



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.

Old Mill gets new flair

DAMASCUS, Va. — Saturday is a good time to slip into Damascus.

That's the date for the annual town-wide yard sale, running 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.

While in town, you can also pay a visit to the Damascus Old Mill, which is not only open for meals and lodging but is also looking at an expansion.



Joe Tennis

The mill features a dozen rooms. But, to truly be even more of a destination, says manager Randy Bass, it's going to need more.

So that's what's under construction right now at a century-old house next to the mill.

Bass, 62, expects the building project on those rooms to be ongoing through the rest of the spring.

He also wants to redecorate the walls of the current inn.

Right now, the walls of the halls are quite bare.

"Let's put something on there — some local art," he said.

A former resident of North Carolina, Bass has been a regular visitor to the Damascus Old Mill for about 18 years — long before he took the reins as manager earlier this year.

Among his plans for the century-old house facing the mill is to add four guest rooms "and a state-of-the-art conference room," Bass said as he showed off the construction project at the 19th-century structure.

"It has a lot of character," Bass said.

July is likely to mark the opening date of the rooms at this house, Bass figured.

"And I want it," Bass said. "I need to increase revenue."

Beyond this weekend's flea market and the subsequent Trail Days celebration in Damascus on May 16-19, Bass is looking forward to holding a two-day music festival on June 7-8.

"It's Old Mill Music Fest," he said. "We have the Church Sisters. ... We finish with Russell Moore & IIIrd Tyme Out."



JOE TENNIS/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Randy Bass is manager at the Damascus Old Mill.



JOE TENNIS/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

A milldam is a scenic attraction at the Damascus Old Mill.

THE STORE @ MENDOTA



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Dorothy Dye stands in front of a 14-foot wooden table originally used as a meat counter in the old store. The counter was moved to the front of the store where customers can pick up to-go sandwiches.

Mendota memories

Landmark community store reopens with SW Va. native at the helm

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON

FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

MENDOTA, Va. — Dorothy Dye is proof that you actually can go home.

The retired Southwest Virginia native has moved back home to Mendota, Virginia, to spend her senior years and to revive a piece of history that's never faded from her memories.

CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Tables and chairs provide seating in The Store @ Mendota which serves sandwiches, chips and cookies. The store contains many original pieces, including antique glass showcases, a 14-foot wooden counter, shelving and a tin ceiling.

After a leap of faith and nearly a year of planning, Dye and three of her family business partners have reopened an old-fashioned mercantile that operated in a thriving agricultural community when Dye was a child.

The four women — Dye, along with Katie Harris, Lisa Edwards and Dawn Sims — opened the doors to their new business on Saturday, inviting the community to tour the former Benfield Store — historically referred to as simply "The Store."

Their dreams are coming true as the entrepreneurs write a new chapter in the life of the 1928 building, now operating under the name The Store @ Mendota.

They recently won third place in the 2019 Washington County Business Challenge for new startup businesses. The Business Challenge is an ambitious business plan competition designed to attract entrepreneurs to start and expand business in the county.

The store will feature retail and handmade gift items, along with basic needs for outdoor enthusiasts visiting Mendota. Signs, Mendota T-shirts, books, mugs, hummingbird feeders and cookbooks are just a few of the items they stock.

"The store originally had a kitchen in the back," said Dye. "We plan to have a sandwich shop there. We'll also have local music and crafts."

"We also want to offer Appalachian craft classes for sewing, basket-weaving, painting and gourd-making."

"The more you teach people to do for themselves, the stronger their hopes become," said Dye. "I want to help bring hope back to Mendota."

"We want to bring revitalization to the community. We're not looking to make a lot of money with this venture. It's for the community. It's great

Over the past few weeks, the Washington County News has featured a series of stories on the winners of the 2019 Washington County Business Challenge. The last in the series is on The Store @ Mendota, which won third place in Startup Business Awards.



If You Go

» **Contact** the store owners at 276-669-2401, which, according to Dye, is the same phone number for the store when a phone line was installed in Mendota in 1958.

» **Directions** from Abingdon to Mendota: From West Main Street, take Route 19 North on Porterfield Highway for 7.3 miles. After crossing the North Fork of the Holston River, turn left onto Mendota Road. Travel 14.5 miles. The Community Center is located on the left at 2562 Mendota Road.

to be involved with our little community again and sharing the history with the young people here. That's what I enjoy more than anything," she said.

Dye hopes their business will benefit from being in close proximity to

A Day in Mendota

The 2019 Virginia Highlands Festival will feature a Day in Mendota, when visitors can spend the day learning about the historic town and enjoying the quiet and charming atmosphere of the community.

Activities begin at 9:30 a.m. at the Mendota Community Center, where participants can learn about the history of Mendota and pick up maps and a detailed agenda for the day.

