

An emotional lifeline in an underserved area

BY TAFT COGHILL JR.
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Gary “Trey” Taylor was initially hesitant to pursue his license in clinical therapy.

The Caroline County native began his career in mental health services 11 years ago with Snowden at Fredericksburg and later became a crisis therapist with the Rappahannock Area Community Services Board.

But Taylor’s primary passion remained erasing the stigma of discussing mental health in the Black community, particularly among Black men.

He began a mental health awareness group called the Goodfellaz Project, where Black men would gather and discuss various issues concerning their mental health in a nonjudgmental environment.

The project started off with great success, but was forced to hold virtual gatherings after two sessions at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and enthusiasm waned.

“Obviously, the need was there,” Taylor said. “Black men were getting to the point of starting to say, ‘I need some help.’”

Recognizing the lack of Black male

therapists throughout the Interstate 95 corridor from Northern Virginia to Richmond prompted Taylor to pursue his license in the field.

He ultimately achieved his goal, and opened a private practice in the Lady-smith Business Park last June.

Taylor has 30 clients from across the state, with the vast majority being Black men. They discuss everything from the impact of social justice issues on their psyche to transitioning into life as a husband and father.

Taylor said the response has been overwhelming, and he’s been forced to

SEE THERAPY, A10

THE THERAPY

► FROM A1

pause accepting new clients while averaging 15 to 17 sessions per week.

"I knew it was going to get busy because I knew there was a gap," Taylor said. "But there are points where it just comes in waves."

Taylor said he chose to open a private practice because the opportunity to help Black men heal in a clinical fashion was too meaningful to pass up.

He said the response from the Goodfellaz Project was an inspiration. He learned that while other groups have issues as well, Black men "are a little more complex."

He said for many, constantly witnessing the deaths of other Black men because of street violence or police brutality can be an emotional trigger. He said navigating the workforce as a minority is a challenge, as well. He's worked to help more Black men learn how to communicate emotions despite some never having been taught that it is OK to do so.

"Then there's the anger piece," Taylor said. "The anger is always heavy. But the anger for me as a Black man can be a byproduct of depression or anxiety. So they might actually be depressed or having anxiety issues, but it's coming out as anger. We also deal with grief. You pile all of that in with how it is to be a Black man in America and that's what you're faced with every single session. That's why I said Black men are a little more unique because you have to attack all of that at once sometimes. It's like, where do we start first?"

Taylor said he tries to peel back as many layers as possible in 1-hour sessions. He comes up with strategic treatment plans that address the underlying cause of mental health issues. He often begins conversations with lighthearted discussions about sports, the latest Marvel movie or other personal interests.

Taylor is a car and sneaker enthusiast, so that often prompts discussion.

"For us as brothers, it's hard enough to get us to talk about our feelings anyway," Taylor said. "So you've got to go around-about a little bit. If you come in nervous and anxious about what's going on, I want to make sure I bring you down so you can properly talk and get stuff

You pile all of that in with how it is to be a Black man in America and that's what you're faced with every single session.

—TREY TAYLOR

out ... I think sometimes in this field we see people as clients and patients but I've always seen them as human beings who are going through some issues in life and need some help."

Taylor penned a book titled "You Good Fam?," addressing mental health among Black men. He has a second book, "Refresh: Journey to Find Peace" coming out in October.

His passion for mental health carries over into his role as a deacon at Oxford Mount Zion Baptist Church in Ruther Glen. Taylor said he only incorporates faith into his practice if the client takes the conversation in that direction.

His pastor, the Rev. Duane Fields Sr., said Taylor is chipping away at the stigma of mental health issues in the Black community and the church. Fields said that for any Black man seeking therapy, "it's an added benefit when you look across the table and see someone that looks like you."

"Mental health in the Black community and in the church has always been taboo," Fields said. "He's brought it to light. He's made it an open dialogue ... Whenever we have any type of conference or leadership development, we make sure we add that mental health piece in there."

Taylor and his wife, Shauniece, oversee the Millennials ministry at their church. Taylor has also conducted mental health workshops. He proactively checks on Fields to ensure he's in a good place mentally and not on the verge of burnout.

"I always say that mental, physical and spiritual all works hand in hand," Taylor said. "Just because you might be depressed or anxious dealing with some type of mental health issue, it doesn't mean that God can't handle and deal with that. It also doesn't mean you don't need a therapist if you believe in God. You can do both. I know that God put therapists in place to help us. I'm living proof of that."

