

# arts & culture



SCOTT ELMQUIST

## Dolly Doldrums

A recent transplant to Richmond finds some celebrity takers for her sad, frowny-faced dolls.

by Karen Newton

**T**hings began to feel a little surreal just before Christmas when Rebecca Floyd found herself packing up a doll to send to Oprah.

A decade earlier, she was a new mother with a young son and time on her hands. The transition moving to Richmond from New York — where she'd earned her living photographing book covers — was accompanied by the adjustment of having a baby. As gifts for her son rolled in, she was struck by how every toy had a smiling face.

"All smiles. I got tired of the big, plastic smiles on everything," Floyd says.

Her response was to make a sad,

frowning doll out of gray socks. "I know it sounds a little strange. In the beginning, the idea was to create an empathetic doll that kids could relate to when they were feeling sad." She envisioned parents using Frowny Face Dolls to help children too young to vocalize sadness understand that everyone feels that way sometime.

Soon friends began asking her to make their children Frowny Face Dolls and a web-based home business was born with the tag line, "You're not happy all the time. Why

**Rebecca Floyd started making dolls with frowns because she was tired of all the smiling ones. Soon she began making them for people as varied as Oprah, Debra Messing and an all-girls school in New York. "I was told one man died holding his," she says.**

should your dolls be?" The classic Frowny Face Doll is available with braids, a fringe of hair under a cap or just a stocking cap, with eyes and frown being embroidered on the face.

Then a friend whose mother had just been diagnosed with cancer asked for one and Floyd became convinced that there was an even greater need for empathetic dolls. Her organized home studio got messier with additional supplies everywhere as she increased output.

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“I was told one man died holding his,” she says. “That was sad, but it made me feel good.”

Last year, she noticed that one of her sock dolls bore a striking resemblance to Melania Trump. It was enough to inspire her to start an Instagram celebrity page — @frownyfacedolls — and motivate her to make a celebrity sock doll every day.

“Instagram has been a truly amazing outlet for me because I can actually reach untouchable people using tags,” she says.

Once she began creating dolls for people like Mo Rocca, Michael J. Fox, Maria Shriver, George Stephanopoulos and Lady Gaga — even porn star Ron Jeremy rated a likeness — some of the celebrities began contacting her back, eager to own Frowny Face Dolls that resembled them. Debra Messing was so enchanted with hers that she made a video with it and went on record as saying that you weren’t officially a celebrity until you had a Frowny Face Doll made in your image.

Floyd sees celebrities as needing a sad outlet just like the rest of us.

“It doesn’t matter how thin, rich or beautiful a celebrity is, they still get sad sometimes,” she explains. “And celebrities get that it’s funny to see a sad version of yourself on a sock.”

Once Instagram boosted the dolls’ profile, custom orders began coming in. Rosanna Arquette ordered one in her likeness wearing a “Fuck Trump”

T-shirt. Once the Insta masses saw that, it became one of Floyd’s best-sellers, as is the frowny Ruth Bader Ginsburg doll. With quiet understatement, she acknowledges, “It turns out that adults really dig them, too,” while acknowledging that perhaps we live in frown-inducing times, too.

Business has been augmented by custom orders from noncelebrities, too. The all-girl, private Spence School in New York contracted her to make 68 Frowny Dolls of its graduating class. When a woman sent Floyd a photograph of herself and her girlfriends, she re-created each woman’s ensemble, from dress to jewelry to hats. Floyd laughingly admits to spending a lot of time at Diversity Thrift sifting through old jewelry for pieces to use.

“If someone wants a doll of their mother and they tell me she always wore a shell-shaped gold necklace, I’ll go so far as to go get the clay, sculpt it and paint it gold,” she says. “That’s the most fun.”

In addition to the classic, celebrity and custom dolls, Floyd also makes Faerie Frownys, complete with tulle wings and colorful flower appliques. When her husband’s uncle was headed to the World of Faerie Festival in Chicago, he asked her to make 20 Frowny Faerie Dolls to market and sold out the first day.