At the community center, visitors can view artifacts Dye has collected from every store that operated in Mendota decades ago. Her collection includes memorabilia from old churches and some of her own belongings when she attended Bible School.

Around noon, the group will eat lunch beside the river and listen to discussions on the Bristol-Mendota Trail and Adventure Mendota. Lunch can be purchased at The Store @ Mendota.

Following lunch, visitors can participate in several activities — a talk on organic farming and a farm tour, a walk on the Bristol-Mendota Trail or kayaking on the river with Adventure Mendota (reservations are required).

CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

The Store @ Mendota originally was built by Frazier Shepherd in 1928. The building was later purchased by Harold Benfield, who left the store building to his daughter, Katie Harris. Harris and three other family members have reopened the business in an effort to revitalize the Mendota community.

Adventure Mendota River Outfitters, which offers recreational kayaking on the North Fork of the Holston River. The trailhead of the Mendota Trail also lies in front of the store. The trail is a 12.5-mile hiking and biking recreational corridor between Bristol, Virginia, and Mendota.

"We're centrally located only 30 minutes or 20 miles from Kingsport, Bristol, Abingdon and Gate City," said Harris, Dye's niece, who inherited the store building from her father Harold Benfield.

The original Mendota General Store was a wooden structure built in the 1800s. Frazier Shepherd purchased the store around 1928, tore it down and built the current

Mendota

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brick building. Benfield later purchased the building and renamed it the Benfield Grocery Store.

Memories are easily sparked for the business partners. A cutting of an old-fashioned climbing pink rosebush from their homeplace down the road blooms beside the store. Harris said her grandmother, Lillie, taught her how to sew on an old pedal sewing machine, which she plans to display in the store. "I love this building," said Harris. "It's sat empty since my daddy closed it in the 1980s. We used it as a storage building for years.

"Dotty [Dye] has brought vision to the project, and I'm on the backbone. It's coming back alive."

Preserving the flavor

To help achieve their goals, the women worked with the Community Design Assistance Center (CDAC), an outreach center in the College of Architecture and Urban Studies at Virginia Tech. Through funding from the Environmental Protection Agency's Brownfields Assessment grant, CDAC worked with Mendota community members on several redevelopment projects, including a design for the redevelopment of the Benfield Grocery Store.

Professor Lisa Tucker and students from the interior design program redesigned the interior of the store in an effort to create a community-oriented business and gathering space that supports cultural heritage and outdoor recreation tourism.

The flavor of the building is preserved with many of the original furnishings.

Dye said a 14-foot-long wooden counter that was once a meat counter sits at the front of the store as a check-out station for food. Old glass showcases that once held candy when



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Among the many flowers planted beside The Store @ Mendota is a pink climbing rose, which was rooted from a cutting from a plant Dye's mother grew nearly 100 years ago.

she was a girl are being used to display new merchandise in the store. Original shelving and the store's tin ceilings are still intact. An antique ice chest in the wall still exists where ice was cut out of the river in the winters and stored for later use.

Antique doors from the Mendota Methodist Church — built about the same time as the store — were hinged to shelving on the wall, creating desks once folded down. Dye said the workspace will be used during craft lessons.

In addition to enlarging the store's bathroom and adding new fixtures, most of their work has involved elbow grease — cleaning and painting the interior and stocking the shelves with merchandise.

"The foundation of the building is very strong," said Dye.

Memories of a thriving town

Dye just seemed to know



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Standing in a flower bed she created at the side of the store building, Dorothy Dye holds one of the printed signs that will be placed along the highway to mark the way to The Store @ Mendota.

when it was time to return to her roots.

After leaving Mendota in the 1960s, Dye later settled in Florida, where she stayed for 50 years before retiring as a metallurgical engineering technician in 2000.

"When my husband died, I finally realized I could come

back home.

"My family thinks I'm nutty. I sold everything I had in Florida, left my two children and two grandchildren and came back to Mendota. It's where I want to spend my last days.

"I returned three years ago to find that you couldn't even buy a bottle of water in Mendota.

Everything had left Mendota," Dye said.

"It's nothing like what I remember.

"I'm almost 80. I grew up in Mendota when it was a thriving little town. We had about five stores where we could buy anything we needed," she said.

Dye believes the town's failing economy was a direct result of the steady decline of both the rail service and the tobacco industry.

"I'm old enough to remember when the steam engines and the passenger trains came through Mendota. It was a thriving town then. It was a fun, healthy town. People loved and took care of each other," said Dye, who was in the last graduating class at Mendota High School in 1959 before students were moved to John S. Battle High School.

"People were forced to find work other places, and when they did, they bought what they needed elsewhere. That caused the stores to gradually close, and by the mid-1980s, everything was gone."

Dye said the store was always referred to as "The Store."

