

On ice

Local man works on U.S. base in Antarctica

BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Staff Writer

Mike High stood in a treeless, grassless world and listened to an extraordinarily powerful wind. It was summer, or so he'd been told. Steadying himself on a sheet of ice, he gazed up at Mount Erebus, an active volcano nearly 4,000 meters high. When he tilted forward, his arms outspread, the wind kept his 245-pound frame nearly upright, as if he were floating.

Until last October, the Orange County resident who grew up in northern Virginia had never traveled farther from home than Nebraska. Now, here he was in Antarctica, helping to run the wastewater treatment plant at McMurdo Station, a U.S. research facility operated by the National Science Foundation on Ross Island.

When he first got there, he said he thought of Antarctica as “a vast, dead land, very lonely and empty.” But once he got over the altitude sickness that bothered him for a few weeks, he changed his mind. “Before long, I began to see the amazing beauty of it all and realized it wasn't actually dead, just very remote. The most impressive thing was the amazing scenery,” especially the icy mountains visible across McMurdo Sound on a clear day.

High, 55, retired early from his job managing a wastewater plant at Quantico in 2010. In more recent years, he worked contract jobs, and he and his fiancée, Tina Bucci, launched a ferret rescue operation out of their home in Unionville.

Going to Antarctica was on his “bucket list.” When he saw a social media posting for carpentry jobs there, he wrote to the contracting agency and asked if there were openings for wastewater treatment operators.

Of course there were. High signed on for a summer hitch below the equator, which meant he would be at McMurdo during the Northern Hemisphere's winter months. He left in early October and headed to Christchurch, New Zealand., where contractors are prepped before going “on ice.” A trainer told the group their operative question should always be, “How will Antarctica try to kill me today?” One key survival lesson was to stay hydrated, since the ice-covered continent is actually a desert with extremely dry conditions.

A massive storm delayed the final leg of his inbound flight, but on Oct. 16, an Air Force jet touched down on the ice and brought High to his temporary new home. Early on, he saw the sun set—and then rise 10 minutes later. That was the only bit of nighttime he saw in a place that gets six months of daylight and six months of darkness.

For more than four months, he worked six days a week, but after hours and on Sunday, he explored the area around McMurdo and got to know his intrepid and fun-loving colleagues, some of whom had started out in the station's galley and worked their way up to operating heavy equipment.

Contractors run the power and desalinization plants and generally keep the infrastructure in tip-top condition at McMurdo and other research stations, so scientists from around the world can study the weather, volcanoes and climate change, among other topics.

He added that summer temperatures, once typically in the teens and 20s, “are now creeping up into the 30s”—a sign of climate change. However, it still gets plenty cold. During his stay, the typical low temperature was a couple of degrees below zero.

The windy, dry conditions created a startling situation. High discovered that when he touched metal surfaces, long jagged lines of static electricity would shoot out from his fingers, “like the emperor from ‘Star Wars.’” He learned to ground himself first to avoid getting shocked.

Antarctica is in many ways what High calls “a sterile environment,” due to the extreme cold. There are no insects or vermin, but penguins, seals and huge

seabirds called skuas manage to thrive there—and High has the photos to prove it.

Human society is quite different from what most people are used to. High said there were between 500 and 1,000 people at McMurdo during his time there, and during the dark, inhospitable winter, the number drops to around 150. In his estimation, the ratio of men to women was about 18-to-1, with men dominating carpentry, welding and other trades and women filling many of the clerical and galley jobs. His boss at the wastewater facility, however, was a woman, and there were women who worked as “fuelies” refueling planes.

To handle living near the South Pole for a few months or longer, he said, “You have to go with the understanding that, above all else, you’re there as support. It’s something you go into and you think, ‘Wow, this is something I’ve never seen before, and I’ll probably never see again, and it’s really great to be here.’”

But, he noted, it is a work assignment and must be treated that way.

Beyond that, he added, “You have to be able to live with pretty much no contact with the outside world other than phone calls and computer. . . . You have to be able to live inside yourself to some degree.”

He said, “Most people love it while they’re there” but are happy when the time comes to return to their families and the creature comforts of home.

High and the other contractors were assigned roommates and lived in furnished dormitory rooms, each of which came with a TV tuned in to the American Forces Network. They could communicate via Skype with family and friends back home, and High talked by satellite phone every day with Bucci. The internet service was “fairly good,” but there were no accessible radio stations other than the one at McMurdo run by volunteers.

