

## THE GOOD LIFE

### 3 business owners reflect on decades of success

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON  
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — While there are many enduring businesses in the area, these three Abingdon shops have really learned how to stand out from the crowd. ♦ Being a successful entrepreneur is never an easy task, but the owners of Goodman Jewelers, Wholesale Vinyl & Aluminum Products and Highlands Ski & Outdoor Center just seem to make it look so simple to have been in business for 30 years. They look forward to what the world of business will bring them in the future. ♦ Despite the challenges of being an entrepreneur, each of these business owners says the ride has been worthwhile, and they would not hesitate to “do it all over again.”



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

A graduate gemologist, Mark Goodman is a member of the American Gem Society. ‘We’re one of the few jewelers in the region who still make jewelry,’ he said.

#### Goodman Jewelers

The teen who made a beeline to work at his father’s jewelry store in Chilhowie every day after school is celebrating 30 years operating his own jewelry business, Goodman Jewelers of Abingdon.

“It doesn’t seem possible. Thirty years have gone by much faster than I ever dreamed,” said Mark Goodman, who opened the doors to Goodman Jewelers in the Abingdon Town Center in 1988. Mark, along with his wife Michelle, has since relocated the business to the historic district of Main Street in town.

While 30 years as a business owner is impressive, the elder Goodman can boast of twice that much.

The Chilhowie location started in 1959 by his enterprising father William Goodman, who worked as an apprentice to a watchmaker before graduating from Marion Senior High School.

Jack Hudson, a Marion watchmaker, went to the shop teacher at the school and asked for recommendations of students who were good with their hands and who might want to learn a trade. Mark’s father was recommended.

And so the story begins of a family of entrepreneurs whose work has been a shining gem in

the community for decades.

The Chilhowie store is still operated by Mark’s older brother, Mikel Goodman, who will celebrate the 60th anniversary milestone next month.

The siblings have spent years learning the trade and developing skills that set them apart from many jewelry stores. A graduate gemologist, Mark is a member of the American Gem Society.

“I think you’d have to go to Knoxville or Roanoke before you find the next American Gem Society member,” he said.

In recent years, his Abingdon store has evolved into more of a design center than a place to purchase jewelry.

“We’re one of the few jewelers in the region who still make jewelry,” said the gemologist who relies on a host of high-tech machinery to create 3D designs from scratch before he turns it over to his brother in Chilhowie to cast the items.

Mark described his brother as an “old school metalsmith,” having learned from talented workers in factories and schools after World War II.

“What he learned, you don’t pick up in schools these days.”

He credits those skills for giving them an edge over other jewelry businesses in the region.

Using computer-assisted

design programs, a 3D printer and laser welders, the brothers can carve out specialty pieces of jewelry custom-made from their stores.

“Over half of our work is one-of-a-kind, custom jewelry,” said the younger jeweler. “That may mean creating a new piece of jewelry from scratch or taking a vintage piece from Grandma’s collection and transforming it into something new again.”

The design process begins when customers visit the historic home office he has labeled a boutique store of sorts. “After 27 years at the shopping center in town, we moved to Main Street to be able to focus on a slightly better product and a custom store.”

The jeweler sketches out design ideas and uses a computer to make three-dimensional drawings. Machines are capable of printing resin models in the store to ensure jewelry is made to the exact specifications.

“Engagement rings are our most popular custom pieces, followed by wedding bands,” he said. “But we have the ability to make any piece of jewelry you want.”

“We still carry a lot of merchandise for customers who want to walk in and buy a wedding band or a silver charm. We also work with gemstones that



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Karen Raines, store manager, helps Austin Norris of Mountain City, Tennessee, select a pair of Rossignol ski boots.

most people don’t know exist, such as morganites, lotus garnets, watermelon tourmalines and imperial topaz.”

Advances in technology have enabled the family of jewelers

to create custom work that may very well become heirlooms one day.

See **BUSINESS**, Page B4

## Friday night out on the Town Council

**WANDERING AROUND WASHINGTON**

Editor’s note: “Wandering Around Washington” is a regular, exclusive column from Joe Tennis highlighting the untold stories in the county, direct from the people who live and work here. Watch for him to wander into shops, restaurants and parks to bring you the gab and gossip — only in the Washington County News.