"When Mama needed something when we were little, she'd say we could go to Mr. Litton's store, Mr. Cross' store or Mr. Nunley's store. Or if she said, 'The Store,' we knew exactly where she meant."

Since moving back home, Dye has dreamed of seeing the town come back to life — one step at a time.

"We started dreaming together that we could reopen the store. It's taken us a year to realize our dream.

"We're on our way to making this a vibrant community again."

The Store @ Mendota is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. each weekday, except Wednesdays when it is closed. Sunday hours are noon to 5 p.m.

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

New artwork on display at Town Square Center



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Susan Powers, coordinator of educational programs at the Town Square Center for the Arts, talks about the resident artists whose works are currently on display.

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

GLADE SPRING, Va. — Four new affiliate artists have their work on display at the Town Square Center for the Arts in the Glade Spring town square.

The artwork of Nancy Johnson, Nancy Garretson, Jackie Dolpp and Joyce Samuel is being exhibited in studio space designated for the guest artists. Each is a resident artist at The Arts Depot in Abingdon.

The special display will rotate on a regular basis, frequently showcasing new work from the artists.

"We are very grateful to the artists for letting us exhibit their work to broaden our horizons," said Susan Powers, a potter and stained glass artist at the arts center and coordinator of educational programs.

"We want to expand our art exhibits for people in the community who may not have the opportunity to see it elsewhere."

Each affiliate artist demonstrates unique visions.

Dolpp loves to experiment with collaged florals, landscapes and alcohol ink paintings.

Samuel paints what she loves — the world around her.

Garretson's expertise is fiber arts and weaving.

Johnson depicts ethnic pride and a loving look at black American culture by creating folk paintings.

"These people put their heart and souls into art, and it shows," said Powers.

"You can take one look and know that's a Nancy Johnson painting. The bright colors and folk themes are well-known signatures of Johnson," she said.

"Nancy is so well-known for her fiber arts, but it's nice to see her pen and ink drawings of Appalachian homesteads," Powers said.

"The thing about Joyce is she works in several different media. She's always coming up with



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

"Geraniums," by Joyce Samuel, is one of the pieces on display at the Glade Spring Town Square Center for the Arts. The pieces can be viewed from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. The artwork was all produced by resident artists at The Arts Depot in Abingdon, and the display will rotate artists on a regular basis.

something new. She's so versatile in the media she uses.

"And I love the way Jackie works with textures. Her painting called 'The Path' has colors and textures that are very three-dimensional. They pop off the canvas."

Artwork from the affiliate artists and the art

center's four resident artists can be viewed from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday through Saturday. Visit their website for the Town Square Center for the Arts at www.tscaart.com or follow them on Facebook.

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



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

The Town Square Center for the Arts will feature a rotating roster of artists.



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Trooper Lucas B. Dowell

'We are all brothers'

Funeral service held for fallen VSP trooper from Chilhowie

BY ROBERT SORRELL
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
CHILHOWIE, Va. — As he wiped tears from his eyes, Virginia State Police Sgt. Matthew Riley shared some of his fondest memories of Trooper Lucas B. Dowell, who died last Monday when authorities executed a search warrant in Cumberland County.

About 1,500 people — including representatives from dozens of law enforcement agencies from around the country — attended Saturday's funeral service in Dowell's hometown of Chilhowie.

Riley, Dowell's tactical team supervisor in Appomattox, shared the stage at Chilhowie Christian Church with several speakers and dignitaries. Dowell was a great storyteller and a wise-cracker, Riley and others said, and he often had a smile on his face.

Dowell's humorous personality stood out in the department, but he was always ready to support his team and help the community, speakers said.

Riley, who was wrought with

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Memories to share

Sally Anne Mumpower Heltzel, 78, (right) and daughter Ginny Shaver are hoping to crowdsource funds from the community to help restore an old farmhouse in Benhams, believed to be one of the oldest houses in Washington County.

Family hopes community initiative can preserve piece of Washington County history

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
BRISTOL, Va. — A Washington County woman is hoping her love of things from the past will spur a community

movement to restore a historic landmark in the Benhams area of the county. Sally Anne Mumpower Heltzel and her daughter, Ginny Shaver, have created a GoFund-

Me account as a way to help restore a vacant farmhouse that has been in the family for more than 100 years. The structure is believed to be one of the oldest houses in Washington County. "This homeplace is a landmark for the Benhams community, and it's so very sad to see the condition that it rests in today. We have come to realize the only way that we can restore this is to ask for help," wrote Heltzel last year on the

online fundraising site. So far, the mother and daughter project has only raised \$30 with a \$550,000 goal. "We're not giving up," said the 78-year-old woman with a mist of tears in her eyes. "We hope more people will decide to help once they learn this landmark is right in their own backyards. "It is truly overwhelming and heart-wrenching seeing

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Black history in spotlight all year at Glade Spring Library

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
GLADE SPRING, Va. — Tonia Kestner wants community members to know that every day is Black History Month at the Glade Spring Library. That's why the branch librarian is eager to showcase — especially during February — a large variety of books that honor the heritage, contributions and achievements of the African-American community.