Frowning, it seems, is in. No word on how Oprah liked her doll, but Bo Derek and Charo both admitted to loving theirs. **S**

**Humorist  
Mo Rocca  
holds his  
Frowny  
Face Doll.**



# SMALL TALK

WEEKLY



**How a City Council member's past is helping shape Richmond's future.**

by Carol A.O. Wolf

## Gray's World

# The Black and White of Gray's World

A voice of change in local politics, City Council member Kimberly Gray is helping bridge our cultural divide.

by Carol A.O. Wolf

**STANDING ON A PORCH IN THE MAYMONT NEIGHBORHOOD**, she looked up nervously at her big brother, who was four-and-a-half. They held tightly to each other's hands, the way children do when really scared. They stared down at their feet, the way children do when they're nervous and don't know what else to do. She wanted to cry but squeezed her eyes shut.

The children's father stepped up and knocked again on the storm door, using his keys this time to tap a distinctive rhythm before stepping away. Finally, the door opened and a short, stout black woman with light skin stared down at them, silent at first. Then she spoke the words that changed their lives.

"[She said] 'I was worried that I might look at you and hate you. But all I see right now are two little angels sent to me by God for me to love,'" recalls the little boy today with crystalline clarity. "Then she knelt down, hugged us and brought

us inside."

Their father followed them into their new home.

The lady was Gertie Elam Gray, the wife of their father, Edward Earl Gray, a black man known as Earl. The children — Jeffrey and Kimberly — were the products of an affair Earl had been having for years with a white woman in Fulton Hill.

The children's maternal great-grandmother had contacted Gertie and told her that something needed to be done. The kids weren't safe because their mother couldn't keep them safe in the segregated and severely racist neighborhood where she lived. So Gertie sent Earl to pick them up.

Race relations in the city at the time, the early 1970s, were marked by the constant threat of violence simmering just below the surface. White anger was visible at many demonstrations against the busing orders of U.S. District Court Judge Robert R. Merhige Jr., then the most hated

man in Richmond, who ruled that schools in Richmond, Henrico and Chesterfield would be merged and students would be bused to achieve desegregation.

Segregationists threatened his family, spat in his face and shot his dog to death after tying its legs. Protesters held weekly parades outside his home. A guest cottage on his property, where his mother-in-law lived, was burned to the ground. Oliver W. Hill Sr., one of the lawyers who helped bring the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case to the U.S. Supreme Court, had a cross burned in his yard.

Within this polarized world, the little girl bonded quickly with Gertie, though she was afraid to go to sleep. She ended up sleeping next to Gertie with her fingers twisted around the woman's hair and a little leg flopped across her stomach because she was so worried someone would try to steal her away in the night. Her brother was traumatized as

photos by Scott Elmquist



Gray understands that Richmond still has distinctly white and black neighborhoods, as it did when she was a child. As the 2nd District School Board member she represented Fox Elementary, a largely white school in an affluent neighborhood, as well as Carver Elementary, a largely black school that served students from the housing projects. Since 2017, she has represented the 2nd District on City Council.



**Mayor Levar Stoney cuts the ceremonial ribbon Sept. 27 to reopen Monroe Park after a 22-month restoration. Among other dignitaries he is flanked by Michael Rao, VCU president, Alice McGuire Massie of the Monroe Park Conservancy and Kim Gray.**

well, but sleep came easier for him since he didn't have to worry so much about keeping his little sister safe.

Somehow, Gertie and Earl survived the trauma of how they came to be a family of four and not only dearly loved these children, but remained married to one another until their deaths.

"Gertie absolutely saved our lives," says City Council member Kimberly B. Gray, the little girl who stood on the porch 45 years ago trying not to cry and desperately squeezing her big brother's hand.

Elected to serve on the Richmond School Board in 2008, Gray, a Richmond native and a divorced mother of seven children, two by adoption, wasn't expected to win.