ABINGDON, Va. — They sauntered toward the stage like a cast of performers.

I saw them from my aisle chair, the five of them. And, as they passed, each offered a polite “hi” and a small wave.

Neatly dressed, they made it to their positions.

And then?



**Joe Tennis**

They checked the time. Friday night: 7:15.

This was on Main Street in Abingdon, Virginia, and you might have expected this to be the time for the curtain call at the Barter Theatre.

But that was next door. This was town hall. And this was on a Friday



JOE TENNIS/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Abingdon’s Town Council meets on a Friday — not the usual Monday.

night, of all crazy times, and not the usual first Monday of the month, when the Abingdon Town Council chose to conduct its regular meeting for January.

Friday! This is a night when you should be devouring all-you-can-eat fish.

Enjoying dinner. Listening to live music. Watching a movie. Seeing a show.

But this being January, the stage was dark next door at the Barter Theatre on Jan. 4.

The big show in town: Watching Mayor Wayne Craig and the Abingdon Town Council perform their oddly scheduled Friday night jam of municipal business.

The agenda was light.

Hardly anyone showed up.

“I appreciate your interest,” Craig told an audience of nine people just before the meeting began.

In a light tone, Craig added, “You must not have a life to come to a council meeting on a Friday evening.”



John Berry said timing was just right for his business, Wholesale Vinyl & Aluminum Products, to take off in 1988 in Abingdon.

# Business

From Page B1

## Wholesale Vinyl & Aluminum Products

John Berry said timing was just right for his business, Wholesale Vinyl & Aluminum Products, to take off in 1988 in Abingdon.

“There was a need in the area for a supplier of specialty exterior building products,” said Berry. “The closest source was in Johnson City.”

Taking a leap of faith, Berry opened the business on Feb. 1 that year, immediately after leaving a job selling home improvement on the road for Sears.

“The market for vinyl siding was just beginning to get strong in this area, and I could see the demand was getting greater. Contractors had to devote at least half of a day of work traveling to Johnson City to pick up the supplies. It was an extra cost for them,” said the business owner.

“I asked contractors I knew if they would support an Abingdon supplier, and they assured me they would.”

At age 70, Berry said his business venture turned out to be a good experience. “I’d still choose to do the same thing. I’d do it all over again.”

Berry has accumulated a 900-customer base throughout the years, selling about 10,000 squares of vinyl siding each year, which translates to around 1 million square feet of coverage.

His company trucks deliver to building supply companies that buy the products to resell.

“Our truck runs to Roanoke to Knoxville every week. A lot are mom-and-pop businesses,” said Berry.

For 30 years, he has carried Heartland vinyl siding, his mainstay product that attracts customers from 100 miles or more away.

While vinyl siding has been the best money-maker for Berry, he’s added other products along the way, such as windows, shutters, gable vents, insulation products, aluminum porch railing, aluminum fencing, cultured stone, accessories for siding and, most recently, metal roofing.

In 2001, the company began manufacturing vinyl porch and deck railing and fencing on-site at the Abingdon store.

Receiving the raw materials from a supplier in North Carolina, the local business fabricates the vinyl items, runs them through computerized machines, assembles and boxes them and ships them out.

According to Berry, his business continues to

diversify, along with the growing demands in the market.

“A lot of our products are ones we see at national shows, and we introduce them to our customers in Southwest Virginia and East Tennessee,” he said.

“We appreciate the community supporting our small, family-owned businesses all these years.

“Small business is the backbone of this country.”

## Highlands Ski & Outdoor Center

Protecting the environment while enjoying it’s natural beauty is close to the hearts of sisters Sandy Clayton and Karen Raines and their uncle John Trivett, who own and operate Highlands Ski & Outdoor Center in Abingdon.

Just a stroll through the store is like unveiling a treasure trove of adventures that await you — bicycles, skis, hiking boots and clothing.

And as avid outdoors enthusiasts, they strive to carry products that are eco-friendly.

