

THE CONNECTION

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Reston ♦ Vienna ♦ Burke ♦ Fairfax ♦ Springfield ♦ Fairfax Station ♦ Lorton ♦ Clifton

Dr. Vernon C. Walton, senior pastor
First Baptist Church of Vienna.



Family, Love and
Respect at Mountain View

PAGE 8

Mourning Former
Mayor John Mason

PAGE 4

Fentanyl Killed 2,490
In Virginia in 2023

PAGE 3

Justice Sunday
In Vienna

PAGE 10

OPINION, PAGE 6 ♦ ENTERTAINMENT, PAGE 16

PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION



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1313 Merrie Ridge Rd
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Curious what your home is worth? Call to chat with JD and Ed today!



PHOTO BY SUSAN LAUME/THE CONNECTION

Supervisor Rodney Lusk chairs the Safety & Security Committee as it hears presentation on county fentanyl response strategies.



PHOTO - OFFICE OF VA FIRST LADY

Virginia First Lady Suzanne Youngkin kicks off "One Pill Can Kill" campaign.

Fentanyl Called Deadliest Drug Threat

Multi-tiered response seeks to save lives.

BY SUSAN LAUME
THE CONNECTION

Street names like, Dance Fever, Friend, Goodfellas and Jackpot are meant to appeal to the young. There is easy access through sales on social media and e-commerce, making it available to anyone with a smartphone. It is easy to see why the Drug Enforcement Agency says, "Fentanyl is the single deadliest drug threat our nation has ever encountered." The CDC reports that fentanyl, and other synthetic opioids, are now the most common drugs involved in overdose deaths. Over 150 people die every day from these overdoses, many of them children and young people below the age of 24.

Virginia officials in both state and local governments are taking action to combat the scourge. Virginia First Lady Suzanne S. Youngkin, with Attorney General Jason Miyares, recently announced the launch of a Fentanyl Awareness Pilot Program. The Virginia Department of Health awareness initiative is being implemented with

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support from the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth, in partnership with the Attorney General's 'One Pill Can Kill' campaign. The campaign strives to warn parents and caregivers that "it only takes one." One bad decision, one counterfeit pill, can cost a life. An average of five Virginians die from fentanyl poisoning every day, becoming the leading cause of unnatural death in the Commonwealth. Since 2019, deaths have more than doubled in the Roanoke region, where the campaign was kicked off on Jan. 30. "Fentanyl is killing our young people and hurting families across the Commonwealth," said First Lady Youngkin. "By bringing attention to the dangers of this illicit drug, while giving a voice to victims, we aspire to save lives." For more information and additional resources on the campaign, visit ItOnlyTakesOneVA.com.

General Assembly Takes Action

In the General Assembly this session, House Joint Resolution, HJ 41, sponsored by Del. Kannan Srinivasan (D-26), and Sen. Saddam Salim (D-37), was one of several bills related to fentanyl. If passed, HJ 41 would direct that the Joint Commission on Health Care study policy solutions to the Commonwealth's fentanyl crisis. The resolution cited 2,490 drug overdose deaths among Virginians in 2023

Signs of overdose

Recognizing the signs of opioid overdose can save a life. Here are some things to look for:

- Small, constricted "pinpoint pupils"
- Falling asleep or losing consciousness
- Slow, weak, or no breathing
- Choking or gurgling sounds
- Limp body
- Cold and/or clammy skin
- Discolored skin (especially in lips and nails)

An average of five Virginians die from fentanyl poisoning every day, 2,490 drug overdose deaths in 2023.

that were caused by fentanyl and related drugs. There were 22,398 drug overdose emergency department visits among Virginians in 2022 an increase of five percent over the prior year. [Note - the bill was tabled in the Appropriations Subcommittee for lack of state study resources. An amended fentanyl study bill passed and was on its way to the House for consideration at this writing.]

Fairfax County's Response

The Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Safety & Security Committee, chaired by Supervisor Rodney Lusk, (D-Franconia) heard testimony on the opioid/fentanyl crisis and Fairfax County's strategy on Jan. 30. Speakers included members of the substance abuse task force, police department, and public schools. A cross-sys-

DEA

SEE FENTANYL, PAGE 13



John and Jeanette Mason



BONNIE HOBBS/THE CONNECTION

In January 2023, past City Mayors (from left) Steve Stombres, David Meyer and John Mason, attended current Mayor Catherine Read's swearing in.

City of Fairfax Mourns its Former Mayor

John Mason: 'Gifted leader' and champion of the arts.

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

City of Fairfax residents are mourning their longest-serving mayor ever, John Mason, who died last Wednesday, Feb. 7 at age 89 after a second battle with cancer. He was a City Council member from 1986-1990 and mayor from 1990-2002. And to honor his legacy, from Feb. 7-14, flags at Fairfax City Hall were flown at half-mast.

Even after he left office, said current Fairfax Mayor Catherine Read, "He never stopped serving in a leadership role here in the City and in Northern Virginia. I sit on regional boards and commissions where Mayor Mason once sat, and he's still spoken about with reverence for his foresight and commitment to building a thriving economic region with Fairfax City at its center. His years of service are his legacy for all of us and for future generations."

Mason is survived by his wife, Jeanette; their three grown children, John, Joanna and Jeffrey; and four grandchildren. And last May, the Masons celebrated their 60th anniversary by inspiring their community to raise more than \$11,000 for The Lamb Center, a daytime, drop-in shelter in the City.

"They chose to commemorate their joyful occasion by giving back," said friend and Councilmember Tom

Ross. "They exemplify the true essence of community spirit, uniting and catalyzing action for the betterment of our homeless neighbors."

Mason just turned 89 on Jan. 27; however, for the past year-and-a-half, he'd been quietly fighting cancer. "He was undergoing chemo treatment, but still leading an active life and making lots of plans for future things, right up to the end," said longtime close friend, David Meyer, also a past Fairfax mayor. "He was thinking about the United States' 250th birthday in 2026 and what the area should do to celebrate it."

Recently, though, Mason entered The Virginian in Fairfax for rehabilitation. But he took a turn for the worse and his condition rapidly deteriorated. He died in the early morning hours of Feb. 7, surrounded by family and friends.

"I've known John since my wife and I moved to the City in 1981 and he was president of our neighborhood's - Old Lee Hills - Civic Association," said Meyer. "He'd spent 20 years in the Army, retiring in 1976, and went to work at SAIC, heading its transportation consulting group. Then he put down roots here in the City."

Meyer noted that "people used to say John was so persuasive at getting people to volunteer for things that it was like getting 'volun-told.'" For example, when Meyer was just 29, Mason got him to play Santa for the neighborhood.

"Our civic association had Santa go around to each house with small children and ask what they wanted

Snapshot of John Mason's Life and Legacy

Born Jan. 27, 1935, in Springfield, Mass., John Mason had a distinguished, 20-year career in the U.S. Army before retiring as a colonel in 1976. His service included two tours in Vietnam, plus a follow-on command tour with the 5th Battalion, 68th Armor, 8th Infantry Division. His final assignment was as Assistant Director, Operations and Readiness, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, at Department of the Army Headquarters at the Pentagon.

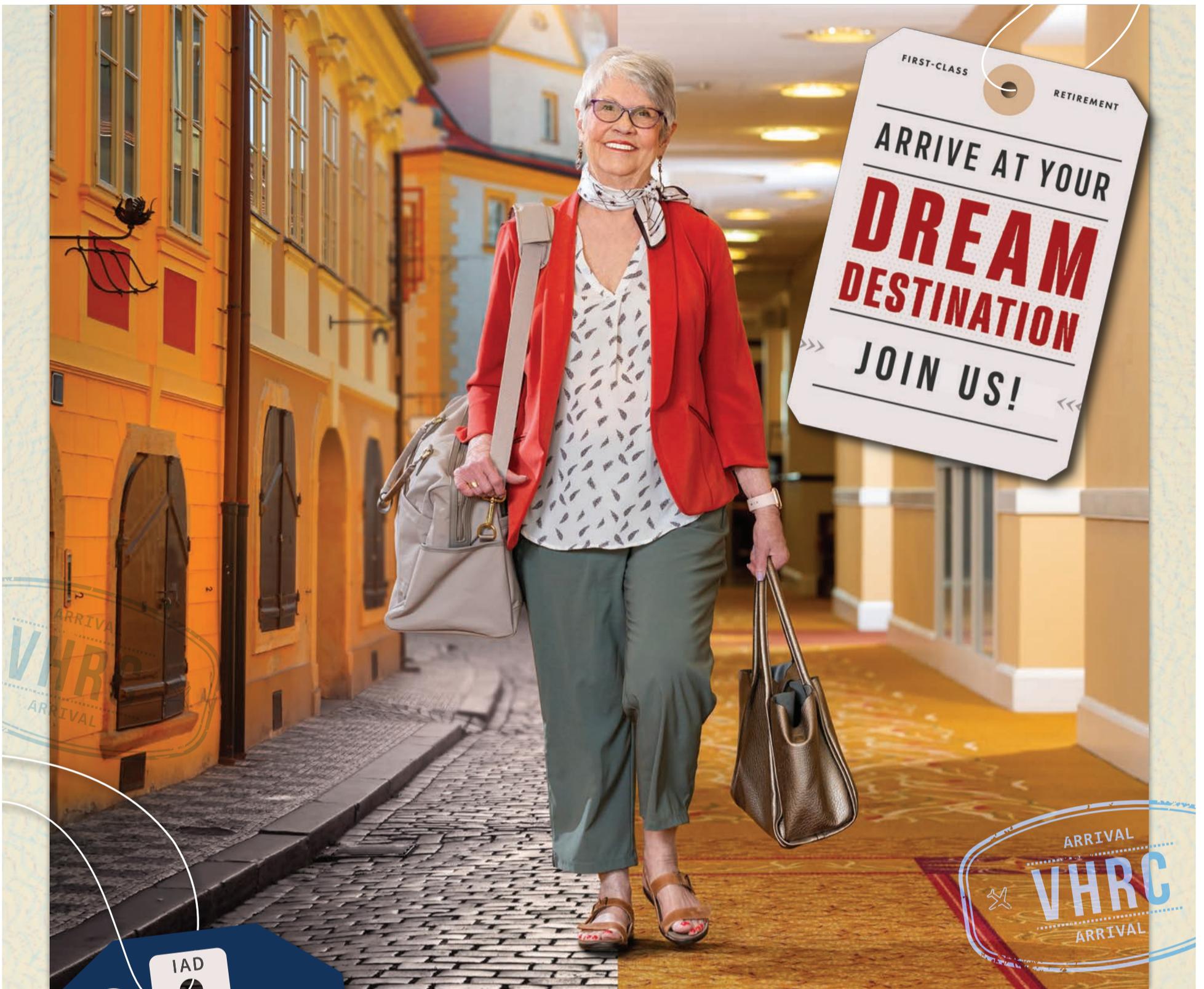
After his retirement, Mason worked in the private sector as vice president of Science Applications International Corp. (SAIC) and director of the Transportation Policy and Analysis Center. As a politician, he served on the Fairfax City Council from 1986-1990 and was the City's mayor from 1990-2002.

