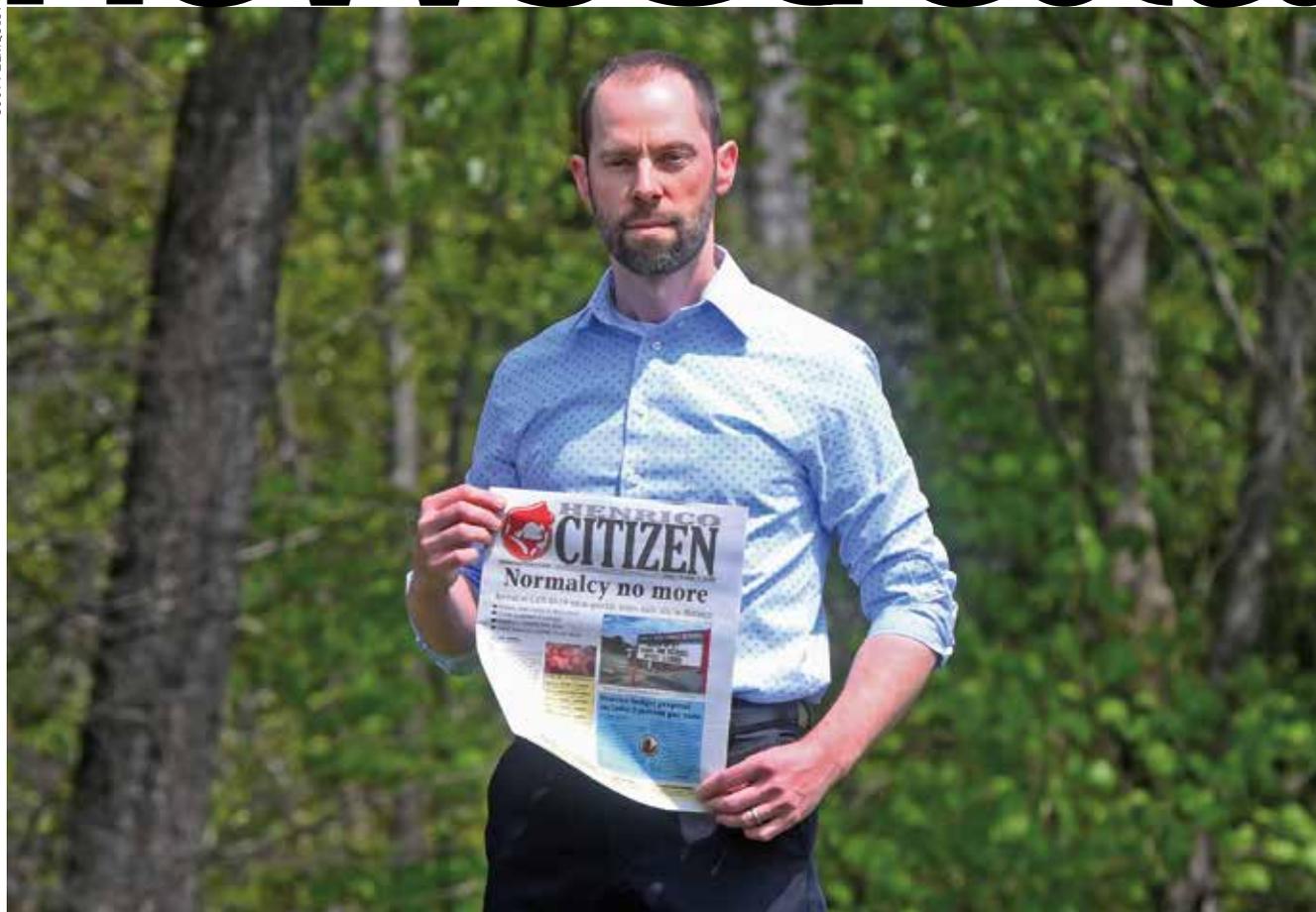


# news & features

SCOTT ELMQUIST



## Henrico Citizen halts print edition

Longtime community newspaper is one of many publications suffering economic fallout from the pandemic.

by Rich Grisct

**T**he Henrico Citizen, an 18-year-old community newspaper covering Richmond's northern neighbor, has halted its print edition, perhaps for good.

In an online letter on March 30, Citizen publisher and editor Tom Lappas announced that with many of the free newspaper's pickup locations closed and its advertisers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the twice-monthly tabloid would stop publishing in April and post its content solely online instead.

Lappas, who founded the Citizen when he was 24, says he believes the shift to digital-only will allow the Citizen to increase its news coverage. In recent years, Lappas says the Citizen has run most of its stories online first and published them in print afterwards.

The move online comes at a time

when local news outlets have been handed a devastating blow by the pandemic and its economic fallout. As many daily and weekly newspapers in small and midsized cities were already suffering from the decline of advertising revenue, the transition of readers from print to online and the lingering aftereffects of the Great Recession, closures, furloughs and salary cuts have further distressed publications around the country. Locally, those impacts have been felt as well, including at the Richmond Times-Dispatch where employees are required to take two weeks unpaid leave because of the pandemic.

