

Potomac ALMANAC

Sharing The Boulevard

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Beware Holiday Scammers

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Temporary barriers were put in place on the south side of MacArthur Boulevard between Anglers Inn and Brickyard Road in late November. The barriers separate bicyclists and pedestrians from traffic and prevent parking along that side of MacArthur.

REAL ESTATE SALES, 2 ❖ KENNY LOURIE, PAGE 7

PHOTO BY PEGGY MCEWAN

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6 13728 Canal Vista Court
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3 10519 Rivers Bend Lane
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1	11605 LUVIE CT.....	6... 6...1	POTOMAC	\$1,775,000	Detached	0.84	20854	MERRY GO ROUND FARM	10/02/20
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7	12303 GLEN RD.....	6... 5...1	POTOMAC	\$1,500,000	Detached	2.51	20854	GREENBRIAR ESTATES	10/23/20
8	10409 SHEPHERDS CROOK CT	5... 4...1	POTOMAC	\$1,500,000	Detached	0.94	20854	POTOMAC OUTSIDE	10/28/20

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Sharing MacArthur

As more people flock to the C&O Canal National Historic Park during the pandemic, some vehicle/bicycle conflicts have had serious consequences.

BY PEGGY MCEWAN
POTOMAC ALMANAC

Residents of the area of MacArthur Boulevard near Old Angler's Inn have long been subject to traffic congestion, illegal parking and sharing the road with numerous bicyclists, all caused by enthusiastic visitors to the nearby C&O Canal.

Neighbors have united to call attention to the problems and to seek county help for solutions.

"The illegal parking on MacArthur is a huge issue that has been going on for years. There doesn't seem to be the will on the part of the government to enforce the 'no parking.' Unless that is dealt with, all attempts for enhancement will be for naught," one neighbor wrote on the macarthurbldvgooglegroups page.

Another expanded on the problem: "I think there are two major issues for seeking assistance from MCDOT:

"1. Traffic calming measures and shared use on MacArthur

"2. Residential parking impact

"Both issues existed prior to the pandemic but have been exacerbated by the large influx of visitors to/through the area. I believe there have been two crashes near Old Angler's between a cyclist and driver since July, one fatal."

The concerned residents met with representatives for Montgomery County Department of Transportation via Zoom on Dec. 8.

Twenty-five people logged on to the meeting hosted by Emily Troutman, the organizer.

"We want to talk about the section of road from the intersection of MacArthur [Blvd.] and Falls [Road] to Clara Barton [Parkway]," she said. "I was hoping we would have an update on temporary separated lanes."

Vincent Ho, Angel Chang and Mark Terry represented Montgomery County Department of Transportation with good news about implementation of the temporary solution.

"In the past week or so, on the south side of MacArthur Boulevard, flex posts were erected on MacArthur [from Anglers Inn] to Brickyard Road," Ho said.

Ho said they had received a number of complaints about the illegal parking on the south side of

MACARTHUR BOULEVARD BIKEWAY IMPROVEMENTS – SEGMENT 1 FROM OLD ANGLER'S INN TO EGGERT DRIVE, PROJECT PURPOSE:

- ❖ Upgrade the existing shared use path to current standards
- ❖ Promote pedestrian and bicycle usage along the corridor
 - * Enhance safety for all users along MacArthur Boulevard
- ❖ Improve safety of bicycling on MacArthur Boulevard to better serve the bicyclists of all ages and abilities

MacArthur. The temporary barriers will block that.

