



Charisma and Cole  
Sydnor on the banks of  
the James River, where  
Cole suffered a diving  
accident that left him  
paralyzed nearly 10  
years ago at age 16.

THE MAKING

OF A

*Beautiful*

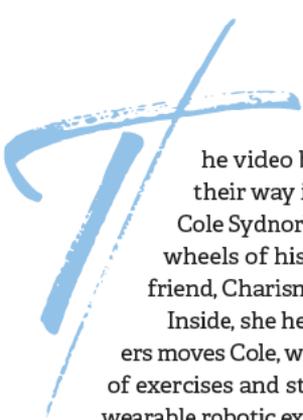
LIFE

**Cole and Charisma Sydnor** share their daily adventures on their popular YouTube channel, "**Roll With Cole & Charisma**"

*BY KIM CATLEY*

# "YES, WE HAVE A DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIP, BUT WE DEAL WITH THE SAME NORMAL ISSUES THAT AN ABLE-BODIED COUPLE MIGHT DEAL WITH."

—CHARISMA SYDNOR



The video begins with a young couple making their way into a physical rehabilitation center. Cole Sydnor's hands, clenched into fists, push the wheels of his wheelchair forward, while his girlfriend, Charisma Jamison, walks alongside him.

Inside, she helps him onto a table. A team of trainers moves Cole, who is a quadriplegic, through a series of exercises and stretches before strapping him into a wearable robotic exoskeleton that wraps around his legs and torso.

"I actually can't feel my legs," he jokes to his mother behind the camera.

After a few minutes, Cole is on his feet while Charisma looks on, smiling.

"You're so tall," she says before coming in for their first-ever standing hug.

Cole then places his arms into braces attached to a walker. Two trainers support him as he takes one step, and then another, and then another. Cole walks across the room, out the door, down the hall and outside. Charisma is there every step of the way.

Cole and Charisma recorded the video to share a milestone with friends and family — but it spread like wildfire on YouTube. Almost three years later, the video has nearly 3.5 million views.

The video marks a turning point in Cole and Charisma's relationship. It shows the first time Charisma saw Cole standing and walking. It's the video that allowed their hobby to morph into a career. And it's the moment their space for sharing updates and answering questions became an international platform for educating others about life as an interabled, interracial couple.

## 'THIS THING HAS LEGS'

The story of Cole's disability began on a summer day nearly 10 years ago when, at 16 years old, he dove into the James River and struck his head on a submerged rock.

He tried to swim to safety, but his body didn't respond. His friends pulled him from the water and called 911.

At the hospital, Cole learned he'd fractured his C4, C6, and T1 vertebrae, and the C5 was shattered.

His recovery took him to the Shepherd Center, a top spinal cord rehabilitation facility in Atlanta, where he gained a fuller understanding of the scope of his injuries. Cole has no function from the chest down. He can use his biceps and has limited use of his forearms, which gives him some wrist mobility.

Four months later, Cole and his parents returned to Richmond, and he eventually began outpatient rehabilitation at Sheltering Arms hospital. He graduated from Atlee High School, where he had been an avid athlete and a promising lacrosse player before the accident.

Cole was outspoken about his experience — and about accessibility. He spoke to local student groups about safety on the river and got involved with Sportable, a local organization that offers adaptive sports and recreation opportunities for people with physical and visual disabilities. During his senior year at the University of Richmond, Cole became the first rower with arm and shoulder adaptations to compete with his collegiate team in a regatta.

Through it all, he continued his rehabilitation with physical and occupational therapy at Sheltering Arms, where, in November 2017, he first crossed paths with Charisma.

Even as a young child, Charisma had an interest in the medical field and in helping others. After graduating from Hermitage High School, she majored in exercise science at Virginia Commonwealth University and studied abroad in Brazil. That's where she learned about occupational therapy, and it led her to a job as a rehab tech at Sheltering Arms.

Cole and Charisma share slightly different versions of their first meeting.

Charisma says she was on a break on the inpatient >



Charisma and Cole Sydner first met at Sheltering Arms hospital in 2017, where Cole was receiving occupational and physical therapy and Charisma was working as a rehab tech.