"But it's not just during February," said Kestner. "These books help all of us to learn about and support the needs of our community every month — not just this month. "You'll find all of these books on the shelves throughout the year at the library," she said. Kestner said her role as a librarian, educator and responsible citizen is to make sure the library collection is diverse.

"This is something I'm very passionate about promoting," said Kestner, as she leafed through a display of books that either feature African-American characters or are written by African-American authors. "I try to focus on providing books that focus on the minority populations because I think that's an important part of my job. "Last spring, a teen approached me in the library

and asked if it was Black History Month. He thought it may have been in April because there were so many books displayed with African-American characters. This warmed my heart. I told him we celebrate African-Americans all year long." According to Kestner, at least one third of the library books at the Glade Spring

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Sally Anne Heltzer said her grandfather's house, built between 1903 and 1906, was considered a modern home in its time and "a bit of a mansion" because of its large size.

Farmhouse

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this house the way it is now compared to when our ancestors first built their family home," she said. "In its time, it was considered modern and a bit of a mansion."

The restoration project is an emotional one, especially for Heltzel, whose grandfather William Hancher Mumpower, a Civil War veteran, built the wood-frame, two-story house for his family of six children from 1903 to 1906. A photograph of two of the children who died as infants still hangs on a wall in the house.

According to Heltzel, Mumpower was a prominent figure in the community and an excellent carpenter, farmer and miller for many years. He also dealt in real estate.

"It's a little unnerving for some people to learn that my grandfather died in the house and was embalmed there," said Heltzel with a tinge of excitement in her voice.

The last habitant was Heltzel's aunt, Bailey Mumpower, who never married and lived in the house until her death in 1993.

Since then, the ravages of time and numerous acts of vandalism have left the house in dire need of repairs in order to bring the house back to its original condition.

The mother and daughter say the restoration project is left to them since they have no close relatives in the area. "Many of our distant relatives moved away years ago," she said.

"There are many family names associated with the house — Booher, Mumpower, Smith and Moore," said Heltzel. "But we're the last of the kinfolk."

Their dream of fixing the house includes repairing the foundation, replacing the roof, repairing porches, replacing wiring and installing a security system, in addition to sprucing up walls and floors.

"We would also like to fix the old spring house and washroom behind the house, where they washed clothes on an old wringer machine and by hand," said Shaver.

"We have gotten estimates on restoring the property, and with all the damages, we're figuring somewhere around \$550,000 is needed to restore this place," the daughter said.

"That's a lot of money, and that's why we need help. There is no way we can do this alone. It costs so much more to restore than to build brand-new again, but this is history that we want to preserve," Shaver added.

"We don't intend to make a dollar off of this project," added her mother. "We just want to preserve it for the future. I'm just that way. I love to preserve history."

The elder woman said once the house is restored she hopes to convert it into a museum, of sorts, allowing the public to tour the early 1900s structure and learn about the way people lived back then.

"It will be an asset to the community because this landmark will come alive for people to enjoy for years to come," Heltzel said.

"This house has a lot of memories to share. I want the house to serve as a living memory for future generations to learn about the past.

"Very few days in my childhood went by that I didn't visit that house. My family lived in a house across the road, and we took our milk over there and stored it in the cool springhouse in the evenings. Meals and late at night were special times for me. I remember watching heat lightning with my granny while sitting on the front porch," she related.

"It used to be quite a showplace. My granny grew flowers and roses down the walk with a rose arbor at the front gate." The house boasts a large kitchen, din-

To make donations to the restoration project, visit the website at <https://www.gofundme.com/motherdaughter-restoration-project>.

For more information about the project, contact Sally Anne Heltzel at sallyh85@bvunet.net and Ginny Shaver at gin412@hotmail.com.



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Among a collection of vintage family photographs are those that were developed from a roll of film in an old Brownie Hawkeye camera found in the house a few years ago.



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Ginny Shaver (left) and mother Sally Anne Mumpower Heltzel stand in front of a farmhouse built in the early 1900s by Heltzer's grandfather, William Hancher Mumpower, a Civil War veteran. The mother and daughter have created a GoFundMe online account to help raise money to restore the landmark in the Benhams community.

ing room, parlor and bathroom downstairs and four bedrooms upstairs.

"Over the kitchen is a garret — a small living space at the top of the house. That's where we aired dried green beans called leather britches," recalled Heltzel.

