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CHARLES BRANDON RAPP

## McGuigan

is now a man. This past June, my son graduated from high school, and in the fall, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, will take a gap year before going to college. In his middle school years, he was bullied in extreme ways. It was sometimes blatant, sometimes subtle, but always mean-spirited. Charles could have allowed anger to fester into aggression. But he didn't. Instead, he chose creativity and compassion. During a commencement ceremony, Principal Joshua Lutz said this of my son: "His academic skills, his creative drive, and his passion for others are unrivalled. Charles has always been one to step up for the little guy or for somebody he feels is marginalized by society, and that is a character trait that you can't teach. It has to be within you." *continued on page 12*



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#### COVER IMAGE:

*Photographed by Rebecca D’Angelo*

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# Monument Avenue Soon To Be “A Road Less Traveller”

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

**A** COUPLE YEARS back, shortly after gun-toting, torch-bearing, flag-waving, Nazis, white supremacists and neo-Confederates descended on Charlottesville like a plague, murdering one woman and injuring many others, my brother Chris and I were texting one another about the fate of Confederate monuments in Richmond. At that time, Chris and his wife lived in a tiny Maryland village called Keedysville, less than five miles away from Antietam National Battlefield in Sharpsburg. Chris and his wife, Margaret, had raised their two children there in an 18th century log and stone house they had meticulously restored over the course of some twenty years. Chris, who is among other things, a sculptor, an architect, and a blacksmith, spent most of his career with the National Park Service. His specialty was historic preservation.

“What will they call Monument Avenue when the monuments come down?” he typed.

“A road less Traveller,” I responded.

“Well-played,” Chris replied, which meant a lot to me. Chris possesses a rapier wit.

When the monuments began to come down last month, they were like bowling pins, falling in slow motion. A massive ball of outrage, molded from centuries of racism and inequity, struck the pocket perfectly—no spare; just a resounding, if protracted, strike. One by one they fell, torn from their pedestals by protesters, or removed by professionals with the aid of portable circular saws that cut through bronze bolts that had secured them to their lofty heights for more than a century. The monuments ended up, some have said, at the City’s sewage treatment plant down on Southside. Just a temporary holding place before their final fate is decided.

On July 1, the very day a state law went into effect giving municipalities the power to remove Confederate monuments, Mayor Levar Stoney began tackling the statues along Monument Avenue with all deliberate speed.



Marcus-David Peters Circle surrounds the Lee monument.

Jefferson Davis had already been toppled by protesters back in mid-June. The statue lay face up on the asphalt, its torso coated with pink paint that called to mind a negligee, perhaps a reference to the legend that Davis, a month after the Surrender at Appomattox, had dressed in women’s garments to avoid capture by Union troops, who ultimately arrested him just outside Irwinville, Georgia. The former president of the former Confederacy was unceremoniously loaded on to the flat bed of a tow truck and hauled away into the night. A group of protesters cheered and chanted.

Two weeks later, I stood among more than a thousand people, the vast majority wearing masks, who formed a large circle thirty feet from the central island of the rotary at the juncture of Arthur Ashe Boulevard and Monument Avenue. Rising from that island, atop a stone pedestal, was a massive equestrian statue of Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, who, in the eyes of many Confederate devotees, is just one rung below General Robert E. Lee in that strange pantheon at which they

seem to worship.

Work crews rose on the fenced platform of an articulating boom lift, a sort of cherry picker that can move in any direction. Once at the hooves of Little Sorrel, Jackson’s horse, the team of hard-hat-clad men began carefully securing harnesses sheathed in anti-chafing gear at key points around the forelegs and hind legs of the bronze horse. The operation would last for a few hours, and there was reason for this.

Acting as a sort of consultant, Jillian Holland of Round Hill, Virginia, sporting a harness and a hard hat, accompanied the crew on several of their expeditions up to the bronze statue, and made recommendations. She knows a fair amount about large bronze sculptures. Jillian herself is a metal worker, whose media include steel, aluminum, iron and cast bronze. What’s more, she’s often assisted Richmond-based sculptor Paul DiPasquale in the assembly, installation, and delivery of his work.

“Once lowered,” Jillian told me. “It has to be laid on its side for transport. We have to make sure that we will not

bend, in any way, the extreme parts. His legs are sticking out, and his boots, and his saddle bags. We just need to make sure every piece of stays intact as he comes down.”

Throughout the afternoon, the crowd swelled along Arthur Ashe Boulevard and Monument Avenue, and each time a harness was secured, there rose a chorus of chants. “No justice, no peace.” “Black lives matter.” “F\*\*\* that statue.” And so on.

A massive crane, towering above the monument, would groan and screech when the tension on the harnesses tautened, and it seemed at any moment the machineries would lift the statue from its perch. But time dragged on.

By late afternoon, clouds had begun moving in, white at first and then gray, and to the South a steep bank of clouds turned dark as ancient pewter. You could see bolts of lightning in the darkest of those clouds, and I overheard the man operating the crane yell up to his compatriots at the top of the monument to hurry up. “You can see it coming,” he screamed, and the



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## MONUMENTS

two men near the legs of Little Sorrel, looked to the South, and then got back to their work of cutting through the bronze bolts. Just then, the skies opened. Globes of water, each a puddle unto itself, fell hard, and were quickly followed by sheets of rain. Once that final bolt was severed, and after the two men descended, the crane peeled the statue away from its stone base. As the statue rose, there was a long peal of thunder that rolled along like the report of distant artillery, ending in a final clap loud as the voice of God. At the same instant, a man and a woman crossed over to the large bell of a nearby church and began ringing it.

The graffiti on the stone base, the crowds, and their chants and their applause and their cheers, and the tolling of the bell, reminded me of footage I had seen on TV thirty years ago when the Berlin Wall came down. The throng on Monument Avenue was jubilant and thoroughly soaked by a pummeling rain, a showering baptism. And they were people of all colors, ages and genders. "Who's street?" they asked in unison. "Our street," they answered as one voice.

The following day, without much fanfare, the statue of Matthew Fontaine Maury came down (the globe would be removed a little over a week later). On July 7, J.E.B. Stuart, the last of the city-owned Confederate statues on Monument Avenue was removed. All that now remains is the largest monument, which resides on state land. A court injunction has temporarily barred its removal.

Lee stands alone now, the only member of the pantheon still towering above Monument Avenue. He is crippled in his power much as he was during the Civil War: his right arm (Stonewall Jackson) is gone, and his eyes and ears (J.E.B. Stuart) have been plucked away and punctured. The white marble pedestal on which the gelded Traveller stands has been converted into a rainbow canvas, and the median strips adjacent it have been turned into a sort of camp for protesters, an army of them, who seem intent on holding their ground until this three-dimensional memorial to white supremacy is removed, until they achieve victory. The circle itself has been rechristened Marcus-David Peters Circle in honor of a 24-year-old Black man shot and killed by Richmond police two years ago.

Those who want the monuments to stay often cry a chorus of "History and heritage".

Every one of the Confederate figures represented by the statues that once



Top: Matthew Fontaine Maury globe freed from its orbit.

