

# THREE'S COMPANY



Virginia is mired in an unprecedented political crisis, with the commonwealth's top three Democratic elected officials caught up in controversy. A racist photo in Gov. Ralph Northam's medical school yearbook has led to nearly universal calls for his resignation. Attorney General Mark Herring, after calling for Northam to step down, has now admitted he too wore blackface in the 1980s. And Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax, who would take over should Northam resign, is facing detailed allegations of sexual assault.

# Scandal engulfs Virginia

## Northam, Herring admit to wearing blackface in 1980s

BY **NATHANIEL CLINE**  
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Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring (D) admitted on Wednesday to wearing blackface while at the University of Virginia in 1980.

Herring's admission comes less than a week after Gov. Ralph Northam (D) faced questions and calls for his resignation over a racially offensive photo in his medical school yearbook. Aside from the yearbook question, Northam admitted he wore blackface to mimic Michael Jackson during a dance contest in the 1980s.

On Wednesday, Herring, a Loudoun County resident and former county supervisor, said as a 19-year-old undergraduate in college, some of his friends dressed like rappers — inspired by hip hop artist Kurtis Blow — wearing wigs and brown makeup. He was among them.

"I am sure we all have done things at one time or another in our lives that show poor judgment, and worse yet, have caused some level of pain to others. I have a glaring example from my past that I have thought about with deep regret in the many years since, and certainly each time I took a step forward in public service, realizing that my goals and this memory could someday collide and cause pain for people I care about, those who stood with me in the many years since, or those who I hoped to serve while in office," Herring said in a prepared statement.

The attorney general continued, "That conduct clearly shows that, as a young man, I had a callous and inexcusable lack of awareness and insensitivity to the pain my behavior could inflict on others. It was really a minimization of both people of color, and a minimization of a horrific history I knew well even then."

Herring said he is "deeply, deeply sorry" and hopes "in the days ahead, honest conversations and discussions will make it clear whether [he] can or should continue to serve as attorney general."

Herring announced in late 2018 that he plans to seek the governor's mansion in 2021.

Governor Northam initially apologized for being in the yearbook photo following its widespread release on Feb. 1, but the next day he said he does not believe it's him in the image. Northam has resisted calls from leaders of his own party to resign. The photo in question, which shows one person in blackface and another in a Ku Klux Klan robe, appeared on Northam's 1984 yearbook page from Eastern Virginia Medical School.



Facebook/Attorney General Mark Herring  
Virginia Lt. Gov. Ralph Northam (D), left, and Attorney General Mark Herring (D)

The medical school announced on Tuesday an independent investigation is underway pertaining to the photo in the yearbook.

Loudoun County NAACP President Michelle Thomas said her organization is not seeking the attorney general's resignation, but "rather atonement, a measurable path to justice, equality, healing and racial reconciliation."

Thomas said she believes Herring is "perfectly positioned for leading the pathway out of the darkness of racism into the light of unity."

Thomas, who has called for Northam's resignation, said she is still numb to all the news out of Richmond over the past week.

"A couple of days later to find out that your beloved attorney general has participated in racist activity—you're still numb," Thomas said. "The governor hasn't stepped down. He's unrepentant. There's almost no words for the callousness and lack of respect of the people he hurt—the African-American community — and so when this comes along with Mark, you ask, 'How much do we not want to know about our elected officials?'"

### **RANDALL, WEXTON CALL FOR NORTHAM TO RESIGN**

Loudoun County Chairwoman Phyllis Randall (D) called for Northam to resign as the racist photo scandal hit.

"It's hard not to feel stunned at the now confirmed photo of Gov. Ralph Northam," Randall said. "Yes I realize it was 35 years ago and he's no doubt very regretful; however, 1984 was not so long ago, and there is no possible way to believe that was acceptable. To be clear, I denounce and condemn in the strongest possible terms that picture. I also have grave concerns that anyone in my party would defend this picture. I wish the governor all the best but yes, he must resign."

Northam has signaled he intends to stay in office.

During a press conference in Richmond on Feb. 2, the governor said he doesn't believe he is in the photo, which was on Northam's page in the yearbook.

The photo in question is one of four on the page. The other three clearly show Northam.

The governor suggested there was a mix-up in the compilation of the yearbook, and that's how the photo ended up on what essentially amounts to his personal profile page.

The governor said he isn't excusing the "racist" and "horrifying" content on the page.

Northam said he has "reflected with [his] family and classmates and affirmed that [he is] not the person in that photo."

