



Pipers Gap Rescue Squad photo

# Firefighters battle blaze in Carroll

No injuries in structure fire

By SHANNON WATKINS  
Staff

Nobody was injured when a single-story wood frame building was destroyed by fire at Lockwood Lane in Carroll County on May 29 at 1:30 a.m., according to Galax Fire Chief David Hankley.

On arrival, firefighters found “heavy fire showing from approximately 50% of the structure,” said Hankley. He noted that access to the building was limited due to poor access; the home was approximately half a mile off the main road on a private one-lane drive, he said.

“In addition, there were two homemade bridges that were impassable for the heavy trucks,” he continued, explaining the difficulty of the situation for firefighters.

However, they were able to run hoses to the building to apparently extinguish the fire, though they had to return at 12:53 p.m. that day for a resurgence of the blaze.

Assisting were the Hillsville, Independence and Fries fire departments, along with Pipers Gap Rescue Squad. The Glade Creek Fire Department from Ennis, N.C., responded to the Galax Fire Station to cover other calls.

Assistant Fire Chief Mark Burnett expressed appreciation for the other agencies who assisted.

# State will enter Phase 2 of reopening Friday

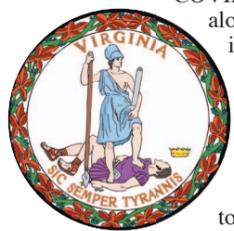
Barring any changes to COVID-19 data, more pandemic-related restrictions will be lifted on June 5

By SHAINA STOCKTON  
Staff

Gov. Ralph Northam on Tuesday announced that, due to the continuing downward trend of COVID-19 cases in Virginia — along with increased testing capacity and steady levels of safety equipment and available beds in hospitals throughout the state — Phase Two of “Forward Virginia” is still planned to take effect this Friday.

It’s the second of four phases of the state’s plan to safely reopen businesses, entertainment venues, places of worship and other areas while mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. While Phase Two will allow more flexibility — including gatherings of up to 50 people, indoor restaurant seating, gym classes and

See PHASE 2, Page 3A



# ‘Slim’ Phipps



## Downtown Galax icon remembered

SHOE REPAIR SHOP OWNER KNOWN FOR GENEROSITY, HARD WORK AND BEING THE BEST-DRESSED MAN IN TOWN

By SHANNON WATKINS  
Staff

Weldon Herbert “Slim” Phipps was known in the community for three things: his kind nature; his strong work ethic; and his perfect, elegant style.

Phipps, born in Carroll County on Sept. 18, 1935 to Harvey and Effie Newman Phipps, is best remembered by those who knew him professionally as the owner of the Riteway Shoe Shop in downtown Galax and by his surviving family as a loving father and father figure. He served his country as a member of the U.S. Air Force

“He was iconic,” said Galax City Manager Keith Barker, who added of Phipps’ leatherworking and repair trade, “It’s a lost art.”

His children — Lesia Brown, Pandoria Henry and Chris Saunders — said he was a guiding light to them as young people and an ongoing inspiration as adults.

“He was a great example of what a great man should be,” said Brown. “I never saw him act anywhere, in the public light, in any way that was less than Christlike. I thank God for him stepping into my life as a young teen-



Weldon “Slim” Phipps at work in his long-running business, Riteway Shoe Shop (top) and in church with wife Lola (above), displaying his signature style.

Gazette file photos

age girl.” (Phipps was, technically, a stepfather to the three siblings, though all say they saw him as nothing but their own relative).

She continued, “I thank God most of all because he was a godly man; he showed godly characteristics. He was

a good provider... most of all to me, he was a great inspiration. He was that great man that you want to look up to... he would give love, give, give, give. He gave to the hungry and the homeless and

See SLIM, Page 2A

# Carroll small businesses can qualify for grants

Staff Report

HILLSVILLE — The Friends of the Town of Hillsville Inc. is providing two Carroll County businesses \$500 in grant funding. The goal of this Friends of Hillsville Small Business Grant is to help local businesses survive and thrive during the pandemic and to continue the Friends of Hillsville’s mission of supporting the community.

- To qualify, a business must:
- be located in Carroll County;
  - have been open prior to March 1, 2020;
  - have fewer than 20 employees; and
  - be non-franchised.

Applications are due June 19. Applications may be submitted at [townofhillsville.com/foh-grant-application/](http://townofhillsville.com/foh-grant-application/).



SILENCE = COMPLIANCE

# Protest marches planned in Galax

“It was heartbreaking and saddening to watch the life of a man leave his body at the knee of someone who took an oath to serve and protect,” said protest organizer Dondea Young

By SHANNON WATKINS  
Staff

Two marches to protest systemic racism and violence against the black community are being held Wednesday and Friday in Galax.

Perhaps unique among such protests in America at the moment, the marches will both have the presence of law enforcement — in the form of a safety escort.

Dondea Young of Galax is the organizer for today’s march; Houston Dixon of Hillsville is the organizer for Friday’s march.

Both marches, organizers said, will have Galax Police Chief DeWitt Cooper and other local officers riding alongside as an escort for safety’s sake.

Both marches were created in the wake of George Floyd’s death under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer — which was recorded on video — and the subsequent multi-city rioting in protest. The officer has been charged with murder.

“It was heartbreaking and saddening to watch the life of a man leave his body at the knee of someone who took an oath to serve and protect,” said Young. “We all heard the hurt and pain as Mr. Floyd pleaded for a breath and watched as he called for his mother. The hurt, the pain is still ringing from coast to coast. Enough is enough!”

Both protests, though, are centered around love, though Houston has also stated that it’s important to let the black community speak without fear of being silenced, argued with or talked over. “This is a safe space for black voices to say, ‘This is not okay, and this will not be accepted in our community,’” she said.

Young said of today’s march, “We want to come together with this peaceful march in Galax as we know that prejudices and racism still exist in our community. The purpose of our march is to bring everyone that is sick and tired of being sick and tired together to honor Mr.