Above: Stonewall Jackson just before his removal.

stood on Monument Avenue defended human bondage, and the rape, torture and murder of enslaved Africans, and their descendants. Just read the articles of secession from each of the rebel states that would form the Confederacy. Slavery, and its preservation, is mentioned over and over again, as is the notion of white supremacy and the inherent inferiority of people of African descent.

Consider this excerpt from what is often called the "cornerstone speech" delivered on the eve of the Civil War by Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy. "Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea," he said. "Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race

is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth."

Here's another fact: Each one of those Confederate leaders once memorialized on Monument Avenue attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and broke his solemn oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic . . ."

In terms of their history, Confederate monuments like those erected in Richmond served two other purposes, one being a revisionist, and often romanticized, history of the Confederacy and the myth of the "Lost Cause". The other reason for their placement in Richmond and elsewhere in the country is even more disturbing. They were sym-



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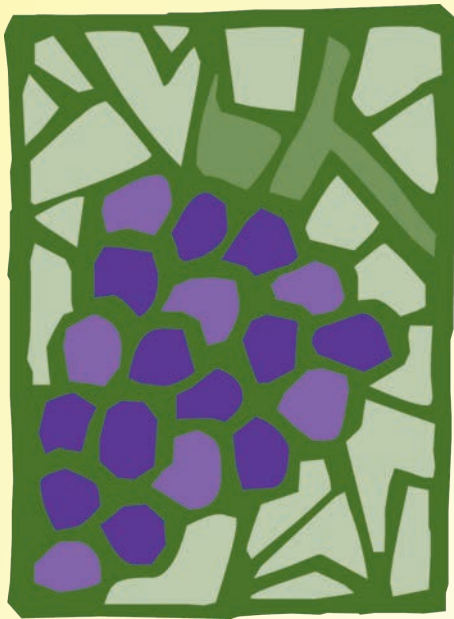


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bols of white supremacy to let Blacks know that despite the Emancipation Proclamation, the Union victory, the adoption of the Civil War Amendments, and a hundred years later, the Civil Rights Movement, they, as a people, would never be equal to whites.

The vast majority of the Confederate monuments erected in public places began in the mid-1890s just as Southern states began enacting the egregious Jim Crow laws which were created to disenfranchise Blacks and re-segregate society after three decades of integration. These laws and this rapid construction of Confederate monuments lasted well into the 1920s, a period that saw the lynching of Black men in unprecedented numbers, and a massive revival of the domestic terrorist group known as the Ku Klux Klan. Many of these monuments were sponsored by the United Daughters of the Confederacy.


It's worth noting here, too, that the white supremacist who massacred the Charleston Nine, had visited Confederate monuments throughout South Carolina shortly before he went on his rampage. So, it would seem, these symbols do incite the most hideous kind of racial violence.

Returning to Monument Avenue and its inception. Real estate developers selling lots there claimed in advertisements at the time that "no lots can ever be sold or rented in MONUMENT AVENUE PARK to any person of African descent." That's historic fact.

Only real history can save us from ourselves.

Not a sanitized version of it either, one that glorifies just those moments in our past when we did act in exemplary ways. It must be a history that exposes all of our failures and shortcomings, an acknowledgement and an acceptance of our imperfections, those critical moments when we succumbed to our baser instincts, and forsook our loftier ideals.

All great fiction must confront painful pasts. Literary works that do otherwise, fall short, and end up in bargain bins or kindling boxes because they are two-dimensional tales at best, lacking any real depth.

Even when examining the novels of our own lives, the histories of our past deeds, we can never inch forward to a greater truth unless we are able to admit our own mistakes, and confront them, and learn through their correction. There is something gratifying in coming clean with it all, even those things that in the past might have plagued us. Without lies to obfuscate, all things become clear. 



# How the Irish Dealt With Offensive Monuments

by JACK R JOHNSON

**A**PPARENTLY, BEING rid of unwanted monuments is not as easy as it sounds. As Richmond, Virginia suffers legal wrangling to be rid of the Robert E. Lee monument, we might take note of how the Irish handled a similar situation. On the 50th anniversary of Irish independence, a gentleman named Liam Sutcliffe, took it upon himself to relieve the Dublin skyline of an extraordinarily high monument to the British Admiral Lord Nelson—for whom the Irish had no overwhelming affection.



ing time, and he was the last to leave.

“At 1:30 am, a huge blast sent Nelson and tons of rubble on to the quiet street below, damaging a taxi - the only casualty of the night apart from Lord Nelson. The driver escaped injury.

“The government officially denounced the attack, though it’s said that President Eamon De Valera called the Irish Press newspaper, owned by his family, to suggest the light-hearted headline: “British Admiral Leaves Dublin By Air.”

But that’s not all.

In the explosion, Nelson’s granite head was separated from his body and that morning it was picked up off the street and taken to a municipal storage yard. Ten days later students from the National College of Art and Design stole it, looking for a way of paying off a Student Union debt.

Nelson’s head turned out to be just what they needed. The granite head appeared on stage with the Irish band, The Dubliners, and in TV and magazine ads - including one for women’s tights - and people paid for it to be displayed at parties.

According to the BBC, the police finally tracked Nelson down and today, the Admiral’s head “sits in the corner of a library in Dublin, largely ignored.”

Someday soon, perhaps, Lee’s statue will be suitably re-contextualized, sitting in a corner of the American Civil War Museum where onlookers may pass by mostly ignoring the old Confederate general’s intrepid gaze. **[N]**

It was not an easy task. A group of students tried and failed to burn Nelson down in 1955, but by the time 1966 rolled around, Liam Sutcliffe thought he was ready. According to Diarmaid Fleming of the BBC, “the idea was to place a bomb made from gelignite and ammonal on the viewing platform at the top of the pillar, with a timer set to go off in the early hours of the morning when the street would be empty.”

Sutcliffe says he took his three-year-old son with him to avoid raising suspicions.

“If the Special Branch had their eye on the Pillar and seen me going in on my own with a bag under my arm they might have become suspicious - but with the young lad with me, they wouldn’t pay any attention.”

They planted the bomb and left - but by 2 a.m. nothing had happened.

Apparently, the infamously damp Irish weather fouled the timer. So Sutcliffe realized he had a problem. There was a bomb in the center of busy Dublin that might go off at any time.

Sutcliffe had to retrieve the unexploded ordinance.

So, according to the BBC, “The next morning, as soon as the pillar opened again for tourists, Sutcliffe went back to collect it. He redesigned the timer, he says, and planted the bomb again a week later, on 7 March, this time without his son. Again it was just before clos-

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# A.P. Hill Monument Last Man Standing

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

**W**HEN MY SON Charles attended Linwood Holton Elementary School, it always struck me as odd that his Black classmates, every single day, had to look at a statue to a man who fought to preserve the enslavement of Black people. It's a particularly odd dichotomy when you consider the school was named after a progressive white governor who effectively ended massive resistance and the white supremacist legacy of segregation, while shattering the demon Byrd machine. By the way, Black students make up more than sixty percent of Holton's student body.

Recently, the Hermitage Road Historic District Association (HRHDA) voted unanimously for the removal of the A.P. Hill monument, under which Hill is interred.

