



HODGES VAUGHAN

## Two charged in Fries

Information about fugitive leads to additional drug-related arrests

Staff Report

**FRIES** — Information regarding a fugitive led to the arrest of two additional residents from the Fries community last week after authorities discovered illicit substances.

Sheriff K.A. Kemp advises members of Carroll County Sheriff's Office responded to the area of Hilltown Road in the Fries Community to locate a wanted fugitive on Feb. 19.

The report stated that "Upon arrival of Carroll County Sheriff's Office fugitive Nickie Vaughn was located."

Detail from the report confirm that deputies with the Carroll County Sheriff's Office searched the residence and found methamphetamine along with drug paraphernalia.

Nickie Vaughn was charged for possession of a controlled substance and arrested on an outstanding capias for failure to appear. According to records in the Carroll County General District Court, Vaughn is wanted in Carroll for felony charges from Feb. 2, of possession of schedule I/II drugs with intent to manufacture. Vaughn was scheduled to appear in court on Feb. 18; however, a capias was issued for her arrest on Feb. 19.

Additionally, Vaughn has previous convictions spanning from 1995-1998 in the Carroll County Circuit Court for trespassing, forgery, violating a court order, a probation violation.

ARRESTS—SEE PAGE 3A



## The gift of life

A single woman's generosity brought a second chance at life to Robert Fallon, an Elk Creek resident who was in desperate need of a kidney transplant

By SHAINA STOCKTON  
Staff

**INDEPENDENCE** — When Robert Fallon of Elk Creek was diagnosed with end-stage renal failure at age 19, his hopes for survival hinged on the kindness of a single person.

Last August, seated with his mother in her kitchen in Elk Creek, Fallon shared his story with the local newspaper. It wasn't his first interview; his plea for help had gone viral thanks to a creative undertaking from his girlfriend — now fiancée — Krystal Sparks. In the months following Fallon's diagnosis, painted rocks began cropping up in local areas, and then started to spread. Colorful painted designs drew attention to a single plea: "My boyfriend needs a kidney."

Each of the stones included Fallon's blood type and an email address to receive information about organ donations. The rocks spread, first up and down the East Coast and then to the west. Today, they've been spread all over the country, and even overseas.

Fallon and his family decided to use his diagnosis to spread important information about the importance of organ donation, a difficult topic that not many people want to discuss. Fallon shared that even if he didn't receive help, he hoped the rocks would start an important conversation that could mean help for other people in need.

But what came next took Fallon and his family completely by surprise: a local

DONOR—SEE PAGE 2A



Above: Donna Strongheart Godwin (left) painted a picture of Mary Hessler (right) and Robert Fallon for a fundraiser at Hessler's church.

Top: Robert Fallon and fiancée, Krystal Sparks



Facebook photo



Beckah the Beagle

## Rugby Creek Animal Rescue seeks funding for continued efforts

The rescue is seeking sponsors, monthly donations to fund expenses for special needs animals in their care

By SHAINA STOCKTON  
Staff

**RUGBY** — Rugby Creek Animal Rescue is seeking help with funding for new projects to help animals in need. In addition to regular expenses for special needs animals in their care, the rescue hopes to see to new projects, such as the construction of a cattery, and a monthly funding setup for a special needs beagle and training for a traumatized horse that is currently at the farm.

"Right now our greatest needs include monthly recurring donations for operating costs," said Ashley Smart of Rugby Creek Animal Rescue.

The rescue is currently trying to grow a fundraising campaign called "Dollar Angels," which asks members of the community to consider pledging a dollar a month to the rescue through PayPal.

So far, the fundraiser has accumulated interest from around 25 donors, which is already making a positive difference. Smart's goal for the fundraiser is to get 300 people to pledge \$1 for the cause.

"It may not be much coming from just one person, but if 300 people committed just \$1, it would make a huge difference in our program," Smart said. "I thought it was a good idea and if it took off, it would benefit our rescue efforts in a huge way without affecting people's monthly needs as well."

Money from this fundraiser would be used to budget expenses that are needed to care for special needs animals.

Rugby Creek Animal Rescue, located on the western side of Grayson County, is a small rescue organization consisting of seven board members in three states including one licensed veterinarian. The volunteer-based program helps animals in need including farm animals and special needs animals.

The rescue is not a shelter, but they remain in touch with shelters around the area and often take emergency cases and help to relocate animals from shelters to no-kill rescue facilities.