In addition, he was executive director of the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority (NVTA) and president and CEO of the Workhouse Arts Center in Lorton. Mason also served on the boards of several organizations.

These included the American Red Cross, National Capital Area Chapter; Boy Scouts of America National Capital Area Council; Fairfax Symphony; Arts Council of Fairfax County; Fall for the Book Festival; and Mason Housing Inc. at George Mason University. In addition, he chaired the national board of the American Metropolitan Planning Organization.

❖ Funeral services will be held Saturday, March 2, at 11 a.m., at Fairfax United Methodist Church, 10300 Stratford Ave. in Fairfax.

SEE JOHN MASON, PAGE 14



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Commonwealth Is Failing Students

BY JEFF MCKAY AND KARL FRISCH

As leaders of the largest school district and locality in the Commonwealth of Virginia, we are frustrated and disappointed by the hard truth exposed in a recent study: the Commonwealth is failing students in every part of Virginia by chronically underfunding local K-12 public schools. We trail the 50-state average, the regional average, and three border states – West Virginia, Maryland, and Kentucky – in per-pupil funding.

Education funding is the foundation of a strong community and economy. If we want the Commonwealth to be an economic leader, we must lead by investing in our

young people – our future workforce. We call on Gov. Youngkin and the General Assembly to make K-12 funding their top priority.

The Virginia General Assembly's nonpartisan research arm, the Joint Legislative and Audit Review Commission (JLARC), recently completed a full review of state education funding. JLARC found that Virginia's funding is woefully inadequate compared to the rest of the country. School divisions in other states on average receive 14%



McKay



Frisch

more per student than school divisions in Virginia, which equates to \$1,900 more per student.

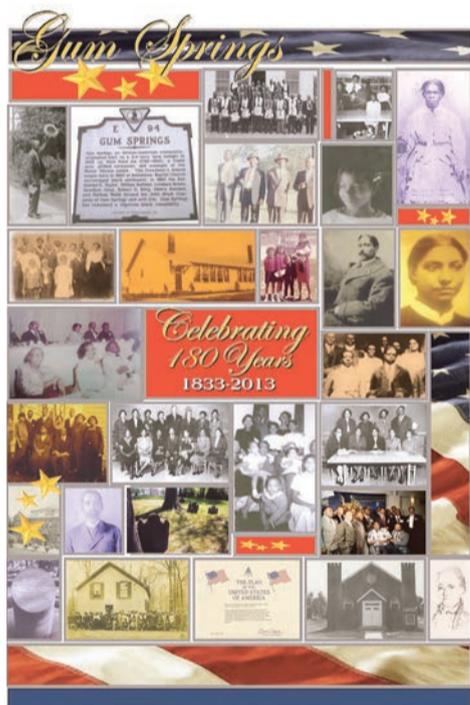
Virginia's funding of local schools is based on an outdated formula that results in chronic underfunding by the state. On average, Virginia local governments allocate 52% of their budgets to meet educational needs. In Fairfax County, that means our local government provides 69% of the school system's budget. We do this because our residents expect and demand the best schools. But we are at a

breaking point, where local tax increases to compensate for state underfunding of schools are making Northern Virginia, and other parts of Virginia, less affordable. The number one challenge for any employer is finding high-quality talent. Unfortunately, many of the people who would fill those roles in our area simply can't afford to.

The state's formula under calculates the true cost of education by \$6.6 billion; that's \$1.2 billion for Fairfax County Public Schools alone. This is an embarrassment and must be addressed by the Youngkin administration and the General Assembly.

But it's not just an embarrassment. It hampers the ability of localities to fully address other

SEE COMMONWEALTH, PAGE 19



Gum Springs celebrated the 180th anniversary of its founding last year.



Gum Springs Museum.

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED

Celebrating Black History Month In the Mount Vernon District

BY SUPERVISOR DAN STORCK

History is all around us in Fairfax County, and especially when you live here in the Mount Vernon District! We are fortunate to have so many well-known historic sites such as Mount Vernon Estate, Gunston Hall, Woodlawn & Pope Leighy House, the Workhouse Arts Center and more. But have you ever taken a moment to think about some of the history left out of books that shaped our District and our country? Nearly 191 years ago,

Gum Springs was founded by the patriarchal Freedman West Ford. Gum Springs began as a place for Black individuals to prevail, assimilating runaways and freed slaves who migrated there by way of the nearby port of Alexandria.

Gum Springs is the oldest African American community in Fairfax County, and it was and is a space where Black individuals can raise a family, get an education for their children and feel a sense of community. According to Gum Spring Museum founder Ron Chase, Gum Springs had five schools for Black

students. The most well-known, Drew-Smith Elementary School, was located where the Gum Springs Community Center and Museum are today. At the time, the only other institution available for Black students to attend was the Manassas Industrial School which meant students had to wake up at 5 a.m. to get there on time. Having schools nearby provided the ability for students and families to stay in the area. Today, Gum Springs continues to be a thriving community with over 2,500 residents with as many as 500 being descendants of

the original families.

A great place to learn more about Gum Springs is the Gum Springs Museum. This Museum was founded and continues to be operated by Ron Chase, whose great-great grandfather moved to the community in the 1840s. Ron has lived in Gum Springs nearly his entire life after going to school at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and Virginia Commonwealth University. He opened the museum in 1966 and has dedicated every day since then ensuring the legacy of

SEE CELEBRATING, PAGE 19

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Reston ♦ Herndon ♦ Oak Hill
Chantilly ♦ CENTREVIEW ♦ Burke
Fairfax ♦ Springfield ♦ Fairfax Station

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ROUNDUPS

Car Seat Inspections, Thursday, Feb. 15

Parents may get their children's car seats inspected this Thursday, Feb. 15, from 5-8:30 p.m., outside the Sully District Police Station. It's at 4900 Stonecroft Blvd. in Chantilly. Inspections are done on a first-come, first-served basis. Participants should install the child safety seat themselves, so the inspection can be performed. The seat will be properly re-installed, if necessary, and parents will be taught how to install the seat properly. Everyone is eligible. Another car-seat inspection is scheduled for Feb. 29, at the same place and time.

Stuff the Bus for WFCM on Saturday

Western Fairfax Christian Ministries (WFCM) provides food for local residents in need, but it can't do it without the community's help. So it's participating in Fairfax County's Stuff the Bus food drive, this Saturday, Feb. 17, from 9 a.m.-3 p.m., at the Giant Foods store at the Colonnade Shopping Center, 5740 Union Mill Road in Clifton.



Hadisa Ghulami Receives Good Citizen Scholarship

Hadisa Ghulani, Centreville High School, receives a \$500 Scholarship for her essay on civic responsibilities of a good citizen in today's society. Pictured are her mother, Oxana Ghulani, her sister Diane, Hadisa, and Anita Bonner, Regent of Lane's Mill Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution.

Make a Difference in McLean!

Want to earn valuable community service and outreach experience?

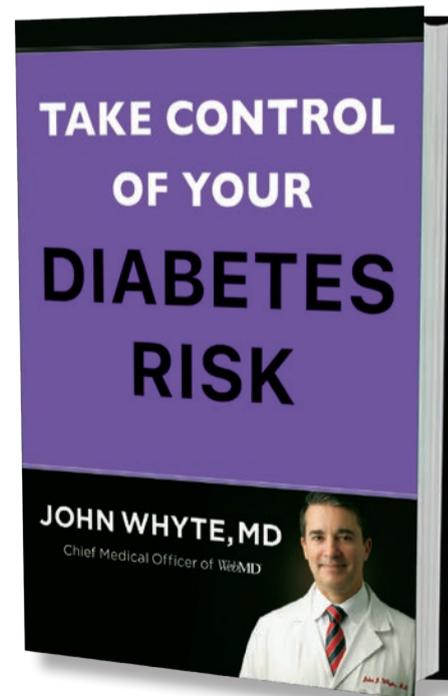
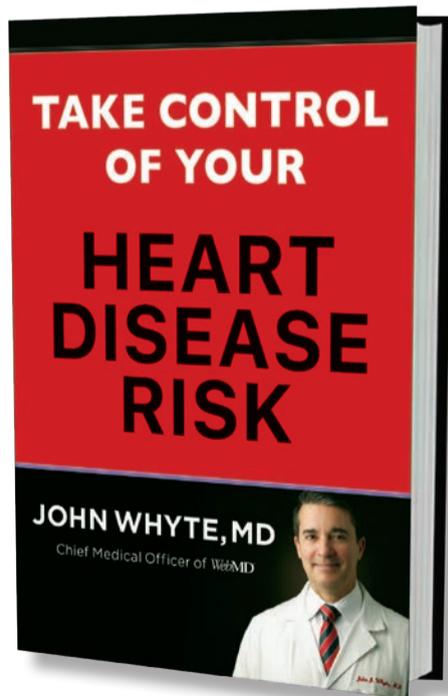
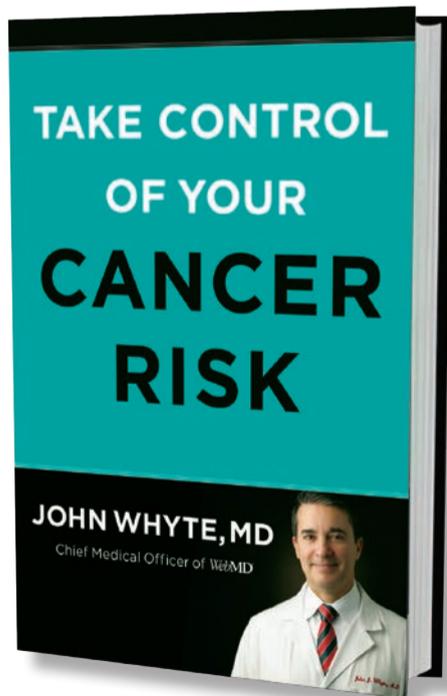
Run for a seat on the McLean Community Center's all-volunteer governing board!

We're looking for high school students who wish to serve their community by playing a lead role in helping to carry out McLean Community Center's goals.

Candidate Petition Packets will be available starting Wednesday, Feb. 7 at 9 a.m. Completed packets must be returned by Monday, March 11, at 5 p.m.



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Mountain View High Holds Winter Graduation

PHOTOS BY BONNIE HOBBS/THE CONNECTION

Principal Catherine Stone gives advice to the students.

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

Mountain View High's winter graduation may have been small, but it was still as warm and heartfelt as always. Held last Monday, Feb. 5, at Centreville High, it marked the school's 55th commencement ceremony.

At the outset, Assistant Principal Kim Witeck told the graduating seniors, "You are resilient and strong. Our motto of Family, Love and Respect is living and breathing inside you."

Principal Catherine Stone acknowledged the nonprofit Mountain View Foundation which awards thousands of dollars of scholarships to the grads each semester. She then addressed the seniors directly. "Class of 2024, this day is the culmination of years of school," she said. "Take a look around – all these people are here to celebrate you."