“People are becoming more environmentally conscious these days,” said Raines, store manager.

“Companies like Patagonia are making recycled polyester from plastic soda bottles, and it was the first outdoor clothing manufacturer to turn trash into fleece.

“The company also is making clothing with organic cotton and hemp. We see hemp as being one of the next big waves in clothing and shoes,” she said.

It all started when the family loved the sport of skiing so much that they opened a ski shop in 1988 in Abingdon.

The business was first named Highlands Ski Haus when it primarily carried ski supplies, but it later became Highlands Ski & Outdoor Center as the owners gradually introduced a wide variety of outdoor clothing and equipment.

“Early on, we felt the need for a ski shop in Abingdon because every time we needed ski supplies, we had to travel to Johnson City, Kingsport and even Boone, North Carolina, to purchase them,” said Raines.

Customer demand eventually caused the owners to sell more than ski gear.

They recognized the need for an outfitter in town — a place that supplies winter clothing. “There weren’t a lot of places in the area where you could find good winter coats or gloves,” said the manager.

“We sell toboggans to farmers and goggles for them to wear on their tractors. We even began selling ski bibs to people who work in car garages

and gas stations.”

The following year after opening, the business added an outdoor department with supplies for camping and backpacking, hiking boots and tents.

“People started asking for more products. Two years later, we got into the bicycle business. The Creeper Trail had just kicked off, and people wanted supplies for riding on the trail.

From the beginning, the store has carried Trek bicycle and later incorporated the Electra brand.

“Another need we saw was people asking for bikes for special needs. We started selling Terra Trikes for adults with back and balance issues or for someone who has suffered from a stroke.” Models adjust to each rider’s needs.

The storekeepers pride themselves on listening to their customers, which is why customer service is a big part of the family’s mission as business owners.

“If it’s something you want to learn to do, we can help you get started,” Raines said.

“Between our 10 employees, we can answer most every outdoor question.”

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

# Kitten rescue

## Marion firefighters perform life-saving act of kindness days before Christmas

BY JASMINE DENT FRANKS FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

MARION, Va. — Turns out, rescuing tiny felines isn’t just for cartoon firefighters.

Just two days before Christmas, Marion Police officers lowered Sgt. April Morgan into a storm drain near Francis Marion Manor to bring a small kitten to safety.

Morgan said she and her fellow officers spent the better part of two hours trying to coax the kitten to come to them.

“But it was a little tiny kitten, and it was skittish and ran down the pipe,” said Morgan, who, along with the kitten, had gotten thoroughly drenched during the ordeal.

After fetching a cat trap and some food, it didn’t take long to lure the fuzzy feline to safety, though.

Following the rescue, Morgan took the kitten back to the department, where the two warmed up while fellow officers popped their heads in to check on the kitten they’d come to call “Stormy.”

Community members praised Morgan and the department for their efforts after the department posted photos of the rescue on its Facebook page. A few people even offered to adopt Stormy, but Officer Tim Whisman had become quite smitten with the kitten and took her home to be loved by his 3-year-old son, Parker.

While Marion officers have previously had to rescue stray animals from off the side of the road, Sunday’s rescue



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

While Stormy’s life was in danger just two days before Christmas, now he’s getting an abundance of love and attention from Officer Tim Whisman’s 3-year-old son, Parker.



marked their first time undertaking the rescue of an animal in danger. Since the retirement of Marion’s animal control officer, the task of afterhours animal rescues has fallen on the police department, Morgan said.

She expressed admiration for her fellow officers and gratitude to Marion Fire-EMS for helping them gain access to the manhole to

rescue Stormy.

“The officers that were working on my platoon that night put forth so much effort to try and save this cat,” Morgan said. “I think they just went above and beyond out there, and it was cold, and it was raining, and they just wanted to make sure this cat was safe.”

Police Chief John Clair said the rescue served to exemplify Morgan’s dedication to the community.

“I think what that says is that she’s committed,” he said. “She’s committed to just doing the right thing.”

He called the rescue efforts “community policing at its best.”