According to the mother and daughter, some of the original furniture is still in the house, including a dining room table built by her grandfather, a sideboard and a cupboard. A china closet that was hauled to the house on an oxen-driven wagon more than a century ago also would be used if the house is restored.

They would like to furnish the house with smaller original items that came from the house and purchase other period items to expand the exhibits.

"This is what the house looked like before a storm came through in the 1970s and took two pine trees by the house," said Heltzel, as she scattered family photos across a table and began reminiscing.

"I found a roll of film on an old Brownie Hawkeye camera in the house and had it developed. Many of these old pictures are from that roll.

"Here's the front of the house. I always figured my grandfather built all those steps off the front porch for his daughters to walk down when they got married.

"This is my favorite photo of the house when it was fairly new and timber from the farm was being hauled by wagon for some of the construction.

"If this restoration happens, it's going to bring back a flood of memories," said the mother.

"I don't really believe in ghosts, but I've often thought what my grandfather would think if he came back and saw his home in good repair.

"I know for me, it would be a dream come true," Heltzel said.

"I can just see the candles in the windows at Christmas."

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Trooper

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emotion as he shared stories about his friend, spoke about the first day he talked to Dowell about joining the tactical team. After giving a spiel about the unit, Riley said Dowell interrupted him, leaned forward, smiled and squinted his eyes.

"Look, let's just get down to the heart of this thing," Riley recalled Dowell saying. "Do I get to drive a tank?" I said, 'No, you don't get to drive a tank, but you'll get to drive a Bearcat if you're lucky.' He stood up, twirled his fingers and said, 'That's good enough for me.'"

Riley also shared the story about Dowell's first time entering a residence while executing a search warrant near Lynchburg.

Before the mission, Riley briefed the team and then checked with each of them to make sure they knew their duties. He said Dowell didn't seem to have been paying too much attention.

Everything was going fine, until he reached Dowell, who had a grin on his face and a World War II helmet on top of his head, Riley said.

"I said, 'Lucas, what is your role?' Riley recalled.

Dowell looked at the team and responded by quoting a line from "Saving Private Ryan," one of his favorite movies.

"Keep the sand out of your weapons. Keep those actions clear. I'll see you on the beach," said Dowell, who then turned around

team," said Settle, pausing as he tried to compose himself. "And it was his team that carried him out."

The superintendent said Dowell's death has been difficult for VSP and the community.

"Lucas' death has weighed a little heavier on my heart. You see, it happened on my watch," Settle said.

Dowell's sister Erica spoke during the service on behalf of the family.

She recalled attending a funeral last year with her brother in Chilhowie for a close friend. After the viewing, they returned home to talk about life.

"Lucas said, 'I want to do a better job of making the people I love know and feel how much I loved them,'" Erica Dowell said. "Looking out over this crowd and thinking about all the love that has just been poured out over my mom, my dad and I for Lucas in the last four days, I believe even more strongly now that what I said to him then was the truth. I said, 'Lucas, you already do that.'"

She also expressed gratitude to the VSP for their outpouring of support to the family.

"I can tell you that it has just made us more proud of the work that he did and the family he chose to join," she said.

Dowell's body was transported in a tactical vehicle to St. James Lutheran Church Cemetery.

State troopers, deputies and police officers from numerous Virginia agencies, as well as troopers from across the country,

said Hall, who attended service at the church and then traveled in the procession to the cemetery.

The troopers from Tennessee gave Dowell's family a THP flag, a challenge coin and a shadow box, Hall said.

Several troopers from New York, including four who previously worked in Virginia, attended the services.

Among those was Trooper Romel Arias, who currently serves in West Chester, New York, but previously worked in the Virginia Beach/Norfolk area with VSP from around 2011 to 2014.

It was good to be back in Virginia, he said, and to support a fellow brother in blue. Arias said it was good to see so many fellow law enforcement officers from so many different areas.

"I'm here to support my brother," he said, "because we're all bonded. We are all brothers. We bond together."

Pain suffered by one is felt by all, Arias said, and the loss of a brother is felt most deeply of all.

"You feel the pain. You feel the hurt," he said. "We are here to extend our condolences to the family. I bring those condolences from all the brothers in New York."

Numerous state dignitaries were in Chilhowie for the trooper's funeral, including Gov. Ralph Northam and his wife Pam Northam; Virginia Chief of Staff Clark Mercer; Virginia Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security Brian Moran; Virginia



ANDRE TEAGUE/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Virginia State Police motorcyclists lead the funeral procession for fallen Virginia State Police Trooper Lucas Dowell on Saturday afternoon in Chilhowie, Virginia.

and walked off. While his team laughed at Dowell's antics, Riley said the trooper proceeded to enter the wrong vehicle.

VSP Superintendent Gary Settle, who called Dowell a hero, said it was humbling to see so many rows of officers in uniform during the funeral.