Charisma and Cole Sydnor's YouTube channel, "Roll With Cole & Charisma," has nearly 550,000 subscribers.

side of the facility, and she asked an outpatient therapist if she could help out. She was assigned to assist Cole with getting off the electrical stimulation bike, and they talked for a few minutes about the Sheltering Arms gala later that week.

"I asked him if he had a date, and he asked me [if I did], and we both said no," she says. "At the gala, I had this mindset of approaching him in some way, but I was very nervous."

Cole says the therapists at Sheltering Arms knew that both he and Charisma were looking for a relationship, and they pointed her out to him one day. But, he counters, it wasn't until the gala that he really saw her and was struck by her smile.

The day after the gala, they followed each other on Instagram. Charisma says he "liked some pictures, and then he slid into my DMs. We started talking from there."

It only took a month for Cole to know the relationship was real, he says. That's when Charisma first spent the night with Cole, who was then living with his parents, Kelly and Clement. During the night, she accidentally knocked off the catheter he uses while sleeping.

"I was mortified," he says. "I was thinking I would have to call my parents in to help out.

"But she was like, 'No, I don't want that to happen.' She fixed the problem and did it so gracefully and didn't seem put off by it at all."

The next morning, Cole heard Charisma mumble something that sounded like, "I love you," and he responded, "I love you, too." They both awkwardly recanted, each not wanting to admit they'd been the first to say it.

"We both knew, a month in, we're in love with each other," Cole says. "We both knew that we wanted a life partner, and that this thing has legs — pun intended."

### 'HOW MANY COUPLES SAY THE SAME THING?'

As Cole and Charisma's relationship progressed, their friends and family members started to ask questions about how their relationship worked and what obstacles they faced. There were also more mundane queries, like, when they watched a movie, did they sit together on the couch, or did Cole stay in his chair?

Rather than answering each person individually,

Charisma suggested they make a few videos and start a YouTube channel. “Who knows?” she thought. “Maybe other people will be interested, too.”

Cole wasn't a stranger to sharing some aspects of his story. While he was at the Shepherd Center, his mother, Kelly, recorded updates on Cole's progress for everyone back at home. She filmed Cole speaking for the first time a month after his accident, his first wrist movement and his final tube removal.

When Charisma approached Kelly about her idea, Kelly had two pieces of advice: Leave some space for privacy and intimacy, and keep it positive.

“I said, ‘If you can do that, I'm all about it,’” Kelly says.

Cole and Charisma's early videos show the couple going on dates to festivals, baseball games and shopping malls. A few educational videos talk about how Cole gets into a car or an inaccessible house, while others answer questions about intimacy.

Charisma's mother, Katrina Jamison, says she wasn't afraid to ask questions, but she appreciated having a place to go and learn about her daughter's relationship.

“When they did their Q&A, it made me realize, this is an education for everyone,” Katrina says. “It's a good thing, because it's not just her friends and family looking at this.”

Cole and Charisma continued that way for two months until July 22, 2018, when they posted the video of Cole in the exoskeleton. After the video went viral, they were able to monetize their videos and started attracting a larger audience.

Today, their channel, “Roll With Cole & Charisma,” has close to 550,000 subscribers, with another 168,000 followers across their three Instagram accounts. Even their service dog, Sophie, has a few thousand followers.

“When they started [their channel], there was nothing like that out there,” says John Kobal, who became friends with Cole and Charisma when he worked as the coordinator of Sheltering Arms' Neuro Fit program. “It's been super helpful for people who have questions. It breaks down stigmas. Maybe it'll even break down the wall for somebody to start dating somebody who has a disability — and that would be great for all parties involved.”

Over the last three years, their channel has grown steadily. Advertising revenue and brand sponsorships pay the bills. Cole, who previously had a real estate company focused on creating accessible lodging, and Charisma, who left Sheltering Arms and withdrew from an occupational therapy graduate program, now focus on their channel full time. They also hired Armando DeMarchi in March 2020 to edit most of their videos. The couple continue to film themselves, and Cole handles any remaining editing.

In the future, they're eyeing a podcast to highlight the work and stories of others in the disability community, and they're hoping to become more active as public speakers, particularly with corporations that want to be

## WATCHLIST

Ready to binge-watch Cole and Charisma's journey? Head to [youtube.com/c/rollwithcole](https://youtube.com/c/rollwithcole) and start with these videos.