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# Washington County News

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# Heavy rain causes flooding, landslides



A mud and rock slide occurred along the shoulder of Interstate 81 northbound near mile marker 36 in Chilhowie on Thursday morning. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

BY JOE TENNIS  
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Heavy rains on Saturday prompted road closures across the greater Bristol region — including Abingdon's East Main Street, where Town Creek sliced the historic town in half with its overflow in Southwest Virginia.

"With this much rain, everything is at capacity," said Abingdon Police Chief Tony Sullivan. "Our water table is full, the ground is saturated, and there is nowhere for the water to go. We have not seen rains like this for a long time."

Abingdon town officials closed Tunnel Street at 10 a.m. Saturday due to flooding, Sullivan said, then blocked off East Main Street at noon, between Tanner and Deadmore streets, due to high water levels.

Town officials created a detour using Tanner, Valley and Hutton streets yet issued a release, noting, "This detour is not wide enough to accommodate large towed vehicles or tractor-trailers."

The town also posted "High Water" signs

See **FLOODING**, Page A5

# Out of gas

Renovated gas stations make trendy homes for new local businesses



PHOTOS BY CAROLYN R. WILSON/ FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS  
ABOVE: Exposed wooden beams and overhead gas pipes lend a vintage, industrial flavor to Chef Heather's restaurant, converted from the old Dixie Service Station on West Main Street. TOP RIGHT: A painting of the original Dixie Service Station by Abingdon artist Roma Baker hangs on a wall at Chef Heather's restaurant. BOTTOM RIGHT: Heather and James Warren stand in front of a chalkboard menu at their restaurant, Chef Heather's in Abingdon.

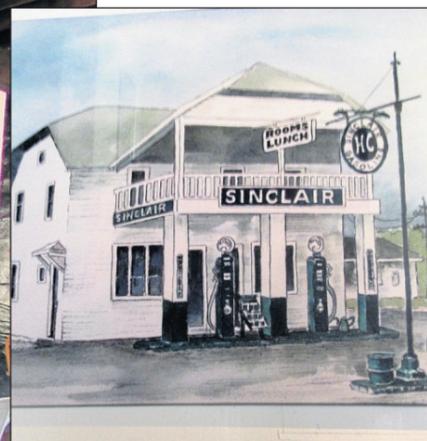
BY CAROLYN R. WILSON  
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — Around the country, old gas stations are being converted into trendy, upscale places of businesses. Abingdon is home to at least four of them, each bursting with charm and a bit of nostalgia on the side.

Chef Heather's restaurant and 343 Designs are the most recent transformations.

According to Bob Howard, a courier with First Bank & Trust and a part-time employee with the Abingdon Fire Department, the buildings that house Ernie Sullins Clothing Outlet and Bella's Pizza and Subs are also known to have been gas stations at one time.

"The new location for the Historical Society of Washington County on the corner of Russell Road and Main Street was a gas station many years ago that was later expanded to make the current



building," said Howard.

## Chef Heather's

Loyal customers flock to Chef Heather's restaurant on Main Street to savor homemade breads, salads and dressings from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on weekdays. The housemade chips and dips are quite popular, known for attracting a big crowd on Wednesdays when their

See **GAS**, Page A6

# Grants give supplies to VHCC machinist students

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON  
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — Seven precision machinist students at Virginia Highlands Community College will be better prepared for the job market after graduation this year thanks to a grant from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

A \$20,000 grant is providing work boots and rolling toolboxes for each of the students who demonstrate career readiness.

David Brock, Jonathan Shuttle, Don Johnson, Wyatt McCroskey, Robbie Murray, Clay Seymore and Ryan Blankenship are taking advantage of the Innovation Challenge, a grant-funded initiative from VDOE to create dual-enrollment opportunities for students seeking vocational training.

The opportunities are typically developed through partnerships between regional adult education programs and

community colleges across the commonwealth.

Mount Rogers Regional Adult Education Program (MRRRAEP), which is the recipient of the grant, approached the community college about developing a dual-enrollment program.

"This is one of several partnerships our office has had over the last five years," said Shirley Carlson, regional program manager for MRRRAEP. The office serves six counties

in the region and the cities of Bristol and Galax.

