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Children's & Teens' Connection 2021



Claire Yao, 7, Grade 2,
Terra Centre Elementary
School, Burke

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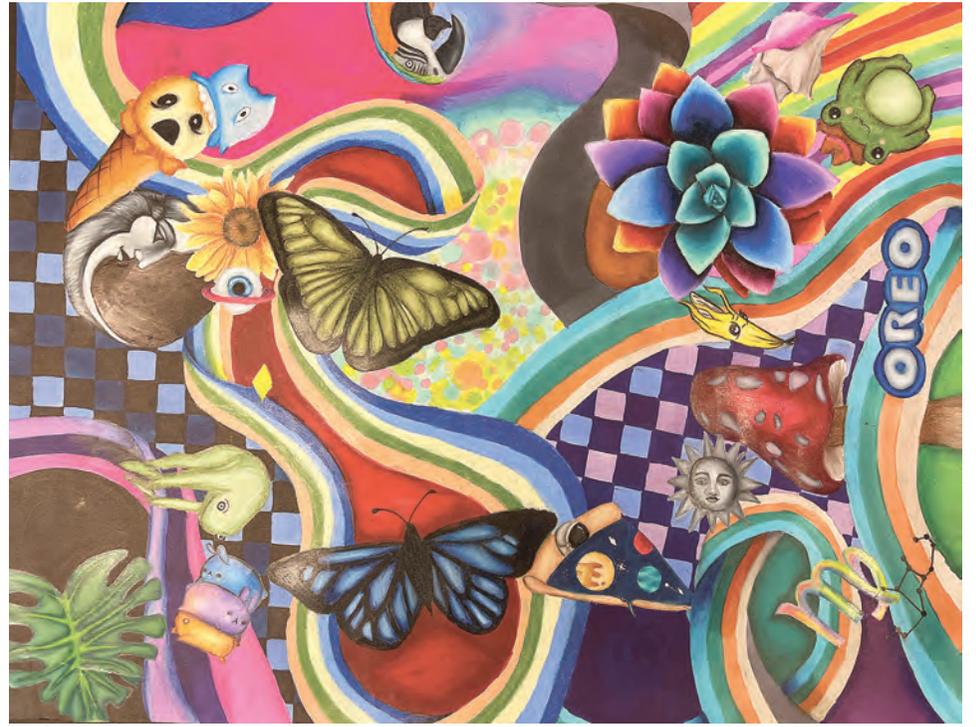
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2021 CHILDREN'S AND TEENS' CONNECTION



“Circus Mayhem” by Akshara Mittal, grade 7, Katherine Johnson Middle School, age 12 (Fairfax)



“Faith Forgotten Land” by Geetika Mittal, grade 7, Katherine Johnson Middle School, age 12 (Fairfax)

Welcome to our 2021 Children's Connection sections. While submissions were still short of the pre-pandemic avalanche of children's and teens' art and writing, in 2021 students have delivered a delightful, sometimes unusual, panoply of expression. I've enjoyed the art and writing as we've downloaded it over many many hours in the last two weeks. And I hope you will also.

You can find digital copies of the papers, including the Children's and Teens' Connection at <http://www.connectionnewspapers.com/PDFs/>. The papers should be posted by Thursday, Dec. 16. We deliver tens of thousands of papers to homes, businesses, public libraries and community centers, plus thousands more in email and digital. We will print extra copies, and restock at libraries and community centers. But also

feel free to print out pages from the PDFs or take a digital copy to a photo center to print out larger, high resolution copies of your child's art if you desire many copies.

It feels like a small, or not so small, miracle to have made it to the end of 2021 and be looking forward into the New Year. The pandemic has been a bear, financially and otherwise. Revenue plummeted at the beginning in 2020. More recently we have seen the return of advertising for events and Grand Openings. Some beloved advertisers have stayed the course supporting us throughout, and many more have done what they can. Revenue is still short of our greatly curtailed costs.

At the end of 2020, we didn't have any idea how we would keep going. But our readers responded overwhelmingly to our Go Fund Me, bringing us within reach of our goal of \$50,000. PPP funding, “forgiv-

able loans,” made our survival possible. Now we are still hoping for a grant from Rebuild Virginia to help get us into 2022. We applied almost a year ago, but it seems possible that our application might be reviewed while there is still money in the fund.

I think we can be characterized as pathological optimists. While there are forces out there that could make it impossible for us to keep going, we continue to push forward. While I have said this a few times without yet making it happen, keep your eyes open for our membership drive, which would hope for readers, sources and community members who would be interested in supporting us on a monthly basis.

One of the magical elements that helped us get this far was the presence on our staff of an international journalism legend, Kemal Kurspahic, who served as managing

editor and guiding light for decades. Kemal died tragically and unexpectedly this fall, having a stroke after minor surgery. We miss him daily. Keeping everything going has been harder since. You can read Kemal's obituary here: <http://www.connection-newspapers.com/news/2021/sep/22/courage-journalism/>

We haven't done everything we aspire to do, we always aspire to greater community service. But we do know that the community is better off for Local Media Connection continuing to publish.

Now that we've told you how we're doing (ha!), let us know how you are doing, what you think about the state of our communities.