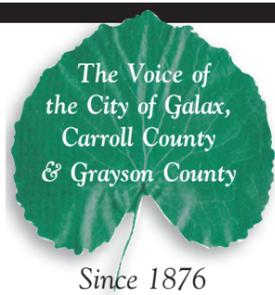
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# Slim

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never regretted it."

Henry said of him, "He was a good dad. He was a kind, gentle man. He came into my life when I was about 13, and he was a dad to me. My mom married him when I was 12; we weren't his natural kids but as far as we were concerned, we were his."

Saunders was the most voluble about his father, and echoed what his sisters said, adding that Phipps' apparently calm nature was genuine, even at home.

"He was the same man (at home) that everybody saw," Saunders said. "He was a kind, generous man. What everybody saw was who he was. He didn't act one way at home and another way out, and most people don't do that. He seldom had a bad day. You never saw him angry. When he was, you never saw him upset. He never talked down or demeaned anybody."

Saunders also spoke of his father's charitable actions — which, he said, Phipps preferred to keep quiet. "Everybody knows about the shoes, but they don't know about the spiritual aspect of it. He loved people, and his actions showed it. He was a giver. If people were going to college, he would call the kids and give them money when they would come home, but he would never say a word. Nobody ever knew that undercover stuff. But the people who he helped, they got up afterward and told about it. He'd bring them bunches of food, stuff we didn't know for a long time. But that's just the kind of person he was."

Saunders said that Phipps had always been known as a good-hearted person, but it was after a severe illness and an amazing recovery that he became a spiritual man and really began pursuing a path to spreading divine love in earnest.

"He was supposed to be dead 40 years ago," noted Saunders, due to liver disease. Notes from the funeral indicate Phipps had cirrhosis. "He gave his life to Christ. He was a kind man before that, but after that he was even better. It was a miracle. That's where the love comes from, a change from inside your heart. He prayed all the time, he talked to God all the time. He put his heart into God."

Tony Truitt of Roy's Diamond Center in downtown Galax — formerly the location of an Allen's Shoe Shop, where Phipps started out in the 1950s — said that he was so generous that "he charged way too little for what he did."

However, Phipps' business policy, combined with his amazing ability to make even the most beat-up shoes and other leather goods look like new, earned him an eye-opening amount of business.

"People who moved away from here brought their shoes back to have them fixed because he was really good at what he did," said Truitt. "He took shoe jobs nobody else would take. If you'd taken them to fancy shoe shops in Richmond or New York, they wouldn't have tried to help you."

In a 1996 Gazette article profiling him, his wife — the late Eller Iola Phipps, who preceded him in death — said, "We fix shoes, boots, belts, coats; even holsters and saddles. Even a trampoline, so help me Lord!" Even she cannot believe it.

He left a lasting impression.

"I can remember him my entire life," said retired Galax police chief Rick Clark, who recalled Phipps

working in other shoe shops before finally getting his own on Carroll Street. "He was a very sincere, kind man. I doubt that you would find anyone in Galax to say a hard word about him." As an officer, Clark said, "I saw him two to three times a week. He'd be walking up the [Blue Ridge] Grill for one of the lunch specials."

Phipps outfitted Clark, like many others, for some of the most important moments of their lives.

"He polished the shoes that I wore when I married Susan," said Clark. "When I had an important court case or a special occasion, I went there. He was the last stop on my way to city hall to be interviewed for police chief."

Asked about Phipps' best attributes, Clark said, "Well, there were several things. With him, what you see is what you get. If he told you something, you could go to the bank with it. He would not say anything behind your back that he wouldn't say to your face. He walked the walk and talked the talk [of a true Christian]. He was just a really good person."

"He was a great guy," said Galax City Council Member Willie Greene. "I admired him. He shined shoes, worked hard, worked late, and ended up owning the shop."

Greene also spoke of Phipps' character — which, as everyone who chose to comment said — was sterling. "He was a good Christian man. He used to tell the story all the time about how sick he was once, and the Lord helped him, and he came back stronger than ever."

Phipps' religious sentiments lasted his whole life. "He used to come over to my house all the time," said Greene. "He and my father would talk about the Bible."

His work ethic, combined with his own sense of style, provided his customers with recognizable looks. "He was a sharp dresser from head to toe!" said Greene. "When I first got elected to city council, he would shine my shoes; he said, 'You gotta have those shoes shined!'"

Greene recalled attending a Head Start meeting out on the West Coast, representing the state of Virginia. "Some folks were looking for me; once they found me, one guy said, 'I knew it was you out of everybody, because the backs of your shoes were so shiny!'"

He also spoke about Phipps' generosity and dedication. "You take your shoes in there, he'd say, 'Give me a dollar,' or two dollars. He wouldn't gouge people. He just made you feel good. I came in there 12, 1 o'clock at night, he'd be in there. I'd be out working late, I'd ride by and see him, he'd still be there working. That's what he was like."

"Him and Sister Iola worked together at that shoe shop," remembered Sue Greene, pastor of MacMillian Ministries and the councilman's wife. "He was a great man. He was a deacon at his church. Everybody loved Brother Weldon; he was a great help to everybody. People would come to him from everywhere, and bring their shoes. The white men who had their cowboy boots, they would bring their boots to him."

"Weldon 'Slim' Phipps was the epitome of a gentleman," said Lois Fincher of Galax. "Courteous, polite, thoughtful, respectful and he always greeted you with a smile on his face, and of course he was known for his impeccable dress. If he even stepped out of his house, he always had on a suit, a tie and good shoes. One way I would describe Slim's dress is, he always looked like he was going to a royal wedding."

Like many others, Fincher



Phipps with his family at an event honoring him at the Rex Theater in 2007, sponsored by the Galax Downtown Association. The painting of Phipps is by artist Becky Guyonn.



Clockwise: Phipps with grandson Devon Saunders; working in his shop; and a wall of shoes waiting to be repaired.

Gazette file photos

praised his craftsmanship. "My children, whether they lived in New York, California or Europe, if their shoes needed repair, they always brought them to Galax and took them to Slim. He really was a perfectionist at his craft. As a matter of fact, my daughter's luggage got damaged. She took it down to him, and you could never even tell it had been damaged at all."