As web advertisements generate a fraction of the revenue, print ads remain the bread and butter of most publica-

tions. With an unprecedented dearth of advertisers and events to advertise, local news is under siege.

Because of the pandemic, Lappas says he'd already lost two of his top three advertisers, and while he'll probably lose more in the move to digital-only, Lappas says printing and distribution costs are 65 to 70% of his annual expenses. As to how the declines in revenue and expenses will shake out, Lappas says time will tell, but it's "potentially a wash."

Betsy Edwards, executive director of the Virginia Press Association, says that while there have been furloughs and a few publications have reduced how often they publish, none of the association's roughly 175 member newspapers has said that it is closing permanently.

"Most of them feel that it's temporary, that they're going to restaff or take people off of furlough once business gets open again," she says. "Newspapers have it hard, don't get me wrong, but I think that they're not having it worse than anybody else."

Overall, Edwards believes that publications should return to whatever financial footing they had before the pandemic hit, and that newspapers appear to be seeing a bump in readership: "People are getting a tremendous amount of traffic to their newspaper websites because people are so interested in the coronavirus, which is interesting, because the news [coverage] has shrunk, but interest has grown, so who knows how this is going to turn out."

Christina Bellantoni, a professor who specializes in media criticism, industry trends and political reporting at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, says the impact of the pandemic on local journalism isn't exactly rosy.

"This is just so swift and so severe. It's devastating, and there's nothing more important than local journalism," says Bellantoni, who covered the Virginia General Assembly for the Washington Times in the early 2000s. "It's been a slow, slow death now over a couple decades. I just don't know if anybody can come back."

Bellantoni predicts that larger, corporate-owned newspapers will survive on a reduced staff, but smaller local publica-

**Tom Lappas holds the last printed edition of the Henrico Citizen, a newspaper he founded 18 years ago.**

tions may bear the brunt of the impact.

"If I had to put a number on it, I would hope that you would see a lot of rebuilding, but I would guess that it would be less than half [of] those jobs that come back," she says, adding that the cuts will lead to government and other institutions going unchecked. "There just is so much opportunity for corruption, and that's what great local journalism can be [fighting]. Again and again, we've seen papers that are

punching above their weight, demonstrating their ability to root that out."

As for Lappas, who usually served as the Citizen's only full-time employee, he's hoping that the lack of a print edition will allow him more time to cover Henrico. He's looking to hire another full-time reporter in the next month and says that his online readership in the past year eclipsed his print circulation, which varied between 12,000 and

15,000 recently.

Will the Citizen print again after the pandemic? "The romantic journalist in me would say yes, but I think candidly, like a lot of businesses, the longer this goes on, we're all getting used to doing things differently," says Lappas, who stresses that the move online is a boon. "We're not going anywhere. We're stopping the print publication, but we're actually producing more news." **S**

# STYLE WEEKLY

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# STUPID

WEEKLY

## Monumental Divide

As turmoil over police reforms and Richmond's Confederate legacy continues, how will it impact the mayoral race?

by Rich Griset



Protesters stand on top of the Lee monument June 2.

# Representation Matters

With the Black Lives Matter movement reframing city politics, what will it mean for Stoney's re-election chances?

by Rich Griset

Standing around the Robert E. Lee monument in face masks, the protesters aren't mincing words.

"Fuck that statue!" they chant, followed by the kind of rhythmic clapping usually reserved for sporting events.

They have reason to be angry. The evening before, June 1, this was where Richmond police tear-gassed many of them while they peacefully protested as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Eventually, their chants turn to a question. "Where is Stoney?" they shout, followed by more clapping.

And then, through the sea of protesters, the man of the moment appears.

Mayor Levar Stoney wades through the crowd and stands at the base of the monument. An uneasy scene ensues as hundreds of angry protesters shout demands at him: Hold the Police Department accountable for yesterday's tear-gassing. Remove the monuments. Create a citizen review board of police. Release the arrested protesters.

That morning, Stoney had appeared outside City Hall to apologize for the tear-gassing, but the crowd wasn't having it. To demonstrate solidarity, he marched with protesters to the Lee monument that evening, only to be met with more hostility.

Holding a small megaphone, Stoney addresses the crowd's demands, including the creation of an alert system that

would allow police to collaborate with mental health officials when responding to someone in crisis.

"We need a critical alert, aka the Marcus Alert, to de-escalate for mental illness," says Stoney, referring to the 2018 police killing of 24-year-old high school teacher Marcus-David Peters while he was experiencing a mental health episode. "And so that means I have to work with the City Council to make that happen."

"What's been taking you so long, bruh?" shouts a woman as the crowd gets restless again.

Since the May 25 death of George Floyd at the hands of a white Minneapolis police officer, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement has

**On the cover:** Mayor Levar Stoney gazes out at the crowd at the Robert E. Lee monument on June 2. After addressing protesters by megaphone, Stoney was booed as he left. *photo by Scott Elmquist*

upended more than just Confederate statues in Richmond. An all-out war has broken out between protesters, police and the Stoney administration during an election year.

In early March, it seemed that Richmond's mayoral race was shaping up to be a referendum on the previous milestones of Stoney's first term, with issues like the aborted Navy Hill project, increased school funding and the real estate tax weighing on voters' minds.