### “Girlfriend Sees Quadriplegic Boyfriend walk for the First Time!”

The video that started it all



### “Do we face challenges being interracial?”

Cole and Charisma talk about their relationship on Loving Day.



### “WE'RE ENGAGED!!”

Cole proposes with an original song.



### “Wheelchair Friendly House Tour”

How Cole and Charisma renovated their new home



### “(Mostly) Independent Night Routine”

A look at their daily life at home



### “WE'RE MARRIED”

Cole and Charisma recap their big day.

more accessible and inclusive for their employees, clients and consumers.

The content on their channel has expanded as well. They still answer questions about accessibility and inclusivity, offering an inside look at their relationship, but >

they also include lifestyle content such as travel, cooking and home renovations.

"We want to raise awareness regarding acceptance and inclusivity," Charisma says, "but we also want to show the normalcy of our relationship. Yes, we have a different relationship, but we deal with the same normal issues that an able-bodied couple might deal with. We always talk about how the biggest challenge in our relationship is communication — and how many couples say the same thing?"

### 'THE DREAMS ARE STARTING TO BECOME A REALITY'

While the rise of their YouTube channel has brought in hundreds of thousands of supporters, Cole and Charisma have also been on the receiving end of negative comments.

Charisma is more often the target. Commenters ask if she's taking on too much, and whether she's able to handle Cole's needs. They question whether Cole is capable of typical daily life tasks and see Charisma as his caregiver, not his partner. Viewers assume they know the most intimate details about the couple's relationship and have insight into their decisions. Charisma has even faced racist comments.

"At the beginning, the negative comments were hard for me to deal with," she says. "I cried a lot and felt like people were constantly bashing me. It's so much easier for people to be racist when they're hiding behind a computer screen.

"We had a conversation about how to deal with it, and it really brought us closer together."

They blocked certain words and phrases on the channel, which helped. Their fan base is also deeply loyal, and Cole says their comment section "kind of self-polices at this point."

The questions about Cole's abilities and Charisma's caregiver role presented an opportunity, though.

They've produced videos that show Cole's night and morning routines, as well as how they remodeled their house to make it accessible. In early 2021, after one video revealed a bottle of prenatal vitamins, they responded to questions and confirmed they are trying to have a baby.

"We don't want people to look at Cole's disability and say, 'Oh, they can't [have a baby] because he's disabled,'" Charisma says. "That's just not fair. So we address things head-on."

The videos also reveal Cole and Charisma's growing independence. After the couple moved out of the Sydnor family home and into their own house last summer, their daily support system shrank, meaning that Charisma had to shoulder many of Cole's caregiving needs without his parents down the hall.

Kelly says that in the earlier years of Cole's recovery, he often relied on her to figure out new ways of doing daily tasks — something she was happy to do.

"I couldn't fix him," she says, "but I could fix little things in his world to make his life easier.

"With Charisma, if they have dogs and children and housework and jobs, for her to take all of that on would be a lot. Charisma would do anything he wants, but he doesn't want that. He wants her to be his partner, not his caregiver."

Cole says the move was a huge step toward his independence, and it encouraged him to reevaluate his own understanding of his abilities. He's taking on more household responsibilities, and he has made further progress in his recovery, such as using the bathroom on his own.

It helps that Charisma worked at Sheltering Arms and studied occupational therapy. She knows how to approach the skills Cole needs, and they both have an inherent drive that motivates them.

And with Cole's independence, both Kelly and Charisma have regained some of their own freedom and flexibility.

"There were times, especially in the first hours of his accident, when I thought, 'All of my hopes and dreams for this child are gone, in a nanosecond,'" Kelly says. "And then I realized the dreams are just going to look different. I still wanted the same sort of things I had before: that he lives a happy life, that he finds someone he can partner with.

"I do feel like all of the pieces of the dreams are starting to become a reality now, and I couldn't ask for more than that."

