

Newest food truck offers tastes of Mexico, Philly

BY LINDA BURCHETTE
Staff

Special treats from the East Coast and Mexico can be found at Marion's newest food truck.

D's Street Grubb, owned and operated by Danielle Johnson and Shawn Byrd, opened this week offering Mexican Street Tacos and Philly Cheese Steaks.

Street tacos aren't your typical tacos of meat, tomato, lettuce and cheese. Johnson said she did research to discover these authentic treats are made with round flour tortillas holding a mixture of meat (beef, chicken, etc.) with onions, cilantro, queso fresco cheese and a squeeze of lime.

Shawn, said Johnson, has been to Philadelphia and knew what the original Philly cheese steaks taste like. That is how they strive to fix them at D's Street Grubb, with the right kind of cheese approved by a Philadelphia native who happened to stop by the food truck.

"People didn't know what a street taco was," Byrd said. "They knew a Philly cheese steak but not the authentic kind. The cheese makes a difference."

Their meat comes from Laurel Springs Farm and they purchase everything they can locally. Their logos and signs were made by Twelve45 Graphix of Atkins.

The Marion residents are lov-

ing their new adventure with the food truck and thank fellow food truck operator Brad Mullins of Brad's Tasty Dawgs for the inspiration.

"A huge thanks to Brad Mullins with Brad's Tasty Dawgs for giving us the push to be here," Johnson posted on Facebook. "You are truly a great friend and have been the inspirational center of our growing food truck family, in the coolest town in Virginia."

Byrd was running a Sarah Lee bread route when they met Mullins. He was needing top quality hot dog buns and found them from Byrd. He and Johnson

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had also worked for many years at Food City. They were looking for something different, a career they could control. Mullins, said Johnson, encouraged them to try a food truck.

"I thought, this would be great," said Johnson. "He (Brad) seemed so happy. It seemed like such fun. Shawn said, 'Let's go for it.'"

"We wanted to be more independent, to control everything," Byrd said. "Be our own bosses and make our own rules."

They sold the bread route and got the food truck and got started. Johnson said they wanted to offer something different that wasn't already available. Street tacos and genuine Philly cheese steaks seemed the perfect choice, and the customers seem to agree.

"We're getting lots of feedback on Facebook. Everybody seems to be

enjoying it," Johnson said. Just the other day she posted, "Today was such a great day we sold out just as we [were] about to close...Thank you all for coming out to support Shawn and I, it's been amazing to meet so many different [people] and see what they like!"

D's Street Grubb is on location Tuesday through Saturday, 12-4 p.m. They offer the street tacos on Tuesday and Wednesday along with street corn, which is fire-roasted corn cut off the cob, with chips and salsa, and the Philly cheese steaks Thursday through Saturday, and drinks. Items can be dressed to order. They plan to expand with soups and sandwiches in the cold weather, and be on site as long as possible weather permitting.

Byrd and Johnson said they like the location behind the historic bridge off North Main Street next to the former Happy's restaurant, which can be accessed either from the parking lot of the Marion

pool or the parking lot on North Main where customers to walk across the bridge.

Plans are to remove the gates on the bridge for easier pedestrian access, add lights, picnic tables, and perhaps have utilities attached by the town.

For right now, they are enjoying the weather and growing business. They also enjoy having their three children – 12-year-old boy and 7-year-old twins, a boy and a girl – at the food truck.

"I like it," said Johnson. "Once the bridge is decorated and tables set up, it will be better. And when the pool opens next year that will be nice."

Food trucks are a growing segment of the economy and have gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic as traditional restaurants face restrictions. In August, the Marion Town Council OK'd plans for the food truck park. Monday, officials and vendors celebrated the park's opening with a ribbon cutting. The

park is using the dead end on the north side of the historic East Chilhowie Street Bridge, also known as King Bridge, as a designated food park.

All food trucks operating in Marion must have a Virginia Department of Health permit, certificate of liability insurance, a Marion business license, and pay Marion meals tax, even if set up on private property. Customers who want to visit the "King Bridge Food Park" may use the town swimming pool parking lot.

The town is exploring converting the now closed East Chilhowie Street bridge into "a pedestrian crossing with enhancements such as lighting, decorative bollards, picnic tables, trash cans, etc. if there is sufficient use and demand."