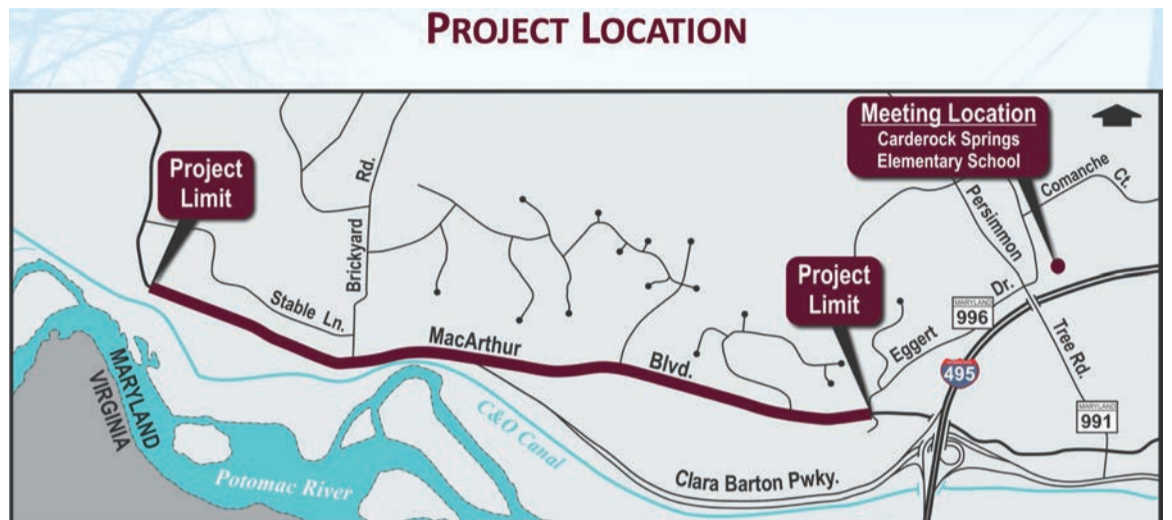
When asked why police do not ticket the many cars parked along the road especially on weekends, Ho said he could not speak for the police but thought it was a matter of lack of resources.

"It's an endless task to [give tickets]," he said.

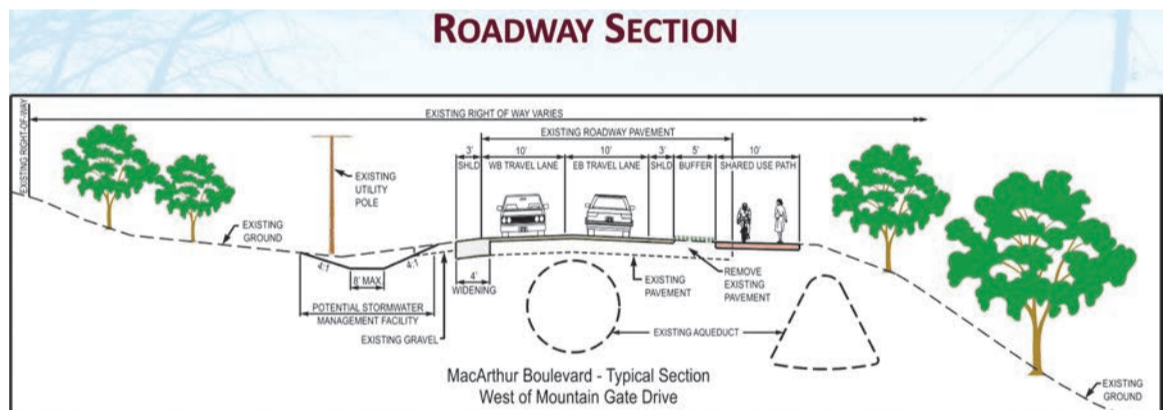
The new barriers will separate automobile traffic from the shoulder of the road and give walkers and cyclists protected lanes, Ho said.

Cheng is project manager for a

SEE SHARING, PAGE 6



Project location.



Typical roadway section, MacArthur Boulevard.



Temporary barriers were put in place on the south side of MacArthur Boulevard between Anglers Inn and Brickyard Road in late November. The barriers separate bicyclists and pedestrians from traffic and prevent parking along that side of MacArthur.



Some homeowners along MacArthur Boulevard between Anglers Inn and Brickyard Road had put up their own no parking signs.

PHOTOS BY PEGGY MCEWAN

Protecting Trees in Potomac

Trees are front line workers to clean our water.

BY PEGGY MCEWAN
POTOMAC ALMANAC

Spurred on by two recent cases of unlawful tree cutting on private property in Potomac, the West Montgomery County Citizens Association invited representatives from Montgomery County Planning Department to speak at its December meeting.

