

Distinguished Dozen: Amos' art grew on trees



Local photographer Ézé Amos poses for a photo on the Downtown Mall earlier this month.

MIKE KROPF, THE DAILY PROGRESS

It was late June, and Ézé Amos had to hurry. This photographer needed City Council's permission, as the fifth anniversary of August 12, 2017, was fast approaching, to deliver his art to the citizens: a series of personal portraits taken that day, to be put in an open-air exhibition.

"I was under the illusion that it was going to be easy to put it up on the Downtown Mall," he says now, laughing. "Little did I know."

Just as the term “both sides” has become a catchphrase used to denigrate the president from that era, City Council operates in world in which favoritism to any side is seen as an abridgment of free speech. But Amos found a way to honor the day when Charlottesville’s best and worst sides were shown to the world.

“So I sold it to the city as a gift,” says Amos. “And it was a way to commemorate what happened.”

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Hoisting larger-than-life color photographs into the trees of the Downtown Mall isn’t cheap, but Amos says that he didn’t feel that he could fundraise before getting that approval, which came at the June 21 City Council meeting.

With a GoFundMe and personal entreaties to larger players such as the University of Virginia and the Charlottesville Community Foundation, he says that he and project manager Natalie Batman raised about \$80,000 in less than one month. Along the way, Amos interviewed over three dozen survivors from August 12, when hundreds of white nationalists marched in the streets, and one of them killed anti-racism activist Heather Heyer and injured many others.

The result is “The Story of Us,” an [interactive exhibition](#) that hung in the Mall’s treetops from August 11 through September 29.

Anyone strolling the Mall could not only gaze up at images captured by Amos that fateful weekend, but they could hear each person in their own voice, after scanning a QR code, speak their personal history.

One of them is April Muñiz, shown sobbing by the street after the horrific

injuries and death from the car attack.

"We are lucky to have Ézé in our community," says Muñiz. "He's a true street photographer who always has camera around his neck so he can bear witness to the life and lives around him."

Muñiz says she met Amos over six years ago when he shot a dramatically happier image of her and her dog in an owner-pet lookalike contest.

"Whatever the circumstance," says Muñiz, "Ézé's portrayal of it captures the moment with true sincerity."

Amos came from his native Nigeria in 2008 to Charlottesville where his now ex-wife wanted to live. An early interest in hydrology got pushed aside after he realized his ability with photography. And storytelling.

"The dream has always been the storytelling," says Amos, who grew up in a regional capital called Ibadan.

"Everything in my culture is based on storytelling," he says. "When my dad wanted to teach a lesson, he'd tell us a story."

Amos says that Charlottesville's day of infamy had not only marked the city in the eyes of the world but told an incomplete story. This city where he works and where he raises his daughter became known for Nazi flags and a lethal car attack.

"That's all they know about Charlottesville," says Amos. "Every time I go out of Charlottesville — even in Italy — people say, 'Oh, you live there?'"

Amos wanted to capture not the views of politicians and policy-makers but the experience of "random, average people."

He says he captured thousands of photographs that weekend. But after sending out some of them to news organizations in those first few days, he kept the rest hidden away from everyone's eyes — even his own — for five years.

"I thought it was too fresh a story to tell," he says. "It was too close to home. I felt we needed time to take a breather."

Earlier this year, he began looking through the images when the idea of an exhibition occurred to him. Now, he wonders if they could be collected into a book.

In recent years, Amos has become a frequent contributor to the New York Times, Getty Images, and other news outlets. And yet he managed to track down the subjects of his 36 chosen images and to conduct all those audio interviews in the precious few weeks between Council's approval and the outdoor exhibition's opening.

"I'm under no illusions that I could tell the complete story," he says, "but I felt it was important to try."

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Distinguished Dozen: Charlottesville school crossing guard Cox puts eyes on street and feet on pavement



Kevin Cox, a crossing guard at the intersection of Hazel and East High Streets, poses for a photo on Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2022.

MIKE KROPF, THE DAILY PROGRESS
alert top story

Arriving a little early for his afternoon shift as a city school crossing guard, Kevin Cox uses the minutes to pluck trash from a bush near his perch along busy East High Street.

“Stuff like this drives me crazy,” says Cox, holding a discarded styrofoam cup, “because it breaks down and then goes sailing down to the river and

then to the sea."

This is the same bush that in mid-October became the unplanned and injurious landing zone for a bicyclist [intercepted by a driver in a caught-on-camera incident](#) that drew local outrage. It was Cox who witnessed what happened and brought the incident to the attention of law enforcement.