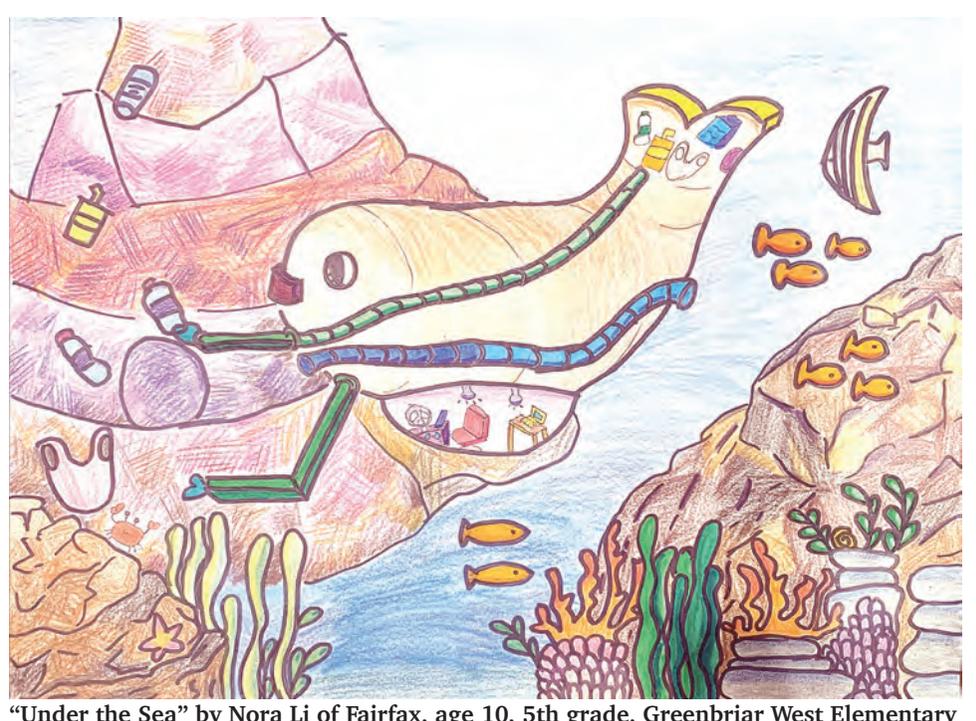
Thank you.

— MARY KIMM,
KIMM.MARY@GMAIL.COM

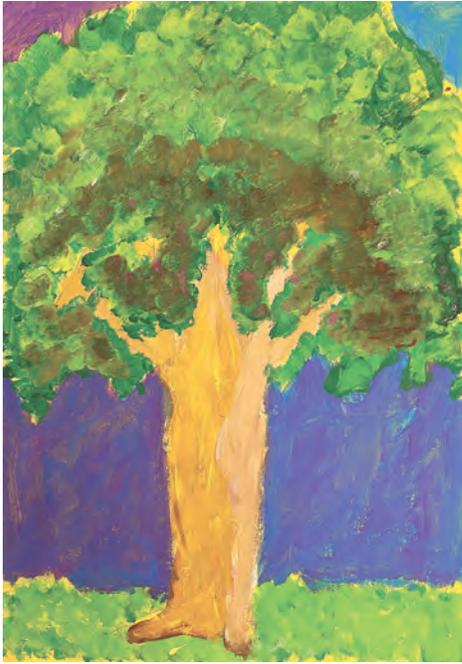


Liana Kim, Grade 10, 15-years old, Fairfax, WT Woodson HS, Fairfax, VA

WWW.CONNECTIONNEWSPAPERS.COM



“Under the Sea” by Nora Li of Fairfax, age 10, 5th grade, Greenbriar West Elementary School, Fairfax



Ron Moses, 1st Grade



Lydia Markley, 3rd Grade



Ilana Aschan, 2nd Grade



Eytan Baxter, 6th Grade



Emma Welborn, 6th Grade



Amber Yin, 6th Grade



Arianna Hicks, 4th Grade



Simran Shah, 2nd Grade



Simran Shah, 2nd Grade



Nigel Ferrell, 5th Grade

Memoir: Cox Farm Hayride!

BY: CALEB JAMES
ORANGE HUNT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, 6TH GRADE
TEACHER: BRENDA K. PATRICK

The line that I was standing in got shorter and shorter. Up ahead loomed the HayRide depot. Loose pieces of yellow gold hay was all over the ground and smoke still hung in the air from the last tractor that had just departed. A large tractor pulling two trailers filled with hay pulled up to the depot. The attendant shepherded us to a boarding line for the first wagon. The man driving the tractor who looked like he just got done working a day in the fields told us all the rules involved with riding safely, like keeping your arms and legs in the wagons at all times. Then with a grunt and a heave, the tractor started to pull forward.

The itchy hay tickled my bare legs as the tractor jolted towards the crashed silver spaceship. Not your typical hayride attraction. The countdown started and as we reached one, five aliens dressed in neon jumpsuits ran out of the glinting UFO. They ran around the tractor and waved as the Star Wars theme song blared from the spaceship. The tractor crossed a rickety looking bridge and then we saw that the road split into two directions. A sign told us that one way was the easy way and one way was the hard way. The driver asked us gruffly if we wanted to go the hard way or the easy way and a chorus of voices shouted, "the hard way!" The driver kept heading for the easy path, but at the last minute the driver did a hairpin turn and the tractor veered onto the hard path.

We cruised by a ghost town full of empty buildings that were overgrown with ivy and had many broken windows. Then we drove right into the middle of a deep stream. The water gurgled around the large tractor wheels and then continued farther down the muddy stream. The tractor finally pulled out of the long stream and onto the sandy bank. The trailers where we rode, bounced up and down as the tractor headed

for the troll's bridge. As we pulled up to the bridge, a sign said, "out for lunch." I was disappointed because usually the trolls come out and stop the tractor and banter with the tractor driver and ask the passengers to solve a riddle. We moved on and drove into another muddy stream. About halfway through, we came to a jarring stop.

The driver revved the tractor's engine, but the tractor still didn't move. "Ugh," the driver said. "The tractor got stuck again." Then the driver in a gruff voice told all of us kids to get out of the tractor and push it out of the mud. I was just about to jump out of the wagon when he told us that it was a joke. I sat back down and hit my leg in the process. Then the driver shouted to us that we should call for help. On the count of three he shouted, "one, two, three, help," we all screamed. Superman came out from behind a tree and started pulling us out of the mud with an imaginary rope. The tractor got back on to more solid ground and pulled away from the murky, mucky, muddy stream. We drove around a small line of trees and then passed another abandoned town. Just then four horses pulled up alongside the wagon with their riders on top. The horses traveled with the wagons while the kids stroked the horses, until they veered off so they could do the same for the next group of wagons. A huge long barn came up in front of us and then we were swallowed into its inky depths.