Stephen Peck, Senior Planner and Forest Conservation Inspector, and Kristin Taddei, Forest Conservation Planner Coordinator, joined the meeting via Zoom to share, “a fact-filled discussion of trees and forests – how to protect what we have and how to increase them,” as the meeting was billed in the WMCCA December newsletter.

Following the meeting, WMCCA President Ken Bawer gave two examples of recent incidents of tree cutting leading to investigation and, in one case, a \$1,000 fine.

The first was on a vacant lot on Valley Drive.

“The vacant lot was on the market and sat for quite a while,” Bawer said. “Then they [basically] clear cut the lot.”

Speculation, Bawer said was that the owner hoped a potential



buyer would be more interested if they could envision a house on the lot.

Neighbors called Peck who visited the site and found that there was a violation of a tree cutting ordinance. In this case, it also turned out that there were two small streams on the property for which there are more protective

ordinances. In addition to the fine, the owner is required to have a wetlands survey done.

The second incident, on S. Glen Road, was also reported by a neighbor who was alerted by the sound of chainsaws. Again, Peck investigated and found the property owner in violation for cutting trees in a forest conservation ease-

ment.

Conservation easements protect the water supply, Peck said. They also preserve forest communities or a collection of plants. They can protect specimen trees and specific small landscape areas.

Peck also offered suggestions for things that should be done in a conservation area. Among them

were planting native trees, honoring standing dead trees, respecting wildlife, and managing invasive plants.

Taddei, who coordinates Reforest Montgomery, discussed forest statute amendments pending before the Montgomery County Council.

Among other things she said, her group tracks forest removal and works with the State of Maryland to uphold the standards of the Maryland Forest Conservation Act of 1991.

“Montgomery County opted to create our own law which must follow the state but can be stronger,” she said.

“We do our best to plant trees in [nearby watersheds],” she said.

Taddei answered questions about Forest Banks, a method of substituting trees in one area by planting them in another and said residents can conserve trees by caring for those on their own property and encouraging neighbors to do the same.

On its website WMCCA states, “...The look and feel of Potomac today is no accident. Much of what we hold dear is due to the vigilance of volunteers working to preserve what is best here – a community that values our history, the environment, and our role as “Green Wedge” in the overall vision of county planners.”

The December meeting shows that WMCCA is doing its part to maintain that Green Wedge.



Correction

The Dec. 9, 2020 story on the dedication of Cabin John Park Volunteer Fire Department’s new fire truck mistakenly reported that former Fire Chief James P. Seavey retired in 2017. Seavey stepped aside as chief in 2017 but remained an active member of the department until his death the following year.

Also noted by CJPVFD communications director Harry Fones was the apparent discrepancy in the story on the history of the wetting down ceremony for new fire trucks. Fire Chief Corrine Piccardi explained the tradition of blessing the horse with holy water, while Fones’ explanation referred to the wetting down of the new engine.

BULLETIN BOARD

Submit civic/community announcements at ConnectionNewspapers.com/Calendar. Photos and artwork welcome. Deadline is Thursday at noon, at least two weeks before event.

SUNDAY/DEC. 20

An Evening of Readings and Carols. 5 p.m. Live-streaming from Bethesda. Celebrate the holiday festivities with The Thirteen, as they sing carols from King’s College’s trove of music for their Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. Paired with poetry on the Christmas story by acclaimed poets including Maya Angelou and Margaret Gooding, this concert is sure to delight and excite audiences of all ages.

Subscriptions may be purchased at <https://thethirteenchoir.org/concerts>.

NOW THRU DEC. 23

Sandy Spring Museum’s Fine Arts & Crafts Holiday Gift Show. Monday, 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.; Wednesday 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.; Friday 10 a.m. – 8 p.m.; Sunday 12 p.m. – 4 p.m. At 17901 Bentley Road, Sandy Spring. The annual Fine Arts & Crafts Holiday Gift Show features one-of-a-kind gifts handmade by local artists including jewelry, quilts, pottery, and other fine arts and crafts. The museum’s resident artists will offer their newest creations ranging

from glossy enamel work and mixed media collage to a variety of hand-forged jewelry and unique hand-built ceramics. In addition, local artists from the community will have hand-crafted items for sale. A percentage of sales supports SSM’s community generated programming. Visit www.sandyspringmuseum.org/giftshow.