She noted that, earlier, she told the students to choose a moment they want to remember from their ceremony. "Maybe you want to remember walking in to 'Pomp and Circumstance,' listening to your classmate give her speech, walking across the stage to get your diploma, or walking out of the auditorium as a high-school graduate," said Stone. "Maybe you want to remember the pride your family and friends express as they celebrate with you today, or the pride you have in yourself."



From left, Subhan Ahmadzada stands beside his newly graduated brother, Abdul.



Morelia Osorio Rivera receives her diploma from Catherine Stone.



Jayvin Luangraj with his diploma from Principal Stone.

No matter what moments they chose, she said, "I hope you remember this feeling. You've worked hard to get here, and your journey wasn't always the easiest. In fact, you may not have always believed graduation was in your future. Many of you said school hasn't always been the best experience for you. You've each faced challenges during your time in school."

Stone told them about a TED Talk video in which the speaker discussed the qualities that make a student more likely to be successful and graduate. After studying students and adults in a variety of challenging settings, the speaker concluded that the one characteristic that predicted success more than anything else is grit.

"She said grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals," explained Stone. "Grit is having stamina and sticking with your future, day in and day out, for years – and working hard to make that future a reality. Grit is living life as a marathon, not a sprint. Each of you has grit. You stuck

with it, and you'll have to stick with it for your future goals, too."

She then urged the grads to remember that goals are important, and "even small ones help us get to where we want to be. Set a goal and follow it through to completion. You're resilient and you now know you can't focus on the challenge. You have to find a way to use it as a learning experience and move forward."

Sometimes, said Stone, "When things aren't going how you'd hoped, the best thing is to take a break – pause, take a deep breath, and when you're ready, get right back to it." She also reminded them that their family will always be there for them. "Family isn't just blood relatives," she added. "It's the community you build for yourself, like the family you found at Mountain View. And treat everyone with love and respect. Remember, you get what you give."

"You can achieve great things when you work hard, are resilient despite the challenges, and believe in yourself," continued Stone. "Re-



Grad Anabelle McAllister with her family (from left) grandfather Rick McAllister, mom Kathleen Ikonomidis, stepmom Diana McAllister and dad Shad McAllister.

member today and how it feels to accomplish a goal you've worked hard for. You've each earned the diploma you'll receive, so celebrate your success – but don't forget to thank all the people who helped you along the way."

Lastly, she advised the grads to never forget that "You're import-

ant, you're valued and you deserve success. Please stay in touch with us; we'll always be here for you. We want to know how you're doing and to continue to help you with your journey. That's what families do. Congratulations, Class of 2024 – your Mountain View family is proud of you."



PHOTOS BY BONNIE HOBBS/THE CONNECTION
Anabelle McAllister receives the Faculty Award from Leslie Chekin.

Grad Speaker Shares Her Personal Challenges Calls Mountain View 'a safe environment where I could thrive.'

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

During each Mountain View graduation, one or more students share their personal stories of the obstacles they've overcome en route to obtaining a diploma. Last week, class Valedictorian Anabelle McAllister of Centrev-

ille told hers.

"Today I'm filled with mixed emotions – joy, gratitude and a profound sense of accomplishment," she said. "But behind this moment of triumph lies a journey marked by struggle. For years, I battled with extreme anxiety surrounding school. The mere thought of stepping into a

SEE GRAD SPEAKER, PAGE 9



Mohamed Dieye receives the Personal Achievement Award from Lora Bates.

Grad Speaker Shares Her Personal Challenges

FROM PAGE 8

classroom filled me with dread.

“The weight of academic pressure felt suffocating. There were days when I questioned whether I’d ever make it to this moment and walk across the stage as a graduate. But then amidst the darkness came a beacon of light – Mountain View High School. From the moment I arrived, I knew this place was different. The staff greeted me with warmth and compassion, and my peers welcomed me with open arms.”

Within the school’s walls, said McAllister, she found a safe haven – a place where her struggles were met with understanding and support. She’d felt uneasy at her previous schools. But at Mountain View, she said, “I had a community rallying behind me. My family, friends and especially the school staff never gave up on me. They believed in me when I couldn’t believe in myself – and for that, I’m eternally grateful.”

She said this school not only gave her an education but also instilled in her a newfound respect and love for learning. “It was here that I discovered the power of a supportive community and the importance of mental wellbeing,” said McAllister. “Thanks to the unwavering support of this school, I stand before you today as a graduate – a feat I once thought impossible.”

She said looking ahead to the next chapter of her life fills her with hope and excitement. She wants to someday become an elementary-school teacher and has been accepted to Longwood University to continue her education.

Voice breaking as tears filled her eyes, McAllister said, “To my family, friends and the incredible staff at Mountain View, I owe you more than words can express. Thank you for believing in me and lifting me up when I needed it the most – and for being a safe and welcoming environment where I could thrive.”

She then urged her fellow grads to remember the power of community. “We’ve proven we can overcome even the greatest of challenges when we have the right support system by our side,” said McAllister. “Congratulations, Class of 2024 – our futures are bright. I have no doubt that each and every one of us will go on to achieve great things. Thank you, Mountain View, for shaping me into the person I am today and for preparing me for the journey ahead. We did it!”

Afterward, Assistant Principal Kim Witeck told attendees that stories like McAllister’s are “what drives the Mountain View staff

to come to school every day and work so hard for the students.” Then special awards, voted on by the faculty, were given to two of the graduating seniors.

❖ The Personal Achievement Award recognizes a student who’s succeeded both academically and personally, despite having to deal with other adult commitments. ESOL teacher Lora Bates presented this honor to Mohamed Dieye.

❖ The Faculty Award for Excellence goes to the student achieving the greatest academic and personal success, despite significant obstacles. ESOL teacher Leslie Chekin presented it to McAllister.

Chekin said McAllister embodies Mountain View’s motto of Family, Love and Respect. “She’s a communicator, a creative and critical thinker, is ethical, goal-oriented and tremendously resilient,” explained Chekin.

“She excels in many subjects, and one of her teachers wrote, ‘I don’t know how she does so well with all she has to cope with,’” said Chekin. “Her graciousness and respectfulness will be remembered by all her teachers. Anabelle, we’re proud to have had you as a student at Mountain View.”



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	Fed Struc Id	Route #	Route Name	Crossing	Posted Date
WASHINGTON	18852	19	PORTERFIELD HWY	LITTLE MOCCASIN CREEK	1/22/2024
GREENE	8985	624	BEASLEY ROAD	BLUE RUN	1/17/2024
GREENE	8996	633	AMICUS ROAD	SWIFT RUN	1/17/2024
GREENE	8997	633	AMICUS ROAD	PARKER BRANCH	1/17/2024
GREENE	9002	634	MUTTON HOLLOW ROAD	SWIFT RUN	1/17/2024
BLAND	3057	605	ROUTE 0605	BIG WALKER CREEK #2	1/8/2024
GRAYSON	8754	58	HIGHLANDS PKWY	MILL CREEK	1/4/2024

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.

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PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

Dr. Vernon C. Walton, senior pastor First Baptist Church of Vienna



PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

Affordable Housing: Mary Paden



SCREENSHOT

Public Safety: Fairfax County Board Supervisor Rodney Lusk (D-Franconia)

Justice Sunday

On First Baptist Church of Vienna's 8th Annual Legislative and Justice Sunday, elected officials update the status of bills and review past actions.

BY MERCIA HOBSON
THE CONNECTION

The 8th annual Legislative and Justice Sunday occurred on Feb. 11 at the First Baptist Church of Vienna. Congregants and guests joined in person and through a live broadcast. State, county and local legislators filled three rows, with eight invited to speak during the service.

Minister Hazel Wynn opened with a prayer. She emphasized the importance of social justice by recalling the struggles for equality and fairness that have come before and those that are now underway.

It being Super Bowl Sunday, Wynn illustrated her point with a video and reference to NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick formerly of the San Francisco 49ers. In 2016, Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem, protesting police brutality and racism. There were more than a dozen shootings of unarmed Black men around the country in 2016. Kaepernick said, "It would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street, and [police] getting paid leave and getting away with murder."

Dr. Vernon C. Walton, senior pastor, preacher, and advocate, said the video captures how they celebrate this particular Sunday morning with a conversation that began nationally and transcended to conversations in Fairfax County and Virginia.

"Jesus Christ Himself said, I've come so you might have life and have it more abundantly," Walton said. Abundance does not translate to money but to access to health-

care, education, housing, and safety, Walton said.

"There is no difference between my school and your school because of the color of my skin or the zip code. ... Abundance suggests ... I too am able to drive my car down the street and go to the mall, and have a reasonable expectation that my child and I are able to return home. Abundance suggests that I spent a week working [and] that I'm able to make enough to provide a roof over my head," Walton said.

Walton acknowledged the weight of the responsibility in the daily decision-making process wears him down. He spoke of how Jesus calls for accountability in stewardship in the Gospel of Matthew.

"Rents are up; property values are up, meaning property taxes are up. It's hard to buy; it's hard to rent. It's hard to live in Fairfax County; a lot of people are moving out."

— Mary Paden

Today, it is how one treats the poor and marginalized, Black and brown people, women, LGBTQ, and everyone else, he said. There is importance in seeing and appreciating people's full humanity rather than focusing on their brokenness or classes.



SCREENSHOT

Fairfax Casinos: Supervisor Walter Alcorn (D-Hunter Mill)

Our actions toward others reflect actions toward Him. "He will ask, and inquire of us, 'How did you handle the poor ... the homeless and unhoused ... the educational tests that are within our system ... What difference have you made? What solutions have you offered,'" Walton preached.

Walton asks: "Are you satisfied with: 60,000 [Fairfax County] residents experiencing food insecurity, ... more than 1,200 unhoused, ... 15 percent of the student population at Northern Virginia Community College being homeless? Are you satisfied with the proposed state budget offered five days before Christmas that cut \$10 million from permanent supportive housing, ... [banning books] that tell the story and journey of the people who've made significant contributions back to America?"

Affordable Housing:

Mary Paden serves on Fairfax County's Affordable Housing Advisory Council as a representative of the Fairfax NAACP, of which she is the Housing Committee's chair. Speaking on behalf of the NAACP, she updated the county's affordable housing initiatives and detailed their challenges and the fallacy of the "trickle-down" economic

theory. Paden told of racial disparities in the criminal justice system contributing to Black people being incarcerated and impacting their lives when returning to society. And she shared solutions.

"Rents are up; property values are up, meaning property taxes are up. It's hard to buy; it's hard to rent. It's hard to live in Fairfax County; a lot of people are moving out," Paden said.

According to Paden, there is a flawed belief that by increasing the supply of high-end housing, the market will eventually trickle down to more affordable housing, making it more accessible to lower-income buyers. Creating housing that is more accessible to lower-income buyers must be more effective in facing resistance from the local community.

"The suburbs were created for a reason," Paden said. You all know what that is, and they want it to stay that way," Paden said. "We need community support."

