

Why Crozet: Tim Tolson Has a Vision For Crozet

November 4, 2022



Tim Tolson has worked to improve Crozet since he moved here over 30 years ago. Photo by Malcolm Andrews.

“Why Crozet” was started by the Gazette nearly two years ago to focus on what keeps people wanting to move and stay here. We also saw it as a

chance to introduce some of the residents, old and new, with an eye towards understanding each other and strengthening our community. If that intent could be embodied in Crozet residents, Tim Tolson would be one of them.

Like a good many people we run into around Crozet, Tim Tolson is a U.Va. graduate who found a way to get back to the area. He'd visited Crozet a couple of times as a student and picked it as the place to settle, to raise his family, and to stay.

He had carefully considered what he was looking for, and he knew it wasn't a typical suburb: "I wanted to live in a place that was already an established town," he said. "There were two grocery stores, a pharmacy, a dry cleaner, a post office and a library—pretty much everything you'd need without having to leave."

He's intentional about his use of "town." "We're unincorporated, true, but Crozet is a town." He also appreciated Albemarle County's contributions to Crozet's fire and rescue services, water, and recreational opportunities.

At the same time, he realized the importance of individual contributions to community life. He saw a need for new residents to follow the lead of many of the long-time Crozet residents he met, to pitch in as the area grows. He's done more than his share, taking a leadership role in building the new library, working with the Crozet Community Association and, most recently, assuming leadership of that volunteer body.

Tolson has a Ph.D. in psychology, and one of his major fields of study was community psychology, a focus that's helped him in his efforts to encourage people from all backgrounds to work together for the good of everyone in Crozet. He sees a number of influences working against that vision. "People who have been here for a long time are just overwhelmed at the rate of growth," he said. Also, people who have recently moved here may not know about the challenges of rapid growth, and the importance of community participation in vital organizations like fire and rescue services, community

meetings like the Crozet Community Association, and events that bring people together like the Fourth of July Independence Day Celebration.



The cross-country bikers arrive at Dawson Creek, the beginning of the Alaskan Highway. Submitted photo.

Tolson credits former CCA chairman Mike Marshall (full disclosure: Marshall is the Crozet Gazette's founder, publisher and editor) with recognizing the importance of symbols that show pride in the community, such as the Crozet flag and Crozet magnets. He and Marshall agreed that events and places where people from all backgrounds can meet are extremely important for cohesion, so the library, the community celebrations and concerts, the civic meetings, and service on the emergency crews have an importance beyond fulfilling their first and most obvious roles.

There are a number of reasons why participation in many community efforts has fallen off, Tolson said. "Online communication serves a purpose, but it is

not the same as meeting in person." For one thing, people may feel a sense of connection when they post every day on Next Door or Facebook groups and then believe they've done their part in reaching out, when they've actually only reached out to people they agree with or attacked people they don't agree with.

A second difficulty, he said, is that the relative anonymity afforded by social media nudges people into less congenial conversations than they'd be likely to have when meeting in person. The complaints aired online add to the feeling on the part of newcomers that they're unwelcome, and on the part of long-time residents that newcomers want to change the community into a rural imitation of the place they left.



More than 1300 miles later, Tim Tolson and traveling companion Jim Toler stop at the northernmost point of the Alaskan Highway. Submitted photo

Tolson doesn't believe either interpretation is true. "What would help is if everyone found one or two ways that they could meet other community members and work towards a common goal," he said.

Tolson serves on the library board as well as the Crozet Community Association and, in his paying job, directs IT policy and outreach at U.Va.'s Information Security. Before he became a civic leader, before he received his Ph.D., before he came to Crozet, he took a motorcycle trip with a childhood friend from Warrenton, his home town. Forty years later, this last June, the two friends rode their BMWs to Alaska in an extended journey designed to see as much of the scenic western and northern landscape as possible.