NEW RESTRICTIONS DUE TO COVID-19

Montgomery County Executive Marc Elrich announced further safety restrictions in order to slow the dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases in the County and throughout the Washington region. The restrictions began on Tuesday, Dec. 15. The new Executive Order 139-20 will restrict restaurant service to outdoor dining. Carry-out, delivery and drive-through service will be allowed to continue. The order also limits indoor sports gatherings to a maximum of 10 people total. (Outdoor dining will be prohibited between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., per an existing Executive Order from Maryland Governor Larry Hogan.) The maximum capacity for retail establishments has been changed to one person per 200 square feet of retail space—not to exceed a maximum of 150 persons.

SEE BULLETIN, PAGE 6

Office of Consumer Protection Warns of Charity Scammers

The holiday season sees an increase in charitable donation drives. It also sees an increase in scammers pretending to be charities. This year, the Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection advises residents to follow warnings issued by the Maryland Secretary of State and the State Attorney General that the COVID-19 health crisis is adding an extra layer of complexity.

As the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) noted, because of COVID-19, many (if not most reputable) charitable organizations are faced with greater demand for their services this year, but have received less in donations as people have less to give.

Charities — and scammers — are focusing their efforts on donations toward coronavirus-related response programs, such as aid to the unemployed, families of those ill with COVID-19 or toward care packages to thank healthcare workers. It is important for residents to make sure that donations will be used wisely and well.

Charity fraud schemes either seek money for non-existent nonprofits or take money for organizations that do little or no work, siphoning donations to the charity's creator. Whether donating at the cash register, responding to unsolicited inquiries (through email, social media, crowdfunding, calls or mail) or donating in the spirit of National Giving Month, the Office of Consumer Protection wants residents to reach out for more information on whether a charity is legitimate before they reach for their wallets.

There are some regular tricks and scripts that scammers use. A resident may receive a mailer thanking them for a donation or pledge that they never made. The resident may feel obligated to return the pledge card with a donation. Criminals can manipulate the phone number a resident sees on caller ID to make a call look like it is from a local area code if the scammer is pitching itself as a local charity, trying to make the resident feel more comfortable about accepting the call and listening to a pitch. Some scammers use the names of legitimate organizations or names similar to reputable organizations. Scammers also make many vague and sentimental claims and leave the resident to fill in the blanks on forms about how their donation will be used. Residents then assume that the donation they will make will address those situations.

Scammers may also try to entice a resident into making a donation by claiming that the donation will be tax deductible, but for many taxpayers, that is not the case. And a payment to a bogus charity is never tax deductible.

Montgomery County's Office of Consumer Protection has recently investigated two types of charity scams.

After a complaint regarding donation boxes on counters at local retailers, OCP discovered a company that made Lucite boxes and sold route information to donation hustlers. The company also provided scripts on how to advertise as a charity and escape prosecution for false advertising. The schemes often claim to support charities that help find missing children and pets or say the funds will go toward research on cancer and other disease. Consumers see the boxes near the cash registers at restaurants, nail salons and other local shops and believe the endeavors had been vetted by the retailer. They drop in loose change (sometimes in exchange for candy of dubious quality or age). The Office of Consumer Protection engaged in outreach to business owners to warn that their goodwill was being misused and worked with the local disseminator of the boxes to have its boxes removed.

The Office of Consumer Protection also investigated a complaint from a local volunteer firefighter and uncovered a scam political action committee (Heroes United PAC) that claimed to be collecting charitable donations on behalf of "Volunteer Firefighters Association." The PAC reported to the Federal Election Commission that it collected \$4.6 million nationwide in 2018. It used telemarketing vendors, caller ID spoofing and three local mail drops to mislead consumers into thinking that their donations would be used locally for volunteer firefighters. Instead, more than 90 percent of the donations were retained by third-party vendors and less than 10 percent were used for so-called "political action." Office of Consumer Protection entered into a settlement agreement for refunds to be offered to County residents who made donations to the Heroes United PAC.