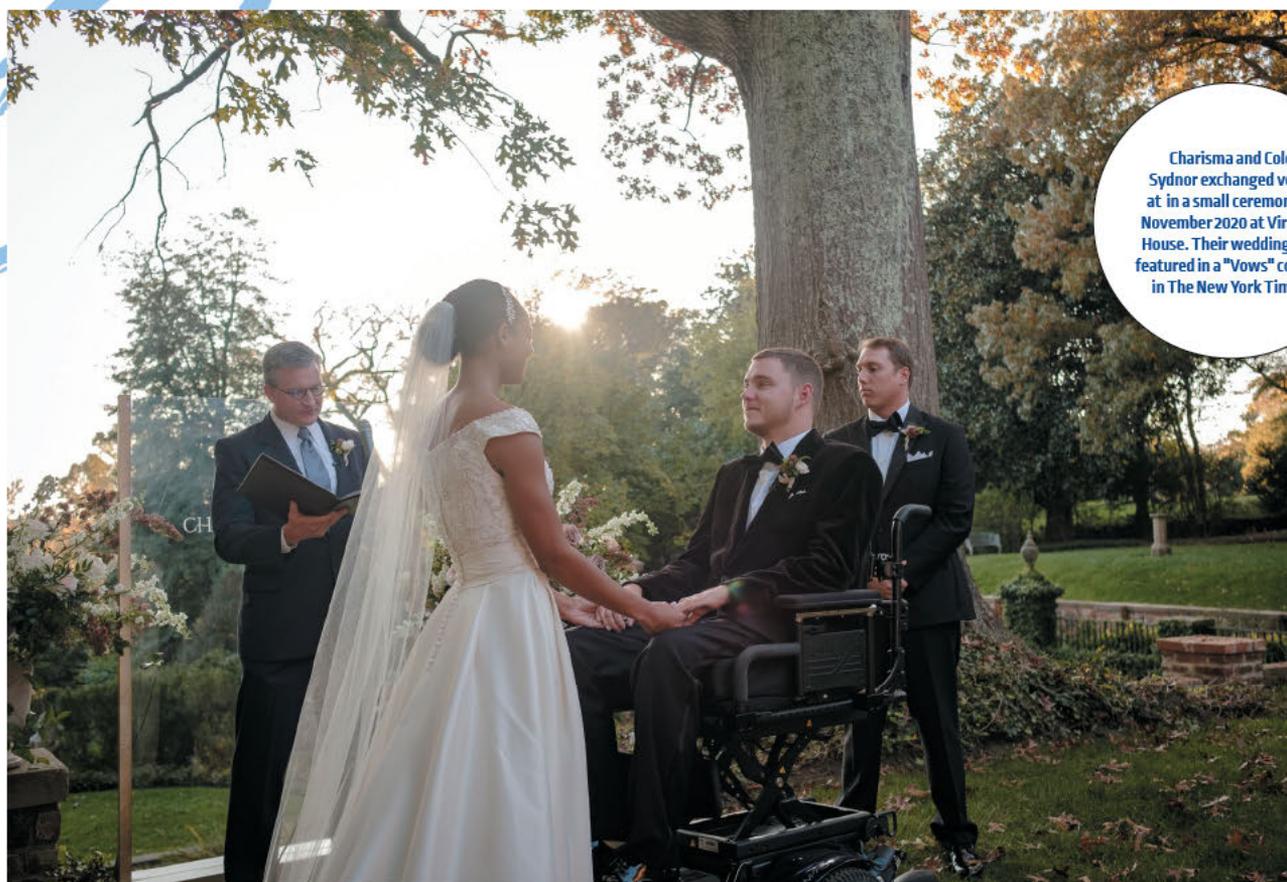
### 'I CONSIDER IT A LIFE WELL SPENT'

Cole and Charisma reached the next milestone in their relationship in November 2020, with an intimate wedding at the Virginia House, an English Tudor manor house overlooking the James River.

They originally planned for more than 200 guests, but COVID-19 restrictions prevented a large gathering of family and friends. The couple included farther-flung supporters through a livestreamed ceremony — on YouTube, naturally — and their wedding was featured in The New York Times' "Vows" column.

"WHAT SHOULD HIT PEOPLE FIRST IS THAT LOVE COMES IN ALL SHAPES, FORMS AND SIZES."

—COLE SYDNOR



Charisma and Cole Sydner exchanged vows at in a small ceremony in November 2020 at Virginia House. Their wedding was featured in a "Vows" column in *The New York Times*.