In the dual-enrollment program, the precision machinist students continue to receive classroom instruction at the community college while also preparing for Career Readiness Certificates (CRC) with the adult education program. The students earn the certificates by passing tests in ap-

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# Gas

From Page A1

spinach dip is served. Authentic foods are not the only draws to the restaurant. Heather Warren and her husband James Warren recently moved their popular eatery to the former Dixie Service Station, a landmark on the west side of town.

The gas station was owned and operated from the 1940s to the early 1980s by Bob Galliher of Abingdon and later his son, Charles Galliher.

Bob Maiden in Abingdon remembers pumping gasoline at his grandfather's Dixie Service Station when he was a youngster.

"That was during a time when full-service stations were common. They not only pumped gasoline but checked the oil and cleaned the windshield," said Maiden.

"My grandfather was making a dollar a day working on a farm during the Depression. When he didn't get a pay raise, he and a friend decided to go together and buy the station building in 1941.

"It was a place where you could buy gasoline and get something to eat, too."

Maiden said his grandmother and grandfather lived upstairs until the 1960s when they moved to Bradley Street in town.

## 'A good move'

Chef Heather and her husband spent nearly two years working in their spare time on weekends to transform the building into a 55-seat establishment — 10 more seats are on the patio — that boasts an industrial, vintage feel.

James Warren, the owner and operator of Stone Mountain Construction, had the vision for the project. His wife wasn't so sure, at first.

"A gas station?" Heather Warren asked her husband when he introduced the idea.

"There was an old water fountain leaking in the floor when I first stepped inside," she said. "This place just needed a lot of love."

"But it's been a good move. We have more room and better visibility on Main Street. Our customers know they won't have to wait to be seated, and if they do, the wait isn't long," said Heather Warren.

She first opened a small coffee shop with sandwiches after receiving a degree in culinary

arts from Virginia Intermont in 2006. More than a year later, business was so good that she moved across the street to the Charwood Center, where she operated her restaurant for nearly 10 years.

"We had outgrown the place, but we never advertised. It was all from word of mouth."

The gas station building's "good bones" offered a sturdy foundation for the vintage remake.

"A coat of paint inside and outside made a dramatic difference," said James Warren.

An overhead silver pipe for gas heat gives the dining area an industrial look. Black columns are big contrasts to mint green accents.

## Uncovering history

Exposed wooden beams throughout the restaurant and lighting made from vintage electrical transformers offer a nostalgic vibe. An old claw-foot tub from an upstairs apartment was converted into a bench-style seat.

Probably the piece of history that catches the eye the quickest is a large Sinclair sign hanging on the wall in the dining area. The original sign for Sinclair gasoline sold at the gas station nearly 80 years ago was uncovered in the ground during renovations.

The story of the gas station is also told through numerous store receipts the Warrens found in the basement and framed for a historical display on a wall. A painting of the gas station by Abingdon artist Roma Baker preserves memories of the early station that flourished on business from nearby Pet Milk plant workers, who ate their meals and filled their tanks at the store.

The original garage doors were made into fully functioning windows.

James Warren said he'd love to know more about the history of the building and the people who ran the business. The couple invites people to share their memories of the old gas station with them.

"If these walls could talk, it would be interesting to hear all the stories the men told as they warmed around an old coal stove in the garage," he said.

## 343 Designs

Vision. That's what Josh Combs must have possessed when he set foot in a former gas station at 343 E. Main St. that had been vacant for years.

Though the building had been neglected for years, he



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

**Interior designer Erika Campbell helps customers enhance interior spaces at 343 Designs, a business in town that focuses on cabinet, appliance, plumbing and lighting retail sales for new construction, as well as remodel-**

still could envision transforming the old gas station into a home for his retail business, 343 Designs. The business, which opened last fall in its new location, focuses on cabinet, appliance, plumbing and lighting retail sales for new construction, as well as remodeling.

"I kept driving by the building each day and thinking it'd make a perfect place to start a showroom," said Combs, who had already established the business in a temporary location in 2017 and was waiting to find an ideal location.