But with a pandemic underway, a recession on and confrontations between protesters and police taking place nearly nightly, these events have fundamentally reshaped city politics and the narrative of the mayoral race. Just last Tuesday, following two more nights of tear gas outside Richmond Police Department headquarters, Stoney fired Police Chief Will Smith and replaced him with interim Chief William "Jody" Blackwell, saying he wanted to take the department in "a new direction." A week later, that direction appears to be a more authoritarian one, with Blackwell saying he was "going to get the city back" from protesters. Following a weekend of Juneteenth commemorations, protesters were tear-gassed and had nonlethal rounds fired at them Sunday evening for attempting to pull down the J.E.B. Stuart statue.

As Stoney comes under fire from both progressives and law and order proponents, how will protests, police reforms and the monuments factor into his re-election chances in November?

**I**n the sleepy former Capital of the Confederacy, change has suddenly come with lightning speed.

Statues commemorating Richmond's Confederate past have been toppled and defaced. Storefronts along Broad Street have had their windows smashed, their contents looted and, in some cases, set ablaze. Clashes between police and protesters have been violent at times. The graffiti-covered Lee monument has been unofficially renamed Marcus-David Peters Circle, and now serves as a space of reflection and remembrance for the Black Lives Matter movement.

And following last week's skirmishes of tear gas, rubber bullets – and what police say were hurled asphalt and Molotov cocktails from protesters – outside Richmond Police Department headquarters, concrete pillars have been erected on Grace Street, which some on Twitter are referring to as #StoneyHenge.

Before the protests, this year's mayoral race was shaping up to be a showdown between incumbent Stoney and City Council member Kim Gray. After all, Gray played a major role in defeating Stoney's \$1.5 billion Navy Hill development plan to replace the aging Richmond Coliseum with a large, mixed-use development. But in response to the current crises, a new challenger has emerged who appears to have juice.

### Stoney and then-Police Chief Will Smith address protesters the morning of June 2 outside City Hall.

Alexis Rodgers, a 28-year-old who served as Gov. Ralph Northam's policy director during his term as lieutenant governor, has stepped into the ring, saying the city needs a progressive leader. Boasting a wide-ranging resume that includes expanding access to health care at Planned Parenthood and working as the state director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, she has the support of Richmond For All, a progressive group instrumental in torpedoing the Navy Hill project.

Within a week of announcing her candidacy, she received \$58,440 from more than 700 contributors. From April 1 to June 11, Stoney raised just under \$5,600 with a balance of \$77,548, and Gray had \$42,800 in her war chest, about half of which was left over from her City Council run. Fellow mayoral candidate Justin Griffin raised \$13,843, and Tracey Mclean raised no money during this period with a balance of \$514.

Rich Meagher, an associate professor of political science at Randolph-Macon College, says that Rodgers' campaign announcement and the ongoing unrest has hit the reset button on the mayoral race, offering a rebuke to both Stoney and Gray.

"There's a growing young political class in the city, and it's challenging some of the older networks," Meagher says. "That's affecting the mayoral race most obviously with the recent entry of Alexis Rodgers."

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SCOTT ELMQUIST

**Alexis Rodgers, state director of Care in Action, has emerged as the progressive candidate in the mayoral race.**

Bob Holsworth, a veteran Richmond political analyst, is similarly impressed with the work of young activists, calling it “one of the most remarkable social movements that we’ve seen in Richmond since the Crusade for Voters,” referring to a voter education and registration organization founded in 1956 to further African Americans as a voting bloc in the city.

Though noting that it can be hard to turn social activism into electoral action, Holsworth says Rodgers’ ability to quickly raise money from numerous contributors speaks to having “legions of volunteers that are going to enable her to run a city-wide campaign.” Running an organized campaign is especially important in Richmond, where the mayor is chosen not by the popular vote, but by winning five of its nine voter districts.

“The financial report [indicates] that Alexis Rodgers is now the candidate of the progressive wing, the people who have been involved in the Navy Hill issue and some of the people who have been involved in the protests,” Holsworth says.

Still, Holsworth says Stoney shouldn’t be discounted, and will raise money going forward.

“He’s somebody who has been brought up in the political realm, and understands it very well,” Holsworth says. “He’s a really good candidate. He understands how to run a campaign.”

Meagher disagrees, saying it’s unclear who his constituency is, and that Stoney may now be at odds with people who previously voted for him.

“He has kind of turned his back on the

young political class of the city,” Meagher says. “He has embraced the kind of developer and white business class, and still wasn’t able to deliver for them.”

Chelsea Higgs Wise, a local activist

involved with Richmond For All and host of “Race Capitol,” a weekly radio show on WRIR 97.3 FM that explores racial narratives, is highly critical of Stoney.

“He’s still only continuing to take the measures that he feels he has to,” according to Higgs Wise, who says she and other protesters have yet to sit down and meet with Stoney.

Asked about this, Stoney says via email that he’s “had multiple meetings with groups representing all aspects of this movement,” and the activists he has met with understand “that the violence and vandalism that has taken place has done nothing but undermine the BLM cause.”

