little music thing?"

They both nodded. "Yeah, it'd be great," said Dacey. "Will you do it? Will you organize it?"

Which is exactly what Brooke did. That October Bellevue Porchella was born, and for some of those in attendance it was the first time they had left their homes in seven months.

Since then every spring and fall there has been a Porchella. Sponsored by the Bellevue Civic Association, the event has grown larger each year, and it is put together by many talented musicians and a host of committed volunteer. Among them are Jami Bricker, Rob McAdams, Marcie Murphy, Johnny Utterback, Geoff Bernardo, Shae McGrath, Barry Long, Zach Schindler, Chris Sterling, Ray Flournoy, Larry Corkey, Will Martin, and Paul Quel.

This year's Porchella will be held from 12:30pm-6pm on Saturday, April 22; rain date, April 29.

For more information and a map, please visit <https://arcc.is/1Xeeaz0>



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ART

Incanto—Words and Sculptures

Coming to Lewis Ginter

“INCANTO,” COMING to Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden at the end of April, explores human nature, while inviting visitors into a transformational space of self-inquiry. Created from metal and words, two artists—sculptor Kate Raudenbush and poet Sha Michele—combine their creative skills in five monumental sculptures that explore profound concepts of identity and the higher self. Instead of an attempt to form conclusions with the artworks, the artists hope that the dialogue of art forms and inclusive physical experience of the art will offer meditative questions for open-hearted explorers to answer for themselves.

Intricately and beautifully designed from a range of laser-cut, mixed metals such as weathered steel, mirror-polished, hammered stainless steel, and patinated bronze, most of the sculptures invite visitors to step inside. With heights reaching up to seventeen feet, they serve as veritable portals to other worlds of thought, meaning, and healing.

Each piece is created in dialogue with the landscape, embracing companion plantings and water features developed in collaboration with the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden Horticulture team. Dramatically lit from within and paired with poetry, the art creates multi-sensory experiences that will invite further exploration at night. The Garden will offer many related events and classes, and even extended hours

on select evenings.

Kate Raudenbush and Sha Michele began collaborating at Burning Man after meeting there in 2000. Kate is known for large-scale, allegorical works in laser-cut steel that form immersive, high-concept, experiential spaces for human connection. In her poems and art, Sha Michele draws on her African-American, Native American and European ancestry to address questions of heritage, cultural definitions, longing, and belonging.

Kate Raudenbush is an award-winning sculpture artist who emerged out of the creative vanguard of Burning Man to exhibit her work widely in the U.S. and internationally at art fairs, civic squares, arts festivals, galleries and museums. She has forged a creative path in Seoul, Amsterdam and Tulum, to Hollywood, Montreal and Washington, D.C. Poet Sha Michele has storied experience as a former actress and designer in Los Angeles, working with Spike Lee, Jamie Foxx and Gita Salem, in addition to her talent as an internationally exhibited designer of exotic, nature-inspired, totemic jewelry. Both artists incorporate a range of cultures, symbols and mythology in their work. They are thrilled to bring this thought-provoking, dynamic exhibit to the greater Richmond community. Exhibit runs April 29 through October 29.

Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

1800 Lakeside Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23228
(804) 262-9887



Star Seed by Kated Radenbush. Photo by Trey Ratcliff.



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