Taft Coghill Jr: 540/374-5526
tcoghill@freelancestar.com

Caroline hardware store counting down final days



BY TAFT COGHILL JR.
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

As Debbie Edenton walked around Homestead Hardware one recent morning, her husband encouraged her to search for deals.

The store, located on U.S. 1 in the Woodford area of Caroline County for the past 30 years, was having a going-out-of-business sale.

But Edenton couldn't control her emotions enough to shop as she pondered the close of the business and the relationship she's built with owner Gary Trice, store manager Sheri Hepburn and others.

"My husband was like 'Do you want to pick anything

out?' and I'm like, I can't," Edenton said. "My eyes are watery. We're going to miss [Trice]. Aside from being able to run two minutes down the road and pick up whatever you might need, the kindness

SEE HARDWARE, A6

Trice says health woes and supply-chain problems led to his decision to close his store after three decades in business.

HARDWARE

► FROM A1

when you come in here is touching. He treated everybody like family.”

Homestead has allowed Caroline residents to make do without the convenience of a Lowe’s or Home Depot nearby.

But a combination of Trice’s health woes and supply chain issues led the business to close. Trice, 61, said the final day hasn’t been determined, but will probably be by the end of the month, depending on how much inventory can be liquidated.

Trice said it wasn’t an easy decision as he expressed gratitude for his employees and customers. He still owns the building and is hoping an entrepreneur will lease it and allow it to continue as a hardware store, but so far there have been no takers.

“Quite honestly, since the beginning of COVID it has become increasingly hard on small businesses like this because the supply chain is so choked,” Trice said. “We’ve been struggling for the last year and a half to get goods. The lead times are many times longer than what they were before. The availability is not there.”

Trice said for 30 years, owning the store never felt like work. He said that’s changed in the past 18 months as he and Hepburn have spent hours on the telephone each day trying to procure the inventory necessary for the store to survive.

Trice and Hepburn noted that smaller stores are often last to receive inventory as suppliers look to take care of the large chain operations first.

A Tractor Supply opened last month in Ladysmith a few miles down the road, but Trice said that did not factor into his decision to close, because there are differences in what the stores offer.

“Most people don’t have an idea of how hard it is to compete with the giants in corporate America—the Lowe’s, Home Depot, Amazon Prime and Tractor Supply,” Trice said. “It’s tough, but we’ve been able to do it through the support of the community. We have the best customers and employees on the planet.”

Those customers and employees showed up for



Trice is hoping someone will lease the store building and keep it going, but that hasn’t happened yet.



After serving Caroline County for more than 30 years, Homestead Hardware is closing its doors.

My emotions are overwhelming. It’s hard to come in here every day knowing that I’m leaving. I have forged so many friendships and I have seen the good in people unlike you could ever imagine.

—GARY TRICE, HOMESTEAD HARDWARE OWNER

Trice in full force in 2016 after he spent seven weeks in the hospital’s ICU and another month in recovery following a massive heart attack that eventually led to a heart transplant.

Doctors told him he had a 4 percent chance of survival after the heart attack.

Trice said during a “cognizant” moment after the heart attack, he pledged to close the business. But Hepburn, other employees and customers prevented that from happening.

“The first thing I told the employees is, this is no longer just a job,” Hepburn said. “I got them together and I said, this is now personal. And they were the absolute greatest.”

A 2016 Free Lance—Star report noted that customers offered help with any chore needed to keep the store going from unloading tractor-trailers to delivering feed to the farm. One man spent days assembling a farm tiller and dozens of others left their phone numbers with mes-

sages to call anytime.

After Trice recovered, he held an appreciation event at the store for those who kept it running.

Trice said knowing how the community rallied around him made his decision to close even tougher.

“My emotions are overwhelming,” he said. “It’s hard to come in here every day knowing that I’m leaving. I have forged so many friendships and I have seen the good in people unlike you could ever imagine. ... It’s been the highlight of my life.”

Trice will retreat to his home, which sits on a farm near the store. He’s unsure what he will do next. Hepburn has worked at Homestead for 26 years and said she’ll now look for work elsewhere. She has no plans to retire.

“It’s extremely emotional and it hurts on the inside,” Trice said of closing. “But I feel like it’s something that has to happen.”

Taft Coghill Jr. 540/374-5526
tcoghill@freelancestar.com

Group offers ‘extreme’ help to those in need

BY TAFT COGHILL JR.
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

As the front desk clerk at the Garden Inn on U.S. 1 in Spotsylvania County, Debbie Tyree has witnessed all sorts of efforts to assist long-term residents.