"Some of the members of the association brought up at a normal business meeting whether or not we should take a position on the monument because it's actually located in the district," says HRHDA president Bob Balster. "So I appointed a committee to look at the issues and they came back with the unanimous recommendation that we support the removal of it." Shortly after that, the association held a Zoom meeting. "The vote was unanimous to remove the statue," Bob says.

The removal of the unwanted monument will also rid the Northside of one of its worst intersections, the scene of many accidents. "We had talked about the removal before, sometimes in the context of the traffic hazard that the Hill monument posed," says Bob. "You've probably heard about the problems there with that intersection. And with everything going on the way it is, it was time for us to take a position on it. It was an issue whose time had come."

So the association drafted the following letter on June 26:

*"The Hermitage Road Historic District Association stands for justice and equality for all people. We are compelled to take action in support of this belief. Our Association and its Executive Board support the removal of the*



*AP Hill Monument and the remains of General Hill interred therein.*

*"We concur with the Monument Avenue Preservation Society that "we have overlooked the inherent racism of these monuments" and their grandeur has blinded us "to the insult of glorifying men for their role in fighting to perpetuate the inhumanity of slavery." If there is an assumption of past silence regarding the AP Hill Monument from our neighborhood as implied acceptance, we hope this statement and our future actions prove otherwise.*

*"We are asking that the Mayor and the City Council of Richmond create a plan to remove the monument and remains expeditiously. We understand the reinterment process may take more time, so we ask that the statue itself be removed as soon as possible.*

*"We look forward to being a part of creating a new vision for this intersection that serves as a gateway to our historic district and other Northside neighborhoods."*

And then on Independence Day, the Historic Brookland Park Collective sent out this letter:

*"I'm sure that you're aware of the change in the landscape of our city in the past few months. In these tumultuous times people are demanding change and are not waiting for the power elite to give it to them.*

*"Richmond being the former capital of the Confederacy is a place where systemic racism permeates the soil. The biggest example of that is the odes to white supremacy in the form of numerous Confederate statues covering our city's landscape.*

*"That being said, we the Historic Brookland Park Collective are in full support of the Hermitage Road District Association's efforts to remove the AP Hill Monument and the remains buried within it. Located at the intersection of Hermitage Road and Laburnum Ave, it is not only an eyesore but a traffic hazard that needs to be removed immediately. Our children are subjected to this racist imagery daily as they enter their school building.*

*"Please remove this homage to white supremacy immediately and give our city a real opportunity for the healing that we are so in need of at this time."*

For the time, though, things have been stalled. The same day the globe of the Matthew Fontaine Maury monument came down, and a statue of Joseph Bryan and a cross to Fitzhugh Lee were removed from Monroe Park, Richmond Circuit Court Judge Bradley B. Cavedo granted an anonymous plaintiff's request for a temporary injunction to prohibit the removal of any other Confederate monuments from city-owned property. The only one remaining is A.P. Hill.

Back in June, Cavedo granted an injunction prohibiting Governor Ralph Northam from removing the Lee monument which is owned by the state. Cavedo, incidentally, resides in the Monument Avenue Historic District.

There's this, too, as reported by Brad Kutner for Courthouse News Services: Back in 1977, Cavedo, who attended University of Richmond, wrote an op-ed piece for the college paper. Caved wrote, "I will be leaving the solicitous paternalism of the federal courts, which among other things nearly wrecked my high school education by instituting a massive busing plan that caused more upheaval in my school and life than most people could imagine." Cavedo had attended Thomas Jefferson High School in Richmond. **NSJ**

*It should be noted that A.P. Hill was originally buried in Hollywood Cemetery, among twenty-five other Confederate generals, which is where the monument that now stands in Northside was to have been placed. It was Major Lewis Ginter who spearheaded the move to relocate Hill's remains. And Hill's family members were none-too-thrilled with the idea. G. Powell Hill wrote: "I was not favorable to the second disturbance and removal of the General's remains, and I believe such were the feelings of a majority of his surviving relatives, as we believe it was wholly unnecessary and furthermore, we think it would have been far more desirable had the monument been erected over the grave in the most beautiful God's Acre in his native State, and where he has been sleeping for nearly a quarter of a century."*



# Lush Hope in Dire Times

by FRAN WITHROW

**T**HERE ARE SOME books that are so gorgeously written, so thoughtfully and masterfully crafted, that I close the last page with a sense of helplessness. How can I review this book in a way that does justice to the author?

Just such a book is “Deep Creek,” Pam Houston’s exquisite collection of essays centered around her ranch in Colorado. A traumatic childhood eventually leads Houston to develop a deep love for nature, and culminates in her eventual purchase of a 120-acre home. Though Houston travels for much of the year, the ranch in sparsely populated Creede, Colorado is where her heart is.

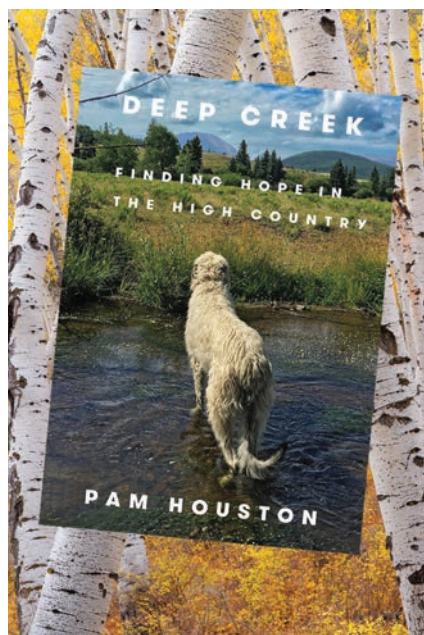
In a simple yet compelling voice, Houston talks about her beloved animals: her deeply devoted dogs, her sheep, her ancient horses, and her spunky mini-donkeys. She also unites her deep appreciation for the grandeur of the mountains around her with her love for the native wildlife who share her space.

The chapter about the six-week forest fire that rages through her area is one of the longest sections of the book, but I raced through it, engrossed. Would her ranch fall to the flames? What about her sheep and her chickens?

Interspersed throughout the main sections of the book are shorter essays: her “Ranch Almanac,” which focus on specific ranch animals. I found these more personal musings absolutely riveting.

Houston loves her ranch, but also travels regularly to teach and to travel to the wilder parts of the world. She says it is in these more untouched places that she feels truly at home. Her account of a “once in a hundred lifetimes” sighting of a migrating group of narwhals and her paddle boarding experience with a gentle manatee are heartwarming.

As she travels, Houston repeatedly bears witness to the dying earth. She realizes that just by being alive, she is contributing to our planet’s demise. Yet her description of how she finds



both utter joy in the earth’s incredible beauty as well as sorrow over what we are doing to destroy our home is perfectly painted.

Houston repeatedly acknowledges the dichotomy between being alive in this world and destroying it: observing the heartbreaking beauty of aspens growing among the charred forests as well as the potential demise of polar bears. How does one live with such a juxtaposition? Houston ponders how one finds hope for the earth that may be facing its end days, or “at least of the earth as I’ve known her.”

How indeed.