Finally, she recalled, "He had a sense of humor. My daughter would sometimes call him 'Obama,' and he would smile and give her a salute."

At the Galax Downtown Association's 2007 "Slim-Abriation" event honoring Phipps, Harvey Hennis of the Galax Volunteer Fire Department presented him with a special plaque to thank him for his years of mending firefighters' turnout gear for years at no charge.

According to a Gazette article, Hennis announced, "He always said, 'I may need you guys one day.' Let's hope that day never comes."

From the same article comes an illuminating anecdote, courtesy of citizen Mary Guynn: "Speakers shared stories about Phipps and the ways he'd helped them out."

Mary Guynn remembered Phipps fixing a hole in her old leather cavalry saddle and kindly cautioning her to take better care of it. "He always fixed things with great care and for very little money," Guynn said. She noted that attendees of the event filled a donation box for Phipps "because they feel guilty that they've never paid him enough."

At the same event, Phipps' nephew, pastor Sidney Beamer of Living Waters Church in Galax at the time, said he hoped Phipps would be

around for many years to come, "but when you get to heaven, God's gonna say 'We've been waiting for you — people walking these golden streets have worn some shoes out!'"

Phipps passed away on May 28 in the Woltz Hospice Home in Dobson, N.C.

He is survived by his children and their spouses Lesia Brown; Chris and Margaret Saunders; Pandoria and Terry Henry all of Galax, Virginia; sister Roberta Jefferson of Denver, Colorado; three grandchildren Kayson Saunders; Devon Saunders and Darius Brown; several nieces and nephews.

A well-attended graveside service was held in the Bethany Cemetery with Bishop Barry Early and Bishop Sydney Beamer officiating.

A guestbook is available online at vaughanguynn.com.

# March

Continued from Page 1A

Floyd, as well as all of the others: Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin — and the list goes on — that have lost their lives to senseless acts of murder. The voices of all those that have been silent for far too long are now awake and ringing loud and clear."

She added, "We are marching to spread love and destroy the hate and prejudice in our community."

Dixon said of Friday's march that she will have a sign reading "SILENCE IS COMPLIANCE." Dixon noted that this means those who keep quiet when racism is perpetuated are compliant with it; she still asked that, while anyone can march with her, black voices are allowed to be heard without interruption.

"I most certainly agree with Houston," said Young. "I know we as an African-American community in a predominantly white area of Southwest Virginia have felt as though our hands

have been tied and our voices suppressed to speak out about the racism that is among us [and] being profiled by local law enforcement because of who family members are."

She continued, "We appreciate and are very grateful for Houston stepping up and organizing a peaceful march, to bring understanding to those who may not know what is happening and going on in this country and why it is going on. Racism and hatred can no longer keep people quiet, oppressed and traumatized."

*Today's march will begin at noon at the upper level of Felts Park and continue to the Galax police station on Main Street. Friday's march will begin at 6 p.m. at the Galax Elementary School and continue to the Galax police station, as well. At both events, participants are asked to wear masks for safety reasons related to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*"Racism and hatred can no longer keep people quiet, oppressed and traumatized."*

— DONDEA YOUNG,

ORGANIZER OF WEDNESDAY'S PROTEST MARCH IN GALAX

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Bolen indicted on murder charges Hillsville man to stand trial for wife's strangulation death



By ETHAN CAMPBELL Staff

HILLSVILLE - A Hillsville man was indicted Monday on charges related to the murder of his wife, Cassandra Lauren Bolen, who was found dead at home in Hillsville two days before Christmas last year.

Marcus Anthony Bolen, 36, was taken into custody on Dec. 26, 2019, after warrants were obtained for his arrest on charges of second-degree murder and felony child neglect.

A grand jury in Carroll County Circuit Court on June 15 certified the charges and sent the case to trial, which will be set at a hearing on July 8. An indictment is a formal criminal charge, not a finding of guilt.

According to the murder indictment, on Dec. 22-23, 2019, Marcus Bolen allegedly killed Cassandra Lauren Bolen.

The child neglect indictment says that Bolen, "while being a parent, guardian or other person responsible for the care of a child under the age of 18, did commit a willful act or omission in the care of such child

which was so gross, wanton and culpable as to show a reckless disregard for human life...."

Information from local police at the time of Bolen's arrest provided no explanation as to where he went after his wife's death. However, investigators stated that they believe one of Lauren Bolen's children was left alone at the residence around the time of the homicide, resulting in the charge of felony child neglect.

Lauren Bolen's other two children were not at the

See BOLEN, Page 2A

City will use CARE funds to help small businesses

Using \$218K in federal funding, Galax is also teaming with God's Storehouse to provide more meals and helping Rooftop of Virginia provide housing assistance

By SHANNON WATKINS Staff

Galax City Council has approved three new programs, totaling \$218,200, to assist local small businesses and citizens due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The programs approved at council's June 15 meeting include the Small Business Assistance Program, Food Assistance Program and Housing Assistance Program.

Funding for the programs is provided to the city by the CARES Act, from the federal and state governments.

City council allocated \$150,000 to a Small Business Assistance Program, which will provide grants of up to \$2,000 to small businesses in Galax that were affected by Gov. Northam's Executive Order 53, specifically those small and personal businesses that were required to close or drastically change their business operations. The grants are intended

See GALAX, Page 2A

Virginia not ready to enter Phase 3

By SHAINA STOCKTON Staff

Although the numbers continue to look favorable in Virginia, Gov. Ralph Northam announced that the state will not move into Phase Three of reopening this week.

"We want more time to look at the trends as we see surges in other parts of the country," Northam said at his press conference on Tuesday.

At Thursday's news conference, Northam took more time to elaborate on the details of what Phase Three will allow.

"While our health data is positive, we are also monitoring other states; and we're going to be cautious and careful and watch the data for a little longer before we move forward," Northam said on Thursday.

The governor noted that surrounding states are

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ROLL MODEL

Ronald Vaught and his skating rink were a fondly remembered part of growing up for many in Galax

By SHANNON WATKINS Staff

The late Ronald Lee Vaught of Galax presided over the Galax Rollerland, a palace of amusements the likes of which is sadly in decline.