For Cox, 70, watching traffic is not just his job twice a day; it's an educational mission pursued over three decades with visits to City Council meetings and shoes on the ground. Cox found his latest platform in August when the city said it didn't have enough drivers to bus all the children to school.

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"When the city said they needed crossing guards, I jumped on it," he says.

Cox says his status as one of Charlottesville's most visible pedestrians began in 1985 when he was hired as a medical lab technician at the University of Virginia.

"I tried taking the bus, I tried riding a bike, and I tried driving; but they all had disadvantages," says Cox. "Walking to work was easier for me."

By the 1990s, Cox's two-legged commute made him a extra visible. Rain or shine, this man was making a five-mile round-trip journey between his Woolen Mills home to his laboratory near the UVA Corner.

Cox credits his wife, Sarah Pool, who lost all her eyesight through a degenerative condition with helping him ponder the plight of the pedestrian. Yet he hastens to note that he tries to weigh all perspectives.

"I've spent years walking— and driving," he says. "Most drivers are nice

people who want to get along."

Three decades of walking have made Cox something like the late Jane Jacobs, a self-educated urbanist, someone demanding best practices for their city.

"I believe that the physical environment matters to people's state of mind," says Cox. "This street contributes to bad attitudes."

For starters, he notes that East High's sidewalks often end abruptly. In other places, parking lots from the pre-site-plan era extend all the way to the roadway. Cox says that such factors conspire to send a message to cars they can just steer their way onto private property to speed through.

"It's ridiculous," Cox says. "It's a wasteland for pedestrians."

Off in the distance, Cox spies a woman struggling on a westward trek with two shopping bags bearing the imprint of discount store Rose's. He grimaces as he watches her pause to hoist the bags while preparing to navigate past the sidewalk-free brick building owned by AT&T.

"She's got to deal with that dirt path," says Cox, shaking his head. "I'm gonna talk to her when she gets up here."

In a city that recently planned to spend nearly \$700,000 for just one stretch of sidewalk (on Stribling Ave.), city government has allocated just \$100,000 annually for new sidewalks for the entire city. Cox contends, however, he's been hearing encouraging words from city officials about getting a sidewalk past AT&T.

"Hello," he says to woman with the Rose's bags, "I'm trying to put a sidewalk here."

Cox's years of foot commuting have introduced him to many people.

"Hey, Kevin," says a smiling Carl Hicks, retired from Region Ten and now delivering auto supplies, as he motors into a parking lot with a drop-off.

Next comes John Petro walking down Hazel Street with his two Burnley-Moran schoolchildren, six-year-old Hazel and Jackson. They're walking home and turn to Cox to bring High Street traffic to a stop.

"We always look forward to seeing Kevin," says Petro.

Cox says that he tries to use smiles and eye contact with all drivers and that it's rare to go more than a few minutes without a wave from a motorist.

"That's what surprises me," says Cox. "How much positive support I get."

One supporter is the owner of Charlottesville Glass & Mirror, where Cox typically stands and one of the businesses whose parking lot hugs the street.

"He's been a real asset," says company owner Dwight Corle. "His presence has really reduced cut-throughs and made it safer for folks who cross there. He's just been a great influence."

Corle says that East High Street is a much safer place than it was before Cox began working as a crossing guard.

"We're thankful to have him," says Corle. "My only regret is that I wish he was there eight or ten hours a day."

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Distinguished Dozen: Food is humbling for chef Laura Fonner



Laura Fonner, the executive chef and owner of seafood restaurant Siren, poses for a photo in her restaurant on Saturday earlier this month.

MIKE KROPP, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Editor's Note: Welcome to the first of this year's Distinguished Dozen! The Daily Progress is happy each year to present 12 local residents nominated by others in the community as examples of generosity, kindness, leadership and service. The series gives us an opportunity to introduce the community to great people in our midst, and it is one of our most favorite parts of the year. We hope you enjoy meeting this year's Distinguished Dozen.

The first time Laura Fonner ever cooked a meal it resulted in a hole in the kitchen floor and a basement fire. She was 10 at the time.

A few decades later she has become a venerated executive chef and owner of the popular downtown Mediterranean-style seafood restaurant Siren.

“My passion is food, and I was really, really lucky at a really young age to figure it out,” said Fonner.

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While her earliest forays into the culinary arts ranged from 911 calls to over-microwaved “chewy cheese sandwiches,” she truly began her journey into the world of food when her mom enrolled her in a cooking class at CATEC. She then spent the next few years making cheesecakes and pastries at former Main Street mainstay Blue Bird Cafe before applying for a job as a line cook at Duner’s in Ivy at age 19.