Built in 1885, the wrought-iron Pratt through-truss bridge has been said to be the oldest two-lane iron bridge in Virginia.

Stephanie Porter-Nichols contributed to this article.

New studio-gallery to open in Marion

BY LINDA BURCHETTE
Staff

New Marion residents are bringing a different kind of art gallery/studio to the community while paying tribute to a bit of history.

Jon Ives of Jive Pottery and mixed media artist R.L. (Rachel) Gibson are opening The Ford Studios in the former Smyth County Motor Company building in the downtown area. The longtime Snider family-run dealership specialized in Ford vehicles.

Ives and Gibson named their new business in honor of the former occupants of the building.

“We have worked with Jerry’s Signs & Awnings Inc. to come up with an homage to the Smyth County Motor Company sign

that used to grace the building,” said Gibson. “The sign features UV protected, black HDU lettering on a pair of silver metal raceway rails and measures a whopping 28 feet long by 22-inches high. With a 60-plus foot frontage, we really appreciate the help with such a large sign.”

The sign was installed Nov. 10, and the studio is scheduled to open on Tuesday, Nov. 24.

Gibson said funding for the sign came mostly from a façade grant from the Marion Downtown Revitalization Association that assists businesses revitalizing existing buildings and promoting the heritage of the town.

“This was a throwback to the town’s history,” she said. “The tilted ‘D’ is an homage to the Richard Indiana ‘LOVE’ artwork. It

was unofficially adopted by many Virginia towns after the 50th anniversary of ‘Virginia is for Lovers.’ It is a subtle, obscure reference to our love of our newly adopted state of Virginia.”

The couple met the building owner, Joe Ellis, during a trip to Marion this past summer and fell under the spell of the well-preserved dealership building.

Gibson and Ives lived and worked in South Carolina as a downtown development director and a vendor, respectively, before delving into their art full time in Gatlinburg, Tenn., in 2007.

They are also musicians with Ives playing the drums and guitar and Gibson performing vocals. While they worked in their arts,

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they traveled throughout the East as Pea Pickin' Hearts, performing Appalachian-inspired folk music and covers from the 1930s through the 1970s. You can hear them next month at the Waterlily restaurant in Marion. They will perform on Saturday, Dec. 5, at 8 p.m.

Music is how they met.

Gibson said that Jon has been a musician since his teens and studied music in college. He played percussion in both rock bands and symphonies, including drums for the South Carolina Philharmonic.

"On our first date, he invited me to see him at the Philharmonic," she said.

They had met when Ives was playing with a rock band and Gibson was friends with one of the members. She became the band's booking agent.

They've been married 23 years and have a 21-year-old son, who is studying psychology and is also a musician who sings and plays guitar, bass and piano.

Their son is part of the reason Ives and Gibson ended up in Gatlinburg. Gibson said they no longer felt tied to their South Carolina town and began looking for somewhere else to live and work. Gatlinburg won out, she said, because of the good school system.

They lived about eight miles north of town and were there during the big fire in Gatlinburg although it did not destroy the townhouse they were living in. The Gatlinburg fire didn't come close although the high winds at that time brought down trees on power lines and started smaller fires in their neighborhood. They lost power and didn't even know of the other fire although they could see it from their mountaintop.

Gibson said they left and went to Kingsport, Tenn., where her mother lives and when they went back their house had been saved, but the landlord had raised the rent so high they couldn't afford to stay.

They began looking for a space that would offer them room to do their art and have a gallery in the same place.

"We had planned to move. We were looking for a town where we could do what we'd done there [Gatlinburg]," Gibson said. They traveled to Arizona and New Mexico in January and found a place they liked. But not long after they came back to Gatlinburg, Ives was laid off from his job in commercial pottery and a cross-country move became too expensive.

Gibson said a client of hers has a daughter who lives in Marion and had talked about its attributes.

"I thought we'd just check it out and we came in June," she said. "We looked at a couple places and coming down the street we noticed the (Ford) building. Jon said we'd never be able to afford that building, but we called the number and made arrangements to see it."

Joe Ellis, Gibson said, told them about the town and the magnetic pull of tourism with each piece connecting to the others when it comes to places for visitors to see and do things such as shop, tour, eat and play.

"I was a little stunned," Gibson said when they toured the old building that had been used for storage for years with the original structure hardly touched. "Usually with buildings like this people

have come in and over-renovated with office space. The bathrooms were made ADA compliant, but it has the original counters with leather tops and the original glass-enclosed office."