"It was a fairy-tale wedding," Charisma says. "I think it was a blessing in disguise having such a small, intimate wedding with people who mean so much to us and are in our daily lives."

Cole adds that he knew it would be an emotionally powerful day, but he still wasn't expecting the range of emotions he experienced.

At a private first look before the ceremony, he saw Charisma in her dress for the first time.

"I already had tears in my eyes," he says. "When I saw her, I just lost it. I knew, this is going to be a beautiful life, with a beautiful woman."

In his vows, Cole promised, "If I can make you smile every day for the rest of my life, I consider it a life well spent." It's a commitment that aligns with the motto undergirding their entire presence and outlook on life: Be positive.

It could be easy to see that optimism as saccharine, a facade they present in their virtual world that they can't possibly maintain in real-life. But their parents and friends insist — what you see is what you get.

In fact, their following grew considerably in 2020 as people sought out content that made them feel happy and connected.

"It was a blessing for a lot of people who subscribed and watched them," says Derrick Jamison, Charisma's father. "To click on the channel and see something positive,

something totally different than what's going on — I think that was a good thing."

The positivity is both a balance and a choice. Of course, they say, they experience challenges and hard days, but they choose to focus on the silver linings, the uplifting moments.

"Right after my injury, I learned what it was like to live in despair," Cole says. "I was about to die, and coming back from that was super depressing. Coping with being paralyzed was super depressing."

"I remember a moment where I thought, 'Let me just try to be positive, see what that feels like.' I felt so much lighter. I felt so much happier. It was an easier way to go through my recovery and my rehab. That's how I wanted to live moving forward."

Cole and Charisma say it's validating to hear from followers who tell them that their videos helped them smile when nothing else would. At its most elemental, they hope their channel is a beacon of positivity, with love at its core.

"The love is there," Cole says. "If you watch our videos and don't see that —"

"You've got some blinders on," Charisma says.

"What should hit people first is that love comes in all shapes, forms and sizes," Cole adds. "With that foundation, you can create a full, meaningful life with somebody, no matter what your circumstances are."

"Love is love, and no matter how it manifests, it's beautiful." ■



# BIG

# FEELINGS

We've all experienced isolation, trauma and grief over the past year. As we move into the aftermath of the pandemic, emotions we aren't prepared to deal with may surface. What if the best thing we can do is to unleash a primal scream, smash a TV or just laugh it off?

*By Kim Catley* //

*Photos by Jay Paul* //

## I ARRIVED AT RAGE RVA THREE MINUTES LATE FOR MY APPOINTMENT AND FEELING FLUSTERED.

I was coming out of my busy season at work. I couldn't find my shoes. I left my keys on the counter. I caught that traffic light that always lasts forever.

I've been practicing yoga for 20 years, and I know how to calm down when facing everyday frustrations like these. I take a deep breath, drop my shoulders, unclench my jaw.

This time, though, I grabbed a baseball bat — one with some heft — and walked into a concrete and cinder-block room. Waiting for me was a beat-up SUV, a crate full of bottles and mugs, and an old dot-matrix printer.

With the drumbeat of AC/DC's "T.N.T." filling the space, I picked up a small plate, lifted it over my head and smashed it to the ground, sending shards of glass skittering to every corner. Then I grabbed the bat and slammed it into the printer, "Office Space"-style, until the casing splintered and the ribbon spilled out.

Ten minutes later, I walked out sweaty, with a cramp in my thigh — and grinning uncontrollably.

While the sources of my agitation that day could be attributed to minor inconveniences, the truth is, they're building on a year of pent-up stress and anxiety. After living through a pandemic and reckoning with the current social justice movement against systemic racism, we've all experienced some degree of prolonged grief, isolation and trauma. As our worlds reopen and we move into the aftermath, emotions will crash through to the surface, and we aren't necessarily prepared to deal with them.

Culturally, we're inclined to stay positive. When faced with the difficult emotions of others, we put up a wall and say "good vibes only" are allowed in our presence.

But what if the best thing we can do in these moments is to unleash a primal scream, slam through a windshield with a sledgehammer and lean into the full complexity of our emotions?

### ANGER

Nicole Cline opened Rage RVA in 2017 after seeing a rage room in Denver featured on a TV show. She thought the concept would make a fun night out, and she had always wanted to own a business.