Her deep respect for the land she lives on as well as for the larger world shine through each page. There is an undercurrent of lush hope and love for life running throughout the book. From saying goodbye to her beloved dog Fenton to digging a path through the snow to get to her horses, Houston’s appreciation for all creation is powerful. Her writing makes me realize that I need to cultivate more intentional awareness of, and gratitude for, this planet we call home. **NJ**

**Deep Creek: Finding Hope in the High Country**

By Pam Houston

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# Charles Brandon

## WORDS AND DEEDS

**FROM THE TIME HE WAS AN INFANT,** Charles had the bluest of eyes, luminous and wide, and they scrutinized the world around him, and he stored away all the images he had gathered. Out on walks with him, in a stroller, or on my shoulder, he would watch everything around him, studying all things with care, and something like devotion. And well before he uttered his first words, his ears were trained on every conceivable noise from the faintest tick of a distant clock that no one else could hear to a clap of not-too-distant thunder that could deafen the deaf. He absorbed these things, not so much as a sponge, but as a strong suction that pulled in the entire world. By paying such careful attention to everything around him, including human emotional responses, Charles became extremely empathetic. He also developed an uncanny ability to synthesize experiences and sensations, and began to tell stories through paintings and drawings, through music and words. These things became his passion.

**B**

**ACK IN 2003,** shortly after my son's second birthday, I began noticing things about little Charles that didn't seem quite right. I was reluctant to talk with his mother about these behaviors, but they were there all the same. They were small things, insignificant, yet they seemed symptomatic of something dire. When I'd pick him up from his mom's house over in Lakeside, I'd notice the same kinds of behavior there as I saw over in our Bellevue home. Of course, his mother, Diane Rapp, had noticed the same things.

Charles would line up his Hot Wheels—trucks and cars—front bumper to rear bumper, place them in a line so straight and unwavering it seemed he had used a ruler to achieve the effect. And he was obsessive about it. God forbid one of them got out of line: A total meltdown would follow and there was no consoling him then.

Of his hands, he would make puppets that seemed to be talking to one another, sometimes frantically, and he would follow their actions closely with his eyes, squinting, three inches away from them, as if to discern deeper meaning in their seemingly random movements.

Plus, he wasn't talking, and he was slow to walk. His pediatrician said just wait and see; his hearing was fine, his vision checked out. That was reassuring, but I still had my doubts.

Many people I talked with about my son's development said the same thing, "All kids develop at differ-

ent rates." And this: "Boys are slower than girls." My daughter, Catherine Rose, five years Charles' senior, had matured much more quickly. She was walking by the time she was a year old, talking non-stop by age two, dressing herself before she was two, coloring profusely just over a year and so on. There was no comparison between the two; they were worlds apart.

Charles would also do uncanny things. One afternoon in the late winter, a freezing Saturday crusted with dirty snow, as my kids and I played on the living room floor, secure in the cocoon of our home, Charles stacked up a half-dozen soft, foam rubber puzzle pieces. I didn't notice anything unusual about the order, but Catherine called my attention to it.

"You see what he did?" she said.

I shook my head.

"They're the colors of the rainbow," she said. And sure enough he'd stacked the puzzle pieces in their ascending prismatic order—violet, blue, green, etc. I thought, perhaps, it was an accident, so I took the stack apart, scattering the puzzle pieces across the floor, and once again Charles mimicked the spectrum when he reassembled them. He was just over a year old at the time and I don't think he'd ever seen a rainbow or shattered light through a prism, yet he seemed to understand the sequence.

In the corner of our living room, behind the front door, stands a carving of a hornbill, its feathers black



*Charles earlier this year at his High School graduation.*

BY CHARLES MCGUIGAN  
PHOTOS BY REBECCA D'ANGELO



# Rapp McGuigan



and white, its bill, eyes and feet a garish orange. It was a gift from a friend who had traveled to Guinea-Bissau. Charles when he was not quite two, would, on unstable legs, approach this wooden bird, his approximate height, stand eye to eye with it, pet its head, look deeply into those orange eyes as if he might elicit a response, make this piece of senseless wood communicate with him. He would do this every day; it became part of his routine, his ritual. His tiny hands stroked the wooden torso, the baby skin of his fingers sometimes snagging on the rough etching that described the feathers. And he would stare into those dead wooden eyes, fifteen, twenty minutes at a time, trying to coax a response, but the bird remained mute, at least to my ears.

During a summer power outage, late at night, not a wisp of air moving through our house, the kids and I lay on the bed, drenched in sweat, and I read to them by candle light and oil lamp. I turned the pages slowly so Charles could see every picture in “The Clown of God”. By the time I was finished, Catherine had already drifted off. I blew out the candles, turned down the oil lamp until the flame died. Minutes later, Charles sat upright in bed and clapped his hands once, saying, “Lights on.” And immediately the power, which had been off for three days, came on and with it the lights, fans, air conditioners, refrig-

erator and aquarium pump, so the house again began to hum with a satisfying electric life. I wondered if his brain had somehow perceived the motion and energy of electrons along their copper conduits nanoseconds before the power was restored. Of course, it could have just been a coincidence. But still.

My mind lit up with the word autism. I was familiar enough with the disorder, having written a series of articles in the early nineties about it. Charles seemed to have some of the red flags going for him, but not all of them. For one thing he was always extremely affectionate and easily made eye contact with everyone he encountered. Sometimes he would look so deeply into a stranger’s eyes that they would be taken aback as if he had crossed an invisible boundary, had invaded a personal space.

A woman behind us at the checkout counter in Ukrop’s once said to me, “What he looking at?”

I considered her question. “You,” I said, looking into her eyes.

“Well he shouldn’t look so close,” this woman said.

“That’s his way,” I told her, as she gathered her change, keeping her face down, away from the stare of my inquisitive child.

When he was about three and a half years old, Charles began seeing a speech therapist, and the results were palpable almost immediately. I had been watching him very closely, would spend hours in the evening reading to him, sometimes as many as twenty children’s books at a setting. He followed the words closely, was insistent on looking at the accompanying pictures, and what’s more he could remember the plot lines and would ask questions about the characters.

One Sunday afternoon in the spring, when Catherine was off with her mother, Charles and I sat on the living room floor and talked. I asked him what he meant when he used his hands. I’d always assumed these were just random motions. Boy, was I wrong. A splayed hand held upward meant “tree”; a splayed hand held downward meant “bird”. A fist with the thumb protruding was the symbol for “truck”. The fingers of his left hand drawn rapidly across his right wrist meant “running”. He went on and on for hours, explaining in detail what every hand movement meant. I listened and made notes and rudimentary drawings. When it was all over—about five hours later—I had 218 separate hand symbols describing 218 different words. A few days later I quizzed him on the hand symbols and their meanings remained consistent. I was amazed and relieved.



A week later, I met with two social workers at the child development center Charles attended at the time. They had been observing Charles and had come up with a preliminary diagnosis. I waited. “We believe Charles has high functioning autism,” one of the women told me. “Or Asperberger’s syndrome,” said the other. For a moment, I was speechless.

Later, I took Charles to see Dr. Pasquale Accardo at Children’s Hospital. He spent well over an hour with my son, putting him through a battery of tests, asking him scores of questions. At the end of it all he told me Charles had clearly fallen under the rather wide reach of the autism umbrella, but at its very edge. He might also have Attention Deficit Disorder. Charles, it turned out, had the intellect of someone twice his age, but didn’t have the ability to express his thoughts and feelings, which is why, as Dr. Accardo put it, “He created his own sign language.”

