

On this day

In 1789, the Bill of Rights was approved by the U.S. House of Representatives.

Neurodiverse farm provides job placement, addresses food insecurity

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Contributing Writer

Organically grown fruits, vegetables and herbs sprawl across an acre of land in Richmond's East End. Welcoming and providing jobs to people with neurological disorders, Frank Community Farm seeks a larger purpose than feeding the community.

Crystal Stokes, president of Frank Community Farm, and Rachel Matthews, vice president of training and behavioral support, founded the business in 2017 after realizing there were disparities in job placement for adults with autism.

"So I thought that my love intertwined — my love for farming and my love for the autism community — could make for a good space for people to learn workplace skills," Stokes said.

Before going into business, Stokes and Matthews worked at the Dominion School for Autism as teacher's assistants.

For Stokes, a fifth-generation farmer, this was the beginning of her journey within social work, marking a significant switch from her past jobs in musical theater. She went on to work in case management and run group homes, or residences providing care for those in need. Stokes said she was able to learn a lot from the individuals she served.

Matthews' desire to help those with neurological disorders stemmed from a personal connection, as her brother has autism. Growing up, she worked at her church with twins Mathew and Tyler Frank, who also had autism.

"And so they were really a lot of what inspired me to get into this field, and to help children with autism, and eventually to get involved with starting a farm like this," Matthews said.



Frank Community Farm president and founder Crystal Stokes, a fifth-generation farmer, tends to crops at the site.
Photo courtesy of Adam Weatherford



1: Frank Community Farm donates produce to local food shelters, such as Mutual Aid District RVA and Richmond Food Justice Alliance. 2-4: The farm grows baby kale, Japanese turnips, strawberries and other produce. Photos courtesy of Adam Weatherford

Named after the twins, Frank Community Farm has a central mission: neurodiversity.

The concept encourages society to accept neurological disorders such as autism and ADHD as variations in functioning, rather than disabilities that must be cured, according to the farm's website.

Frank Community Farm enlists up to six interns at a time, all led by Matthews. They are given various tasks to assess their interests and skills. Some duties include planting and harvesting, fulfilling product orders, making deliveries, producing teas and caring for chickens.

Rewards and a variety of other techniques are used to help the interns learn. Once they find their niche, they can complete these tasks on their own.

Matthews said the interns' differences in thinking are beneficial to the workplace, and witnessing their growth is the most rewarding part of her job.

"Just seeing the progress that these guys make," Matthews said, "and the joy that they get out of coming to work every day and having a place where they can come be a part of the community and really be themselves."

However, the coronavirus has shifted the farm's day-to-day operations and affected their ability to accept new interns.

Stokes and Matthews said they make an effort to socially distance the interns, which is difficult for those who require hands-on attention. Some struggle with staying away from their friends who they've grown accustomed to seeing every day, Matthews said.

The farm at 2218 Fenton St. hasn't been able to sell produce at its stand or hold farming classes for the public, largely impacting revenue.

Despite these setbacks, Frank Community Farm adapted by delivering boxes of produce to the community — an idea of one of the interns — through a program called Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA.

"Many of our interns that are with us and interns that have left have really built our business," Stokes said. "They are so creative, and the attention to detail is amazing. And they're just great to have around."

Through the CSA program, the farm has reached 60 people every week among Richmond's vulnerable populations.

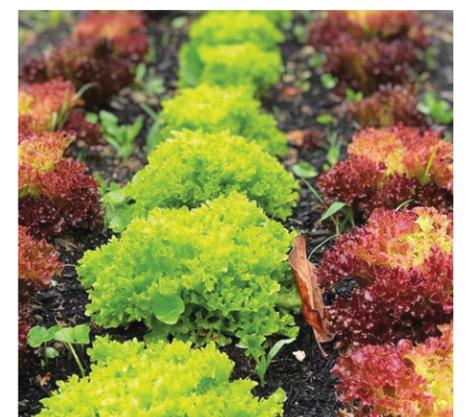
The farm donates the rest of their produce to local organizations such as Mutual Aid District RVA and Richmond Food Justice Alliance, volunteer partnerships helping Richmond's food insecure communities.

As Stokes has enjoyed feeding Richmonders in need, she hopes the farm can be more community-focused after the coronavirus subsides.

"There's not many community gardens, so we hope to start a community garden next year," Stokes said. "And just continue to do



what we're doing — providing more employment for adults who are neurodivergent and educating people about neurodiversity and why it should be celebrated."



Duties of the interns include planting crops and caring for the farm's chickens.
Photos courtesy of Adam Weatherford



Preview: Upcoming ICA exhibit to explore concept of commonwealth

Created by Dominican artist Firelei Báez, this mural stands as part of the “Resiliency Garden” at the ICA. The design overlays new imagery on historical maps and architectural renderings from Philadelphia and Richmond. Photo by Jon Mirador

CLAIRE DARCY
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In the wake of COVID-19 and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, “Commonwealth,” the newest exhibition coming to the Institute for Contemporary Art this weekend, notes relevant themes of activism, community and resilience portrayed through sculptures, video and large-scale murals.

The gallery is a collaborative effort between the ICA, non-profit organization Beta-Local in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Philadelphia Contemporary. Each of these are within areas designated as commonwealths.

“Commonwealth” will be presented in both indoor and outdoor formats. Mediums include a garden, large-scale outdoor murals, sculptures and videos.

The murals are currently available for viewing, and are located on the museum’s exterior “Thinking Field” wall, which faces North Pine Street.

“Commonwealth” has been in the works since 2018. In spring 2019, an undergraduate course about the exhibition’s subject

was offered by the VCUarts painting and printmaking department in collaboration with the museum. The course led to a series of public discussion sessions.