The following tips can help residents avoid these schemes:

Check with the Maryland Secretary of State's Office at 410-974-5521 or <https://sos.maryland.gov/Charity> to be sure the charity is registered.

Give to established charities or groups whose work you know and trust.

Use trusted research sites like Charity Navigator, Guidestar, Charity Watch to get backgrounds on the charity, its financing and use of funds. In addition, search its name plus "complaint," "review," "rating" or "scam."

SEE CHARITY SCAMMERS, PAGE 6

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Why Is the 'Anglers Inn' Parking Lot Access So Popular?

The congested parking along MacArthur Boulevard indicates the popularity of the Anglers Inn access to the C&O Canal and the Potomac River. Why is it so popular? Why is this particular access creating so much congestion? Let me approach it from the paddler's point of view.

Flatwater paddlers, including sea kayakers, have access to the watered C&O Canal which widens to the lake-like widewater one half mile upstream of the improved canal put-in.

Whitewater paddlers, after carrying 300 yards from the lower parking lot to the river, have two choices: First they can paddle upstream against the current and return with the current taking out at the same put-in beach. Although the walk up the hill is arduous, the paddler returns to the same parking lot. There is no need to move the car. What are the advantages of upstream attaining? Three quarters of a mile upstream, just out of sight from the put-in, are Difficult Run Rapids. This broad expanse of novice/intermediate whitewater offers a perfect practice area plus the physical workout of paddling against the current. Upon attaining



Barbara Brown

Difficult Run rapids, the boater enters the lower Mather Gorge. After a mile of relatively easy water, the rapids called Wet Bottom Chute (opposite the rock climbers) offers the next hindrance. More advanced water is upstream. Rocky Island Waves at perfect levels offer endless surfing. Surfing a kayak requires similar skills to surfing in the ocean except that the river waves are stationary. Above Rocky Island, and Yellow Falls, they can take out at Carderock (a steep hill

Turn" rapid and on up to the base of Great Falls. Less than 1 percent of paddlers have the skills and courage to attempt Great Falls.

Choice #2: from the put-in beach below Anglers Inn, paddle downstream. Downstream paddlers usually run a shuttle. They drive to the takeout, and bring back one car with all the drivers which frees parking spaces. After paddling two named rapids, Offutt Island, and Yellow Falls, they can take out at Carderock (a steep hill

or continue to Lock 10, getting to run one more bouncy rapid, Stubblefield. The downstream rapids are easier than Mather Gorge and attract novice and intermediate level paddlers, especially in the summer. As a result of all these choices, the river attracts all levels of paddlers from novice to advanced to expert. If the Potomac is liquid, it is being used by paddlers all times of the year.

This area also attracts other recreationists anxious to enjoy the National Park. I have seen fishermen walk by carrying 25 pound catfish! The towpath passes by incredibly scenic Widewater and is a two mile walk or bicycle ride to Great Falls.

The exit to the Billy Goat Trail A is only a half mile upstream. The put-in beach offers an attractive place not only to fish, but to also throw stones, play with children and dogs, or even picnic right at the river's edge.

The Potomac River is very level intensive. At higher water levels, it becomes more and more demanding for the advanced paddler.

The area is drop dead gorgeous. The beauty of Mather Gorge is easily compared to famous western canyons.

The only other access point to

this section of the River is Great Falls itself. On the Maryland side, it requires a half mile carry around Great Falls. On the Virginia side, one descends vertically down the bluff below the Falls to Fisherman's Eddy. To put in near Great Falls requires the skills to handle the more difficult rapids.

The Anglers Inn/Difficult Run put-in is VITAL not only to the recreational paddlers but also to instruction. People wanting to learn - whether from Club classes, professional classes -- kayak, canoe, sea kayak or stand-up paddle board — are also crowding the parking lot in large numbers.