Higgs Wise says replacing the police chief does little to meet activists’ demands.

“We all knew that there was no goodwill with Stoney. We saw that from the Navy Hill project. We saw the type of deception and lies and marketing” he stands for, says Higgs Wise before touting Rodgers. “She’s been running campaigns for the Democrats, she’s been organizing for the Democrats, she’s been fighting for us to have a seat at the table with the Democratic Party in Virginia.”

Longtime local activist Arthur Burton says that many in Richmond have lost confidence in Stoney’s leadership, and that people are tired of waiting for change.

“Stoney spent most of his political capital on Navy Hill, and so I think he basically went into the crisis politically bankrupt,” says Burton, director of Kinfolk Community Inc., a nonprofit that works to empower low-income Black neighborhoods. “[The mayor] just finished spending two years on the largest economic development plan in the history of the city, one that really did not address the health and economic inequality of Black and brown people.”

Some also blame Stoney for what they see as slow movement on the monuments.

Nearly two years after the Monument Avenue Commission recommended that the Jefferson Davis statue be removed and signs be added to give context to other monuments, no change had taken place until earlier this month when Stoney said that he would introduce a measure at City Council to remove all of the street’s Confederate monuments on July 1, the day a new state law takes effect allowing localities to remove war monuments that they control.

Though she may criticize Stoney, Kim Gray isn’t exactly a perfect alternative for progressives.

The 2nd District councilwoman has gained kudos for her proposal to rename the Boulevard after tennis great Arthur Ashe last year, but her longtime



SCOTT ELMQUIST

**Councilwoman Kim Gray stands underneath the Lee monument. The majority of the Confederate memorials on Monument Avenue are in her district.**



SCOTT ELMQUIST

**Justin Griffin, a lawyer, was a leading voice against the Navy Hill development.**

opposition to removing Confederate monuments may come back to bite her. Previous to this past month, Gray said she was hoping to add to instead of subtracting from Monument Avenue by inserting a tribute to the 14 African Americans awarded the Medal of Honor after the Battle of New Market Heights just east of Richmond during the Civil War.

"It's going to be very difficult for Kim Gray to draw a contrast on that issue," Holsworth says. "It's hard to think that the activist community that was so involved [with Black Lives Matter] is going to be highly supportive or energetic and eager about her."

Holsworth says that Gray's fundraising isn't what it should be, and that her "law and order" stance won't garner support from progressives.

"She is talking about the looting, she is talking about the damage that has been done to businesses," Holsworth says.

As for Stoney, Holsworth says he's been caught in the middle.

"He's not in a position that's been easy to please either side on this," he says. "It's by far the most challenging and difficult moment of his [time as mayor], because whatever action he takes is generating fairly substantial and passionate opposition on either side of him."

Meagher says Stoney is trying to "thread the needle" between opposing sides.

"He's pleasing nobody, and it's the exact opposite of the story he likes to tell about himself as the bold leader who makes the tough choices," Meagher says. "He's hiding out and trying to gauge which way the wind is blowing."

**R**eached by Zoom two weeks ago, Stoney says that during his tenure as mayor he's proudest of investing more money in public schools, creating three new schools that will open next year and the expansion of after-school programming for elementary and middle school students.

As for criticism of his response to the protests, Stoney says he's on board with reforming the police, instituting the mental health alert, creating a civilian review board and other reforms. Every complaint against police, he says, will be investigated.

"There will be disciplinary action, but investigations are necessary before disciplinary actions take place, and I'm committed to bringing about that accountability for the people of this city," says the 39-year-old mayor, who has since announced a task force that will look at reducing the workload for police and divert nonviolent calls for service to other entities.

As for the monuments, he says it's time for change.

"What removing those monuments will mean for us as a city is akin to the Berlin Wall, the fall of a racist system, but we as elected leaders have to do the remaining work to continue to tear down the racist infrastructure," he says.

Asked about his chances in November, he's confident.

"I think voters in this city know that I'm going to continue to swing for the fence for our city, whether it's Navy Hill or whether it's my work to bring more revenue from real estate taxes," he says.

Gray, who was elected to City Council four years ago after two terms on the School Board, says she decided to run