“Each of the collaborating institutions felt it was important to have a community-based process of exploring ideas related to commonwealth with people around them,” said Stephanie Smith, chief curator of the ICA.

The project explores the idea of “commonwealth” as a political territory, its further community-based implications and its historical significance to each locality. It also examines the possibilities and limitations to the term. According to the ICA’s website, it seeks to address questions such as “Who is the ‘we’ in ‘We the people?’” and “How could we reimagine wealth and come together for common good?”

Smith said the project was a chance to think more closely about the range of meanings that the term can have, from its “utopian possibilities” to its “historical roots.”

Themes and topics of the exhibit include natural resources, the built environment,

assembly, public domain and the line between common wealth and common debt.

“For the show, we didn’t say to an artist ‘work with this theme,’ but we talked through this range of research and they came up with their own ways of addressing it,” said Noah Simblist, chair of painting and printmaking at VCUarts and a member of the “Commonwealth” curatorial team.

Many themes discussed by the production team and artists, such as the connection between wealth and health, evolved as time progressed throughout the project.

“History is unfolding in real time, and we as a group are being very mindful of how those current events affected the way we’re thinking through the project,” Simblist said.

One of these changes was the “Resiliency Garden” by artist and food justice activist Duron Chavis, which was not originally planned to be part of the museum’s exhibit. It came into motion in the wake of COVID-19 and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement to

highlight the ties between systemic racism and food insecurity.

The garden will be one of the exhibit’s outdoor components and will feature several raised planters, a variety of vegetables and other plants, and a multi-surface mural.

Working on the project through COVID-19 meant several changes to the original plan for “Commonwealth.” Although it was supposed to launch in a traditional format in all three collaborating locations, the ICA will be the sole site for a physical exhibit. Online programs and print publications will be produced in Philadelphia and San Juan.

“It was not so much changing the end date, but changing how we got there,” Simblist said.

The coronavirus also shifted how the art will be presented. The ICA adapted its planned live performances to a film format and added floor space between art installations to allow for social distancing.

“Commonwealth” will be on display at the ICA, 601 W. Broad St., from Sept. 12 to Jan. 17.



The garden includes murals made by local and international artists. Photo by Jon Mirador



The “Resiliency Garden,” by food justice activist Duron Chavis, addresses issues of social justice and food insecurity. Photo by Jon Mirador

Stories of the week
NATIONAL: United States surpassed 200,000 COVID-19 related deaths on Tuesday.

INTERNATIONAL: Saudi Arabia signed a series of deals to raise over \$200 million in United Nations funding for Yemen.



Downtown Richmond vigil honors RBG

A child at the candlelit vigil holds a candle in honor of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Photo by Jon Mirador

ANYA SCZERZENIE
Staff Writer

RICHMONDERS MOURNED THE DEATH of an influential Supreme Court justice with candles and Jewish blessings on Sunday, as people across the nation continued to wonder when her spot on the nation's highest bench will be filled and if her dying wish will be honored.

Around 150 people gathered outside the Virginia Eastern District Court in downtown Richmond on Sunday night for a vigil honoring the life of late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

The 87-year-old justice died due to complications with metastatic pancreatic cancer on Sept. 18. She was known for her forceful dissents in the United States Supreme Court, and for her support of reproductive and women's rights.

"We know that RBG's passing means we have a fight ahead of us," Virginia Pride member Stephanie Merlo said during the event. "It is our duty as Americans to fight in her honor. Do not give up, do not despair. Organize. Vote."

Virginia Pride is an organization that seeks to raise awareness for the LGBT community. James Millner, the organization's interim director, planned the vigil on Facebook.

Speakers included a rabbi, a Christian minister and directors of local activist groups. Because Ginsburg was Jewish, one speaker read the mourner's kaddish, a Jewish blessing for the deceased.

Attendees shielded flames of white candles from the wind, reigniting them with others' as they extinguished.

Reverend Lacette Cross, pastor of the Restoration Fellowship RVA, spoke at the event.

"This is a moment that her life needs to be mourned, and people are scared," Cross said. "I believe that the best way to move forward is to collectively grieve, so we can collectively move forward to make a difference."

Cross requested the crowd take a moment of silence in honor of Ginsburg. As the vigil winded down, a musician played guitar and sang as attendees spoke in quiet conversation.

Camille Bird, a resident of Carytown, said she came to be with others while grieving the loss of Ginsburg.

"It's better to be together with others than crying in my living room," Bird said. "I think it's really important to grieve as a community."

Bird said what she remembers most about Ginsburg was the justice's reputation for writing dissenting opinions in the Supreme Court.

During her lifetime, Ginsburg fought for

housing allowances for women in the military, advocated for same-sex marriage, argued the Virginia Military Institute should allow female students, fought for the rights of people with mental disabilities and assisted in many other landmark Supreme Court rulings that marked pivotal moments in the nation's history.

Ginsburg's death leaves a vacancy on the Supreme Court, which has ignited debate on when her spot should be filled. After the death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, the Republican party blocked former President Barack Obama from nominating a justice more than 11 months before a new president would be sworn in. Now, less than two months before the presidential election, President Donald Trump tweeted that he is obligated to fill the seat "without delay."

President Donald Trump has promised to make an appointment within the upcoming days, despite Ginsburg's dying wish — according to her granddaughter Clara Spera — that the next elected president nominate her replacement.

Richmond resident Perina Kiner says she came to the event to honor Ginsburg, despite concerns about how her vacant seat will be filled.

"She wasn't always liked or agreed with," Kiner said. "But she always accomplished what she wanted to accomplish."



Attendees at Sunday's vigil raise their candles. Photo by Jon Mirador



Vigil-goers shield their candles from the wind. Photo by Jon Mirador