During her 17 years at Duner’s, Fonner worked her way up the ranks to executive chef, but that isn’t what stands out about her tenure at the Ivy establishment.

Her gratitude for the chance that she was given as a young person led her to a desire to help the community. She reached out to local chefs and farmers she had met through her work, asking for leftover food from their restaurants and farms. She began creating meals out of those excess ingredients and donating them to the unhoused community once a week through People and Congregations Engaged in Ministry (PACEM.)

“It’s a basic necessity to live. You need to eat, and not everybody has the ability or means to do it,” she said.

Then, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, everything changed.

Not only was she not able to continue her charity work, but she had also begun talks to buy Duner's three months before the pandemic officially began. Although the talks ended up falling through, her optimism persisted.

"You gotta let life lead you in the direction that it leads you," said Fonner.

Her life ended up taking an interesting turn.

Fonner received a call from Food Network asking her to compete in cooking competitions on TV.

As someone who battles with anxiety, the idea of flying across the country to compete on camera was daunting, but nevertheless she did it and she did it well. She has now competed in eight episodes of Guy's Grocery Games, beating out other champions and earning \$60,000 in prize money. While some of those earnings went toward the opening of her new restaurant, a portion of them went directly to PACEM.

A few days away from its one-year anniversary, Siren has been Fonner's dream. She says that the restaurant, which she designed and worked on with the help of her parents and friends, is meant to feel like coming home, Its cozy interior of warm woodtones and mismatched art is welcoming by design, in an almost self-portrait of the talented chef. The staff is stocked with friendly servers and accomplished cooks, two of whom Fonner brought meals to for years through her program with PACEM.

Fonner was nominated and chosen as a member of this year's Distinguished Dozen for her dedication to the community and her position as a role model for everyone who meets her. Her infectious enthusiasm is unparalleled and her humble optimism is inspiring.

“This industry really humbles you and teaches you,” said Fonner. “I was lucky finding my passion and my passion just happens to be a basic necessity. Everybody has to eat.”

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Distinguished Dozen: For Mike and Emily Callahan, a journey of giving, gratitude



Emily and Mike Callahan pose for a photo with their son Jack on Monday.

MIKE KROPF, THE DAILY PROGRESS

These days, Jack Callahan, a busy 7-year-old first-grader at Johnson Elementary School, enjoys swimming and playing golf. His hearing aids are the only visual reminders of his chemotherapy journey to fight metastatic cancer.

Jack has been in remission since September. And his parents, Mike and

Emily Callahan, are channeling their gratitude into making the path easier for the next families who find themselves plunged into a stressful stew of treatment, travel and worry.

After Jack was diagnosed with an extragonadal germ cell tumor in 2019, the Callahans needed a community. Friends stepped forward to raise money to help replace income lost when both parents had to leave their jobs and head to Philadelphia for their son's advanced treatment.

Alec Lorenzoni and Lawren Magerfeld organized a child-focused, family-friendly festival that combined fundraising with sheer fun. Thanks to Lorenzoni, Magerfeld and other devoted friends and volunteers, JackFest was established in 2019.

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That first event lifted everyone's spirits. "It was the perfect fall day, and just a celebration of families being together," Emily Callahan said.

The beauty of the moment spurred the Callahans to make that feeling available to other parents. Although the Callahans had been uncomfortable with the idea of accepting financial help, they realized that they'd found an opportunity to give back — and pay forward.

"We, throughout the course of our journey, were the recipients of such kindness and generosity," Emily Callahan said. The couple was determined "to find a way to express our love, support and gratitude. To this day, it was life-giving in moments we didn't know we needed."

JackFest's most recent festivities, which resumed March 27 at Foxfield after a pandemic-prompted hiatus, included children's running races, a costumed superhero dash, a Lego build challenge, an obstacle course challenge, a

petting zoo and bouncy houses and slides.

Admission to JackFest for children and families is free. Registration fees for specific competitive JackFest events help raise money for Ronald McDonald House of Charlottesville, which gives families a home away from home while their children are seeking treatment, and the pediatric oncology program at the University of Virginia Children's Hospital, where the funds will help expand pediatric immunotherapy and stem cell transplant programs so more patients and families can find specialized care without traveling so far.

Life as the Callahans knew it changed abruptly in February 2019, when their energetic 3-year-old son became ill.

"We thought he had some kind of infection," Mike Callahan said. "We had no idea he'd have cancer. We didn't know what was happening."

An MRI revealed a grapefruit-sized tumor in Jack's pelvis. A constellation of lesions appeared in his lungs. Cancer was not only present, but spreading.

"Emily stayed calm and asked questions," Mike Callahan said. "I fell apart. It's extremely difficult to get that news."