Careful planning allowed them to camp most of the time, stopping here and there for a real bed and a hot shower. Tolson said they were glad to see the formidable wildlife, mostly from a distance, and to become familiar with the great Alaskan highway. They hiked when they could, and ended up in Anchorage, where they met their wives and toured together with the relative luxury of a rental car. Weeks later, the two men rode back into Virginia with only a minor gas gauge malfunction and a sore finger between the two. There will be others trips, Tolson said, although he's not sure of the time frame, including a possible journey west via the famous route 50 from St. Louis.

Meanwhile, Tolson invites anyone wanting to understand or contribute to life in Crozet to join him at the next meeting of the CCA, November 10, at 7:30 p.m. at the Crozet Park Community Building.

Why Crozet: India Sims Honored by Soul Legend

July 7, 2022



Crozet's India Sims. She was honored last winter by soul legend Mary J. Blige. Photo: Malcolm Andrews.

"Why Crozet" first appeared in the Crozet Gazette in January 2019 to report on the many reasons why people like living in Crozet. We've highlighted businesses, history, the natural beauty and rural heritage, but some of the most important inspiration comes from Crozet's people, what they've endured and what they've learned. This is the story of India Sims, who has overcome enormous challenges and continues to face more.

When she first heard that Mary J. Blige had a message for her, Crozet native India Sims found the idea preposterous. "So I didn't believe it," Sims said. Her skepticism lessened when people representing Good Morning America began to collect permissions and make arrangements for filming her conversation with the hip-hop-soul star. After a few days of this, Sims finally believed it was true.

Also true: Blige had been following her TikTok channel (1uniquechairgirl) for a while, noting the power and joy of Sims's message to those with disabilities. In their televised exchange, each of the women credited the other with inspiring them. Sims had taken Blige's hit song, "Good Morning, Gorgeous," and used it as the backdrop for a short TikTok video.

Both women understood the deeper meaning of the song. "It's not about vanity," Blige said to Sims in her February 14 segment of "Good Morning America." "It's about who we are. Good morning, smart woman; good morning, strong woman."

Blige told Sims that she was an inspiration to her. "You don't understand," Sims replied through tears, arguing that she was the one inspired by Blige. "I used to sing your songs all the time."

This was not just flattery from Sims. "When I grew up here in Crozet, my mother encouraged me to sing, but I was only allowed to sing gospel. Mary J. Blige was the one exception she allowed." Sims had a realistic shot at a singing career—in fact, she got to the second round of The Voice—but she has her eye on something that will be of service to people like her, people with disabilities.



India Sims at Grit with employees Kate Burns and Shi-Ann Loving. Photo: Malcolm Andrews.

She's already reaching her TikTok and Facebook followers with a profound message, one of unrestrained energy and joy. You'll see her dancing in her wheelchair, riding a motorcycle, indoor sky diving, modeling beautiful outfits, laughingly hitching a bumpy ride upstairs on someone's back: always beautiful, always a unique combination of exuberance, poise and wisdom. Most of all, she's always dancing, dancing, dancing with perfect moves—not only in her wheelchair, but in her car, with her sons, in the kitchen and by the pool.

India Sims has never known what it's like to dance on her own two feet. At ten months old, she was given a spinal tap to help diagnose the reasons behind a persistent ear infection. When the day was over, she still had the ear infection but she was partially paralyzed from a needle break. As the reality began to sink in for her stricken family, Sims was enduring constant fevers and seizures. There was nothing but a weak apology from the

surgeon, followed by several years of surgery after surgery. "They didn't really think they could restore the use of my legs," Sims said. "But they started trying to fix everything else."

Even as a young child, she was mystified by the multiple operations. "Not only was I paralyzed, but I was often in a full body cast," she remembers. Finally, at 10 years old, she told her mother, "no more surgeries." Her mother knew the strength of India's spirit and will and listened to her. India gives her mom the credit for her own courage and persistence. "She put the idea of determination in terms a child could understand," Sims remembers. "She read me "The Little Engine that Could" over and over. The story's refrain, "I think I can; I know I can," had a special meaning for the little girl in the wheelchair, dreaming of her future.