It is probably a logical argument that river usage alone would use all the available parking spaces. Add that to the other users of the Park and we have this continuing weekend crisis of people ignoring the "no parking signs" to enjoy their National Park.

Anglers Inn is not a "choice" but a unique access point to the river. No matter how you discourage parking, you won't discourage use. We need to fix this parking crisis before tragedies occur.

Barbara Brown
Safety Chairman,

Canoe Cruisers Association

Sharing MacArthur

FROM PAGE 3

long-term project to redesign the roadway, a project that began as a feasibility study in 2004 and is now under final design status. Funding for the project, however, is a long way off.

It will not come up for funding for another year and then will be in the FY 21-27 cycle, Cheng said.

Another problem is that MacArthur Blvd is an historic roadway which means, she said, "we are pretty much limited with what we can do there."

One person asked if there was more that could be done to address the parking problem when the lots near Anglers Inn fill up and spill over to neighboring side streets.

On Dec. 2 Troutman wrote, "I did an informal count of cars this weekend. There were 104 parked illegally on MacArthur Blvd between Stable and Brickyard. 71 cars parked mostly legally on Stable Lane. 14 parked mostly legally on Whiterim Drive. I say "mostly" because, as you know, many park too close to the curb/stop signs."

Joanne Irving offered this suggestion:

"My husband and I went to Carderock this past Sunday afternoon, a gorgeous day with MacArthur completely parked in.

There was more than ample parking in the three parking lots [at Carderock] with easy access to the Billy Goat Trail and the Canal towpath. I suspect that most people don't realize that free parking is available so close by, but given that it exists, I have little sympathy for those parking illegally. Perhaps signs directing people to that part of the park would help."

Chang agreed.

"Carderock parking," she said, "We need to share the information."

The MCDOT representatives seemed willing to continue to study safety issues brought up by the residents. Issues like improving marked crosswalks, doing a traffic count and a cyclist count, though Ho said he thought that would be best done in the spring when the weather is nicer.

"Being in the safety business, I wish I could make everything safe everywhere," Terry said. "It's baby steps."

To join the conversation email macarthurbldv@googlegroups.com.

For more on county plans, see https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/dot-dte/Resources/Files/MacArthurSeg1/MacArthurBlvd_public%20workshop.pdf

Office of Consumer Protection Warns of Charity Scammers

FROM PAGE 5

Be wary of new organizations that claim to aid victims of recent high-profile disasters.

Never agree to give money over the phone or to a door-to-door solicitor. Ask for written information about the charity and read it before deciding on whether to donate.

Give using a check or credit card. If a charity or organization asks for a donation through cash, gift card, virtual currency or wire transfer, it is probably a scam. Review checking and credit card state-

ments closely to make sure you were only charged the amount you agreed to donate – and that you are not signed up to make a recurring donation.

Practice good cyber hygiene: Do not click links or open email attachments from someone who is unknown. Manually type out links instead of clicking on them. Do not provide personal information in response to an email, robocall or robotext. Check the website's address—most legitimate charity organization websites use ".org" rather than ".com." Be skeptical of social media posts

BULLETIN BOARD

FROM PAGE 4

LIBRARIES OFFER ONLINE WORKSHOPS

Montgomery County Public Libraries is offering free online workshops and one-on-one sessions geared toward assisting job seekers throughout December. All workshops are free and offered virtually. An internet connection and a device (such as a smartphone, tablet or computer) is required for participation.

Wednesday Dec 16; 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. How to Apply for Jobs with Montgomery County Government -- Find out everything you need to know about applying for jobs with Montgomery County Government.

Tues/Thurs Dec 15/Dec 17; 5:45 to 7:45 p.m. LinkedIn Boot Camp

(Part I / Part II) -- This popular two-session/two-day workshop focuses on both the mechanics & strategy of using LinkedIn as a tool to conduct a successful job search Monday, Dec 21 and Monday, Dec 28 session -- H.I.R.E. (Helping Individuals Reach Employment). Meet confidentially with a career counselor for advice and assistance with your job search.