He wasn't looking for an old gas station, but as it turns out, the building offered the kind of character that was hard to turn down. And the building has a story to tell.

Ralph Price of Abingdon operated the gas station for 45 years, owning the business along with his wife Juanita "Jean" Price for the last 35 years.

Price, 91, said the station started out as Central Esso and later became an Exxon station in 1972 when the company changed its name. An illness caused Price to step away from operating his business in 1991. Beginning in 1993, Price began leasing the business to a series of people.

A portrait of the gas station painted by Roma Baker hangs in the living room of his home,

a fond reminder of earlier days.

Combs knew the building was exactly what he wanted.

The businessman has been around the construction business since he was a child, watching and helping his father build homes. Confident in his skills as a builder, Combs later earned a degree in building construction from East Tennessee State University in 2001.

"I grew up doing this work. I learned the trade by hanging around and working at job sites. It's all I've ever known," he said.

It took Combs more than a year to transform the old gas station into retail space with character.

The interior of the building was removed and replaced with new walls and floors. The only thing that remained was the metal shell of the building.

"New garage doors keep the facade of the building alive," he said.

The building was converted into a showroom of kitchen cabinetry displays and a working kitchen complete with functioning appliances for demonstrations. Customers can see samples of granite, marble, quartz and recycled glass countertops.

"We cover everything from elaborate decor to basic contractor building grades. We have a price for everyone," he said.

Interior designer Erika Campbell works with customers, as well as other installers and contractors, to enhance interior spaces while taking into account how different colors, textures, furniture, lighting and space will work together to meet the customer's needs.

"We are price-competitive with big-box stores, offering better quality, better service and more experience," said Campbell.

"I have 17 years in kitchen design experience before moving to Abingdon. It's eye-opening to see how my designs get implemented. I've spent time at job sites, which helps me do my job better as a designer."

Combs said being located on Main Street has been good for business.

"I'm happy to have the support of people in the community. Every week, someone approaches me to say they love what I've done with the building. They're in awe of how we transformed this old station into a showroom."

"It took a lot of blood, sweat and tears, but it was worth it."

343 Designs is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Call for an appointment at 276-525-4640.

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

# VHCC

From Page A1

plied math, work place documents and graphic literacy.

The CRC is a requirement among many local employers.

"Our goal is to help people become work-ready. We're the programs that fill in the gaps for those people without jobs or education," said Carlson.

Carlson said the adult education program, which is part of this partnership, often gets misunderstood.

"Adult education has

always been viewed as the GED program, but over the last few years, the Virginia Department of Education has said we need to provide opportunities not only to educate but to train people who are not headed to a four-year college degree.

"We're not just GEDs anymore. We're GED plus other components, such as remediation, computer skills, preparing for college placement tests and even writing resumes," she said.

"These grants are a result of the state's mission to develop better communities, to provide local employers with work-

ers they need and to promote other companies to locate in our region."

Carlson said MRRAEP supports as many as 30 day and night classes for adults.

"Not all are dually enrolled, but our goal is to eventually provide as much training as possible in these partnerships. Most of our students are not dually enrolled, but the opportunities are coming more and more."

## Grateful for the opportunity

Robbie Murray, 18, said he is grateful to have the opportunity to complete the CRC tests.

"I like to take advantage of every positive opportunity that comes my way. It's a blessing to be able to achieve my goals," said Murray, who works part time at General Engineering Co. while attending the community college.

"And I was really excited to pick out a pair of boots that fit my personality. I'm enjoying wearing them."

Johnnie Keene, assistant professor of precision machining at the community college, said the grant has enabled him to spend \$1,500 on each student, providing them with vouchers for work boots and rolling toolboxes fully stocked

with tools.

The professor, who began teaching at the college in 2017, said his goal is to secure funding each semester for his dually enrolled machinist students.

"The community col-

lege seeks every opportunity to assist our students — both in and out of the classroom," said Keene. "We love to find ways to provide resources — such as boots and tools for these precision machine technology

students — to help them achieve their goals. This type of practical assistance is a real distinctive of Virginia Highlands."