Her 2008 victory first surprised — then stunned — political insiders, not only because she upset the incumbent, widely considered a shoo-in for the School Board chairmanship, but because she outpolled newly-elected U.S. President Barack

Obama, 6,027 to 5,755 in the 2nd District. The win also made her the first female of color and the first African-American elected to represent the district.

Yet, if news reporters and pundits were surprised by her victory, Gray's family and close friends were not.

"Kim grew up knowing the importance of knocking on doors and conquering her fears," recalls Jeffrey Gray, her big brother. "She tended to be sort of shy and soft when we were students at John B. Cary. She toughened up when we got into middle and high schools."

He explains that she figured out that the best way to deal with a bully was never to let a bully get away with it.

"We had to get tough, she had to get tough — it was the times."

**IT'S AN UNDERSTATEMENT TO NOTE THAT THE LATE 1960S AND EARLY 1970S** were a tumultuous time. As a nation, we put a man on the moon, experienced Wood-

stock, watched soldiers slog through jungles in Vietnam on the nightly news and saw far too many come home in body bags and coffins. And in Richmond, capital of the Confederacy and the birthplace of Massive Resistance, the '70s ushered in an era of anti-busing hysteria and heightened racial tension.

Driving through her old neighborhood, Kim Gray, 48, reflects on her journey from that life-changing day at 1801 Greenville Ave. to City Council chambers in Richmond City Hall. She remembers what it was like to be a biracial child in Richmond during that time. She felt blessed to grow up in the Maymont area, "such a nice African-American middle-class neighborhood."

"It was like growing up in a small town," she explains. "It was a sheltered and idyllic childhood in so many respects. Gertie was a master gardener and would share the vegetables she grew. Everyone knew each other and everyone took care of

one another. If you needed something sewed, you knew whose house to go to. If you needed something fixed, you knew whose house to go to. If you or a child was sick, if you were having a baby, you knew where to find help. You knew."

Driving past the street where her father grew up (Kemper) and past the corner where her grandfather ran a blacksmith shop for years, originally in Jackson Ward and later at Allen Avenue and Main Street, she recalls family stories about when she first moved from Fulton Hill, a largely white neighborhood, to the Maymont area, a largely black neighborhood.

The adults in her family "used to laugh at us good-naturedly because we were terrified to look out the window and see so many black people. We were seriously afraid. It was really hard to get us to go outside."

Laughing, she says, "You gotta know our family helped us get over *that* real fast." But then she adds in a serious tone,

“You see, even at that young age, we had already been trained to fear dark-skinned people.”

“Despite it all, Gertie and Earl Gray, as we called them, made sure we were raised right and got proper home training,” she says. They were good, hard-working role models. Gertie worked as a domestic and in a doctor’s office. Earl was a porter at the Richmond Airport. The family’s church was the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart and the children learned and lived their Catholic faith.

Earl Gray was a hard-working man by all accounts, as well as a talented musician on the piano and drums. He had started the Earl Gray Orchestra which provided musical background for various legendary performers who played at the Hippodrome Theater at 528 N. Second St. in Jackson Ward. The Hippodrome was part of the Chitlin’ Circuit, a group of venues throughout the South that supported black performers during the days of segregation. Because black performers could rarely afford to travel with their own orchestras, they would hire local musicians to provide backup. In its heyday, Earl Gray’s group accompanied performers such as Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Little Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, Moms Mabley, James Brown, Ida Cox and Ella Fitzgerald.

The children credit Gertie with teaching them about forgiveness and faith. And they credit their father with instilling a love of politics and the necessity to give back to the community. One of Jeff’s earliest memories is watching the news and political talk shows with his father. He recalls being amazed at how his dad would carry on at the television the way some people do when watching sports.

“He *made* us watch,” he says. “He called it ‘history happening in front of our faces.’”

Jeff will never forget at age 5 seeing how visibly upset his father became while watching the news of President Richard Nixon’s resignation.