HELP YOUR COMMUNITY THROUGH THE 2020 HOLIDAY DRIVE

For more than four-and-a-half decades, Rockville's Holiday Drive has helped the community's neediest members. This year, with the need greater than ever, the drive will continue, albeit with minor

changes to keep everyone healthy and safe.

This year, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the city is requesting cash donations only that will be used to purchase gift cards for families in need. Here's how you can help:

Make an easy, online donation. Send a tax-deductible contribution check. Checks can be made payable to Rockville Holiday Drive Fund, and sent to Rockville Holiday Drive Fund, 111 Maryland Ave., Rockville, MD 20850.

In December, the Holiday Drive will be seeking sponsors to buy gifts for families in need. For more information, contact Allison Hoy, volunteer coordinator, at 240-314-8304 or ahoy@rockvillemd.gov.

A Holiday Season Reimagined

The pandemic leads to altered and new traditions.

BY MARILYN CAMPBELL
THE ALMANAC

When schools adjourn for winter break the anticipation of a COVID-19 pandemic holiday season will become a reality. As festive gatherings are altered or cancelled to help prevent the spread of the disease, many families are faced with the loss of traditions and the challenge of getting into the holiday spirit.

"This year many families will be coping with not being able to spend the holidays with extended family or to travel in the way they usually would," said Stacie B. Isenberg, Psy.D. "Although some may appreciate a break from obligation many may be grieving the loss of time spent with loved ones, as well as missing their usual routines and traditions."

Creating new holiday rituals or adjusting old ones can help minimize feelings of longing and melancholy. "Families can work toward recapturing some of these traditions at home," said Isenberg. "Perhaps other traditions can continue in a modified way such as baking with Grandma in two separate kitchens connected by a video call during the activity. Maybe kids can do Mad Libs or other games with their cousins over a call."

For those accustomed to traveling during the holidays, a substitute might be driving, walking or biking around the neighborhood to look at Christmas lights. A hike through Rock Creek or Great Falls Park might appeal to families with children from toddlers to teens.

"To make hikes or walks engaging, adults or older children can think ahead about what they may see on the hike or walk," said Sonia Pruneda-Hernandez, College-Wide Chair, Early Childhood Education Program at Montgomery College. "Ask children to look for birds. 'How many birds can we find or hear during our hike or walk?' The next day, focus on animals. 'Can any animals be spotted during the hike?' The following day, collect leaves, have the children take a bag with them and find different leaves then return home and help the child identify the leaves and the type of trees each fell from."

In fact, time spent outdoors can improve overall mood if holiday weeks off from school turn sometimes glum or dull. "Physical exercise gives energy ... and helps regulate sleep," said Jerome Short.

When the weather or circumstances make venturing outside difficult, indoor activities like scavenger hunts can preserve holiday cheer without health and safety risks.

"Hide items throughout the house and give the children clues to find items," said Pruneda-Hernandez. "Items can be simple objects that are in the home like toothpaste, with clues like 'What do you use to brush your teeth?' You can do a different scavenger hunt every day.



PHOTO BY MARILYN CAMPBELL

Activities like biking or hiking can replace traditional holiday traditions.



PHOTO BY CHAD CONEWAY

Alexandria-based artist Kathryn Coneway is using the creative process to redefine how holidays are celebrated.

"Some fun ideas are reading stories together and then acting them out, creating a scene from the book in a shoebox or playing charades with topics related to the story," said Patty Howick, education instructor at Marymount University. "Writing a letter to a friend, asking an older relative to share a memorable moment in history or taking a walk to observe the changes in nature are some ways to stay connected. Be creative and have fun together."

Trade the hustle and bustle that often accompany the holidays for projects that offer opportunities for reflection and contemplation. "Many of us are used to school concerts or holiday parties and will be missing them this year," said Kathryn Coneway, an Alexandria, Virginia based artist, author, and educator. <https://www.kathrynconeway.com> "This year, perhaps you can take a walk or spend time in nature, take photographs and share them with family or friends."