Within six months, Cline realized she was onto something. Customers weren't just coming to celebrate a birthday or a promotion. They were going through breakups

[From left] Sandra Meredith and Felicia Hunter drove from Fredericksburg to unleash their emotions by breaking things at Rage RVA.



and divorces, grieving the loss of family members and processing complex traumas. In the past year, she's also seen people looking for an outlet after being stuck at home, juggling work and family in isolation.

While the name Rage RVA might suggest a dark room with heavy metal screams blasting through speakers, it's actually a cheery space. While Cline started the business in her home garage, it has since moved to a building on Main Street in the Fan, underneath a salon. The lobby is robin's-egg blue, with upbeat sayings like "You are my sunshine" on the walls.

It's an intentional design meant to foster a sense of safety. As with many rage rooms, most of the customers are women looking for a judgment-free place to express their anger.

"Some people are private," Cline says. "They don't want someone to know what they're going through. They just want to deal with it on their own. And if they need to come here and break s--- to get it out, then come on."

Since its opening, Rage RVA has seen more than 2,500 customers, and Cline says not one has arrived in a state



Rage RVA owner Nicole Cline

of rage. Rather, it's a mix of emotions — including happiness. Some ask up front if it's OK to cry or scream. For others, a full range of emotions doesn't manifest until the glass shatters.

JAYPAUL

The soft-spoken Cline sometimes acts as a quasi therapist. Her wife, Sue, says Nicole has the kind of personality that makes people want to open up.

The Clines would like to see Rage RVA prescribed as part of a therapy program. Several therapists have come in to experience a rage room before recommending it to their clients. The couple are working with the Social Psychology and Neuroscience Lab at Virginia Commonwealth University on a study to evaluate how people feel in the month after a smash session.

I signed up for the Sensory Smash, which is advertised as a “therapist favorite.” For \$35, you get 15 breakables and an electronic item, with 10 minutes to smash — enough time to find that physical release without veering into obsession. With your anger behind you, you can find clarity and move forward. Other options range from a five-minute “quickie” for \$20 to a \$300 team-building session.

“A lot of times, you need therapy after therapy,” Sue says. “It brings stuff up, and what do you do with those emotions? How do you work through that?”

“Believe it or not, throwing stuff, breaking stuff in a controlled environment is believed to be incredibly therapeutic. It's both psychological and physical — it unites the body.”

## JOY

Author and storyteller Slash Coleman experienced that physical and emotional link firsthand. Growing up, he was surrounded by family members who struggled with addiction and anger, often leading to fights and violence. Rather than follow in their footsteps, Coleman simply refused to get angry.

It worked for a while. But then he started getting sick. No one could explain it until he started seeing a therapist who recommended he join an anger management group.

“He thought it would give me some insights into what I was struggling with and how to express my anger,” Coleman says. “It's a legitimate healthy emotion when it's expressed in a healthy way.”

In the anger management sessions, Coleman would listen to the instructor's recommendations and quietly do the opposite. He even started a fight club in Portland, Oregon, where he used wrestling to help people with similar trouble accessing their anger. Eventually, he says, he reached a healthy place.

Now he's focused on a different emotional expression: unconditional laughter.

After his lung collapsed while he was on a book tour in 2015, Coleman's surgeon recommended laughter >

yoga to help with his recovery. Initially, Coleman — a performer with an irreverent sense of humor — thought the on-demand laughter seemed fake. But after his first class, he was hooked.

With laughter yoga, participants engage in a series of deep breathing and laughter exercises. Rather than waiting for inspiration, they laugh intentionally, making direct eye contact with other participants. This, in turn, leads to genuine laughter and connection with fellow gigglers.

Coleman became certified as a laughter yoga instructor and spent a year experimenting with unconditional laughter, which is laughter that isn't a response to jokes or comedy.

"It wasn't something [where] I had to memorize or entertain people or put together lesson plans," he says. "I could just go there and be present and laugh."

He founded Laughter Yoga Richmond in 2019 to promote the practice, and he currently hosts monthly laughter yoga meditation classes online, as well as corporate team building sessions.