“You see, my dad was a Republican, an active Republican. But he was an old-school Republican, definitely not like the ones we have today.” Virginia’s first Republican governor since Reconstruction, A. Linwood Holton, appointed Edward Earl Gray to serve on the State Welfare Commission.

Kim Gray says some of her earliest and happiest memories were “the daily outings with my dad in the community—the barbershops, funeral homes visiting the elderly [...] sitting in dimly lit bars and smoke-filled rooms. I would sit at the bar, he would order me a Cherry Coke with extra syrup and I would be real quiet



**Councilwomen Kim Gray and Kristen Nye Larson at Carver Elementary School stand in front of a life-sized cutout of School Superintendent Jason Kamras and Mayor Levar Stoney.**

and take in the hearty political debates. I loved listening to them.”

“I also loved campaigning and using the microphone, asking people to vote for my daddy, Earl Gray [for City Council].” She says that the most valuable lesson she learned from her father was “that it’s much better to make people fall in love rather than trying to make them fall into line.”

Election records show their father was active in the Crusade for Voters and ran unsuccessfully for the House of Delegates in 1971, and the family maintains that he ran unsuccessfully for City Council six years later. Donald Gaines, the assistant voter registrar for the city, explains that due to an order from U.S. Department of Justice there were no City Council elections in the city from 1972 to 1976. The office only recorded the winners of races immediately following release from the order, he says.

Gray and her brother recall that one night close to the City Council campaign, a group of white men attacked and severely beat their father. The beating left him bloody with his teeth knocked out, a broken jaw, several broken bones and a concussion. Earl Gray said at the time that he was told he needed to “stop running with that white woman.” No one could ever identify the attackers but the family believes it was the Ku Klux Klan.

While the white folks were singing “Dixie,” and the black folks were singing “We Shall Overcome,” Kim recalls that the words to the Supremes’ hit song “Love Child” kept playing in her head.

She remembers blaming herself then and again years later when her brother, Jeff, was also attacked and beaten. She also remembers vowing that she would make Richmond a better place for all and that, just as she squeezed her eyes shut on that porch long ago, she could not and would not let anybody see her cry.

GRAY HAS BEEN AN ELECTED OFFICIAL IN RICHMOND FOR THE PAST DECADE. Look her up on the internet. Talk to folks who pay attention to city politics. You’ll discover that many Richmonders rely on her to be a voice of conscience and common sense. You’ll also see that some others see her as an annoying antagonist.

Some want her to run for mayor. Others want to run her out of town.

Roxie Raines Allison, a former president of the Richmond Crusade for Voters and one of Gray’s constituents today, sees a lot of Earl Gray in his daughter. She remembers Earl as “a big man who never minced words ... who stepped on more than a few toes, but always worked harder than he expected anyone else to work.” She says that Kim Gray is similarly “fearless” and loyal.

“She has a unique leadership ability to advocate for what’s right, not what’s easy. Her ability to rise above seemingly insurmountable opposition and build a coalition is impressive.”

— Virginia Delegate  
Jeffrey Bourne



**Kim Gray speaks to constituents of the 8th District on Dec 13 at the Satellite Lounge. Councilwoman Reva Trammel asked Gray to share information on the commission she was proposing to help analyze the proposed \$1.4 billion Coliseum replacement.**

“Kim’s own personal story makes her uniquely situated to bridge Richmond’s changing diverse demographics.”

— Viola O. Baskerville

“She does her homework and is totally comfortable in both the black and white worlds, just like President Barack Obama,” she says. And like Obama, Gray had to fight societal forces that tried to classify her based on skin color instead of character.

Talk to small business owners on Broad Street who lost significant revenue because the Pulse construction took much longer than anticipated, and they will tell you how Gray fought for — and won — compensation for them. Ask Richmond’s first responders who saw the first stage of pay equalization thanks to Gray’s ability to work with her colleagues on City Council. Or meet impoverished families of children who have died unexpectedly and you’ll learn how, in the midst of their grief, Gray helped them find money for a decent dress or suit in which to bury their child.