Settle said Dowell had great patience, remained calm while under pressure and found it easy to deal with people.

Since Dowell's death, Settle said staff found a "to-do list" that Dowell had apparently created for 2019. It was posted on the bulletin board in his VSP residence.

"It demonstrated that Lucas had a plan for his faith and for his family," said Settle.

Dowell vowed to play fewer video games, work out more and go to church and spend more time with his family, Settle said.

Dowell was a trooper that others could rely on.

"Members of his [tactical] team felt safer with him there," Settle said. "He was the guy fighting for what was right, the guy you wanted on your team when things got tough. Lucas is a hero."

Settle said he believes Dowell saved lives while authorities executed the search warrant on Monday.

"Without a doubt, he saved lives of his tactical team members," Settle said.

Dowell told his tactical team members that he often felt safer with them than when he would work alone on a traffic stop.

"He went in with his

including as far away as Utah, Arizona, California, and Washington also attended the services. Officers from major cities, such as Chicago, Dallas and New York, were also present.

Capt. Thornell King with the Georgia State Patrol and three other troopers from the Peach State traveled to Chilhowie to support Dowell's family.

"Although we may wear a different uniform, we are all one brotherhood," said King, referring to a common sentiment among attendees Saturday. "All of our blood runs warm and red through our veins. We're just here to show support. Anytime we have a loss like this, it's such a tragedy."

King noted that 15 law enforcement officers have so far been killed in the line of duty this year, including three in Georgia.

"It's always a tragedy when we lose a brother," said King, commander of the GSP honor guard. "Georgia State Patrol came down to show their support for the family of our brother."

King said the honor guard travels across the country to attend law enforcement funerals and support the families.

"I'm all the way from the Florida/Georgia line, but I would have driven anywhere to be here today to be with the family," King said.

Four troopers from the Tennessee Highway Patrol's Fall Branch office also attended the service, said Sgt. Nathan Hall.

"It's like one of our own,"

Deputy Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security Ryant Washington; and Virginia Deputy Attorney General Victoria Pearson.

Other attendees included Virginia Sen. Bill Carrico, R-Galax; Virginia Del. Ronnie R. Campbell, R-Rockbridge County; and U.S. Rep. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem. Carrico and Campbell are former state troopers.

Dozens of Chilhowie residents lined the streets Saturday to see the procession travel through town.

"It's just a sad day," said resident Kathy Evans, who stood along Lee Highway with her husband, Morris Evans.

Kathy Evans said when her son served in Iraq in the military she often worried for his safety.

"I feel for his mother," she said.

Like many Chilhowie residents, the couple, whose youngest daughter attended school with Dowell, placed their hands over their hearts as countless law enforcement vehicles passed. They stood a short distance from the Chilhowie Fire Department, which waved a large American flag over the two-lane highway.

Messages of encouragement and condolences were displayed on message boards throughout Chilhowie and other parts of the county the last several days.

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Just how important is replacing Abingdon's courthouse? B1



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Work continues on The Sessions

BY DAVID MCGEE
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

BRISTOL, Va. — Nearly 11 months after The Sessions Hotel held formal groundbreaking ceremonies, workers are steadily converting three 100-year-old buildings into the Twin City's second downtown boutique hotel.

The 70-room, \$20 million project will combine the former Jobbers Candy factory and Service Mills building along Goode Street and the Owen Equipment building — formerly Bristol Grocery — at 833 State St., near the intersection with Volunteer Parkway and Commonwealth Avenue. Plans include a restaurant, indoor and outdoor music venues, rooftop space and a luxury spa. It is being developed by Creative Boutique Hotels and MB Contractors.



ANDRE TEAGUE/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Work continues to bring the Sessions Hotel closer to opening.

Project partner and architect Hal Craddock, of Lynchburg, said work is proceeding inside all three structures.

"We're painting in the Bristol Grocery building, we're dry-walling in the Service Mills, and

we just finished studding out all the rooms in the Jobbers Candy factory. We've got the roof on the Jobbers Candy factory — which will be an outdoor dining deck,"

See **HOTEL**, Page A5

Authorities search for evidence in Mendota murder case

BY ROBERT SORRELL
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

MENDOTA, Va. — More than 70 law enforcement officers from multiple agencies scoured through woodlands and fields last Wednesday and found additional evidence in an ongoing triple murder case.



Wright

The Washington County Sheriff's Office continues to investigate the case involving James Michael Wright, a 23-year-old Mendota man who authorities

said confessed to killing three women near his home over an 18-day period in February and March.

WCSO Capt. Jamie Blevins said officers returned to Mendota last week to search for any possible evidence in the case.

"We have found additional evidence," said Blevins, who spoke with the Bristol Herald Courier outside the Mendota Community Center, where officers coordinated their efforts.