According to Paden, the county's housing committee also expresses concern for those currently experiencing homelessness. She said that while Black individuals make up ten percent of the overall population of



SCREENSHOT

Prison Reform: Del. Holly Siebold (D-35)



PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

Student Homelessness and Maternal Health Disparities: Del. Karen Keys-Gamarra (D-7)

Justice Sunday

FROM PAGE 10

Fairfax, they constitute a far higher proportion of the homeless population, accounting for 50 percent.

The inequities seen in the county's criminal justice system have resulted in a significant number of Black individuals being imprisoned and then released as returning people.

They can't rent an apartment, get a job, or get back into society. Paden characterized it as a "free fall" for the individuals, resulting in them being at "the bottom of the barrel. ... It is a big problem," and preventing individuals from being homeless is one method to combat it.

Paden referred to the availability of tax credits for developments that incorporate affordable housing units. She advocated for the current tenant bills, giving tenants more rights so landlords do not exploit them and "more support at eviction court from legal aid lawyers." The legal aid lawyers and the State Housing Trust Fund require financial support. The funding has increased compared to previous levels, yet more is needed.

According to Paden, the most effective way to accomplish these tasks is to contact lawmakers personally. "I encourage all of you to email me at housing@fairfaxnaacp.org," she said.

Public Safety

Supervisor Rodney Lusk (Franconia), chair of the board's public safety committee, recounted growing up under his grandparents' care and values and his experience as a public servant.

Lusk cited the three valuable teachings his grandparents imparted to him. One, if you say you are going to do something, you have to do it. Two, if you live in a community, you have the responsibility to serve that community. And, if you see someone suffering, if you see someone in need, you have the responsibility to help them, Lusk said.

Lusk provided an overview of the committee's accomplishments since 2020. Following the police mur-

der of George Floyd and nationwide and local protests, Lusk, Chairman Jeff McKay and others solicited community input and received hundreds of responses recorded in a matrix.

An early recommendation was to implement police body worn cameras, which have proven beneficial for transparency and accountability, Lusk said.

Lusk with Supervisor Walter Alcorn put together a co-responder motion that the board approved. "We're talking about the very beginning of the process of the 911 dispatch; we have to figure out if people have mental health or substance abuse issues. We're going to send a trained clinician out with a police officer to help them," he said.

In 2023, Lusk created the Police Reform Matrix Working Group which reviewed the community input and developed a proposed action plan.

The Matrix Working Group took hundreds of recommendations recorded in the matrix. After synthesizing them down to 50, Pastor Walton presented the committee's findings to the public safety committee.

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/boardofsupervisors/sites/boardofsupervisors/files/assets/matrix%20action%20plan%2005-12-23.pdf>

Lusk said that the police department is, as a result of that matrix, in the process of

changing the General Order that deals with the pointing of a firearm. "We're going to now look at a way to capture and record that as a reportable use of force," Lusk said.

In addition, they created the Courthouse Self-Help Resource Center inside the Public Law Library. The public, on an ad hoc basis, can access informational materials, forms, and legal resources and receive referrals to legal services or other agencies and services that may be available, among other things. "There are people who don't understand the language, going into the courts, and they have no idea what's being said in the courtroom," Lusk said.

"The numbers of people of color and the death rates of not only our mothers but our babies are astronomically high in an unjustifiable way."

— Del. Karen Keys-Gamarra

SEE JUSTICE SUNDAY, PAGE 12

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Dulles Toll Road Eastbound over Route 123 Bridge Rehabilitation Fairfax County

Virtual Public Information Meeting

Thursday, February 29, 2024, 7 p.m.
<https://www.vdot.virginia.gov/TollRoad123>

Find out about plans to rehabilitate the Eastbound Dulles Toll Road (Route 267) bridge over Route 123 (Dolley Madison Boulevard) to improve safety, increase vertical clearance under the bridge and extend the overall life of the bridge. The bridge was built in 1963. The project includes replacing the concrete deck, parapets and steel beams and repairing the piers and abutments.

The meeting will be held as a **virtual/online meeting**. Information for accessing and participating in the virtual meeting is available at <https://www.vdot.virginia.gov/TollRoad123>. The project team will make a presentation beginning at 7 p.m. and answer questions after the presentation.

Review project information and meeting details on the webpage above or during business hours at VDOT's Northern Virginia District Office, 4975 Alliance Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030. Please call ahead at 703-259-2429 or TTY/TDD 711 to make an appointment with appropriate personnel.

Give your comments during the meeting, or by **March 21, 2024** via the comment form on the project website, by mail to Ms. Dipali Patel, P.E., Virginia Department of Transportation, 4975 Alliance Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030 or by email to meetingcomments@VDOT.virginia.gov. Please reference "Dulles Toll Rd over Rt 123 Bridge Rehab" in the subject line.

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State Project: 0267-029-535, B657, P101
 UPC: 118396
 Federal: NHPP-BR09 (308)

In case an alternate date is needed, the meeting will be held Thursday, March 14, 2024 at the same time.



SCREENSHOT

Gun Violence: Sen. Saddam Azlan Salim (D-37)



PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney (D), candidate for Virginia governor



SCREENSHOT

Minister Hazel Wynn

Justice Sunday

FROM PAGE II

Casinos:

Supervisor Walter Alcorn (Hunter Mill) expressed concern over possible casino development in Fairfax County; he emphasized the need for a more inclusive economy and called for limits on political donations.

Alcorn asked if anyone in the congregation was for casinos; no one raised their hand. Alcorn said, "The point is, we didn't ask for it. This is not something that Fairfax County Board of Supervisors asked for." Alcorn questioned whether a casino economy is one the community wants or one based on productive jobs and focusing on an inclusive economy.

According to Alcorn, a lot of money is being thrown around in the General Assembly, and he is concerned about the bill being pushed through the General Assembly in 2025. The good news is, not this year, but they will have to wait for it to come through in 2025.

Alcorn warned that those driving the casino issue will continue to raise more and more dollars. "You shouldn't be able to buy the government. ... Somebody shows up and puts hundreds of thousands of dollars into my colleagues' political pockets in the General Assembly. ... This is just not right. ... I guarantee you the folks that are throwing around that kind of money, they're not thinking about the least of us."

Prison Reform

Del. Holly Siebold (D-35) advocated for prison reform in Virginia, focusing on living conditions, medical care, solitary confinement, and canine use. Virginia spends \$1.5 billion a year to incarcerate people, and it is "not necessarily given any oversight." She said living conditions for those incarcerated are dismal and there is a lack of medical attention. The inhumane use of canines in Virginia prisons accounts for 92 percent of bites happening in the country. Prisons are using solitary confinement.

Siebold said legislators need to make sure

they are working toward making those conditions better. She told of hearing from families of those incarcerated at Virginia's super-maximum security confinements, Keen Mountain Correctional Center, and Red Onion State Prison concerned about black mold among other issues.

Siebold said drugs in Virginia's prison system have gotten "out-of-control." Chadwick Dotson, director of the Virginia Department of Corrections, "has admitted that drugs are getting in through staff," according to Siebold. "So we need to be holding those people accountable," Siebold said.

Siebold advocated for providing educational programs and second chances for inmates. Incarceration shouldn't be punitive; people will make mistakes, and that worst day should not reflect the rest of their lives. "Ninety percent of those who are incarcerated come back into society, and we need to make sure that we have programs set up to help them reenter society," Siebold said.

Student Homelessness and Maternal Health Disparities

Del. Karen Keys-Gamarra (D-7) reviewed four bills as chief patron. Keys-Gamarra said one of her proudest moments was when [HB 168] passed the House. It provides appropriate support and services to students experiencing homelessness. Her second bill, HB 166, provides guidance and resources for composting programs in local school divisions. HB 974 dealing with worker's compensation is presumptive that certain injuries arise out of employment unless overcome "by a preponderance of competent evidence to the contrary."

HB 171 relates to petitions, signing pleadings, motions, and other papers, oral motions, and sanctions. Keys-Gamarra said she introduced HB 169 Maternal Health Data and Quality Measures, Task Force on State Health Commissioner to reestablish. "because the numbers of people of color and the death rates of not only our mothers but our babies are astronomically high in an unjustifiable way."



PHOTO BY MERCIA HOBSON/THE CONNECTION

Front row, Steve T. Descano, Commonwealth's Attorney; Karl Frisch, chair and Providence District representative, Fairfax County School Board; (back row) Sen. Saddam Azlan Salim (D-37); and Del. Karen Keys-Gamarra (D-7)

Gun Violence

Sen. Saddam Azlan Salim (D-37) discussed several pieces of legislation as chief patron related to gun violence prevention, including SB 319 Firearms: purchase, possession, or transportation of firearm following an assault and battery against a person in a dating relationship with the alleged offender, penalty following an assault & battery against a person in dating relationship is guilty of a Class 1 misdemeanor. Salim's legislation, passed in the Senate, changed it from 365 days to 364 days.

"It took a lot to explain to people why," Salim said. This avoids a federal immigration law that triggers an automatic deportation at 365 days. "So by doing that, we avoid a lot of good folks that are paying their taxes, they've been here for a while, from getting deported to a nation that they do not belong to," he said.

His other legislation includes SB 55 Firearms; waiting period for purchase, penalty: Provides that no person shall sell a firearm unless at least three days have elapsed from the time the prospective purchaser completes the written consent form to have a licensed dealer obtain criminal history record information. SB 57 Concealed handgun; carrying onto the premises of any restaur-

ant, penalty makes it a misdemeanor for anyone to carry a concealed handgun onto the premises of any restaurant or club for which the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority has granted a license to sell and serve alcoholic beverages for on-premises consumption, except active and qualified retired law enforcement officers.

SB 327: Firearms; age requirement to purchase, penalty: prohibits any person under 21 years of age from purchasing a firearm, with exceptions for law enforcement, members of armed forces, and National Guard. SB 338 Gun violence instructs JLARC to study effects on communities.

Salim said that as a first-term senator, he realized that many policy changes would be tough, and that's where community input is necessary. He requested the public to send him an email.

City of Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney (D), who is running for Virginia governor, shared his achievements in justice and education, including restoring voting rights to returning citizens and increasing funding for public schools. He emphasized the need for justice outside the church walls and called for collective action to bring about real change in Virginia.

Fentanyl Called Deadliest Drug Threat

FROM PAGE 3

tems approach employs about 40 programs aimed at education and prevention, early intervention and treatment, harm reduction, recovery, criminal justice and enforcement, and data and monitoring.

In FY 2022 and 2023 the county received an approximately \$4 million share of opioid settlement case funds, which have been used for prevention and support programs. Funding might continue in future years but is uncertain.

The presentation to the county committee highlighted opioid settlement funded projects including Drug Court expansion, a diversion program; jail based medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) impact on post release overdose and recidivism; partnership with public schools on a prevention campaign and anti-stigma initiative targeting youth risky behaviors; and an expanded program to treat opioid use disorder. The effort seeks to use grant and local matching funds to bring a residential youth detox/substance use treatment service facility to the Northern Virginia region, since potential patients must now travel out of state to receive such services.