Together, they dug deep for resilience to navigate a confusing new world, and to stay strong for their son.

"Everyone said, 'You're so strong,'" Mike Callahan said. "Everyone would do it. It's your kid."

Jack received four rounds of chemotherapy at UVA Children's, but he needed more extensive treatment at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

"He spent 117 nights in the hospital," Mike Callahan said. "Emily and I had to leave work and go to Philadelphia."

The family ended up spending nine months there.

"His disease was not responding the way they wanted it to," Emily Callahan said. "We were not able to come home."

The Callahans soon discovered how rich they were in terms of friendships. The Lorenzoni family "raised funds for us," Mike Callahan said. "Thank God we had them in our lives."

Mike Callahan called the inaugural JackFest event "a smash hit." As families laughed and played together, the Callahans noticed that they weren't alone. A new community emerged around them of parents who understood what a child's cancer journey was like, and the value of fun and togetherness to fight the toll it can take on families.

The community at large needed to be more aware of pediatric cancer and its impact on families, and those families needed a dose of hope and some time to hop off the treadmill of treatment schedules, change and stress. The Callahans resolved to transform a generous expression of emergency support into an ongoing event to raise funds for others.

"The need in the community was so great," Mike Callahan said. "It wasn't just us. We saw a niche here. We could do kids' races with activities around them and raise money for kids' causes. We saw a demand. A need."

"There came a point during the [JackFest] event this spring that I thought, 'We did it. People are more aware of pediatric cancer,'" Emily Callahan said. "We wanted to be there and be known."

Helping Ronald McDonald House was an easy choice for a family grateful for its hospitality.

"It's all about supporting the whole family," Mike Callahan said. "It's not just

lodging. We feel a personal connection to it. We said, 'Let's extend a rope to the next families.'"

Greater visibility for pediatric cancer was a valuable component of the JackFest experience. These days, the Callahans are the ones offering help and encouragement to other families.

"I connect with a lot of families now — even a family in Paris," Emily Callahan said.

The Callahans did not realize right away that they are giving people another gift — one that's difficult to describe, but easy to feel. When one person learns how to receive help from others, caring people are changed by finding opportunities to make a difference, and a community is built one generous gesture at a time.

"Accept the help," Emily Callahan said. "Don't feel guilty about it. You'll find a way to pay it back. If not, you'll find a way to pay it forward."

Her advice to people who feel motivated to reach out and help someone in need points to the Lorenzoni family's example of fighting fear with fun.

"Don't ask what somebody needs. Just do something," Emily Callahan said.

Learn more about JackFest at jackfest.net.

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Distinguished Dozen: For Summer Thompson, helping kids is a "blessing"



MIKE KROPF, THE DAILY PROGRESS Johnson Elementary School principal Summer Thompson poses for a photo in a third grade classroom on Thursday, Dec. 15, 2022.



It's hard not to love Summer Thompson, say those who know her.

Nearly everyone who knows the Johnson Elementary School principal talks about how much they her.

It's evident from the school bus full of kids who yell, "we love you Ms. Thompson!" at dismissal every day. It's evident even from the cards and drawings from students that adorn her office. Most of them say some variation of "I love you." One adds that she is "awesome."

"I think it's that her smile is just so warm," said Tyesha Hill, whose youngest child is in kindergarten at Johnson. Her two older children graduated from Johnson. "She has the most beautiful smile, even if something's wrong."

Her students feel the same way. Not long after he started at Johnson, a

kindergartener took up the habit of charging at Thompson—whether he was rushing up from Cherry Avenue, dashing through the trees near the school or being dropped off by a car—and koala-clinging to her leg.

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Thompson helps with the morning drop-off every day, and the ambush by hug has become part of her routine.

"I don't know that he will remember it, but it's special to me. It starts my day off right," Thompson said.

Thompson's desire to work with kids and help people pushed her toward education. She started out teaching at Venable, then took a math specialist position at Johnson 17 years ago. She's been there ever since.

"You're going to have every kid from every kind of background here," Thompson said. "It's certainly not a perfect utopia, but it's pretty awesome here. We just have awesome kids and an awesome staff ... and we see that it plays out."

Parents do too. Hill said her older kids are doing well at other Charlottesville City Schools, making A's and B's and playing sports.

"It all started at Johnson. I don't even want to move into a new neighborhood until my younger son is finished," Hill said.

Thompson said that, typically, she brings her work home with her, and that she was grateful to her family for "putting up" with it. "It" includes leaving her house open for 14 hours a day during the pandemic to distribute Chromebooks and other necessary items to students.