Gibson and Ives have been renovating the space into an open studio and gallery space while keeping those original pieces of the former dealership. The former garage area is now a parking garage with spaces for the apartment building next door and about six spaces for the new studio. The couple was able to acquire an apartment in the renovated building next door.

Gibson and Ives plan to work at the studio as visitors come in and they can explain what they are doing.

"Jon and I are used to working while people are watching and commenting," Gibson said. "It's like performance art in a way. It's a great way to meet people."

They did this at shows and sites throughout the East as they traveled as musicians and artists. It was great fun, Gibson said, but got a little wearing so they officially came off the road in 2017 to concentrate on their art full-time. They still plan to perform their music at times, including the upcoming show at the Waterlily.

What visitors will see at The Ford Studios is Ives creating functional pottery and Gibson painting watercolor pictures overlaid with embroidery.

Ives said he prefers the minimalist aspect of pottery compared to the decorative. His pieces can be used every day and include such styles as cups, bowls, plates, mugs, vases and more. He also prefers soft colors and mixes his own glazes. They've named them pearl, pear, pewter, peony, Jupiter and jasper.

"I'm able to do without exorbitant prices," Ives said because his focus is on simplicity and elegance rather than fantastical designs and colors.

Ives worked in pottery for about 10 years while he was performing music. He learned on the job with no formal training as it was something he just enjoyed doing.

Gibson said Jon taught himself to throw pottery and has thrown as many as 22,000 pieces in one year.

"I really enjoy the feeling of the clay," he said. "It's a pile of dust at first and then it's something beautiful."

Ives also enjoys telling people what he's doing as he makes a piece.

"They can see the process as it happens. I can talk as I throw. Sharing what we do with people and seeing the process is a value added for them."

This type of process is familiar to Gibson and Ives as they participated in "Artists in Action" on the road all those years.

Gibson creates a watercolor painting and then stitches over it with embroidery using various threads for texture and color. She discovered that polyester or viscose threads were better than cotton as the sharpness of the cotton would often tear the paper on which the painting was made.

She also makes clothing. Her mother taught her to sew and it is something she really enjoys.

"She's still a quilter," Gibson said of her mother. "It runs in my family. All the aunts are quilters. So it's not really unusual that I ended up doing something with stitching."

They are very happy with the place they've found in



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Galaxy Mugs in Pearl and Pear by Jon Ives of Jive Pottery is an example of the work that can be found at The Ford Studios, a new working gallery in downtown Marion.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

"Seahorses" is a watercolor & embroidery on 140 lb. cold press paper by R.L. Gibson whose work is featured at The Ford Studios in downtown Marion.

Marion to enjoy and share their art. They hope visitors will enjoy it as well. They also offer space for other artists to show their work and hope to install another artist in the glass-enclosed office space which is perfect for one person to work.

Some of the other work they will showcase includes handmade soaps, metal sculpture, paintings, paper marbling, paper mosaics, knitting, spun fibers and quilts.

Window shelves they've installed are custom-designed, deco-inspired units that are mirror images of one another. They are meant to draw the eye diagonally from the top outside to the bottom inside corners.

"We will eventually teach classes, but once we are open you can come by anytime for a personal demonstration," Gibson said.

The pair also enjoys refinishing old and antique furniture and welcome donations.

"We're a different type of gallery," Gibson said. "Big thanks to all the folks of Southwest Virginia for passing on their much-loved, and sometimes much unloved, furniture to us to repurpose as displays."

Hours for the studio will be 12-6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday with extended hours for special events and holidays. A grand opening has been postponed until spring.

Find out more on Facebook for The Ford Studios.

Couple launches dream store

BY LINDA BURCHETTE
Staff

Step into The Toybox and step back in time.

Marion residents Arnold and Jessica Davidson welcome all those young at heart to enjoy a nostalgic visit to their childhood at a new business in downtown Marion.

The Toybox is a dream of Arnold Davidson's since he began collecting vintage toys and ran out of room to display them all.

"I started collecting things here and there. You kinda get that bug," Davidson said. "For a collector, basically it comes down to that feeling you had as a kid. I like that feeling. I'm a very nostalgic person."

Davidson said it began with

his search for a toy he had as a kid. The "He-Man" action figure was his favorite.