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

**Precision machinist students at Virginia Highlands Community College, David Brock (front) and (from left to right) Jonathan Shuttle, Don Johnson, Wyatt McCroskey, Robbie Murray, Clay Seymore and Ryan Blankenship each received work boots and fully stocked rolling toolboxes through a grant from the Virginia Department of Education.**



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**Stephanie Howard (left) poses with her husband and children at the Play Date entrance at the Highlands Shopping Center in Abingdon. Howard's business won second place among start-up businesses, and she was honored for having the best financial pitch of all participants in the Washington County Business Challenge. Her \$3,000 in prize money will go toward expanding services offered at the play area.**



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**Max and Owen enjoy the Ball Dumper in the foam ball arena inside Play Date.**

Over the next few weeks, the Washington County News will feature a series of stories on the winners of the 2019 Washington County Business Challenge. The fourth in the series is on Play Date, which won second place in the Start Up Business Awards.

# All work. All play.

## Play Date imagines fun and educational expansion with awards from Washington County Business Challenge

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON  
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

**A**BINGDON, Va. — With as many as 100 five-star, handwritten reviews and nearly 3,000 followers on Facebook, Abingdon's newest indoor play and party venue is becoming more than child's play.

Stephanie Howard said her business, Play Date, located in the Highlands Shopping Center, is creating a positive impact in the community for both kids and adults.

After being in business for nearly a year, Howard has won second place as a start-up business in the 2019 Washington County Business Challenge. She also received the highest score from judges for "pitching" a business idea during the competition.

The Business Challenge is an annual business plan competition designed to attract entrepreneurs to start and expand business in the county.

Both awards will offer her a total of \$3,000 to use toward expansion projects.

"I'm finding my business is answering a need I actually didn't foresee when I opened in 2018," Howard said.

"There's a need for parents, grandparents and other caregivers to relax and just have someone to talk to while their children play in a safe and fun environment. We are delighted to be offering that feature."

In addition to providing an indoor, clean space for kids ages 10 or younger to play, socialize and party, Play Date allows free admission to caregivers and noncrawling babies.

"It's really such a compliment to be the place [that] caregivers trust enough to bring their children to play and to feel comfortable enough to enjoy some coffee and good conversation while they're here," said the business owner.

"The word is getting out. People really love Play Date and what we have to offer. It's very heart-warming, and it makes me feel really good about our hard work."

"Our sales have increased by 50% since October 2018. I've also been able to hire two part-time employees."

Booked months in advance, private parties have taken off, providing Howard the stable revenue needed to make her small business successful.

"I love being open during the week for kids to come and play, but my prices are so affordable, I can't survive on that. Parties are what keep us afloat."

"We usually host five parties each weekend. Most private party spots are booked solid for the next two months. We offer private party packages where we do everything — we decorate and provide the pizzas, chips and drinks. All you have to do is bring the cake," she said.

"A lot of caregivers are grandparents and even great-grandparents. We want to take the stress off of them. All they have to do is show up with the birthday child and a smile, and we've got the rest covered."

Before opening her business, the mother often traveled with her children to Asheville, North Carolina, and Gray, Tennessee, to indoor playgrounds for one of their birthday parties or to play for the day.

"Being a mother of three children younger than 10, I know and understand the need for a clean, safe, affordable and fun space for our younger kids to exercise and socialize," Howard said.

Howard said her rapid success as a businesswoman has prompted her to think about growing her small business. Currently, the facility offers opportunities for physical play, improving sensory

skills and growth in socialization. Howard entered the Business Challenge with hopes of expanding her business with more learning opportunities for children.

First, she envisions adding an outdoor patio where parents and caregivers can soak up the sun while their children play at water and sand tables.

Her second idea is to convert a 150-square-foot unused space in Play Date into a Play Market.

"With our Play Market concept, we will teach children about money management, counting, customer service and, most of all, confidence for their young entrepreneurial minds," she said.

Howard said the Business Challenge has given her greater confidence to pursue her business goals.

"I can't say enough about the positive impact of the Business Challenge. I'm a college graduate, and I've taken business courses. I thought I knew how to write a business plan when I opened my business. Now, I have a true business plan."

