

# Call it a night



## Meet the people whose work days begin in the wee hours

Photos by Eze Amos  
Words by Erin O'Hare

Charlottesville's never been known for its nightlife. Sure, there are some late-night restaurant-bars, and concerts, dance parties, and other entertainment events that go past midnight. Those who venture out in the dead of night, onto Charlottesville's open streets and empty sidewalks, past closed businesses and dark houses, might say that the city is, well, dead.

But that's not the case at all. Plenty of people are awake and active, particularly those working the night shift.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 15 million people in America work regular or sporadic night shifts—that's about 5 percent of the country's total population. For some, it's a choice (they prefer to work at a time when they'll mostly be left alone), for others, a necessity: A number of workers in this story have two, or even three, jobs. In some fields, night shifts do pay slightly more than day shifts.

Here in the Charlottesville area, many people work all night to make life easier, better, or safer, for others. Their labor often goes unnoticed and unappreciated, though, because it's done when most people literally have their eyes shut.

Over several recent nights, photographer Eze Amos and I took a peek at some of the things that go on in town long after the sun goes down. It's a chance to get to know some of the people who do that work and see, just briefly, what their lives are like.





## WAFFLE HOUSE

When you work a Waffle House night shift, you're going to have one of two kinds of evenings, says Collin Clark.

It'll be dead, the kind of night where you hope someone comes in to the 24-hour breakfast spot so you can make an order of hash browns and chat (and get a tip), rather than fall asleep.

Or, it'll be slammed, full of folks (some of them drunk) ordering Texas bacon cheese steak melts, steak and eggs, or waffles with bacon and hash browns. Those nights, perhaps after a sold-out concert at the Sprint Pavilion, "you have to control the store, or the store controls you."

Waffle Houses are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, under all conditions—they even have a "power out" menu. The chain's restaurants are so reliable that the Federal Emergency Management Agency uses something called "The Waffle House Index" to determine the severity of a storm and gauge what sort of relief to send. If the local Waffle House is closed, it's dire straits.

Clark has worked as a local solutions rep at Charlottesville-area Waffle Houses for about six months, picking up shifts dropped by other workers. In that time, he's learned that it's "the entertainment value of the people" that makes the job, particularly the night shift, pretty great—even when he has to scrape all the pork grease off the grill a few times a night in order to accommodate vegan diners.

He likes chatting with folks who sit solo at the counter, and teasing the regulars who change up their orders all of a sudden (Clark usually starts prepping regular customers' orders for the grill as soon as he sees their cars pull into the lot). He especially loves hearing folks butt in on strangers' conversations from a few booths over, no matter the topic.

"It's never a Waffle House," Clark's colleague, Garrett Knuckols, chimes in from behind the counter. As a manager once told him, "It's a Waffle Home."



## KROGER

The Kroger at Barracks Road Shopping Center is open 24 hours a day. And while the store's not exactly humming with customers overnight, it is bustling with hustling employees.

Between the hours of 10:30pm and 7am, Kroger's overnight staff restocks bags of potato chips and boxes of Pocky, cans of beans and bottles of beer, piles of apples and containers of almonds. They update price and sale tags, clean up the back room and storage areas, create end displays, unload nightly truck deliveries, and make sure in-store machinery runs

smoothly. And, of course, they assist customers (like a Domino's delivery guy) who shop after their own late shifts.

Mike Page has worked the night shift at Kroger for about four years now, and he likes it quite a bit. It pays better, he says, and having fewer customers in the store gives the staff a chance to build a really unique camaraderie. "We play when it's time to play, and work when it's time to work."

Page is a shift lead, but he still straps scuffed knee pads over his work pants to push pallets and stock shelves alongside his colleagues. He manages truck deliveries, too, and on this particular night,

he's facing an unprecedented situation: both trucks (it's a two-truck delivery night) are stuck in the shopping center parking lot, a mere few hundred feet from the Kroger delivery berth.

For safety reasons, the Department of Transportation limits freight and truck drivers to 11 hours of driving time before a mandatory 10-hour break. Page has had delivery trucks stop a few towns, or even just a few miles away, but never this close to the store; the trucks cannot legally drive the final few feet until the following morning. It might mean a longer in-store shift for Page and some other folks, but Page says he understands. They'll make it work.





## NEWSPAPER DELIVERY

Every Tuesday night, Dale Anderson waits for the call.

It comes late, usually around midnight, the indication that a few thousand copies of C-VILLE Weekly are hot off the press and ready for him to deliver. For the next 12 hours, Anderson will drive all over Charlottesville, putting weekly papers into blue boxes and designated racks, picking up any left over from the previous week's delivery, and seeing which of C-VILLE's magazines, such as Knife & Fork, Abode, and Unbound, need to be restocked at which locations. Then he stocks those, too.

He has to be purposeful about where he delivers, when: While most newspaper boxes are in public places, a number of racks are located inside buildings and businesses that aren't open until the morning.

In addition to distributing for C-VILLE, Anderson delivers Crime Times and the Blue Ridge Buck Saver. He also owns and drives a taxi.

