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Family in Smyth County murder-suicide laid to rest A3

Washington County News

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Free tuition helping laid-off employees get back to work
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COMMUNITY



Animal foster care on the rise during pandemic
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ART



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Correction: A headline in the Nov. 25 edition incorrectly identified the college providing substitutes to Washington County schools. The student teachers go to Emory & Henry.

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HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS



Harold Hannah, who has grown Christmas trees on his Washington County farm for decades, talks about families coming out to cut down their own real Christmas trees this holiday season.

Trees for all SEASONS

Christmas tree farm brightens customers' holidays

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — At 86, Harold Hannah dusted off his Christmas tree yard sign last week in preparation for another season of greeting local families who want a real tree for the holidays.

He's not sure what to expect this year as far as sales go.

"This pandemic has affected so much of our lives. I'm not sure if that will mean fewer Christmas tree sales this year," said the Abingdon grower.

Concerns about the pandemic may be the reason why more people are decorating for the holiday earlier than usual. Some say it's a way of making Christmas a little brighter this year.

And real trees may be on the wish list for many families.

Kara Ratcliffe, 20, of Atkins, Virginia, said her family usually puts up an artificial tree, but this year is different. "I think a real tree is more special," said Ratcliffe, who browsed for a tree at Hannah's farm last week. The customer believes a real tree will help her family end the year on a

more comforting note.

Hannah said he hopes to sell at least 200 of his Norway spruce trees. Customers choose and cut their own trees on his 6-acre property on Lee Highway between Meadowview and Abingdon.

"And they have to bring their own saws to cut the trees," he said.

The trees range in height from about 7 to 12 feet tall. Trees that tall often get donated for holiday festivities, he said.

Hannah and his wife Ethel used to cut the trees for their customers up until about three years ago, but he is no longer able to navigate the hills behind his house.

The amazing thing is Hannah sells the trees for just \$10 each. He charged just a little more when he did the cutting for customers years ago.

Business has been steady the past few days. Hannah has seen new and familiar faces of families who selected 7- and 8-foot trees for their homes.

"One person from Virginia Beach came with the family they were visiting, and he decided to

See **TREES**, Page A5



METROCREATI

Vendors describe success at Winter Market

BY JOE TENNIS
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — By Sunday afternoon, artist Tony Mitchell had sold out of his most popular pottery item in Abingdon.

And that was a mug with a COVID-19 mask on its face, retailing for \$29.

Mitchell, of Seagrave, North Carolina, said business has been "good" for the first couple of weekends at the Winter Market, held on the Martha Washington Inn lawn as an affiliation of the Virginia Highlands Festival.

"It seems pretty well attended," said Mitchell, 37.

This show has helped business at the hotel, said Lydia McKenna, 25, the banquet captain at the Martha Washington Inn.

"It's been really good," McKenna said.

"I've talked to the vendors, and they've all done really well. This will also be the Virginia Highlands Festival's second chance."

See **MARKET**, Page A6

Marijuana could become legal in Va.

BY SARAH WADE
and LEIF GREISS
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam recently announced that he's planning to introduce legislation legalizing marijuana when the General Assembly meets in January.

"Our Commonwealth has an opportunity to be the first state in the South to take this step, and we will lead with a focus on equity, public health, and public safety," Northam said in a Nov. 17 news release about his support for the move.

"I look forward to working with the General Assembly to get this right."

Virginia has already legalized the medical use of marijuana. And new legislation that took effect in July decriminalized (meaning sharply reduced the penalties for) simple

See **MARIJUANA**, Page A3

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Trees

From Page A1

take a tree back to Virginia Beach using the car's luggage carrier," said Hannah.

"A customer reminded me that he's been coming here for Christmas trees for 17 years."

He enjoys using his professional skills to make the trees flourish, but interacting with customers has brought him the greatest joy over the years.

"My family and I have enjoyed that part of the business more than anything — especially seeing the kids who get to pick out their first Christmas trees."

Throughout the years, the business has been a partnership shared by the couple and their four children. Hannah recalled that his wife often took the initiative of cutting trees for customers using a bow saw before he had arrived home from work.

Having a large family has been a blessing for the tree operation. He has 11 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren, many of whom have

helped with the tree farm throughout the years.

Sprouting an idea

Before the tree grower retired as a regional director for the Virginia Department of Forestry in 1991, he began dabbling with growing evergreen trees in the late 1970s.

"I know how trees grow, but growing Christmas trees is a whole different situation. Just like any crop, there's maintenance. The trees require shearing, trimming and mowing around during the hottest part of the year," he said.