"I started collecting toys about a year and a half ago," he said. "I wanted the He-Man toy I had as a kid and looking for that I got the bug."

Did he find He-Man?

"I found several, but I'm still on the hunt," he said.

Davidson scours yard sales, estate sales, eBay and toy stores for interesting vintage toys. Mechanical tin toys are a favorite of collectors. Davidson also likes Masters of the Universe toys and retro video games. In The Toybox, you can play a couple vintage games using quarters.

The toys, games, comic books, video games, action figures, dolls, lunch boxes, collectibles,

and more for sale in The Toybox are all things Davidson has collected for the store. He also welcomes people to bring in vintage toys in good condition for consignment sales or he may purchase them.

"All in here is done from the ground up," he said of the store. "I'm not ready to sell any of my own collection yet."

And visitors to the store won't see the same things all the time. Davidson will change up his inventory on a regular basis. The Toybox features an ever-changing mix of nostalgic items that span generations, including a 1936 Monopoly game and 1966 Mandrake board game.

Davidson also makes diora-

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mas, including Frankenstein's lab, Harry Potter scenes, and anything fantasy. He also enjoys drawing and painting. A mural that spans the counter at the front of the store was painted by Davidson.

Music is another passion. Davidson went from playing drums to guitar, bass, piano, dobro, harmonica, mandolin and banjo. He also sings and writes songs. His full-time job is at the Wohlfahrt Haus Dinner Theatre in Wytheville, where he is an actor, musician and all-around helper at whatever needs doing, he said.

Davidson is one of four children born to Mack and Annette Roark Davidson of Saltville. His father Mack was a musician and passed his love of music on to his children. His sister, Stacy, sings; his brother, Carlton, plays the drums in Davidson's band; and his brother, Clay, plays guitar and sings. Carlton is also a musician and a toy collector and enjoys going on the hunt with his brother.

"It's very exciting," Carlton said. "I love going on toy collection runs. If you only find one thing, it's worth it."

Davidson's wife, Jessica, who works full time at Scholle, writes poetry and song lyrics, and has performed on stage with her husband, said she never thought of herself as a toy collector until Arnold took it up.

"I didn't think I was until his stuff started getting over on my side," she said. Then he began finding her things that brought back great childhood memories.



LINDA BURCHETTE/SMYTH COUNTY NEWS & MESSENGER

A ribbon cutting ceremony was held to mark the opening of The Toybox in downtown Marion recently. Participating, from left, are: Jessica Davidson and Arnold Davidson, owners/operators; Rex Anders, with Downtown Marion; Ken Heath with the town of Marion; and Julius Winebarger with Downtown Marion.

"He'd say, 'Here, this came for you.' And I would open it and say, 'Wow! I remember that!' My favorite thing he found was a Cabbage Patch doll still in the box. He said it can't be touched. But I took it out and giggled over it and then put it back. I got it out and smelled it. I don't think the Cabbage Patch dolls ever lose that smell."

Jessica grew up in Rich Valley and remembers the corner store where the old folks would gather, and Hardee's where other groups would gather.

"I kind of wanted to create a spot like that, where people will like to gather and reminisce," she said.

That's why the Davidson's set up a game table in the store for people to sit and play games or just talk.

Folks can come in and play Dungeons and Dragons or other board games, enjoy pool on a billiards table, and watch classic cartoons on an old-fashioned floor model television set.

Davidson said the town was excited for him to open and he and Jessica love the location at the corner of the Center Building. He plans to attend the

next Small Business Boot Camp to learn more and hopefully win grant money to expand.

"We are so excited to welcome The Toybox to our Marion business family," said Marion Mayor David Helms. "The Davidsons are a great addition to our downtown."

A ribbon cutting was held recently to celebrate the store's grand opening.

"GI Joe. Hot Wheels. Barbie dolls. Nintendo. These are some of our best childhood memories," said Ken Heath, director of community and economic development for the town of Marion. "And now, thanks to Arnold and Jessica Davidson, we can once again hold onto our past."

Look for items coming for Halloween, including masks and horror stories.

The Toybox is at 201 East Main Street in the corner of the white Center Building closest to Hayden's World. Hours are Monday through Thursday, 5-9 p.m. and Friday and Saturday, 2-10 p.m. Call 276-685-7670.

Glenna Crabtree-Bullins contributed to this story.