Blevins, who leads Washington County's Criminal Investigations Division, said the evidence will be useful as Wright's court case continues. He wouldn't discuss specifics of the evidence except to say it didn't indicate that there are additional bodies.

Washington County Commonwealth's Attorney Josh Cumbow, who was not present for the search, confirmed that officers were looking for new evidence.

With the assistance of the U.S. Marshals Service, officers from a number of agencies, including sheriff's offices in Scott, Russell, Tazewell and Wise counties, as well as the Abingdon Police Department and Bristol Virginia Police Department, joined the search. The Virginia State Police, National Park Service and other state and federal agencies also assisted.

Tazewell County Sheriff's Office Maj. Harold Heatley said seven officers from his department joined the efforts. Heatley noted that Tazewell County has a good working relationship with the U.S. Marshals and tries to assist whenever requested.

Blevins said a variety of officers, including those with tactical and forensic evidence experience, assisted.

Officers conducted grid searches over a 40-acre area near Wright's home. The search covered some difficult terrain, Blevins said. The officers searched wooded areas and fields, as well as steep hills, all the way toward Pinnacle Road and the Mendota Fire Tower.

Blevins said a limited search

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VIRGINIA HIGHLANDS COMMUNITY COLLEGE



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Deborah Ledford, coach for Great Expectations at Virginia Highlands Community College, said the coach model is the key to success for their program. Great Expectations is a program to help foster youth succeed in higher education, uses relationships and trust between students and coaches to bring about academic success.

Fostering TRUST

Community college program gives foster youth the tools to succeed

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — A growing program initiated more than 10 years ago at Virginia Highlands Community College is in the national spotlight for empowering foster youth to succeed academically.

Deborah Ledford, coach for Great Expectations at the community college, said she's been contacted by higher education programs from as far away as California and Colorado since The Chronicle of Higher Education featured the Abingdon commu-

See **FOSTER**, Page A6

Great Expectations students beat the odds at college

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — As a former foster child, MaKenzie Helton knows what it's like to have the odds stacked against her.

When MaKenzie was in third grade, her mother was incarcerated. MaKenzie was raised by her great-grandparents until they died, when she was in middle school.

On top of that, a high school teacher told MaKenzie, who was diagnosed with dyslexia, that she would likely never succeed at higher education.

MaKenzie, 19, defied the odds when she became part of the Virginia Community College's Great Expectations program, offered at 21 community colleges throughout Virginia, including Virginia Highlands Community College in Abingdon.

Great Expectations is a nationally recognized program that helps Virginia's foster youth earn the post-

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Foster

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nity college in an April 26 video titled “Foster Youth Face Extreme Barriers to College. Here’s One Program That’s Helping.”

The Great Expectations program, shared by 21 Virginia community colleges, is designed to help foster youth pursue associate degrees and workforce credentials, transfer to four-year universities and position themselves for employment and life success. The Chronicle of Higher Education chose to spotlight the work being done on Virginia Highlands Community College’s campus, where the program has grown from 10 students in 2008 to 94 in the latest academic year.

“We are ecstatic that The Chronicle of Higher Education — which is to education what Sports Illustrated is to sports — just did a feature on Virginia Community College System’s Great Expectations program, and they chose to use the program at Virginia Highlands Community College as their example,” said Ledford.

Representatives of The Chronicle of Higher Education spent several days on campus earlier this spring shadowing Ledford and interviewing several of the school’s Great Expectations students.

A direct web link to the story can be found at <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Foster-Youth-Face-Extreme/246171>.

“The entire state of Virginia is being applauded for their programs, but we are one of the larger, more successful programs in the state,” said Ledford.

“Owing to Great Expectations’ success, other states and higher education programs are replicating this coaching model to help foster youth and other at-risk communities.”

Connecting foster youth to college success

Great Expectations was created in 2008 by the Virginia Community College System, championed by Anne Holton, former secretary of education and former first lady of Virginia, who recognized a large number of foster youth are more likely to end up incarcerated after aging out of the system — and some of them may even become homeless.

Since 2008, more than 3,000 foster youth in Virginia have been served through Great Expectations programs.

According to the website for the Great Expectations program, “one in four children who enter Virginia’s foster care system will not find a permanent home before they turn 18. As a result, approximately 500 young people age out of the system each year, which usually means making it on their own — often with devastating consequences.”

For those who voluntarily choose the foster system, turning 18 sometimes means foster youth face an abrupt end to support, which brings with it financial, social and emotional challenges.

“For a lot of these foster kids, everything has been done for them while they were in foster care — they had a case manager, they had a foster care worker and a department of social services worker,” said Ledford.