"Finances have been tough in the last couple of years, so we've had to back off a little on our rescue projects. We do have several horses in foster homes which is helpful, but we are still responsible for them financially. Our residents include special needs ani-

RESCUE—SEE PAGE 3A

# Flue fire spreads to roof

Staff Report

**FRIES** — Fries, Independence and Galax fire departments responded to a house fire at 131 Clito Rd. in Fries last Thursday, where a flue fire spread through the roof system of the home.

According to reports from the responding departments, Fries Volunteer Fire Department was dispatched at 8:17 a.m. that morning to a possible structure fire in the Clito community. Upon arrival, the crews found an active fire that began around the flue and spread to the roof framing.

Fries was joined by Independence and Galax firefighters on scene.

Firefighters fought the blaze for four hours, according to Galax.

"Firefighters cut holes in the roof and pulled interior ceiling to stop the progression of the fire. Considerable time was needed for overhaul due to the two roof systems and hidden fire in void spaces," read a report from the Galax department.

Fries stated that members initially knocked down the fire quickly; however, the battle also involved the overhaul of the structure to find hidden fire between two roof systems in the home.

One resident was evaluated for smoke inhalation, according to the reports. Units cleared the area at 1 p.m. that afternoon.

Photos courtesy of the Galax Volunteer Fire Department and the Fries Volunteer Fire Department



## INSIDE THIS EDITION

UPCOMING EVENTS.....	5A
OBITS .....	6A
GAMES.....	1B
CHURCH NEWS .....	2B
CLASSIFIEDS .....	5B



We are always on the lookout for interesting news stories. If you have a story to share, please email:

editor@independence  
declaration.com

# Donor

Continued from front

woman, Mary Hessler of Galax, was willing to go under the knife and give Fallon the kidney he'd been searching for.

A few months later, thanks to the Paired Donor Exchange Program, Fallon received his donation; not directly from Hessler herself, but as a result of her donation of a kidney as part of the exchange. In fact, Fallon was one of four recipients that received a kidney because of Hessler's involvement with the program.

## The Diagnosis

Last August, Fallon's kidney function sat at around 0.5%. At that time, he was on a strict schedule for dialysis treatments three times per week. Due to his medical issues, Fallon was unable to work, and he faced a number of obstacles trying to navigate a tenuous maze of dead ends for medical insurance and other financial assistance, in tandem with his health struggles.

The situation looked bleak, but the fight was still strong with Fallon and his family. When he was first diagnosed at age 19, he said the news came as a complete shock. He was staying with a friend one night when he woke up unable to breathe. He drove himself to the hospital, where he was given X-rays and blood work. It was then he learned that he was in end-stage renal failure, and that he suffered from Stage 5 kidney disease.

"It was a complete shock," Fallon said last August. "The only symptom I'd ever had was chronic heartburn, and that was written off as acid reflux when I was younger."

Sparks, Fallon's fiancée, wanted to help however she could. She wanted to get people's attention not just for her boyfriend's sake, but to share information about organ donation in general.

"A couple of years ago, I was working as a car hop at Sonic during the summer. Some kids and some adults in the area would leave painted rocks all over the pavement. I remember that they made me so happy when I'd find them, so when I was looking for a way to do something unique for Robert's situation, I thought of that," Sparks said in a recent interview.

In the coming months, colorful rocks began cropping up along the East Coast, and then started to spread to other areas of the country.

"She started painting these beautiful rocks with all of these cool designs, and giving them to people who were traveling to other areas," Fallon said of Sparks.

Sparks then took the message to social media under the Facebook page: "Rocks for Robert." It was there that the rocks were tracked to areas all over the country. To date, the family believes there is at least one rock in every state in the U.S., as well as areas in Germany, Italy and other places overseas where their supporters took them. Others even joined in the effort by painting rocks of their own.

Janet Fallon, Robert's mother, said that Robert's brother was working as a limo driver when Sparks project started, and he took rocks up to New York and then out west.

"He dropped one of them off in Mount Rushmore," Fallon said.

"The rocks got the message out about organ donation and helped Robert, too. I enjoyed it, and I made the page to see how far they traveled," said Sparks.

When asked if the project would continue now, she smiled and answered, "I want to continue. Only now they won't say 'My boyfriend needs a kidney' anymore. Thanks to Mary, he has one."

## An Opportunity to Give

In December 2019, Fallon was contacted by the University of Virginia's transplant team with life-changing news: they told him that an individual, later identified as Hessler, was willing to donate a kidney for him. Testing was completed, but because of the age difference between Fallon and Hessler, a direct donation was not possible.

However, that didn't stop the donation from taking place; it merely took a different course.