In its heyday, though, it was a hub of kid-friendly fun and social interaction on wheels.

Born in Mount Airy, N.C., on March 29, 1942 to Wayne and Mildred Hinshaw Vaught, he went on to own and run the skating rink for 38 years with his wife, Linda Vaught.

His first cousin, Lib Russell, said of him, "He always called me his sister. We grew up together. My actual brother and I grew up with Ronald. We lived across the street, we played together, we did everything together."

Russell noted that he was a Boy Scout, which seemed to suit his overall nature of helpfulness. "Ronald was always

See VAUGHT, Page 3A

TOP: Galax Rollerland owner Ronald Vaught skates with kids in a photo from the 1990s.

RIGHT, TOP: Vaught with wife Linda.

RIGHT, BOTTOM: Kids skated at the rink from 1979 until it closed in 2017.

Photos courtesy of Linda Vaught



ELECTION 2020

Three seek nomination to challenge Sen. Warner in November

Find out more about candidates for U.S. Senate seat in Virginia's June 23 Republican primary

Staff Reports

The Virginia Primary Election will be held June 23, and voters will choose a candidate in the state's Republican primary.

Three candidates are seeking the Republican nomination to challenge incumbent Democratic Sen. Mark Warner in November.

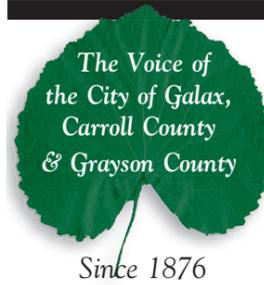
June 16 was the deadline to request an absentee ballot online or mail — the method of voting recommended by the Virginia Department of Elections — but if you plan to vote in person next Tuesday, polls will be open from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m.

If you will be voting in-person, election officials suggest reviewing the CDC's recommendations on protecting yourself and others due to COVID-19, such as wearing a face covering and maintaining a distance of at least six feet from others. For the latest updates, visit vote.org/covid-19/.

On the ballot, voters in the Twin Counties area will find three candidates seeking the Republican nomination — Alissa A. Baldwin, a civics teacher; retired U.S. Army Lt. Col. Daniel M. Gade, an American University professor; and Thomas A. Spedale II, a U.S. Army reservist.

The candidate that wins the GOP nomination faces an uphill battle in November. The Virginia Mercury newspaper reported that Warner is "considered a strong favorite to win reelection this year," noting that Republicans haven't won a statewide race in Virginia since 2009. "The state GOP has seen its political power shrink considerably in the Trump era, losing their majorities in the General Assembly and three congressional seats," the

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# Vaught

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helping somebody," she said. "He always helped another person if he could. He did that all his life."  
 "He was a very good man," said Linda. "He went to school at Galax High and graduated Class of 1962."  
 In high school, said Russell, he worked at Higgins Oil Company before serving in Vietnam with the U.S. Army.

"He owned the West Galax Texaco station in the late '60s, early '70s," said Russell. "He always attended church. He was a faithful Christian." Vaught previously attended West Galax Methodist and went to Cranberry Christian Church for some time before he passed away.

And, along the way, he found his passion: "The love of his life was skating," said Russell. "He would help [owner] Red Johnson at the roller rink and he decided that's what he wanted to do all his life."

"He and I married in November of 1965," said Linda. "He had worked at the local skating rink in his teenage years, so that was a dream of his, to have his own business."

The rink, according to Linda, was located on top of a hill behind the current E&L Diamond location on South Main Street in Galax. Ronald loved it, but "in a snowstorm in the late '60s, the roof collapsed," she said. "Johnson never opened it again."

However, Vaught – who didn't like to sit idle and had a very community-minded sense of ambition – decided to make sure the area had a skating rink again, and thus opened Galax Rollerland, about a mile outside the city.

"It was Ronald's dream to get the skating business going back in Galax," said Linda. "In September of 1979, he got everything together and opened the skating rink out on Highway 89, just south of Galax. It served Galax and surrounding counties. We did birthday parties and church parties, church youth groups. Just about anything anybody wanted to do."

Rollerland was there from 1970 until his health declined in 2017.

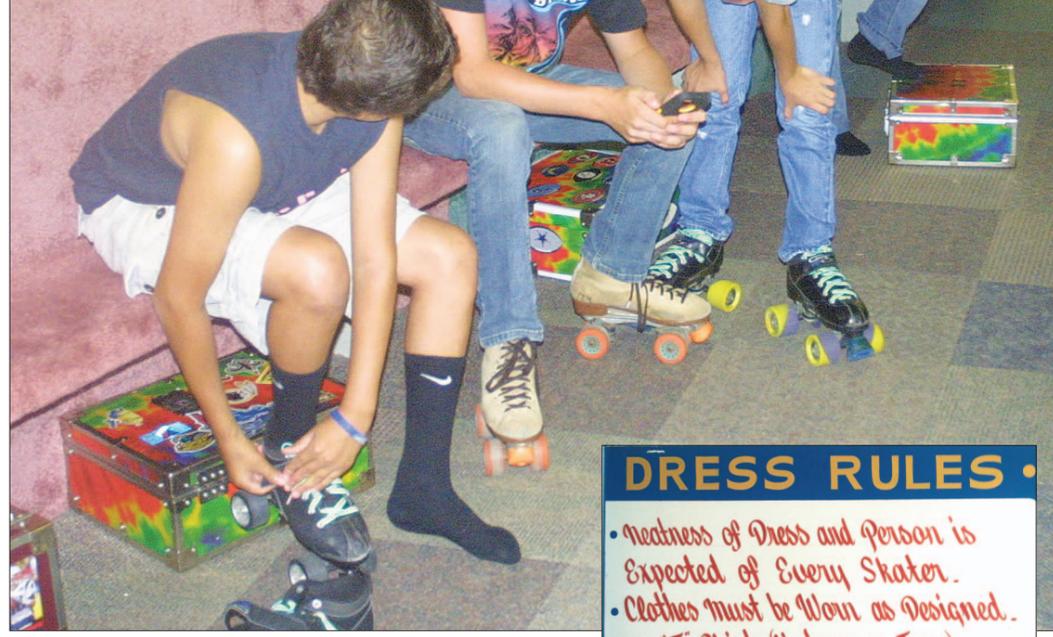
"I think it kind of hurt him, you know, that skating fell off, and the children were into so much social media and they didn't skate as much. I think that he missed that," she said. "We talked about that a lot. He would say, 'What are they doing, now that they're not skating?'"