A loud pre-recorded voice shouted "AbraKadabra." Two seconds later the whole inside of the barn lit-up and all these little displays suddenly came to life! We drove through the barn as loud speakers blared music—it was deafening! After a minute we pulled out of the barn and arrived at the station. The tractor idled as we got off at the platform and then chuffed away to pick up another load of people. The hayride was one of the most memorable I had ever been on—the gruff driver was interactive and rustic in his manner, and his driving, while rough, felt really authentic.

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All our team members are following COVID-19 infection control protocols, including wearing a mask. Number of visitors allowed inside is limited, to maintain appropriate social distancing.

OAK VIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ARTWORK



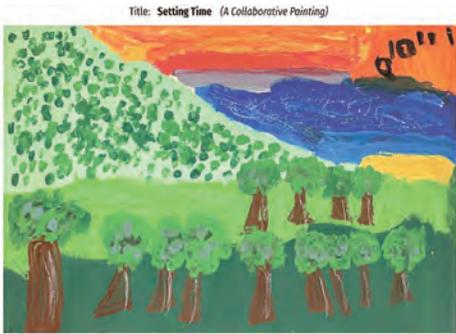
Name: Amelia Lykins Grade: 3rd From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams



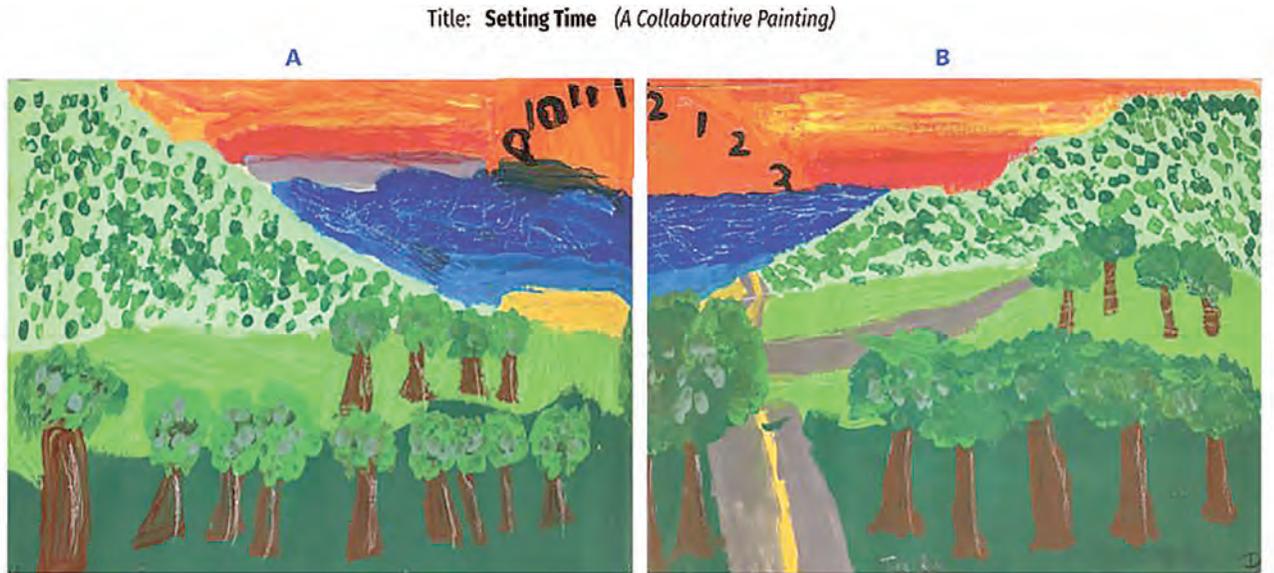
Name: Amelia Lykins Grade: 3rd From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams



Name: Brynn Strano Grade: 2nd From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams

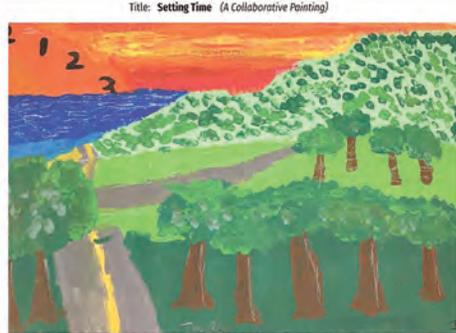


Name: Adam Rainer Grade: 4th Age: 9 From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams



A Name: Adam Rainer Grade: 4th From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams

B Name: Dash Taylor Grade: 4th From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams



Name: Dash Taylor Grade: 4th Age: 9 From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams



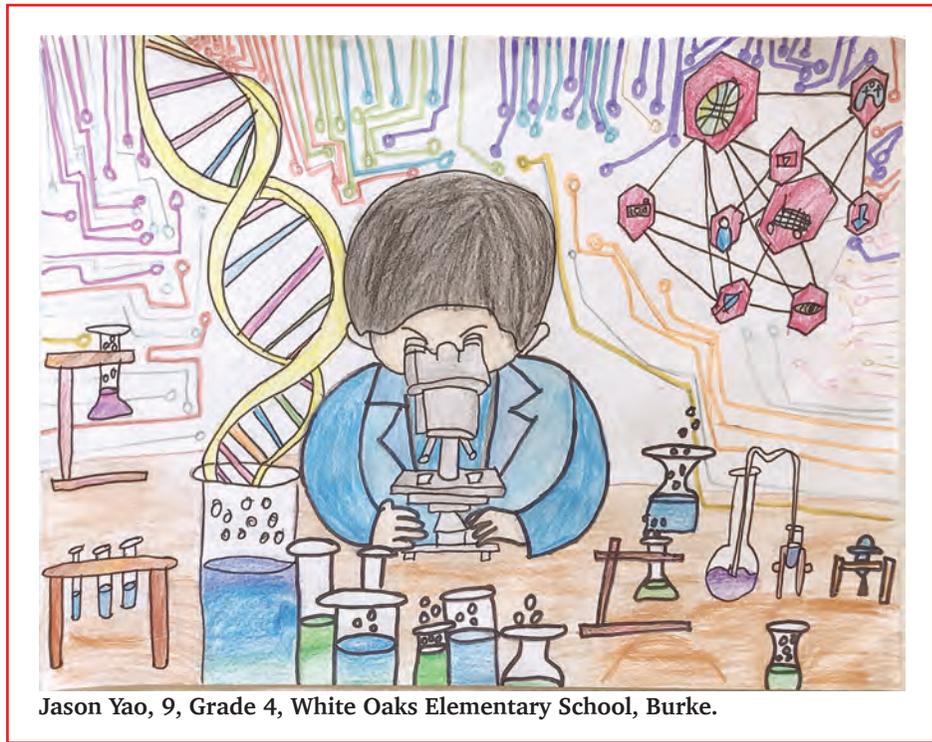
Name: Laney Lewis Grade: 3rd From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams



Name: Rami Dixon Grade: 3rd From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams



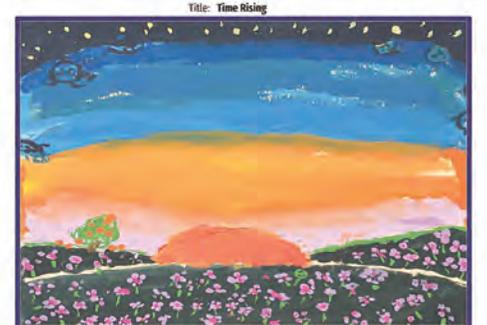
Name: Emma Strano Grade: 3rd From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams



Jason Yao, 9, Grade 4, White Oaks Elementary School, Burke.



Name: Gioia Lobo Touzard Grade: 5th From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams



Name: Maverick Simmons Grade: 4th From: Fairfax, VA School: Oak View Elementary School County: FCPS Art Teacher: Mrs. Williams

ORANGE HUNT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Memoir: Versailles

By: Audrey Gresh
Orange Hunt Elementary School, 6th grade
Teacher Brenda K. Patrick

I stared at the lush green plants engulfing me, the shrubbery stretched upwards like its dream was to one day touch the sky. A voice called my name from a distance, "Audrey, look at this!" and that brought me back to reality with a jolt. I realized that it was my sister who had called me. Spinning in her direction, I saw that she was pointing at a sleek, smooth white statue, its eyes seemed to follow me as I sprinted to check it out. It was made of fine marble and, as my Mom later told me, it was carved by a famous artist. That made sense considering that this statue belonged to the King and Queen of France, and we were in their garden.

Yes, we were in Versailles, their summer palace. It was like a luxury guard tower to survey all of Paris. The palaces' faded brick color gave me a sense of welcome but also power. It felt like a fantasy to be

here. To be living in a dream. I halted for a moment thinking about all of this, and how we still had much more to explore here! My day dreaming came to an end when I noticed that my family was not with me!

I felt my heart banging against my rib cage longing to get out. "Where are you?" I whispered to myself. I started to stampede down the path, my feet pounding against the bumpy path making a sound like a drum. Then out of the corner of my eye I spotted my Dad! I was now a wolf running to its pack but... I ended up doing a face slam into my Dad. That was definitely not the graceful entrance that I had planned. Despite that, I was still filled with relief. So my family and I set off again, ready to go exploring.

After that unsuccessful journey we decided to end the day by buying miniature sailboats to watch them glide, gracefully across the water and having refreshing popsicles which felt like a melted river of chocolate when it entered my mouth. And as for me? I was determined not to get lost again.

Memoir: Just an America Away

By: SIMONE MOUTON

I felt miserable as I stared at my suitcase on my bed. Was this really over? I didn't know, but what I did know was that the members of my family's perception of me changed forever. My hands felt as cold as ice. I started unpacking my clothing from my suitcase. I pressed my cracked lips together. My lips stung as I licked them and tasted blood. It had become an unhealthy habit of mine chewing off the skin from my lips and mouth, sometimes even tearing small chunks of flesh from my mouth. I took a deep breath and as I took out a shirt felt wet, cold. "Well that's weird" I thought. But then I brought my hands to my face and felt tears currently running down my face onto it. A tear ran into my mouth and it tasted as salty as the ocean. My face felt clammy and cold like a dead person. I brought my cold and delicate hand to my glistening brown orbs. When I was younger, unpacking my suitcase was always a happy thing. Doing it now just felt depressing. I glanced around my room and it felt smaller probably because the last time I was here I was nine and now I'm eleven. I couldn't believe that I had spent two years living in that horrid hole. I opened my closet and spotted my guitar in the corner as I started to hang up my shirts. I opened my window and took a deep breath. The air smelled as fresh as it was two years ago. I walked back towards my suitcase to finish unpacking. I winced as the skin around my nail caught on the zipper on my suitcase. The skin around my nails was ragged, torn and bloody. Picking at the skin and tearing it off was also another bad habit that I could not get rid of. My suitcase was filled to the brim with clothing and it was going to take a while to unpack all the clothing.

As I lifted out the clothing from my suitcase I couldn't help but be swept away by memories. I heard a knock at the door and it turned out to be my mother. I quickly dismissed her. I sighed deeply as my eyes glistened from my previous breakdown. I walked over to my mirror and stared at myself. My eyes were puffy and beet red. I quickly wiped my face off so no one would notice. I shuffled towards the bathroom and

looked around in interest. The shower had clearly been redone and furnished and I glanced around in interest. My thoughts were interrupted by screaming. I looked down the stairs disinterestedly. My sisters were fighting as usual and there was nothing that I could do about it.