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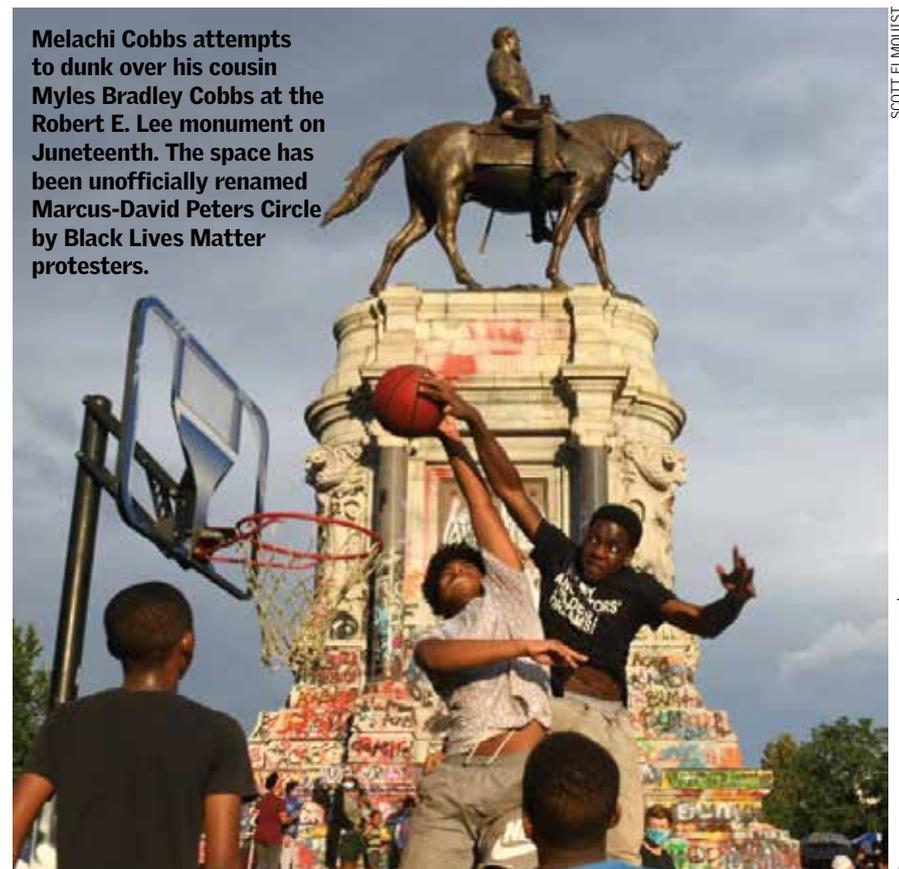
**Tracey Mclean, a businesswoman, says she wants to be mayor because she's "in touch with the community and knows what they want."**

because she's frustrated with elements of how local government functions. As for her thoughts on Stoney, she says she's "learned that he lacks the experience to run the city. I think he cares a lot about himself and his political future, but he's kind of left us to fend for ourselves in terms of city services and care for the people."

Regarding the monuments, she says that she voted against removing them twice because the legal process wasn't

in place yet, and that she was with her daughter in the hospital the third time the measure came before council. Now, she says we're past the time when the monuments can remain.

On Rodgers, Gray says that some may like the idea of a younger candidate who looks more like them, but that local government experience matters, and she wants residents to have a better interaction with City Hall and city services. As



SCOTT ELMQUIST

**Melachi Cobbs attempts to dunk over his cousin Myles Bradley Cobbs at the Robert E. Lee monument on Juneteenth. The space has been unofficially renamed Marcus-David Peters Circle by Black Lives Matter protesters.**



Protesters march down Hospital Street bound for the city jail on June 5.

SCOTT ELMQUIST

for the police, Gray says she's behind "serious reforms" and wants the Richmond Transparency and Accountability Project to draft legislation for what a community review board should look like.

Rodgers, who grew up in Hanover, says she entered the race because she felt that Stoney was putting community members at a distance in a time of crisis.

"Right now, what we're seeing is a breach of trust," says Rodgers, who's currently state director of Care in Action, a nonprofit that supports domestic workers. "Protest is great, [but] we shouldn't have to put our bodies on the line to get this kind of change when it's so unequivocal what's right and wrong."

Rodgers says Stoney's reactions have been delayed, and that she wants the city government to focus more on people who have uncertain immigration statuses, are low-wage earners or are incarcerated.

"We need a mayor at this time who's going to bring everybody to the table, stand for the right values and fight for a progressive agenda," she says.

Holsworth says Rodgers may prove a real challenge to Stoney for the endorsement of the Richmond City Democratic Committee in a heavily Democratic city during a presidential election year.

"People are going to come out in droves to vote against Donald Trump, and

the question is, who do they vote for as mayor? In the past, if you had the endorsement of the Richmond Democratic Party, even though it's officially a nonpartisan

election, you're the mayor," Holsworth says. "You're going to see quite the fight within the Richmond Democratic Party about what to do here."

Rain is falling on the heads and umbrellas of protesters in Monroe Park, but that hasn't deterred hundreds from coming out.

Omari Al-Qadaffi, a community organizer with racial justice group Leaders of the New South, addresses the crowd, mentioning their demands before referring to a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.

"He said that riots are the language of the voiceless," says Al-Qadaffi on June 16, not far from where protesters toppled the statue of Confederate Gen. Williams Carter Wickham a week and a half earlier. "We have done everything that they said we should do. We have voted, we have shown up to City Council, we have protested and now we need a diversity of tactics to effect justice."

Soon, the crowd marches downtown to the Miller and Rhoads building where Stoney lives.

"When we say we need to have a diversity of tactics, we need to be up in people's homes," Al-Qadaffi tells the crowd that will pull down the Confederate Richmond Howitzers statue later that evening. "We need to visit them in their places of work, their places of play. No justice means no peace."

Some protesters enter the apartment building lobby after being let in by a tenant but leave when asked by security. On the street, people light fireworks and chant "Stoney's a phony!" as some graffiti the building with anti-Stoney messages.