India Sims got the message. By the age of ten, she knew she was unstoppable. In fact, that was the exact word she used in a lengthy two-part interview on the "Women are Worthy" show. "Nothing can stop me," she told Jacquyn Charles, the creator of the popular YouTube series. First in her sights were two goals she'd been told she'd never reach. "I was going to learn to drive a car," she said, "and I wanted to become a beauty specialist." Sims got some help from disability advocates along the way but it was really her own brand of strength and grace that powered her forward, past reluctance and outright refusals. At her church, she sang gospel. At her school, Western Albemarle, she became a cheerleader. She took courses in masonry as well as in cosmetology. She played basketball. As an adult, she had two sons and raised them alone. She remembers tucking her babies into her jacket to leave her hands free to roll her chair. Whenever there was an obstacle, she thought of a way.

"Think through a day of someone in a wheelchair," she said. "How do you get out of bed? How do you clean the bathtub? You never know what challenges you might face." She said she never, ever thought of her boys, now 16 and 10, as adding to her struggle. "They're my brightest lights," she said.

The exuberance and energy Sims shows her followers is real, but there's another side to her life. She's been denied more jobs than she cares to think about, and been let go with little notice when employers found the accommodations inconvenient. She's been offered jobs, but they've fallen through when she explained her disability. This happened two times in the last month, she said, once with an office job and once with a spa job. A predictable pattern: she applies for a job, is interviewed—these days most interviews are done by Zoom—and employers are impressed with her experience and confidence. She's offered a job, volunteers that she's in a wheelchair, then suddenly the job is "held up in HR" or "our fiscal situation has changed." It's hard to discourage her, but the challenges are difficult. Her despair was evident in a recent social media post where she departed from her usual joy-filled video to tearfully beg potential employers to allow those with disabilities a chance to prove they can fulfill job requirements rather than assuming they can't.

Last fall, she suffered a serious injury at a Texas Roadhouse with a badly maintained rest room, an accident that broke her wheelchair as well as a couple of bones in her back. It was an injury that put her in bed for a month or so. The restaurant personnel hustled her out, not even willing to call an ambulance, she said.

India Sims is well aware that she may be the only person with a disability that some people see out and about around Crozet. "That's not because I'm the only one," she told Jacquelyn Charles of "Women are Worthy." "It's because the others are hibernating." Her compassion for those who are exhausted from navigating an unfriendly landscape has inspired her to come up with a unique business plan. She wants to create a spa with all the related service—hair, make-up, massage and nails—for them. "It would be a place where they could just be themselves and have a relaxing, enjoyable day," she said. She has considered everything from the lighting to the portable shampoo basins. The only thing missing now is a source of funding.

It's been a frustrating process, she said, with little response to her loan applications, but she'll stay with it. Meanwhile, she'll keep searching for work and producing her videos, full of the same hope and inspiration that caught the eye of Mary J. Blige. Lately, she's singing more, and hopes to travel with her son, Darius, to Tampa later this month for a national basketball recruiting tournament.

No one could put more pressure on Sims than she does on herself, but Blige challenged her with an awesome charge: "We need you," she said on the televised morning show. "You're what we need on this earth."

Find the Good Morning America segment with Mary J. Blige:

[goodmorningamerica.com/culture/video/mary-blige-surprises-deserving-fan-educates-uplifts-social-82874766](https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/culture/video/mary-blige-surprises-deserving-fan-educates-uplifts-social-82874766)

Find the "Women are Worthy" interview with Jacquelyn

Charles: [youtube.com/watch?v=Mz5ZplUJDSk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mz5ZplUJDSk)

Find India Sims on TikTok at [1uniquechairgirl](#); or on Facebook; or reach her by email: [iadbuttercup85\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:iadbuttercup85[at]gmail.com).

Why Crozet: The Two Years That Changed Everything

May 6, 2022



Jeff Stone went from the corner office of an executive suite to a corner of the WAHS auditorium, where he monitors study halls. Photo: Malcolm Andrews.

From what we hear at the Crozet Gazette, it seems everyone's lives were changed by the pandemic, and not always for the better. But we've also heard some remarkable stories of positive transformation through changes, large and small. If you have a pandemic story, we'd love to hear that, too.