Late at night, I would sometimes look at the faces of my children in slumber. I would look at Charles, his eyes shut against the world, mouth open, head resting in the cradle of the pil-

low, peaceful, content, his mind finally at ease. Some nights as he slept and dreamt he would laugh out loud. “I love you with all my heart and soul,” I would say to my son. There were times that he roused briefly from his sleep and said, with his eyes still shut, “I love you too, Daddy.”

We were lucky to get Charles into Holton Elementary School. No school I know of was ever run better. All thanks to David Hudson and his hand-selected teachers and other staff. The first teachers Charles had there—Christal Mark and Ricky Gay—taught him for a total of three years.

Viewed through the right lens, life reveals itself as an unending series of victories, each one a call for celebration. Just consider the eruption of spring out of the sodden earth, transforming the world overnight from monochromatic blur to polychromatic mural. Think of the first steps your son or daughter took, or the first words he or she uttered. The way your legs respond when you take a walk, ride a bike, jog a distance. How your eyes capture every visual event in the universe like a camera, only better, depositing each image instantly in the



Charles flanked by his sisters Miranda and Catherine

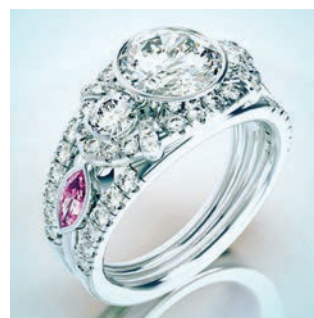
archives of the brain to be recalled in less than the blink of an eye in dreams or reveries. And how those small drums within our ears allow us to hear every conceivable sound—from the subtle nuances of the human voice to the blessings of all music. Each a victory, a small accomplishment, worthy of acknowledgement and celebration. That was always the approach of Christal Mark and Ricky Gay.

On a Tuesday morning twelve years ago, I walked my son Charles—as

I did every morning when he was with me—through the rear doors of Holton Elementary. Once inside, we were greeted by safety guards, lime green bands crossing their chests, who lined the halls at intervals, keeping the trooping bands of kids in line, saluting them with a very formal, but pleasant, “Good morning.”

And at the door to the classroom, Christal Mark and Ricky Gay welcomed my son. Charles wangled out of his backpack, unzipped it, removed

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a marbled notebook and yellow folder, placing them in a wire mesh basket, and then zipped the backpack up and hung it from a hook in his cubby. He took his seat at a small table across from Charles McIlwain.

That was an extra special day for the children in the classroom: in a little over an hour they, and students from Ms. Prentiss' room next door, were headed over to the Ukrop's Supermarket at Brook Run Shopping Center for a field trip.

"The trip to Ukrop's will correlate with a number of SOL requirements," said Christal. "In mathematics we've been working with buying and selling and coins and their value. We've also been talking about community workers. We've been categorizing in language arts and reading, so this is a good opportunity to see how things are arranged and categorized." She also has planned a scavenger hunt for her charges so that they'd have the opportunity to identify six items from dairy, six items from produce and so on, but time would run out before the kids get to go a-scavenging.

Giving back is what Christal and Ricky

do for a living—both would tell me at various points during a series of interviews I did with them. Teaching, as you might have guessed, is not about money, it's about molding young minds and teaching critical thinking. The hours both Ricky and Christal had put in each day, and the intensity of the work they performed, blew me away, and does to this day.

Our experience with every teacher at Holton was the same. They were all committed to the well-being and education of their charges. David Hudson enforced a policy of "no bullying", and it was a success. Middle school proved to be the exact opposite.

Those years frankly are something of a blur today. There was constant fear on both my part and his mother's part that we would receive a phone call from school about Charles. For months, he was bullied so severely in middle school by students and at least two teachers, that at the end of it, when his mother and I removed him from that school, he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Because of the tangled bureaucracy it took months to get Charles a home-



*Charles fishing at Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge.*

bound instructor.

Ultimately, Charles was assigned a string of homebound instructors by the schools so he was able to pass both seventh and eighth grades with flying colors. He loved completing his assignments. During that entire period of time, he was forever by my side, or his mother's. Even when meeting with the homebound instructor at an area library, one of us had to be present.

Charles and I made a home and a workplace out of Stir Crazy Café every day

of the week thanks to the good graces of the owner and her entire staff of kind souls. As I worked on my laptop, Charles wrote and read, and created works of art, things he gave away freely to whomever wanted them. I cannot tell you how hard this was on Charles. Every day throughout the school year, he would see his friends come through the front door of Stir Crazy when school let out. It was good to see them, but it was a stinging reminder that he was still not in school. They had lives between eight

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and three that he was excluded from, and even though he rarely mentioned this the pain on his face was readable as block print.

During that time though, several wonderful things occurred. For one thing, Charles began seeing a gifted therapist named Dr. Pam Waaland who treated my son for post-traumatic stress disorder and other issues. We would also get pro-bono help from Valerie Slater, who was both advocate and lawyer for the Disability Law Center of Virginia. It was through her wrangling with city bureaucrats and attorneys that Charles was finally given private placement. But that was still a long way off.

Something else happened in that period when Charles was still being bullied in the schools that served as a life preserver for him. Charles was always a sweet child, unable to understand why anyone would hurt another. He just didn't get it, I'm happy to say, and still doesn't. But things were hard on him at that point and the smile that had frequently played across his face was gone. That is until he began taking classes with SPARC's Live Art. It was a game changer. From the first class at SPARC it became my son's sanctuary from the hell he endured in classrooms and hallways, cafeterias and gyms for days on end.

I spent virtually every Thursday night that year with my son Charles in Live Art's Soul Sound class. There were two dozen kids, and a total of eleven instructors and assistants present. In those early weeks, the kids were getting to know one another and their teachers, and almost immediately they felt at ease, were comfortable, and began to learn the rudiments of music, of rhythm and tempo. From the time he was just months old, Charles responded to music of every description, so Live Art became the best of times for him.

The moment my son and I first stepped foot in that studio, we both noticed something that was unfamiliar. There didn't seem to be any differences among the vast array of students there. "We call Live Art kids, students of all abilities," said Erin Thomas Foley, the woman who came up with the idea for Live Art. "When class starts we don't talk about who's typically developed, or who may have special needs. Once our classes start, they are all inclusive classes. End of story. We simply make sure we have enough staff in the room to assist every ability."

When I mentioned to Erin that one of the students in Soul Sound, who, as they say, presents with Down syndrome, excels beyond his peers, she

said, "And do you know why?"

"Because nobody's judging him," I suggested.

"Yes," said Erin. "But it's more than that. It's what music does and color does and movement does. That's what it does for the human spirit. It transforms us."

Later, when I talked with Joshua (Josh) Small, a local musician who was a teaching artist at Live Art, he likened the place to a church. "It's a sacred place in a sense," he said. "In the way the program is set up. And everybody there has common behaviors and desires. It's a place to be validated. You can't fail here. It's kind of an art church. The people here are in this place because they feel strongly about expressing themselves. We are all here to support each other. That is sacred, and no one would want to break that trust."