“Then suddenly when they turn 18, they’re told they are adults. Go live



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Deborah Ledford, coach for Great Expectations at Virginia Highlands Community College, is surrounded by Great Expectations students: (from left) Travis Ferguson, Katelyn Hatcher, MaKenzie Helton, Robbie Murray, Jennifer Kiethan and Cruz Lyons.

your life. So we try to be a bridge for those youth.”

Virginia Highlands Community College adopted the Great Expectations program in 2008, serving as few as 10 students.

“Ten years down the road, we have served more than 200 foster youth. As many as 39 associate degrees and certifications have been conferred on Virginia Highlands Great Expectations students,” Ledford said.

“This academic year, 94 students have been served. Next academic year, we project that more than 100 will be served.”

Diamond Jackson, an alumna of the Virginia Highlands Great Expectations program, will receive her Master of Business Administration in December. “She will be the first from our program to earn a graduate degree,” said Ledford.

“This year, six of our students have earned degrees and certifications. Two of those students are already enrolled as transfer students to four-year universities.

The coach model

“The key to our success, I believe, is the coach model we use,” Ledford said.

Great Expectations is based on a coaching model, which fosters relationships and trust between students and coaches to

bring about academic success.

The program works by pairing each foster youth with an adult coach at one of the 21 community colleges throughout the state. Coaches are there to help the foster youth every step of the way.

“The coach becomes a mentor who helps the students on many levels — career counseling, tutoring, help with applying for college admission and financial aid, help with applying and keeping jobs, financial management and sometimes as a mentor who just sits and listens,” Ledford said.

Along with coaching, Great Expectations students can receive financial assistance with living expenses, textbooks and required school supplies and other assistance in times of emergency.

“This really seems to make a difference in helping them pursue and complete a degree. Just having someone look over their shoulder and listen to them is so important.

“Many foster youth go from home to home throughout their childhoods. Counseling is what makes the difference in building trust and relationships — especially for those kids who struggle with failure.”

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

Odds

From Page A1

secondary credentials they need to achieve an independent and successful life.

Not only has she completed a certified nursing assistant program at Virginia Highlands Community College, MaKenzie holds a 3.7 grade point average, is active in the college choir and string band and serves as the student activities officer with the Student Government Association.

MaKenzie wants to continue her education at a four-year college, where she will pursue music and special education.

It’s stories like this that offer hope to Deborah Ledford, the Great Expectations coach at Virginia Highlands Community College.

“As a Great Expectations coach, I get to build strong personal relationships with each of my students. I know all of the barriers and additional challenges they face because they are foster youth. I try to be there supporting them every step of the way through their college career, and nothing is more rewarding than watching them succeed.”

For most foster youth, the Great Expectations program is life-changing.

“Being part of the program has helped me with scheduling my classes and getting my financial aid,” said MaKenzie, who credits Great Expectations for keeping her in school.

“If I needed help with homework, Deborah Ledford would help me find tutors. Even if I needed to talk with her about something outside of school, she was there to listen.

“It really is a great program, and it gives opportunities to people that society may look over. Because of Great Expectations, we do have a voice and can better

ourselves so that we don’t follow in the same footsteps of our parents who made bad choices.”

MaKenzie is featured in the 2019 Chronicle of Higher Education’s video news story, “Foster Youth Face Extreme Barriers to College. Here’s One Program That’s Helping.”

“One of the struggles we face is keeping the students enrolled. They often drop out and come back,” said Ledford.

“Our local foster youth report that transportation and housing are the two largest barriers to completing their degrees in a timely manner. The Virginia Highlands Great Expectations program is actively working with other community agencies, attaining grants and seeking out other financial resources to help our students overcome those barriers.”

Katelyn Hatcher, 25, from Bristol, Virginia, graduated this spring, earning an associate of applied science degree in human services — a degree that took her nearly seven years to complete.

Katelyn spent eight years in foster care, removed from her home at 13 even though her siblings stayed behind.

“I was in two facilities because I was told no foster home wanted me. I was in 30 psychiatric hospitals because it’s a good temporary spot to put somebody

because most foster kids face some kind of trauma. So that’s where they put me when they were waiting for a home for me.”

During her childhood, she was placed in at least five different foster homes.

She learned about the Great Expectations program while she was part of the Independent Living Program with the Department of Social Services. However, Katelyn was moved so frequently with the program that she was never able to stay at one college. “I had to drop my classes and start over at a different college,” she said.

She pursued a degree in human services because she wants to help foster kids who are going through the same things she faced as a teen.

“I want to help people who are in the same shoes I was in when I was younger,” she said.

She plans to complete her Bachelor of Arts degree in social work with hopes of one day working for Child Protective Services.

“If it weren’t for Great Expectations, I could never have come as far as I have,” said Katelyn, who received all As and Bs during her last semester at Virginia Highlands Community College, giving her a 3.75 grade point average for the term.

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



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