"They wanted us to do distribution at the school from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.,

something like that. And I was like, 'My people can't do that!'" — because their jobs wouldn't give them that time off, Thompson said.

So Thompson gave them her home address, said to come by any time between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m., and passed out technology to families who needed it so their kids could learn remotely.

Thompson opened up her home to students prior to the pandemic, too. A few years ago, three students needed a place to stay in Charlottesville during the week, so they stayed with Thompson and her family before going back to their mom on weekends.

"It just seemed to make more sense to have some kids stay with me than some of the other alternatives that were available," Thompson said. Her own three kids loved it, she said.

Part of her dedication to Johnson students comes from the fact that her own kids currently attend or graduated from the school, despite the fact that the Thompson family's house isn't zoned for Johnson.

"If I'm going to put your kid in that classroom, then I should feel good about putting my kid in that classroom. And if I'm going to be the principal of a school then I should believe in that school enough to bring my kids here," Thompson said.

Thompson remains dedicated to her students, even after they leave her school. Thompson continues to ask about Hill's daughter and older son.

"It's not just, 'I'm a principal,' you know?" Hill said of Thompson. "It's, 'I'm a mom, I'm whatever they need me to be.'"

Hill hopes that Thompson knows just what an effect she has had on her family.

"She is loved all around. It will always be like that, even when my babies gotta leave her."

For Thompson, it's been a privilege to serve the Johnson community.

"It's been the blessing of my whole life."

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Distinguished Dozen: From Easter Bunny to school counselor, Renee Lundgren does it all

LYNNE ANDERSON



Renee Lundgren, part of the counseling team at Walton Middle School, poses for a photo last month. She's one of this year's Distinguished Dozen.

MIKE KROPF, THE DAILY PROGRESS

In the spring, Renee Lundgren dresses up as the Easter Bunny for a community-wide Easter egg hunt.

In winter, she and her family chop wood for people who otherwise would not

have fuel for heat.

At Christmas, she decorates her house for days and hosts a giant sleepover for her six grown kids, spouses and grandkids on the night before Christmas. For many years, she helped organize a Breakfast with Santa, allowing kids who couldn't visit Santa at a mall to see Santa in Scottsville — and get a healthy meal at the same time.

And those are all just side gigs for which she volunteers.

In fact, Lundgren has a full-time job as a senior family support worker in the Albemarle County department of social services. In that role, she assists elementary and middle school students in southern Albemarle County in the Scottsville area who are experiencing some type of difficulty, from grief to anger to fear to anxiety, the latter of which Lundgren said she's seen a lot in recent years due to COVID-19.

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Just where she gets her energy is anybody's guess, but Lundgren said that helping people actually gives her energy.

"I know it sounds corny, but being able to help people feeds my soul," said Lundgren, who has lived in Albemarle for 37 years. "I've always been passionate about helping people. I feel it's really important to build bridges, because when you build bridges, you build strong communities."

With degrees in social work and mental health counseling, Lundgren has worked for more than 30 years helping school children, tailoring her responses to their unique needs and to their ages. For example, middle school students are more skilled at identifying their emotions than elementary school students, Lundgren said. She uses a technique called

“play therapy” for the younger students to help them learn about their emotions. Sometimes the middle-schoolers are just “needing someone to talk to.”

“I try to provide caring and empathy and a hand up,” Lundgren said. “I’ve been in the community so long that I’ve been able to build relationships with a lot of people.”

Lundgren said she loves seeing how people can grow — and also how a community can grow. She’s been a major part of both. She helped to spearhead the development of a childcare center in Scottsville.

“We didn’t have childcare out here,” she said. “But with help from others, we were able to open a day care center that not only provides childcare but also employs 14 women from the community.”

And, after hearing that many of school kids and their families needed food, she started a food pantry, working with the local Food Lion.

“They just gave out 90 food baskets last week,” she said the week before Christmas.

And then there’s the wood chopping. Her kids and the local 4-H club organize “The Lumberjack Attack” to cut and split wood to give to people who rely on wood to heat their homes. The family will be chopping wood this Saturday, Jan. 7, and delivering it to families.

Terri Higgins, Lundgren’s nominator for this year’s Distinguished Dozen, said she marvels at Lundgren’s energy and devotion.

“I worked with Renee for 18 years, and she was always committed and would give one hundred percent,” Higgins said. “She just really wants to serve. She has a big heart for people who are struggling and wants to do all she can to

help.”

With her years of experience in helping people who are experiencing a crisis, Lundgren said she is very aware of how vulnerable people can feel at such a time, and also of the role she can play in helping them.