^.^

The move had happened too quickly to be able to remember all of the details. It had been as rushed as a running cheetah. Most of the things that we own were still in Egypt and would not be arriving anytime soon. My room was bland, cold, and dark. Just how my soul felt right at this moment. It started to rain outside and I could hear the rain outside pelting on the window. I stood by my bed and touched the suitcase for what seemed to be the 100th time today. I bit my cheek from the inside of my mouth and tasted blood gushing out. "Shucks," I muttered under my breath. I felt tired and sad and my mouth now hurts as well. I started crying again. "Get it together Simone you don't have time for this" I scolded myself. I had to finish packing and I had barely even started. Well, I guess it's time to restart here. I smiled bitterly to myself. Before finishing unpacking.

HOLIDAY CALENDAR

HOLIDAYS IN THE MOSAIC DISTRICT

At 2910 District Ave., Fairfax. Santa at Mosaic -- Now Thru Dec. 23; Santa's Motorcade -- Dec. 17 at 5 p.m.

NOW THRU DEC. 19. Holiday Lights on the Farm.

Fridays thru Sundays 5:30 to 8 p.m. At Frying Pan Farm Park, 2739 West Ox Road, Herndon. What is "Holiday Lights on the

Farm"? It's where you tour Frying Pan Farm Park in the safety and warmth of your car and see an amazing display of holiday decorations lighting up the 135-acre park. The cost is \$20 per private vehicle. Or you can take the tour on a tractor-drawn wagon ride with up to 20 of your family or friends for \$150 per group. Last year this event sold out, so get your tickets early at <https://bit.ly/FPLights>.

NOW THRU JAN. 2

Ice & Lights: The Winter Village at Cameron Run, 4001 Eisenhower

Ave., Alexandria. Open nightly 5 to 10 p.m.; January 8 to February 27, 2022 (ice skating only), open Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Featuring an ice rink, multiple new holiday light displays perfect for Instagramming, a retail area, food, music and more. Admission: \$9 for general admission to Village; \$22 for village admission and skating; beginning January 8, \$14 for ice skating; free ages 2 and under. Visit novaparks.com/events/ice-lights