What Is Fentanyl?

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. There are two types of fentanyl: pharmaceutical fentanyl and illegally made fentanyl. Both are considered synthetic opioids. Medical fentanyl was approved for use in the U.S. in 1968 and is prescribed by doctors to treat severe pain, especially after surgery and for advanced-stage cancer. It is also used as a sedative.

Illegally made fentanyl (IMF) is available on the drug market in different forms, including liquid and powder. Powdered fentanyl looks just like many other drugs. It is commonly mixed with drugs like heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine, and made into pills that resemble other prescription opioids. Locally the 'street price' has dropped to less than \$10 per pill, as compared to \$30 in recent years. Fentanyl-laced drugs are extremely dangerous, and many people may be unaware that their drugs are laced with fentanyl since it can't be seen, tasted or smelled. It is nearly impossible to tell if drugs have been laced with fentanyl unless you test drugs with fentanyl test strips. Test strips are inexpensive and typically give results within 5 minutes, which can be the difference between life or death. Even if the test is negative,

test strips might not detect more potent fentanyl-like drugs. This is why fentanyl awareness campaigns suggest, one pill can kill.

Fentanyl is the major contributor to fatal and nonfatal overdoses in the U.S. In 2023 fentanyl overdose deaths topped 112,000 in a 12 month period for the first time, according to the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention. Fentanyl and other synthetic opioids are the most common drugs involved in overdose deaths. Even in small doses, these illegally made opioids can be deadly. Fentanyl poses an exceptionally high overdose risk in humans, since the amount required to cause toxicity is unpredictable. It overtook heroin as the most dead-

ly drug in 2018. DEA warns, "The ease of its manufacture, its high potency and relatively low price; and being easier to produce and smuggle, results in fentanyl replacing other abused narcotics and becoming more widely used."

The Only Safe Meds

The DEA warns, "the only safe

medications are ones prescribed by a trusted medical professional and dispensed by a licensed pharmacist. Any pills that do not meet this standard are unsafe and potentially deadly." DEA launched the public awareness campaign, One Pill Can Kill, to educate the public on dangers of counterfeit pills

SEE FENTANYL, PAGE 17

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OBITUARY

Mason Is Praised for Regional Leadership

Friends, colleagues recall his governance and consensus-building.

BY BONNIE HOBBS
THE CONNECTION

Besides all he did for the City of Fairfax, former Mayor John Mason also played an important part in the county and region. “He was a fantastic planner and manager,” said former Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chairman Sharon Bulova. “That’s why he was tapped to lead the Workhouse Arts Center.”

“Because of his leadership, the Workhouse Arts Foundation was well positioned for success,” said Foundation Board Chair Caroline Blanco. “After he left this role, John continued to be a strong advocate for the Workhouse. In his passing, the Workhouse has certainly lost one of its most prominent and dedicated family members.”

Bulova described Mason as “a renaissance man, curious and interested in everything. He was a mayor of a small city but wound up being a transportation giant in the region on the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority [NVTA],” she said. “He really enjoyed getting into the weeds of transportation and its funding and was highly respected in that field.”

She first got to know him in 1988 when she became Braddock District Supervisor and he was a City Councilman.

“I started getting angry letters and phone calls about a proposal he’d made to connect Pickett Road through a county neighborhood,” explained Bulova. “I wasn’t even sure where Pickett Road was, so I called and asked him what was going on.”

“He backed off; he hadn’t realized what difficulties it would cause that neighborhood. But we connected over it and became good friends and colleagues. We then created a county/city committee so we could work through some next-door-neighbor issues together where our jurisdictions touched. One of them was the City library; John and I worked together on moving it and finding ways of funding its relocation and construction.”

Bulova said Mason had a connection with the actual Lord Fairfax, for whom the county and City are named, and Mason hosted him in his home when he came here from England for one of the county’s anniversary celebrations. And when he returned in 2018, Mason arranged for him to tour the perimeter of the land his ancestors had granted to the county.

But time moved on; and about 18 months ago, said Bulova, Mason shared that his cancer had returned, and he was going through chemo. “Yet he was upbeat and optimistic,”



John Mason

she said. “You’d never know he was dealing with a major health challenge. He was just a good guy, with a talent for bringing people together. I was very saddened to hear of his passing. The world has lost a wonderful human being – but what a legacy he’s left in so many different areas.”

Former Mason District Supervisor Penny Gross served with Mason on the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) and on the Northern Virginia Regional Commission. And she and Mason were among a delegation visiting Israel in 1998. “We visited a kibbutz overlooking Lebanon and saw gun emplacements,” she said. “John, with his military background, made it all come alive and gave us a lesson in military tactics because he’d been through it himself in Vietnam.”

And at COG, said Gross, “He was an expert in transportation. When he walked into the room, you instantly felt better because you knew he knew what he was talking about and would help you find a solution.”

While on COG’s board, she said, Mason was first diagnosed with bladder cancer. “We watched his physical changes as he underwent treatment,” said Gross. “But he was a profile in courage, doing the best he could while undergoing a personal crisis.”

She said Mason understood the value of regional cooperation throughout the entire Washington Metropolitan area and called his revival of the Workhouse a “later-in-life, defining moment for him. He was a lovely

SEE REGIONAL LEADERSHIP, PAGE 19

John Mason: ‘Gifted leader’ and Champion of the Arts

FROM PAGE 4

for Christmas,” said Meyer. “Then volunteers would buy and wrap the presents and, as Santa, I’d deliver them. John was my driver.”

However, he continued, “My wife stuffed all these pillows into my Santa suit, and John showed up in a tiny, Volkswagen bug and I could hardly fit into it – but we had fun together. And that was my introduction to John Mason. Little did we know that one day, we’d both be mayors.”

As Fairfax mayor for 12 years, said Meyer, “John understood the importance of building community support for new initiatives. And in 1990, he created the 2020 Commission to answer the question of where we wanted the City to be 20 years from then.”

The entity looked at all aspects of Fairfax’s civic life – schools, parks, trails, housing, transportation system, the City’s position in the region, its relationship with GMU, and the redevelopment of its commercial centers. Subcommittees had citizen groups examine these issues, make recommendations about them and ultimately create a report.

“This became the roadmap for guiding the City’s future polity decisions and priorities,” said Meyer. “It was like a Comprehensive Plan on steroids because it was far-reaching and comprehensive. And it emphasized how all these things were interrelated and reinforced each other. For example, it discussed improving our schools, upgrading our parks, protecting our natural environment and creating more diverse housing options.”

But that’s not all. “John simultaneously promoted the arts in the City while raising money under Spotlight on the Arts for scholarships for students to study the arts at GMU,” said Meyer. “He was the spark behind Spotlight. And even after leaving office, he kept up with transportation and housing issues, both regionally and Citywide.”

“He was a strong believer in regionality and put Fairfax City on the regional map. He was a board member of the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments [COG] and chaired its transportation planning board. John was also instrumental in helping establish the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority [NVTA], serving as its first executive director.”

Furthermore, when Sharon Bulova chaired the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, she asked Mason to become CEO Of the Workhouse Arts Center in Lorton. There, said Meyer, “He was transformative in restructuring its debt and getting it onto solid, financial footing to move forward.”

Deeply saddened by the loss of his friend, Meyer said, “John was innately bright, had a quick sense of humor and an appreciation of irony while keeping his good cheer. I’m thankful for his presence among us; he was a gifted leader and a good friend to many people.”

City Councilmember Jeff Greenfield – who as a teen, worked on Mason’s first political campaign – called his death “a tremendous loss for his family and the community at large. “John was mayor when we were looking at redevelopment opportunities for Old Town,” said

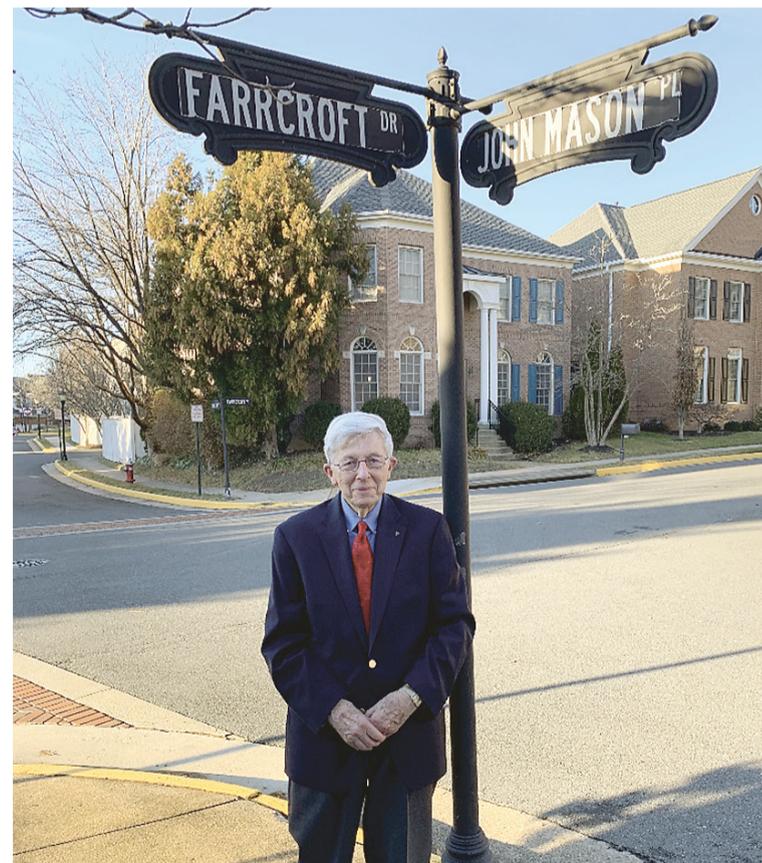


PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID MEYER

John Mason standing at the corner of Farrcroft Drive and John Mason Place in Fairfax.

SEE JOHN MASON, PAGE 15

OBITUARY



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF GREENFIELD

Cutting a ribbon on the Interpretive Center at Fairfax's Historic Blenheim in 2008 are (at far right) Chap Petersen, Jeff Greenfield and John Mason.

John Mason: 'Gifted leader' and Champion of the Arts

FROM PAGE 14

Greenfield. "Under his watch, we got all the plans in place."

They entailed moving the post office from North Street and Route 123 to Page Avenue, removing a gas station from North and University Drive, and moving the library from Chain Bridge Road to North and Old Lee Highway. And when the Farrcroft community was approved during Mason's tenure in the mid-'90s, said Greenfield, "The City finally got housing for residents who wanted to move up to larger homes with larger yards. It was something modern, new and different."

"I was always impressed – not only with John's military background, which made him a good leader – but his command of the subjects he was dealing with, like transportation," continued Greenfield. "He really had a vision for the City and worked to get consensus for it. He was one of our top mayors."