“I often encounter people at their lowest points,” she said. One of the most important things she can do for them, she said, is to provide empathy. To help meet material needs, she has developed a web of connections who can steer people quickly to groups that can help them and their families as quickly as possible.

“She is extremely connected,” said Higgins. “Everyone knows who she is, and she will help them and do whatever she can. She will fight the right people who can help when she herself cannot.”

For these reasons, Lundgren loves the tight-knit Scottsville community, she said. And she loves building what she describes as “protective factors” for children, with community get-togethers and events such as the breakfasts with Santa and the Easter egg hunts.

“Some kids come from homes that don’t have the resources” for such merry-making, she said. But that, she believes, is where the community comes in.

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Distinguished Dozen: Schuyler a champion of nature for children



Wildrock founder Carolyn Schuyler poses for a photo in her home earlier this month.

MIKE KROPF, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Standing at the base of Fox Mountain in the family nature center she fostered near Crozet, Carolyn Schuyler drifts back to recent memories of the busloads of children who routinely relish this experience.

“Watching the students getting off the bus and seeing their reaction to the mountain and the realization that they have this huge space that’s theirs and is designed for them is just consistently good and amazing,” says Schuyler.

This is Wildrock, 28 acres of verdant land, forest, fields and creeks—all devoted to the idea that the development of mentally and physically healthy children depends on play and nature. Here they get both.

“One of best ways you can build a high-functioning child is by letting them play outside,” says Schuyler, 53. “There’s a really strong evidence base for getting children into nature playing.”

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Last year, the American Pediatric Association declared a mental health crisis in childhood. Meanwhile, a variety of academic papers have found positive associations between nature and physical and mental health, according to the Children & Nature Network, a clearinghouse of research and advocacy and a trusted resource for Schuyler, who began her career as a play and family therapist.

Seven years ago, Schuyler presented the idea for Wildrock at pitch night at the annual Tom Tom innovation festival. She won, and two years later, in 2017, opened Wildrock on land donated by her family.

“Both nature connection and free play are critical for healthy child development, and both are endangered in childhood today,” says Schuyler. “So that really motivated me to start Wildrock.”

Wildrock is both this Crozet-area nature center and a non-profit that meets children where they are: in their schools, their neighborhoods, after-school centers, and agency side lots. Even before the pandemic, Schuyler says there was a crisis caused by too much structure and didacticism in American schools.

“The research is saying the average American child only spends about seven

minutes in true free play outdoors and several hours in front of a screen," says Schuyler.

She says this situation leads to higher rates of depression and anxiety. And a green space for underprivileged children promotes equity.

"Connection to nature is such a part of mental health, and it tends to be overlooked," she says.

At Wildrock, kids wade and catch minnows in a mountain stream, play in sand, make art with Virginia slate and produce plays at a little outdoor stage. And Schuyler says that play really is the natural language of children.

"They don't do talk-therapy," she says. "They work out their emotional challenges through the expressive opportunity of free play."

This isn't Schuyler's first local non-profit. She helped start the Women's Initiative, a mental health center that serves women regardless of ability to pay, and she was its first program director. She says she got particularly interested in trauma treatment because trauma can cause depression and anxiety.

"The natural world was coming up again and again," says Schuyler. "I just feel really sad and honestly alarmed at the degree of which children in this generation are being deprived of the kinds of experiences that build emotional resilience."

Wildrock has firmed up so many links to local families and schools that it now serves over 15,000 people a year and employs a staff of seven. Schuyler plans to hand over the reins to the person who has recently been leading it with her. Meg Phillips will become the sole executive director on January 1.

“Things have gone so well with her and a couple of other great new hires that it became apparent to me to it was really time for me to start focusing on some special projects to advance the mission and to allow the new team of leaders to run with deepening and expanding the core programs,” says Schuyler.

The University of Virginia recently invited Schuyler to be a visiting scholar. The environmental thought and practice major co-taught a class outdoors in one of the historic Pavilion gardens.

And Schuyler says she plans to devote more time to research and to writing about nature connections and nature play given the ongoing public health crisis. Already, she has published a study with a William & Mary professor and plans to soon unveil a new mobile nature play laboratory.

Friend and fellow professional counselor Trudi Goodwin expresses confidence that Schuyler’s contributions will continue.

“She’s passionate about educating people,” says Goodwin. “Her life’s work is serving others, and Wildrock is just a manifestation of that.”

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Distinguished Dozen: Strong hands build strong minds at boxing gym for all

WarTime Fitness is not your average gym.

The Charlottesville boxing haven and nonprofit organization have only been open for a year and a half, but it's already made a lifetime impact on its members. WarTime provides life and fitness mentorship and a boxing team with everyone's mental and physical health in mind.