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Adelaide Frank, 13



Brianna Guiffre, 13



Makayla Storr, 13



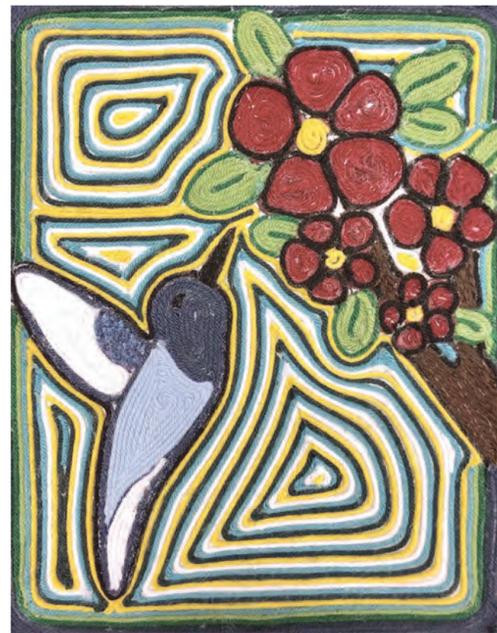
Marielle Malvas, 13



Monika Lukas, 13



Erin Kyle, 13



Yumna Mamun, 13



Rachel Truong, 13

CHERRY RUN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



1st grader Jane Lundin



5th grade Student Braden Hodge



4th grade student Dexter Hoffman



5th grade student Kalen Lonetto



5th grade student Kellan Blaylock



6th grader Nat Painter

EAGLE VIEW ELEMENTARY



Emma Myagmarradnaa, Kinder



Jahnvi Mithun, 6th



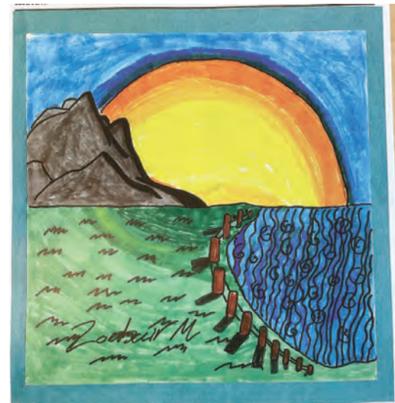
Nana Yaw Asamoah, Kinder



Neda Cengiz, 6th



Samitha Chandrashekar, 4th



Zoubair Morton, 5th

WAKEFIELD FOREST ES



Annelise Saunder



Campbell Gardner



Charley Petrik



Charlotte von der Heydt



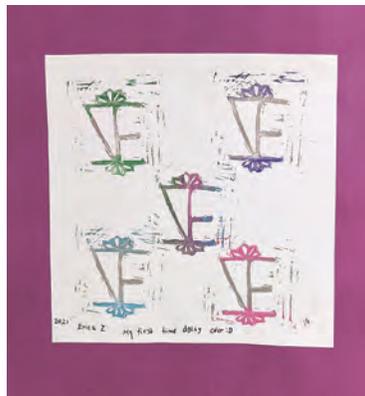
Charlie Saad



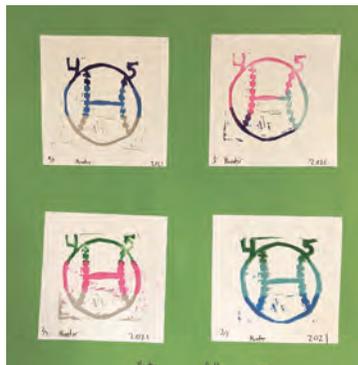
Dilara Seyfi



Elise Rivers



Erica Zheng



Hunter Dalton



Ipek Eroglu



Isabella Papageorge



Jemma Garcia



Juliana Gluecksmann



Lily Verne



Luka Illincic



Madison Worthington



Marcel Mateos



Matthew Gardner



Maylee Lim



Noelle Lukas



Olivia_Atiyeh_WFES



Quinn_Manning_WFES



Selah Yoon

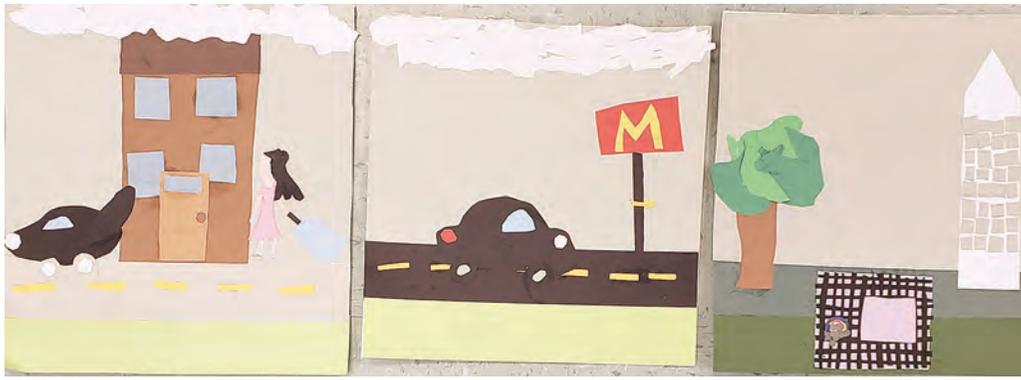


Shivani Kolelveetil



William Edwards

PROVIDENCE ELEMENTARY, FAIRFAX



Maiah Vasquez-Severich
My Memorable Journey:
Cut-Paper Collage
5th Grade



Theodore Field
Pattern Painting: Tempera Paint
Kindergarten



Zeeshan Akhtar
Family Portrait: Crayon & Watercolor
1st Grade



Camila Zavala Martinez
Family Portrait: Crayon & Watercolor
1st Grade



Margaret Jasinski
Fall Landscape Painting: Tempera Paint
2nd Grade



Tyler Owensby
Fall Landscape Painting: Tempera Paint
2nd Grade

Life is short.
Don't make it shorter.

Choose life. Make sure your kids get their HPV vaccine and protect them against cancer.

@vaccinatevirginia

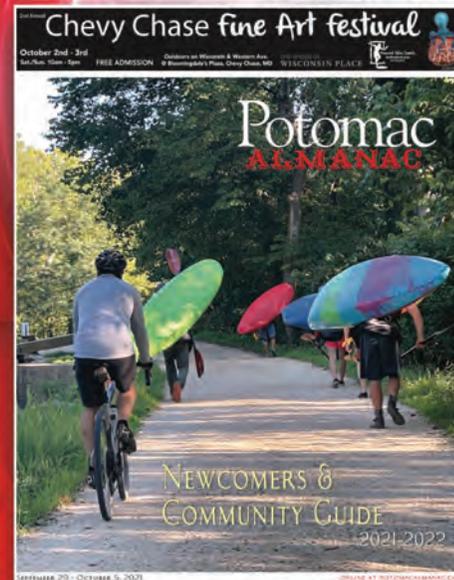
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Enjoying Lunch with Santa in Fairfax City



Alex Heath, 7, (with mom Andrea) tells Santa he wants Hot Wheels and their tracks.



Posing with Santa Claus are parents Manuel and Maritza Moreno with son Mateo, 3, and daughter Mia, 6.

PHOTOS BY BONNIE HOBBS/THE CONNECTION



Twins Emma and Ella Jones, 5, proudly hold the pictures they're coloring.

Fairfax City's annual Lunch with Santa was Saturday, Dec. 11. Children enjoyed box lunches of chicken nuggets, juice, applesauce and a cookie, while doing Christmas crafts and talking to Santa (from a distance).



Xander Jinowat, 2-1/2, reaches for some more chicken.



Noah James, 6, shows off his new, Christmas sweater.



Wearing the reindeer-antler headbands they decorated are (from left) Isabel Zandi, 9; Sam Jamasb, 3, and his sister Mantreh, 5.



Enjoying lunch together are dad and mom, Nelson and Stephanie Caban, daughter Stephanie, 8, and son Zurriel, almost 2.

Fairfax's Storefront Window Decorating Contest

Some 14 Fairfax City businesses are decorating their storefront windows, trying to win the 2021 Fairfax City Holiday Window Decorating Contest. With a "Winter Wonderland" theme, they'll vie for customers' votes to be named the People's Choice winner. In addition, Fairfax City Council will select a Grand Prize champion.

Each winning business will receive complimentary access to digital marketing consulting services valued at \$1,500 and designed to help them create stronger, online visibility. Votes may be cast now through Jan. 3 by scanning the QR code in each participant's window.

Voters' names will be entered into a raffle for a chance to win a \$25 gift card to the participating City business of their choice. To learn more about the window decorating contest and which businesses are participating, go to fairfaxcityconnected.com/21windows.

Humane Society's Fairfax Thrift Store Re-Opens

The Second Chance Thrift and Gift Store in Fairfax City is owned and operated by the Humane Society of Fairfax County, a non-profit animal rescue. And it's a great place for bargains on a wide array of household goods and clothing. The store was closed for more than a year due to the pandemic, but recently re-opened.

It's at 4057 Chain Bridge Road (across the street from the courthouse), and is open Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; and Saturday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. New items are stocked on the shelves hourly, as new donations arrive, and all proceeds go toward providing medical attention for animals in the Humane Society's care.

The organization also helps find homes for companion animals. Go to hsfc.org or check out the Humane Society's Facebook page to meet animals seeking their fur-ever homes, including the "12 Cats of Christmas." For more information, call 703-385-7387.