Some local politicians see her determination as recalcitrance and a refusal to go along to get along. Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney and Dominion Energy Chief Executive Thomas Farrell have been publicly frustrated by her successful insistence on an independent commission to evaluate their \$1.4 billion proposed Navy Hill project to build a new arena and dedicate the taxes from an 80-block area surrounding it to fund the plan.

Gray believes that transparency and accountability are fundamental to any sustained and substantive progress our city makes, she says, and that residents deserve representatives who will look at Richmond’s \$720 million budget and ask the hard questions.

“Frankly, before we undertake some blue-sky, billion-dollar-plus project, we must fix our schools, the potholes, equalize our salaries for first responders, fix our basic infrastructure, work on alternative transportation,” she says.

And while she appreciates all the talk about running for mayor, Gray insists that she remains focused on the job that she has.

“I was elected to serve on City Council and that is my focus,” she says, adding that the job requires strict “attention to basics and [to] watch out for the taxpayers.”

She bristles at the suggestion that those who think her recent call to create an independent panel to evaluate the \$1.4 billion coliseum proposal is an effort to obstruct their plan. “Before we mortgage the future of our city,” Gray says, “we need to ask the hard questions”

Viola O. Baskerville, a lawyer and longtime politician who once served on City Council, as well as a former General Assembly delegate who last served as

secretary of administration in Gov. Tim Kaine’s Cabinet, agrees.

“Her recent call for a commission to review the \$1.4 billion proposal, while not popular in some circles, was the obvious result of listening to constituents,” she says. “Kim’s own personal story makes her uniquely situated to bridge Richmond’s changing diverse demographics.”

Virginia Delegate Jeffrey Bourne, who served on the Richmond School Board with her, recalls Gray’s unwavering commitment to improving the lives of children in Richmond.

“She has a unique leadership ability to advocate for what’s right, not what’s easy,” he says. “Her ability to rise above seemingly insurmountable opposition and build a coalition is impressive.”

Gray understands that Richmond still has distinctly white and black neighborhoods, as it did when she was a child. As the 2nd District School Board member, she represented Fox Elementary, a largely white school in an affluent neighborhood, as well as Carver Elementary, a largely black school that serves students from the housing projects, and various iterations of the Alternative School, a mostly black school for students with discipline and attendance issues. She also represented Richmond on the board of Maggie L. Walker Governor’s School, which sits in her district, and draws a mostly white population of students from 12 surrounding cities and counties.

Alongside former School Board colleague and current City Council member Kristen Larsen of the 4th District, Gray and the board developed a plan to fix school infrastructure issues and finally finish the required Americans with Disabilities Act improvements to Richmond school buildings.

The plan remains unfunded and Gray remains unbowed. She knows that, regardless of color, “all families want options for their children.”

In many respects, Gray’s story is also Richmond’s story, the struggle to reconcile past and present while moving into the future. It is an ongoing struggle for both resident and city, using the past as a crucible to forge an identity that will heal personal pain and bind up the city and the nation’s ancient, still festering racial wounds.

All this looking back at her life had Gray thinking about her own birth mother.

“I appreciate and honor the courage it took for her to allow my father and Gertie to raise us,” she says. “It was a tough decision for her. [And] I am happy to note that she has become a terrific grandmother to my children.” **S**



# news & features



SCOTT ELMQUIST

## No Fly Zone

Dockless scooters promise mobility for all, but recent restrictions limit their operation in Gilpin Court.

by David Streever

**D**errick Gregory doesn't drive to work. The North Side resident commutes to his information-technology job downtown by bike, bus or until recently, an e-scooter. His last trip ended at East Baker and North First streets, where the scooter slowed to a stop.

"As soon as I turned the corner from Duval, onto the bridge going over 95, the scooter started slowing down," Gregory says.

He didn't know what had happened until he looked at the app on his phone:

He'd entered a restricted zone, a geofenced region in which the Bolt company doesn't allow its scooters to operate.