In addition to a salary, contractors received free room and board. High said food was plentiful and available at all hours, but there were times when bad weather prevented planes from bringing in fresh food—“freshies,” in local parlance—and every meal came from cans. That was “not all that much fun,” High admitted.

During their free time, he and his coworkers played ping pong and pool, hiked and watched videos. They could also go on “boondoggles,” working trips that

involved digging supplies out of a depot on ice, or take “morale trips” via helicopter. There is a crafts room on the base and a non-denominational church, Chapel of the Snows.

High ended his assignment in February and took a restorative vacation in St. Thomas with Bucci before settling in at home.

“I’m enjoying rain and nighttime and getting what I want to eat,” he said.

High has crossed Antarctica off his bucket list. But that doesn’t mean he’s gotten it out of his system: “I was offered a contract to come back next October.”

Still missing

Investigators continue search for Samantha Clarke

BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Staff Writer

If Samantha Clarke is still alive, she is 28 years old and hasn't been in contact with her mother in nine years. If she's still alive, she doesn't look the same as she does in photos that have circulated ever since the police investigation began shortly after her disappearance late on the night of Sept. 13, 2010.

The pictures of her at 19 show a smiling young woman with long brown hair, often worn in a bun, a somewhat unusual style for a teenage girl. She wears glasses, but you can see that her eyes are brown.

Her 2010 high school graduation photo is especially striking. Something of the woman she might be at 30 or 40 emerges from that picture in which Clarke, like all the girls in her graduating class at Orange County High School (OCHS), wears an off-the-shoulder black dress. Lit with golden highlights, her hair flows down her shoulders. There is a thoughtful, mature look in the tilt of her head and her compressed smile.

Clarke's mother, Barbara Tinder, has a "pose book" full of pictures taken during the graduation photo shoot. Sitting outside her apartment on Church Street in Orange as dusk fell on Monday afternoon, Tinder said she also

has kept all of her daughter's possessions and has copies of most of the articles written about the search for her missing daughter.

The hope, of course, is that Samantha will come home and resume her life with her family, but Tinder is realistic.

"I hope and pray every day," she said, "but it's just been too long without contacting a family member. That's just not Samantha."

The night Clarke left home, Tinder was working the night shift at Rigid Products on Old Gordonsville Road. During her break, she called home because she saw on her cellphone that someone had tried to reach her from her home phone. Her son Hunter, 12 years old at the time, told her Samantha had gone out. It was Samantha who had called but not left a message.

Clarke's departure didn't make sense. Tinder said her daughter didn't like going out by herself at night, and she'd left very late, after midnight.

Tinder finished her shift and came home. Her daughter was still out. She went to bed and when she woke up and Clarke wasn't home, she knew she had to go to the police.

Still an active case

In the ensuing, chaotic days, the police search focused on locations in Greene County and Orange. A key person of interest was Randy Taylor, a new acquaintance of Clarke's, but Taylor was never charged in the Clarke case.

In May of 2014, Taylor was sentenced in Nelson County Circuit Court to two life terms for killing 17-year-old Alexis Murphy. In the fall of 2014, about 150 law enforcement officers and volunteers searched for Clarke on 200 acres of land in Eheart in Orange County. Police knew of a connection between Taylor and the property, privately owned by a hunt club. The search didn't turn up Clarke's body, nor did multiple searches of a Greene County lake.

Clarke's disappearance remains actively under investigation, according to both Orange County Commonwealth's Attorney Diana O'Connell and Orange Chief of Police Jim Fenwick.

Fenwick said his lead investigator on the case, Evans Oakerson, retired, but he brought the detective back on a part-time basis a couple of years ago to continue working the Clarke case. He said much of the focus has been on prodding other law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, to keep the investigation going.

“At the beginning of the case, we got tons of information coming in. It’s gotten much more sporadic at this point,” he said, though he stressed the case is active and a top priority for him.

“Ninety-nine percent of what we’ve had to do in this case has been outside this town,” he said. “Probably more like 99.5 percent in terms of following up on leads.”

“A good student, a good person”

So much time has passed since her disappearance that few people at the high school remember Clarke and those that do have only faint recollections of her.