KEY MIDDLE SCHOOL



Alexis Hite, Grade: 8



Aleyah Olarinde, Grade: 8



Alice Zhang, Grade: 8



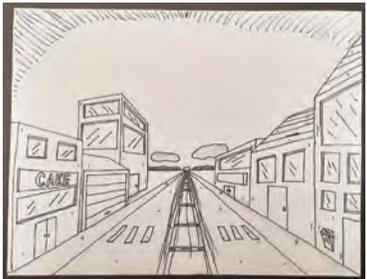
Alison Sandoval, Grade: 8



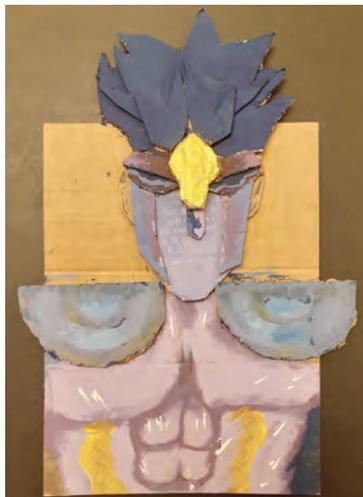
Jennifer Aquino, Grade: 8



Cecilia Waddington, Grade: 7



Joel Carrasco, Grade: 7



Kirubel Mekonnen, Grade: 8



Liam Wilson, Grade: 8



Melodel Amdemariam, Grade: 8



Lisa Nguyen, Grade: 8



Public Notice

Updated weight limits on Virginia bridges and culverts

In accord with state and federal law, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) has imposed new or changed existing weight restrictions and installed new signage indicating the updated weight restrictions on the following bridges and culverts (structures) in Virginia within the last 30 days.

Jurisdiction	Structure ID	Route	Structure Name	Crossing	Posted Date
MONTGOMERY	12355	787	DRY VALLEY RD./ROUTE 787	MEADOW CREEK	10/28/2021
DINWIDDIE	6063	631	CLAIRBORNE RD.	HATCHER RUN	10/23/2021
CARROLL	4640	620	FOREST OAK RD./ROUTE 620	CROOKED CREEK	10/22/2021
SCOTT	16924	796	GILLENWATER LOOP	BIG MOCCASIN CREEK	10/20/2021
LUNENBURG	11609	626	DOUBLE BRIDGES RD.	LEDBETTER CREEK	10/12/2021

The list above is not a comprehensive list of all structures with weight restrictions in the Commonwealth, but shows only structures that have new or changed weight restrictions within the last 30 days. The list contains only basic structure identification and location information and the date the new or changed weight restriction and signage became effective.

For a full listing of all bridge and culvert weight restrictions with detailed information about specific structures, including location data and actual weight limits, visit <https://www.virginiadot.org> and navigate to Info Center/Trucking Resources. This page references a posted structures report and a GIS map tool that contain detailed information about restricted structures in Virginia. To receive email notifications regarding new or updated weight restrictions for structures statewide, complete the sign-up form on the web page.

Notices regarding bridges and culverts with new or updated weight restrictions are published monthly by VDOT. For additional information or questions, please contact, haulingpermits@vdot.virginia.gov.

The Virginia Department of Transportation is committed to ensuring that no person is excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any of its programs or activities on the basis of race, color, or national origin, as protected by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. If you need further information on VDOT's Title VI Program or special assistance for persons with disabilities or limited English proficiency, please contact the Virginia Department of Transportation's Title VI Program Specialist at 804-786-2730.

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Free Sober Rides Offered for the Holidays

It is the time of year when, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than a third of all U.S. traffic deaths involve drunk drivers (38%, Christmas; 36%, New Year's Day – NHTSA, 2019). Free safe rides will be offered to would-be drunk or impaired drivers throughout the area during the winter holidays beginning on Dec. 17.

Washington Regional Alcohol Program's 2021 Holiday SoberRide program will be in operation nightly, 10 p.m. until 4 a.m. from Dec. 17, 2021 to Jan. 1, 2022 as a way to keep local roads safe from impaired drivers during this traditionally high-risk holiday season.

Each evening, during this six-hour period, area residents ages 21 and older celebrating with alcohol may download Lyft to their phones, then enter a SoberRide code in the app's 'Promo' section to receive their no-cost (up to \$15) safe transportation home. A new, separate Holiday SoberRide promo code will be posted at 9:00 p.m. on Dec. 17, 24 and 31 on www.SoberRide.com.

During the 2019 winter holidays (COVID-19 prevented Dec. 2020's full-out campaign), over 1,100 (1,121) people in the Washington-metropolitan area used WRAP's Holiday SoberRide program rather than possibly driving home impaired. The charity also officers its SoberRide program on St. Patrick's Day, Cinco de Mayo, Independence Day and Halloween.

"More than a third of all U.S. traffic fatalities during the holiday season in 2019 involved drunk drivers according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration," said Kurt Erickson, WRAP's President.

SoberRide is offered throughout Lyft's Washington D.C. coverage area.

Since 1991, WRAP's SoberRide@ program has provided 81,184 free safe rides home to would-be-drunk drivers in the Greater Washington area.

More information about WRAP's SoberRide initiative can be found at www.SoberRide.com

Take a Hike (On New Years Day)

Enjoy the great outdoors on New Year's Day with a first day hike at any of the 41 Virginia State Parks.

All state parks offer free parking on Jan. 1, 2022 and visitors to each park will receive a commemorative water bottle sticker (while supplies last).

For a list of scheduled hikes and programs, www.virginiastateparks.gov/firstdayhikes

Mason Neck in Lorton is included. <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/mason-neck>

Leesylvania in Woodbridge <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/leesylvania> and Sky Meadows <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/sky-meadows> are in easy driving distance also.

Virginia State Parks has many hikes and opportunities to choose from, or visit a park and create your own special First Day Hike. Here are a few ideas:

Sky Meadows State Park will open at 5:30 a.m. on New Year's Day to support the sunrise celebration of various cultures. At 10 a.m., join a ranger at the Backcountry Trailhead for a guided hike.

Pocahontas State Park in Chesterfield offers a special New Year's Eve night hike to celebrate the count-

SEE TAKE A HIKE, PAGE 15

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CONCERT

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED



Singer/songwriter Negleatha Johnson will host the "I Can Only Imagine" benefit concert Dec. 19 at the Falls Church Marriott.