"Why Crozet" is a monthly feature that began in January, 2019, and examines the people and natural features that make Crozet a remarkable home. We welcome your suggestions for future stories.

From the Corner Office to the Corner of a High School Auditorium

Jeff Stone was a rising star in the world of high-level advertising and marketing, and he paid a big price. "I worked 60 hours a week, did a lot of traveling, and wasn't able to spend the time I wanted with my family," he said. "I knew I loved Crozet, but I never had time to really get to know the community." He said it wasn't only the demanding job, but the mental and emotional space it took in his life that affected even his time off.

Stone said he'd spent 10 years climbing the corporate ladder, working for huge companies like Proctor and Gamble, General Mills and a number of beer companies. Finally, he arrived at a point where he put together sponsorship and advertising for large-scale events. In early 2020, the looming pandemic canceled one of his NBA events mid-game. "It was all over in a blink," he said.

One by one, all his events for the foreseeable future were canceled, and he had to let his whole division go. "They were like family to me," he said. "I was offered a different kind of job, but I decided to ask myself some hard questions instead." He knew instinctively that the pandemic break in his career would present some answers.

He was surprised to see that his family was well aware of the stress he'd been under all those years. "I tried to hide it," he said. "But my wife kept reminding me that it was not normal to wake up feeling sick day after day. Everyone was relieved and supportive."

First up in his new life was to improve his overall health. He began to accompany his daughter, a runner, to the Western High School track. "I walked while she ran," he said. It dawned on him: "High schools make me happy. They're kind of a microcosm of real life, with ups and down, tears and laughter. There's always something happening." When in-person school resumed, he decided to work as a teaching assistant at the school.

“Obviously, I couldn’t teach,” he said. “I didn’t have a certificate.” But he could monitor study halls and do other odd jobs. He looks back on his high-powered former life as a kind of addiction, and once he got some distance, knew he didn’t want to go back. “I went from the corner office to the corner of the auditorium,” he said.

“I was spending my time making rich people richer,” he said. “Advertisers have a couple of goals: get people to buy what they might not need, or convince them they need something they didn’t know about before.”

These days, Stone loves being more present for his family, enjoying nature, getting lots of exercise and trying his hand at a couple of creative pursuits, including writing screen plays and stories instead of writing for a brand. “Who knows what will come of it? Maybe I’m just a hack.”

Meanwhile, he keeps a diary of his days and finds the students fascinating. There’s some informal ad hoc teaching: “I walked past some economics students writing on a whiteboard in the hall, and I was able to clarify some points about supply and demand and inflation,” he said. When the students began to unmask, he was happy to see their faces.

He doesn’t know where he’ll go from here, but is not much bothered by it. “I’m just happy to be a witness to it all,” he said.

Culture Shock Times Two

Laurel Chruma’s family watched the pandemic advance twice, first from China’s Sichuan province and then from their Cory Farms home in Crozet. The family was living in Chengdu, Sichuan’s capital city, when they first became aware of what was happening in Wuhan.

The timing couldn’t have been worse, Chruma said. In January of 2020, they were planning an Asian vacation ahead of their return to Crozet, where they’d lived for several years before their move to China. Chruma’s parents

had joined the family in Chengdu to join the family's farewell tour of Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam. The night before their departure, strange things began to happen. One by one, flights were canceled, businesses shut down and the family learned about the deadly virus. "We decided it was best for us to stay put, rather than go to the airport and be turned away," she said.

It turned out that staying put was their only option. Chruma explained: "In China, there's top-down authority from the central government, but also a lot of local variation, depending on where you live." They were far (800 miles) from Wuhan, and the nature of each neighborhood determined how restricted they would be. The outer walls of the huge apartment complexes in her area served as a kind of barrier to the neighborhood, with gates opening at intervals, manned by guards. "We were lucky enough to have several gates, with many guards," she said. "Those in poorer neighborhoods might just have one or two guards." It was in those apartment complexes that stories arose of people being bolted in when no guard was on duty. "Our friends back home were horrified," she said.



Before the lockdown, Justus, Laurel and Violet Chruma enjoy the safe streets of Chengdu.