Kim Harris, the testing coordinator at OCHS, was a guidance counselor when Clarke was a high school student, but she wasn’t on Harris’ list of advisees. Still, Harris knew who she was and who some of her friends were.

“She was always real sweet and pleasant and polite. She would speak in the hallways,” Harris said.

Reflecting on the long years of Clarke’s absence, Harris said the lack of closure in the case must be “very difficult” for Clarke’s family. “It’s just very sad. It’s really sad for the family.”

Gene Kotulka, principal at OCHS during the time Clarke was a student there, is now superintendent of schools in Allegheny County. Commenting by phone while driving to Pittsburgh, Kotulka said, “She was a good student, a good person. She was quiet and did what she needed to do to graduate from high school.”

By the time Clarke disappeared, Kotulka was working in the central office for Orange County Public Schools. He said he and everybody else in the main office felt “awful” when word got out that the recent graduate was missing.

Longtime secretary to the OCHS principal Betty Almond didn’t know Clarke, but like Harris, she spoke with great sympathy for Clarke’s family.

“It’s one thing to lose a child and bury them. But to not know what happens to your child would be difficult for any parent. I can’t imagine what you go through with something like that,” Almond said.

“Being there was some hope”

Tall, with long brown hair and green eyes full of anger and sadness, Tinder, 44, is a familiar sight to people who go up and down Church Street because she is so often out on the patio, smoking and watching over her young son, Matthew. She makes no secret of the pain she is in.

She is disabled, lonely and depressed and said she has no one to lean on now that her sister Brenda Rhoades is dead. A resident of Rapidan, Rhoades died of cancer in August.

When she was growing up in Orange, Tinder was in what she calls the “slow learning” group at school. Her home life was hard, and she ended up running away and dropping out of school after eighth grade.

She said her daughter was taken away from her when Samantha was around 3 years old. Tinder was homeless at the time, but she visited with her every other Saturday. Then, when the girl was 13 or 14, she wrote her mother a letter and said she wanted to come live with her.

With the new arrangement in place, Clarke spent her teen years in Orange and lived with her mother and brother in an apartment on Lindsay Drive. Tinder explained that she would still live there if the remodeling of the apartment complex hadn’t forced her to move out, seven years after Clarke vanished.

She is haunted by the thought that Clarke doesn’t have her current phone number and wouldn’t be able to find her if she came back to Orange.

“It’s the last place she knows where I could be,” she said of her former residence on Lindsay Drive. “Being there was some hope.”

“So much I’d like answers for”

A single mother, Tinder has a young son, Matthew, age 7, who lives with her along with her older son, Hunter, 22. She said it’s hard to provide for the family on the \$800/month check she receives for being on disability.

But when asked to describe her daughter’s high school experience and outside interests, Tinder brightened slightly. She said Clarke liked her algebra class at the high school.

“She liked to cook. She liked gym. She liked to be moving, exercising, working out,” Tinder said.

Clarke’s cooking specialties were baked goods, including cakes, cookies and brownies, and yams with brown sugar and marshmallows.

“She liked pretty much all animals,” Tinder said. “She used to have rats, hamsters, gerbils, numerous of dogs, numerous of cats.”

When the family lived on Lindsay Drive, Clarke had a gerbil and a “bobtail” cat. After the cat ran off, she got another one she named Booger. Later, she had a beagle she kept at her boyfriend’s house.

In high school, Clarke and her boyfriend at the time used to do yard work after school to earn spending money.

“They would go out to eat together or they would go to the malls to buy clothes or a new pair of shoes,” Tinder said.

Clarke and her boyfriend were together for three years before breaking up in August of 2010. At the time of her disappearance, Clarke hadn’t yet gotten her driver’s license or made firm career plans.

Tinder speaks with weary regret of what appears to be a foreshortened life. But given the chance to imagine a conversation with her daughter, she knows what she would ask.

“Where’s she been all these years? Why’d you leave?” Tinder said. “There’s so much I’d like to have answers for.”

Ridgeway ready for the challenge

First-time candidate felt a “call” to run for office

BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Staff Writer

Ann F. Ridgeway has the open, trusting face of someone used to finding the good in people. She is not a career politician and doesn't act like one. When news broke that her opponent for state delegate, Republican incumbent Nick Freitas, had failed to file his candidacy paperwork on time and wasn't scheduled to appear on the Nov. 5 ballot, she didn't gloat.