Part of me wished then, and now, that principals in public schools from across the nation would sit in on sessions of Live Art and meet the teachers there and seek the advice of Erin Thomas-Foley, so they might learn how it's done, how you ensure a child's safety, how you nurture, how you teach humanity along with the humanities. Something the current Secretary of Education could learn a thing or two about. Because my son, Charles, who was so damaged by bullying that he was then being treated for a disorder that afflicts soldiers who return from the forever wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, asked me one simple question, and he asked it over and over again: "Daddy, why can't schools be like Live Art?"

I had no answer then, and I have no answer now.

Charles has always had a close relationship with his two sisters, Miranda and Catherine. They're protective of him, and love to needle him, which he returns in kind. They have consistently reminded me of lion cubs at play, who learn through their play how to protect themselves.

Catherine has spent hours with Charles teaching him what she knows about art. When he finished a painting several years ago of a sun with rays like fingers, pulling itself over the horizon of a large body of water, Catherine was reminded of Picasso. And I could see that. "I can't believe he did this," she said. And then mentioned the three bicycles he drew over a road map. "He really has talent," said Catherine.

From the time they were both very young, Charles and Catherine loved to travel, and every summer whether we could afford it or not we packed





*Charles and Catherine exploring Acadia National Park.*

the JEEP or the CRV so tight there was scarcely room for us. Charles loved it though, and told us years ago that he liked it to be “snuggly”, because he would be in the backseat surrounded by a few stuffed animals and luggage and coolers, with a pillow under his head and a blanket wrapped around him even when it was hot which it frequently was (I don’t think we’ve ever had a car with air conditioning that blew cold for more than a month). Over the years, we have scoured the coastline from Prince Edward Island to Key West and out to New Orleans, visiting more than 160 beaches.

A week ago, while I was interviewing Charles, I asked him what his favorite destination was. “Maine,” he said. And then I mentioned the Carolinas and Florida. He remembered a great white heron who would greet us every morning as we went fishing from the wharf behind a shack we rented on Islamorada in the Florida Keys. We would catch pinfish and toss them over to the crane. He would swallow each one whole, but never ate more than seven in one sitting. “I guess I like all the places we’ve been,” he said. “I like that it’s been us going there, and what we’ve seen together.”

Charles is the best of traveling companions. He doesn’t whine when things go wrong. “When that happens,” he told me once. “That makes it an adventure. Remember Ocracoke?”

We were on the final leg of an odyssey from Maine down to lower North Carolina. We’d eaten at Pigman’s Barbecue, fished for a couple hours on the Bonner Bridge, then headed down to Hatteras Village. By the time we board the ferry it was nine o’clock.

We were the last car off the ferry, and began the 13-mile drive down to the village of Ocracoke with its welcoming lights. Halfway down Route 12, I pulled over to the sand and gravel shoulder, turned off the lights, and

Charles and I entered the dark night. There was no trace of light and the stars were bright and the planets steady in their streams of colors.

“You can see the Milky Way,” Charles said. He was right.

In Ocracoke, we tried every motel and hotel and B&B, and there was no room at the inn. I drove down to the ferry landing on Silver Lake, on the leeward side of the island. I talked to a sheriff’s deputy there and she told me we could just sleep in our car, if we liked, that she’d be on duty until seven, and watch out for us. I moved the car over to the information center and began talking with a bearded man who worked with the ferry service. I opened all the doors of the car, including the tailgate. I opened the sun room, and an ocean breeze was coming off the southwest, so I realigned the car, drop both front seats back to their lowest position and Charles climbed in and was sleeping within minutes. I talked with ferry guy until one in the morning and then returned to our Honda CRV, a car I had told Charles on numerous occasions we could sleep in if we had to. My son woke, and I told him the ferry man said tonight was the peak of a meteor shower. We stared into the night skies, among the brilliant haze of stars, through the open doors of our car, and through the sunroof, and all through the night, for the next three hours, we saw shooting star after shooting star, quick slashes of pale green light like an ocean plankton, streaking the sky and gone in an instant, my son and I saw this, and we lost track of how many we had seen after we counted forty. And then we drifted into sleep, with the moist, now cool, breeze flowing over us, as if we slumbered in a bed of clouds, and later, we were the first to board the ferry southward, an hour after a spectacular dawn, and neither of us had ever felt more refreshed, even though we had slept for only two hours.

We settled in for a week below the Cape Fear River on Oak Is-

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land where there are palm trees and Spanish moss-clad live oaks. I plucked ripened jelly dates from a palm tree that was two doors down from us. The fruit was citrus tart and mango mellow.

With a hundred other people, at two one morning, we watched loggerhead turtles hatch and make their way to the loving embrace of the Atlantic. We fished and ate shrimp and visited the North Carolina Aquarium over at Fort Fisher where Charles petted sharks and sting rays.

Our last two days we stayed in a motel room overlooking the charter boat fleet in Hatteras Village. I watched the mates at four in the morning readying the boats for a long day of fishing in the Gulf Stream. We watched them come in with their catches in the early evening, watched them weigh the wahoos and mahi-mahi, which both ended up as the catch of the day in half-a-dozen local seafood restaurants.

That final night, long after Charles had fallen asleep, I checked my email and there was a message from our attorney. Charles had been granted pri-

vate placement. And though the first school would not work out, the second one did. Charles discovered himself there, learned that his only limitations were constraints he placed on himself.

He also learned to deal with bullies. Here's what he told me recently: "I learned to ignore them, but sometimes you have to confront them and tell them to leave you alone. If they don't listen to that, you just ignore them."

When he finally settled into a high school where there was no tolerance of bullying, a place called Dominion Academy, Charles began to write furiously. Every single day, he would turn out lyrics for songs, or flesh out stories that he wanted to eventually turn into screen plays. Since the pandemic struck in earnest and school classes were cancelled, Charles writes every day for an hour or more. And he reads voraciously now, and knows more about film and music than any 19-year old I've ever met.

Here's a song Charles wrote a couple years ago, both music and lyrics. It's called "Into Another Life."



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"She's in a hospital room holding her child  
While her friends and family watch with love,  
Crying tears of joy.

"First, you're born.  
Then you're taught to speak words and walk.  
Go to daycare and school to learn,  
make friends, puberty, graduation.


"Go to college, fall in love, get married,  
Have beautiful children, take them on vacations.

Become elderly and frail in a hospital room.

"You're at his funeral crying in your eyes in sorrow and pain.  
He says, "Don't be sad or scared, my darlings.

I know the pain will go away when I'm in the blanket of heavens."

During the most recent interview I had with Charles, when I asked what he wanted to do, he smiled.

"I want to write and be kind to people and change the world," he said. "I want people to know how there can be wonder in everything. You just have to look for it." 

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# The Dandelion Garden An Outdoor Classroom

by CHARLES MCGUIGAN

**B**ACK IN MID-MAY, shortly after noon, and the temperature unseasonably cool, I met up with three women who nurture The Dandelion at Holton Elementary School. Two of them—Ellen Shepard and Susanna Raffenot, the OGs, or Original Gardeners, as they're sometimes called—planted the initial seeds, almost ten years ago to the day, for a project that has frankly surprised this pair of progenitors. The other woman is Kate Lainhart who now works as the garden educator at Holton Elementary School. She's the teacher who uses hands-on nature as her classroom, showing her charges how important it is to care for our planet, relating it to other courses of study.