Professional boxer, trainer and gym founder George Rivera put both feet into the plan to launch WarTime Fitness. He immediately knew that he wanted the gym to be a safe space for all members "from ages four to 100" to learn, grow and reach their fitness goals.

One of the main things that make the gym unique is its focus on its younger members. Rivera was aware of the increase in gun violence among local youth when he decided to start the gym in his garage in Fluvanna in 2019. He maintained the same mission when he opened the gym's first official location on River Road on Juneteenth in 2021.

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"There's no other gym like this," Rivera said. "Everybody pushes everybody, we support one another to be great."

Rivera has been an athlete for all 44 years of his life. The only thing he's grown to love more than competing professionally is coaching young people to be the best athletes—and people—that they can be. Rivera, who most

members know as Coach, has more than two decades of professional boxing experience that have prepared him to coach over a hundred members who visit the gym multiple times per week.

When his sister Daniella passed away in 2018, Rivera tapped back into a dream deferred by life's most beautiful moments, like getting married to his wife Amber and the birth of his three children.

"Because when my youngest son was born, I stopped coaching," Rivera said. "Daniella was telling me that she and our sister Gabby wanted me to get back into the ring and coach the kids. She said 'It seems like you're scared of success. You should cut that safety net off. I'm the oldest and she's the youngest, but she schooled me on that one.'"

"I told her I would get back in the ring," Rivera said. "Then a week later she passed, so I gave her my word."

Fluvanna Beginnings

Rivera moved to Fluvanna County from East Harlem, NY in 1996 during his senior year of high school. The culture shock he and his siblings, who were all preteens and teenagers at the time, was difficult to ignore.

In New York, Rivera found confidence and community on the basketball court, so it only made sense that he try out for the Fluvanna County High School team. Rivera recalls walking into the school gymnasium on the first day of tryouts and being stopped at the door. As a star football player who led the Fluvanna football team to the playoffs, Rivera was thrilled that the basketball coaches were holding special tryouts at the end of the football season.

Instead, the head coach met Rivera at the gymnasium door.

"He shook my hand and said 'Thank you for everything you've done for the Fluvanna football program, but I don't want any New York streetballers on my team,'" Rivera said.

Stunned, Rivera left the gym with new knowledge about himself. He knew that, when the time came, he would be the opposite kind of coach than the one he encountered at Fluvanna.

"He's one of the big reasons I started coaching. Everything happens for a reason," Rivera said. "He labeled me out the gate just because I was from New York City. He labeled me but he didn't know me. I was excited and he stopped me. Now that I'm older and I'm coaching, I realize he was wrong for what he did."

A few years after graduating high school, Rivera says he was misunderstood and got into a lot of altercations. After one, a familiar face recommended that Rivera and his younger brother visit a new boxing gym in Charlottesville with a head coach named Joe Mallory.

"The rest is history," Rivera says. Mallory and other trainers at the gym helped Rivera focus the energy that he was using to get into trouble on training and learning techniques that got him into professional fighting shape. Mallory's gym is also where Rivera got his start as a coach to young boxers 20 years ago.

Rivera has designed Wartime Fitness to be a safe haven for young people who are getting into trouble in the same way Joe Mallory's gym was a safe space for him.

Not Your Average Coach

Today, Coach gives each of his young members the attention and

encouragement they deserve.

Rivera makes himself available to Charlottesville and Albemarle schools as a resource for students who may benefit from a healthy outlet, like training at Wartime Fitness.

Several parents of grade school students who go to the gym have given Rivera permission to speak with teachers about students' academic progress during the school year. If their grades and school work aren't satisfactory to students' parents and teachers, they won't get to spar until they make a positive change, Rivera says.

The gym is a healthy and constructive option to help students back on track from whatever challenges they face.

"We found out about Wartime through a friend who signed her son up here because he was going through a tough time in school," said the mother of 14-year-old Premiere Boatwright, who is training to spar professionally. "[Premiere] was having a few small problems in school, but he's not that kind of kid. "I just wanted him to learn how to defend himself and stand up for himself. That can be hard, especially for a boy."

Young gymgoers are organized into two categories, although the groups often train together. Members ages 6 to 11 are called Young Guns while members ages 12 to 18 are called Junior Jos.

Seventeen-year-old Bella represents one of several family members who are dedicated gym members. Her mother, trainer Ingrid Vaughan, joined the gym when it was in Rivera's garage. Once the River Road location opened, Bella's nine-year-old brother joined the gym. Finally, Bella decided to give Wartime a try earlier this year.