And the protest marches on. **S**



SCOTT ELMQUIST

A phalanx of state troopers blocks Stuart Circle after launching tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters June 21.

# STYLE

WEEKLY

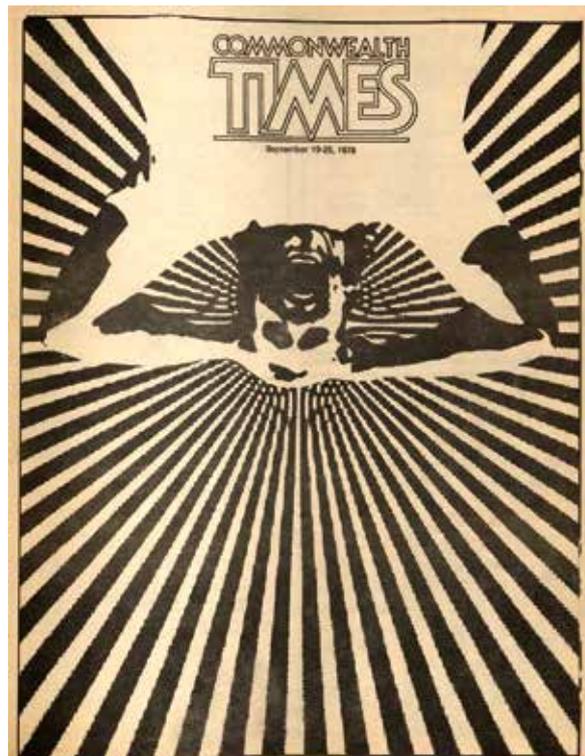
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## SIGN of the TIMES

Half a century  
in print, VCU's  
student newspaper  
comes into its own.

by Rich Griset



# Pressing Issues

The life and times of VCU's student newspaper, The Commonwealth Times. *by Rich Griset*



**I**t was a crude, obscenity-filled Q&A with a local punk rocker and street hustler named Dickie Disgusting that raised the ire of Virginia Commonwealth University's president.

The year was 1980, and then-president Edmund Ackell wasn't a fan of Bill Pahnelas' interview with the Degenerate Blind Boys singer that ran in The Commonwealth Times, the school's newspaper. In a conversation that ranged from pimping himself to middle-aged ladies to printing handbills for his band with swastikas that read "I love Jews," Dickie Disgusting made every effort to run afoul of most people's notions of good taste.

Ackell wasn't pleased.

"This kind of article does a great disservice to our institution, and raises a serious question in my mind about the appropriateness of the Times as it is presently identified with this university," Ackell wrote to the paper's editors.

The Dickie Disgusting interview nearly led the college to defund The Commonwealth Times. Luckily, VCU's funding committee ultimately decided to continue supporting the paper, and The Commonwealth Times – or "the CT," as many refer to it – publishes to this day.

Last September, the newspaper celebrated its 50th anniversary, and, in a sense, it's come into its own as of late. In the fall, the newspaper won the Pacemaker Award, often referred to as the Pulitzer Prize of student journalism, for the first time in its history. In April it was

revealed that the paper had racked up an additional 27 state, regional and national awards this year.

Earlier this month, it was announced that The Baltimore Sun had won a Pulitzer Prize for a scandal involving that city's mayor; CT alum Amanda Kell is the Sun's senior content editor for Maryland news. Not too shabby for an independent student newspaper that's kept pace with the university's culture and occasionally rubbed the school administration the wrong way.

For some, it's been a springboard to a career in journalism. For others, it's simply offered community and a sense of belonging. But in all eras and incarnations, The Commonwealth Times has reflected the experiences and views of its students, and stands today as a living record of VCU.

## 'Electric Kumquat Cabala'

In the summer of 1968, the Medical College of Virginia and Richmond Professional Institute merged to form Virginia Commonwealth University. Hoping to reflect this change, Proscript, the 30-year-old student newspaper of RPI, became The Commonwealth Times the following year. Over the decades, the paper has switched names between the Commonwealth Times and The Commonwealth Times.

The first issue, dated Sept. 10, 1969, was similar in appearance and content to its predecessor.