Greenfield said Mason was also a "tremendous family man, proud of his kids and grandchildren. I'd be walking into Daniels Run Elementary to get my daughter after school, and he'd be walking out with a grandchild. I could write a book about all the stories John told me about his life and the City. I'd joke with him that, if he'd have let people see his softer, less-formal side, he could have been mayor for life."

Former City Councilmember Steve Stombres knew Mason since 1998. "I and residents all across the City are grateful for his many

years of service to the community," said Stombres. "He was a tireless advocate for many important causes – such as parks and recreation, trails and the arts – and he's going to be greatly missed." And even after Mason was no longer mayor, said Stombres, "He continued to deliver results for the things he cared about."

Stombres said Mason's death surprised him. "When he was mayor, he had a bout with cancer, so this was his second time," said Stombres. After moving from Old Lee Hills, the Masons moved to Stombres's neighborhood, Farrcroft.

"When the development was built, a street was named after John, and he and Jeanette have been truly wonderful neighbors," said Stombres. "Jeanette's an amazing lady and has always been a great strength for John and a wonderful partner in all he did."

During Stombres's first Council campaign in 2008, he asked Mason for advice on how to conduct it. "He gave me a whole litany of what to do and not to do – even what to wear when knocking on doors," said Stombres. "He walked me through all the City's development plans; he was a fount of knowledge. He also told me how to conduct myself – to be respectful even to people I disagreed with; it was great advice, and I won."

Stombres called Spotlight on the Arts one of Mason's "lasting legacies to Fairfax. What an impact he had on the City; it's a testament to all the lives he touched here. He

SEE 'GIFTED LEADER', PAGE 19

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The Cher Show will take place at Capital One Hall in Tysons Corner on Feb. 16-18, 2024.

FORB'S ANNUAL NATIVE PLANT SALE

Online ordering for FORB's annual Native Plant Sale opens on Thursday, February 1, 2024 and closes on Sunday, March 24, 2024. Go to the website at www.forbpark.org, and click "2024 Native Plant Sale" on the home page. There are over 500 plants from which to choose including Virginia Bluebells, Cardinal Flowers, several varieties of Phlox and many, many more. All orders will be picked up on Saturday, April 13, 2024 at the Riverbend Park Educational Pavilion on Potomac Hills Street.

THE MCLEAN TREES FOUNDATION, NEIGHBORHOOD TREES PROGRAM, WANTS TO HELP YOU PLANT A NATIVE TREE IN YOUR YARD!

Don't know how to plant a tree but want to support the environmental health of your community? Want your family to have the experience of planting a tree? If you live in McLean, the McLean Trees Foundation (MTF) (a local nonprofit) will help you select an appropriate native tree for your property, deliver the tree to your yard, help you plant it, provide information on maintenance, and even check back with you a few months after planting to see how your tree is doing. If you are interested in participating in this program to boost our native tree canopy in McLean, visit the website at <https://www.mcleantreesfoundation.org/neighborhood-tree-program> and submit your application! A fee of \$100 is assessed to cover the costs of the program (limit one 6-7 foot tree in 15 gallon container per household). There is a separate program for those who are interested in spearheading a community tree planting campaign in their neighborhood. MTF's Tree Champion program makes it easy to help your neighbors plant more trees!

WEDNESDAYS THROUGH SATURDAYS

Tours Aboard Tall Ship Providence and Sen. John Warner Maritime Heritage Center. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. At Alexandria's Waterfront Park, 1A Prince Street, Alexandria. Guests of all ages are recruited into the Continental Navy aboard Tall Ship Providence with legendary Captain John Paul Jones. Recruits are assigned jobs on the

ship, learn where they will work and live, how to load a cannon, etc... Tours conclude in the Naval History Theatre with a film about the ship. The Heritage center is a floating museum on the Alexandria waterfront. Visit <https://tallshipprovidence.org/>

BONITA LESTINA FAIRFAX OLD TOWN HALL PERFORMANCE SERIES

Enjoy an evening of music showcasing a variety of genres in the elegant interior of historic Old Town Hall (3999 University Drive) in the heart of Fairfax City. Doors open at 7:30 p.m. and performances begin at 8 p.m. and run from October to April. Admission is free. Visit: www.fairfaxva.gov/government/parks-recreation/cultural-arts.

SCHEDULE

February 16: Matt Trkula – Classical Guitar
March 8: Mandoleers – Mandolin and Guitar Orchestra
March 22: James & Victor – Jazz Duo/Steel Pan
April 5: Francesca Hurst – Solo Piano
April 19: Sylvan Waters Duo – Harp/Brass

NOW THRU FEB. 17

McLean Project for the Arts' Winter Exhibitions. At McLean Community Center, 1234 Ingleside Ave., McLean. McLean Project for the Arts will open its winter exhibitions—Moving Beyond Beauty: Reverence and Reclamation (Emerson Gallery) and To March is to Love: Weavings by Janel Leppin (Atrium Gallery)—on December 7, 2023. Both shows will run through February 17, 2024, with an Opening Exhibition Reception on Thursday, December 7, 2023 from 7-9 p.m. Bringing together five artists—Adjoa Jackson Burrows, Jacqui Crocetta, Maggie Gourlay, June Linowitz, and Elzbieta Sikorska—Moving Beyond Beauty features work that is at once aesthetically pleasing and philosophically compelling.

FEB. 1-18

"Shutter Sisters." At 1st Stage, 1524 Spring Hill Road Tysons. This sweet and funny tale explores the parallel lives of two women. A white woman named Michael struggles with strained family relationships at her adopted mother's funeral, while a Black woman named Mykal navigates a challenge of her own: becoming an empty nester. A surrealist journey through womanhood, identity,



Buckets 'N Boards will perform on Friday, Feb. 23, 2024 at McLean Community Center in McLean.

and what it means to belong. Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays at 7:30 p.m., Saturdays at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., and Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets can be purchased online at www.1ststage.org or by calling the 1st Stage box office at 703-854-1856.

CELEBRATE BLACK HISTORY MONTH WITH THE FAIRFAX COUNTY PARK AUTHORITY

Embark on a journey of cultural richness and historical significance this Black History Month with several programs in Fairfax County parks. Join them in honoring and exploring the vibrant tapestry of Black heritage through interactive events, programs, exhibits and offerings for all ages.

Programs and Events

Black History Month at Historic Frying Pan Church, Frying Pan Farm Park, Feb. 17, noon-2 p.m., Free.

Preserving Our Legacy: A Workshop for Black Cemetery Owners and Stakeholders, Frying Pan Farm Park Visitor Center Auditorium Feb. 17, 10 a.m.- 1 p.m., Free.

Remembering Metilda- An Enslaved Child at the Mill, Colvin Run Mill, Feb. 17, 1-2 p.m., \$9.

Enslaved Lives and the Legacy of Slavery, Historic Huntley, Feb. 17, 1-2 p.m., \$12.

Workshops, Exhibits and Activities Getaway-Frederick Douglass Home & Portrait Gallery, Green Spring Gardens Park, Feb. 20, 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m., \$89.

Special Black History Month Exhibit: "On One Farm—The Women of Walney, 1853-1862," Exhibit is on display through Mar. 26. Ellanor C Lawrence Park, Free.

Celebrate Black Athletes in Sports and Recreation, Oakmont Rec Center, display available through Feb. 29. Black History Month at Oakmont Rec Center.

Take a picture with the LOVE Sign at Oakmont that features Black History Month colors.

Explore achievements of Black Inventors throughout the years in the Oakmont Minigolf Story Walk. Honor Black Musical Artists.

All Rec Centers Drop-In Fitness Classes will be showcasing songs by Black

artists during many of the classes. Black Athletes in Fairfax County. Providence Rec Center will be showcasing a different athlete from Fairfax County each week. The rec center will display a banner that tells the story of Edwin B. Henderson, who introduced D.C. to basketball in 1907.

To learn more about Black History and culture in Fairfax County Parks or to participate in any of the programs above, visit the Black History Month webpage.

SAVOR THE SWEETNESS OF MAPLE SYRUP AT COLVIN RUN MILL

At Colvin Run Mill, 10017 Colvin Run Road in Great Falls. As the sap begins to flow and the maple trees are tapped, Colvin Run Mill invites you to embrace the winter warmth by the fire. Immerse yourself in the fascinating process of maple syrup production. Discover the secrets behind why trees produce sap and witness the art of sap collection through tree tapping.

Experience the magic as the sap is expertly boiled down to create the delectable maple syrup that graces our tables. Indulge your taste buds by sampling this liquid gold on cornbread made with Colvin Run Mill grains.

Join them on two Sundays on Feb. 18 and Feb. 25 for a Maple Syrup Boil Down. Choose times between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. This program is tailored for groups, families and children aged 6 and older.

WEDNESDAY/FEB. 14

"After Life" Film. 6:30 p.m. At McLean Community Center, 1234 Ingleside Ave., McLean. Japan; Directed by Hirokazu Koreeda. Shown in Japanese with English subtitles. In this acclaimed film, a group of people who have recently died find themselves in limbo. Counselors are on hand to help new arrivals pick one memory from their lives to bring with them into eternity. Once the memories are chosen, the staff makes a short film representing each one, and the films make up a collage of thoughtful cinematic moments.

THURSDAY/FEB. 15

Double Film Feature. 1 p.m. At McLean Community Center, 1234 Ingleside Ave., McLean. "Sing Faster: The Stagehand's Ring Cycle" and Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex" (Not rated). Wagner's "Ring Cycle" is a daunting undertaking for an opera company and for the union stagehands at the San Francisco Opera. Directed by Jon Else. "Oedipus Rex" features Jessye Norman, Philip Langridge, Bryn Terfel and Min Tanaka; Conducted by Seiji Ozawa; Directed by Julie Taymor. (Not rated)

FEB. 16-18

The Cher Show. At Capital One Hall, Tysons Corner. Superstars come and go. Cher is forever. For six straight decades, only one unstoppable force has flat-out dominated popular culture – breaking down barriers, pushing boundaries and letting nothing and no one stand in her way. The Cher Show is the Tony Award-winning musical of her story, and packed with so much Cher it takes three women to play her: the kid starting out, the glam pop star, and the icon. Visit capitalonehall.com.

SATURDAY/FEB. 17

Mason Artist-in-Residence A.I.M by Kyle Abraham. 8 p.m. At GMU Center for the Arts, Fairfax. MacArthur Genius Award-winning choreographer Kyle Abraham has developed a dance aesthetic that defies genre, mixing and morphing from social dance to classical dance styles and back again, creating his signature postmodern gumbo. The Center presents his visionary works using various dance and music styles to uncover the relationships between identity, history, and geography.