Now, Bella is on track to become a trainer preparing Young Guns and Junior Jos for the ring.

The boxing interest-to-trainer pipeline is strong at Wartime Fitness.

Alijah Wyatt, nicknamed "Batman" by Coach, and known to wear a shirt with a Batman graphic around the gym, is on the road to the Olympics after he started training at the gym earlier this year. The third-year University of Virginia student is the newest amateur boxer preparing for competition boxing matches. Wyatt began training after only three months at the gym, although Coach does not allow most members to step into the ring until they have been training for at least six months. He is also the newest member in a training position. On several nights out of the week, Wyatt can be found coaching young people in the art of sparring in one corner of Wartime's black and orange boxing ring.

The potential for Young Guns and Junior Jos to grow into trainers within a year of joining the gym gives young people something exciting to look forward to other than sparring, Bella says.

Moving On Up

After just over 18 months in Wartime's first location on River Road, Coach is getting ready for a big move. In the new year, Wartime will open the doors of its new location on Cherry Avenue across from Tonsler Park and near Buford Middle School and Johnson Elementary School.

"Coach is moving right in the middle of where all the shootings are happening to give young teenagers another option," said the father of an 11-year-old who joined the gym earlier this year.

Wartime is still raising money for the essentials of the gym. In October,

Rivera started a GoFundMe fundraiser with a goal of \$250,000 dollars. The fundraiser is just shy of \$3,000 dollars. The gym raised an additional \$8 thousand by hosting a boxing event, a fundraising mixer and an open invitation to donation the gym's [website](#).

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Distinguished Dozen: Tommy Safranek strives to make sure trails are for everyone

Tommy Safranek was late the first time he met Allie Hill in early January 2020.

He'd been on his way to a Three Notched Trail planning group meeting when the car in front of him got stuck in the snow. Safranek got out of his own car and dug the person out before continuing to the meeting.

"When somebody needs something, he just jumps in," said Hill, who also works with Safranek as a board member on the Rivanna Trails Foundation.

Community support is what made Safranek passionate about trails. In 2007, he hiked the Appalachian Trail and met "trail angels," people who will give hikers a place to rest or a ride into town.

"You just meet a ton of awesome people," Safranek said. "When I was working for the park service, I was getting paid to work with these volunteers and I was always blown away by their dedication and hard work, that these people are volunteering their time."

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Since he and his family moved to Charlottesville in 2019, he's strived to make sure that the trail community includes more than the predominantly older, white male crowd. Charlottesville's network of trails pushed Safranek and his wife to move here.

“Trails strengthen communities by bringing us together. If every city had a Rivanna Trails Foundation, they would be healthier and happier,” Safranek said.

As part of that effort to make trails more accessible, Safranek worked to create signs along all 20 miles of the Rivanna Trail. The trail weaves in and out of green spaces and more developed areas, which can be confusing for anyone unfamiliar with it.

“To get people to feel comfortable, they need to have signage,” Safranek said. So he created hundreds of new signs to do just that.

“If somebody wants to get out there, they don’t have to have a private tour of a [Rivanna Trails Foundation] board member who knows the space,” Hill said. “they can do it on their own and not get lost.”

That means that the trail-curious but inexperienced—say, a family with young kids—can explore the trail system safely, knowing that they won’t stray too far from their parked car.

For Safranek, getting people involved means showing people what they might have been missing out on. In the fall, he pitched in with Loop de Ville, the trail foundation’s annual festival to celebrate the Rivanna Trail.

In earlier years, “you had to be a board member to really know about,” the 20-mile hike, Safranek said.

“The idea is to reach people to join the hike who might be too intimidated to do the hike by themselves, who might not feel safe doing the hike by themselves,” Safranek said.

He and others on the Rivanna Trails Foundation reimagined the event as a place where hikers, runners, cyclists and stroller-pushers could all enjoy the

trails. It went from a one-day event to a weekend-long festival that included a concert. Loop de Ville had more than 200 people to sign up to participate in 2022—previously, about 50 people participated.

“Most places don’t have this,” Safranek said. “We need reminding how unique and awesome it is.”

Since moving to Charlottesville, Safranek has been a stay-at-home dad, ferrying his kids to school, coaching soccer and working on getting his teaching license, which he earned in early December. He’s been approved to teach social studies and is currently applying for jobs. He hopes to connect his love of history with his love of trails.

He worked for the parks in Tennessee and Kentucky, where he could see old coal mining camps and railroad tracks. His work on the proposed Three Notched Trail, a 25-mile route that would connect Charlottesville, Ivy, Crozet and Afton.

“I just always thought it was cool,” Safranek said. He hopes his future students feel the same.

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