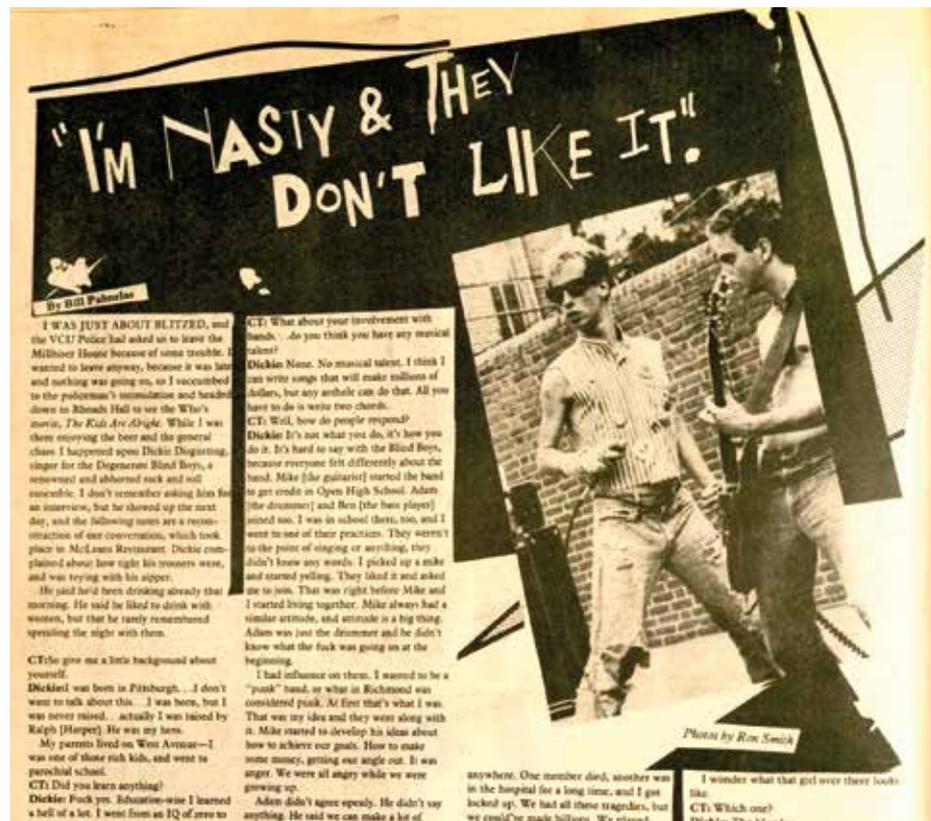
**The Commonwealth Times' first issue, dated Sept. 10, 1969, had much in common with Proscript, its predecessor.**

"It was a really conservative college newspaper," reflects Dale Brumfield, who covers the history of the publication in his book "Richmond Independent Press" and served as its art director from 1978 to 1981. "They were talking about ring dances and proms."

It wasn't long before the counterculture came knocking, starting with a humor column titled "Electric Kumquat Cabala" that began running Oct. 15, 1969. In March 1971, the CT was likely the first Richmond publication to cover sexual minority issues when it wrote about the formation of the Gay Liberation Front, an early effort to raise gay awareness at VCU and in Richmond. That fall, the paper split from VCU's mass communications department, ensuring greater autonomy from the university and opening the door further to nonjournalism students.

In its initial year of independence, the paper had its first true brush with controversy after the paper ran an advertisement for abortion services in Washington, where abortion was legal. As Virginia law prohibited lectures and advertisements that encouraged abortions at the time, printing the advertisement was legally risky.

Along with the ad, editor Bill Royall wrote a commentary on behalf of his staff in their Jan. 6, 1972, issue, explaining that they did not believe the state law squared with the First Amendment. According to Royall, Richmond's commonwealth's attorney told him that he had broken the law and should expect to be arrested. At the same time, VCU's student media board called Royall in for questioning and a reprimand, noting that the ad could impact the university's allocation of state funds, but decided not to punish him.



**Bill Pahnelas' 1980 interview with rocker Dickie Disgusting nearly led to the defunding of the student newspaper.**

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The Rams, who have not lost a home game since Dec. 1969, will host the University of Virginia's football team at the center Steve Turner, though, as the giant from Nashville, Tennessee, who was a member of the championship team '69 and '71 and was performer for Polka.

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Richmond's commonwealth's attorney threatened then-editor Bill Royall with arrest after running this abortion ad in 1972.

## Dr. Bass elected chairma

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Dr. Bass is a Norfolk. He has from Virginia Institute and St. and a Ph.D. de University of he was a p research assis

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Royall was never arrested, but says that the pre-Roe v. Wade event led to the General Assembly revising the law to make only the promoting or encouraging of *illegal* abortions a crime. Royall would later found a direct marketing services firm, Royall and Co.

Recently, Royall and his wife Pam donated and fundraised to create the university's Institute for Contemporary Art and facilitated the acquisition of Kehinde Wiley's sculpture "Rumors of War," unveiled at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in December. In September, the Royalls held a 50th anniversary party for The Commonwealth Times at Try-Me, their private art gallery on Main Street.

## The Ballad of Dickie Disgusting

It was at the old McLean's Restaurant in the 4000 block of West Broad Street that Dickie Disgusting gave his infamous interview.

Discussing how he had made as much as \$700 a night by pimping himself to middle-aged women, he told staffer Bill Pahnelas "I have a half-inch cock – but I've got an 11-inch tongue."

Though the story drew heat from

VCU's administration and led students to hang bundles of the paper from trees in effigy, the CT lived to have more run-ins with President Edmund Ackell. In 1983, editor Ronnie Greene questioned Ackell's presence on the board of a company that sold \$1 million worth of medical equipment to the school annually as a potential conflict of interest. As a result, the university's third president refused interviews with the paper for the next two years. Greene went on to win a Pulitzer Prize in 2014 as a project editor for a series on coal miners stricken with black lung disease.

Over the years, the paper would vacillate between hard-hitting journalism, sophomoric stunts and a mix of both.