Hannah first started experimenting with growing different varieties of trees on a small acre lot around his house. He later opened for business in 1986, selling white pine and Fraser fir. Hannah eventually phased out those varieties and began growing the Norway spruce about 12 years ago, a variety that requires no labor-intensive spraying of insecticides.

"I'm lucky to be able to hang on this long," said Hannah, who has been growing and selling the trees for decades.

But Hannah said his tree-

growing days are winding down with only a few hundred trees left. At one time, he may have had as many as 7,000 trees growing on his land.

He's not replanted trees in several years. Each year, more land on his property becomes vacant of trees. Eventually, the land will be reclaimed for other uses,

he said.

"This whole area used to be solid trees," Hannah said pointing to the acreage of greenery.

"There was a tree every 6 feet. I used to warn parents to not let their small children out of sight because we might not be able to find them," Hannah said with a laugh.

The grower said the Christmas tree business isn't something he wants to give up anytime soon.

"Growing trees has always been my way of helping make the land pay for itself."

He plans to sell the trees again next year.

"If I'm still healthy enough to keep up with it,

I think I'll have some good-size trees for next Christmas, too."

Hannah's tree farm is located at 26428 Lee Highway in Abingdon. Hours of operations are 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily.

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Harold Hannah's Christmas trees are selling for \$10 — but customers will have to cut them down themselves, since the hills of the farm have gotten too difficult for Hannah to navigate.

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Editor's note: "Wandering Around Washington" is a regular, exclusive column from Joe Tennis highlighting the untold stories in the county, direct from the people who live and work here. Watch for him to wander into shops, restaurants and parks to bring you the gab and gossip — only in the Washington County News.

Yard sale permits now free in Abingdon

ABINGDON, Va. — Put your three bucks back in your fanny pack. And get your yard sale permit for free — from now on — in Abingdon.

By order of the Abingdon Town Council, the \$3 yard sale permit fee has been eliminated in Washington County's courthouse town.

"Why do we do yard sale permits?" Town Manager Jimmy Morani asked the Abingdon Town Council at the council's Aug. 19 meeting.



Joe Tennis

Well, otherwise, Morani hinted, some folks may just turn their yard into a sale — on and on and on.

"You have perpetual yard sales," Morani said. "They decide to have a sale every weekend and become a nuisance. And neighboring property owners don't like it."

Also, Morani said, there are actually some IRS regulations that become involved with ongoing yard sales.

"But we don't get involved with that," Morani said with a chuckle, "because we're not the IRS."

Ultimately, Morani wants "full compliance" on people having yard sales so that all get permits.

"It's just a way to control the amount of yard sales that occur every year," Morani said. "And I've always found that if you have a fee attached to this permit, you get less compliance."

Will everyone now get a permit?

"We're not going to get full compliance anyway," Morani conceded. "Let's face it. I mean, we're not going to send court enforcement out and start asking every yard sale to get a permit. But we do encourage people to get the permit."

The \$3 fee was apparently a hindrance on both ends.

"The amount of money that we collect, it probably costs us that much money just to actually process the \$3 charge," Morani said.

A lot of people do want to follow the rules, and they can fill out the permit online, Morani said.

On a motion by council member Amanda Pillion, the Town Council passed the new rule unanimously, establishing the yard sale fee at zero dollars.

"Anything I can do to help the yard sale residents of this community," Morani said with a lighthearted tone. "Now, the prices will correspondingly decrease at yard sales because we've removed this burden from them."



METROCREATIV

Yard sale permits in Abingdon will no longer require a \$3 fee for residents to obtain after an Abingdon Town Council meeting vote.

ABINGDON RESTAURANTS

Comfort and change

Chick-n-Little revamping its look, menu and tech before reopening



BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — After a monthslong coronavirus shutdown, a small Abingdon restaurant is making big plans to keep the lights on.

While hundreds of restaurants throughout the country are expected to shutter this year, Chick-n-Little Diner is preparing to reopen — as soon as next month.

Restaurant owners Carrie and Todd Baxter rolled up their sleeves earlier this spring to come up with a plan to ramp up dining room service during the pandemic while keeping the option for takeout orders.

Since a temporary closing in March, they have spent their free time remodeling the nostalgic building, giving the interior a face-lift as well as making it safer for employees and customers once they return.

"We knew we had to make some changes," said Carrie. "Some changes are to meet new restaurant guidelines, and other fixes will help bring the business up to speed in technology."

"It was time to reimagine the restaurant."

As odd as it may sound, the couple said there is a silver lining to being closed during the pandemic.

"One of the positive outcomes of the coronavirus is it's given us time to make Chick-n-Little our own diner and to step out of the shadow of the former owners. While the food and the general principles will remain the same, we're now offering our own take on things — our own recipes and our own solid service. We would never have had the time to do this otherwise," Carrie said.