However, for a long, glorious period, Vaught lived his dream.

"He loved the children and he loved being with people and that was just his dream," said Linda. "He was also a skater himself, he loved to skate. It was just ideal for him, because he was a people person. He never met a stranger. When we'd go to Walmart or anywhere else, he was always passing out free skating tickets to the children and talking to them. Their grandmothers and grandfathers would bring them here when mom and dad were working. It was just a delight for him."

The generation who grew up with the Rollerland speak of it, and of Vaught, with great fondness.

"Ronald graduated high school with my dad [Larry Thompson] in 1962," said Lynette Poe, who spent many



teenage years at Galax Rollerland. "Even though he knew my name, it always made me laugh when I would go to the door [of the rink] every Friday night and Saturday mornings in the mid-late '80s and he would yell in his sweet, friendly voice 'Hey Larry's young'un! Come on in and get ya some skates on!'"

She said of the Vaughts' far-flung influence, "Every kid in Galax in the 1980s was partially raised by Ronald and Linda. Times were so different. Our parents totally trusted them to take care of us. He knew everything about all of us and he was like a second dad to all of us."

Galax City Council Member Travis Haynes lived across the street from Vaught growing up. He proved to be a great help in Haynes' life and something of a father figure, as well as an employer.

"He actually trained me in one of my professions; I was a car detailer from the time I was 10 or 12. I used that later on, I had my own shop and I was a detailer for a dealership. He would give me free passes to the rink in exchange for helping clean and wax floors. I worked on my skating. I spent a lot of time trying to skate backwards. The rink was a huge part of my social life at the time. Once I got a driver's license, that ended that phase of my life."

While under Vaught's direction at the rink, however, Haynes said that very little bad behavior was tolerated. "He was harder on us than our parents were," said Haynes. "He didn't think anything of yelling at you over the microphone to 'stop doing that.'"

As a member of the neighborhood, said Haynes, Vaught "would clean neighbors' driveways of snow in winter. He never liked sitting down much;

Linda Vaught in the snack bar at Galax Rollerland (top left); kids skating and preparing to skate at the rink (above, left and right); and a sign listing Ronald Vaught's rules (right). Locals who skated at Rollerland as kids remember always feeling safe there, knowing that Vaught didn't tolerate any bad behavior.

Photos courtesy of Linda Vaught

he always wanted to be doing. His yard always looked great and he had an amazing garden."

Haynes said, "My kids would call him 'Mr. McGregor' after the farmer in 'Peter Rabbit,' because he was always out in his garden."

Candi Owen said she grew up at Rollerland, skating every weekend. "My mother, Verta Owen, grew up with Ronald, and it was the only place when I was young that she would drop me off and know that I would be taken care of because Ronald was amazing to everyone."

Galax Rollerland was a reliable part of her young social life, as well. "I had my birthday party every year in elementary school at the rink," she recalled. "Ronald used to sit me up on the counter and say, 'Candi, girl, since you're as sweet as candy, go over to the snack bar and get whatever you want!' He would then hug me and send me on my way. There wasn't a person who didn't walk in the roller rink that he didn't make feel like family."

Angela Ramey Underwood merely said, "I thought so much of him and the skating rink was a big part of my childhood!"

The Rollerland years were busy and happy, said Linda. "From the time we opened in 1979 all through the '80s, I guess we had a full decade of booming, all the business that we could take

care of, really," she said. "And we had folks that worked for us that enjoyed it as much as Ronald did."

And he got to run things to his satisfaction. "We never had a DJ, so most of the music would be what Ronald liked, but we had a jukebox and the people who put music on the jukebox was what was popular at that time. Ronald was an Elvis fan, so if nobody was playing anything on the jukebox, he put Elvis on."

He also let his spiritual side show. "Ronald was a mighty fine Christian," Linda said. "We had Wednesday nights dedicated as church night. Wednesday night was gospel night."

Linda worked there, too, and recalls all the other diversions available. "We had the snack bar and I worked in it. I wasn't much of a skater, but I made pizzas and sold popcorn. It was open every time people skated. We had video games and the foosball table and the claw machine where they could put their money in and get the little animals from."

One of the reasons Galax Rollerland was popular among parents was the fact that Vaught put up with very little improper behavior: kids were safe there.

Though he had a good sense of humor and liked to goof around sometimes, there were "lots of rules," said Linda. "By Ronald already having a lot of previous experience, he knew

what to look for. I would say in the first 10 years, we had extra security hired. There was an off-duty Grayson County deputy; he would come down there every Friday and Saturday, and he would periodically patrol the parking lot. He was very strict. He would not let anybody 'park' in the parking lot. If you were there, you better make it known your child was either in there or you were coming to pick them up. If any laws were broken, he immediately called the law."

Vaught himself "was a super character!" said Linda. "He wanted it done right and he didn't put up with foolishness. If someone came to the door and there was alcohol on their breath, he did not let them in. Older teenagers would sometimes push him to the limit. He would give them two or three tries, but if they would keep breaking the rules in the skating rink, he would give them six weeks' leave of absence to think about that thing."

She added, "We were married in November of 1965 and we never had children. It's not that we didn't love them, they just didn't come along. We found that being with the children at the skating rink was just ideal for us."

And, in that light, the mark that Vaught left was both simple and long-lasting: "I think his legacy would be that he ran a good clean place for children to come and have a good time," said Linda.

# Fire department handles crashes, sets up landing zone

Staff Report

INDEPENDENCE — The Independence Volunteer Fire Department recently reported a busy week on social media, sharing the details of several calls with the public.