SATURDAY/FEB. 17

Remembering Metilda- An Enslaved Child at the Mill. Colvin Run Mill, 10017 Colvin Run Rd., Great Falls. 1-2 p.m., For age 14 and up. Come learn about Metilda, an enslaved 14-year old girl who came to live at Colvin Run Mill. Discuss her life at the mill and the house. Examine

ENTERTAINMENT

what history tells us about the lives of enslaved children, their work, and their families \$9 Visit <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/topics/black-history-month>

SATURDAY/FEB. 17

Enslaved Lives and the Legacy of Slavery, Historic Huntley, 6918 County Rd 723, Alexandria. Join a historian for a tour of Huntley that examines the relationship of the Mason family to slavery and recovers insights into the lives of the Humphrey family and other enslaved people whose labor maintained Mason wealth and social status. \$12 <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/topics/black-history-month>

SATURDAY/FEB. 17

Black History Month at Historic Frying Pan Church, noon-2 p.m., Frying Pan Farm Park, 2709 West Ox Road, Herndon. In honor of Black History Month, the Frying Pan Baptist Meetinghouse will be open Saturday February 3rd and Saturday February 17th from 12-2pm. Established in the 18th century, the original congregation of the meetinghouse included enslaved, free Black, and White-slave-holding members. Interpretive signage will tell the story of a local Black family that lived next to the Meetinghouse while a docent will be available to talk about the experience of Black congregants of the church. Stay for just a few minutes or a couple hours! Event is free, register online. <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/topics/black-history-month>

SATURDAY/FEB. 17

A.I.M by Kyle Abraham. 8 p.m. At GMU Center for the Arts, Fairfax. A pre-performance discussion with A.I.M by Kyle Abraham Rehearsal Director Jessica Tong, moderated by Mason School of Dance Professor Lawrence M. Jackson, will take place in Monson Grand Tier,

which is located on the third level of the Center for the Arts Lobby, 45 minutes prior to curtain.

SUNDAY/FEB. 18

“Soul to Soul” – African American & Jewish Music. 3 p.m. At Reston Community Center’s Center Stage, Reston. “Soul to Soul” brings together African American and Yiddish American experiences in a deeply stirring musical presentation.

SUNDAY/FEB. 18

Traditional Celtic Music. At 4:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. At The Old Brogue Irish Pub, 760-C Walker Road, Great Falls. Charlie Zahm and Tad Marks: Brilliant baritone ballads and fine, fancy fiddling! www.charliezahm.com

SUNDAY/FEB. 18

NTRAK Model Train Show. 1-4 p.m. At Fairfax Station Railroad Museum 11200 Fairfax Station Road, Fairfax Station. The Northern Virginia NTRAK members will hold a N-Gauge Train Display. Admission: museum members, free; adults 13 and over, \$5; children 5-12, \$3; under 4, free. Seniors 65+ and military (active & retired), \$4. For more information on the museum and show events, phone 703-425-9225. Visit www.fairfax-station.org www.facebook.com/FFXSRR

TUESDAY/FEB. 20

Five Hills Garden Club Program-Getting Started with Eastern Bluebirds and Helping Them Stay. 11 a.m. At Vienna Presbyterian Church, 124 Park Street, N.E., Vienna. Valerie Kenyon Gaffney, President of Virginia Bluebird Society, will present on the lifecycle of the bluebird. Valerie will provide background on the bluebird’s decline in population and what role we can play in supporting bluebirds and attracting them to our backyard and communities. The public is welcome.

FRIDAY/FEB. 23

Film: “A Great Day in Harlem.” 1994. At 7:30 p.m. At Stacy C. Sherwood Community Center, 3740 Blenheim Blvd., Fairfax. ARTScreen Free Film Series: This Oscar-nominated documentary compiles interviews of all the top jazz musicians in NYC in the year 1958, for a piece in Esquire magazine, inspiring the iconic photograph by Art Kane.

FEB. 23-24

Sing Down the Moon: Appalachian Wonder Tales. 7 p.m. At Ernst Theater, 8333 Little River Turnpike, Annandale. Oakcrest School will present its Middle School Theatre production. The musical leads the audience on a journey through the Appalachian Mountains with six traditional tales and folk-inspired songs. With stories inspired by beloved fairy tales, the evening is sure to be captivating while sharing mountain-lore wisdom for the whole family. Sing Down the Moon: Appalachian Wonder Tales will include performances from more than 25 students, as well as a crew of Upper School students working behind the scenes.

FEB. 23-24

GAMEmason 2024. 10:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. At George Mason University. A two-day gaming convention featuring Esports tournaments, arcade and tabletop gaming, industry panels and keynote speaker voice actress Jennifer Hale. GAMEmason 2024 will feature guest speakers from Bethesda Game Studios, Monument Sports and Entertainment, and more; educational sessions with Mason faculty and staff as well as alumni and business leaders; free arcade play; tabletop and console gaming; Augmented Reality (AR)/Virtual Reality (VR) demonstrations; an artist alley featuring work by Mason students and featured artists; vendors and businesses from across the game



A Sweetheart Parent-Child Dance will take place Friday, Feb. 23, 2024 at McLean Community Center in McLean.

industry; and more. Visit: si.gmu.edu/gamemason.

ARTSCREEN:

A FREE FILM SERIES

CELEBRATING THE ARTS

Join in a free film series on Friday evenings in the City of Fairfax at the Stacy C. Sherwood Community Center, 3740 Blenheim Blvd., Fairfax. Doors open at 7 p.m.; Films begin at 7:30 p.m. Free popcorn, candy, refreshments and door prizes, too!

Feb. 23: A Great Day in Harlem. (1994) Not Rated - The documentary compiles interviews of all the top jazz musicians in NYC in the year 1958, for a piece in Esquire magazine.
April 12: Midnight in Paris. (2011) PG-13 - While on a trip to Paris with his fiancée’s family, a nostalgic screenwriter finds himself mysteriously going back to the 1920s every day at midnight.

FRIDAY/FEB. 23

Black History Month Event. 5:30 p.m. Join your neighbors for an evening at the Government Center (12000 Government Center Parkway, Fairfax) to celebrate Black History Month. This year’s theme is “The Value of Telling Our Stories.” Enjoy local performances, interactive activities, enlightening discussion and light refreshments.

FRIDAY/FEB. 23

Sweetheart Parent-Child Dance. 7-9 p.m. At McLean Community Center, 1234 Ingleside Ave., McLean. Children are invited to come to MCC for a fancy “date” with their parent or guardian. Featured activities included a photo booth, a DJ playing favorite dance tunes, craft projects and light refreshments. Create lasting memories by joining us. Parents must attend with their child/children and register individually at mcleancenter.org.

News

Fentanyl Called Deadliest Drug Threat

FROM PAGE 13

and how to keep Americans safe from the increase in the lethality and availability of fake prescription pills containing fentanyl and methamphetamine. International and domestic criminal drug networks are mass-producing fake pills, falsely marketing them as legitimate prescription pills, and killing unsuspecting Americans. These counterfeit pills are easy to purchase, widely available, and often contain deadly doses of fentanyl. Pills purchased outside of a licensed pharmacy are illegal, dangerous, and potentially lethal.

Fake prescription pills are widely accessible and often sold on social media and e-commerce platforms. These counterfeit pills have been seized by DEA in every U.S. state, and in unprecedented quantities. Criminal drug networks are mass-producing deadly fentanyl

and fentanyl-laced, fake prescription pills, using chemicals sourced largely from China, according to alerts.

“These fake prescription pills are designed to appear nearly identical to legitimate prescriptions and have been found in every state in the country,” DEA Administrator Anne Milgram says. “Criminal drug networks are harnessing the perfect drug trafficking tool: social media applications that are available on every smartphone. They are using these platforms to flood our country with fentanyl.” For more information, visit DEA.gov/onepill

What Happens in Fentanyl Overdose?

According to the CDC, “fentanyl’s adverse effects are identical to those of other narcotic opioids, including: addiction; confusion;

respiratory depression, which if extensive and untreated may lead to breathing arrest; drowsiness; nausea; visual disturbances; dyskinesia [involuntary muscle movements]; hallucinations; delirium; ... loss of consciousness; hypotension; coma; and death. Alcohol and other drugs (e.g., cocaine and heroin) can exacerbate fentanyl’s effects.

Naloxone (also known as Narcan) can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose; however, because fentanyl is so potent, multiple doses might be necessary. Fentanyl users may be observed having difficulty staying awake and exhibit labored breathing or snoring.

The Fairfax County Community Services Board provides Opioid Overdose and Naloxone Education trainings (REVIVE! kit training) that includes a free box of naloxone — often referred to by the

brand name Narcan — upon completion of the training. A free box of naloxone is only available to residents of Fairfax County and the Cities of Fairfax and Falls Church upon request. See <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/community-services-board/heroin-opioids/revive>

Those who find someone or have a friend who might be experiencing an overdose should call for 911 help immediately, without fear of reprisal in Virginia due to ‘safe harbor’ provisions. Your quick response could make a life over death difference. No individual is subject to arrest or prosecution for the unlawful purchase, possession, or consumption of controlled substances or paraphernalia, if the person seeks or obtains emergency medical attention for himself in overdose, or for another individual experiencing an overdose,

if remaining at the scene of the overdose until a law-enforcement officer responds. (VA Code §18-2-250.03)

For those who suspect a person is using drugs or dealing with addiction, parents or guardians can speak to their school’s Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist, reached through the school’s office or counselor. A Peer Outreach Response Team (PORT) provides help to individuals who have opioid and other substance use challenges. If you or someone you know could benefit from PORT services, find more information at <https://bit.ly/35ibMB5> or call 703 559-3199.

For more information and resources: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/topics/opioids> and <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/news/opioid-overdoses-continue-how-get-help-1>

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Employment

Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc. seeks a Product Engineer in Vienna, VA to write data science and machine learning samples using ArcGIS and open source ecosystem. Can work remotely. Reqs. BS+1 yrs. exp. To apply, submit resume to Vinesh Patel, 380 New York Street, Redlands, CA 92373. If you have questions, you may contact Vinesh Patel at: vinesh_patel@esri.com. REQ#: 2024-423.

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Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc. seeks a User Interface Designer in Vienna, VA to help pioneer the field of mapping and spatial analysis through design. Reqs. BS+1 yrs. exp. To apply, submit resume to Vinesh Patel, 380 New York Street, Redlands, CA 92373. If you have questions, you may contact Vinesh Patel at: vinesh_patel@esri.com. REQ#: 2024-426.

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Celebrating Black History Month

FROM PAGE 6

Gum Springs continues to live on.

"The knowledge of African American history is essential to the history of our nation. The contributions of individuals who came from Gum Springs helped change the lives of so many such as Annie Smith, the first teacher at Drew-Smith Elementary School who taught students that would later go on to be doctors and lawyers," said Ron. He also says that when he walks around the Museum and sees photos of people like Samuel Taylor, who bought land on Fort Hunt Road and re-

sold it to Black families (at cost) to build up a community, he is inspired by their perseverance to create a lasting presence.

During Black History Month, take a moment to stop by the Gum Springs Museum to learn about the men and women who made contributions to not only our District, but the whole nation. For those who know Ron, he pours his heart and soul into the Museum and always has a welcoming smile for everyone, especially new visitors. The Gum Springs Museum is open Tuesday - Friday from 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. and Saturday 1:30 -

5 p.m. You can keep up to date on upcoming events and programs on their website <https://gumspingsmuseum.blogspot.com/>, Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/gumspingsmuseumronchase/> and keep an eye out for their new magazine coming out in March - History In Motion the Gum Springs Historical Society Magazine.