"UVa explained that this individual would not be donating her kidney directly to Robert. Instead, Robert and his donor would be placed into UVa's Paired Donor Exchange Program."

"A lot of stuff in the system contradicts itself. One of the biggest pieces of advice I would give someone is, if you're right about something, do not stop fighting for it until someone else sees the struggle and helps you," Fallon said.

Hessler's recovery has also gone relatively smoothly, though she did share that the anesthesia affected her more than the actual surgery.

"I went back to work after three weeks," she told the newspaper. "It's been a little tougher [to recover] than I thought. I have a lot of nausea, but that has less to do with donating. I typically don't do well with anesthesia and I knew that about myself going into this."

Thankfully, a recent trip back to UVa for a checkup revealed that she is healing ahead of schedule.

"I haven't had much difficulty. I get tired more easily than I used to, but I keep reminding myself that it's only been a few weeks," she said.

## Spreading the Message

Aside from her job as a driver, Hessler is a chaplain for Twin County Hospice and an associate pastor for her church. She also

Instead, Fallon's actual kidney came from a donor in the midwest, who also used the donor exchange program. Hessler's kidney went to a patient in the Washington D.C. area.

"Mary and I had our surgeries on the same day. She had the first surgery of the day, and mine was the last surgery," said Fallon.

Hessler, in a phone interview with the newspaper, said she'd first heard about Fallon from an article in The Declaration last August.

"When I read the story and I looked at Robert's picture, this young man who had his whole life ahead of him, with that wild hair and big smile... I knew I was going to do it," Hessler said.

She contacted Sparks through email, and they contacted UVa. "We contacted them and it started the long process of being tested from head to toe," Hessler said.

When the doctors expressed concern about the age difference, and Hessler learned about the Paired Donor Exchange Program, she agreed to be a part of it for Fallon's sake.

"I was told that if I agreed to give my kidney to someone I didn't know — and honestly I didn't know Robert other than what I'd read in the article — that he would be guaranteed a kidney," said Hessler. "As a bonus, they said that they might be able to get a bigger exchange and even more people get kidneys."

It was Jan. 4 when Hessler and Fallon received the call they'd been waiting for.

Hessler drives a bus for special needs children in the Carroll County Public School system. She was on the bus after her shift when she got the call; and she pulled off of the road to answer.

"I was so excited to know that he would be getting the same call in just a few minutes saying they could do this for him," Hessler said.

## Life After Surgery

When Fallon woke up from his surgery, his doctor told him that the kidney had fit him perfectly, like it had been made just for him.

"The doctor told me he was the only patient he'd ever had where he'd hooked up a kidney and it worked immediately," Fallon said. "I told Mom and Krystal that I wonder now if I have family out there in the midwest somewhere we don't know about."

The doctor told him that it would take roughly six to eight weeks for full recovery, but Fallon is already healing beautifully. He is no longer on dialysis, and his days now involve planning a bright future.

"Two days before my transplant, I proposed to Krystal and we are now engaged," Fallon said. She and Sparks exchanged smiles. He talked about the day he proposed; his friends helped him orchestrate the scene, including running out to get all of the bells and whistles.

"I sent a friend to get rose petals, a chocolate rose and a chocolate-smelling teddy bear. We got everything set up and I knelt outside. When she walked out, I saw her and I was so full of love for her I basically held out the ring and screamed, 'Marry me!'"

Fallon said he wanted the moment to be as special as possible.

"Krystal was the voice and the powerhouse behind this whole thing," Fallon said.

When Fallon is done with recovery, he will also be going back into the workforce; this time with the freedom to plan long-term.

When asked what he wanted to do with his life next, he shrugged and said, "I've been thinking about it, and I keep going back to the subject of transplants. There are other people who are my age and need organs, who are young and going through a hard time. I was 19 when I was diagnosed and I was 22 when I got the kidney. The hardest part was the emotions; nobody understood this, and I felt alone and isolated."

Since he knows what that pain is like, Fallon shared that he's considering becoming a mentor for younger people who are waiting for organ transplants.

"I want people to know that someone cares and help them through a hard time. I think if I'd had that, my mental state would have been much better," Fallon said.

Fallon also wants to see people who are in the situation he was in to have advocates when it comes to issues involving assistance, another area he struggles with.

"A lot of stuff in the system contradicts itself. One of the biggest pieces of advice I would give someone is, if you're right about something, do not stop fighting for it until someone else sees the struggle and helps you," Fallon said.

Hessler's recovery has also gone relatively smoothly, though she did share that the anesthesia affected her more than the actual surgery.