In 2019 he also started exploring how unconditional laughter might benefit people experiencing addiction. While traditional 12-step recovery programs often have a meditation component, Coleman says sitting can be challenging at first. For some people, laughter yoga can remove those barriers and make a meditation practice more accessible.

Coleman also says the release of endorphins and increased oxygen that come from a deep belly laugh can disrupt feelings like anger, frustration and anxiety. He sometimes asks participants to imagine anger-inducing situations — like opening a letter from an ex — and interrupt the scenario with intentional laughter. In time, they can retrain their brains to respond to real-life challenges in this way.

"There's a chemical cocktail [released] in the body when you interrupt anger with laughter," he says, "and I think it all comes down to the breath. You could take a breath-work class, you could sit and meditate — all roads lead to Rome. I think laughter is the most fun."

## SADNESS

"Expression of big emotions is something that our culture is so very bad at, and it is harmful ultimately to us as individuals and as a collective people and society," says Karla Helbert, a licensed professional counselor who focuses on grief and loss. "Often, people don't even know they've had trauma. They're walking around the world carrying a lot of pain, and we live in this culture that says you're not supposed to feel it."

"I always tell people that every feeling you have is valid. You hear people saying things like, 'You can choose to be happy,' and that's just not true. The feelings that are difficult have a whole lot more to teach us than the happy ones do."

Helbert considers herself a grief activist who tries to educate and raise consciousness about grief and give people the language to talk about it.

She comes to it with personal experience. In 2006, her young son, Theo, died of a brain tumor. It was a traumatic and life-altering loss, and it made Helbert realize just how ill-prepared she was for the aftermath.

"In grad school, I took an elective course on death and grief and bereavement," she says. "We spent a lot of time on hospice [care], but there was no discussion of traumatic grief."

"Luckily, I had something in me that knew I couldn't



Slash Coleman founded Laughter Yoga Richmond in 2019.

run away from it. I had to be in it. And I didn't have anyone to show me how to do that."

Helbert's clients often don't have the language to talk about their grief. She begins by asking about their story and helps them understand that emotions are meant to be felt and expressed. She explains that they will constantly shift between intensity and softness, experiencing everything from rage to sadness to guilt and regret.

She encourages clients to let go of the idea that there are stages to grief, and she doesn't leap to diagnose specific conditions. These tactics, she says, encourage us to codify grief and establish a timeline for getting over it. Instead of wondering if we're grieving the right way, we need to let go of our expectations and just be.

"I think a lot of people become therapists because they want to help people feel better," she says. "You cannot do that with grief. There's nothing I can do to fix the problem. All I can do is help you be OK where you are."

Yoga and making art are among the tools she relies on to help bring emotions to the surface. As she explains in her book "Yoga for Grief and Loss," our feelings and our bodies are inextricably linked. The more we can tune into the sensations in our bodies, the better able we'll be to manage our thoughts.

After all, she says, the grief never really goes away. A birthday, a holiday or a small reminder can bring everything flooding back. She wants her clients to develop the skills to recognize and lean into emotions when they arise.

"You [sometimes] see in yoga culture this toxic positivity and spiritual bypassing, but really what yoga says is you're perfect as you are, right now," she says. "Yoga



Grief activist  
Karla Helbert

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*— Karla Helbert, licensed  
professional counselor*

encourages us to be with those difficult feelings, to try to find that sweet spot in a really uncomfortable space. Whether I use yoga words or not, I'm trying to help people figure out that it's OK to be uncomfortable."

While she encourages clients to learn how to lean into their emotions, rather than shying away, she says that it's just as crucial for a person's community to give them space for that expression. This will also be critical as we begin to reemerge from the collective trauma and pain of the past year.

Instead of falling back on our tendency to move on, put the past behind us and get back to normal, Helbert hopes to see community spaces where we can gather to tell our stories, grieve together and share what's happening in our lives. Not only will we be finding release for ourselves, but we'll be creating a safe environment for others to do the same. And with that release, we'll truly be able to move forward.

"Monsters live in the dark," she says. "The more we talk about the big, scary things, the less scary they'll seem." ■

## NEWS

# THE BIG QUIT

Employees reassess their careers and work-life balance in the wake of the pandemic

By Kim Catley

**T**his summer, I quit my job. It's a shift that's always lived in the back of my mind. Someday, I thought, I'll go out on my own as a writer, but the timing never seemed right.