"The app told me I had to move the scooter out of the zone immediately," he says.

He didn't realize he was supposed to manually resume the ride and tried to drag it back to the bridge. This caused another problem. "They have these speakers, and it started saying it would call the police. I couldn't leave it, I couldn't drag it. I felt stuck."

He was able to resume the app and

ride the scooter out of the zone, but it took several tries, leaving him frustrated and stressed out. "There was no warning, no prior information."

According to customer support, restricted areas appear shaded in red on the Bolt app map. But on a weekend afternoon two weeks later, a reporter found

**An abandoned Bolt scooter sits in Gilpin Court. The company has an internal policy of leaving a third of its scooters in low-income neighborhoods, but it has seen more vandalism and damage to its scooters in Richmond than any other city.**

the app still showed Gilpin Court as open, marked in green, despite the restriction. Just as it did for Gregory, the scooter shut down at Baker Street. One other person trying to ride in Gilpin, a local man who asked to be quoted as Ernest M., says the problems are recent and have made it harder for

him to get around.

"I use it when I need to," he says. He doesn't own a car, and sometimes needs to run last-minute errands that don't line up with the bus schedule. He finds the restriction frustrating, but doesn't blame Bolt.

"I'm not trying to be too blunt or blame anybody, but I see some people abusing them in this neighborhood," he says. "They can't come out and say it, but I think they think black folks can't be trusted with them. Of course they're going to punish us for that. It's not fair but that's life."

Ernest says he's seen crimes committed by scooter, petty and serious, and witnessed a lot of vandalism of the devices. Some of those incidents have made it to social media, such as a recent burning of scooters filmed in Gilpin Court and placed on YouTube. Other incidents, like a drive-by paintball gun shooting that left a man blind, have been perpetrated by riders.

According to reporting by Mark Robinson in The Richmond Times-Dispatch, the company has seen more vandalism in Richmond than in any other city, with a third of its scooters taken out of commission. Speaking on condition of ano-

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### **Scooters** *from page 7*

nymity, a Bolt representative confirmed it had restricted operation in Gilpin Court, citing threats to employees who pick up scooters for repairs and charging. The restricted zone begins at Baker Street and ends as far away as South Barton Heights near Tybee Terrace, three-quarters of a mile away.

Although the company made the decision to restrict the scooters, Bolt is working with Richmond police and the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority to curb vandalism and other issues. It described the current restrictions as part of a broader investigation, and the representative said it hopes to lift them soon. As part of that effort, Bolt staff took a walking tour of Gilpin Court with the housing authority's chief executive, Damon Duncan, and the Richmond police, talking to residents about the scooters and other neighborhood issues.

While some cities have mandated equity agreements, formalized contracts to make scooters accessible to low-income residents, Richmond has no such formal agreement with Bolt. Rather, the company has an internal policy of leaving one-third of all scooters in lower-income neighborhoods. Recent comparisons between the Bolt map and census data for household income suggest the company is keeping to this policy.

Still, restricting the scooters from a large housing complex doesn't fit in with statements by Mayor Levar Stoney that the e-scooters could serve all residents by filling a last-mile transportation gap between bus stops and homes. In the case of Gilpin Court, the restrictions have a double impact, affecting both that community and residents in North Side, like Gregory, who commute through the neighborhood to downtown.

While it was an inconvenience for him, Gregory is concerned about disparate impacts on others, saying, "I'm not naive to the fact that I was in a public housing complex."

Bolt says it's committed to the city, although vandalism and restricted zones are only the latest challenges to dockless scooters in Richmond.

The city charges Bolt \$45,000 per year to operate here, making it the highest annual fee for such a company in the country. Although data from Bolt suggests the scooters are wildly popular all over the city, Gregory says the company has lost him as a customer.

"I'm not confident that they'll go where I want to go now," he says. Although he was able to get through Gilpin eventually, it wasn't convenient. "I go through that part of town for work and it's basically my only reason for using them." **S**