"It doesn't hurt me none," Anderson says about working night shifts that often extend into the morning, or even afternoon. "I'm only a four-hour sleeper anyway. I'm just used to it! My body likes four hours of sleep." Maybe, he wonders out loud, because he and his wife have seven children, so he's "used

to being up and down" at all hours of the day and night.

Anderson started delivering more than 20 years ago, "back when newspapers were king" and daily deliveries kicked off somewhere around 2am. He worked for The Washington Post, and then The Hook (which merged with C-VILLE in 2011); now, he's delivered for C-VILLE for so long that he knows every route by heart and is often the one to pick up other drivers' routes when they're on vacation or call out sick.

"The thing about working late at night is that it's much easier. You don't have people in your face, you don't have traffic," he says, laughing. "Charlottesville's not a super happening town in the middle of the night."





## OMNI HOTEL/UVA HOSPITAL

Joseph Sesay arrived in Charlottesville in August 2004. One month later, he started working as a bellman at the Omni Charlottesville Hotel, and he's been there ever since, working the second shift, 2:30 to 11pm. He escorts guests to their rooms, gives them the rundown of amenities available at the hotel (indoor pool, outdoor pool, bar and restaurant, fitness center, etc.) and in the immediate vicinity. He makes sure guests have their luggage, enough towels, anything else they may need or want. It's not heavy work—talking with guests is mostly quite enjoyable, says Sesay, who came to Charlottesville as a refugee from Sierra Leone.

Sesay's heavy work begins after his Omni shift, when he heads directly to his second full-time job as a housekeeping team lead at the University of Virginia

hospital. He inspects all of the recently vacated rooms on floors three through eight, assessing whether they've been cleaned well and with the appropriate chemicals based on what's happened in the room. Sometimes, as is the case with labor and delivery, there's a lot to clean up—extra sheets, blood, other bodily tissues and fluids. When the morning shift takes over at 7:30, Sesay's done with room inspections, but he still has to do payroll. He gets home around 8:30am, goes to bed around 9:30, and manages to sleep for about 4 hours until he gets up to return to the Omni.

Working two full-time jobs, Sesay's got to be tired. "At times, I am," he admits. But he does it to support his family—his wife and daughter here in the States as well as his sister and her three children back in Sierra Leone; all three kids are doing spectacularly in school and in their trade programs, Sesay says, smiling.

On his precious days off, he cooks.

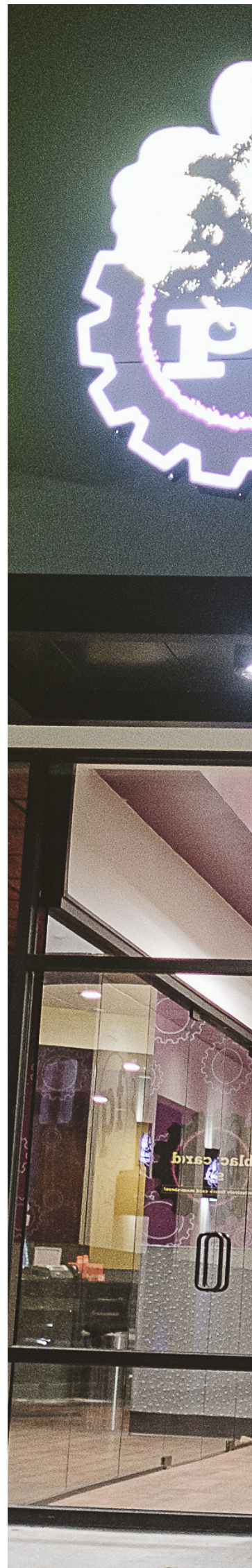
## PLANET FITNESS

Nighttime isn't terribly busy inside the 24-hour Planet Fitness gym located inside 5th Street Station, says front desk clerk Christian George, with just a handful of people coming in after their own late work shifts. Activity picks up around 3:30am, when folks start to trickle in for their pre-work morning workouts. The television is always on, as is the music, and George is always busy—when she's not greeting people who walk through the door, checking them in and tidying up the desk area, she's doing gym-related paperwork. The 10pm to 4am overnight shift works well with her schedule—it's a part-time gig for her; she also works at UVA hospital. During her shift, she often chats with Planet Fitness custodian Carl Monroe, who cleans during the overnight shift five nights a week.

"I love working in the gym because I talk a lot," says Monroe (to knowing laughter from George). He likes to chat with customers as he cleans the 90-or-so machines, plus mats, mirrors, floors, bathrooms, and locker rooms. Monroe, who's 62, worked at Gold's Gym on Hydraulic Road for years; when Gold's closed, he was worried that, at his age, he wouldn't be able to find a job, as businesses seem to prefer to hire younger workers. "How are older folks supposed to live?" he asks.

"This is one of the cleanest gyms out there," says Monroe. "We take pride in it, but we don't get the credit for it." He notes that when he's not at work, people ask where he's been.

It's true, says George. Customers want to know if he's okay...and they notice when the gym hasn't received Monroe's golden touch.











## EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS CENTER

When Lisa Fitzgerald applied to work at the Charlottesville-UVA-Albemarle County Emergency Communications Center 31 years ago, she thought she'd just be answering phones. But during her yearlong training, she realized that taking 9-1-1 calls is a way to actively help people...just without the blood and guts. Now a public safety communications supervisor, she not only works a full-time shift load, she helps train new hires for the job she's come to love.

Fitzgerald has worked days but she prefers nights, in part because night calls

tend to be more urgent. "And it's never the same night twice." A couple weeks ago, she delivered a baby over the phone. The next night, she took a call for a shooting.

Fire, police, and EMS workers are often heralded as "first responders" for being the first to arrive on the scene of an incident. But "we're answering the phone. We're really the first ones," says Fitzgerald of emergency call takers and dispatch operators. Depending on how an incident is handled over the phone—if she's able to calm down a hysterical caller and get more information to relay over the radio—it can make a big difference for when fire, EMS, and police do arrive on the scene.

Full-time ECC employees like Fitzgerald work 12-hour shifts, and it's not an easy job—each call is unique, some are very

stressful, and call takers are under a lot of pressure to respond responsibly and well. It takes a year to be fully trained, longer if the ECC is shorthanded (as it has been recently) and needs experienced workers to take calls instead of teach trainees.

There's often a personal price paid, too. Sleeping during the day can be difficult. It's noisier, and more people are apt to contact Fitzgerald via phone or email, expecting an immediate reply. "People who don't work the night shift don't understand," she says, adding that "family life suffers a bit, too," though she says her two children have come to understand her unconventional schedule. For instance, she says, "Christmas is whatever day I'm off around Christmas. But I think I'd be bored doing anything else."





## LUCKY 7

Lucky 7 is the only 24-hour food spot in downtown Charlottesville, so it's a bit of a destination. The 10pm to 7am night shift isn't slow, but it's not terribly busy, either, says Ron Jude, who's worked at the convenience store for a few weeks now. "It's something to do to keep me occupied, keep me out of the house," he says.

There's a fairly steady stream of customers and a nightly pre-midnight rush when folks come in to buy cigarettes and alcohol before sale of the latter is prohibited per state liquor laws. Things pick up again a bit after 2am, as bars let out and customers are looking for a bite to eat, or for more alcohol (when they can't buy it at that hour, says



Jude, some people try to steal it). Many of the store's nighttime customers are homeless folks or people stopping in after working their own late-night jobs.

Jude's lived in Charlottesville off and on for about 30 years, and he says that

while Charlottesville's not as "crazy" as other places he's lived, Lucky 7 customers still manage to surprise him, like a guy who recently came in flamboyantly dressed, fresh from a rave (yes, a rave... in Charlottesville).





## RED CARPET INN

Travis Hilton says his job is “pretty boring 99 percent of the time.”

The 11:30pm-7:30am front desk shift at the Red Carpet Inn on Route 29 is relatively quiet. Hilton, the night auditor, spends most of that time doing the hotel’s general accounting, though he’s occasionally summoned to check in guests (between three and eight on a regular night, upwards of a dozen on UVA basketball and football game weekends), and tote bottles of shampoo, extra towels, and rollaway beds to one of the hotel’s 115 rooms.

Hilton started working hotel night shifts when he was in high school. In his 20-plus years in the industry, he’s learned that those hotels with ballrooms, event spaces, and full-service bars and restaurants are more active at night (this isn’t the case at the Red Carpet Inn). He’s seen his share of drunken antics, and at least one room completely destroyed by cats (it required a complete reupholster). He’s seen a drug bust go down, too, but he says his stories aren’t nearly as flashy as those his boss has told about working at a hotel across the street from the Pentagon, where there were tales of car chases and briefcase switches.

## INSOMNIAC

The older Sean Tubbs gets, the more he yearns for an early bedtime. Most nights, he can get to sleep early, but he can’t seem to get the recommended eight consecutive hours.

After working as a journalist for many years, where he often had to stay up very late or wake very early to cover an event or make a deadline, Tubbs is used to running on maybe four hours of sleep a night. And while he’s no longer a journalist (he currently works as a field representative for the Piedmont Environmental Council) he says he still can’t manage to sleep more than a few hours at a time and is often awake at 3am.

At that hour, he tunes in to the industrial hum coming from the nearby UVA hospital, or the sound of the Pegasus helicopter

whirring to its landing pad. Most nights, he hears the rumble of a dump truck, or a fox screaming in the field behind his house. In the summer, he hears mockingbirds.

Tubbs knows he’s not the only insomniac in town: Through his windows, he notices a “surprising amount of people” awake, driving and walking through the neighborhood.

He prefers to wander around his house in the wee hours, “relishing” his thinking time. He resists picking up his phone to tweet about public transportation, and while he tries not to work (something he’d have done were he still reporting), he does allow himself to think about work.

“I think about what my day’s going to be, the challenges I’m going to have. It’s useful, that kind of worry.”

After a couple hours, Tubbs is sleepy enough to return to bed.