It is fitting that we are seated at safe social distances on picnic benches under the roof of The Hudson House, named for the man who made this singular project possible. Principal David Hudson gave the okay for Ellen and Susanna to proceed with the project, and threw his full weight behind it. On about the time The Dandelion was dedicated, Mr. Hudson was named Principal of the Year by RPS. Along with a plaque, he received a \$7,500 cash award, and being David Hudson, he donated the entire sum to The Dandelion project.

"Bon Secours and the Holton PTA also gave us big chunks of money," Ellen said. "As well as the Family Foundation, Lowe's and individual donors."

Susanna remembered the moment she first came up with the idea of a teaching garden. "I was at the Holton 5 K Family Festival, helping to put together all the activities for that, and I was spending a lot of time out back here," she told me. "And I kept looking at these old beds that were there over by the bus loop. They were just kind of run down, and I thought, let's throw some pansies in there to spruce them up a little bit."

That night, she took to Google and discovered an entire movement devoted to school gardens thanks in large part to a truly remarkable First Lady, Michelle Obama. "The White House had



*Holton students planting seeds in The Dandelion.*

started planting their garden that same year," said Susanna. So she planted the seed in the minds of other parents who had children at Holton, and was amazed at how rapidly it germinated. "As you know, this community is just so fabulous once you put an idea out there," Susanna said. "There was instant support around the idea, including Ellen Shepard here who was super excited about it and she just really took the ball and ran with it."

That summer, the pair attended a symposium on youth gardening held in Cleveland, Ohio. "And that just kind of opened our eyes up to what possibilities were out there," Susanna recalled. "I think what we came away with were these things: Use your own space, know what your strengths are, adopt and develop it, know where your community resources are, and know who your school support is, like the principal and the staff."

Then in April of 2010, not long after the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history when a petroleum company in its quest to fatten corporate gains damned near destroyed the Gulf of

Mexico, The Dandelion was formally dedicated. Among those present were former Governor Tim Kaine and First Lady Anne Holton.

Back then, I talked with Chris Chase, a sculptor and carpenter, who designed the Hudson House, this outdoor classroom which is the omphalous of The Dandelion.

It is an elegant essay in post-and-beam construction with massive upright members sheathed in copper supporting an array of joists fitted at various angles.

"I just sort of played around with it," Chris had told me a decade ago. "I just took that metaphor of a butterfly and went with it. I tried to be as organic as I could, using as minimal an amount of materials as possible."

Susanna Raffenot looked up at the ceiling of the Hudson House. "This place is hurricane proof and Chris really developed it to be in commune with the gardens," she said. "It's got six legs, it's got a winged roof. It's got a light membrane roof to protect from sun and light rain, and he also developed little spouts so we could collect

rainwater off the corners, so we've got rain barrels surrounding it. And it opens up into the butterfly garden, our pollinator garden, which is in the shape of a butterfly."

That garden is filled with native plants—Joe Pye weed, highbush blueberry, milkweed, purple coneflower, mountain mint, golden rod, bee balm, rudbeckia, and more

Because of the massive community support from the school and beyond, The Dandelion continued to grow. "We added the garden shed, a composting station, the bluebird trail," said Susanna. "And we just couldn't say no. So we kept on going and it was a lot of work in the beginning, but we also had a lot of resources."

With a grant from The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, they were also able to construct a rain garden. Located on the island in the parking lot at the front of the school, this garden of native plant species cleanses runoff water before it is returned to the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

To prepare the spot for the rain garden, tons of fill-dirt was removed and replaced with appropriate layers of clay, sand and soil. And then plantings were made.

"There are bald cypress, native grasses, and two bay magnolias," Ellen Shepard said. "I think there are in the neighborhood of a hundred and fifty plants out there. In the City of Richmond we have terrible pollution problems, and so the rain garden helps control both the quality and the quantity of water that is running off, collecting from 1.8 acres of run off between the roof and the pavement and the compacted soil. It is a monster rain garden."

Ellen remembered the day of the ground-breaking for the rain garden. Governor Linwood Holton, who had just turned ninety, drove himself to the school and delivered a speech. "He talked about environmental stewardship and this diverse school," said Ellen. "And the kids sang Happy Birthday to him and got to meet the man their school is named after. It really was one of the highlights of this entire gardening project."



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## SCHOOLS

On the opposite end of the school property, The Dandelion Garden has created something of a forest, another example of good land stewardship.

"Over the years, we have planted 363 trees, most of them natives," according to Ellen. "We have mulberry, button bush, indigo, hazelnut, honey locust, sycamore."

Susanna nodded as Ellen listed the trees. "We know trees are the most cost-effective thing to do to fight climate change and suck up carbon," she said. "They are the key."

And those trees have a number of other functions. "They form a natural boundary," Susanna said. "And what I love about them is that they block out the road noises and buffer the wind a bit. And there are so many birds and other native animals that take shelter in there."

All of these features make The Dandelion the most unique outdoor classroom imaginable, and Kate Lainhart uses it all to full effect. Her son had started attending Holton three years ago, and Kate, who has a background in agriculture, began volunteering. This past year she started working at Holton as the school's garden educator. All school year long, she sees all 600 students who attend Holton over every two-week period. "So every child comes out every other week," Kate said. "I come up with a curriculum that involves either math or science, or another subject. Or just getting dirty. We do everything from planting, weeding, watering to harvesting. We do experiments. We do observations. Sometimes we just sit here really quietly and listen."

And the grounds are large enough and harbor enough diversity that the kids can actually go on nature hikes. "We did a seed hike one day around our amazing school," Kate explained. "We found as many seeds as we could, which with all of our trees and bushes and shrubs and flowers wasn't hard to do."

Kate looked around her, and then said, "This is my classroom. On a freezing day or a rainy day I do go inside and teach the class inside each individual class's classroom. But, I would prefer to be out here all the time."

The kids have noticed Kate's attachment to the outdoor classroom. If they see her in the halls, they'll ask very seriously, "What are you doing inside?" And some of the students believe she might live in the potting shed. "Do you live in there?" they'll ask.

Only when the weather is extremely inclement, will Kate move to the in-

doors. "Richmond is amazing because from day to day it can be twenty and the next day it can be forty," she said. "If it's above freezing, I really want them to be out there. I try to get them to move their bodies and not just sit around."

Kate's position at Holton is funded neither by RPS nor the PTA. "It is a crowd-funded," Ellen Shepard said. "So, we're always looking for contributions. Sara Hendricks (who has two daughters attending Holton) is kind of our fundraiser. Our school has recognized that this is an important part of our curriculum and our community."

One of the major components of The Dandelion will always be the produce gardens. Before COVID-19 struck, students had already begun planting crops, everything from carrots and radishes, to leaf crops and strawberries.

"We let the students plant and harvest, to see how that whole process is from start to finish," Susanna said. "Because then you're invested in it, working with it and watching it grow, you really care for it."