On May 21 at 6:40 a.m., the department was dispatched to a motor vehicle crash on Wilson Highway near Fox Creek Road. On arrival, volunteers found a vehicle that had veered off the road through a wooden fence.

The rescue teams extracted the driver; and the Independence Rescue Squad took over patient care.

Virginia State Police are investigating the incident. The Grayson County Sheriff's Office also assisted at the scene.

Later that afternoon, at 5:20 p.m., the department was dispatched again to a second wreck on Wilson



Setting up a landing zone for a medical emergency.

Photos courtesy of the Independence Volunteer Fire Department

Highway. On arrival, crews found a truck that had run off the side of the road and was nose-down in a steep embankment.

When responders arrived, the driver was already out of the vehicle and was uninjured. "Firefighters checked the vehicle for hazards and cleared," the

department post said.

The Independence Rescue Squad and the Grayson County Sheriff's office also responded to the scene.

On May 18, the department was dispatched to set up a landing zone for the Independence Rescue Squad at 11:38 p.m., for a patient with a medical emergency.



Independence firefighters respond to two crashes on Wilson Highway.



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Valerie Rives of Galax (left) worked as an assistant to legendary actress and singer Liza Minnelli in the 1990s.

## Theater community remembers Valerie Rives

Friends from NYC to L.A. to Galax celebrate Rives' life

By SHANNON WATKINS  
Staff

Valerie Ann Gardner Rives was born in Covington on Feb. 22, 1953, and died in Winston-Salem, N.C. on Dec. 17, 2020, at age 67.

In between these dates, Rives lived the life of a theater professional with wit, patience, a generous heart and a keen eye for talent that she helped actors coax out of themselves. Her loss is felt far beyond Galax, from New York to Houston to Los Angeles, where she worked as an assistant to the legendary Liza Minnelli.

She is survived by her husband, Michael Rives of Galax; her sister, Rene Revene, and brother, Jeff Gardner, both of Richmond.

Rives lived in Galax until she was about 8; then her family moved to Richmond, where she grew up. In recent years, she had returned to Galax and worked in the local arts community.

Everyone who talked about Rives spoke of her big heart, and all of them came close to tears at least once when describing her.

See RIVES, Page 3A



## Say goodbye to 2020 (or good riddance) with fireworks in Galax

Staff Report

Ready to wave a heartfelt goodbye to 2020? You're not alone.

Galax City Tourism and High Country Lights are pairing to bring the community a "Goodbye 2020 Fireworks" event on New Year's Eve.

The display is free and open to the public, and will be held on Dec. 31 at 10 p.m. in Felts Park.

All are welcome, but please remember to wear a mask and practice safe social distancing.

## Grayson looks back at 2020

County officials also detail 2021 plans, pandemic status

By SHAINA STOCKTON  
Staff

INDEPENDENCE — The Grayson County Board of Supervisors closed out the year with an update on COVID-19 numbers, a look ahead at 2021 and a look back on what the county has managed to accomplish in spite of the year's unique

series of obstacles.

The board on Dec. 10 heard an update on the county's COVID-19 status from Emergency Services Coordinator Paul Hoyle. He said the county experienced a "substantial" surge in cases in the weeks after Thanksgiving.

"We are seeing increases in all categories, no particular place it is coming from

specifically, just community-wide spread," Hoyle said. "So all of us need to be doing everything we can to maintain social distancing. We need to wear masks, avoid public spaces and do everything we can in the next few weeks to avoid further spread."

See GRAYSON, Page 2A

## Healthcare workers receive vaccinations



## Protecting the frontlines of the pandemic fight

By SHANNON WATKINS  
Staff

When Sandy Jones, a Galax dental technician, stepped into the COVID-19 vaccination clinic at the Rec Center on Monday afternoon, there were plenty of Virginia Department of Health (VDH) employees and Medical Reserve Corps volunteers, all masked and shielded, ready to help her.

The clinic was the first in the Twin Counties but more are to come. It was a closed clinic, only open to people in what the Centers for Disease Control has designated Group 1a — healthcare workers and long-term care facility patients. The groups were created to prioritize those who are most vulnerable to infection. Eventually, as each group is vaccinated, the clinics will become open to the general public.

What might you expect when it's your turn? Here's what Jones experienced:

Jones was stopped at the first table — there were several scattered at safe distances about the first-floor gymnasium, each with its own purpose — and had her temperature taken, along with being asked basic COVID screening questions, such as if she'd been around someone who had the virus or was exhibiting symptoms.

See VACCINE, Page 2A



Top: Sandy Jones, a dental technician in Galax (right) receives her COVID-19 vaccination from a VDH nurse on Monday.

Above: Jones receives post-shot information from volunteer Melissa Peddy (left).

Gazette photos by Shannon Watkins

## Suspects sought in Fairview break-in

Police seek help from community

By SHAINA STOCKTON  
Staff

FAIRVIEW — The Grayson County Sheriff's Department is asking the community to be on the lookout for suspects in a Dec. 10 break-in at a home in the Fairview area.

According to the sheriff's report, officers responded to the scene of an active burglary at a residence in the Fairview area on Dec. 10 around 1 p.m.

The report summarized that a male juvenile was home alone and called 911 when he noticed that someone was breaking into the home. The juvenile described a suspect as a Black male wearing a black hat, a black jacket and a COVID mask.

After calling 911, the juvenile hid in his room, according to the report.

See SUSPECTS, Page 2A

## Child advocacy center to locate at Joy Ranch

Office provides services for victims of abuse and neglect

Staff Report

Twin County Community Foundation has awarded \$10,000 to the Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) in Roanoke, which will enable Children's Trust to add a local CAC at Joy Ranch Home for Children in Carroll County.

This local office "will allow staff to see and be a part of the community, have a well-rounded understanding of services available, and strengthen trust and our col-

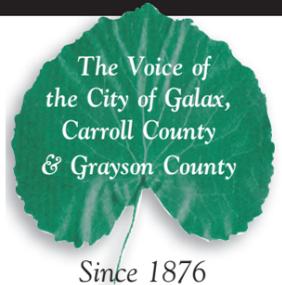
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# Rives

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"I couldn't ask anyone to be a better big sister than Valerie," Gardner told The Gazette. "She babysat us when our parents were away, like not just a big sister but another mom."