Instead, the Democratic challenger made it clear she was waiting, just like everyone else, to see what would happen. As Freitas made repeated attempts to get on the ballot, she attended to the logistics of her own campaign. High on her to-do list was finding a campaign manager who was the right fit.

A week before Freitas announced he would launch a write-in campaign, when he was still angling for a spot on the ballot, she said, without sarcasm, “Poor Nick. He just messed up. Now he's having to deal with his mess-up.”

Ridgeway, 67, is a resident of Locust Dale in Madison County and a first-time candidate for political office. The Fredericksburg native is the daughter of Thomas G Faulkner Jr., the rector of St. George's Episcopal Church in Fredericksburg for 30 years, and Mary Faulkner, who started the Fredericksburg Interfaith Council. She says social justice was extremely important to her late parents. She speaks with pride of her father's involvement in civil rights activities at a time when few other white ministers in the area shared his commitment.

The youngest of three children, she graduated from Old Dominion University in 1976 with a degree in psychology. She has spent her career in Orange County, first as a juvenile probation officer and later

as a substitute teacher at Orange County High School, often doing long-term duty for several months in one classroom. At the request of the school administration, she went on to revamp the in-school suspension program at the high school.

She also helped start the Orange County Youth Commission and the Orange County Youth Council. Through her involvement with the council, she created a school division-wide festival of the arts and sciences and helped launch the Orange County Recreation Department, among many other projects. She has volunteered with 4-H clubs in Madison and Orange counties and hosted the Locust Dale Farm Riding program for children at her home.

She and her husband, Michael, have two grown daughters, Sarah and Katherine. Michael is a retired schoolteacher who taught for a year at Prospect Heights Middle School but spent the bulk of his career teaching at various schools in Spotsylvania County.

When Ridgeway speaks of her family life, a heartbreaking story emerges. She and her husband had a third child, who died in a car crash at age 6 in 1997.

Her gaze direct, she says, “I'm a survivor. I've got a really thick skin.”

She recalls how her daughters got home one day and said they'd seen a wreck on Route 614; they wanted to know where their father's car was. Ridgeway was not worried because her husband rarely came home on that road. He was out with his mother and young Michael, and she expected they would be back before long.

Then she got a phone call from the University of Virginia hospital saying her husband and mother-in-law had been admitted for treatment after a car accident. When she asked about her son, the response was, “We don't know about your son.” It took a call to the Orange County Sheriff's Office for her to find out he had died. A driver had come over a steep rise on Route 614 and hit her husband's car and pushed it off the road.

It was only fairly recently that Ridgeway began getting involved in local politics. She helped with Democrat Leslie Cockburn's campaign for representative in Virginia's 5th Congressional District. (Cockburn lost to Republican Denver Riggleman.)

Although she had no political aspirations, her friend Suzanne Long, chair of the 5th District Democratic Committee, encouraged her to run for Freitas' seat.

The suggestion startled Ridgeway, but she couldn't put it out of her mind. Her friend Betty Long encouraged her to go for it. As she thought things over, she began having strange experiences that felt spiritual in nature. In a conversation with a minister, she described what she was going through.

He told her, "You've had a calling from God."

Ridgeway responded incredulously, "To run for political office?"

The minister told her God calls people to do all sorts of things.

With that in mind, she consulted Harold Boyd of Culpeper, a friend since childhood who has been involved in Democratic politics for years. She also traveled to Richmond to visit the Virginia State Capitol and the Pocahontas Building, where Freitas' office is located.

The point of the visit to the capitol, she said, was to ask herself, "How does it feel to get there and be in the belly of the beast?"

It felt OK. Finally, after much reflection, she decided to run for the seat. Her key issues include seeking increased funding for people suffering from mental health and substance abuse problems and helping ensure that Virginia's citizens have access to affordable healthcare. Her campaign website lists protection of the environment, veterans' needs, women's healthcare, education and rural broadband as other focus areas.

She is a gun owner who advocates for gun safety. On her website, she says legislators must set aside their differences and work toward "common-sense gun legislation reform."

She said that before Freitas became embroiled in the problems created by submitting his paperwork late, she gave herself a 40% chance of winning. Now she sees it as more like 50/50.

Acknowledging that the race is an "uphill battle" in a district that has traditionally favored Republicans, she said, "I'm happy to trudge up that hill. It's not a problem."