Meanwhile, her Chinese friends were horrified, too. "They thought the U.S. was about to declare war on China," she said. "They really believed it."

Meanwhile, movement outside the buildings, whatever the neighborhood, was severely restricted. Her family was invited by other tenants of the building who were already on vacation to house her parents in their empty apartment. "That apartment had access to a rooftop garden, with trees and plants," she said. "It really saved us."

One person from each family could go out for groceries once each day, but there were other opportunities to get food and supplies. Chengdu is a city of nearly 16 million, and its residents were accustomed to round-the-clock delivery. "You could get a cup of coffee from MacDonald's delivered at midnight," she said. "The delivery person would bring it to the guard, then

you could collect it. So, no one was starving." There were very few COVID cases in her area, and most of the population supported the restrictions and failed to understand the growing U.S. controversy over masks.

In July of 2020, it was possible for her family to return to Crozet. "It was just as much a shock coming back as it was adjusting to life in Chengdu," she said. The kids (Violet, 16; and Justus, 12) had been homeschooled in China but wanted to try in-person school when it became available. They were used to safe streets, no matter what the time of night, and were worried about the widespread violence they'd seen on television. Gradually, they began to relax when they saw Crozet was different from images they'd seen from Philadelphia and New York. They both adapted well to their new lives. Violet's at the Miller School and Justus at the Field School, both schools that didn't have the same restrictions as the public schools.

At first, Chruma was confused by the wildly differing approaches: "I'd go to Waynesboro and no one would be wearing a mask, even when the numbers were at their highest; then I'd go to Charlottesville and no-one would be without one, and people felt so strongly against the other point of view."

"I thought I just had culture shock," she said. "After a while, I realized that we all—meaning not only our country, but the whole world—we all have culture shock from this pandemic."

Rediscovering a Lost Passion

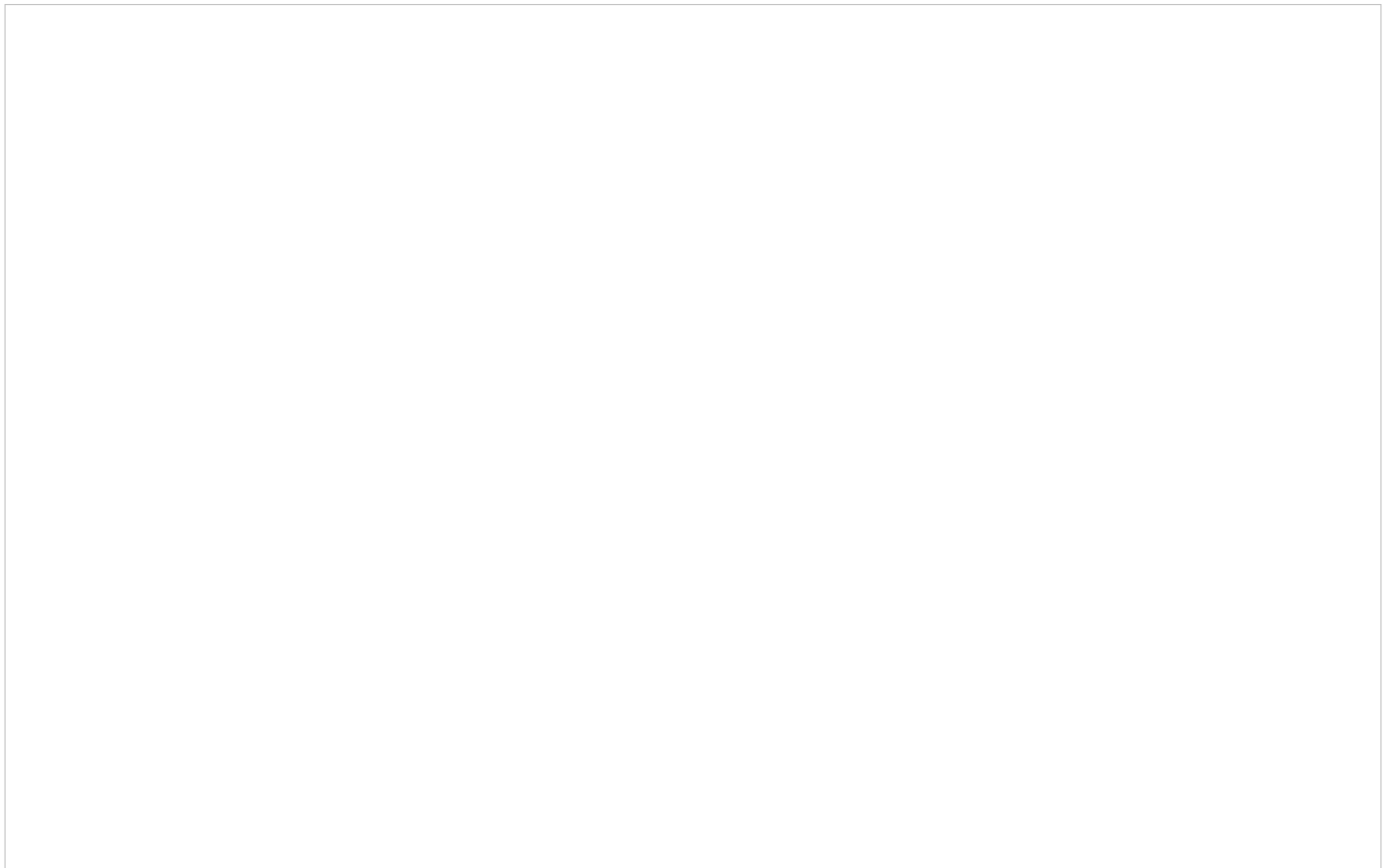
In the midst of a dark time, Scott Apicella found optimism and strength. He was furloughed from his job selling beer in a large, familiar territory in North Carolina. "I'd also gained a lot of weight, had high cholesterol, hadn't exercised in 20 years, and turned 40," he said. Scott also had a kind of chronic heart arrhythmia and worried about its effect on his health.