"I recognize that many people will find this difficult to believe," he said, referencing his earlier apology for being he in the photo.

But the governor could not clearly say why he quickly apologized for being in the photo if he wasn't certain it was him.

Unprovoked and in prepared statements, Northam did admit to wearing blackface on another occasion in the 1980s — during a dance contest in San Antonio when he was dancing like Michael Jackson.

At one point during the press conference, a reporter asked Northam if he could still do the moonwalk. The governor appeared to be considering performing Michael Jackson's famous dance move mid-event before his wife cautioned "inappropriate circumstances."

The Democratic Party of Virginia maintained its call for Northam to resign following the press conference, as did the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Rep. Jennifer Wexton (D-Va.-10th) said after the press conference that Wexton stands by a statement issued Feb. 2 calling for the governor to resign.

"We've spoken twice since this story broke, and I encouraged him to resign because it's what's best for Virginia," Wexton said on Twitter. "This is a difficult time for our commonwealth, but I know we can move forward and start healing under the leadership of Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax."

Wexton on Feb. 1 condemned the picture, but she stopped short of calling for his resignation.

Phillip Thompson, a civil rights advocate and the former Loudoun NAACP president, echoed the calls for resignation.

"He should for the good of the state and country resign immediately," Thompson told the Times-Mirror. "His attempt to alter the truth only makes the circumstances worse. Wearing blackface and then admitting to wear blackface is the same thing. African-Americans are not your personal joke. Resign now."

Republican leaders across the commonwealth have roundly called for Northam's resignation.

"Why has Gov. Northam not resigned yet?" John Whitbeck, a GOP candidate for Loudoun County Chairman, said. "Republicans and Democrats are united in the belief that he should immediately. If he does not, the General Assembly should take action."

# THE SOUND OF SURVIVAL

Members of A Place to Be's stroke survivor choir perform their holiday concert earlier this month. A Place to Be is a music therapy nonprofit based in Middleburg.

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Times-Mirror/John Battiston

# The healing power of music

A Place to Be offers support, community through stroke survivor choir



Times-Mirror Photos/John Battiston

A Place to Be therapist Skylar Freeman and the nonprofit's co-founder, Tom Sweitzer, rehearse with the organization's stroke survivor choir.

**BY JOHN BATTISTON**

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One of the greatest challenges for recovering stroke survivors is regaining a sense of self, and the Different Strokes for Different Folks choir gives new meaning to the idea of finding one's voice.

Tom Sweitzer, co-founder of Middleburg-based music therapy organization A Place to Be, began the choir five years ago to help stroke survivors work toward regaining their verbal skills, memory and physicality.

"Music, its ability with text, its ability with rhythm, connects to a human being in the brain where nothing else can," Sweitzer told the Times-Mirror. "We find a lot of music ... to be something that not only engages their memory but prompts them for words that they might not be able to access very easily."

During the group's final rehearsal before its Dec. 8 Christmas concert, it's clear each of these people has been affected by his or her stroke differently. Some members are able to sing operatic solos or play power chords on an electric guitar, while others struggle to form sentences, let alone words, between songs.

Further, some members suffer from neurological damage other than having



Singers in the stroke survivor choir practice their songs.

had a stroke: one has Parkinson's while another is grappling with dementia. According to Sweitzer, this variety of challenges is what makes something so universal and all-engaging as music such a useful tool.

"We take in consideration where everybody is in their healing journey," he said. "If we're maybe dancing to music, but we know somebody only has the ability to tap their toe or move their toe, we

make that their success."

Perhaps the choir's greatest draw, however, is the sense of community it creates between people who endure similar difficulties, and who might have trouble engaging with those who don't. Cate Bartaim — a stroke survivor who attends rehearsals with her longtime partner, Bob O'Connor — said she enjoys singing with others much like she did in her youth, and the choir thus "allows me to

seem and feel more normal."

"We do a lot of joking and teasing and listening," said Jim Burns, a life coach who volunteers by interacting with and encouraging the other singers. "Some days we'll go around the room and talk about what we're experiencing, or what was difficult this week, or what was great this week."

The familial bond between members has grown so strong that they'll often spend time together outside rehearsals or recitals. Sometimes they'll exercise together, other times they'll arrange trips to the movies — almost always independent from the choir's organizers.

"We've never put together an outing for them besides what we do as a choir. Their socialization and their friend group, their family group that they have created, completely was created by them themselves," Sweitzer said.