"The quality is going to go up and down depending on the students who run it. That's the nature of student journalism," explains Greg Weatherford, who was a copy editor and writer for the CT in the early '90s and oversaw the paper as director of student media from 2003 to 2016. "There were times when I would go back through the archives and it was sort of mind-bogglingly brilliant and clever, and there were times in which it was inane and juvenile and not very good at all."

Other notable events of this period include publishing a photo of a "glory hole" on campus alongside a story about recent arrests for solicitation, and the CT's printing of all university employee salaries, which became something of a tradition.

"At that time, that was quite controversial," says Michael Fuller, a former editor who went on to become a vice president at IBM and a senior executive at United-Health Group, of printing the salaries. "I

don't think any other student newspapers had done that. We won the Columbia [Scholastic Press Association] award and some others for doing that."

The CT's pages were also filled with less-incendiary stories, including coverage of civil rights efforts, Vietnam and the university's long-contemplated expansion into Oregon Hill.

"You get a sense when you go through those years of The Commonwealth Times that the coverage was great," says Ray Bonis, a staffer in the mid-1980s who is now a VCU archivist. "They covered a lot of stories on campus and stories nationally. You get a sense that people actually read the paper back then. As the years have gone on, it seems that CT readership has gone up and down."

With the paper's emancipation from the mass communications department, more students from other disciplines began working at the paper, including VCU's renowned art department. Especially under the art direction and editorship of Sue Dayton and Bill Pahnelas, the paper took on a look that reflected the counterculture in the late 1970s and early '80s. Two of the better-known covers of this era include a colorful homage to Andy Warhol's visit to Richmond and one illustrated by the Ramones when they played the VCU Halloween Dance, both in 1978.

Still, some mass communications professors held the paper up in class to mock it.

"It made it really hard to get real journalists on the paper anymore," Brumfield says. "We'd gone full circle. We'd gone from being a journalist-only publication to a publication where journalists were slow to come to work [for the CT]."



The CT covers Andy Warhol's visit to town, featuring art by Michael Sherbert.



The Ramones sprawled on the floor to draw this cover when they played the VCU Halloween Dance in 1978.



The newspaper's coverage of seven arrests for homosexual solicitation and sodomy at VCU's Business Building in 1981.

## 'An archive ... a history'

By the late 1980s, the paper had begun returning to its mainstream roots, reporting primarily on campus goings-on.

For major news events, like the Sept. 11th attacks, the Virginia Tech shooting and the election of President Barack Obama, the newspaper gives a glimpse of what students thought at the time. It also covered a series of VCU scandals in the late 2000s, including the university's awarding of a degree to Richmond Police Chief Rodney Monroe after taking only six credit hours at the university, and the arrest of university Police Chief Willie Fuller after he allegedly solicited an undercover cop posing as a minor in a chatroom while using the screen name Hotcop2006.

Mark Robinson, the City Hall reporter for The Richmond Times-Dispatch and a former editor who served on the paper in the early 2010s, says the experience was "an important proving ground" for him.

"We had a lot of fun, but it was also a venue for dealing with some difficult subject matter and making some mistakes," Robinson says. "It was the defining experience of my college years, and it is the single thing I could point to for catapulting me to where I've been able to go in journalism."



In September, Bill and Pam Royall held a 50th anniversary party for The Commonwealth Times at their Try-Me art gallery. The current and former editors in attendance are pictured here.

JUD FROELICH, VCU DEVELOPMENT AND ALUMNI RELATIONS



Georgia Geen, the most recent editor, and incoming editor Andrew Ringle stand outside the paper's current headquarters at the Student Media Center on Broad Street.

SCOTT TELMOQUIST

While tales of long-tongued pimps appear to be a thing of the past, the CT still enjoys the occasional controversy, and generated headlines beyond VCU in February when at least one member of the university's Student Government Association allegedly took bundles of the paper from distribution boxes because they were displeased with a story. Altogether, more than 800 newspapers were seized from kiosks on the Monroe Park campus.

"That original story would not have gotten a fraction of the attention that it ended up getting if they had just gone about their day and sucked it up," says Georgia Geen, the most recent former editor.

Allison Bennett Dyche, who took over from Weatherford as director of student media in 2016, lauds Geen and the current staff, noting that they recently won 16 Virginia Press Association awards against professional publications.

"The CT is the only student newspaper I've advised that competes against professional publications at the state level," Dyche says. "I think it speaks volumes to the quality of work."

For Geen, who graduates this spring, the newspaper helped propel her to a

prestigious internship with The Los Angeles Times this summer.

"I would be a fraction of the journalist and a fraction of the person I am now if it weren't for the CT," she says. "It taught me to write and edit in a way that I would not be able to if I had just relied on my journalism classes."

Over the years, The Commonwealth Times has shifted between publishing one, two and three times a week. It's fallen under the unofficial mentorship of journalism professors and spun out on its own again. It's variously covered the community around it and focused back inward.

But overall, it's trained a legion of journalists, helped students become better citizens and endeavored to document the culture of VCU.

"The paper itself, the whole news organization, absolutely reflects the culture of the time, the student culture of the time, in a way that no professionally run paper ever could," says Weatherford, also a former *Style* editor. "That's the real value of it, as an archive, as a history." **S**

*Rich Griset is a former Commonwealth Times editor.*