Various ministries have fed those dwelling at the facility. There have been clothing drives, and school supplies have been provided for children.

But the most recent effort has stunned Tyree.

Amazon’s Black Employee Network—one of 13 affinity groups the company created—has partnered with former Fredericksburg resident Januari Coates and her mother, Debra Samuels, to

I just told them the pains of my heart and what I think the Fredericksburg community needs. They said they’ve got my back. I never thought they meant to this capacity.

—JANUARI COATES

provide necessities for residents of the Garden Inn.

They’ve also helped refurbish the Thurman Brisben Center homeless shelter where Coates was a resident for two weeks 25 years ago and now serves on the

Board of Directors.

Coates and Samuels collaborated with Arm of the Lord Ministries in Fredericksburg to distribute the supplies, as well as food and other necessities.

“I’ve been with the hotel for two years,” Tyree said. “People come feed our residents and do other things. But nothing this extreme.”

The “extreme” Tyree speaks of is more than 60 slow cookers and air fryers, beds, dressers and more. Coates and Samuels also requested suitcases for residents because they don’t like seeing them come and go with their belongings in trash bags.

SEE AMAZON, A6

► FROM A1

Amazon provided more than 200 toys at Christmas, and representatives from BEN went door to door to ensure the gifts were age appropriate.

The company is also finalizing a \$100,000 pledge toward Downtown Greens purchasing a 56-acre parcel in Fredericksburg to expand community greenspace.

“We have three signatures, and we’re three more [Amazon] signatures away from making that happen,” Coates said.

Coates is a Woodbridge resident and real estate agent.

She said the partnership with Amazon was established after a chance encounter with BEN’s President, Rivera Williams, near her real estate office in Dumfries.

She later had a lunch meeting with BEN representatives.

“I just told them the pains of my heart and what I think the Fredericksburg community needs,” Coates said. “They said they’ve got my back. I never thought they meant to this capacity.”

Coates and Samuels arrange for a box truck to pick up items at Amazon’s warehouse in Springfield. They then hire a driver transport the goods to the Fredericksburg area.

Coates said she’s particularly concerned about residents at the Garden Inn, because they may go overlooked since they’re not on the streets.

When residents arrive at the Garden Inn, they enter empty rooms with no bed, dressers, refrigerator or cooking equipment.



FILE / MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Januari Coates and Debra Samuels (center) are working with an Amazon group that has helped local residents in need by supplying food, furnishings and jobs.

“There are people above the threshold of Brisben but they’re still in need,” Coates said.

Amazon is addressing issues at the Brisben Center, as well.

The company donated new sofas for the activity room, along with 70- and 55-inch TVs. Amazon is working to upgrade the computers at the shelter to ensure they’re up to speed for residents to conduct job and home searches.

New curtains were also donated and Amazon has partnered with Cracker Barrel to ensure three meals per day are provided to residents when there are no volunteers available to cook.

“They’re going to outfit the shelter with new curtains, bedding ... The children’s playroom looks like it was left back in the 40s,” Samuels said. “Amazon is coming in and redoing the whole playroom.”

Coates and Samuels stressed that the part-

nership with Amazon has yielded more than giveaways and cosmetic upgrades.

There was a job fair held at Montego Bay Grille & Sports Bar, where five Brisben Center residents were hired to work at an Amazon warehouse for \$16 an hour. Altogether, 23 Fredericksburg-area residents were hired that day.

“We found that Brisben was very credible,” said Williams of BEN. “We wanted to align ourselves with its mission statement.”

Williams said BEN saw the partnership with Coates and her mother as an opportunity to fulfill its goal of assisting community partners.

A new 630,000-square foot distribution hub is coming to Stafford County, but Williams said that venture had nothing to do with the company’s involvement in Fredericksburg. He called his meeting with Coates

“happenstance” and “divine intervention.”

“What we wanted to do from the standpoint of Amazon is to fill in the gaps and help support [the Brisben Center’s] mission statement,” Williams said. “So it’s not that we’ve created anything different. We just align ourselves with those causes that are supportive of the local community.”

Coates also helped facilitate a spa day at the Brisben Center last weekend. She plans to arrange drop-offs from Springfield to Fredericksburg each Saturday, if possible.

She said the ultimate goal is to have a permanent distribution location.

“I’m just happy to be the vessel that can be a part of something,” Coates said. “It’s not about me. I’m just part of the bigger plan. It’s amazing to watch it come to fruition.”

Taft Coghill Jr. 540/374-5526
tcoghill@freelancestar.com