Not that there isn't fun to be had between singers and leaders. Sweitzer and other music therapists at A Place to Be lead the collective while playing a number of instruments — keyboard, guitar, cello, percussion — and everyone present exchanges a steady stream of wisecracks, laughs and smiles while gathered.

This genuine, open feeling was just

See **MUSIC 7**



Times-Mirror Photos/John Battiston

A Place to Be musicians Brandon Hassan and Alec Reynante rehearse with the stroke survivor choir.

**MUSIC** from 6

as apparent during rehearsal as it was at the Christmas concert at Middleburg's The Hill School, where Sweitzer once taught music. No invisible barrier stood between the audience and the on-stage performers, if one could even call the recital performative — "celebratory" is far more fitting a word.

Yuletide tunes on the setlist included "A Holly Jolly Christmas" and Howard Blake's "Walking in the Air," though a few not-so-holiday-themed songs managed to slip in as well, notably Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger," a real crowd-pleaser. Keeping with that song's theme of endurance in the face of great trial, the show wrapped up with a song the group penned together, "We Are Survivors."

During an instrumental break in the

finale, singers took turns rattling off what they love about music therapy and being a part of Different Strokes.

"Seeing all these good people," one singer said.

"All the songs are so inspirational, and I love to sing them," said Bartaim.

Sweitzer, the last to pitch in before the final verse, said, "I love how brave everybody is."

An annual tradition since the group's inception, Sweitzer hopes more people will flock to the Different Strokes for Different Folks Christmas concert in years to come and be inspired by the courage on display.

"In the holidays we are really desperately looking for hope, and I think when you watch them perform, hope is what you get," he said.



"We take in consideration where everybody is in their healing journey," said Tom Sweitzer, the stroke survivor choir's director.



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# CHIP: A LOVE STORY



The hunt for  
the promiscuous  
peacock

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**FIRST PERSON | TREVOR BARATKO**

# A promiscuous peacock brings a community together

Kate Hogan was having the time of her life in Italy. Her pet peacock Chip was just trying to do the same in Loudoun.

Early last week, Hogan was celebrating her brother's wedding abroad when she got word from her friend Kelly Rutkowski: Chip, whom Rutkowski was *supposed to be* keeping an eye on, had escaped his Lucketts-area home after being spooked by Viking, the resident black lab.

You'll soon learn this wasn't a complete surprise – Chip, that rascal, is prone to perversity.

Hogan was concerned, of course, but she was also some 4,000 miles away, carousing with people close to her soul. There wasn't much she could do.

But there's always social media. So Hogan put out the call – only she was more honest about her beloved peafowl than most.

“Hello!” Hogan opened her Facebook plea. “One of my peacocks broke out of bird jail and is running the town on a wild bender. He's an aloof Spaulding male named Chip, which he refuses to respond to despite it being a perfectly nice name. The only thing he likes more than cat food is sex. If you see him trying to seduce your cat or hear him screaming from your rooftop, please comment or contact Kelly Rutkowski, who is kindly helping me round him up while I'm out of town. We live on Stumptown Road, so he could be



An ill-manner peacock named Chip escaped his Lucketts area home last week.

anywhere in the Lucketts, Waterford, Taylorstown area.”

Click by click, share by share, the uninhibited nature of Hogan's message cap-

tured the Loudoun community's attention. The Hunt for the Promiscuous Peacock was on.

Hogan's post caught our eye late April

25, and we saw it as a community newspaper's duty to help spread the word: a randy peacock is on the loose.

After our initial report April 26, several majors news outlets – The Washington Post, WTOP, NBC Washington – picked up the story. Within five days, Rutkowski estimated, she received 40 reports of Chip sightings around rural Loudoun.

“I would've never thought this many people would constantly be aware and looking out,” Rutkowski told the Times-Mirror this week. “It's been interesting to see the power of social media and how this community, if we work together – how many people care. It has made me see the good in the community.”

Still, as in life, we take the good with the bad – or at least the daunting uncertainty. At press time, Chip remained at large.

Considering the uproar he's caused, we indeed hope Chip has been enjoying himself. Perhaps he's found love. As Hogan told us, her lothario is just two years old – the equivalent of a “teenage boy” – and he's entering his first mating season.

As they say, you never forget your first.

*Those still on the hunt for Chip can contact us at [LTMeditor@loudountimes.com](mailto:LTMeditor@loudountimes.com) and we'll share your message with Hogan and Rutkowski. Contact Baratko at [tbaratko@loudountimes.com](mailto:tbaratko@loudountimes.com).*