He knew things could be different. An enthusiastic high school soccer player, he was encouraged to run track to improve his game. There may have been

a bit of a hidden agenda: His father was a dedicated runner, and it was no surprise to anyone who'd seen Scott run on the soccer field that he soon quit soccer to focus on track. He became a bit of a young athletic prodigy, an elite athlete at the high school and junior college level, competing in a number of track events and winning at the state and national levels in the mile and relay. When he left school, he left it all behind.

"It's always haunted me," he said. "I missed it, but years went by and I was completely sedentary." He couldn't figure out how to fit running into his life, and was a little frightened about his heart condition.

Then came March 2020. He was jobless, with plenty of time. His doctor cleared him for running, in fact, told him it would help his condition. With no excuses left, and badly in need of an uplifting experience, Apicella took one step, and then another. It all came back, faster than he even expected. "I felt so much joy," he said. "I wondered how I had lived so long without running." From that day until now—more than two years—he hasn't missed a day of running.





Scott Apicella at the 2022 Tobacco Road Marathon. Submitted photo.

Other events kept changing his life. He went back to work, but was assigned a different territory centered on Charlottesville. He moved to Crozet and then to White Hall. "Once I saw the beauty of the countryside to the west, I knew that's where I wanted to live," he said. He lost a lot of weight, found tremendous support from the local running community, and developed a routine that he could stick to even while working full time. He loved having the same athletic interests as his daughter, Abbie, a runner at Western. He has run two marathons and recently qualified for Boston. Both Abbie and his son, Ethan, joined him to run the last 400 meters of his most recent marathon. "That reminded me that I always want to set a good example for

them," he said. "You can set goals and persevere." A photo on the front page of the Richmond Times-Dispatch shows Ethan beaming up at him as they ran.

Best of all, "I have a much better outlook on life," he said. "Setting and reaching my goals with this has encouraged me to set goals in other areas in my life." It's not easy, he admits. His long runs are on the weekends, starting pre-dawn in the winter months so he can have some family time later.

He meets other runners at 6, sometimes at 5:30. "I don't mind at all," he said. "I jump out of bed with a smile on my face. I just love it."