"Once we knew our eight employees would be taken care of with unemployment benefits, we decided it was best to temporarily close."

"Our last day for business was March 17," she said. "It was that week that everything came crashing down with COVID-19 concerns. That night, my husband and I discussed how many to-go items we'd have to sell just to be able to stay afloat. We decided it would be better to shut down for the time being. We had no idea it would be months instead of weeks."

"I think we naively believed this virus would only last for a few weeks and things would go back to normal."

"It was a hard decision to make. But we knew if we complied with social distancing regulations before we remodeled, we would be able to have only three or four tables in our little restaurant."

Same diner, new look

The landmark business on West Main Street has drawn generations of customers over the years who crave

If You Go

- » **When:** 8 a.m. - 8 p.m., Monday-Friday; 8 a.m. - 3 p.m., Saturday
- » **Where:** Chick-n-Little, 401 W. Main St., Abingdon, Va.
- » **Phone:** 1-276-628-6690

the nostalgic, comfort foods it offers.

Carrie said the menu will still offer the same home-style foods plus a few new selections.

When the doors open in a few weeks, they will serve around 20 items, focusing on their most popular items, such as breakfast biscuits and gravy, chicken and waffles, omelets, sweet potato pancakes, hamburgers and fries and chicken tender baskets.

"We have to control our inventory right now, making sure we spend money in a responsible way and making the most of what we're selling."

"We will have a few new menu items. I'm not sure if I should say what — maybe I will let it be a surprise," said Carrie with a grin.

"Actually, we're upping our biscuits. We've always been known for our sausage and tenderloin biscuits, but the biscuits are getting bigger and better. We're going for some new biscuit combinations."

Catherine Widener is the restaurant's morning gravy maker, arriving as early as 5:30 a.m. to get the biscuits and homemade gravy started. She learned how to make gravy from her grandmother, she said. At 66, Widener has worked at the restaurant for nearly 40 years, at first for Ida Lupo, who owned the restaurant in the 1980s, and later for Lupo's daughter, Debbie Lambert, who sold the restaurant to the Baxters in 2013.

All these years, she's insisted on making gravy from scratch. "I will never make gravy from an envelope. It doesn't taste the same," said the cook.

Part of the couple's new plan is to extend the restaurant's operating hours.

"We're going back to opening at night again," said Carrie. The new hours are 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Monday through Friday and 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday.

To create more space in the approximate 1,500-square-foot building, the couple made some changes, some of which tugged at their heartstrings.

"We had to remove the 6-foot old-fashioned bar to open up more space for tables. That was really hard, and I actually cried. It's a sentimental thing

for a lot of our customers. It's like an old-school lunch counter.

"We saved the bar in storage just in case we can bring it back one day."

The old cash register located at the front entrance to the restaurant was replaced with a computerized system and moved to a corner for customer ordering and paying.

"We knew we couldn't have customers standing 6 feet apart at the front where people are walking into the restaurant," she said.

"Even before the pandemic started, we were looking to replace the cash register. We've really enjoyed our low-technology status all these years, but in order to be competitive and stay alive in this business, we needed an upgrade."

"We couldn't find ink for the cash register to print receipts, so we had to handwrite the receipts for customers."

"Now, I can text or email a receipt to you. We have a lot of business clients who need receipts for reimbursements."

The checkered floor will remain, but the walls were painted a light Colonial-style green. "To me, the green color pays homage to the rich agricultural history of Abingdon."

"Old booths will get reinstalled, but we plan to replace them soon after we shop around."

The restaurant's former entrance door will serve as an exit now. A second door that was not in use will be converted to a new entranceway.

"It will help with the traffic flow into the building and create a safer environment," said the owner.

"People are anxious for us to open. We serve families with children and folks who are even in their 90s. We've missed our customers, and we're ready to come back."

She recommends patrons check Facebook and Instagram for updates on the opening date of the restaurant.

"When we open, I'm sure the word will get out," Carrie said with laughter. "That's the good thing about being in a business that's been around for so long. People know we are here. Word of mouth is my best form of advertising."

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

Washington County teacher returns from stint working in Saudi Arabian schools

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — With three suitcases in hand, a backpack and \$800 in his pocket, Luke Parks disembarked a plane in the summer of 2018 and took his first steps on the foreign soil of Western Asia — several thousand miles from the only home he'd known in the mountains of Southwest Virginia.

The Washington County native was a physical education teacher at Holston High and Meadowview Elementary schools for eight years before the educator decided it was the perfect time to see the world.

The teacher with wanderlust has spent the last two years teaching in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

While most teachers opt to stay closer to home, Parks combined his love for teaching with his yearning to travel to connect with people around the globe.