Gardner spoke proudly of her early accomplishments, noting that when still a teen, she was asked to intern at the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, which was written up in a local paper. It was there, he noted, that his sister met her future husband, Mike Rives; they would marry later in 1976. "I never saw two people who loved each other more than Mike and Val," he said.

Rives also forged friendships there that she kept until the end of her life, her brother said — but that was nothing unusual, since she made them all along.

"I've never known anyone who made friends as fast and kept them as long as Val did," said her brother. At the time of her death, "She still had friends from all over."

The reasons why were clear to him. "When she listened, you could tell she cared. She helped people with whatever they needed help with. What I'm going to miss most was being able to talk with her and laugh with her. She was such a fun person to be around. It's hard to imagine a Christmas without her, anything without her. I always felt like I had a home when Val was around. I had a place to go to if I needed to."

## New York, Houston & L.A.

Actress and singer Sally Mayes met Rives while the latter was living in Houston, where her husband's family resided. Mayes and Rives were both involved in the University of Houston's theater program.

"I went to the Coke machine one day, and there she was," recalled Mayes. "I bummed a cigarette from her. We talked, and became fast friends. Over the years we have always maintained a very close and loving friendship. She's one of my tribe."

Time and distance meant nothing while in the glow of Rives' friendship. "I didn't see her for years at a time but when I did again, it was like a shirt I'd taken off the day before, you know," Mayes said. "She was kind and funny and talented and amazing."

And her friendship was not merely a conversation, but a demonstration of kindness. "Years ago, after I had a child and was going back to work, Valerie came and stayed in my house as a nanny," said Mayes. "She taught my son to walk and rocked him to sleep and loved him as much as I did. Even after she moved out, there was never an occasion where there wasn't a card or present from Auntie Val."

Mayes ended, "She was great. She's one of a kind. She was my biggest cheerleader. She always, always supported my songwriting and my theatrical work. I will miss her every day."

**Composer and pianist Billy Stritch** likewise met Rives in Texas 40 years ago.

"Valerie Rives was probably my oldest and best friend in the world," he said. "We both met 40 years ago when we were both at the University of Houston. We just took an instant liking to one another. She was just so appealing and fun, she was a good person with a good heart."

Theirs was a friendship of empathy and similar tastes. "We bonded first over our mutual love of theater and humor. We just like the same kind of things," he said. "We just forged an instant bond. It's the longest friendship that I've had. We spent a long time together back in Houston in the '80s; we were inseparable."

Life in the arts meant contact between the two of them waxed and



**ABOVE:** Rives met her husband, Mike Rives, while at Barter Theater.



**LEFT:** Rives (shown with her dog, Gabriel) passed away on Dec. 17.

**RIGHT:** Rives (left) with Laura Barrett. While living in Los Angeles, both worked as assistants to Liza Minnelli in the 1990s.

waned. "There would be periods of time where we just stayed in contact by phone, but also long periods of getting to see one another in person," he said.

In the early 2000s, both of them lived in New York. Rives was working as assistant stage director for three-time Tony nominee Mark Bramble — whom both Rives and Stritch also knew as a friend — on the revival of the hit musical "42nd Street." Stritch played the role of Oscar, a rehearsal pianist.

"I was in that production so I got to see Val every day and it was a golden time for us," said Stritch. "Broadway was an exciting time for both of us."

He continued to paint a fascinating picture of New York theatre life, and how — and why — Rives thrived.

"She just excelled," Stritch said. "She has incredible organizational skills. She was an excellent stage manager, director. Incredible creativity. She really knew how to work with actors and how to assist and collaborate. I think part of that was that she was so intuitive with the people she worked with."

Being able to manage schedules was really only a part of it, though, he said. The other part was a deep understanding of people.

"She was 'Mama Val' to so many people on '42nd Street.' She would make them laugh, and listen to their problems," he said. A grueling production schedule could grind actors down, but Rives was always available to them.

"She had a big heart," Stritch said. "She totally put herself in your position. She had incredible empathy and a great connection with people. Everyone would agree that she stood out in her loyalty and empathy. She just connected with you. People who have that naturally — it's kind of rare when those qualities line up. She was just an angel. I didn't really get to spend any time when she moved back to Virginia, but I know she got to direct when she was there. It made me so happy to know she found an outlet for her artistic skills. She was like a big sister to me. Just like family."

Often people who are noted for their kindness are less renowned for their sense of humor, but Rives possessed both, he said. "She had a kind of wicked wit... she could just come up with very funny things off the cuff."

Stritch said that another friend recalled an incident from their Houston days when he and Rives had been lounging next to one another and someone observed them and said, "Oh, you two must be related!"

"To which Valerie replied, 'Oh, must we?'" said Stritch.

He continued, "When we first knew each other, we would spend hours on the phone. I miss that. I

miss long conversations with her."

**Laura Barrett** worked with Rives in the 1990s in Los Angeles; both were assistants to a legendary actress and singer.

"We met in 1994 when I was working for Liza Minnelli and we needed to hire someone else," said Barrett, "and Valerie had known Liza for years through Billy Stritch. He suggested she come out here and she did."

Minnelli, Barrett said, "adored Val."

Everybody who knew Rives had a memorable story to tell about her and Barrett was no exception. "One of the funniest times I ever had with Valerie was a day that Liza decided to have a dinner party," said Barrett.

Minnelli wanted to serve a pot roast, said Barrett, and had the ingredients stocked in the kitchen before taking Barrett out for some errands. "So [Minnelli] said to Val, 'Why don't you start cooking?' Well, the errands went long term, and it was a chaotic day at the house, with decorators and other people coming and going" for the party, all of which Rives was responsible for.

She continued, "Every time I called Valerie I could hear the frustration more and more in her voice, and she was cooking dinner on top of everything else. I called later on in the day and you could hear the frustration in her voice. I said, 'Oh, Valerie, I'm so glad you know how to cook, because I don't know how to make pot roast.'"