And though the students have been unable to reap the rewards of their labor, Kate is diligent about tending the raised beds, and collecting the crops.

"Since school has been out, I have been coming every week and harvesting and taking that over to the Ginter Park Elementary School Food Distribution Center," said Kate. "Since March I have taken thirty-six bags of salad mix, twenty-tree bags of spinach, thirty-three bags of herbs, nine bunches of radishes, twenty-five bunches of carrots and eleven heads of Romaine lettuce. I will continue to do that until school is officially out."

Susanna Raffenot had to leave for a remote meeting, but before she did, she stood up and walked over to the Butterfly Garden, and looked over to the trees and back to the raised beds and The Hudson House.

"I'm blown away looking at how much greenery there is now, how much fill in, and I keep going back to that empty field that was here ten years ago," she said. "People need to see what a huge difference this has been. I think of the number of people and the dedication and the time that went into this. And it just keeps growing." **NJ**

*If you'd like to make a donation or volunteer your time, please contact Kate Lainhart at lainhartk@gmail.com, Ellen Shepard at ellenshepard@yahoo.com or Susanna Raffenot at sraffenot@verizon.net*

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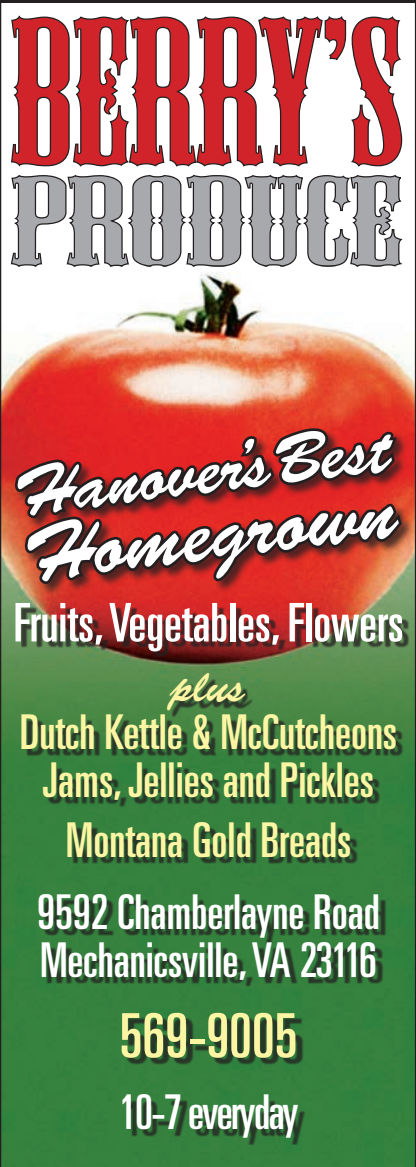
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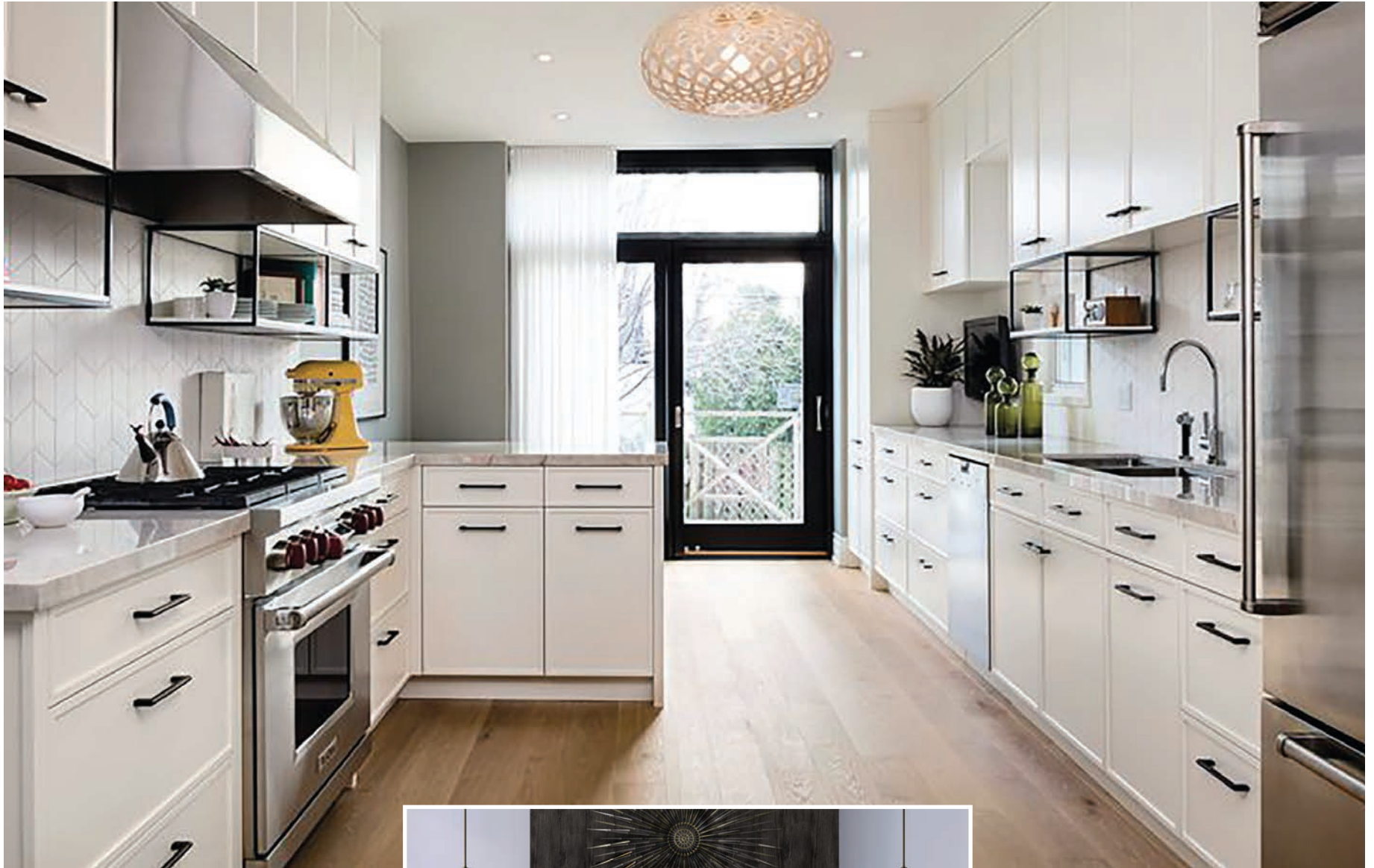
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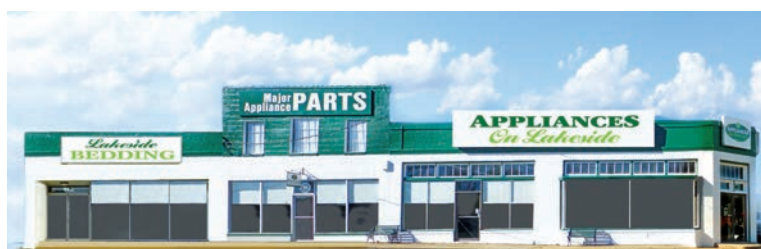


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