"I went back to work after three weeks," she told the newspaper. "It's been a little tougher [to recover] than I thought. I have a lot of nausea, but that has less to do with donating. I typically don't do well with anesthesia and I knew that about myself going into this."

## Spreading the Message

Aside from her job as a driver, Hessler is a chaplain for Twin County Hospice and an associate pastor for her church. She also

has two grown sons.

"[My boys] are one of the reasons I wanted to donate," Hessler said. "If this happened to one of my boys, I would want someone to step up."

Hessler said she'd had people ask her what would happen if, down the road, she or a member of her family needed a kidney after she'd already made a donation to a complete stranger. The answer, both Fallon and Hessler say, usually comes as a surprise to a lot of people.

"A lot of people think that if they donate and something happens down the road, they won't have help; but that isn't the case," said Fallon. "If something happens to you or a loved one you could have helped with a donation, you or they are put at the top of the list because of what you did before. Some transplant centers give you a voucher; and if someone in your family needs a kidney in the future that you can't help because you already donated, they can use that voucher."

Hessler, in her interview, added, "The biggest thing is to not live in fear. If you're healthy enough and you're in a situation where you can help someone, it's important not to love your own life too much and be too afraid to take that step. If this calls to you, God will take care of all the details."

Hessler shared that she hopes hers and Fallon's story will inspire others to look into the paired donor program, due to the high level of need.

Sparks shared that living organ donation is one of the best ways to immediately help someone who needs an organ. To become a living organ donor, a person has to have a favorable medical history and be in good condition. But even for those who can't donate while they are alive, help can also be provided just by ticking a box on a DMV application.

"Checking the box that says 'I wish to become an organ donor' on your license could also help someone. When we leave this world, we can't take our organs with us. Why not use that opportunity to help someone else?" said Sparks.

According to the American Transplant Foundation (americantransplantfoundation.org), almost 114,000 people in the United States are currently on the waiting list for a life-saving organ transplant. A new name is added to the list every 10 minutes; and an average of 20 people die each day from the lack of available organs for transplant.

When Hessler agreed to donate on Fallon's behalf, he was initially told that the waiting process might still take up to six months. But in Fallon's case, everything lined up perfectly.

"Two months later, there it was. I got the phone call on Jan. 4, and I freaked out. I drove here, ran into [my mom's] house with the phone on speaker, and started beating on my chest because I felt like my heart was beating out of my chest," Fallon said.

Janet Fallon shared that during the medical battle, everyone had agreed to brutal honesty.

"I had to prepare for the worst of everything throughout all of this. I had to have conversations with my son about what his wishes were if he didn't make it. So to hear someone on the other end of the phone say that someone who doesn't even know my son is willing to save his life... there's nothing I could ever do for this woman to repay her for what she has done," said Janet.

Hessler shared that she learned a lot from the experience, and wishes to spread information about the Paired Donor Exchange Program with others.

She has a personal history concerning this topic: her late husband suffered from kidney failure and had to wait on the list for his transplant. Hessler also had a friend who went through a similar process.

"It's crazy when you read the statistics of how many people get kidneys every year. They say the average wait time is 3.8 years; and in all that time, the person's health is declining. It affects their heart and their whole body," Hessler said. "My late husband, by the time he got the transplant, he was so sick. He never did fully recover even when he got the transplant." She added that he'd suffered from heart complications related to his diabetes, in addition to his years waiting for a transplant while on dialysis.

Hessler didn't sugarcoat the process itself. She had to go through a lot of testing, including lab work, X-rays, a CT scan; and meetings with a social worker, the surgeon and a psychiatrist.

"The meeting [with the psychiatrist] was funny. When I was asked about my plan for being out of work, I said that God would provide for me," Hessler said. When the psychiatrist pushed further and asked again, "Well that's fine; but what is your plan?"

Hessler responded, "My plan is to rely on God."

Hessler thanked her family and the members of her church, Glenwood United Methodist Church, for their support. She noted that a member of the church went with her to the hospital and stayed with her; many friends provided food and financial support for the travel; and that she never paid out of pocket aside from transportation and a missed day of work thanks to insurance.

"So many people think that if you need a kidney for a family member, but you get tested and you're not a match, that that's the end of it and you have to keep waiting," said Hessler. "I think the takeaway from this is that even if you don't match for the person you want to help, you can still guarantee that your loved one gets help from someone else."



Krystal Sparks with fiance', Robert Fallon  
Facebook photo



The Rocks for Robert page on Facebook chronicles the journey many of Sparks' rocks took across the United States. Several finders posted pictures of the finds and some even contributed their own rocks to raise awareness for organ donation.