Then Barrett drops the punchline: "And she said, 'I don't cook!' But the pot roast turned out OK, I guess because it was Liza's recipe. She was the cook, not us!" she laughs.

Rives "was the most loyal friend you could ask for. A wonderful confidante," said Barrett. "She had the biggest heart. She had such a big personality and lived such a big life. She was a big hit when she moved out here. Everyone loved her."

**Beverly Petty**, producing director of the LaMaMa Theatre in New York — described by many as Rives' best friend — said that in later life, "[Valerie] spoke so kindly and lovingly of everyone in Galax. I'm so grateful she had this adopted family there. Just kind-hearted, enthusiastic, wonderful people to surround her in her new home. Such incredible people have rallied around her. It humbles me and I am forever beholden to all of you."

Petty met Rives at the North Carolina School of the Arts prior to the latter moving to Houston. Rives tried her hand at acting, but ended up behind the scenes in stage managing and directing.

"Once she did stage managing, everybody wanted her to continue," said Petty. "The stage manager is



the bond between the director, the playwright and the actors. And then she became a director. That's where a lot of her credit lies. It brought all of her skills together in a brilliant way. She had the ability to deal with the actors and to deal with the playwright (playwright is most important). So she did it all, and she did it all well."

Petty continued: "I've known and loved Val for 50 years. I've known her since college and was in her wedding. There's so many instances of us being together. When Liza went on tour, she and Billy were working together. I remember it being such a great time; there was so much electricity in the air... I think you have a family beyond your own. Val was my family and always will be."

When they communicated from a distance, "We'd get on the phone and we'd talk for three hours. There was no quick five-minute phone call."

She concluded, "I've been in the theater for over 50 years and I've met a zillion wonderful people, but Valerie Gardner Rives was one of the most generous, loving, big hearted, talented women I've ever known, and she will be tremendously missed."

## An Asset to Local Arts Community

Locally, Rives was loved in the arts community.

She worked for a while at Chestnut Creek School of the Arts, and director Chris Pollins said of her, "Her enthusiasm and passion for the arts was endless and contagious. Her support of CCSA and each of us was boundless and she will be sorely missed both as colleague and dear friend."

"The first thing everyone noticed about Valerie was her speaking voice, pitched low and very melodious," said Arts Council of the Twin Counties Director Laura Romanowski. "The second thing was her generosity of spirit and willingness to jump right into whatever you needed her to do. The third thing was the ever-present can of Coke Zero. She never left home without it. I remember so clearly the day she walked into my office. Within the space of one conversation we discovered three or four people we both knew from different times in our lives."

Romanowski continued, "She and I connected through theater. Valerie was a gifted director, my friend, my partner in crime. She helped me with my theatre bucket list — though who will direct 'Harvey' for me now, I haven't a clue."

**Rives directed productions** for both the Arts Council and the Wandflower Theatre, a youth pro-

gram under the Arts Council's aegis.

Vicky Blevins, who is involved with Wandflower, said of her, "Valerie can take the lives of our youth and turn them around just by being herself. She's made a huge impact on their futures. She gave them so much confidence. She helped so many young people who didn't know what directions their lives were going in."

Her children, Mason and Levi, acted under Rives's direction on Wandflower productions.

"She taught me so much," said Mason. "Both of course in theater, as a director and a theatrical mentor, but as a person, too. She was so caring and tender and loving. I don't even know how to put it into words. There wasn't a day I would spend with her that she didn't touch my heart and teach me something new."

"She was just an exemplary example of what a human being should be, and I think she was the kindest, most inclusive person that I'd ever met," said Levi. "I don't think she really cared about publicity or fame or money or anything like that. I think she did it just because she loved the arts and wanted to see people shine and be true to who they are."

**Emily Brooks**, also a young actor, said that she had almost been a high school dropout before meeting Rives. "I didn't think I had a future ahead of me; then I did a show with Valerie."

Sometimes both of them would show up for rehearsals an hour early and end up chatting, a memory that Brooks treasures.

"She wanted everyone to be able to explore theatre and be confident in themselves," said Brooks. "She will be really missed a lot."

**Karen Johnson** of Dream Rock Silo was friends with Rives, as well, and became a companion who accompanied her on medical visits when Rives' health was failing.

"Her death has left a hole," said Johnson. "She struggled for almost a year with these various ailments and now she's in a better place. I'm glad for her but I'm sad for the rest of us. She was such a great person and it's hard to think that she's gone from us."

"To say her last theatrical home was in Galax is a wonderful tribute, because she really loved working with the actors and the ensembles there," said Petty, finally.

Theatre, she said, is "human beings sitting in the dark, telling stories and trying to make it until morning. That's how it started."

And Rives excelled in it because, as Petty described her friend of decades, "She was a big-hearted talent."

# Advocacy

Continued from Page 1A

laborations within the community," CAC said in an announcement.

In addition, the agency said having a CAC location closer to home would allow Twin County investigators to spend less time on the road, and more time working cases to keep kids safe.

Children's Trust is a non-profit organization encompassing four programs that provide prevention, intervention and advocacy for children who are victims of child abuse and neglect. The agency said CAC "coordinates a community response to child abuse bringing together the people and services a child needs during the investigation and prosecution of

cases, provides an environment that is safe and child friendly, and ensures that every child gets the help he/she needs to heal physically and mentally."

CAC offers forensic interviewing services, where an abused child often tells their experiences for the first time at the center, the agency said. Children's Trust "employs a full-time interviewer who is specially trained to conduct developmentally appropriate, legally sound interviews with children who are alleged to have been abused."

Children's Trust said its interviewers are trained to put the child at ease while asking difficult ques-

tions and taking care to protect the value of the child's report as evidence of a crime. "The forensic interview is non-duplicative, non-leading and neutral in nature," the agency said.

The Twin Counties Community Foundation provides funding to improve healthcare in Carroll County, Grayson County and the City of Galax, including meeting unmet healthcare needs of the indigent and uninsured; supporting healthcare education programs and supporting programs to prevent and reduce illness and disease and other programs to promote the health, education and welfare of the community.

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