Until a pandemic struck.

In March 2020, like so many workers around the country, I was sent home from the office with no date of return. Yes, there were kinks that had to be smoothed out, and having my preschooler at home for a few months was challenging, to say the least. But I was also lucky to work in higher education communications, with an employer that gave me the flexibility to adjust as I needed. I created balance in the fluidity of my day, able to pause for an hour to go to the grocery store or turn my nonexistent commute into extra time to build a freelance business.

After nearly 18 months of this newfound work environment, there was no going back. Freelance writing became my full-time focus, allowing me to maintain the flexibility I had come to love.

I'm not alone.

Between April and August 2021, 19.8 million of the nation's workers quit their jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, with studies predicting waves of resignations that could continue through at least the end of the year. The reasons are varied, with some departing by choice and others by force.

"There are a lot of things going on," says Violet Ho, a management professor at the University of Richmond's Robins School of Business. "It depends on what

industry you're talking about, as well as the employee's career stage.

"There's this notion about work-life balance, which in reality isn't very balanced and was exacerbated by the pandemic. Compensation [for lower-paid, frontline workers] is not adequate, and those who are working are overstretched and understaffed. And some people are reevaluating and reprioritizing their life goals and deciding to exit the labor market altogether."

One of those people is Theocles Herrin. He studied economics and music at William & Mary, spending his free time playing music. After graduation, he worked as a data analyst at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, but Herrin still performed a few times a week. In three or four years, he hoped to become a full-time musician.

The pandemic expedited his plans. He missed working in an office, but being

stuck at home also allowed him to save money. In December 2020, Herrin moved back home to Charlottesville to strike out as a singer-songwriter. Teaching music classes at Front Porch, a music education and community space in Charlottesville, provides a steady baseline income. Plus, he has the freedom to play regular gigs at The Homestead resort in Hot Springs, perform at a private event in Richmond, or step onstage at a brewery with his band, Theocles and the Scruffs.

It remains to be seen if the surge — now dubbed the "Great Resignation" — is overblown, but there's no denying that it's a job seeker's market. To hire and retain employees, businesses have had to listen and adapt.

Grant Millsaps, CEO of the local consulting firm Frontier, has been helping clients do just that. Most of the companies he works with are Fortune 500 and >



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multinational corporations in industries ranging from health care and manufacturing to government and finance, as well as food and beverage.

He says most companies hire Frontier to stave off retention problems before they begin. Frontier helps them evolve by thinking through return-to-office plans, hybrid work environments, benefits, new governance models and more.

"Employees got used to the human response and level of empathy and flexibility [they saw during the pandemic]," Millsaps says. "They're watching very closely to see what their organizations are going to do."

For those clients that are slower to adapt, he encourages taking a look at the big picture.

"If you're thinking about your footprint, about the money and time for this big space that you have, you're asking the wrong questions," he says. "The real

question a leader should always ask themselves is, 'How do we get the best outcomes for our customers and our stakeholders?'

"If someone is working from home and they're more productive, why would I ask them to return to the office?"

The flip side of remote work is also playing out. Erik Jacyshyn was used to working from home when the pandemic hit. As a health care recruiter — most recently for HCA, where he placed nurses and medical social workers with Chippenham and Johnston-Willis hospitals — he saw business surge during the pandemic, but it also became more isolating. He no longer had monthly hiring events and hospital visits. When his fiancée, a teacher, returned to the classroom this summer, Jacyshyn had few opportunities to interact with others.

"I didn't have a boss or co-worker that I could just chat with," he says. "Things escalated, and I was unsure of what my next

move would be."

A friend at JES Foundation Repair approached him about joining their team as a field inspector. He found that JES not only gave him more flexibility and a face-to-face work environment, but they also invested heavily in training new employees, which made Jacyshyn more confident about changing industries.

UR's Ho says those nonfinancial benefits can go a long way toward making people feel valued.

"Give people a paycheck," she says, "but also empower them to do what is necessary to appease a customer or protect their own self-interests and physical health. Make them feel involved, give them a sense of autonomy."

"We talk about employees reevaluating their life goals, but I think businesses also have to reevaluate their organizational values." ■



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