"The Business Challenge makes you look at things realistically — where I am, what I can do differently. It gave me a solid foundation I thought I already had."

Play Date, located on Charwood Drive, has extended hours from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesday through Thursday, starting May 7 as a summer trial. She hopes to continue the extended hours depending on popularity. The business opens 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Friday and Saturday.

Private parties are reserved for Friday and Saturday after 3 p.m. with two spots available on Sunday.

Follow Play Date on Facebook for prices and special events.

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

# Jane Seymour talks TV, Johnny Cash and fan questions

**WANDERING AROUND WASHINGTON**

Editor's note: "Wandering Around Washington" is a regular, exclusive column from Joe Tennis highlighting the untold stories in the county, direct from the people who live and work here. Watch for him to wander into shops, restaurants and parks to bring you the gab and gossip — only in the Washington County News.

Johnny Cash showed up on the set of "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman."

And for actress Jane Seymour, the star of the 1990s' "Dr. Quinn" series, that was "a life-changing experience," Seymour said during a recent telephone interview.

Seymour has starred in movies like "Live and Let Die," "Somewhere in Time," "Wedding Crashers" and "East of Eden."

On "Dr. Quinn," she worked more than once with Cash and his wife, June Carter, who was, incidentally, born just one county away from Washington County

— in Scott County, Virginia, at Maces Spring.

Johnny and June showed up on a few episodes of "Dr. Quinn," Seymour's series from 1993 to 1998.

"We became lifelong friends," Seymour said. "It was just an amazing privilege."

Seymour, 68, and her then-husband, James Keach, became such great friends with the singers that they would stay at the Cash couple's homes in Hendersonville, Tennessee, and Jamaica.

Over time, too, Seymour said, Johnny started talking about how he wanted his life story told.

"Johnny turned to us and said, 'Someone is going to make the story of my life,'" Seymour remembered. "He said, 'I don't really have anyone that I can trust.'"

Yet, for about a decade, Johnny and June would trust James and Jane, giving them exclusive interviews that could form the basis for future projects. Those interviews became the launching point for a movie script, and "Walk the Line," a biopic of Johnny's life with June, finally premiered in 2005.

But, you may not know that from looking at the credits, where Keach is listed as co-producer.

James Keach's work is noted; Jane Seymour's is not.

The Keach-Seymour couple — now divorced — had actually sold the rights to making the movie in order to find a way for it to be produced, Seymour said.

But, Seymour added, "We had a chance to read the actual finished script to John-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

**Jane Seymour, star of "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman," "Live and Let Die" and "East of Eden," will attend Barter Theatre's "An Evening with Jane Seymour" fundraiser, answering fan questions and giving autographs.**

ny and June before they passed."

Both Johnny and June died in 2003.

Today, Seymour said she could write a book about her experiences with Johnny and June.

And writing a book is something that Seymour has certainly done. The actress has released about a dozen books in addition to starring in television shows and movies.

You can find out more — and up-close — when the actress arrives in Abingdon for "An Evening with Jane Seymour" on May 8 at the Barter Theatre ([www.bartertheatre.com](http://www.bartertheatre.com)).

This is a fundraiser and includes a post-event reception at the Martha Washington Inn & Spa. Barter Theatre is offering special event tickets starting at \$150 and running up to \$600, which includes a private meet-and-greet with the actress, a photograph opportunity and an autographed DVD. You can reserve a spot by calling 276-628-2282.

Seymour says she's looking forward to coming back to Virginia, where she spent some time a few years ago when she made a 2012 movie in Roanoke called "Lake Effects."

Coming with her is Johnny Keach, her son, who was named for Johnny Cash.

At 23, Keach is a singer, and he said he wanted to come to Barter Theatre because he recalled the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains as a beautiful area, according to his mother.

Expect lots of laughter and life stories on May 8.

Seymour says she wants to stage a question-and-answer session.

"I think we're going to do a Q&A, which is my absolute favorite, because I've got so many stories and so many different parts of my life that I could talk forever," Seymour said. "And I think it's always great when whoever's the moderator gets to know what the people in that room would be interested in."