Victor Solomon, right, a top 5 finalist in The Voice vocal competition, will be the featured musical guest at a benefit concert Dec. 19 at the Falls Church Marriott. He is shown singing a duet with John Legend during The Voice Finale in May.

'I Can Only Imagine'

Benefit concert to feature The Voice finalist Victor Solomon.

BY JEANNE THEISMANN
THE CONNECTION

It's been six years since Negleatha Johnson first hosted a benefit concert following her sister's diagnosis of a rare and aggressive cancer. Following a hiatus in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Fairfax County resident and international recording artist returns Dec. 19 with special musical guest Victor Solomon, a top 5 finalist in the vocal competition The Voice.

"One of my older sisters had been diagnosed with leiomyosarcoma," said Johnson. "Within months she was gone but I was able to use that first concert to shed light on sarcoma cancers. Today we have expanded to support various local and national organizations."

Known as "DrJ" for using music as medicine, Johnson uses her voice to spread the message of hope, healing and restoration — the three areas of focus for her work with Life Waters Ministries, the ministry she and her husband James co-founded 25 years ago. It was James who encouraged Johnson to reach out to Solomon following the singer's performance with John Legend in the finale of The Voice in May.

"There was something about Victor that drew us in each week," Johnson said of watching the singer during the competition. "Victor attends the same school and belongs to the same fraternity as my husband did in

North Carolina so we took a chance and reached out to him through some mutual friends. We are very excited to have him perform with us this year."

With a theme of "I Can Only Imagine," the concert will be held at the Falls Church Marriott and will feature dinner in addition to the concert. All proceeds will benefit various charities.

"Funds raised through the gala will be contributed to various organizations in the area as well as throughout the nation," Johnson said. "During COVID we partnered with the Navajo Nation since reservations were hit particularly hard during the pandemic. We also support organizations working with homeless women, the Campagna Center and underserved families by providing gift cards through Alexandria City Schools."

Johnson and Life Waters Ministries has also partnered with JSS Missions in support of their work in Haiti.

"We can't do it all but we want to sow a seed and help those who are doing things in places we might never get to," Johnson said.

Before turning to full time ministry, Johnson worked in higher education helping organizations "be more sensitive to the diversity that is represented in our nation." Despite the challenges, she is excited about the work of Life Waters Ministries.

"Things are different now," Johnson added. "We are much broader than when we started but are ignited that we are able to partner and support others who are trying to do good things. I could never have imagined the privilege it would be to do this work."

Tickets for the concert will not be sold at the door but are available through Dec. 16 at 703-425-4321 or www.lwministriesonline.org.

hike includes a scavenger hunt to discover winter's hidden secrets in nature.

At Clinch River State Park, a ranger will lead you on a 4-mile hike along the Clinch and to ruins of a failed French settlement.

The 41 award-winning Virginia State Parks are managed by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. For more information, or to buy an annual pass or gift certificate, visit www.virginiastateparks.gov

Take a Hike

FROM PAGE 14

down. The park also offers a variety of special hikes for different ages and capabilities throughout New Year's Day.

Guided hikes are available every hour from 9 a.m. – noon at Natural Bridge State Park. The approximately 45-minute hike will lead you to great views of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Join a ranger at Smith Mountain Lake State Park on a mile hike that is rated as easy. The

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Indulge Me And/or Indulge Me



By KENNETH B. LOURIE

Give me whatever I want and/or let me be however I want. I have cancer and if you don't like it? Raspberries. I remember what a friend told me soon after I was diagnosed with cancer: "It's all about you now, Kenny." And it's friendly advice I've shared/passed on to other newly cancer "diagnosees." And it's always been received with such appreciation as if newly diagnosed cancer patients need a sort of permission to be more concerned about themselves than about others.

For many, it's a bit of an unnatural position: to concern yourself with yourself. But I must tell you, when that hammer is dropped that you've been diagnosed with cancer, your world shrinks. It's almost impossible to think of anything else. You just don't know if something you do or don't do will affect your cancer/life expectancy. And so, cancer becomes the center of your universe. Moreover, you wonder if what you normally do: eat, drink, be happy, be sad, really matters to the outcome of your treatment.

I mean, it's not as if there's a dos and don'ts handbook for newly diagnosed cancer patients with easy-to-follow instructions for who to call/where to go for who knows what. And since you've been diagnosed with an extremely serious disease, you just as soon not get your homework assignments wrong. When your life is snatched away and/or your world is turned inside out/upside down, you really don't want to be the cause of your own demise. For cancer, there's hardly any guarantees. Survival is a long way from six-hour chemotherapy sessions every three weeks and scans every three months. Being a cancer patient is very hands-on – by you and/or the medical staff, so you must pay attention. To say your life might depend on it might be a bit much but it's not totally wrong. Once you get diagnosed into the cancer world, everything about your health seems to lead to the oncology department.

Having to deal with this unexpected/new centrality in your life, a life which, depending on the type and staging of your cancer, you may be in danger, is scary as hell. And if that's the case, the disease may very well be in control and this ongoing fear/angst is the axis upon which your world now turns. Every action, reaction, "proaction," is taken in the context of your having cancer. What it all means, what it all does, if and when you have to do it again or not, are all definite maybes. Your oncologist becomes your new best friend. You hang on his/her every word. To think that a person you had never previously met is now in charge of your life requires an acceptance of reality, possibly a grim reality, for which there may be no escape and worse, requires total compliance.

You bet I require kid gloves. You bet I require a wide berth. You bet I require anything my heart desires because learning from oncologist that you have a "terminal" diagnosis, is about as unsettling as it gets. Any port in a storm you might say? Heck, how about any port no matter the weather? If Bette Davis were alive today and had been a cancer patient, she might update her famous lament: "Being diagnosed with cancer ain't no place for sissies."

Kenny Lourie is an Advertising Representative for The Potomac Almanac & The Connection Newspapers.



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