One idea that Coneway is trying with friends this holiday season is using daily drawing prompts inspired by artist Anna Brones <https://annabrones.com/>. The group uses one short phrase offered by Brones each day to awaken creativity which they use to create a sketch over the course of a day.

"The prompts offer a starting point for a drawing a day," Coneway said. "Families could do them at home together or share with family and friends at a distance and then share through texting or posting photos."

Creativity can help children and adults stay connected to family and customs, suggests Isenberg. "This unusual time is also an opportunity to create new traditions or just to have new experiences," she said.

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Three Strikes ...



By KENNETH B. LOURIE

... and now I'm out - of the Handel's Messiah sweepstakes. The sweepstakes being to write in 50 words or less "Why do you love Handel's Messiah?" All I can answer is one word: Hallelujah, and I don't mean the chorus either. 'Three strikes' refers to the number of times I have now been subjected to this "holiday tradition." The first time I was an attendee - with thousands of other Washingtonians. In a jam-packed National Cathedral one Christmas season. The second time, while visiting my father-in-law in Manhattan during Christmas, he suggested going to Carnegie Hall to listen to Christmas music (not specified). I jumped at the chance to go to Carnegie Hall. Little did I know until I was handed the program that the Christmas music that night was Handel's Messiah. And most recently, I was sitting on my couch at home channel-surfing when I came across a "Handel's Messiah" rebroadcast from some famous venue in Salzburg, Austria featuring a lead singer, a mestro, an orchestra and choir, all of whom shall remain nameless to protect their stature. Whatever criticism/less than glowing reaction to hearing "Handel's Messiah" a third time should be a reflection on me, not the performers.

I freely admit my cultural deficiencies. I am not inclined to tolerate - too well, these intrusions into my rather mundane world. I have never been to the ballet, rarely have seen a play/musical, never attended a concert

featuring the Four Italian Seniors (as but one example) and am not so inclined to listen to the classics on WETA 90.9 FM in Washington, DC either, especially since Dennis Owens retired in 2005. In my defense, I am a card-carrying (Three Stooges Fan Club) member of the hoi polloi. And to be perfectly honest, I don't feel as if I'm any the worse for the wear of it - or the why. However, you all might disagree.

I am not a complete dunce though. I can appreciate the talent and discipline it takes to master the skills necessary to sing, dance, play an instrument, memorize pages of dialogue, et cetera. The closest I've ever got to enjoying this kind of entertainment occurred at Wolf Trap during the summer concert season. Twice, if I'm not mistaken, I attended the yearly July 4th concert when the National Symphony orchestra performed Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture with 105mm cannons. It's not exactly equivalent to the old Quaker Oats puffed wheat commercials of my youth but it was entertaining nonetheless. However, having now attended a few times, I'm not so inclined to attend again. And believe it or not, I don't feel at all diminished having said so.

I wouldn't say that the three experiences I've had listening to "Handel's Messiah" has thoroughly convinced me that such cultural forays never be considered again. On the contrary, there is a part of me, a small part, that feels as if I'm missing something. Still, I don't feel incomplete, uneducated or clueless somehow. Instead, I feel like one of the bad guys Clint Eastwood gave an advisory to in one of his "Dirty Harry" movies: "punk. A man has got to know his limitations." And I feel as if I know mine. Perhaps there are cultural areas where I could co-exist but I cannot co-exist with "Handel's Messiah." As I titled an earlier column I wrote for Connection Newspapers while actually attending/hearing "Handel's Messiah" - for the first time, at the National Cathedral one holiday season: "Can't Handel It Anymore."

Two more listens since the original, and I can say with certainty, I still can't "Handel" it. I thought that when I realized what I was listening to at home: "Handel's Messiah," having the freedom to get up, move around et cetera, might possibly enhance the experience. Well, it worked. I didn't feel the least bit trapped so after listening for 10 minutes or so, I got up, turned off the television, left the room, came into my home-office and wrote this column. Apparently, I found a way to "Handel" it after all: stop listening and start writing. I feel better already.

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

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