The former Washington County teacher is home for the holidays, spending time with his Abingdon family and sharing stories about his adventures as a middle school teacher halfway around the world.

Because international travel was shut down due to COVID-19, Parks couldn't travel home this summer, making it more than a year since he's seen his mother, grandmother and siblings.

"There's no place like home," said Parks, who was taking a run on the Virginia Creeper Trail one day last week. When he got to Saudi Arabia, he joined a running club and has run two ultramarathons just this year.

Answered prayers

Teaching internationally is a way to travel, gain work experience and do good all at the same time, according to Parks, a graduate of the University of Virginia's College at Wise.

In 2016, while teaching at Meadowview Elementary, he began thinking — and dreaming — about opportunities abroad.

"I prayed that I wanted some adventure and whimsy in my life," said the teacher. "I wanted the ability to do good and to help people out. God gave me exactly what I asked for but not quite the package I was expecting."

"I easily could have spent the rest of my teaching career in Washington County, but I liked the sound of adventure of Saudi Arabia."

He came close to not accepting the international job offer because he wanted to work in poverty-stricken areas to help meet basic needs. Saudi Arabia has a reputation as a country of wealth, with the highest gross domestic product in the Middle East.

"But one of the reasons I picked Saudi Arabia is because it's in the middle of the globe



Luke Parks during his travels in Western Asia and the Middle East. After teaching in Washington County schools for several years, Parks set off to teach in Saudi Arabia in 2018.



and close to so many cool countries," he said.

Often enduring the struggles of living in a single-parent family when he was a child, Parks has a heart for helping others.

His job in Saudi Arabia has allowed him to hang out with children in an orphanage in nearby Tanzania, where he also helped install a catfish pond to improve the people's livelihood.

"I'm not working in Saudi Arabia to live a flashy life," Parks said. "I'm working there to give myself greater financial opportunities for the future. I may teach at another international school when I leave here. Inadvertently, I also can share my love of Christ just by being

the person Jesus Christ wants me to be."

Leaving home

Parks was offered and accepted the international teaching job in 2018, after attending a recruitment fair for international teaching hosted by the University of Northern Iowa.

"I wanted to get out of debt before I left, so I sold my 1966 Ford and gave my car to my mom."

Parks showed up in the Middle Eastern country one August night, not knowing what it would look like or how it would be.

"It was hotter than I ever had imagined — about 118 degrees — and I wondered right off the bat what I had gotten myself into."

The days that followed put Parks at ease and reassured him he was where God wanted him to be.

In Saudi Arabia, Parks lives in a gated residential community that is built close to the world's largest oil reserve. The employees of the oil company and their families live and go to school in the compound. The schools are owned by the oil company, and Parks' students are the children of employees who work at the oil reserve.

Outside the compound walls, residents must abide by rules that ban things like gender mixing in public and the use of alcohol, which actually is banned throughout the country. Few people speak English.

But inside the compound, life is very different, said Parks. Within that compound, the way of life resembles more of a California city than a Saudi town.

The differences are obvious, he said.

Women are not required to wear their loose-fitting robes, and they can drive — a right just recently given to all women in the country.

"The country is making progressive moves. A cinema outside the compound was put in just this year," said Parks.

Inside the compound, everyday life resembles a small city.

"I can ride my bike to school in 10 minutes," he said. "It reminds me of a small city with a movie theater, bowling alley and restaurants. We even have a Chili's restaurant."

Saudi Arabia is a wealthy country with people who love to shop for the finer things in life, he said. "But they still hold strongly to their culture and the importance of their families. Coming from a big family, I was able to fit in quite well.

"A lot of people move to Saudi Arabia and never leave the compound," said the teacher. "I try to get out as much as I can, to immerse myself in the culture and build relationships with the people."

Out of six schools in the compound, Parks' school is the largest, with about 1,000 students in grades five through nine. Class sizes are manageable with 20 to 25 students.

He said the diversity of students is the greatest difference between schools in America and those in Saudi.

Many of the students' parents are from Pakistan, India, Japan and even Canada. And there are all kinds of religious backgrounds, too.

The students are bilingual, with all of them required to speak English.

All of the children come from two-parent households, which is a requirement for living in the compound, he said.

'Meeting new neighbors'

Through this adventure, Parks has learned that people are the same wherever you go.

"It's not the distance, it's the way you treat one another. When you have that mindset, world travel simply means meeting your new neighbors, and that's pretty cool if you ask me."

The teacher is not sure where his path will lead him next, but he is certain it will offer him the joys of serving others.

"I followed an inkling from God to come here. I'm just hoping he gives me another inkling when the time is right."

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at citydesk@bristolnews.com.

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