The next time you drive down Sherwood Hall Lane and Fordson Road into Gum Springs, take a moment to reflect on the vast history we are fortunate to have here in the District.

Commonwealth Is Failing Students

FROM PAGE 6

community priorities. From mental health to climate change to affordable housing, there are so many opportunities for local government to solve problems if we are not asked to make up for a massive school funding shortfall from the state every year.

And it's also not just about the pressing challenges local municipalities cannot afford to address.

It's about investing in what should be a community's greatest asset and a source of civic pride - its public school system. Decades of research confirms that funding plays a critical role in the quality of K-12 education, and the likelihood of having exemplary teachers increases with sufficient funding. There is not a school district in the Commonwealth that would not welcome more funding to increase teacher pay. To be clear, the teacher shortage is a state and national crisis; it cannot be adequately addressed if local governments are forced to shoulder the burden largely alone. More

funding may not solve every problem, but without it, we are missing opportunities to help our kids succeed.

We know very well in Fairfax County what great schools can lead to in terms of economic growth and competitiveness, and that is why the County funds them at such a high level. While Governor Youngkin says improving Virginia's economic competitiveness is his priority, this cannot be accomplished without providing substantial new resources for public education rather than relying on the "smoke and mirrors" of moving scarce state dollars from one education priority to another. It is time to end his war on public education and provide relief to local governments and school systems.

State underfunding of our schools is nothing new, but this time it is very different. The JLARC report provides a new opportunity. This is not a report from a national partisan think tank with a footnote about Virginia - this is the General Assembly's own nonpartisan commission showing us that the state is

failing our students. This is a time for action and a time for the state to fulfill its constitutional duty to set a high standard for our local schools and then fund them appropriately.

For General Assembly leaders, this session you have an opportunity to use your own report and work with your colleagues around the state to begin fixing this problem.

For Governor Youngkin, to build a 21st century economy we must start with building and funding a world class K-12 public education system across the Commonwealth.

For everyone, the time is now to begin righting a historic wrong and help the Commonwealth's students achieve greatness in their local schools. No more patches or short-term fixes. Let's get to the root of the issue and build a better Commonwealth for future generations.

Jeffrey McKay is Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

Karl Frisch is Chair of the Fairfax County School Board

OBITUARY

Mason Is Praised for Regional Leadership

FROM PAGE 14

person, and I'm so glad I got to know him as well as I did, because he was truly a symbol of doing the right thing."

When Marty Nohe was vice chairman of the NVTA, Mason was hired as its first executive director in 2005. The entity knew he'd be a good fit, said Nohe, because, while Fairfax City mayor, "John was considered the elder statesman of Northern Virginia government and typified the spirit of consensus-building and cooperation necessary to make the region run well."

After about nine months, though, he had to leave the NVTA when its funding dried up. But he returned after new state legisla-

tion was passed in 2013 to fund it. Nohe was its chairman then and hired Monica Backmon as executive director. "But we needed someone ready to hit the ground running and lead it before she came on board, so I asked John to return," said Nohe.

"He was glad to because he wanted to finish what he'd started. His two conditions were that he be called interim executive director and would be part time. He put the long-term success of the organization and service to the region ahead of his own personal ambitions."

Nohe and Mason were also friends who had monthly lunches at Artie's in Fairfax. "He mentored me on leadership," said Nohe. "John taught me that, in public life,

when you have the opportunity to serve in an influential role, the reward should be the satisfaction of serving your community and making your hometown a better place to live, rather than the short-term glory of seeing your name in the papers."

"He cared more about setting the stage for the next generation than about getting praised about what he was doing in the present," continued Nohe. "And that's what made him such a great man. He was the go-to person for advice; and as a friend, I loved the guy. I knew he wasn't well, and his body was failing him, but I'm heartbroken about his death. He was an inspiration for anyone who wanted to serve in local government and do it well."

'Gifted Leader' and Champion of the Arts

FROM PAGE 15

was a constant presence in the City."

Mason founded Spotlight with Fairfax resident Jane Woods. "Their vision was to create an arts organization in the City that not only promoted the arts, but also supported students attending the College of Visual and Performing Arts at GMU," said Spotlight

President and former City Councilmember Michael DeMarco. "Their efforts led to a vibrant arts community in the City and provided several hundred thousand dollars in scholarships to deserving Mason students.

He said Mason's death was "certainly sad news for many people, including myself. I met John when I first ran for City Council in 2010. He came up to me after the first candidates'

forum, told me he liked my vision for the City and became a supporter of mine immediately.

"After my first election to City Council, John asked me to join Spotlight's board. Little did I know, he was grooming me to take over his position as president. John was more than a mentor to me - he was a friend. He was a great public servant to the City, region and nation and will be sorely missed."

Accommodate This



By KENNETH B. LOURIE

Cancer hasn't changed the way most people greet me. Typically, it's the standard "Hello. How are you doing?" Occasionally, the look on their faces or even their body language will give them, and their concern/fear for me, away. Usually, I will respond; accordingly, not too many details though, but something of substance. How do you address a person who's not fine? Most of the time however, people treat me "normally," or at least treat me like other non-cancer/non-terminal types in their social circle. Rarely do I take their questions as encouragement to drone on about my latest cancer blip. For most people who know me and my diagnosis, I must be prodded a bit to speak about it. It's way too heavy a subject (my likely premature death) for introductory-type conversation.

The other day, I saw a good friend who's aware of my condition/challenges and to whom I've uttered some of my usual responses to innocent queries: "Glad to be here. Glad to be anywhere. I'd be crazy to complain," et cetera, as but a few examples. He responded respectfully/sincerely saying I should really be graded on a curve (allowing for my miscellaneous but likely adverse consequences). Immediately, I said "Absolutely! I couldn't agree more."

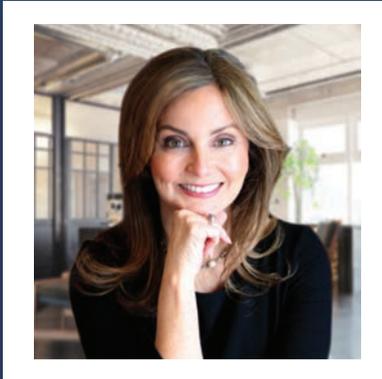
Let's be honest. Fifteen-year cancer survivors don't exactly grow on trees. And if that survivor, hasn't stopped treatment during this entire decade plus (since Feb. 2009), which I haven't, there's going to be some damage; mentally, physically, spiritually, and/or emotionally. Moreover, as the old joke says: the experience is going to leave a mark. It certainly has. To invoke my friend Frank's self-assessment: "I'm in pretty good shape for the shape I'm in." Nevertheless, I am hardly 'normal. After nearly 15 years of cancer treatment, I'm not exactly a shell of my former self, but neither am I fit as a fiddle. As such, I'm always grasping at anything that can lighten the emotional load of being a cancer patient in treatment. And Jim's suggestion about grading my health on a curve resonated. Compared to non-cancer/non-serious health survivors? "Damn straight" I should.

A "terminal" diagnosis. A "13 month to two years" prognosis. An apparent mistake/misdiagnosis which caused my oncologist to treat me for non-small cell lung cancer, stage IV (non-curable) when the revisionist culprit was slow-moving papillary thyroid cancer, stage IV (curable). But that's a reality, a what-if scenario that given my life now, I can't (to quote the late Don Imus) get "torqued" off about. I must leave it in the past and be grateful for the present/future. A 'present/future' that was not at all guaranteed to me when Team Lourie first met my oncologist and heard my original diagnosis.

And to live in the present, I can't revisit the past. I must accept my circumstances which also means, I must accept the fact that I'll never be normal again - compared to my fellow man, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's sort of like some sports (ski racing, horse racing and/or track and field) where adjustments are made to the starting point or time or weight to make the competition fair for all the participants. Not that I feel as if I'm in a race/constant competition with my fellow man, but I do feel, I am due some accommodations: "This is as fast as I can walk." "Give me a sec., I can't get up that quickly." "Sorry. I'm tired. I need to go lie down." And so many more. Despite this reality, I want to be treated as normally as possible. However, practically speaking, I can't be treated like everyone else. I need to be treated like me: a 15-year cancer survivor still undergoing treatment." In summary, who am I kidding? I haven't been normal for years. 'Normal' left the building in early 2009.

Not that I'm ever meant to feel bad because of my deficits or lack of mobility (bending over/tying my shoelaces is torture) but when you're slowing the group down, it's obvious who's the culprit. Not that I can do much about what ails me, I can live with it. I've been living with it/them for almost 15 years. It seems more difficult for other people though. I must modify expectations for myself, and others must do the same. I'm happy to be involved and I promise I won't play the cancer card (the ultimate Get-out-of-jail-free card/excuse for not doing a million things). Nevertheless, just because I don't talk too much about what it's like having cancer, possibly being misdiagnosed, and likely dying before my time doesn't mean I'm not preoccupied with it. It just means I'm comfortable with it. And the sooner others are as comfortable with it as I am, the sooner the positive vibrations I'll receive in kind will help get me to the finish line with an attitude with which I can be proud.

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



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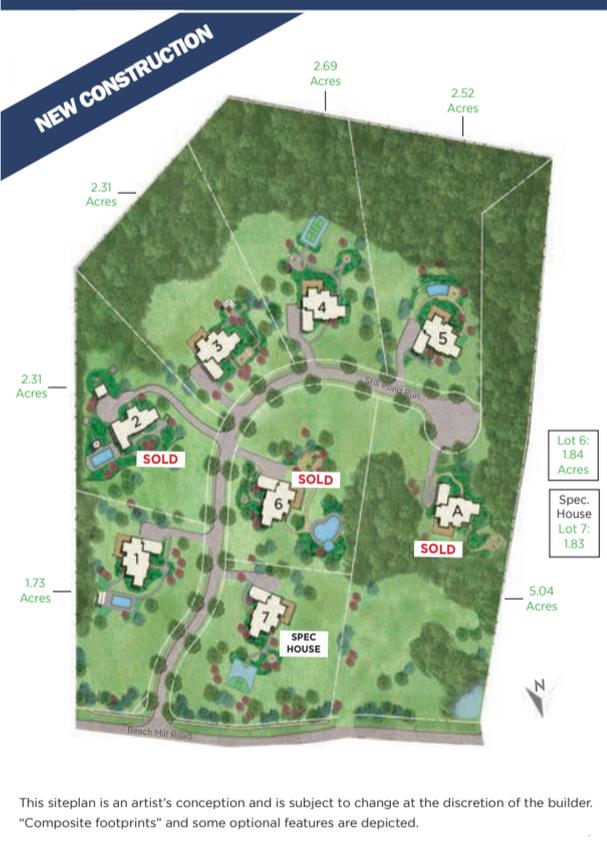


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